



A Candle to the Devil

By

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Chapter One

Tully's Brothel, St Chiles, London

June 20, 1870

2 am

The wooden door squealed on rusted hinges. "Cor' it sounds worse than me own rotten joints." Mavis Tully grinned as the first man stepped into the dark room. He was rough looking and stank of bad rum. "Good to see yer, Bob! Been awhile!" The grin slipped away as the second man, a huge figure cloaked and hooded in black, followed the first. "Don't you look a mystery...?" Mavis took step back. She rubbed fat, sweaty hands down the front of her skirt.

The hooded man stepped up to the bed and pulled the blanket away. "What is the matter with her?" He asked in an obviously disguised voice.

"Out like a light on my special potion. Makes it easier for yer to cop a look. These youngins' can be skittish."

"More light." Hooded man hissed. Bob held his lantern close to the bedside. He lifted the nightgown, exposing the very young naked female body. Her smooth white skin was a stark contrast against the filthy, gray sheet. Her breasts were small, prefect mounds that had barely started to blossom. Her shoulders and hips were narrow and thin. He pulled one foot, spreading her legs. He slid one hand under her backside and lifted her closer to the light. There was some pubic hair but it was sparse.

"Her name's Joe!" Tully laughed. "But she don't look like no Joe to me. But her be what yer asked for, pretty, white and sixteen."

"How old?" Hooded man asked.

"Oh, Hell! She is fourteen. You try to find a sixteen-year-old virgin in this day and age. Ain't none out there. Not ones that got nobody who'll care if she goes missing."

"A virgin?" Bob asked doubtfully.

"Yes, sir! As yer wanted. Ask anyone Mama Tully 'll not cheat yer? Go ahead and check if yer fingers is long 'nuff. Mind you don't break her though. Yer break her and you'll still pay full price for her. Yer'll not cheat me neither."

"Shut up!" She flinched and ducked as Bob took a swing at her.

Hooded man flipped the girl onto her belly and pushed her knees under her chest. He removed one glove. A large diamond encrusted wedding band sparkled in the lamp light. He bent over the unconscious child, held her in position with one hand and slid one finger from the other hand inside of her. He looked up at Bob and nodded. He rolled Joe in the blanket, threw her over his shoulder and disappeared down the twisted, steep stairs.

"There ya go, Bob! See, right as rain. There's a tight pull coming for some lucky sod with that little bitch! Now where is me money? Ten quid and not a penny less!" She grinned broadly at him.

Bob smiled. "Sure thing, Mavis. Yer always turned out good for us, yer did." He reached inside his coat. "Too bad we won't be needing yer no more!" She saw only a flash of the silver blade as he brought razor sharp knife across her throat. Mavis was still grinning as she fell to the floor dead.

The Dedication

Sunday June 20, 1870

On the road to the Wycombe Caves,

The coach of Pierre Desjardin

10:30 pm

"We are soon at our destination." Pierre Desjardin announced to his two companions. The daylong rain finally subsided and a bright moon lit the countryside as they rolled along seldom-used country roads. "Are you frightened, Serena?" Pierre Desjardin asked, smiling at his daughter.

"Not at all, Papa! But I am excited." Countess Serena Lucci turned beautiful black eyes to her husband. "As is your child, Vincenzo. I swear the babe does cartwheels."

Count Vincenzo Lucci placed one arm around his wife and the other on her swollen belly. "My lady is brave, is she not?" He looked from her to Desjardin. "You have raised your daughter well, Pierre."

Desjardin laughed pushed his long black hair back from his face. The brilliant diamonds on his wedding band glittered in the light of the full moon. "Serena is like her mother. Bless our Lord! She quickly learns to accept all that is meant for her." He leaned over, gently touching the back of Serena's hand. "I am a proud man to say that not a single time have either my wife or daughter disappointment me."

Serena smiled with love at her father, sighed and rested her head on her husbands' chest. "And very soon Papa you will have your first Grandchild. Does that make you happy as we are?"

Pierre nodded, fixed his eyes on the moon as it flashed in and out of the silhouetted tree line.

Theodore De Wolfe, Dr. Henry Leighton and Reverend Samuel Jackman spent most of that evening preparing the large circular room that was the apex of the three long and winding Wycombe caves. Dozens of unlit black candles lined the crevices. Several bright lanterns hung from poles that leaned against the sweating stone walls. Golden incense lamps swung in the three entranceways. A mattress dressed in clean linens and lined with satin pillows lay on the far side of the grotto. Not far from the makeshift bed was a black, pot bellied stove. The hot fire in it roared steadily. In the center of the grotto, black velvet draped across a low rectangle, wooden platform and on that laid the unconscious young girl.

The three men sat against a far wall. They wore long grey robes. On the ground before them were bottles of brandy and whiskey and several gold cups. One of the cups held powdered cocaine and a narrow gold straw.

De Wolfe looked at his watch and wiped residue powder from his whiskers. "They will be here soon. We have met Count Vincenzo Lucci." He spoke with obvious dislike as he mentioned the counts name. "The man's is a pompous idiot. Far from worthy of the lovely Serena!"

Leighton laughed. "You say that about every man with a beautiful wife. If you've got an eye for Desjardin's daughter you'd better think twice."

"For a female such as Countess Serena Lucci I would take the chance. Henry, imagine Pierre's talents in the body of a goddess and the face of an angel!" De Wolfe paused and grinned at his choice of words. "A more evil bitch you have never known. They say the child she is carrying is a male but what a wonder it would be if it was a female. That would be something to look forward to when I am an old man."

"Male or female, if the child is like the mother and grandfather Lucifer will take the dedication and mark the baby. That is all that matters to me." Leighton said.

"As usual, Henry, you miss the finer points."

They heard a moan from the girl wrapped tightly in the blanket.

"She is coming around." Jackman staggered to his feet. He pulled the blanket away from her face. Joe squinted in the semi darkness, saw Jackman and grunted trying to speak around the gag tied tightly across her mouth. "Should you give her another shot?" He asked Leighton.

"Better not, Samuel. Pierre will need her awake, won't he?"

Jackman grunted, pulled more of the blanket away. "She's not bad. Young that is a fact. Ripe for the picking, as they say!" He ran his hand down the length of her thin nightgown and pushed his hand hard between her legs. Joe thrashed and tried to pull her body away from him but ropes held her in place. Jackman smiled over his shoulder at his companions. "I wouldn't mind having first crack at her that is a fact."

"Leave her alone!" Leighton said with a voice tired and cold. "You'll get your chance."

"What's the matter Samuel?" De Wolfe laughed. "Sweet Susan not as accommodating as she once was? Maybe you should say your prayers louder and more often."

"Shut your mouth, Ted!" Samuel turned his attention back to their terrified captive. "Poor frightened lamb." He sneered at her and he held her head still. His face was only inches from hers. "We are saving you from a dirty life on the streets, little whore. Just a nightmare, some pain and then it is all over. Isn't that better than thirty years spreading your legs for every decrepit, filthy shit that passes by?" He pushed the neck of her gown down looked at her breasts and pushed his hand roughly across them, pinching and twisting one nipple. She screamed with a fear and fury that was stronger than her age. He threw the blanket over her head.

Leighton and De Wolfe stood and began to light the candles. The girl whimpered, moaned and continued to struggle in vain against the ropes. Not too much later they heard the echo of footsteps and approaching voices. De Wolfe put his hand on his pistol and then relaxed as Desjardin entered the grotto followed by the Count and his wife.

Desjardin ignored the men waiting for them. He turned, took his daughter from her husband and carefully led her across the jagged rocky floor to stand next to the platform. The Count followed behind. Leighton, Jackman and De Wolfe finished with the candles and stood silently watching

“Our grotto is not much, my dear but our Lord does not require fancy trappings to be pleased.” Desjardin spoke with soft affection to Serena.

“It is fine, Papa!” She smiled then jumped slightly as Joe squealed at the sound of the female voice.

Desjardin threw off the blanket. The squeals turned to screams and the young body pulled and strained against the bindings. “We shall have to stop the racket.” He looked down the frantic face twisting and straining around the gag. She had pulled so hard against the gag that blood ran down the sides of her face.

He leaned his face against her, ran his tongue through the blood whispered something the others could not hear. He held her face steady with his hands and briefly glared into her eyes. With a moan, she fell silent and still.

Desjardin pulled a knife from his pocket and flicked the blade open. Joe saw the blade but had no reaction her eyes looking beyond it fixed on Desjardin’s face. He slipped the sharp blade under the gag and sliced it free. Her jaw fell open. He smiled and pushed her mouth shut. He ran the knife through the ropes. They snapped and fell aside. Joe laid very still, her only movement the slow rise and fall of her chest.

Since Desjardin had entered the grotto the smoke from the lanterns, candles, incense had sunk to the ground. The air above it was then so cold they could see their breaths. The atmosphere charged with anticipation.

Desjardin handed the knife to Serena. “She is yours! See if she is worthy.” Serena ran the knife up the front of the dirty nightgown, cut the shoulder straps and with one quick movement Desjardin pulled the garment and tossed it aside. He and his daughter looked down at the naked girl.

“What do you think, Serena? Do you accept her as the vehicle to present your child to Satan. Do not agree just to please me. Study her, you as well, Vincenzo! Only if you are satisfied...then we proceed.”

Serena walked once half way around the alter, running her hand casually up one leg, across the flat belly, the small breasts and stopped at the girls head. “She is young, Father. Her breasts are so small. Does she menstruate?”

“She does and she is a virgin.”

“Are you sure?” the Count asked.

“I felt her. She is intact. But do check for yourself, Vincenzo.”

Serena moved quickly and stood in front of her husband. “No!” she snapped at him angrily. “I told you, you watch and you do nothing! I will do it.”

Lucci nodded and smiled as he stepped aside to watch his wife. Serena pulled the girls legs open roughly and far wider than she needed to. She looked back at the girls’ face. “Tell me now, are you a virgin? Lie and I will slit your throat.” Serena’s beautiful face was hard, her eyes black with hatred, her mouth twisted in a wide grin. Then she looked very much like her father.

Joe moved her eyes from Desjardin to Serena and back to her father. Desjardin nodded.

“I am a virgin,” Joe answered, her voice flat and uninterested.

Serena grunted and pushed two fingers inside the girl. “Gently...be careful!” Her father placed a restraining hand on her arm. “Aamon breaks her or it is all for not.” Serena glared at her father and held her position for a few seconds longer than necessary then stood and walked beside her husband.

She smiled at Desjardin, her face suddenly soft again. "She is as she should be. We will do it, do you agree Vincento?"

"You have a suitable doctor?" Lucci asked Desjardin and looked doubtfully at the three men standing silently watching.

"That is me, Count Lucci." Henry Leighton took a few steps forwards but knew better than to offer his hand. "I am Dr. Henry Leighton."

"You are very young to have much experience."

"I have delivered dozens of healthy children. Your lady will feel no pain. Your child and wife are safe in my care."

"They had better be!" Lucci looked at Desjardin and nodded.

Desjardin rubbed his hands together. "Then we shall prepare!" He turned and disappeared the way he had come.

Jackman took a large black leather book from an ornately carved wooden box. He opened it and began to read aloud passages in Latin.

Serena smiled reached up and kissed her husband passionately. "Thank you, my love."

Vincento touched her face. "You are braver than I." He opened the buttons down the back of her gown and gently lifted it over her head. He slid his hands over her breasts, swollen for the approaching birth and ran them down the huge perfectly round belly. He kissed her neck, dropped the shoulders of her slip and let it fall to the ground. He knelt on the ground removed her shoes and slipped off the black lace panties. She was naked.

De Wolfe glanced at Leighton and raised his eyebrows. Leighton shook his head slightly and fought back a smile.

Vincento Lucci took a long crystal bottle from his jacket and handed it to his wife. He stepped back into the shadows taking a seat beside the make shift bed.

Back at the alter Serena opened the bottle and poured some of the pigs blood on her breasts, belly and down her legs. As she rubbed it into her skin she joined Jackman reciting in Latin exactly as he spoke; praises to the Devil she had memorized before she could she read or write. She continued to chant in unison with Jackman, walked around the platform, dropping the blood onto the docile and now smiling young girl. Starting with her feet, she messaged Joe with the blood, moving upward, taking special care with her genital and breast area. She covered Joe's face and hair. Smoothing the curly blond hair flat as the blood dried. This done she spread more blood over the genitals. She leaned down, kissed the childlike breasts, ran her tongue down and into the small puddle of blood in her navel. She sucked it empty, lifted her head and smiled at her husband.

Desjardin barred the door of the anti-room. He hung his lamp on a hook fixed to the wall. The only furniture in the room was a small iron table. On it were three black candles. He lit them, got to his knees, lowered his head for a moment, sat in silence, clearing his mind of all earthy matters, and woke his powerful dark side.

Desjardin had held many dedications. He had offered the souls of a dozen or more children to Lucifer. The first child of these children was Serena. The acceptance of every one of these offerings honored him and was a testament to the power he held. This child was his grandson, the child of his only child and he knew that there were never any assurances. If rejected the child would die and in anger, Lucifer might take Serena as well. For the first time in all these years, Desjardin had to face indecision and fear. If he

turned back now he would lose face. For him that was far worse than the death of his child and grandchild. In the end, it was Serena and Vincenzo who made the final decision.

When he stood, again he had regained the power and force of his convictions. The evil he had lived for soared in him, heating his body and racing his senses. This particular excitement was an addiction as strong as any he had known. It was a sexual need, a need to taste blood, to harm and kill. It grew with every passing second. From deep in his belly, a sound like a growl emanated from his body and filled the room. There was no turning back now.

He removed all his clothing, placing them neatly on the tabletop. He did not notice his erection or the rivers of sweat that ran down his body. With his knife, he slashed the ends of two fingers on his right hand. There was no pain, just a thrill to see the blood flow. On the dirt floor, in his blood, he drew a pentagram; without the surrounding circle, it was a tribute and signal to the Devil.

He stepped into the pentagram, raised his arms over his head, threw his head back and closed his eyes. "Father, brother, master!" His voice rumbled deep and harsh with his passion. "Hear your servant. Send me Aamon!" He paused, feeling the familiar cold wind that began to circle his feet. He had their attention. His heart thundered. His breath coming in shallows gasps. "Send Aamon, keeper of the pacts. I have a new dedication for you. Let Aamon breathe in me to accept my offering, my own blood to serve and honor you now and forever."

The wind grew stronger and to a freezing temperature. As it moved and circled up his legs drops of his boiling sweat fell into it, hissing as they vanished. He stood ridged, frozen in his passion. Blood from the deep cuts in his fingers ran down his arm, mixed with the sweat and ran in rivulets down his leg. When the devil wind reached his upper body, it raged across the room, extinguishing the candles and lantern. It circled Desjardin's head, he opened his mouth taking in this wind, chocking and gulping as it filled his lungs.

The pain began at the soles of his feet, like fired needles it ran up his legs. He gasped with growing, undeniable passion as this pain pulsed in his penis. His heart thundered and shuddered with the assault. His ears rang and vision blurred. His arms fell to his sides. His strength faded as Aamon took over. He had to fight to stay conscious. He must remain aware until the demon Aamon took complete control. If he did not Aamon would keep his body and take it to Hell with him. The man that was Desjardin would simply disappear off the face of the earth. When the agony reached his mind with an explosion of light and searing heat, he knew Aamon was in and he could let go. He fell like a rag to the dirt floor.

Aamon smiled as he got to his feet. This interruption would mean a fuck with a human virgin, a pathetic weakling to split and kill. Her scream would thrill him, her blood nourish him, her soul his to keep forever.

He ran the bright hot golden beams of light from his yellow eyes down Desjardin's body and shook his head. In the faint the erection fell, the penis hanging limp. The smile turned to a laugh. "Well, we must do much better than that!" He closed his eyes. The body of Desjardin faded and the cloven huffed wolf that was the true body of Aamon took its place. It stood seven feet tall, huge silver rams horns scraped the ceiling overhead, sending out a shower of sparks. His head was the shape and size of

horse. Long, razor shape, blood stained fangs over locked his jaw. Red eyes with yellow pupils filled the dark room light. The massive wolf body covered with long, thick black hair. Spikes ran down his spine to the end of his snake like tail. The only truly human feature was his hands. They were white, his fingers slender and his nails, curled with length and like his teeth, stained with human blood. His penis thickened with the thrill of a pending kill hung half down his haunches. Desjardin sat as silent watcher in the mind of the demon, saw through his eyes and felt the demons passions in his blood.

Pleased with the perfection of the transition Aamon howled with the mighty voice of a thousand wolves. The sound so powerful it penetrated the stone walls and reached those waiting in the grotto.

“Shit! Here we go, Ted!” Leighton whispered to De Wolfe. As often as they had played a part in Desjardin’s ceremonies they were never comfortable with the calling forward of a demon and worst of them all was Aamon. He was by far the wildest and most viscous of those they had dealt with but he was the only one allowed to present a dedication to Satan. He was a favorite of his Master and did as he pleased. He killed at random and the slightest thing set him into a rage. They would only get their hands on Joe if Aamon let her live and that rarely happened. Leighton crossed the grotto and politely motioned for Serena to go to the bed. “It would be far safer to stay out of his way for as long as possible!” he explained when she hesitated.

Lucci stood, took her by the arm, led her to the bed, helped her to lie down and piled pillows high so she could comfortably witness the scene. Leighton pulled a morphine-loaded syringe from the pocket of his robe and took a place in the shadows beside the bed next to the Count.

Jackman continued to read, the flow of his words stilted by fear and growing excitement. The dreadful growl and the absence of Desjardin had slightly stirred Joe. She moaned and tried to sit up. De Wolfe pinned her by the shoulders back onto the platform.

They all heard, felt and smelt the approach of Aamon. No one dared to move or speak as he bent and stepped into the grotto. He was able there to stand to his full length and did so, his huge black penis erect. He threw his upper body in an arc. A growl turned to another deafening howl. Joe screamed, thrashed wildly and fainted. De Wolfe took several steps back and into the deep shadows. Leighton glanced down at Serena. She was smiling and clearly sexually aroused. Lucci was oblivious of her, his attention transfixed on the monster before him.

Aamon crouched down on his haunches, swinging his head side to side he sent the beams from his eyes over each person in the grotto and lastly to the doomed child. On all fours, Aamon circled the stone room. He panted, his thick red tongue hung down on his fangs. He slapped his snake like tail, sending the cups of whiskey and cocaine flying. His stink filled the room. Those who had smelled it before knew what it was, the stench of sulfur and rotten flesh.

Aamon stopped in the narrow space between the bed and the platform. He leaned forwards and ran his nose along the girl. He grunted and slid his surprisingly clean and feminine hands down her body, the nails leaving bleeding scratches. Joe moaned but did not regain consciousness. He turned, squatted and ran the beams from his hypnotic eyes over Serena. She met his gaze and to Leighton’s growing horror, she seemed to be daring him.

"I prefer this bitch!" Aamon spoke with Desjardin's voice. Droll fell from the sides of the wolf's mouth. He reached his hands onto her breasts, fondling them, leaving no scratches. Serena moaned and moved slightly towards the monster.

Leighton saw Lucci tighten. A hand in his coat pocket moved. "Fuck!" Leighton thought. "If he's got a gun and tries to use it we are all dead." He leaned down and whispered very quietly in the husband's ear. "Desjardin will not let him harm Serena." This he did not know to be true at all. Desjardin was all too aware of what Aamon was doing and felt all of the demon's emotions but he was unable to control him. "You make any moves or say anything he does not like and we are all dead."

"Very true, Doctor." Aamon had clearly heard Leighton. The small handgun in Lucci's pocket was suddenly burning hot. Lucci jumped, dropping the gun to the ground. His hand burned and already blistered. The gun melted to a small mound of steaming metal.

Aamon smiled. It was a strange grimace, just a curl at the sides of the wolf's wide mouth. "If I fuck your wife, Count...if I fuck her and kill her, she will be mine forever." He laughed and continued in a mocking tone. "Do not be sad. I would keep her well fucked for eternity. Can you offer her anything like that?"

Leighton placed his hand on Lucci's arm and pressed a warning restraint. He felt the horrified and furious man fall back into his chair.

"Very wise!" Aamon said and turned his face back to Serena. "Call for me yourself one day soon, little sister and we will see what I can do from the inside and the outside of your delicious body!" He stood and stepped over to the end of the platform.

Leighton dropped down to the mattress and shoved the syringe into Serena's backside. She cried out slightly as the strong dose of morphine burned into her blood stream. She fell back onto the pillows and slipped into a dream world.

Aamon took Joe by the feet and shook her violently. She woke and immediately tried to run from the table. In a moment too quick to see, Aamon grabbed her around her middle, his claws piercing her skin. He pulled her to his head, held up as though she was a featherweight. She tried to kick at him. He held her feet together with one hand and pushed his muzzle into her crouch. She screamed again and began to cry for her mother. Jackman had finally stopped reading, dropped the book and like the rest watched with fascinated horror.

The air grew tenser with the sense of approaching death. Aamon stood, held Joe over his head and let out a deafening roar. He turned her back to him. Holding one leg in each hand, he spread her legs and rammed his penis up to the hilt into her. Her scream stopped suddenly, turned to a gurgled, choking gag as blood spurted out of her mouth. For a very brief second she stared straight ahead then fell dead.

Still holding the dead body on his penis Aamon walked back to the mattress and knelt. His red eyes were wild with passion and fury. Drool fell in long streams off the sides of his mouth. He panted, his hot breath steaming into the cold air. He ran his eyes over Serena moving the dead girl's body up and down on his penis. Blood from her torn body ran down his thighs and pooled on the floor. With one hand he scooped some of the warm blood, let it fall onto Serena's swollen belly. He did this several times all the while he continued to rape the dead girl.

When Serena's torso was covered, Aamon began gently rubbing it into the skin of her belly, across her breasts, on and into her vagina. Serena moaned and spread her legs.

Aamon fixed his eyes on Lucci. He laughed. "Your wife in mine now!" He stood, pushed the broken body harder onto his penis. They all heard her spine crack as Aamon climaxed.

He threw the crushed body aside and knelt back beside Serena. With one hand under her backside Aamon lifted Serena's body, pushed her legs as far part as they would go. He inserted his middle finger, with its' razor claws into her vagina. With one sharp, strong movement, he broke the water sac, it poured out around his hand and onto the bed as he let her body fall.

Aamon looked back at Lucci. He was clearly enjoying tormenting the man. Leighton held his hand hard on his shoulder but could tell Lucci was finally too terrified to fight. "You want your child?" Lucci did not answer just sat motionless and staring. "Answer or she is dead and the brat as well!"

Lucci gasped. "Yes, I want my child."

A further moment of heavy tension passed before Aamon moved. When he did, he put his hands on Serena's rib cage, pressed down and outward. Her belly distorted. Serena cried out weakly, still deep in her drugged haze. Aamon studied her belly and spreading vagina briefly, gave one more fierce squeeze and push on the belly. Leighton saw the top of the babies head. He moved closer. Aamon grunted with frustration, pushed again and the baby boy slid out of his mother.

Leighton turned the baby over, carefully cut and tied the cord. He held the child by the feet and gave the tiny backside a slap. The baby gasped and wailed.

Aamon reached for the baby.

"Let me wrap him first," Leighton said with far more courage than he felt.

"Give it to me!" Aamon demanded.

"I just want to wrap him in a blanket. Isn't your body too cold to hold a new born?"

"Do you want to find out?" Aamon snapped. "Wrap it and hurry up!"

Leighton did this and handed the crying baby to the demon. Aamon took a few steps back and closed his eyes. A black cloud rose through the floor and swirled up around him. He and the newborn vanished.

Lucci fell onto the bed beside his wife.

"She is fine. Just drugged," Leighton told him. In amazement, he saw that she was not torn and there was no bleeding. "She will sleep for a while and be nauseous when she wakes but she is fine."

"How long will it take?" Lucci asked looking to where the monster and his son had disappeared.

De Wolfe stepped out of the darkness. "Not too long." He answered. "If they bring him back it will be very soon."

"If?" Lucci asked.

"You were warned, Count Lucci. If Lucifer accepts the child, he will mark him and send him back. If not...well, he will never be seen in this world again and very quickly his mother will die."

Lucci hung his head and held his wife's hand. Moments passed like hours. No one spoke. Finally, they heard footsteps coming down the cave passageway. Smiling broadly Desjardin came into the room, holding his grandson. "I present to all witnesses that Satan has won a new soul, my grandson, Anthony Pierre Lucci."

Sunday, June 21, 1875

The garden behind St. Andrews Rectory,
Madsen Worthy,
1 pm

Cornelia De Wolfe lay back on the long chaise. The warm summer sun blocked from her delicate skin by a brightly colored parasol. A cooling breeze blew across the large sloping garden carrying with it the perfume of full blooming lilacs. A maid in a spotless blue and white apron placed fine crystal glasses and a matching pitcher of fresh made lemonade on the white marble tabletop. Two small boys ran across the lawn. The large boy turned and pushed the other, who fell on his backside and began to whimper.

"Owen!" Cornelia called out. "Do not be such a bully! Theodore, go and get your aggressive son."

Theodore sighed and stood. The dark haired older boy ran up to him. "I didn't do it, Daddy!" He looked up at his father with his mother's wonderful sapphire eyes.

"Not to worry, Connie!" Susan Jackman said to her good friend. "Gabriel does get his own shoves in too. Only he is far too clever and no one ever sees him do anything wrong. But, oh my goodness, he can be a devil."

"No, I won't hear it. Gabriel is a perfect angel." Cornelia turned and smiled across the table to the young handsome Reverend Samuel Jackman. "It was such a lovely sermon, Samuel. How wise to remind us of the blessings of a new summer season!"

"Well, thank you Cornelia! As I wrote the sermon I thought of the long, brutal winter we just suffered through. I hear it was one of the worst on record. Nevertheless, it is behind us now. I have the strong feeling that only bright and joyous days are ahead of us. Do you agree, Ted?"

"Yes, without a doubt. I cannot help but believe that from this first day of summer 1875 all sorts of delightful things are coming our way!"

"Margaret, you are unusually quiet today." Susan smiled and offered a plate of sweet pastries. "Are you not feeling well? If you are too warm do move into the shade, beside me."

"Thank you, I am fine. I did not sleep well last night that is all."

"Cornelia." Ted looked from his wife to Margaret. "I do believe our lovely young friend is suffering from pre-nuptial jitters. The absence of her intended is no doubt not helping. You two married and well experienced should be offering happy guidance. When does Henry return from France?"

"The end of the week or at least that was the gist of his last letter." Margaret sighed and pushed stray locks of golden red hair off her face.

"Ah, well then, Maggie! It is only a month before I marry you and Henry and you will rarely be apart from then on. Not another day of heart ache for you from then on, I am sure!" Samuel nodded over his iced tea.

Margaret and Susan exchanged glances. In a second a thousand fears passed between these two good friends. The lies and sins of their men bonded them. Protecting Susan's precious son and any other future children silenced them.

Tuesday, August 3, 1876
Leighton House,
London
5 pm

Margaret stood at the front window watching until the coach disappeared around the corner. It was the evening of their first wedding anniversary and her husband would not be with her. She sighed and ran her fingers over the emerald pendant and earrings he had just given her. They were beautiful, as were the words he said when he gave them to her. She wanted Henry not jewels and pretty words. She snapped the lid of the velvet box closed and dropped it causally on the table.

“You must not be mad at Henry, Margaret.”

“Mother, how can I be mad at a man I so rarely see? He is just a shadow that passes through my bedroom once a week or so.”

The older woman winced. “Henry is only working so hard to better your life and you know that. As a very young doctor in the first few years of his practice....” She ran a jeweled hand through the air. “You must just think of all that he has accomplished in such a brief time. It is a good wife’s duty to stand with her husband as he builds their future and not be so sulky.”

“If you think he is working tonight then you are the fool he thinks I am.”

Margaret snapped, tears close to falling.

“Well, if you are thinking it is another woman....”

“No, Mother, that is not what I am thinking. If it was just an affair I would know just what to do and she would not stand a chance.”

“Then what? Gambling? Drinking? I cannot see Henry involved in any of that. He is a fine, noble man. I can think of no one his age that is so dedicated to his church. He has helped Reverend Samuel Jackman reach heights in his new ministry.”

The tears were falling heavily. “It is whoring, gambling or drinking, all of that and so much more. Henry Leighton is not a fine and noble man! He and Samuel may have the world fooled with their piety but it is not so when it comes to their wives.”

“Oh my dear! That cannot be so. It must all be in your imagination. We must expect certain faults in a man. Your marriage is so new...it is just that Henry has not adjusted yet. He will in time. It took a few years before your own father calmed down.”

Margaret shook her head and left her mother. There was no point trying to explain the stark reality to her. If she did come to believe the terrible truth about Henry Leighton, all she would advice her daughter was to ignore it all. A wife had so many duties and not the least of them was to turn her face and the eyes of the world from her husband’s frailties.

Her only comfort was in knowing that she was not alone in this misery. That was also a cold comfort. If she exposed Henry and his cohorts to the world, she would also ruin the lives of two very good friends. Cornelia De Wolfe, Susan Jackman and she would have each other for solace as they forever hid their shame.

Chapter Two

Random House, London
1900

Gabriel Jackman stood in the black shadows behind the old shed. To his left was the patch of thick woodland the locals called 'Devils Hallow'. A narrow pathway disappeared quickly into the closely packed trees. To his right beyond the shed and past a small courtyard was the back of the Madsen Arms Inn.

A quick moving wind blew the clouds across the midnight sky, occasionally obscuring the moonlight. The air was hot and humid. Beads of sweat rolled down his back. His heart pounded. He could feel, hear and smell the evil that waited down the path.

The back door of the pub opened. Mary O'Neal stepped outside and locked the door behind her. A window on the top floor opened, another woman stuck her head out and called down, "Thought old Tom was supposed to be out here to walk you home, Mary?"

Mary looked up and smiled. "Oh you know my grandpa! He ain't got no sense of time. It is does not matter. I know those woods like the back of me hand."

"Only if you're sure. I can get Bart to walk you home."

"Na, I am fine. Get to your bed, Betty." Mary pulled her cotton shawl across her shoulders, tied it in a knot and headed across the courtyard and onto the pathway.

She passed within a few feet of Gabriel. He called out to her. "Stop! Do not go down there!" She did not hear him. He did not think she would, they never did. He followed just a few steps behind her. Why did she not feel the danger? It hung with a putrid stench in the hot summer air. Gabriel could clearly see the black, spidery arms beckoning her. Where was the all-loving God and his legions of angels? Was this young woman not one of His children? What had she ever done that would warrant the horror only seconds away?

They reached the half way mark of the path. Gabriel reached out and tried to hold her, to pull her back. His arms slipped through her. She stopped suddenly and turned, shuddering as a strange cold sensation rippled through her body. Her face was only inches from his. She did not hear him yell in rage when the figure stepped out of the bushes.

The heavy wooden plank came across Mary's head with a resounding crack. She crumbled and rolled down into the ditch, landing in the muck on her face. The evil was quickly on her.

A voice screamed in the back of his mind. "Do not watch! Leave!" Gabriel ignored the warning. He dropped down into the ditch, swung futility at the attacker; his arms passed through him. He knew he could do nothing. He took a few steps back; the agony of defeat froze him.

There was another one. Another darker, fiercely evil creature figure moved forward from the shadows. The one with the board stood back, silently watching as he rolled Mary onto her back. Blood trickled from her shattered eye socket. She moaned and tried to sit. He took her by the hair and after one vicious punch to the side of her head Mary fell unconscious.

A silver blade flickered in the moonlight and sliced away Mary's clothes, purposely cutting into her skin. He crawled down the bleeding body, running a hand along the blood. "Oh, pretty Mary," he hissed into her ear. "I am going to enjoy this. What a shame you won't!"

It was over in seconds. Mary O'Neal was dead; her body a bloodied, naked mess. Her killers disappeared into the black woods.

Gabriel broke from his horror-filled stupor, scrambled back up to the roadside, turned his face to the sky and screamed.

"Gabriel! Wake up!" Lee Woo shook the sleeping man.

Gabriel was sitting in his bed, sweat rolling down his face and body. He jumped back, almost falling from the bed and knocking over the night table.

"It's a dream! Just a dream." Lee pulled his friend back on the bed. His hands slipped on the drenched skin.

Filled with horror and rage and only half-awake Gabriel jumped from the bed. Lee rushed around the bed, took Gabriel by the shoulders and shook him. "Bloody hell, wake up!"

Gabriel gasped, his eyes finally fixing on the familiar face. "It's alright, Gabriel!" Lee said in a calming tone. "It was just another damned nightmare."

"Fuck." Gabriel muttered and fell back onto a chair, breathless.

"Are you going to vomit again?" Lee asked, remembering the last nightmare as he reached for the bedpan.

"No. I don't think so!" Gabriel gasped. "Hell, Lee, that was terrible!"

Lee pulled a towel from the washstand and tossed it to Gabriel. "You'd better dry off and put on some clothes or you will catch a chill."

"Was I calling out?" Gabriel asked rubbing the towel over his chest and face.

Lee nodded, handed Gabriel his unworn nightshirt and sat on the bedside. "They must have heard you across the city. Scared the shit out of my poor Sue Lyn."

Gabriel exhaled loudly, pulled on the nightwear and took a long swallow directly from his whiskey decanter. "I must be losing what little is left of my bloody mind."

"Was it one of the De Wolfe murders?"

"Yes. Mary O'Neal. God, Lee...it was so real! I have had night mares before but never like this."

"Well, that is it, then. You have now dreamt of the deaths of all four of the victims. I know you hold the De Wolfe family as close friends, however..."

"I know. I guess we have found our next investigation. What time is it?"

"Just after six."

"You go back to Sue Lyn and get some more sleep."

Lee nodded and stood. "What are you going to do?"

Gabriel looked at his sodden bed sheets. "I will make some tea, get dressed and go for a walk. I need to clean away some of this fog and do some clear thinking."

At three that afternoon, Gabriel and Lee entered the office of Chief Inspector Charles Wesson, Special Investigations Branch. The red, round face of CI Wesson puffed at the sides as he smiled and greeted them.

"Gabriel, Lee!" He motioned to two chairs across from his desk.

"Sorry for the short notice, Charles. I know you prefer appointments."

"Not to worry, Gabriel, that all depends on just who wants to see me. You and Lee are always welcome. In all truth I could use a small respite." Wesson pushed a button his desk and almost immediately, a side door opened. "John, my friends would love a pot of tea."

"Thought you might, Sir! I have one on the go. And it's a fresh mash." The secretary disappeared back into the outer room.

"Good man, John is!" Wesson said rubbing his chubby hands together. "Best secretary I have ever had. I'd swear the man can read my mind." He took a chair from a far wall and placed it beside and slightly in front of his guests. He did not need the authority of his large, ornate desk.

"Good Lord." Gabriel laughed. "I'd not be too happy with that. I would have to censure my thoughts too much."

"No truer words." Lee agreed.

"Well, Gabriel, in your note this morning you mentioned the 'mountain murders'. Am I right in thinking you may have reconsidered and will take on the investigation?"

"I have given it a second thought or two, Charles. I do have a few questions to ask you first."

"Go ahead. I will certainly tell you all I am able to."

"Why me? You know damned well how close I am to the De Wolfe family. Aren't you afraid that will cloud my opinion?"

"For any other case I would say that was an issue. Here it is because you are so close and trusted by them that you may succeed where others have failed. They will have their guard down around you."

"What made you think I would...well, betray them, in the first place? I place loyalty very high, Charles."

"Higher than most do. I know that. But I saw your reaction when you read the report of the terrible deaths the victims endured."

"Any man would be appalled."

"You were more than appalled. It was far deeper than that." Wesson stopped speaking as his secretary brought in a tray, loaded with a steaming teapot, mugs and biscuits. He poured the tea, added the wanted condiments and handed the mugs to Lee and Gabriel. As he did this Wesson took a quick look at Lee. With a movement, hardly noticeable Lee nodded his head.

"If I may, Gabriel I will reach for a more personal level. How long have we been friends? Must be six years now. When we first met, you were happy in your church and ministry, happy and successful. Am I right in saying you had no idea of changing your profession and that you were convinced of your calling?"

"Of course," Gabriel agreed.

"Then three years ago your Helena was murdered. No one can blame you for losing your calling. Your deeply held faith was shattered. I dare say I would be the same way. Because of that, you know the brutal loss felt by those left behind after these

heinous acts. If you learned it was a De Wolfe behind these murders can you honestly say that your powerful sense of loyalty would hold you in check and not bring the felon to justice?"

Gabriel sighed, finished the last of his tea and stood. He placed the mug back on the tray and walked to the window. Across the street two floors below, he saw a man and woman walking by. They were arm in arm, deep in conversation and most likely oblivious to the world around them. In a near by park a boy rolled his hoop and a dog jumped along side of him.

When Gabriel did not speak, Wesson continued. "Can you truly say that you did not see the similarities between your wife's murder and the murder of the De Wolfe victims?"

"I saw it!" Gabriel turned, glared briefly at Wesson, and then shook his head. "I'll take the case, Charles. As before, I will handle the matter the way that I see fit. I will not report to you in any way unless I want to. You will not question as to where or how I obtain my information. All my expenses will be completely covered and I will be on full salary."

"Agreed!" Charles stood and shook his hand on the deal. "But I must ask, Gabriel you are one of the richest men I know, why in God's name do you insist on bleeding her Majesty and her government so tightly?"

"That, Charles, is because she and her government bleed us when ever possible. More than that, they still turn their blinded eyes away from the wretched lives so many...most of our fellow citizens, men, women and children endure. Every blasted penny I make in any of the cases I double and give to charity. I doubt very much any of our so-called leaders would even consider such a thing."

"Very true and very sad, Gabriel."

"Am I that transparent?" Gabriel asked as he and Lee rode back to Random Hall.

Lee shrugged. "In some ways we all are. It does not take much thought to understand why you left your ministry."

"I did not leave it, Lee; I am only on a sabbatical."

"So you say! Now we have the De Wolfe matter to deal with. Have you spoken with Cornelia yet?"

"Yes. I telephoned her this morning. Of course, she still stands her ground. None of her family could be responsible for the murders. We will have to do our investigation without her knowledge and co-operation." Gabriel shifted in the seat. He was restless and irritated from lack of sleep. "To night I am going to meet with the Underhills. They have news on Caroline's illness. You can go to the Three Bells while I am there. I need to know how Elizabeth is doing."

"I think that is obvious. She is working and living in a filthy Hell whole and she has been there for three months. Why are you waiting so long to approach her?"

"As terrible as it sounds I want her truly understand the two very different and unfair worlds. She has been very rich and spoiled now she has had a taste of the way life is for most. She needs to see and hate the corruption of the world she came from. She will need that to work with us."

"You do realize she may not respond. What will you do then?"

"Then I will bloody well go and get her myself. Christ Lee, how could she want to stay in that place?"

"I have no idea. Like any woman she is stubborn and proud and what you have to offer her is rather unusual."

"What I have to offer her is a way out of that Hell hole. Today is Friday. Watch her tonight, and then approach her on Saturday night. She will come here on Sunday or I will go and get her. As my grandfather used to say 'it is far past the time for me to shit or get off the pot'."

"You will have problems with Isabelle, Gabriel. You have no secret of your attraction to Elizabeth Leighton and now you want her to come and live in your house...."

"Isabelle will just have to find a way to get used to it. All I want from Miss Leighton is for her to come and work with us. Nothing more and nothing less."

Lee laughed. "And as my grandfather used to say, 'don't tell an old fisherman you ain't fishing!' Do you remember what you told me the first time you laid eyes on Elizabeth Leighton?"

"No, but you seem to! Refresh me."

"It was before you met and married Helena. You said, 'She's far too young now, Lee, but mark my words one day that female will be mine.'"

Gabriel laughed and rolled his eyes. "You have the memory of an elephant, my old friend."

"I do. I know you well and I know Isabelle just as well. She will not easily be made a fool."

"I have no intention of making Isabelle a fool. She knows clearly where she stands in my life and why."

Gabriel Jackman was not an overly tall man. It was his strong build and the confidence he exuded that added height. That night he decided to walk the mile from Random House to the townhouse of Bishop and Mrs. Herbert Underhill. It was a brisk, cold night and he enjoyed walking, rarely taking a ride unless he had no choice.

He had just rounded the corner of Pearce and Parkland when he passed by two prostitutes. They were better dressed than most but far out of their usual neighborhoods.

"Cor' May!" One of them said with a drunken slur to the other. "'ave a peak that 'im! Sweet as mother's milk, I'd say!"

"Hey!" The other one called out. "Might be a cut rate pull for the likes of you."

Gabriel smiled and kept on walking.

"Come on, lovely boy!" The first one skipped after him. "What's a matter...you don't like the ladies?"

He turned, walking backwards. "Sorry, ma'am. I make a point of never paying for what I can get so easily for free."

"Oh, listen to 'im." She laughed and tottered back to her friend. "Lucky for some!"

He was surprised when the Bishops widowed daughter answered the door.

"Good evening, Gabriel." Mrs. Amanda Carter maintained her stiff elegance but Gabriel noted the dark circles under her eyes and the red-rimmed eyelids of recent tears. "Thank you so much for coming so soon after your last visit. Mother and Father do so look forward to seeing you. You look frozen to the core. Would you have a brandy to warm you? It is the lovely Austrian you referred to as liquid gold."

"I am always happy to come here, Amanda." He followed her into the Underhill's familiar, comfortable parlor. "A little of that Austrian warmer would sit very well right now."

Amanda smiled. He watched as she poured from the crystal decanter. Amanda was well into her thirties but still stood strong with the posture and pretty face of a much younger woman. A widow now for two years she was well out of her sad black and had recently rejoined society life. Gabriel wondered what the cause of the tears was.

She handed him his drink. "Mother and Father are in the study. Please sit with me for one moment before I take you to them. I wish a word with you."

They took chairs by the large fire. "Is something wrong? I know that Caroline has not been well lately."

"No, Mother is not well. I feel you should know. After all, Gabriel, my parents look to you as the son they never had. You have the right to know." She was clearly repeating an argument she had recently had with her parents. "When Dr. Buckley left here yesterday she paused and cleared her throat, 'he was not hopeful. The head pain that we put down to migraine is actually a brain tumor. There is nothing left but to manage her pain. She must take large doses on morphine so her mind is often cloudy.'"

"I am so sorry, Amanda. You are right to tell me and you must let me know if there is anything that I can do." For months Caroline Underhill had suffered excruciating pain and with it a loss of some vision. Gabriel thought but did not say that at least she would soon be out of her misery.

She smiled slightly. "Thank you, Gabriel. Do you remember a few months ago I told you about Mother's dreadful night mares?"

"Yes."

"They are back."

Gabriel nodded slightly. "That is a shame; perhaps they are caused by the illness and the medication."

Amanda stiffened her narrow shoulders and straightened the ornate beaded cuffs of her sleeves. "When she has these dreams it is Samuel Jackman she cries out for."

"My father?" He paused for a moment before touching a rather sensitive subject from years before. He thought about how much his mother detested Caroline Underhill. It was obvious to Susan Jackman that Caroline was in love with her husband and that Samuel thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it. As a younger and more naïve man Gabriel believed his father kept this enjoyment at a safe place. Now he was older, wiser and knew so many things about his late father he wished he did not. He knew it was very likely he and the lovely Caroline had been lovers. "Well, Father and Caroline were close friends."

"It all adds terrible memories to my father's worry and sadness." Amanda spoke with bitterness as though reading her companions thoughts. "He does not need to be reminded why he lost faith in his best friend."

"That was years ago. If anything happened between my father and your mother surely by this time, Herbert has forgiven her. Has she not made it up to him? She must have as they are still a very happy couple."

"You know better than that, Gabriel." She locked her dark eyes into his. "You are not an expert at forgiveness." She stopped suddenly and shook her head. "I am sorry. I should not have said that. I am over tired. You are right, that was then, and this is now."

However, mother is dying and it is Samuel Jackman she cries out for and my poor father hurts all over again. It is not easy for a man to know his wife loves another man even if he is in his grave.”

“No,” Gabriel agreed. “I could not sit too well with that either. I wish there was something I could do to help. Luckily we are not held to account for the sins of our parents.”

“Well, they certainly have something important they wish to talk to you about. I do not know if it has anything to do with that awful business or not but if so, I know you will remember my father’s feelings. He has suffered so much and ...well, now there is more to come, isn’t there?” Amanda stood. “If you are finished with your brandy I will take you to them.”

Amanda knocked quietly on the closed study door. Herbert opened the door, smiled at Gabriel and quietly stepped out into the hallway.

“I will leave you then.” Amanda said stiffly. “Good night Gabriel.”

“Is she angry?” Hebert asked when his daughter was out of sight.

“No, she said she was tired.”

“Ah, well. That is all right, then! Caroline is napping, Gabriel. However, the naps are short. She will wake soon. I will tell you that my good lady is very ill.” The elderly Bishop spoke quietly. He was pale and haggard looking. “Thank you for coming. There is a lot she has to tell you. She may not be direct, though. The morphine she must use is very strong and her mind wanders. It may take some time.”

“Then I will be here for as long as it takes.”

Herbert Underhill took a deep breath, leaned his shoulder against the wall. “What does she have to say to you? I told her she must tell me first but no! Bloody hell, Gabriel! What ever happened to the days when a woman did what her husband told her without question?”

“Long gone, my old friend. I, for one, am glad. Nothing would be more boring than a completely submissive female. I like at least some challenge.”

Herbert raised his eyebrows and laughed. “How very wise! I would wager the stories of some of your ‘challenges’ would add some fire to an old man’s life.” He laughed again. “Lord! I have often wondered what it is about you that brings out the devil in a person.”

Gabriel joined in the laughter. “I do not know Hebert but as far as the ladies go I am forever glad of that.”

“If I were a younger man...ah well! I am not and that is mostly likely for the best. The women of today would only confuse me. Shall we go in and see what this is all about?” He opened the study door and motioned for Gabriel to go in.

The room was over heated and stuffy. Gabriel took it upon himself to open a window a crack. The only light source was from a single, dim gas lamp and the fire. Caroline lay on a settee near that fire. Gabriel took a seat very near her. Herbert sat across from them. “I know you are not sleeping, Lena!” He said with a smile.

She opened her smoldering, dark eyes and returned the smile. “What a burden it must be for those who have to live with you, Gabriel!” She still had a powerful beauty. Her well-defined bones and strong jaw had not changed with illness or time.

“Why are you pretending to sleep?”

"My husband fusses over me! The only peace I get is when I sleep or at least when he thinks I am sleeping."

"That is not fair, Lena." Herbert said with a sigh.

"Some women would love to be spoiled as much as you are, Caroline."

She locked eyes briefly with Gabriel and smiled. "As usual you are correct. How do you come by all this wisdom?" She reached up and slid one hand on top of his. Her hand was smooth, young and not gnarled with age. The brilliant ruby on her wedding ring glittered in the firelight. "Speaking of lust... how is the lovely Isabelle?"

"Lena!" Herbert interrupted. "I am sorry, Gabriel. It is the morphine that makes her...well, drunk!"

"I did not know we were speaking of lust!" Gabriel asked ignoring Herbert's indignation.

"We are now, my lovely young man. Indulge an old woman who has only memories. Herbert thinks I am too fragile now for such lovely things." Herbert slipped further down into his chair, one hand over his face. "So, how is Isabelle? Does she know what a lucky woman she is?" She watched Gabriel as he sat silent and did not answer her. She sighed. "Maybe she is not so lucky after all!"

Finally, he answered her. "Isabelle is well enough."

Caroline nodded, closing her eyes. Gabriel let her drift away for a few moments. He looked across the room to the portrait of her and Herbert, painted thirty years before. They were so young and wonderfully alive. Caroline seated in front of her husband was beautifully dark, mysterious and exotic. Herbert was in his Ministers collar, tall slim and fair-haired. Gabriel remembered them as a couple in their later years; so deeply in love as though hardly a day, not decades had past. He thought of his own brief and passionate marriage, shook away the thought and spoke quietly, bringing Caroline back to the present.

"In your note you said you had something important to tell me."

"Yes, of course." She sighed. "Help me to sit, will you? I am so sleepy other wise."

He stood and slid his hands under her arms. He could feel her ribs through her nightgown. He wondered, not for the first time why the Lord saw it necessary to make passing from this world to the next such a difficult and humiliating experience.

"Help yourself to a brandy, if you like one." She offered.

"No, thank you. I am fine but maybe later."

"First, Gabriel I need to know your opinion. Must a promise be kept if one of the parties has passed on?"

He ran his hands through his long brown hair. "That is a very difficult question. I suppose that the answer depends on the circumstances. One must examine the reasons why the promise is broken. Will harm fall to anyone by the broken promise. Even then, it could be that this harm is necessary for the greater good. To break any promise just for the sake of malice would be wrong."

Caroline sighed. "Yes, that is how I also see it and fairly close to what Herbert told me. Then I have promises to break and unbelievable things to tell you." Gabriel did not look at the other man but was aware that he sat straight again and stared at his wife. "It was twenty-two years this coming Christmas time when Herbert and I met Henry and Margaret Leighton at a dinner party held by Susan and Samuel Jackman. Your parents

did give such wonderful dinner parties, Herbert and I remember them all so well.” She paused and closed her eyes lost the memory. The beautiful gowns, sharp white table linens, delicious aromas and captured snatches of intriguing conversation so much a better place than lying and waiting for death; peace and happiness briefly easing her pain.

The men left her there for as long as she needed. After a moment, she opened her eyes and smiled. “You were just a boy and even then you were a rascal! And your dear mother, what a saint she must have been!” A bitter tone crept into those words. It was never a secret that she and Susan Jackman despised each other, whatever the reason was. “She did love you so much!”

“Herbert was not then a Bishop but doing very well as Minister at St. Andrews. Dr. Henry Leighton was extremely successful with his Harley Street medical practice. I took an immediate liking to Margaret. What a wonderful free spirit she was, a breath of fresh air in a world of docile females. She had thoughts of her own and spoke them with color and intelligence. Margaret was not like the rest of us. She was not a pale and timid reflection of her husband and I so much wanted to be like her. We soon became fast friends.”

“God gave Margaret great strength and goodness, she did need it. It was the following summer when I first saw that. I was spending a few weeks at the De Wolfe Manor. Margaret was also staying there and working on sketches of the local countryside. Several weeks had passed since I last saw her and I knew right away that something was very wrong. She did not look well. I questioned her and she confided in me that she was several months along with child and so for a while I took that to be the answer.”

“One particularly hot day I took a walk in the woods and saw Margaret sitting with her sketchbook in a nearby meadow. She was not drawing, she was crying, bitter sobbing so painful I could barely stand to hear it. She did not know I was watching. I thought I should not intrude and should go quietly away. I did not want to humiliate her. Then she suddenly looked up in my direction. There was so much pain and loneliness in her face. I knew she needed me. For a while, we sat on the long, cool grass and I just held her. I dared not ask her what the matter was for I knew it must be terrible indeed.”

“Are you friend enough to me that I may tell you things, horrible things and be assured that you will never tell them to another soul, no matter what?” She asked when the crying abated and she lay exhausted.”

“I was frightened and had half a selfish mind to tell her no, but thank the Lord; I did the right thing and told she could always trust me. So here, Gabriel is where I break the promise to my dearest friend. You should know that I do this only because I believe that your own life is in grave danger.” She stopped and looked at Gabriel. As usual, his face was a mask to his feelings. He said nothing but she could sense the rise in his tension. The dimly lit bedroom seemed to grow even darker.

Herbert stood and walked to the slightly open window. He parted the curtain and looked out into the dark night sky.

“I do not know if you already know of this man but if you do please do not tell me. Just let me speak. His name was Pierre Desjardin. Perhaps I should not call him a man... a demon in human form is more like it. He was a devil worshiper, a Satanist if there ever was one. As a professor at Cambridge University he found a wealth of

innocent, young male minds to corrupt. To facilitate this corruption he used freely alcohol, drugs, whores, promises and talents taught to him by the Devil himself.”

“If you think of the darkest things a man can do, Gabriel you will know what went on in the weekly meetings arranged and led by Desjardin. It was not very long before a pliable young mind was well under this creature’s control. Henry Leighton had been one of those poor souls.”

Herbert turned back to them. “You knew about ‘The Circle of Mendes! Why in God’s name did you never tell me that you knew?”

“I had made a promise, Herbert. I am telling you now. I do not know how Margaret knew of the things her husband did but she knew them well. A dark cross she had carried alone for years by the time she bared her nightmare to me that hot summer day. She loved Henry for the man she thought he was when she married him but had no respect for him. How could she? When a woman loses respect for a man, it is broken forever. Men do not realize that. Begging for forgiveness and a change of nature is one thing but that does not restore respect.”

“For the right or the wrong, who can say, Margaret took on a lover. Perhaps to hold on to her own self respect. The man she had taken at the time was a married man of high office. She did not tell me who it was and I did not ask.”

“Margaret was by that time a very successful artist. She had money and many friends. It had been her plan that previous winter that she would leave Henry once and for all. Then she had come up with child. Henry, fool that he was, had no idea that he had long since lost his wife and had carried on with her in their marriage bed. Gabriel...how is it that a man can not tell when his touch repels his wife?”

“He can tell, Caroline.” Gabriel spoke softly. “Man is a lazy, selfish being, it is far easier to turn a blind eye than to try and right the wrongs that turn a wife away.”

Caroline nodded slowly. She took a gold pillbox from a near by table, took from it a small yellow pill and swallowed it with a sip of water. “God blessed me with Herbert. Never did he cause me any shame....” she smiled, looked at her husband and then back to Gabriel “or if he did at least he had the sense and good luck to keep it from me. If you ever love again Gabriel, the way you loved Helena be certain every day and every minute of those days to keep your respect in her eyes. She must hold your arm with great pride and not just because she has no other choice.”

Gabriel swallowed hard. Caroline had no idea just how much her story and advice touched him.

“So where was I?”

“Margaret wanted to leave Henry, had a lover and was with child.”

“Ah, yes, then you see the gist of this part. Margaret did not know if the child was Henry’s or the other mans. She could not hazard even a guess. As I said, the lover was a married man and with no real interest in Margaret other than what she brought to his bed. That did not trouble Margaret, as she was not in love with him.”

“She decided to stay with Henry until after the child was born so he or she would not face life as a bastard. That was a cruel trick on Henry, if the child was not his. However, it is not for me to judge.”

“Several things happened that fall. Elizabeth Leighton was born. She had her mother’s bright red hair and looked nothing like Henry. A few weeks later Desjardin was found murdered and forgive us but I joined Margaret in celebration. I asked her about

her plans to leave her marriage. She would still go, she told me, but when the time was right. Months passed to years. Margaret buried herself in her child and her art and I think she was in her own way happy with that and the occasional lover."

"She still confided in me and I held her secrets close. Five years before she died, she met and fell deeply in love with Anthony Lucci. You and he are friends, am I correct? And you knew of their affair."

Gabriel nodded.

"Margaret was old enough to be his mother but that put no shade on their love. Once again, Henry was too blind...or as you say too lazy to see. Gabriel, how Margaret and Anthony did love! I am not ashamed to admit that after spending an afternoon with them I was well spirited with Herbert in bed that night!" Caroline laughed and slid back onto the pillows. The yellow pills eased all her fears and pains.

Smiling slightly Herbert returned to his chair.

"Eventually after the affair had lasted years, Margaret made up her mind to leave Henry. Not only that but she would demand a divorce or she would tell the world all that she knew about him. She wanted nothing more than to marry Tony."

"The rest of this tale of Margaret you already know. Henry murdered his wife. Convicted of this murder Henry died himself in prison waiting for execution. What a sad, mad and bitter world we live in!"

"We made it what it is." Gabriel said. "This is the bed we all must lie in."

"Ah well, I will see my old friend again soon and that is well with me. Tell me, where is Anthony. He was a broken man when his Maggie died?"

"He now lives in Glasgow and writes often. Recent letters show that he is regaining an interest in life and giving a thought to coming back to England."

Caroline smiled. "That is good. He is a fine man and should be happy again. Now I come to the place where you must listen to me very carefully, Gabriel and you as well Herb!"

"Today is Friday, is it not?" She looked at her husband who nodded at her. "Well, I should not have waited this long but it has been a terrible week. Monday morning Cornelia and Theodore De Wolfe came to see me. I was not expecting them but these days people do seem to drop by. Nonetheless, I was very pleased to see Cornelia again as it had been several months since we last saw each other. I have always liked Cornelia." She said the last with feeling. The implication was that she did not feel the same way towards Theodore.

"Theodore only stayed for a brief while. He had business in town and I insisted Connie stay with me. He would come by and get her when he was finished."

"I could tell that Cornelia was not her self. Her conversation was distracted. She fidgeted and seemed to have a hard time looking me in the eyes. At first, she resisted telling me what was bothering her. However, I could tell she really wanted to talk to me so I persisted."

"You both may already know this..." she waved her hand as though that did not matter. "It was my great and sad surprise to hear that Theodore was also a member of this so-called 'Circle of Mendes'. I suppose I should not have been surprised as he and Leighton were as thick as thieves over the years. Cornelia was very careful about just how much she told me. She described Desjardin as an unscrupulous man, a drunkard and

a drug user. She never mentioned anything about devil worship and the like and I cannot say I blame her. What fearful shame she must feel!"

"As with Margaret she never let on to her husband that she knew about...all he did. I have no idea how they did that. It was a great relief to her when Desjardin died. That seemed to put an end to the 'Circle'. The silence and lack of questions from you two I would say that you both already knew all this. Did his death put an end to it all?"

"It did." Herbert answered. "In the final years Desjardin had taken to blackmailing many of his 'followers'. They were happy to disband and try and put it all behind them."

"Ha!" Caroline exclaimed. "The door may have been closed but it seems the monster was just waiting."

"What did Cornelia tell you that made you think I am in some sort of danger?" Gabriel asked carefully maintaining his patience.

"I am getting there! Well, because of all that Connie had taken to watching her husband very closely. For all these long years as often as possible she read his mail, listened to his conversations and checked on his whereabouts. For the last twenty years it seemed that all was as it should be."

"A fortnight ago Cornelia found a letter to Theodore from one Mr. Percy Beryline. He calls himself a 'private inquiry agent'. I believe you have worked with him in the past Gabriel." He nodded. "According to Connie, he is a most unsavory sort of person. She was distressed to find the letter contained reference to 'the recent problem with Desjardin'. He gave the time and day when he would arrive at De Wolfe Manor to speak with Theodore about this matter. Theodore always has his meetings in his private office in the Manor. Connie has long since found a way to stay hidden and listen to whatever went on in there without her husband knowing. That is what she did when Beryline came for this conversation."

Gabriel stole a glance at Herbert. The old man was paler than before and worried.

"She repeated their conversation to me in great detail. I will give you the important and fantastic gist of it. It was De Wolfe, Leighton and another who murdered Desjardin. How, she did not know. Now it seems the creature is back..."

"What?" Gabriel interrupted, sitting forward in his chair.

"His ghost or his evil spirit is back and at the De Wolfe Manor. From what Connie gathered, her husband is the only one of the murderers who is still alive. Desjardin is back for revenge and to collect the dues owed to him."

"Good heavens, Cornelia!" Gabriel did not actually smile but it was in his tone.

"You need not look at me like that! I know that you are not a skeptic, Gabriel. No man is more a believer than you are." Caroline shook her head. "Connie would not mistake or make up this."

"What are these dues?" Gabriel asked.

"She did not learn that...or if she did she did not tell me."

"Do you know, Herb?"

The Bishop sighed. "All secrets are broken tonight. Those foolish young men who joined 'The Circle' gave up their souls to the devil! It must be that Desjardin is back for Ted. Time and time again I warned him that the past would come back on him." Herbert said and shook his head.

“And,” Caroline turned her head and looked intently at Gabriel. “It seems from the conversation Theodore had with Beryline that they believe there is a way out of this...if Gabriel will help them?”

“Me! Why? How?”

“I do not know. Have you heard from Ted lately?”

“A few weeks back he came to see me. He was half ways drunk. He mumbled something about needing my help soon....”

“Then he told you about the ghost?” she asked.

“He did say something confusing about some ‘evil force’. As I said he was drunk, I was busy and not in the mood for him. I spoke to Cornelia today on the telephone. She wants me to come for a visit. I have plans to go the middle of next week. She did not mention any of this, though.”

“Do not go there, Gabriel.” Herbert said with vehemence. “Do not get involved with any of this. Caroline is right, there is great danger for you in this matter.”

“How is that? Why is God’s name in any of this my matter. Shit, Herbert, do not sit there like a frightened old man, tell me what you know.”

The insult hit hard. Herbert cringed and looked at his wife. She returned his look. Her eyes were cold, flat and expectant. Their minds so well connected with a lifetime of love they communicated silently.

“I am sorry Gabriel. I prayed you would never have to know this but...” Herbert walked to the fire and stood there looking down in the flames. “Your father, God bless his poor soul, where ever it is....”

Gabriel stood. Caroline reached out and took his hand; not only to offer comfort but also to hold back the temper of the young man she knew as well as she would know her own child. Gabriel looked down at her. His eyes were wide but she could not truly make out his mood.

“Samuel Jackman, Minster and then Bishop of the Church of England, was also a life long member of that blasted ‘Circle.’”

Caroline felt the shock run through Gabriel as though it was a bolt of lightening. His grip tightened and hurt her but she did not pull away.

“That is a lie.” Gabriel spoke with force and anger. “He was a God loving man. He taught me everything that I am today. There was not an evil bone in his body. You had your own reasons for not liking him, Herbert but I never thought you would sink this low.”

Caroline pulled on Gabriel’s hand. Without really noticing, he sat on the edge of the settee beside her. She wanted to hold him as she had done so many times when he was a child and his cold, bitter mother would not.

She knew her husband’s eyes were on her. Would she finally put to words the painful secret that had hung between husband and wife for so many years? If she told Gabriel, what she knew to be absolute truth so would she also be admitting just how well she had known Samuel Jackman? They would know that for many years she and Samuel were deeply in love, mind, body and soul. If she did not tell him then Gabriel would not have a true grasp of the danger he might face. That could not stand. Herbert was right; all secrets were broken that night.

“Gabriel!” she whispered his name. He looked at her, fixing his eyes deep into hers, searching for the truth. She had often thought his large, beautiful brown eyes were

the saddest eyes she had ever seen. In the back of her mind, she heard Samuel's voice, *'Tell him, you must.'* She sighed. "It is true, Gabriel."

"No, it is not!" Gabriel responded. She had felt the anger drain from him. No matter what he said then, he knew Caroline would never lie to him. Neither of them noticed that Hebert left the room.

"That side, the evil side, died when you were just a boy. For the last twenty years, he was well and truly all that you thought he was. Every day and in a million ways he fought to make up for all the terrible things he had done. I did all I could to help. I prayed with him, cried with him. In a way I was his confessor."

"Amongst other things!" Gabriel said with a slight sneer.

She would not let that hurt her or stop her. It might finally be time to grow up. "More than you will ever know I am sorry for all the pain this will cause you. Until the night of Desjardin's death and for two decades before that, Samuel was more or less his right hand man, his blasphemous counterpart. Susan knew it, all of it. I think Margaret told her or the other way around. I also believe that is what turned your mother away from your father."

"God almighty, Caroline...!" He still searched her eyes and struggled to find words.

"It was De Wolfe, Leighton and Samuel who killed Desjardin. That is how you fall into this mess. De Wolfe is going to ask you to help him. It is up to you if you do but I pray with all my heart you do not. You owe nothing to him. You must know you cannot trust Theodore. He may be an old man and seemingly docile but I do not believe he has truly turned from the dark side. I am so sorry, Gabriel. I so wanted you never learn about Samuel. Please do not feel too badly."

"Not feel badly? You just told me my father was a murdering, adulterous, Satan worshipping hypocrite. Do you expect me to jump for joy?" He was shocked to the core, exhausted and angry. He saw Caroline flinch as he said 'adulterous'. Shame of that powerful but forbidden lust still cut her. "I am going to leave now, Caroline. Do you want me to find Herbert and send him to you?"

"No. He will come on his own. Keep in touch and tell me what is going on. I will go mad with worry other wise. And no matter what, please stay safe."

He leaned down, kissed her cheek and left the room.

Gabriel was glad when he reached his home to find that Lee and Sue Lyn had already retired. He was not in the mood for any sort of conversation. The thought that his father was a Satanist and a murderer was ridiculous. He decided that as sad as it was, Caroline's illness had demented and confused her mind. Now he had the 'mountain murders' to deal with and that was what he would concentrate on.

It was a long while before he fell asleep. For the first time in a long while, he slept without dreams of any kind.

"Who's she when she's home?" The cook from the Peacock Valley Inn asked, catching the eye of the housekeeper and nodded out the kitchen window to the lush back gardens.

"The one with the ever so grand hat?" The housekeeper asked with a smile.

"I ain't never seen so many feathers." Cook laughed. "Must be some damned naked birds shivering, I'd say."

“She is Madam Isabelle Lucci.” Housekeeper took a large bite from freshly baked lemon cake. “You know!” She continued at the look of confusion she got. “You’ve heard of her. She’s that medium that’s all the talk of London.”

“Oh!” Cook stopped rolling the mound of bread dough to scratch her forehead. “One of those that talks to the dead, eh? Those rich idiots will pay for anything.”

“Well, she’s using that money here today and that is all that matters for any of us.” Housekeeper pulled a list from her pocket, handed it to the cook. “This is what she wants for her dinner and it is to be delivered to her room precisely at 8:20 pm. Not a minute before or after.”

“What?” Cook exclaimed. “Rack of lamb, roasted potatoes and string beans in garlic! Who the flippin’ hell...she’ll eat from the set menu! This isn’t bloody Buckingham Palace. Anyways, the lambs out. Where am I gonna get a lamb in flipping December?”

“Sorry, dear!” Housekeeper opened the larder and pulled out several large brown paper packages. “Madam Lucci brought one with her. Along with all the fixin’s for two. It seems Madam Lucci’s ‘companion’ will be joining her. That will be in more ways than one!”

“Shit! As if I ain’t got enough to do. Now I got to cook a feast for some illicit love nest.”

“Don’t be such an old prude. Come on. I will help while I have a free minute. What do you want me to do?” Housekeeper paused and rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “She’s ordered a fragrant bath be brought up to her soon as the water’s ready as well. I have to say I would like a look at this ‘companion’. I will bet he is a lovely piece of goods.”

From where Isabelle sat in the garden, she could clearly see De Wolfe Manor stretched out across the top of Wolfe Mountain. It was a dark and huge building, more like a castle than a Manor house. Five years had past since her brief affair with Owen De Wolfe and even then, she had only been in the house for a few hours. There had been another brief visit the previous spring but that told her nothing. She thought that Gabriel would have to bring her closer if she was to pick up anything.

A young house cleaner was sweeping near by steps.

“That is a remarkable building.” Isabelle said and the girl followed her gaze.

“Yes, Ma’am. De Wolfe Manor. Terrible place it is!”

“Why is that?”

“I ain’t supposed to say.” The girl looked over her shoulder and shrugged. “It’s haunted.”

“Really!” Isabelle smiled. “Do tell me about it. I just love all things ‘other worldly’ So many people think it is all hogwash but I believe completely.”

“Me as well.” The girl said with excitement. “My ma worked up there for years and now my sister does. They said there is a wee ghostie...a little fart that walks the top floor. And he’s mean one, too! A killer if you ask me. I wouldn’t work up there no matter what they paid me.”

“A killing child ghost? Now that is unusual. Is there a story that goes along with him?”

“Well,” the girl was quickly warming up to the subject. “Seems he has been there for hundreds of years. The house has stood there in one manner or the other for a very

long time. They say his father's mistress murdered him. She slashed his throat, poor little fart. Now he walks around crying for his Mommy!"

"That is sad. When I hear of these things, I often wonder why someone from the other side does not come and rescue the lost souls. It is so unfair."

"Oh, they won't want him. He's gone bad, that one and turned to the dark side."

"But you said he was only a child?"

"Aye but now he wants revenge. Hates all women and carries a knife with him. None of them that work there will go up to the top floor. I don't see why he just stays there. Hells bells, there ain't no reason why he don't go downstairs. It'll happen one day, mark my words."

"That was the part of the house where he died." Isabelle explained. "It is very likely he cannot realize that there is more to the house. He will stay locked in the place and time of his horror until he sees the light."

"If you ask me that light would be the fires of Hell. Anyways, I think he might have already left the attic. Been some terrible murders around these parts in the last few years and no one ever been napped for it. I think it was him, has to be. Gotta go Ma'am. Housekeeper will bite me for malingering." She disappeared back into the Peacock Valley Inn.

As the afternoon passed and the hour of Gabriel's arrival grew closer, Isabelle became more and more excited. It had been almost a fortnight since she had seen him and then only for a few hours. This time he would stay for the night and bring her back to London with him. It was the longest time they shared together for a while.

Their long periods apart were her fault and she knew it. Gabriel would always make time for her. She had let the demands of her career keep her away from him. That night she decided she would make it up to him.

She thoroughly enjoyed her bath and took a great deal of time and effort to look her most alluring. She put on her prettiest and newest dress, underneath she wore nothing but garter belt and the black silk stockings that so intrigued Gabriel.

At 8:15, a trolley loaded with wonderful foods rolled into her room. A small round table was set with the best linens. A bottle of Gabriel's favorite wine sat center table and two chairs across from each other. Isabelle was thrilled, she pulled several notes from her purse and handed them out.

"This is for Cook!" She held up a five-pound note. "Where will I find her?"

"That's me, Ma'am!" Cook beamed, took the note and pushed into her amble bosom.

Isabelle quickly hustled them all out of the room and took a last look in the mirror. Exactly on time, as usual, she heard the familiar sound of Gabriel's footfall in the hallway. He had just raised his hand to knock when she opened the door and pulled him into the room.

She threw her arms around him and held him tightly. "God, I missed you, so much!" She smiled up at him, pushing his long, brown hair back, briefly studied his handsome face. He did not have a chance to make any response as she pulled his head down and kissed him with great passion. The kiss finished, she buried her face in his chest. She took a deep breath. His familiar scent, outlined with his favorite fennel soap thrilled her.

As he returned her embrace, she realized he also looked over her towards the table laid out behind her. She laughed, pulled away and slapped his arm lightly.

“My God, Isabelle!” He pulled her with him to the tableside and lifted a dish cover. “With a welcome like that, a man hardly knows which hunger to feed first.” He slid one hand up her waist to a breast.

“Food, first! It will grow cold, I will not!”

As they ate the perfectly prepared food she told him of all she had done in the last two weeks. Gabriel enjoyed watching her when she spoke of her work. The joy she took from giving some comfort to grieving people showed in her eyes. She related the wonder of her clients and the tearful happiness they felt when she reunited them with their deceased loved one. Every phrase decorated with the movement of her long graceful hands. She still had an Italian accent. When she was excited, happy or angry it was always stronger.

When all that remained of their meal was a half bottle of red wine, Isabelle rolled the table aside. She slid off her shoes. “As I was saying, Gabriel, I truly missed you!” She lifted one leg and placed a foot gently up his thigh. “Did you miss me?”

“You have no idea how much! You leave my bed chilly and empty too long, Isabelle. I have been a sad and lonely man. What will you do to make it up to me, I wonder?” As he spoke, his voice deepened with passion and he slid his hand up her leg, pushing the skirt up.

“What ever your heart desires.” She pushed her foot further up his leg.

“My heart? Well, it is not my heart I am thinking about right now.” He lifted her other leg, placing both of her feet on his lap. He studied her legs and pushed the skirt a little higher. “Lovely stockings, Belle! It is almost a shame to have to remove them.”

“But you did not answer my question, what can I do to make up for my long neglect?” As she spoke, she shifted her position so her skirt fell up her thighs and he saw very clearly that she wore no underwear.

She saw his jaw tighten and heard him gasp slightly. “That is a very good start.”

“You like what you see, Gabriel?”

He nodded. The slow wide smile she loved so much spread across his face. “It is warm in here, Isabelle. Don’t you want to open the buttons on your dress?”

With deliberate slowness, she opened the buttons to the waist. She parted the sides of her bodice only slightly and blew down her body. “You are right. It is hot but I am feeling only somewhat better.”

Gabriel loved it when Isabelle teased him. She knew that and learned to do it very well. He leaned forward, pushed the skirt up to her waist. The smell of her perfume and body filled his senses. “Show me!” he whispered.

“Show you what?” she feigned innocence.

“Open your dress. Show me your breasts.”

She slid one arm out of the dress and then the other but kept her breasts covered until her arms were free. She let the dress fall running her hands across her breasts, cupping them and still keeping them from his view.

“Isabelle.” He whispered. “Show me!”

She moved her hands, slightly pulling her nipples. She gave him a few seconds to look then leaned forward ran her tongue across his lips.

“Stand.” His breath hot on her face as he moved her feet to the floor. She stood, let the dress fall to the floor and kicked it aside. She turned her slowly around, stood behind her, placed one hand on a breast, the other between her legs and pulled her body against his.

“What a beautiful body you have.” He was looking at her in the full-length mirror.

“You like what you see?” She pushed her body back harder against his, moving slightly up and down. He kissed her shoulder, ran his tongue up her neck and whispered in her ear. She did not understand his words but took his meaning. She continued the swaying motion and felt as he opened the buttons on his trousers.

He turned her around, not roughly but firmly. She pushed him slightly away.

“First Gabriel, take your clothes off for me?”

He would not tease or take his time. The jacket and shirt he dropped on the floor, then one long boot and then the other. “No, let me!” She stepped up to him and he began to lower his trousers. She slid her hands around his buttocks, lowered his trousers, kissing his penis.

Gabriel reached down and held her head in place. “That is a fine way to make up to me my love!” After only a few minutes, he lifted her into his arms, kissed her with all his consuming passion and carried her to the bed.

It was dawn when she woke. Gabriel was sitting on the window seat, smoking a cigarette and looking up De Wolfe Mountain.

“So is it the murders that have happened around here that is your new investigation?” She yawned and asked sleepily.

He nodded, watching as she wrapped in a bed sheet and sat next to him. “Did you pick up anything?”

“Not on the murders. A talkative maid told me.” She followed his gaze to the rambling mountain top house. “Tell me about the murders?”

“There are four that I know of but there may be more!” He shrugged. “All of them young females, beaten, raped and slaughtered. Three of them were in De Wolfe employ.”

“Good Lord! Gabriel, these people are your friends. You cannot believe it was one of them?”

“I do not believe anything right now. I have an open mind but I will find out the truth, have no doubts in that.”

“Well, all I sensed was a vague feeling of unease. You will have to bring me closer if you want anything useful. But I will not go in the house of the bitch, Cornelia!”

Gabriel shook his head. “It is beyond me why you two hate each other so much!”

“She is a pig that is why!”

“Right...well enough of that. A road runs up to a rocky cliff that runs just under an unused part of the Manor. You can get a good view of the building, at the most thirty feet away. We can easily go there. Will that help?”

“Yes, of course.”

He pulled her to him, kissed her forehead, her cheeks and then her lips. “You were wonderful last night, Isabelle.”

She sighed, looking into his deep brown eyes. “Why does it have to end, Gabriel? Can’t we stay here forever? Just you and I...locked away from the world. Would that be wrong?”

“Wouldn’t you grow bored with only me in your bed? You had a problem with that a year ago.” There was sudden bitterness in his tone, an old pain he had obviously not forgotten.

“That year has been a million nights. I have changed. Haven’t you noticed?” familiar tears of shame and regret filled her eyes.

“Yes, I have. Nevertheless, actions done cannot be undone, isn’t that a fact? Do not cry, Isabelle. We must enjoy this time and not worry about tomorrow.” He wanted to comfort her, to spare her from the pain of her infidelity and to tell her he had forgiven her. However, he had never lied to her and he would not start then. He pulled the sheet away from her body, put his hands around her waist and pulled her onto his lap.

It was near to noon when Gabriel pulled his horse and clip to a halt on the overlook just under Wolfe Manor.

“It is too high up!” Isabelle complained as he studied the beautiful valley below. She held on tightly to his arm.

He laughed quietly. “What a coward you are! Look at the view, it is breath taking!”

“No!” She turned and went to a stone bench against the rocky wall and under a growth of bushes and trees that had stubbornly grown out from cracks in the wall. “It is too far up and I do not like it!”

“Do not worry. I will not throw you over; not today anyway!” He sat next to her. She moved to the end of the bench. “Sorry!” he added, “just my odd sense of humor.”

“I do not like your humor, Gabriel. Sometimes you are an idiot!”

“I was....”

“Just be quiet. I need to concentrate.” She stood for a moment, looking through the trees to the walls of Wolfe Manor. She mumbled a prayer in Italian and crossed her body. She took a sketchbook and pencils from her art bag. She folded the book to fresh pages and took a pencil in each hand.

Gabriel turned slightly to watch her. He had seen her do this many times and it never ceased to amaze him. She lowered her head and closed her eyes. With both hands, moving quickly and completely independently of each other she began to draw. The right hand did the heavy lines, the left hand the shading. Faster and faster, she drew and the page quickly filled. She stopped suddenly, raised her hands slightly but did not open her eyes or lift her head. Gabriel took his cue and turned to a new page. She lowered her hands and their fluid movements began again. Three drawings were completed before she gasped, dropped the pencils, opened her eyes and raised her head. She was deathly pale, beads of sweat rolled down her face.

He knew from experience that she was fairly near a faint. He tossed the sketchbook to the ground, held her in one arm and with the other pulled a flask of whiskey from his jacket pocket. He flipped open the lid and held the flask to her mouth. ‘Drink some!’ he whispered to her. She took a large mouthful and then another. She fell against him, breathing heavily.

He gave her several minutes to recover then closed the art book without looking at the drawings, placed it and her pencils in her bag. He helped her back to his small carriage. They rode in silence back to the Inn. They were alone in their room before she spoke when she did it was a torrent of Italian.

“English, Isabelle, English! What did you learn?” He asked as he opened the sketchbook.

She snatched it from him, holding it tightly against her body. “Gabriel! You cannot do this investigation. There is no place there for your help.”

“Why? What did you see?” He tried to pull the book from her but she backed away.

“There is true evil in that house. It is far too powerful.” There was fear and panic in her eyes. He had witnessed her upset before over ‘things’ she had seen but never like this.

He pulled the book from her and opened it. She turned away, sitting heavily on the bed. The first was a cloaked figure with his head lowered. He had the appearance of a monk in prayer. Under it, she had written the word; ‘Evil’

“Do you know who that is?” He asked. Isabelle shook her head and did not answer. Tears fell down her cheeks.

“Christ, Isabelle, pull yourself together.” Gabriel snapped at her.

He turned the page. The second drawing was a small boy. He had short, thickly cropped hair, hollow dark eyes and a strange thin smile. In his right hand, he held a knife. Gabriel shuddered and turned to the final drawing. The page was a large dark mass, just a scribble of circles, forming a dark center.

Gabriel again handed her the whiskey flask. “Have some!” He insisted when she pushed his hand away.

“You want me drunk so I will talk, I know that!”

“Yes! If that is what it will take.”

She took the flask and took several large swallows before he pulled it away from her. “Bloody emotional Italians!” He muttered “I have to find myself a cold hearted German woman!”

“I hate you!” She threw herself back on the bed.

He shook his head and smiled. “You love me then you hate me. Make up your mind.”

She reached up pulled him by his hair down beside her. “I do love you, Gabriel and you know just how much. I do not want you to do this investigation. There is too much danger at Wolfe Manor. That thing...that dark thing is there waiting for you.”

He took her hand from his hair. “For me? Are you certain?”

“Yes! And others like you.”

“Who? What do you mean ‘others like me’?”

“Three or four others. I do not know...! All of you are in danger. Please, there are other crimes to solve. You must not do this one.”

“I will do this whether there is danger or not and whether or not you help me. It is up to you, Isabelle. Help me or let me and others walk blind into the danger you speak of.”

“Shit!” She cursed, sat up and opened the sketchbook to her first drawing. “This is...was a man who thought himself holy, but he was only evil. He has escaped from Hell!”

“Escaped from Hell? That is new.”

“No it is not! Sometimes it can happen. He is powerful, dark and he wants you and the others. He wants Cornelia. I told you she was evil!”

“You are making that up to sway me. It will not work, Isabelle!”

She sighed. “I am not. If you are so stubborn then you will see for yourself.” She turned two pages to the drawing of the boy. “This child haunts there also and has been there a very long time, maybe 200 years and more. His stepmother killed him. She hated him because he was so much like his real mother. She opened his throat with the knife. He was seven years old. He hates all females and carries the knife for revenge.”

Gabriel scratched his head. “You told me the earth bounds could do no real harm. Other than throw small items, slam doors and moan and the like they were unable to harm the living.”

“That is what they believe. As with the living, everything exists because we believe it does. Why can’t I make you understand that?”

“Just thick, I guess. Therefore, this fellow believes he can hurt with his knife and so he can. It is as simple as that?”

“Gabriel, if it was as ‘simple’ as that existence for the dead and life for the living would be so easy. True belief does not come ‘easy’.”

“Has he killed since he has been dead?”

She shook her head. “All I know for sure is that he thinks of nothing else. Can you imagine the torment of an insane child?”

“That is not my concern.”

“Gabriel, that place he is stuck in is a very low world. And you, priest, already know that.”

“I have told you so many times, I am not a priest! I am a Minister of the Church of England.”

“So you say. Whatever you are, you know what harm true evil can do and true evil waits in the De Wolfe home. There are simple ghosts, yes, and for the most part, I have never heard a true story of them doing serious harm. But there are also evil spirits, dark entities. You and your Church of England prayers are no match. For the sake of Christ, Gabriel at least tell me that you realize this!”

He smiled. “You mean, for Christ’s Sake!”

“Whatever I mean...just tell me you understand!”

“Yes! I understand. I know what evil spirits can do. More than anyone else I know just what I can do!” Gabriel turned to her final drawing. “What in Hell is this?”

Feeling the effects of the whiskey Isabelle pulled her legs under her and turned to face her companion. “How correct you are!” She narrowed her eyes and glared at him.

“What?”

“This is Hell!” She slapped her hand on the penciled page. “And that is what you will find in Wolfe Manor.”

“There is no such place as Hell. I need facts not your Italian imagination.”

“This is the hell of the nightmare you realize the moment as your life is taken from you. That black moment when you see evil win.” Isabelle was crying again.

“Don’t you see,” she tore the page from the book and ripped it into many small pieces, “that blackness is your own death!” She threw her arms around his neck and clung to him.

He held her until she calmed down. He had seen her like this before, not enough sleep, too much emotion and whiskey, she would be better shortly. Even still, her warnings reached him. Isabelle was a powerful physic. She was rarely wrong.

They spoke very little as they rode back to London. Each lost in their own thoughts. For a while, she rested against Gabriel and slept. He wished he could give her what she wanted; simple peace of mind, but pride is an unforgiving and harsh taskmaster. Gabriel demanded strict loyalty from friend or lover. Isabelle had broken this so he believed that now he gave her all he could afford.

“When will I see you again?” She asked when they reached her doorstep.

“What a short and selective memory, Isabelle! Remember you are to spend the weekend with me. I will send a carriage for you at six.” He kissed her gently and whispered in her ear. “You will need to stay that extra night if you are still planning on making up to me for your absence.”

“Oh yes, that woman you desire so much. You want me to meet her. Will she be there?”

“I desire her, as you put it, only to join us in our investigations. If she comes it will be Sunday morning.”

“Tomorrow? My, you are in a rush! And if she does not come?”

“Then I shall go and get her. She fills my needs exactly. I am not worried. She is in such a sad state; she must come and will accept my offer.”

Isabelle watched as Gabriel pulled away. “I will not lose you, Gabriel, no matter what you desire. I would die first.” She thought that not for the first time.

Anthony Lucci stood the kitchen window of his Glasgow apartment. Night fell early that time of year in Scotland. The white-gray sky was quickly turning charcoal. Large snowflakes landed on the window and instantly melted.

“It’s snowing.” He said over his shoulder to Victor, his valet. “It seems like just yesterday I was complaining because of the heat.”

Victor mumbled and clattered the tea dishes into the sink. He never made secret how much he disliked life in Scotland.

“I doubt it is snowing in London.” Tony smiled and continued his weather report. “Mind you, Gabriel mentioned in his last letter how quickly winter had set in.”

Victor turned off the water tap. “Then all is well and good back in lovely London is it?”

“Yes, I suppose it is. He is wondering what I am doing to pass the time.”

“Won’t be much to write back on that, will there, Sir?”

Tony left the kitchen, pulled on his over coat and stepped out onto the balcony. He sat on the stone bench, leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. The cold wind was refreshing. The snow flakes tickling slightly as they landed on face.

A year and two months had passed since the last time he saw Margaret. It was his birthday and she came into the city to pay him a surprise visit. He was completely surprised and very pleased to see her. She brought with her a bottle of his favorite whiskey.

“I have a very special toast to make to you, Tony!” She smiled coyly at him as he poured two glasses and handed her one.

“Very special?”

“Yes. To you, my love, I wish a very Happy Birthday with many, many more to come. May we spend every one of those birthdays together,” she paused and they touched glasses, “as man and wife.”

She laughed with joy when he just blinked at her his jaw had dropped slightly. "Are you saying what I think you are saying?" He whispered hardly daring to believe his ears.

She sighed, reached up and put her arms around his neck. "I have made you wait far too long Tony and for that I am so very sorry. I should have left Henry the very first time I lay with you. Lord, I knew then you were the only man for me. I am going to tell him the truth, he will divorce me easily and you know the reason for that even more than I do. After that is done, Anthony Lucci will you marry me?"

"My sweet Maggie...yes, of course I will." He held her close for a long while, afraid she might see the tears of happiness in his eyes.

She stayed that night and left for her husband's house the following morning. Against his better judgment, he let her go alone to end her marriage. "You worry too much! In all these years, Henry has never laid a hand on me in anger. It seems that all he thinks about these days is money. When I tell him I will not require him to support me, he will be satisfied. I will be back tomorrow morning and I will never leave your side again." She had said that with absolute conviction. "You are stuck with me now, Count Lucci!"

By noon that next day, Tony had started to worry. At two, he was preparing to leave for the Leighton home when Bishop Underhill and Gabriel came to his door. The next few hours had become a blur and for that, if nothing else he was grateful. In nightmares he could still hear Gabriel say, 'I am so sorry, Tony, Margaret is dead!' Gabriel stayed with him day and night for weeks. He sat beside him with through every moment of Leighton's trial and in the darker moments kept the grief stricken man sane and alive.

So many well-meaning people gave him advice and it was mostly the same. Give it time...time heals all wounds. "That is a load of horse shit." Gabriel told him. "There is not enough time in any mans life to heal that kind of wound, Tony. Face it and get used to it; it is there forever. One day you will realize that you have two choices. The easiest one is to give up, become a dried up, flaccid old man full of bitterness and self-pity. On the other hand, you will take this blasted heartache and turn it into energy and, God almighty, believe me the energy of hate is a powerful thing. Then turn that energy into something good."

"Is that what you did when Helena died? Is that why you left the church and began to hunt down murderers?" Tony asked.

"At first it was going to be just that one murderer, the one who slaughtered my lady. As of yet I have not found him but I will. Until then I fill my time hunting down other murderers. That is how I burn the energy of my hate so it does not burn me. One day, after he is in the ground I will go back to the church." Gabriel shrugged. "That is if I am not swinging on some gallows."

Tony moved to Scotland and waited for the day to come when he would realize he had two choices.

The snow turned to a heavy rain. His clothes were soaked through. For a long time he sat there wet and shivering. Perhaps the day of choices had finally come. How easy it would be just to stay there and let the cold wind freeze the life out of him and maybe he would be walking with Margaret by mornings light.

A slight scratching on the bricks behind him caught his attention. A small gray and white female dove perched on a stone ledge, under an overhang and no more than two feet away. Tony moved to get a closer look, thinking she would most likely fly off but the dove stayed put. Clearly, she watched him, with one eye and then the other, bobbing her head up and down.

"Hello there, little lady." He whispered. "Don't you know that birds do not fly in the night time or in the rain?" She fluttered her wings and flew down to the stone railing beside him. "At least that is what I always thought!"

Still watching Tony the bird bobbed a few more times and cooed softly. "And the same to you, I am sure!" He smiled and said. She lifted off, flew in close circles around him three times and to his surprise landed on his left knee.

A memory came back to him then. It was as clear as though it has just happened. It was the evening after the funeral of Helena Jackman. He and Margaret were alone in her studio.

"That poor man!" She said in reference to Gabriel. "Do you know what he just told me?"

"No." Tony answered.

"The last time he saw Helena was that Saturday morning. She was leaving to go on a shopping trip. He feels dreadful because his last words to her were not very nice."

"What did he say to her?"

"It is silly really. I told him that he should not worry about it. He wanted her to buy some things for her self. Apparently, she rarely spent any money on herself. He told that as a ministers wife she must look her best at all times and that she had better come home with some new dresses."

"Well, it is true though. As beautiful as Helena was she paid very little attention to fashion."

"You are missing the point, Tony. He will never see her again, at least not in this lifetime and the last thing he told her was that she had disappointed him in some way."

"Unfortunately that is the way of dying, Maggie. Death is a sudden thief. Only the very lucky few know it is coming and get a chance to say proper good byes."

"Then we must never part without saying 'I love you'. For now and forever, we will not part on bad words. Do you agree?"

"Yes, of course. But do you really think that would help which ever of us might be left behind?"

"I do. I remember my mother had a friend who was a spirit medium. She told us that when we are on the other side we can assume the shapes of small animals and return to our loved ones for a visit."

"You can not tell me you actually believe that! You are starting to sound too much like Isabelle. There is no 'other side'! Dead is simply dead and gone."

"You are wrong in that Tony. There is a life after this one. I not only believe that I feel it surely. If I die before you..."

"Maggie, please be quiet. Do not even say that."

"If I die before you I will come back and see you again. That is my solemn promise. I will come as a dove. I know they are your favorite birds."

"That is nice, my love. However, you are not going to die...not for a very, very long time. That is my promise to you."

With amazement, he stared at the little bird and she stared back at him. He moved his leg and she hopped to the other knee.

“Maggie? No, it can’t be.”

The dove cooed twice and turned to face him straight on. She lowered her head and seemed to be looking at him with both eyes. She stretched her wings and flew up to his shoulder. She pecked lightly at his neck then lifted off and disappeared into the night sky.

“Good God!” he muttered. A lifelong atheist became a strong believer at that moment. He waited for a while, hoping the bird might come back. When she did not he stood and went back into the apartment.

Victor came out of his bedroom, looking anxiously at Tony. “It is awfully wet and cold to be sitting out there, don’t you think?”

“Yes, it is and no doubt I will pay for it with a terrible cold. However, it will be worth it. First thing in the morning, Victor, start packing. We are going home.”

“Back to Italy?” Victor asked with dismay.

Tony laughed. “No. Home is in London. We are going home.”

Chapter Three

Elizabeth hated the Three Bells. She hated the very building itself. It had stood in some form or other for 200 years at the end of Barrows Street at the very edge of London's worn and evil East End. The tiny, dark rooms, dirty windows and narrow halls depressed her. The atmosphere, constantly thick with unwashed bodies and stale tobacco smoke sickened her. Every stick of wood slanted obviously down towards the river as though it would happily slid into the waters and out of sight. Most of all she resented what it represented for her; the total loss of her life as it had been and the realization of a new, dark and changeless world. Gone forever was a life of ignorant luxury and wonderful possibilities. Now her world was the day-to-day struggle against mean poverty and the meaner base of human existence.

She knew why Rose Partridge took her on as waitress. She was a freak show, a source of new entertainment for her customers. How they all loved to see the mighty fall. Elizabeth had lived the life they longed for and they all found a strong measure of pleasure having their ale placed before them by someone who had fallen so far. She endured and ignored the jokes, insults and laughter without response. Her pride and dignity she held tightly in place and saw them for what they were, hapless, terrified and lost. At the Three Bells, they would drink their miserable lives away. God willing, one day she would be free of this place, they never would be.

It was a Saturday night and not too far from closing time. The Bells was as usual mayhem.

Rose pushed her large bulk through the crowd and smiled down at Elizabeth, two gold teeth, her pride and joy, glittered in the dim light. "That fellow with the big hat wants a word with you, Lizzie!" She nodded towards a single table at the back of the room. He had been there the last few nights and he made no effort to hide that he watched Elizabeth.

"That Chinaman's my customer!" Kitty pushed her way in front between the two women. Kitty was as ugly a female as possible, in manner and look. The other waitresses had shown certain amounts of kindness mixed in with their curiosity but Kitty was mean and spiteful raking every opportunity to dig and hurt. "If he wants anything, I'll get it."

"What he wants, Kitty is a word with Lizzie." Rose's smile turned slightly sour. "You mind your other customers. He is better than most we get in here so you both best be polite." She took Elizabeth's arm and pushed her slightly in his direction.

"I don't know him. What does he want?" Elizabeth asked but Rose had turned away.

She squared her shoulders, made ready for whatever insult was about to come and headed across the room. The tall, broad shouldered and well-built stranger stood as Elizabeth approached. He wore a long navy coat and wide black leather hat. The hat pulled down on such an angle the shadow hit most of his face.

“Miss Elizabeth Leighton?” He asked, positioning himself and Elizabeth away from nosey onlookers.

“Yes?” It had been a long time since anyone had addressed her properly. “Do I know you?”

“No, my loss...but that may change. My name is Lee Woo.” He placed a business card in her hand. “My employer assumes you are not satisfied with your present position and requests a meeting with you tomorrow morning at ten.”

She looked at the card. It had an address but no name. “This is very odd, Mr. Woo. May I ask the name of your employer?”

“Tomorrow, Miss Leighton. You will learn that and so much more, that is if you want to leave this awful world you have fallen into.” He raised his hat slightly turned and walked away.

She shrugged and was far too busy to give him or his message much thought. It was later while the employees cleaned and accounted with Rose when Kitty started in on her.

“So what’d he want then?” Kitty snarled, loud enough for all to hear. “Did he offer you a few pennies for a blow? Maybe a lady like you doesn’t know what a blow is!”

“Leave her alone, Kitty.” Betty, Elizabeth’s roommate took a place next to her.

“Yeah!” May, another Three Bells waitress waved her finger at Kitty. “You are always down on Lizzie. What’s up your shitting nose anyways? You’s just jealous, that’s all!”

Elizabeth was tired, hot and more than a little fed up with Kitty’s constant harassment. “I can speak for myself.” She snapped at May. “Since you asked, Kitty, yes he did ask me for a blow job but I told him you were the one here who offers hand outs. He said he rather fuck his bitch dog.” Kitty stared at her with shock and seemed unable to find a come back. Elizabeth was just barely aware that Rose had joined the watching circle. “And you know what, Kitty? I’d rather fuck his bitch too!”

Kitty snapped out of her trance, raised a fat hand and swung. Elizabeth was faster. She ducked and came up quickly catching Kitty her by the shoulder, shoving her backwards. The heel of her shoe snagged the hem of her skirt and she sprawled on her wide backside.

“Alright! Enough!” Rose stepped forward, pulling Elizabeth back. “All of you get to your rooms.” She helped Kitty up to her feet and Betty pulled Elizabeth up the stairs and into their bedroom.

Laughing Betty fell onto her bed. “Jesus shitting Hell, good for you, Liz! It is about time you stood up to the bitch.”

“Well, I am just sick to death of her.” She sat on her rickety cot, kicked off her shoes and rubbed sore feet. “It is not just me, Betty. Kitty is rude to everyone, customers mostly. Why does Rose put up with her? Maybe it is time for ‘Shitty Kitty’ to move on. Does Rose know that that is what the locals call her?”

“Well, of course she does!” Betty sat up and sighed. She sat in silence for a moment. With her pretty head on a slight angle, she bit her lip and reminded Elizabeth of a puzzled child.

"What's wrong, Betty? Rose should fire Kitty and you know it. I have only been here three months and I have more regulars than she does. I make twice as much in tips as she does."

"Rose will never fire Kitty, Liz. Not in a million years. Hell's bells...don't you ever use your eyes."

"What?"

"Them two! Rose and Kitty! Don't you ever see them together? Those two dykes been at each other for years."

"They're lesbians?"

Betty nodded. "Don't know what that ugly bitch has to offer but whatever it is...well; she's got old Rose just where she wants her."

"Shit!" Elizabeth muttered as the reality of it all settled on her. "Guess I am in the deep and murky."

"I'd say!" Betty agreed. "But it will pass. Rose is no fool. There aren't none as pretty as you around here. You are good for business. Rose 'ill put Kitty in her place. Still, if I was you I keep an eye on my back for the time being. Kitty is bloody mad as a hatter and she will have it out for you when Rose ain't looking. She would stick a shiv in your back as easy as pie!"

As worn out as she was sleep was hard to come by that night. Elizabeth needed to have employment and as much as she detested the Three Bells without it, she would be in great difficulty. Without reference or experience, it had taken months to find this shady position and God knew how she would ever find another.

When she was sure that Betty was asleep, she fished around in her skirt pockets and found the calling card given by the strange Mr. Woo. At the time, she thought little of it all. It was not wise to take suggestions given in such a place as the Bells with much creditability. However, she decided she was not in the place where she could take anything for granted. The card simply read, Random House, 142 Danbury Court. It was in Highgate, a very exclusive part of London and only a few blocks from her life before. Rose kept the Bell closed Sundays. Elizabeth decided to go to Danbury Court and hope for the best.

At eight that morning she warmed water and dragged the bucket back to her room. Quietly, as Betty was still sleeping she washed her hair and body. She had brought one good dress with her when she moved in to the pub. It was lavender chiffon, draped with sheer ivory lace. Two summers before it was the height of fashion and fit her like a glove. Now it was winter, cold outside and hardly the time for chiffon. She had lost a fair amount of weight so the dress hung on her. Oh well, she thought, it will have to do.

She dried, brushed her hair and pulled it back into a loose braid, and then tied it with a ribbon she took from her dress. During the last year, her thick, red hair had grown quickly and now reached her waist. She had not had the time or the extra money to have it styled. Lastly, she pulled on her coat, her mother's pearl earrings and all the money she had into her purse. Nothing was ever secure in the Bells.

At nine, she stepped out of her room, carefully closing the door and checking the hallway for Kitty. Elizabeth did not want another run in with her. The only way out was through the main bar. She was surprised to find Rose Partridge there. Dressed in a flamboyant green robe and it seemed very little else she sat at an open window looking

down the muddy slope to the fast moving river below. A cold breeze blew in, the morning sunlight showing the stained and worn décor. Rose was holding a half empty whiskey glass up to her face as though the cool glass eased a headache. She did not hear Elizabeth until she was directly behind her.

"Oh, Jesus! You didn't half scare me!" She started, turned and moved the glass from her face. A large black bruise spread down from her left eye almost to her cheek. "I fell out of bed!" She said quickly then shook her head sadly. "Don't ask." She added.

The actions of the erratic and violent Kitty, Elizabeth decided and her heart went out to Rose. She had always been kind in a small degree with her. Even though her reasons were mercenary, still Elizabeth appreciated it. "I want to apologize for my argument with Kitty last night, Mrs. Partridge. I am not usually a violent person but she...truly, she asked for it."

Rose sighed, shifted her weight, the chair under her groaned. "It was not your fault." She smiled and winced when the smile reached her swollen cheek. "Frankly, I am surprised you didn't let her have it before then. Are you going out for your day off?"

Elizabeth nodded.

"If you've a moment, Lizzie, I would like to talk to you." She patted the chair beside her. Elizabeth sat as she wanted, hoping she would make it fast. Rose swallowed the last of her glass and motioned for her companion to have one. Elizabeth declined.

"Well, my dear. You may not know it from the looks of this place but I am a very wealthy woman. Partridge left me a tidy bundle, hidden from the taxman as they say. I have decided that that I have had more than enough of this fucking hole. I am going to sell up. I want to travel, see the world as I know there is far better than this out there." She paused and seemed to gather courage. Elizabeth was feeling more and more uncomfortable. Rose leaned closer allowing the front of her dressing gown to fall open. She could smell the whiskey on her breath and the aroma of an expensive heady perfume. It took all her power not to move away. "You need this bloody job!" a voice in the back of her mind yelled at her.

"I know that my 'friendship' with Kitty is not a secret around here. Shit and hell, I have finished with her. I told her this morning that she has until the end of the week to move out. You are a beautiful woman and I want you to take her place."

Elizabeth stood and took a few steps backwards. "I am not a lesbian." She whispered, feeling her face turn red.

"I know that, love! God...I know that. I could teach you and in time, you may grow to like it. You've no man in your life now; you told me that, what do you have to lose?" She stepped closer and Elizabeth took another step away. "Think about it. You will have all the money you need. You would never have to work in a place like this again. We will leave England and maybe buy a house in southern Spain." She sighed. "I am so sick of Kitty! She is bad tempered and ugly inside and out. What I wouldn't do to have a woman like you."

"No, Mrs. Partridge!" Elizabeth's embarrassment was turning to anger. "I am not interested."

Kitty stepped out from the kitchen. It was very clear that she had been listening. Her blotchy white face flamed purple. She was making a sound like a growl. "You bitches!" She hissed glaring from one woman to the other.

"Fuck, Kitty!" Rose exclaimed. "I told you it was over. Don't start."

Kitty picked up a bottle from the bar top and smashed it. "You'll not ditch me! Not for the likes of that cow." She moved forward, holding the deadly broken glass in front of her.

Elizabeth moved to the door, trying to pull Rose with her. Rose shrugged her away, pulled open the door and pushed Elizabeth outside. Elizabeth made another grab for her but Rose shoved her again, this time knocking her to the ground. "Go and get the police!" Rose yelled, slammed the door and turned the lock. As Elizabeth scrambled to her feet, she heard a female scream from behind the door.

That early on a Sunday morning in that part of London there was no one about, much less a police officer. She ran three blocks to Market Lane and another quarter mile or so before she found one.

"Go to the Three Bells." She demanded, gasping for breath.

"Why?" He sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Murder, you idiot." She yelled at him. "If you don't hurry up."

"Na, there always trouble at that rat hole."

"Is that what you want me to repeat to Chief Inspector Hawkins? I am sure he would be most interested."

He took a second look down at her expensive clothes, blew his whistle to alert other officers and rushed off down the street.

A small crowd circled around. She pushed through them and headed west as fast as she could. Her heart pounded in her chest. She did not stop until the East End was far behind her and reached the familiar shelter of Regents Park. She sat on a secluded bench to gather thoughts and catch breath. Light headed with shock and faint with hunger, she fought to stop her limbs from shaking. The heavy gray sky had opened and a cold drizzle fell. Whatever happened at the Three Bells it was very clear that she no longer had a job or a place to live.

A hired cab took her to 142 Danbury Court. It seemed like a waste of money under the circumstances but as it was, she was still fifteen minutes late when she rang the bell of the expensive brownstone, town house.

"I am Miss Leighton. I am expected." Elizabeth said as flatly as she felt to the girl who came to the door.

"Good Morning, Miss Leighton." An extremely large, smiling man stepped up behind the girl. From his large body shape and deep voice, she knew this was Mr. Lee Woo. "Please come in. Lord, I had no idea what a miserable day it was!"

She stepped into the foyer, tried to return his smile but her lips only stuck on dry teeth. "I am sorry I am late, Mr. Woo. Something unexpected and unpleasant came up!" The girl took her wet coat and disappeared down the hallway.

He nodded. "In that dreadful part of London, everything is unexpected and unpleasant." He leaned forwards slightly, his smile turned to a frown. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, of course!" She answered a little too quickly and tried to pat her slightly messed hair into place. "I will be better though when I know just why I am here."

"You will find it much warmer in here, Miss Leighton." He opened a near by door. She followed him into the parlor. The room was opulent, colorful, and rich with texture and comfort. All of that she did not notice until later, at that moment it was the warmth of the blazing fire that drew her attention. "Do come and sit by the fire." Woo

took her arm and led her to a high back chair. "I will inform Mr. Jackman that you have arrived."

"Jackman!" She repeated when she was alone. She knew the name well. Her parents had friends by that name. She vaguely remembered that they had a son. Could this be him? It must be.

The warmth of the flames spread through her as though a soothing balm. She was terribly hungry. It had been almost twenty-four hours since she last ate. She laid her head back, closed her eyes and tried to relax. The sound of rain tapping against the windows and the soft crackle and hiss of the fire lulled her quickly to asleep.

She was still sleeping when Gabriel came quietly into the room and sat across from her. For a while, he watched her. Her head had fallen slightly to the right and rested on the wing back of the chair. She had not noticed but when Rose pushed her out of the Three Bells, three buttons at her neckline opened. Then the weight of the collar pulled the side of the dress down slightly. Gabriel studied the fine slim line of her neck and the ridge of her collarbone. He wanted to press his face against that lovely place and draw in her aroma. That would certainly be delicious. Perhaps he could move the dress just a little further off her shoulder.

She woke suddenly and sat up straight. Sitting across from her, in silhouette from the fire light was the still figure of a man. "Good Morning, Miss Leighton." He said and from the sound of his voice, she could tell he was smiling.

"I am sorry! I just closed my eyes for a moment. Goodness knows why I would fall asleep." She made a fuss of straightening her shirt to hide her embarrassment.

"No apology needed, sleeping as far as I know is a perfectly natural thing. Let me introduce myself. I am Gabriel Jackman." He leaned forward and offered his hand. With his other hand, he pushed long dark hair back and she caught a glimpse of what seemed to be a very handsome face. She took his hand; it was large, warm and strong. "It is I who should apologize to you for the very untraditional way I brought you to my house."

She had recovered most of her dignity. "Well, Mr. Jackman, I admit that my first reaction was not to come. Then I suppose that curiosity held sway over better judgment."

A near by door opened. Lee Woo and a woman stepped into the room.

"You have met my associate, Mr. Lee Woo. The lovely lady is his wife, Sue Lyn Woo."

"How do you do?" Mrs. Woo smiled. She also took Elizabeth's hand and held it firmly. She was tall, slim, long shinning blue-black hair hung straight down her back. Her dark eyes glittered like diamonds in the fire light. Her skin was like smooth ivory silk. She was by far the most beautiful Chinese woman Elizabeth had ever seen. "You are hungry!" She said as a fact and not a question. "I will get tea and buns!"

"No please do not go to all that bother. I am fine."

"Not a bother, Miss Leighton. I have a new batch of sticky buns just out of the oven."

"Best not argue with Sue Lyn over her baked goods." Woo said as his wife turned and left the room. "She is a powerful force when it comes to her baked goods, most especially her 'sticky buns'. I swear I will be the first man done to death by his wife's sticky buns! I will go and see if I can help."

Gabriel smiled, stood and crossed the room. "I don't like the cold grey days of winter," he said as he flicked on the gas lamps. "I miss the sunshine."

This was the first clear look she had of him. He was slim with a broad back and wide shoulders. He wore black wrinkled trousers, scruffy knee high leather boots, embroidered dark blue smoking jacket and a black shirt that Elizabeth was sure was actually a pajama top. His tousled long brown hair was clean but not brushed and hung past his shoulders. Thick side burns seemed to blend in with a least a day's growth of facial stubble.

Her first impression that he was handsome was an understatement, indeed. Jackman had the most beautiful, masculine face she had ever seen; large almond eyes, high cheek bones, slightly long and sloping nose, a strong but feminine chin and wide humorous smile. He was still smiling as he took his seat again. "Do you miss the sunshine as well?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

She was suddenly extremely uncomfortable. "I wonder, Mr. Jackman, if you would tell me why I am here. I feel I should warn you it had better have nothing to do with sex. I have had far too much sex for one morning!" The words found their way out of her mouth before she caught them.

That amazing smile spread wider. "Have you really? Lucky for some." He stretched his legs out and folded his hands over his stomach. "Wish I could say the same!"

"No! Good heavens! That is not what I meant." She exclaimed feeling her cheeks burn. "I just...had an unfortunate encounter, it has left me distracted."

"Understood..."

She interrupted him. "I can see you are all trying to be kind to me but I must insist on knowing what you want or I shall have to leave." In the pouring rain, without umbrella or a home, where will you go, the voice of her mind laughed at her.

"Yes, I guess I had better get to the point. I suppose I have been stalling to prolong my pleasant chat with a lovely female." He paused and searched her face. "You do not remember me at all, do you?"

"Well," she answered slowly. "I know the Jackman name. Susan and Samuel Jackman were friends of my parents. Are you a relative?"

"They were my parents. You and I met several times over the years. The first time was five years ago at Miranda Richardson's wedding."

"Of course, I remember the wedding...but"

"Reverend Jackman. I officiated at the wedding."

"You're a minister?" Elizabeth was certainly surprised and did then remember the remarkably handsome minister in the flowing black hassock.

He laughed at her surprise. "Is it that hard to believe? Have I suddenly grown red horns?"

"No!" she laughed with him. "But you must admit you hardly meet the criteria of a reverend. Isn't it a rule that all holy men be bald, purple faced and stout?"

"Good Lord, I hope not." His brilliant smile melted, his playful tone turned serious. "I am a minister with the Church of England. Presently I am on a long sabbatical. Lee and I are for the time being in the employ of Special Branch Services in law enforcement."

"Oh? A reverend turned policeman?"

"No, I am not a policeman as you think. We investigate unsolved murders but we do not have the power to detain or arrest. As Lee told you yesterday, I have an

interesting position to offer you. Interesting and far better than one you now hold. But before I get to that I ask you to tell me how you came to live and be employed at the Three Bells, considering your start in life.”

“If you have any talent in investigations, Mr. Jackman, I am sure you already know the answer to that. If there is something that you do not know then it is most likely none of your business.”

“You have every right to be angry at this intrusion to what must have been nothing less than a nightmare. What I need is to hear it from you in your own words, your view of the matter.”

“Fine! The ‘matter’ as you call it was the murder of my mother. My father was unjustly accused of the murder, faced a one sided trial and was convicted. I was an outcast, shunned by so-called friends and family, lost every thing we had owned to the taxman and eventually I landed on the street. I was down to my last pennies when three months ago I took employment at the Bells. Is that what you needed?”

“No.” He answered with frustration. “I need details...,” he stopped as Sue Lyn opened a door at the back of the large room and her husband pushed in a trolley loaded with pots of steaming tea and plates of sweet, buttered sticky buns.

Elizabeth’s anger abated somewhat as Sue Lyn fussed over her as though she was a child. As she ate the delicious bun and sipped the heavily sweetened tea she thought of the terrible position she was in. If Jackman did have proper employment to offer her, it would only be adding foolishness to her predicament if she did not give him what he wanted. It seemed to her that the whole world must know the details of her sad families demise, what would it matter if she again told the story.

“I need details,” Gabriel repeated as when she finished eating and Sue Lyn gone, “not to embarrass you but because I may be able to help you in several ways.”

“Fine, Mr. Jackman. Here are the details you need. Eighteen months ago on the event of my twentieth birthday, I became engaged to Captain Peter Pace of the British army. My world was a wonderful place. My father, Henry Leighton, was a very successful and wealthy MD. Royalty was included in his patient list. Mother, an American, Margaret Leighton, was a well-known artist. She was a beautiful, happy and loving person. I was an only child. Mother saw to it that I had an excellent education. I studied math, literature and science. I am fluent in French and German.”

“We lived in a mansion very similar to this house only four blocks to the west. I had everything I needed and wanted...perhaps with exception of what life is truly like for most people.” She paused, looking from Gabriel to Lee. “I do know now, though. A lesson well learned.”

“Fifteen months ago, August 20, 1889, Captain Pace died in battle in South Africa.” She swallowed hard and finished the tea. The words still struck like a dagger in her heart. “I was devastated. Mother took me out of the city to stay in the country with my father’s elderly aunt. She said ‘the air’ would help. Well, I had plenty of air but it did not help. My heart was broken...it always will be!”

“After a month with me in the country Mother decided to return to London for a visit with my father. I stayed on in the country. It really did not matter to me where I lived. She returned to London on Sunday Oct 7. That night sometime between ten p.m. when her maid last saw her and eight a.m. when the maid returned my mother was strangled to death.”

“As much as possible I pulled myself together and returned to my Father. He was a broken man. He and Mother were together for twenty-five years. They were still deeply in love. Their marriage was as strong as ever...well, that is what I thought at the time. Eventually I learned that that was not so. Almost right from the beginning they saw Father as their only suspect. One month later he was arrested.”

“What was their evidence for the arrest?” Jackman asked quickly.

“Father had massed huge gambling debts. I had no idea and I do not know when Mother found out about them but she most certainly did the night she died. The household staff heard them having a bitter argument. Mother had her own money from the sale of her artwork and most importantly, she had a collection of jewels she had inherited.”

“It seemed that the people father owed this money to wanted all the money right away. He demanded that Mother sell the jewels so that he could pay them off. She refused and informed him that she was leaving him. She told him she was in love with another man and insisted on a divorce. Staff said the argument lasted for hours. Finally at ten in the evening Mother went to her bed and father to his, in another room.”

“Mother kept the jewels in a wall safe in her bedroom. When her body was found, the safe was empty.”

“Had the safe been broken into?”

“No. The lock was intact. Whoever took them knew the combination. Only my parents knew that combination so they deduced that Father had killed Mother and stolen the jewelry in order to sell them and pay off his debts. However, someone else must have known the combination! I am certain to the deepest part of my soul that my father did not kill my mother. That belief not based solely on a daughter’s loyalty but on the knowledge that Henry Leighton was a kind and loving man. I doubt he could have ever raised a hand on Mother. He spoiled her far more than he even spoiled me.”

“But there was more than the missing jewels, was there not?” Jackman asked when she paused.

She glared at him for a few seconds. “Yes, of course there was.” She continued when he did not flinch or back down. “The prosecution called a Mrs. June Willard. She was my father’s mistress for over ten years. Her two young sons she claimed were his as well. Later Father admitted to me that this was true. And that my mother had told him she wanted a divorce to marry another man.”

“Did you know this man?”

“Yes, I did. His name is Count Anthony Lucci. He is also a successful artist. Mother and he traveled in similar circles. He was often in our home for dinner parties and the like. I was so young...naïve, I suppose and never thought a thing about it.”

“Did they call Anthony Lucci to testify?”

She shrugged and tried hard to ignore the pain at the base of her throat and back of her eyes. She very much did not want to cry. She raised her chin and swallowed hard. “Of course. Tony said that he and Mother were lovers and that they had been so for five years. He said they were also ‘in love’ but she would not leave my father because she did not want to hurt me. He said she had been to see him the day she...died and told him that she would finally tell my father their marriage was finished. He also said that they decided that day that they would marry as soon as possible.”

“Was his testimony convincing?”

Elizabeth nodded. Her cool, pale blue eyes locked into his. She would not and cry she would not bend her back and accept the shame.

“So, Leighton found out about his wives long standing infidelity just a few hours before she died. He had another family and that was no doubt an added financial drain. He was very desperate for money that she would not give him. That is very damning evidence. Was there more?”

“Yes. Small things but apparently they all added up. The murder weapon was the cord from Father's dressing gown. No one could account to seeing anyone coming into or going out of our home at the time of the murder. Father made a point of having our house carefully locked every night.”

Gabriel shook his head slightly, went to the drinks cabinet, poured a brandy and gave it to Elizabeth. She took it but frowned. “Drink it!” He insisted softly. “That must have been a most terrible time for you, Miss Leighton. When not in court what were you doing?”

“Besides being sick at heart for so many reasons, I was informed that by the end of the month our house and its contents were to be seized and auctioned off for back taxes and the like. I could keep only my own personal possessions. Before they could do an inventory I packed them and many other things and sent them to my aunt.”

“Other things?”

“Many of mother's paintings, her treasured crystal collection, love letters from my father and Lucci! They were all personal things that meant a great deal to her.” She drank the last of the brandy in one gulp. The tears held back but her head was hurting.

“And the verdict?”

“As you no doubt know, Father was found guilty. The entire defense was to call character witnesses. The testimony of that Willard woman, Lucci and the dreadful men that Father owed money to ended his chance of freedom. The jury was out for one hour and came back with a guilty verdict. Father was sentenced to death by hanging.”

“He did not appeal. Why is that?”

“I went to see him right after the verdict. He still flatly denied killing Mother. I urged him that he must keep on fighting. He told me that six months before his doctors told him that his heart was failing quickly. He had had several heart attacks in the few years before all this. At the most, he had a few weeks left to live so as far as he was concerned the ‘fight’ I wanted would be pointless. Three weeks before he was due to be executed he died from a massive heart attack.” Elizabeth stopped and leaned back in her chair. Her head spun and her ears rang. She rarely drank and took the brandy far too quickly.

“And so you lived with your aunt? Why did that end?”

“I had no choice but to live with her. All in our grand society shun the daughter of a murder victim and a murderer. No one, not friend nor so-called family wanted connection with my aunt or me. Aunt Ellen was deeply fond of my father. She had never married and then of course had no children. He was more like a son to her. She took all the misery and Father's death hard. She was over eighty. Two months after I moved in she died.”

“She had promised me that she would leave me the country house. However, there had been no time to make the changes to her will. The house, land and everything

else went to the male son of her cousin. He insisted I move out. I fought him! What say does a woman have? None! I put my things into storage, took a small apartment in London and began my search for employment. Three months ago, at the very end of my meager funds I finally found work and lodging at the Three Bells.” She could feel beads of sweat running down her body. Her vision was fading light to dark.

“From what you said earlier I assume things do not run smoothly for you in this employment. Are you having difficulties with you employer?”

“Oh Lord, Mr. Jackman, you do not need to know that. It is not important.”

“Maybe it is. Let me decide. Tell me.”

“Certainly! I have no pride left so what does it matter. The proprietor of the Bells wants far more from me than I am willing to give. She made her wants very clear to me before I left there this morning.” She saw Gabriel and Lee exchange glances. “I told her firmly that I was not a lesbian. Unfortunately the lunatic, Kitty, I do not know her last name, over heard our conversation. She does have that sort of relationship with Mrs. Pritchard. Kitty went mad and came at us with a broken bottle. Rose pushed me out the door locking it. I went for the police but it was rather a while before I found one. I have no idea what he would have found...” Gabriel said something but she could not hear him. He stood and came towards her. Everything went black.

“It’s alright, Miss Leighton!” Sue Lyn was leaning over her, holding a cold cloth over her forehead.

“Where am I? What happened?” She asked with confusion.

“You fainted and we placed you in a guest bedroom.”

“I never faint.”

“You do now!” Sue Lyn smiled at her. “You’ll be fine but you had better lay here for a bit. Gabriel will come and check on you in a little while.” She covered Elizabeth with a blanket and quietly left the room.

Cursing this latest humiliation, Elizabeth tried again to sit up but gave up as her stomach turned. She decided that it would be wise to stay put for a little while. As she lay there, she looked around the bedroom. It was a small but exceedingly pretty, feminine bedroom, done in shades of bright yellow, pale peach and emerald green.

Patterns of daffodils and tiny peach roses repeated on the wallpaper. Lemon yellow brocade and satin curtains gave the room a brightness denied by the cold, grey weather. The canopied bed draped with deep green lace, matching pillows lined the window seat.

Her mother taught her the importance of color and texture and the effect these things had a persons mood. She would have enjoyed this room.

She wondered what Mother would think if she could see her now homeless, penniless and ill in a bed of a strange man’s house! She would be distressed for the first of it all but she would smile for the later.

Margaret Leighton was a free spirit, a woman so far ahead of her time. A female, she often told her daughter, was a many blessed creature. She had a powerful intuition, the ability to think and do many things at one time and magical bodies. “Our bodies,” she told her daughter “would attract, captivate and hold a man firmly in place, in more than one way. Do not allow the prissy, phony, life long virgins of British society stifle your power, Lizzie. If you find a free man who stirs you...well, Lizzie you will know what to do. Do it and be proud.”

Elizabeth remembered one hot summer afternoon when she confided with her Mother that she was worried because Peter was right then telling Father that he wished for them to marry.

"Why are you worried?" Margaret asked. "Peter will make an excellent husband for you. He has beauty; career and honor...would more could we want for you?"

"Father might want a wealthier man to ask for my hand"

"I very much doubt that, Elizabeth. However, if Henry does object then you must marry Peter and Henry be damned. You will not come across another man like Peter Pace, not unless you are extremely lucky and very few of us are." She laughed. "I wish I knew when I was your age what I know now. A magnificent male like Peter would have made only one pass by my bedroom before he would be well and happy in the bed with me."

"Do you really and truly mean that?" Elizabeth asked with naïve innocence.

"Sweet Jesus, yes, Lizzie! Virginity, phony morals...with them what do you have at the end of the day but an empty bed. Years later when you get to my age, you will think of all those lovely males who offered so much and got only a cold shoulder and you will wish for much better memories. For a lover a man should be three things...lovely, healthy and free."

On the event of their engagement party Peter, spent the weekend with at the Leighton house. When the house was asleep, Elizabeth bathed, dressed in her sheerest nightgown, took a fair portion of whiskey, and went to Peters' bedroom.

He woke with rather a start when she sat on his bedside. "Elizabeth! What's wrong?" he asked as he sat up and squinted in the single candle light.

"Does something have to be wrong?" She placed the candlestick on the nightstand, hoping Peter would not see how much her hand shook. No virgin was bolder or more frightened than she was that night! "You had best get used to having me in your bed chamber, Peter."

After a moment of silence, perhaps wondering if he was dreaming, he rose up on an elbow. He looked at her from under his brows, as he would do when he would scold. "Lizzie, go away!" he whispered with his wonderful Welsh singsong voice.

"No!" She smiled and ran her arm up his naked arm to his shoulder. "I am where my heart is. Why should I leave?"

Briefly, he closed his eyes then took her hand, kissed it and pushed it away. "Go away or you'll not be a virgin bride on your wedding night...that is why!"

"Well, from what I hear Peter, that is a risky proposition." She moved just a little closer, this time placing her hand on his chest.

"Really?" He smiled. "Tell me what is it that you have heard?"

"Miranda told me that some men are not well enough equipped for successful love making or sometimes..." She slid her hand down slightly, lowering the bed covers. "Even if well equipped it does not stand to attention as it should. Is it fair that I pledge to man before I am assured he will satisfy me for an entire lifetime?"

"Is it fair?" Peter repeated her words and watched as she slid the blanket down past his waist. He was breathing faster. She could see the vein in his neck pulsate. "Mostly likely it is not. I do not suppose you would take my word for it if I told you my equipment is more than ample and fully functional."

She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. "No, my love, too big a risk! Any way, why should I have to marry as a virgin when I am sure that you are not?"

"Would you want a virgin husband? One who must fumble in the dark?" She could see he was greatly enjoying their sexual banter and knew she would soon win him over. "Wouldn't it be a disaster if I did not know where to put it?" As he spoke, he ran his hand up her thigh.

"Peter?" She sat back slightly, allowing her nightgown to slide down one arm so that the lacey edging exposing half of a nipple. "I will respect your wishes...you do not want me tonight, so I will wait, but give me this, please?" Her hand now under the blanket rested on his hip.

"Give you what?" he asked breathlessly.

"I have never seen a naked man but in pictures. Please may I just look at you? Then I will go and leave you in peace to sleep." She shrugged, a breast completely exposed.

"Sleep in peace?" He laughed looked from her face to her breast then back into her eyes. "After this tease, my love, I may never sleep again."

"Please? You cannot deny me such a simple, innocent wish?" She rose to her knees, allowed the sheer covering to fall completely off her breasts. Slowly she pushed away his blankets and openly like a child in wonder, she studied him. "You are magnificent." She smiled and said to him after a long while. "Do you want to see me? It is only fair!"

"Elizabeth, don't..." His protest was weak. He sat up and watched as she left the bed and dropped the gown to the floor.

"Well!" She turned in a circled then sat back on the bedside. "Am I pretty enough for you?"

He pushed her onto her back, moving so quickly he startled her. "Bloody hell, Elizabeth! You do know what you are doing, don't you? Damn me if you are not an expert. What an interesting wife you will make for me!"

"Then you want me to stay?"

He made a sound like a moan and a growl. "You'll stay, Elizabeth. You've no choice now!"

That was then, now at almost twenty-one Peter was the only man she ever loved or touched.

Somewhere down the hall way a clock chimed twelve times. Close to two hours since her arrival and she still had no real idea of why she was there. Slowly she rose from the bed. No head spinning or stomach turning so she crossed over the room and sat at a dressing table. Her hair had gone from slightly messy to completely comical. She was removing the pins when she heard a light knocking and the bedroom door opened a crack. A small head peaked in.

"Hello?" She said encouragingly.

A beautiful female child stepped gingerly into the room. An amazing wreath of blond curls seemed to float around her chubby face. A thousand freckles dotted her ivory skin. Large, familiar almond shaped eyes studied her. She pursed her lips and frowned.

"Hello." Elizabeth repeated when she stood silent. "Are you the lady of house?"

"I am Gabriella Jackman. Daddy calls me Gabby but I am Gabriella." She said her name very carefully and slowly as though she had finally mastered the saying of it.

She made a curtsy, tapping one patent leather shoe on the floor behind her. "You're supposed to stay in bed when you are sick." She scolded, folding her arms over her chest, no doubt mimicking the actions of an adult.

"I am feeling quite myself now. How do you do, Miss Jackman?"

She stood beside the dressing table. "You don't look good." She said firmly, still frowning. "Your hair looks funny."

"I know. I have had a very difficult morning and I've no brush or comb."

Gabriella nodded, the frown slipped away replaced by a delightful smile. She pulled open a dresser drawer. It was empty but for a brush and comb.

"Just what I need. Thank you, Miss Jackman."

She watched very closely as Elizabeth brushed out her long wavy red hair. "Are you going to be my Mommy?" She asked very seriously.

"Oh my goodness! No I am afraid not, my dear."

"Why? I want a Mommy!" The frown was back and she stamped her foot. "It is not fair. Emma has a Mommy, a step Mommy and a Grandmommy. Why won't you be my Mommy?"

"First of all, is Mr. Gabriel Jackman your father?"

She nodded, wild curls bobbed around her face.

"Well, in order to be your Mommy I would have to marry your Father. I just met him two hours ago. People who marry have to know each other very well and that can take a long time."

"I want a Mommy!" She repeated but then with sadness.

"You must have had a Mommy at one time."

Gabriella turned and crossed to a window. "Does it rain in Heaven?" she asked.

"No, I don't think so. I am sure it is always lovely in heaven. Is that where your Mommy is? In heaven?"

Another nod. "Maybe that is why she went there, because of all this rain!"

Elizabeth's heart went out to the sweet and beautiful child. "My Mommy went to live in Heaven too. I miss her very much. She did not have choice in the matter and maybe it was the same for your mother."

The child fell silent and watched as Elizabeth finished brushing, braiding her hair and tied it into place with the ribbon. "I would like a word with you Father. Would you know where he is right now?"

"I am supposed to bring you to him. He is in his office! Come on!" She took Elizabeth by the hand, pulled her down the hall, stopping at large double doors. "It is messy in there." She whispered as she pulled the doors open. "Sue Lyn says Daddy is a clutter bug!"

"Most men are like that, I am afraid."

They stepped into what would have been at one time a large, comfortable library. Three walls covered ceiling to floor with bookcases and one wall of large French windows on either side of an ornate fireplace. Stacks of books, newspapers and periodicals sat on every available space. Some newspapers were opened and scattered around the floor. A large table in the room's center was draped with a world map, smaller maps of London and various counties. Here and there were small piles of plates and a few half-finished cups of tea.

At first, Elizabeth did not see Gabriel as he sat behind an equally cluttered desk.

“Daddy!” Gabriella pulled Elizabeth over to him. “She doesn’t want to marry you, either!” She announced with frustration, as though there were something he needed to adjust rather quickly.

“Good Lord, Gabby! I have told you to stop that, haven’t I?” Gabriel stood and smiled at his guest apologetically. “Go and find Nana Parks. I am sure it must be your lunch time.”

She sighed, squinted and frowned at her father and made a great deal of turning and leaving the room.

“I am so sorry, Miss Leighton! My daughter is precocious to say the least. In the last week she has asked five people to marry me...including the next-door footman!” He cleared a chair at his desk side and motioned for Elizabeth to sit.

She had to laugh. “Well, at least she is not class conscious. She is a lovely child, Mr. Jackman.”

“Thank you. When I explained to her that men do not marry men she asked me why.”

“Not an easy question. What did you tell her?”

“I simply said that when I married again, if I married again that person would have to be female. That reminds me; while you were resting, I had Lee call our connection at Bow Street police station. Rose Pritchard received some bad lacerations, as did the responding police officer. It took several of the Bell’s employees to knock Kitty down.”

“Will Mrs. Prichard be alright? Compared to most she was in her way kind to me.”

“Apparently she will be. The wounds were mostly superficial. However, it is life in Holloway Prison for this Kitty person. She’s been down a few times before and this time they’ll throw away the key.” He sat back in his chair, ran his hands through his long hair making a point of looking Elizabeth up and down. “I have to say one thing for Old Rosie P. Her tastes in females have decidedly improved. She must have been loaded to the gills to think that a woman like you would...”

“Do you know Mrs. Pritchard?” She stopped him before another embarrassment occurred.

He rolled his amazingly large, soft brown eyes. “Rosie P and I go back a long way. We have been friend and foe. Mostly I do not trust the old bitch and you should not either. The Bells is closed until further notice so you have no need to bother with that place.”

“Well, that’s it, isn’t it?” She was a little irked at the way he dismissed her need of home and livelihood. “I certainly hope that when you get around to telling me about your employment offer it is something agreeable because if it is not I am in deep trouble.”

“We can start that conversation right now if you’d like. But if you are still unwell...!”

“I am quite myself, Mr. Jackman. Why do I sense that you are procrastinating? If after meeting me you have reconsidered, please just tell me so. I would like to leave with some dignity.”

“A loss of dignity is usually self inflicted.” He looked at from the corner of his eyes. “No, I have not reconsidered but perhaps I am procrastinating. That is simply

because you are in all ways exactly the woman I need and I struggle to find the words to make you believe that.”

“How could you possibly know that I am ‘exactly’ the woman you need? Except for my recent misery, you know very little about me.”

He smiled, pulled a thick folder from a desk drawer and placed it in front of me. Across the top in large black ink was my name. “I have intruded into every aspect of your life. I feel as though I have known you all my life. You will be angry, no doubt, but I have good explanation.”

He may have wanted her to open the folder but she did not. “Then please explain. I am all ears.”

“I require a woman to work for me who can easily infiltrate the higher echelon of British society. I need a woman with all the manners, grace and beauty to be expected. She must be one who has been very personally touched and wounded by the injustices of our world.” He paused and lit a cigarette. When he spoke, again his voice was softer, deeper and leaned closer to her.

“I knew both of your parents very well. Tony Lucci is my good friend. I saw him with your mother. Obviously I knew that Maggie was married and that she and Tony were lovers. It was their world and that part of things was none of my business.”

“I admired Maggie greatly. I was a great admirer of her art.” Elizabeth followed his gaze to a painting hanging over the mantle. In the clutter and confusion of the room, she had not noticed one of her mother captivating landscape oils. “Isn’t it beautiful?” he asked and followed as she walked to the painting.

“It’s the ‘Blue Hole’!” She gasped and remembered so clearly many days standing quietly behind her Mother and watched as she brought the magical grotto to life on her canvas.

“I have often wondered, is this a real place?” He stood so close she could feel his breath on her neck. She did not move away or turn around.

“It is and it is just as breath taking, more so, reality always is. Mother caught the true blue serenity of the place.”

“Perhaps one day you will take me there...!” He whispered in her ear, so quietly that she was not sure he had really spoken.

She turned quickly but he was back in his chair. Before she could think or say anything, he continued with his story. “The world lost a fine woman and a great talent when Maggie died. Tony turned to me and I did the best I could to aid him. I attended the trial of Henry Leighton with Tony. I watched you closely. You were there every day, without fail and always alone.”

“I remember seeing Tony there. I was angry and would not speak with him.”

“Of course. Your loyalty to your father was commendable. Tony understood.”

“Do you know where he is now?”

“Tony lives in Scotland. He writes that he is well. Perhaps one day you will write to him, he would like that.”

“Perhaps.” She shrugged.

“I followed the trial closely. It was obvious right from the beginning that unless the defense put up a strong argument that your father would be found guilty. Not only did they not put up a strong defense they gave no defense at all. They did no private

investigation of their own and took only what the police offered them. Your father was denied a fair trial; I have no doubt in that.”

“You believe he was innocent?” She asked with surprise. If he did, it seemed he was the only person in the world other than her.

“I only know that Henry was not given a proper defense. You should know that I am very good at what I do. If you come and work for me, I will learn who killed Margaret Leighton. If Henry was innocent, I will clear his name. Rest assured of that! He took a small piece of paper from the file folder and handed it to her. “This is what I will pay you.”

“A month?” She asked surprised at the large amount.

He laughed slightly. “No, a week and regular whether or not we are working on a particular case.”

She was amazed and excited. “Then I can hardly refuse, can I?”

“You can and maybe you should. I do not want you to take this employment simply because you have no other choice. This is very dangerous work. You will need dedication and courage.” This time he pulled a long white envelope from the folder. He opened it and placed a thick stack of pound notes in front of her. “There a hundred pounds there. It is more than enough to see you on your feet again. I offer it to you as a loan. You could repay me one day if you take it. Now, Miss Leighton, you do have a choice.”

She thought for a few moments. The offered loan was a Godsend. It took months to find work at the Three Bells and that was because she had no experience, no references and no talent. That had not changed. What would she do when the money ran out?

“I have no idea about investigatory work. You would have to teach me a great deal.”

“Lee and I would take great care with that. Your safety would come above all else.”

“And your whole purpose is to right wrongs and bring murders to justice?”

“That is my passion, Lee’s as well. If you want to succeed in this, it must be yours. Are you up to it, Elizabeth?” He gave her that ravishing smile.

She returned it with her best effort. “I am very much up to it! However, I am curious about a few things. May I ask you a few questions?”

“Of course. I expected you to wonder a fair bit.”

“With this file and you obviously have extensive knowledge about my life why did you make me tell you my pathetic story?”

“I wanted to see if you would be completely truthful. I cannot abide a liar or one who is filled with pretense.”

“I see. You were testing me?”

“I was and you passed with flying colors.”

“One more question then. Why me? I mean there must be many women who could do this kind of work?”

“I told you why. But there is more...if you want the total truth.”

“That is what you required from me.”

“I find you to be a very attractive woman. I wanted a reason to fold you close into my life. Who can say what might be if you also found me interesting.” He had

lowered his head and looked at her from under his brows. His eyes had turned a very dark brown.

Elizabeth gasped slightly and felt her face redden. "Well, you certainly do speak your mind."

"You asked and I never lie."

"Well, I will take your offer of employment but you should also know that I am far from ready to let anyone into my life in any personal way, Mr. Jackman!"

"Understood, Miss Leighton. However, when and if you find you are ready...."

She interrupted him. "I may still need to borrow at least some of that money for a place to live, clothes and the like."

"If you will follow me we have come to the place where Sue Lyn says I will most likely have my face slapped! She feels I may have over stepped the bounds." He looked at Elizabeth with feigned innocence. "I was truly just trying to be kind."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "If I was going to slap you it would most likely have happened a few seconds ago."

"True! Please follow me."

They stood and crossed to the far side of the large room. "This section of shelving," he explained, "is a hidden doorway. Push two times on this cabinet door handle, like this...." He stepped back. There was a clicking sound and the large bookcase swung smoothly open. She followed him into a short hallway. To the right was a window that was completely covered with ivy growth. To the left was a door. "That leads to my private apartment on the third floor. Until now, only Sue Lyn, Lee and I knew of this passageway and the hidden door. Obviously I would prefer it if you kept this secret."

They moved down the short hallway, Gabriel opened another door. They stepped out into a sitting room. As the other rooms, this room was a delight of color and modern style. Here blood red and lacquer black with touches of silver gave the space a distinct mystical feel. A few seconds passed before she noticed the silver candelabra and ornate gold tea set on the wall table.

She picked up one heavy and familiar teacup. "Good Lord!" She exclaimed and walked in a circle around the room. On the mantle was her mother's collection of crystal angel figurines, on the back of a chaise lay the shawl she had crocheted and on the walls several of her paintings. "These are the things I took before the auction! How did you get them?"

"Well," he cleared his throat, sat in a chair and stretched out his long legs. "As I said, I watched you throughout Henry's trial. I wanted to reintroduce myself but Tony made me see that it might not be the best of timing. I had Lee keep his eye on you. He learned that you had rented a storage place. You had left your aunt's address as your home at the Garlands storage and for the cost of a few pounds Lee obtained the whereabouts of your aunt's house in the country."

"Then I learned of your father's death and once again decided to wait for a better time. I let six weeks pass and went to the house myself. I was met by an arrogant idiot who told me that you did not live there any longer and that he had no idea where you were."

"I was not pleased to say the least. I do not like to lose in any way and I had lost touch with you. Back at Garlands Storage, I found that they also had no idea of where

you were but that you had paid for that month and two more payments were due shortly. A few pounds offered and Mr. Garland agreed to contact me as soon as he heard from you again. A week later, he did and I learned of your employment and shelter at the Three Bells. You had made only partial payment and Garland gave you one week to produce the rest of the money or he would have claim on your goods.”

“The man is a bloody weasel!” Elizabeth said with vehemence. “He told me that if I came back without the money I could pay him in another way! Of course, I did not have the money and I did not go back. I thought all my treasures were gone forever.”

Gabriel smiled at her use of the harsher words she had picked up at the Bell. “The man is a fool as well as a weasel, Elizabeth. He sold your things to me at a mere fraction of their worth. Especially the paintings! They are now worth a fortune and I am pleased to give it all back to you.”

“All of it? You bought it all?”

He nodded to a door in the far wall. She opened it and stepped into a beautiful bedroom. Everywhere she looked were the things of her life before. On the dresser top was a gild-framed photograph of her mother. This was the only picture of her she owned. She picked it up. Her familiar, lovely face smiled up at her. She heard Gabriel come up behind her.

“Thank you!” She turned to him. “Thank you so much!” The pain and fear of all those months seemed to melt away. With more force than she could control tears of joy over came her. She threw her arms around him, crying and laughing at the same time. For a moment, he held her and let her cry, then gently pushed her away.

“So, does this mean I am not going to get my face slapped?”

“No!” She sniffed and wiped away her tears with the back of her hand. He pulled out a hanky and handed it to her. “Why would I slap you? You are my angel, Gabriel Jackman!”

“An angel? Hardly! Elizabeth, I must confess that my original motives were not honorable. As I said, you intrigued me for certain very base ideas....”

“And now that you have met me, heard my feelings, have you changed those base ideas?”

He cleared his throat. Something she was to learn he would do when he was nervous. “You have been through a nightmare and you have lost a great deal. It would be wrong for me to put any added pressures on you. You said you are not ready for a lover ...or whatever I might become.” She had to fight not to smile as he struggled for words. A slight blush came to his cheeks. “You will live here, in my employ and under my protection without fear of that sort of insult.”

She nodded. “These last few months I have had many base offers. I have to admit that base offers from a man like you are much more pleasant.” She looked him up and down the way he had done to her. The red quickly faded, his eyes narrowed and was about to respond when she cut him off. “But as you are now my employer I am sure you are smart enough to realize such entanglements would not be wise.”

“Yes, of course!” He stopped and frowned. “Why would that not be wise?”

“Because if I was to take you as my lover I would have to be sure you saw me as an equal. Perhaps that would take the edge off your power as ‘employer’.”

“I have no interest in having ‘power’ over you.” He surprised her by reaching out and very gently touching her cheek. “Believe me if you were mine, you would be my

equal in every way, especially in my bed.” He let his hand rest on her shoulder and looked intently into her eyes. “And my God, what a wonderful place that bed would be.”

She smiled and stepped away from his hand. “Do you really think so?”

He followed her taking another step forward but this time he did not touch her. “I know it. Lately in my dreams...,” briefly he closed his eyes and drew in his next breath threw his teeth “If ever you find there is special room for me in your most private world I do hope you will have the courage to let me know.”

“You are right about ‘courage’. For a woman of my age I have very little experience in seduction. I doubt I would be able to express such private feelings.”

He seemed about to say more but changed his mind. He turned and opened the wardrobe. “Sue Lyn took care of your clothes. She had your dresses and the like cleaned. I suppose she put your finer things in the dresser. She told me your clothes are lovely but out of style so you will need new things. The money for that you can take from the envelope. As you will need the clothes for our investigations you need not reimburse me for them.” She could not place his mood; perhaps he was slightly angry or very confused.

With Isabelle’s prefect sense of timing, she knocked on the bedroom door and without waiting for an answer stepped into the room. She wore a dress of antique golden silk. Designed to show off her large, beautiful breasts and narrow waist it was the perfect accent for her olive skin and thick black hair. This hair curled and draped down one shoulder onto her ample cleavage. A diamond cluster on her chocker glittered brilliantly.

“Excuse my interruption.” She stood possessively next to Gabriel, smiled up at him and turned only her eyes very briefly at Elizabeth as she spoke. “I am dying to meet our new associate, my love!”

He returned her smile and nodded. He motioned towards Elizabeth. “Mrs. Isabelle Lucci, Miss Elizabeth Leighton...”

“Leighton!” Isabelle interrupted him and finally turned to face Elizabeth. “Good Lord! You are not the child of Maggie are you?” She took a few steps forwards.

“Margaret Leighton was my mother.” Elizabeth answered feeling small and uncomfortable under the condescending smile of the other woman. The smile did not reach her eyes and showed no warmth or humor.

“My how you have grown since I last saw you!”

“Do I know you? Lucci?” Elizabeth asked with surprise.

“As Gabriel said, I am Isabelle Lucci. Tony was my husband before your mother stole him from me. That was for the best though or Gabriel would never have seduced me. Is that not so, my love? But maybe you have not grown so much!” Isabelle studied Elizabeth openly as she walked around her in a circle. “You are pretty, like your mother but you are far too thin. Gabriel, we shall have to feed her, she is barely visible. But I should go and let you get on with your business talk.” She went to the door, opened it and turned back to Elizabeth. “Be careful, my dear, Gabriel can talk a saint into a whore...as he does to me almost nightly!”

“Oh God!” Gabriel pushed his hands through his hair.

“Who the flippin’ hell does she think she is? If I am too thin to her, it is only because she is too bloody fat!”

“I am sorry. Sometimes, most times Isabelle talks too much!”

“Eats too much too, if you ask me.”

"Isabelle is a very talented physic and a valuable member of our team. I hope that her connections to your past will not change your decision."

"No, why would it. In truth, she has no connections to my past, not in my eyes! I shall have to watch out for her though, won't I?"

"In what way?" he asked, visibly relieved.

"She wants to fatten me up!" Elizabeth ran her hands down her body. "I think I am more than fine the way I am."

He raised his eyebrows and smiled. "I agree completely. I will leave you to rest and get used to your new rooms. Sue Lyn will bring you a lunch tray." He left, quietly closing the door behind him.

"What is wrong, Sue Lyn?" Lee asked his wife. Sue Lyn stared out the dinning room window into the pouring rain. Absentmindedly she folded and unfolded her napkin. "You are distracted and worried so I will not settle for the usual 'nothing, I am fine.'" After a moment of silence, Lee sighed. "If it is about Miss Leighton you should not worry. She will take the position. She would be fool not to and after all I have learned about her she is far from foolish."

"She is scared as well as proud. I clearly felt that. She will take the position and that is not what I am worried about." Sue Lyn turned her wide black eyes to her husband. "You know Gabriel better than he knows himself. Why is he really doing this?"

"You already know the answer to that. She is high born. Her style and beauty is just what we need to reach into the family secrets of the rich and powerful. With the right training and her natural female...."

"That is not what I mean and you know it? You told me yourself that Gabriel has been infatuated with Elizabeth Leighton for years. That infatuation had nothing to do with his work. How much time did he have you spend following her? He was furious when he lost touch with her whereabouts' and before you found her at the Three Bells."

"So?" Lee spread his hands in front of him. "He is a man and she is a beautiful woman. Is it so unusual that he has certain 'feelings' for her? Gabriel is not a fool either. He would not let anything interfere with the work he does."

"Really?" Sue Lyn was angry now. "And what will Isabelle think of this? Will she sit by happily, as a beautiful woman moves into his house! Especially since Gabriel has made no effort to hide his interest in her."

"You do not understand the true nature of their relationship. They are close, yes, but it is not love, far from it. Isabelle will not...well, should not be jealous!"

"If that is what you believe then you are the naïve one. I do understand the nature of their relationship. They have been lovers for two years. It is not just a causal thing. Do not forget that Isabelle and I are friends and she confides in me. Her need for Gabriel is very powerful. She is a strong-minded woman and I think so is Miss Leighton. They will never share him, not a chance in a million on that, Lee! If Gabriel thinks he will keep them both and they will be agreeable then he is in for an awaking."

"Then Gabriel will have to make a choice, won't he?"

"And he will choose Miss Leighton, have no doubt in that. You may not realize it, because after all you and Gabriel are only men but Isabelle is in love with Gabriel. She would give her life for him, if need be just as I would for you. Why won't he just forgive her?"

Lee stood, walked to stand behind his wife. He leaned down, placed his hands on her shoulders and kissed her cheek. "We may be only men but that is all we have to work with. Gabriel is not a forgiving man; it is just not in him. Isabelle was unfaithful to him. Life moves on, Sue Lyn and we must move with it. If Gabriel goes forward with his life, that is right and completely his choice."

She looked up at her husband and briefly laid her face in his hand. "I hate change, Lee!"

"I know, my love but think of it this way. If Gabriel and Miss Leighton become 'close' it could be that Gabriel has met his match and maybe he will finally find some happiness."

Elizabeth was in her sitting room holding her mother's worn, white leather bound bible when Sue Lyn brought in her lunch tray.

"It's a beef stew." Sue Lyn smiled, sliding the tray on the table next to Elizabeth. "We've an Irish cook so stew is often on the menu. Mind you, her stews are excellent so there are few complaints."

"And one of your delicious sticky buns! I could live on them alone." Elizabeth returned the smile and eagerly pulled her chair up to the table. It was the first hot meal she had in weeks.

"I do the sweets, Cook does the meats, or so we like to say. She was not too pleased at first to have me 'invade her kitchen'. Her pastries were dull and pointless. She and I had some arguments but Lee stepped in and took all the fun out of that!" Sue Lyn sat across from Elizabeth and watched quietly as she began to eat. Earlier she noted Elizabeth's gaunt face and thin arms. She ate now with the relish of someone who truly was hungry.

"Gabriel told me that you had my clothes cleaned and cared for." Elizabeth said between mouthfuls. "Thank you so much! You all have done so much for me. It is all so overwhelming. There is a great deal I have to thank you all for."

"It was my pleasure. You do have such lovely things! Oh, that reminds me!" Sue Lyn reached into her pocket, pulled a linen hanky and handed it to Elizabeth. "I found these sewn into the hem of the green velvet and thought they might have been your Mother's."

"The emeralds!" Elizabeth exclaimed as she opened the hanky. A large heart shaped emerald pendant and matching earrings glittered up at her. "I had forgotten about them. I have had so much on my mind."

"You rescued them from the unfair tax man? Good for you! When I found them, I thought I had better thoroughly check all the dresses before starting the cleaning process. Do not forget the diamond bracelet you hid in the ivory brocade. It is in the jewelry box on the dresser."

"I did forget. That bracelet was my inheritance from my Grandmother and I have no shame keeping them."

"And so you should not! The long, sticky fingers of our government get more than their fair share as far as I am concerned."

"How ever will I thank you all for all this?" More tears filled Elizabeth's blue eyes.

"Believe me; Gabriel will see you work for it all in the end. He is a kind and very generous man but when he is on a case he expects a great deal." Sue Lyn paused, ran her

hands down the front of her dress, sighed and sat down. "I should explain to you the household. Later today, when you have rested, I will show you around and introduce you to the staff."

"Lee and I have rooms like these across the hallway. Two unused guest bedrooms and the washroom are at the end of the passage. Front of us on this floor is the library. It is now his office and the one room I am no longer allowed to tidy!" Sue Lyn rolled her eyes and Elizabeth laughed. "Gabriel has an apartment directly above these rooms. His daughter and Nana Parks have the rooms across the hall from his. On the main floor, the drawing room where we met you, across from that is the parlor and next to that the small guest room where you rested. Next to that is the games room, Lee's office, across from that the dinning room and the breakfast room, then the kitchen. We keep a small staff of seven and they have their quarters above the stables."

"Does Mrs. Lucci not live here? She gave me the impression that she was the lady of the house."

"Oh, you met Isabelle! No, she does not live here, except on weekends and the like. She would prefer to live here, I think but it is best she have her own home."

When she was alone Elizabeth thought that Isabelle was likely to be a problem for her but no matter what she was not going to let her spoil this opportunity. She had no romantic interest in Gabriel Jackman. If Isabelle could not keep him only in her bed, she was not to blame.

Chapter Four

Elizabeth enjoyed her first real bath in months, as she soaked in the wonderful hot water she tried to take in all that had changed for her in a few short hours. Living for a year with great insecurity and in misery, she could not help but wonder if all this was just too good to be true. She decided she would do her best with this opportunity and not worry about what might happen.

After the bath, she went to her bed for an hour's sleep. Before she fell asleep she thought of Gabriel Jackman and chided herself for the knot of pain she felt when she met Isabelle. It was clear the woman and Gabriel were lovers and that Isabelle had every intention it should stay that way. However, Gabriel had also made it clear to Elizabeth that he had an interest in her. He was a handsome, charismatic man, there was no doubt it that. She wondered as she drifted off to sleep what it would be like to have him as a lover.

She took her time dressing for dinner and gave attention to detail. She did her hair first, pulling it straight back from her face, fastening it in a tight braid. That braid she wrapped around the back of her head, placing accent on her profile and large eyes. She put on the emeralds. They were the perfect match for her deep red hair.

It was not surprising that her undergarments, so neatly folded by Sue Lyn and placed in the dresser, were far too big for her. There was no point to the corset, as it seemed just to sit on her hipbones. She tossed the hated thing aside. She laughed and decided that with all those delightful pastries she would soon grow back into them.

She picked her favorite dinner dress; a deep emerald green velvet. It was certainly out of current style but still lovely. The full skirt, with diagonal wide silver stripes would add some shape to her hips and the satin sash would hide the extra fabric at the waist. The low cut bodice still fit perfectly, pushing her breasts together making a cleavage and the perfect frame for the heart shaped emerald. The only problem was the twenty or so buttons at the back she could not reach. She knocked on Sue Lyn's door but there was no answer.

"Damn it! How the Hell am I going to do up those stupid buttons?" She muttered going back into her bedroom.

"I am an expert with buttons." Gabriel said.

"Good Lord!" She jumped and turned to him. "I did not see you come in!"

He nodded in the direction of the hidden doorway. "I knocked. You did not answer. I thought maybe you were still sleeping."

"Oh, I went to find Sue Lyn. Why do they put buttons on the back of a dress?"

"I suppose they are rather pressed for choice. Here," he turned Elizabeth around, "I am far happier with opening buttons but I will do what I can." He saw her bare back and the corset lying on the bed and purposely allowed his fingers to touch her skin as he did up the dress. "There, all done. May say how wonderful you look?"

"Yes, you may and thank you. I think I shall have to remember about that door. Is there no lock?" She stepped up to the seam in the wall and studied it.

“Do you want me to have one installed?”

“It is your house and up to you but I would feel better.”

He smiled, sighed and followed her to the well-hidden door. “There!” He pointed what looked to be a knot in the wooden frame near the floor. He pushed it and they heard a clicking sound. “It is locked now, Elizabeth and cannot be opened from the other side.”

She nodded and returned the smile.

“Cook will ring the dinner bell any minute now.” He took her arm and led her to the door. “Goodness knows why. We all know what time we eat at but she does like to be so correct.” Just as he finished speaking a bell sounded loudly and echoed throughout the house. Running down from the third floor a large black cat squealed and sped past them. A door slammed and a little girl laughed.

“Gabriella!” Gabriel called up the stairs. “I have told you not to chase Blackie, haven’t I?”

“Yes, Daddy!” A small voice answered. “But he chased me first.”

“Go back to your room. I will be up to read to you later!”

Another door slammed.

“She is mad.” He explained. “Usually she eats dinner with us but not when we are to discuss our cases. Gabby has her mother’s temperament.”

“Is that so?” Elizabeth asked. Sue Lyn, Isabelle and Lee were standing at the dining room door, watching as they approached. Isabelle was wearing plain black; her long black hair was loose and pulled up at the sides with silver clips. Her only jewelry was a silver cross. She looked subdued and sullen. Elizabeth wondered if she and Gabriel had had words.

“Yes. My looks and Helena’s mind. A very strange combination, so I have been told.”

Gabriel and Lee sat at either end of the table, Isabelle and Sue Lyn to their right sides and Elizabeth next to Sue Lyn, one seat away from Gabriel.

The first course was served and Gabriel offered to say grace. “Hope you do not mind.” He said to Elizabeth. “Saying grace is a left over from my previous life.”

“Not at all. We always said grace as I grew up.”

He said a brief prayer. “Good! Well, I have a great deal to say, so I should start.” He pushed his soup away. “Some of what I will say is already known by some of you but for Elizabeth’s sake I will repeat it all from the beginning.”

“The ‘De Wolfe matter’ or the ‘mountain murders’ as we now call this difficult case has been on the back of mind for some time now, years in all truth. It is difficult because I have known the De Wolfe family for all my life. My Father and this family head were friends and business partners for as long I can remember. The elder son of the household, Owen and I are close friends and have been since we were boys. No matter what I feel about them, it could be that one of them or their staff is insane, a sexual deviant and a murderer.”

“There are four murders that might fall down to someone in this family. I will explain as much as I know about them later. However, I will say now that the most recent death happened this July while I was at De Wolfe Manor as a houseguest. The victim was a young kitchen maid named Daisy Mott. She died; it was believed and declared at the time, as the result of a suicidal fall from the top floor of the house.”

“As I was there at the time it was natural that I took an interest in the matter. It certainly seemed to be a suicide at the time. Other members of staff claimed the child, I say child because she was only just turned sixteen, had shown to be in distress and worry at the time of her death.”

“Before the police arrived, I took it upon myself to have a look through her possessions. I found a letter to her mother, in her hand and dated the day before she died. In it, she pleads with her mother that she is miserable and begged permission to return home. It seemed from the wording that she had asked for this before and had been told to stay where she was.”

“The police did a cursory investigation and that was as usual, since the De Wolfe’s are a rich and powerful family and the death finally ruled suicide. Because of the letter and the lack of other evidence I also believed that to be that case.”

“That changed in August while having lunch in a London restaurant I ran into Dr. Hugo Block. He is the current coroner and heads the department at Bow Street Station. Hugo had not handled that body. The autopsy charged to a younger and much less experienced man. The body was long since buried when Hugo came across photographs the younger doctor, a Dr. Foley, took of the body.”

“Foley had confessed to Block that he did not for one minute think the matter was anything but murder. He had clear orders from above, and so he signed the death off as a suicide. First Foley told Block that the poor Miss Mott was three months pregnant.”

Gabriel paused to refill his wine glass.

“But surely that points even more to suicide, does it not?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes, of course, but for the photographs. The orders that Foley should call a murder a suicide had greatly troubled the young man, so he took it on himself to take photographs. These he gave to Block and I now have in my possession. They show the wrists and ankles of Miss Mott. They were bruised with fresh ligature wounds. These ligatures would have caused severe bruising but there was only slight bruising.” He stopped speaking and looked at Elizabeth.

She thought for a moment. “That means she was unbound shortly before she died.”

Gabriel nodded. “Or very shortly after she died. On her left forearm, six inches up from her wrists was a cut in her skin. It was an inch and a half long and did not bleed. It is my conclusion that after she was so horribly thrown from the window the culprit had a second thought, rushed to the victim and cut away the ligatures, slicing the arm as he or she did so.”

“The day after I received the photographs I went in search of Dr. Foley. He had not shown up for work for several days so I went to the boarding house where he lived. The property owner told me Foley had not been home for several days. I persuaded her to let me have a look around his room. His possessions were still there and nothing seemed amiss. In September Lee looked for him again, still no sign of him at work or home or with his parents. Foley was by that time listed as a missing person. It is still that way.”

Lee added. “Father Foley did tell me on the Q T that his son did seem to have more money than usual that fall. He may have just done a bunk. However, it is my opinion that he was murdered, the evidence and or body all well covered up.”

They sat in silence as the main dishes were brought to the table. Lee watched Elizabeth as she picked absentmindedly at her food. She looked confused. "These cover ups occur very often when a powerful family is involved." He explained to her.

"My father was rich and he had powerful friends. Why wasn't this corruption used to free him?"

"It could simply be that Dr. Leighton was of no use to those who might aid him. Perhaps some of those, who might have wanted an end to Leighton, in power and willing to use corruption for the benefit, felt that the court would take him down. His case largely ignored and he left to fall under a few single-minded idiots in the police force. They do not protect each other out of sense of loyalty. They protect because this person or family is in some way useful or because they hope for similar protection should their own actions fall down on them." Lee spoke with the same hatred and vehemence as Gabriel.

Elizabeth shook her head sadly.

"Have no fear, Elizabeth. If your father was innocent of that murder we will clear his name. You should also be aware that we might find he was not innocent. As his daughter, you will not easily see it in him but men have killed a wife rather than lose her. Either way, you will have your truth." Gabriel said firmly. "Now I will move onto the De Wolfe family. Henry Leighton and Theodore De Wolfe were close friends and attended the same university. How well do you know them?"

"Well, Mother was very fond of Cornelia. When I was younger, she would often drop by and visit. Mother did not like Uncle Ted...."

"Uncle was it?" Gabriel asked.

"Yes, I was young and I called them Aunt and Uncle. I think I only met Theodore De Wolfe a few times. I have no opinion of him but I do like Cornelia. I may have been at their Estate as a child but I do not remember now. Two years, or so, ago I met Owen De Wolfe. Mother took me to one of his shows. He is a remarkable artist. I also have no opinion of him. Although Mother did tell me he was a womanizer. I do not believe I ever met the rest of the De Wolfe children."

"Right, that is fairly how I thought. I would like to explain now how I see each member of the De Wolfe family. As we share opinions, we also learn. I will start with the females."

"Cornelia De Wolfe is wife and mother. She is in her mid fifties but looks much younger. This woman is completely dedicated to her children and husband. She is kind, friendly and trustworthy. As I see it, her only flaw is that she drinks far too much. Perhaps she an alcoholic...yes, she most likely is! She is not the type that we find face down in the dirt but still she drinks every day and has done so as long as I can remember. I do not believe she is in any way a part of these murders but her collective knowledge of her children and husband may hold the clues we need."

"The next youngest female is Ruth, wife of my friend Owen. She is twenty-eight years old. I met her first in the early days of her engagement to Owen seven years ago. Ruth is a petit blonde with an incredibly powerful voice and at the time a vivacious personality. She was a very talented and successful actress and singer. Miss Ruth Kingsley was making quite a name for her self on London stage. She gave this up to marry Owen."

“A year later, Ruth gave birth to a still born baby. The birth and its terrible results left Ruth very ill and near to her own death for some weeks. She did not recover completely, mentally or physically. Her body so ravaged by the illness she lost the use of her legs and is still that way. The doctors never found the cause for this. Ruth is a bitter and terribly unhappy woman. This is exacerbated by her husband who for the most part ignores her. As I said Ruth is wheelchair bound and it is highly unlikely she is involved in any murders but who can say what she knows.”

“The daughter of the household is Jane. She is nineteen years old. She is spoiled, self-centered, vain and very poorly educated. She is engaged to MP Sebastian Ridley and the wedding planned for the springtime. I will speak plainly, our women will forgive me. Jane is a slut of the first order. She has had more men than I have had meat pies. Little Janie has had a go at me more times than I care to remember.”

Elizabeth looked across the table at Isabelle. She looked at Gabriel with unhappy surprise. This was something she clearly did not know.

Gabriel patted Isabelle's hand. “Give me some credit, love; I have no need for nasty females like that. Now as to if she could murder. Yes, maybe so. The problem is that as she is only nineteen and the first murder is seven years ago. I doubt very much she was a twelve-year-old murderer. The recent murders...,” he shrugged.

“Now on to the men. Theodore De Wolfe, father of the family, is sixty years old. Like his wife he looks and acts much younger. My opinion of him is not a good one. I have never trusted him. As far as I am concerned, he is a liar and a thief. He has many interests and great wit. He keeps his wife happy and their marriage has last lasted thirty four years years. Mostly likely not an easy feat...do you agree Lee?” Gabriel smiled across the table.

“Near to impossible, I'd say!” Lee agreed and took a slight slap on the arm from Sue Lyn.

“Have I ever complained?” She smiled at him.

“Not a beep and I thank God for that every day.”

“De Wolfe's money comes from his father's South African diamond mines. He runs the business mostly from his offices at the manor house. During the course of a year, he makes several trips to Africa and he was there when two of the murders occurred. I have strong reason to believe a fair amount of his great wealth comes from the smuggling and black market selling of these diamonds. I know other things about the man that I need not say here. Is he also an insane killer...it very well could be!”

“The oldest son and husband to Ruth is Owen. He is twenty-nine years old. He and I are life long friends. As you know, Owen is an artist. He has a passion for his art unlike any I have seen. He never rests and is always at his easel. He drinks but not too excess like his mother. Unfortunately his marriage to Ruth is now mostly in name. He resents her sadness and accuses her of self-pity. He has a mistress in London. They have a child, a son. He has recently told me he is thinking of divorce. That would greatly please his parents, as Ruth has become a pariah to the family. As far as I know no one else in the family know of the existence of Owen's mistress.”

“I would not be too sure on that, Gabriel.” Isabelle said. “Most women know when their men stray, especially when it is far enough away to create a child.”

“Perhaps but Ruth shows no signs of knowing. Owen is good friend to me but I am not blind to his flaws. He is quick tempered and selfish. It is also fair to say that

even if his marriage were healthy he would have strayed. He likes his women far too much. Could he murder, is he a sexual deviant? If so, it is well hidden but I doubt it.”

“Now we come to the twins. Randall and Steward are twenty-six years old. For twins no two men have ever been so different. Randall is studious, hardworking and intelligent. He graduated from Cambridge this spring with a medical degree. He was engaged to one Amy Walker for along while. Sadly, Amy died six months ago. Randall was...is devastated. To lose a beloved to death is a blow we never really and truly heal from.” Gabriel paused here, taking a long drink and finishing off his second glass of wine.

Elizabeth saw Sue Lyn and Lee exchange looks. Isabelle sat in still silence, her plate of food largely untouched.

“All was not always easy for Randall’s parents. In his early years at Cambridge, he had a gambling problem and that brought him to expulsion. Ted used his influence and Randall was accepted back at Cambridge. From then on, he seems to live up to his parents’ expectations. Could he be a deviant and murderer...yes, I think so. He can be a sullen and lonely man. I have seen him in arguments with his brothers. Before Randall’s engagement, there were some problems with him and some of the local village girls. His mood swings greatly. I learned that he has hit his sister. That is not a good sign.”

“Lastly, I come to Steward. He is a foul and nasty being. Unlike his brother, he has no ambition but to enjoy himself in every possible way. Everything he does he does to excess. Women, drink, gambling and I have even heard a whisper or two about drugs. From the looks of him, I would say that whisper should be more of a shout. Cocaine, I think as his manner quickly changes from low to high. Two years ago, a suit fell on him as a correspondent in the divorce of one Lord and Lady Harrow. Ted paid highly for that and was none too pleased with his son. Steward is a true black sheep if ever there was one. Of course he is the classic type that could be seen as a murderer but I have learned things are rarely what they seem.”

There was another pause as dishes were cleared and the main dish of broiled fish and potatoes fruit was served around. Gabriel stood and moved around the table, refilling the wine glasses.

“Those are my thoughts on the De Wolfe family. Are there any questions?” Gabriel asked after retaking his seat.

Isabelle spoke first. “You said Theodore was away for two of the murders. Can any of the others be ruled out in the same way?”

“I did not say Ted was ruled out, he was not at the Manor house but could still be the murderer. Wolfe Manor is a huge building, with rooms restructured to form apartments. With the exception of Randall who often lived at Cambridge and Stewart who sometimes stays in his London flat, the entire family lives there. I have checked as much as possible and it seems that, with the exception of Ted, they were all present when all the murders were committed.”

Elizabeth sat forward, caught Gabriel’s attention. “Since you obviously care for this family, well...you must have more than proximity to the murders to go on or you would not accuse them.”

“Unfortunately I do! Now I come to the events of the murders. The first was August 2, 1893. It was the weekend of the wedding of Owen and Ruth. I was best man and had been at Wolfe Manor for five days.”

“The victim, eighteen year old Mary O’Neal was employed as bar maid in the local pub, The Madsen Arms Inn. She was last out after closing as was usual when she worked. There was a short walk through a thickly wooded area from the Arms to the cottage Mary shared with her grandparents. Sometimes her Grandfather would escort her home, most often he would forget. It was not until the morning that they knew she had not come home and then sent out the alarm.”

“Her body was found later that morning, somewhat hidden in the woods. I am sorry ladies.” he paused and looked around the table. “The details are ugly but that is murder. Gagged, beaten, raped and then strangled with piano wire, Mary faced a horrific death.”

“A local fellow, Stanley Burke, had long courted Mary. He was furious at her for what he thought was recent unfaithfulness. Over the week before he issued threats to kill Mary if she did not change her ways and marry him. He had a strong alibi and so he was not charged. As a side story, Burke took heavily to drinking after Mary’s death. He died in a drunken fall a year later.”

“The second murder happened a year and half later, Feb. 3, 1896. The victim was Chloe Buckley, twenty-two years old and a kitchen maid at Wolfe Manor. Her body found on the kitchen floor at first light by their Cook. Again, the murder used a gag and a rape happened, the rape in the usual way. The murder weapon was a kitchen knife. The autopsy revealed that Chloe was pregnant. No one was ever charged in this murder.”

“The third murder was two years and two months later, April 10th, 1898. That time it was the De Wolfe family cook. Her name was Alice Clark. She was thirty-eight years old. She was the woman who made the discovery of the body of Chloe Buckley. She was missing for a week before her body located in an abandoned barn, on the De Wolfe property.”

“This time the poor victim was more or less tortured to death. Her death was slow, painful, and horrific. The final cause of her demise was from loss of blood from all her wounds.”

“Alice had a husband who she had long been separated from. He lived miles away but he was in the vicinity at the time of the murder. The husband was arrested but there was no evidence so he was let go and there the case of Alice Clark as with the others was silenced.”

“There is one thing that bothers me.” Sue Lyn began. “There were four murders, for different modes of murder and as much as two years between two of the murders; how can you be sure it was always the same culprit.”

“Yes.” Elizabeth agreed eagerly. “Isn’t it the usual with such lunatics that they keep to one sort of weapon?”

“That is what some experts have written. There is something else that permanently connects these affairs. Each victim had vicious bite marks on her breasts. Some of these bites were so deep they broke through to the other side.”

The room was silent for a few moments. Isabelle crossed her body. Sue Lyn leaned closer to her husband.

Gabriel stood suddenly, pushing his chair sharply back into place. “On the case of Daisy Mott some of the bite marks were old and healed; others were newer, maybe a few days.” He cleared his throat, ran his hands through his hair and looked pointedly at Lee. Their eyes locked and Lee slightly nodded his head. “Now, I have had more than

enough of my own voice for this night and I am sure you all have as well. I will go and spend some time with Gabby, then rejoin you in the drawing room.”

No one spoke as Lee led the three females into the drawing room. A large, crackling fire only slightly lifted their spirits as they settled. Lee stood by the fire, filling his pipe from a tobacco box on the mantle, Sue Lyn and Elizabeth on a settee, Isabelle in a high backed chair across from them. Elizabeth noted that she had a glazed look to her eyes and a flush to her cheeks. That was most likely the effect of several glasses of wine.

“Tell me, Miss Leighton...” Isabelle began, fixing unfocused eyes on Elizabeth.

“I wonder,” Sue Lyn interrupted, smiling at Elizabeth. “Since we will live and work together should we not use first names?”

Everyone agreed.

Isabelle continued. “Elizabeth, do you believe in the existence of ghosts?”

“No. I can not say I do.”

“Your mother did. She and I often discussed spirits. Maggie was a sensitive.”

“A sensitive?” Elizabeth asked.

“An untrained medium. She could see the spirits and sometimes hear them but she did not know how to make good contact with them. A sensitive is a beacon of light for those still walking here.”

Elizabeth shrugged. “I do not mean to insult...but I do not believe in things I do not see. If they do exist then at least I am glad they cannot hurt us!”

“If that is what you foolishly think, then you may have a rude awakening.”

“Isabelle! Be quiet!” Lee snapped at her.

“No, I will not!” Isabelle snapped back at him, and then turned again to Elizabeth. “There are far worse things waiting at Wolfe Manor than human murders. They have a special interest in you! If I was you I would run from this mess, if you can tear yourself away from Gabriel.”

“You shouldn’t drink, Isabelle.” Lee said with controlled anger. “You are making a fool out of yourself. Go to your room!”

Isabelle got to her feet shakily. “How dare you speak to me that way...?”

Sue Lyn stood next to Isabelle, taking her arm. “Perhaps we should go upstairs and let Lee and Elizabeth talk.”

“Your husband is a pompous buffoon!” Isabelle complained as Sue Lyn pulled her out of the room.

Lee followed, closing the door after them. “I apologize for Isabelle. Too much wine does not sit well with her irrational temperament.”

“That is alright, Lee. I can see that Isabelle is none too happy about having me here. I do not want to be the source of trouble.”

He sighed and sat next to her. “Truth be told, she is most likely more than worried about Gabriel’s interest in you. He never tried to hide that fact.”

“Then that is his mistake. I am here only as an employee and that will not change.”

“And so, our Isabelle will just have to get used to that fact. Gabriel will set her straight.”

“Do you believe in ghosts, Lee?” She liked the look of his smooth, intelligent face. He was a man comfortable in his skin and with his life.

"Yes. However, our excitable friend exaggerates. De Wolfe Manor has stood for 300 years. It is not odd that it should have sad residue. Gabriel took Isabelle near to the manor to get a feeling for what is in the place. She picked up on two ghosts, a boy child and a cloaked man, maybe a monk." Lee smiled. "Lord, show me an old house in England that is not haunted by a child and a monk! They seem to come with the very walls. What frightened Isabelle badly was a dark, evil space she could put no name to."

Gabriel came into the room and sat across from them.

"Sue Lyn took Isabelle to her room." Lee said to Gabriel. "Isabelle needs to sleep. I have been explaining to Elizabeth about the spirits at De Wolfe Manor."

Gabriel nodded and sat silent, his dark eyes fixed firmly on Elizabeth.

"I do not believe that such things are possible but as they say seeing is believing." Elizabeth looked from Gabriel to Lee. "I will keep an open mind."

"That is all we can ask for. As a believer I have great respect for a skeptic with an open mind." Lee stood. "I should go and see if Sue Lyn has managed to calm Isabelle. Good night, Elizabeth."

Gabriel took Lee's place beside Elizabeth on the settee. "So we are using first names. That is good. I have to admit, Elizabeth, I am rather excited about what lays ahead of us."

"Really? Even though it might mean the ruin of a family you care about?"

"No, it will mean the ruin of a murderer. It will entirely up to the rest of the family if it ruins them as well. If they are guilt free they should hold their heads high and be damned what the rest of the world thinks."

"More self-inflicted wounds?"

"Yes, like your feeling of loss of dignity earlier. You fell asleep, where is the shame in that? You fainted and that from hunger, most likely...still, where is the shame?"

"Goodness, Gabriel. When I arrived a few hours ago, I had no money, employment or home. You tell me where the dignity in all that is?"

"What I am saying is that, if you ever feel a loss of dignity that is because you have freely given it away. Did you do anything at all to bring all that misery down on you?"

"No."

"It is only our own personal actions that we should be proud of or feel shame for. Dignity is a gift from God, never give it away or believe that anyone can take it from you."

"All of that would apply better in a kinder world, Gabriel. This world is neither kind nor fair. No matter what grand ideas you have the scandal will ruin the De Wolfe name. They may hold their heads high, just as I did but their lives will never be the same." She stopped abruptly, brushing unseen crumbs away from her skirt as though brushing away the unwanted conversation. "May I ask you two very personal and very frank questions?"

"Of course."

"Am I correct in assuming that Mrs. Lucci is your...."

"Mistress?" He finished her question. "Yes, she is."

"It seems that Mrs. Lucci is not all pleased to have me around. I would greatly appreciate it if you explained to her that there is nothing at all, nor will there be, anything between you and me."

He turned his head slightly, looking at her from the corner of his eye. "I do not think I can do that. I would rather not lie to her."

"But it is not a lie."

"Really? Earlier when I showed you your bedroom you toyed, very slightly with teasing me."

"I did not."

"You did but as I said, only slightly. Let's just say you tipped your toe into the water to see if you liked it." He sat back and faced her directly. "You did. Most women do like to tease but few would admit that is so." He paused and touched her face just as he did before, "Do you have enough courage to admit to that? I have the courage to admit that I very much enjoyed your tease."

He felt her body stiffen. She narrowed her eyes and backed away from his hand.

"You are angry and shouldn't be. I just simply say exactly what I think and feel."

"You are very bold. I wonder if you would have dared to speak to me like this a year ago. My fall in the world has not made me any less moral."

"I realize that. Nonetheless, you played with me and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I am always thoroughly entertained by a playful teasing." Gabriel leaned forward slightly to look into her eyes. She turned away. "No," he whispered and gently turned her face to his. "Look at me."

Still angry and embarrassed she glared at him. "I did not tease you." As quickly as the anger came it drained away. She was no longer the slightest angry. She was relaxed and at ease. For some reason their conversation now seemed hilarious and she laughed aloud.

He smiled. "Is something humorous?"

"Yes. We are... well, I am completely ridiculous. Why should I be mad? Really, your attention is flattering." His smile widened to a grin and that made her laugh even more. "No, I am sorry! I must stop." With difficulty, she kept a straight face and stopped laughing.

"So do you forgive my boldness?"

"Yes, of course. However, please listen to me for one minute. I have known you only a few hours. I know really nothing about you whatsoever. I do not sleep with men who are so very close to strangers. I will grant you the fact that you are an excellent specimen of masculinity and I doubt I would be disappointed in you as a lover." She sighed and turned from his demanding stare. "I have had one lover and he is dead. If and when I take another man he will be three things, beautiful, healthy and free." She stood and moved to the door. "It is very clear that you are not free and I will never be 'the other woman' for any man. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly."

"Good night, Gabriel."

"Wait!" he said as she opened the door. "You did not ask me your second question."

She wrinkled her nose thoughtfully. "That is strange. It has gone completely out of my mind."

“It has not!”

“But it has. Isn’t that odd!” She smiled and closed the door behind her.

Isabelle was sleeping when Gabriel climbed into bed beside her. She was the only woman he had known who always slept naked. He pulled her body close, buried his face in her hair and inhaled deeply. The familiar scent, warmth of her body stirred him. He ran his hand down her side, resting it lightly on her hip and whispered in her ear. She muttered something in Italian that he did not understand but it did not sound welcoming.

“Now you do not really mean that, do you?” One hand he slid under and onto her breasts the other down from her hip and between her legs. She moaned slightly, her body relaxing. He ran his tongue up her neck to her cheek. “It has been a long day, my love, how will I relax without your help?”

She smiled, opened her eyes and turned slightly to face him. “God, do you ever have enough?”

“No!” He laughed, pushed her onto her back and climbed onto her.

“And no to you!” She laughed with him, rolled on her side and gently pushing him away. “If you want it fast like that...go and do it to yourself!”

“Shit! The things you say. I am tired. Just this one time make it quick and easy!”

“I said no! Quick and easy is only for you.” She held his penis. “Make love to me, Gabriel and you will sleep like an angel, I promise.” She ran her tongue across his lips and into his mouth.

He moaned as she kissed him. He held her head in his hands, running his eyes hungrily over her face. “Good damn a beautiful woman! I am all yours, hands, body ...tongue. Which would you like?”

“Try it all and then I will decide.”

A half an hour passed before she would let him into her. She moved him ever closer to orgasm, then would stop and change their position. This she did several times before he finally pinned her down and held her in place against the bed.

“Enough...enough!” He gasped in her ear. “Put your legs around me and stay still.”

Isabelle knew when to obey him and that is what she did then.

“There, my love!” She kissed him when he was done and pulled out of her.

“Now you will sleep and give me some peace.” She turned on her side, curled in a ball under the covers.

He rolled away, his tension released but his heart heavy with loneliness. As he waited for sleep he thought of the conversation he had with Lee just after his return from the Three Bells Saturday night.

“I think she will come tomorrow.” Lee said. He and Gabriel sat with cigarettes and whiskey in the drawing room. “She was doubtful and I cannot blame her. Nevertheless, she was curious and that might be enough!” Lee paused and studied the face of the man he knew so well. “I wonder Gabriel, what will you do if she doesn’t?”

“As I told you before, I will go and get her. One way or the other she will hear my offer. She is perfect for our team. She has grace, beauty and education. Most importantly, the very society she was born into has so bitterly betrayed her. Christ, Lee, I will offer her a way out of that hellhole.”

“And a way into your bed! I remember what you said to me about Elizabeth during the Leighton trial. What you wanted then had nothing to do with what she could offer our team. Has that changed?”

When Gabriel did not answer, Lee continued. “Of course she could help us, there is no denying it. If you have powerful feelings for the woman, will you keep your distance from her? What about Isabelle?”

Gabriel shrugged. “I take good care of Isabelle. I give her all I can.”

“You have a certain kind of love for her. I can see that. Wouldn’t it just be so much easier to forgive and marry her?”

“Forgive her!” Gabriel stood, his eyes fired with anger. “Shit, Lee, it was not just rumored and gossip. I saw her with my own eyes riding that fool just as she had ridden me a few hours before.” Lee winced, closed his eyes briefly. “Yes, it is a bad picture, is it not? That picture will be in my mind every time I look at Isabelle for now and forever. Would it release me from that memory if I forgave her?”

Lee sighed. “No, it would not. Then let her go. For this last year, you have used her guilt and fear of losing you to hold her in her place. She is in a constant state of uncertainty. She never knows from one minute to the next when you will finally cast her off. Cut her free before you start with another new female.”

“I want Isabelle. She will stay where she is. Would you do any different if you were in my shoes? Would you forgive Sue Lyn?”

Lee thought for a moment. “I would forgive so she would not live in misery but I would never forget.”

“Then you are a far better man than I am...maybe you are better and luckier. I would be a lucky man if I could forgive Isabelle and marry her as I once wanted to do. I have tried and it is not possible.”

“All you are doing is prolonging Isabelle’s heart break.”

“That is true Lee, but she brought it all on herself.”

As he lay there staring off into the dark, Gabriel knew Lee was right. Isabelle deserved better. At the very least, she deserved to know that his heart no longer needed her. His body and mind did and for now that would have to be good enough.

Elizabeth woke with a start the next morning. At first, she had no idea where she was. The muted morning light shone through a window in the wrong place. Dark silhouetted furniture had no place in her memories. Reality slipped into place, she smiled, stretched, sat up and saw that she was not alone.

“I am sorry Miss! I didn’t mean to wake you.” A young maid said wringing her hands nervously. Behind her, a small fire was growing in the fire place. “It’s bitter cold this morning. Housekeeper said I should do your fire.”

“It is cold isn’t it?” Elizabeth shivered and pulled the covers over her shoulders. She watched for a moment as the young girl slid more wood and coal into the fire.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Vita, Miss! Vita Moffat.”

Elizabeth turned on the bedside gas lamp. “You look very young. How long have you worked at Random Hall?”

Vita smiled proudly. “Six years. I were only ten with the Reverend came and got me.”

“Got you?”

“Yes, that is what he does. Goes to St Marks for girls and boys he needs to work here.”

“St. Marks?”

“Orphanage, Miss. I been there since I was born. There is five of us here now that used to live there. He is a kind man is Mr. Jackman. Mrs. Hartman, she’s the cook, says he is an angel on earth. Lord, I didn’t have nothin’ when I came here. Now I got a job and a ‘ome.”

Elizabeth thought, but did not say, that that was very much the same for her. She could see that Vita wanted to talk about her home and the people in it. “Yes, I doubt that there are many men like Mr. Jackman. I met Gabriella as well. She is a sweet child. I’d hardly been here a half an hour when she asked me to be her Mommy!”

“Ah, she is a lonely little one! Poor thing messes ‘aving a ma!”

“How long ago did Mrs. Jackman die?”

A dark cloud seemed to cross Vita’s eyes. “Three years back!”

“I do not mean to pry but since I am going to be living here, how did she die?”

Vita looked around as though to make sure no one else was listening. She stepped closer to the bed and lowered her voice. “That were such a terrible time. But it all started back that spring and Mr. Jackman was still the reverend at St. Paul’s church. Little Jimmy Parks was one of the choirboys. Lovely voice he had, just like a girls.”

“Mrs. Hensley, church cleaner, went in on Monday morning just as she always does and found poor Jim. Murdered, he was. Such a terrible thing. Mind you, I did not see him but there was talk all over the place. Things were done to that child that only the devil would do. Things like...,” Vita paused, her face reddening, “what people do when they are married, but should be a man to a woman, not a man to a boy. You know what I mean?”

“I do.” Elizabeth answered quietly.

“Mrs. Hensley ain’t never been the same since. There was police all over and Reverend Jackman was mad as bulls to find the monster that did this.”

“I suppose he was! It was his church and his choir boy.”

“And he got right in there helping the police and the like. Guess that was when he first got it into his head to do snooping on his own. Mr. Woo and he was friends forever and just natural Mr. Woo should chip in. They was going all over, asking questions, stirring up things. Some people got mad and said it was not the right thing for a vicar to be doing, but they was all idiots. But the way things turned out maybe they was right, though.”

“Why is that, Vita?”

“Mr. Jackman got a letter telling him that he had better back off, he and the cops or they’d be sorry. People was saying that maybe the cops were onto to making an arrest when Mrs. Jackman went missing. She was coming home from a shopping trip one Saturday but she never got here. She just seemed to vanish and no one seen hide nor hair of her.”

Elizabeth shook her head slowly. The room seemed to have grown darker and colder even with the fire that crackled and hissed.

“Everybody tried to find her. Mr. Jackman was crazy with worry. He were out looking for her all the time.” Vita paused, pushed loose strands of hair back into place

and sighed. "It was three weeks before they found her body hidden out in the country some place. Done real bad and just like little Jimmy she was."

"Good Lord!" Elizabeth whispered. Gabriel's gentle, handsome face came into her mind. It was hard to imagine the misery he had known.

"We weren't supposed to know this but Mrs. Hartman over heard Mr. Jackman talking to Mr. Woo. She been beaten, horrible violated and tortured and bites on her breasts like some animal done it. Not an animal though, more like a monster."

Elizabeth gasped; bites on the breasts, could it be merely a co-incidence? That would be highly unlikely. "How utterly awful! They never caught this madman?"

"No. And the reverend ain't never been the same. He used to sing and laugh all the time but not no more. Please don't tell anyone I told you all that."

There was a knock on the door and the one they simply called Housekeeper stuck her head in the room. "Good morning, Miss Leighton." She smiled at Elizabeth, dropped the smile and turned to the young maid. "Come along, Vita. How long does it take to set a fire? Run upstairs and tell Mr. Jackman that Mrs. De Wolfe is waiting for him in the office. God knows what she thinks coming here unexpected before breakfast!"

Elizabeth stood by the warming fire and pulled on her dressing gown. Her mind raced with what she had just learned. Did Gabriel believe that the murderer of his wife was also the murderer of the De Wolfe victims? If so, why had he held that back when he explained the situation the night before? Shame of what he thought was a terrible personal failure. Possibly. 'Trust and verify!' a favorite quote of her fathers' came into her mind.

She turned the lock of her bedroom door and crossed to the hidden door that led to the small passage and the office. It was bitterly cold and dark, the ivy covered window let in very little light. She shivered and leaned her head as close as possible to the seam of the door to the office and the wall. At first, she was not sure if she would even be able to hear them. A moment passed then she heard what seemed to be a female coughing. As muffled as it was she would be still able to hear their conversation.

A few moments passed. Elizabeth shivered in the cold and dark. A door opened and closed and a female spoke.

"Gabriel, love, it is so good to see you!"

"Cornelia. Good morning. How bright and early you are!" There was a smile and sarcasm in Gabriel's voice.

"Yes, well, you must forgive me for that. I had to leave before Theodore woke. You know how he is. So many questions and then he would likely want to come with me. So tell me, how did things go yesterday with Elizabeth Leighton? Did she accept your offer?"

"She did."

"And she is here now?"

"Yes. Is that why you are here? To ask for her help?"

"Of course. I told you all about it the other day on the telephone. Along with that, I wanted to be sure you understood my reasons for not wanting you to investigate those dreadful murders."

"You do not want to have the matter brought back to public attention. You have been a very good friend to me all these years, Cornelia. I will respect your decision."

Anyway, I am not in the mood for another investigation right now. I have other things on my mind."

"Other things? I can imagine what they are! I have not seen Elizabeth in quite some time. Is she still so much like her mother?"

"Yes, she is! Margaret was an amazingly beautiful woman and so is her daughter. Elizabeth certainly has her mother's carrot top."

Cornelia laughed. "You are taken with her, aren't you? I can see it is your eyes."

"My eyes have nothing to do with this, Cornelia. I told you a long time I was...well, attracted to her."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I am not going to 'do' anything."

"Oh come now! I have known you all your life, Gabriel."

"Elizabeth has been through a horrendous year. She needs time to pull herself together. She is, I suppose you would say, a little skittish about life and men. I do not want to scare her off. She will live here, work with Lee and myself and we will see what the future holds."

"Won't your other females be in the way? So tell me, is that Italian female here. What is her name?"

Gabriel laughed. "You know her name well enough. It is beyond me why you two hate each other so much. Yes, Isabelle is here."

"I do not hate her. That would be like hating an unhealthy child. She is not the right woman for you and you know that. Have you ever given any thought to what your mother and father would say about your affair with her?"

"Well, let me see. Father would say, 'Be careful son, wear a shield. You know those Italians! They reproduce with every lay.' And he might say that I was a lucky man to have such a lovely woman in my bed."

"Indeed, I doubt that last bit. And your mother?"

"My incredibly innocent and cold mother would remind me as she did when she learned of my engagement to Helena. 'Just remember to keep your hands to yourself. Her body belongs to God until you are married.' It is no wonder I have no brothers or sisters."

Cornelia grunted. "Susan was a remarkably sexual female, never doubt that. Unlike some, I should not mention but you know whom I mean she did not flaunt her passions all over for everyone to see. She kept Samuel happy and dear God, he was so like you a beautifully wanton male. Susan Jackman must not have been that innocent, don't you agree?"

"Do we have to talk about my mother, father and sex all in the same sentence?" He laughed again. "I will never be able to eat my breakfast. Shall we go downstairs? I think I smell sausages cooking."

"Yes. I am anxious to talk to Elizabeth and see if she is up to the job. My sons need some very serious 'stirring up'!"

Elizabeth chose a simple lavender day dress. Small yellow florets decorated the bodice and skirt bottom. The deep V-neck line flattered her round face. The very stylish huge sleeves gave the feminine dress drama. Wearing a corset, she showed enough cleavage and not too much for daytime. While she dressed, she wondered just what Cornelia meant by 'stirring up'.

She pulled the bell cord then sat at the dressing and began to brush her hair.

"Yes, Miss Leighton." The talkative Vita asked stepping into the room.

"If you have a moment I wonder if you would help me with this mop. I shall have to have some of it cut."

"Rest are eatin' breakfast and I've had mine. I used to do Mrs. Jackman's hair." She said proudly and took the offered hairbrush. "Her hair was beautiful like yours only it was yellow."

"Was she pretty?"

"Very much. There is a painting of Mrs. Jackman above the mantle in the study if you's curious."

"I am in a way. One likes to put a face to the people they hear about."

"There! All done, Misses!" Vita said after a few minutes and held up a hand mirror.

"Thank you, Vita. It is lovely. You will have to show me how...."

There was a knock on the door. Gabriel stuck his head in just as the tremendous dinner bell sounded. He smiled and shrugged as Elizabeth stood. "Breakfast is ready."

Cornelia followed him into the room. "Elizabeth! How lovely to see you again!"

Cornelia De Wolfe was a short woman, barely reaching Gabriel's chest. She was slightly over what would have been a proper weight. This fact concealed by the careful cut of her garments. The jacket of the turquoise traveling suit tight at the waist and slightly flared at the hips. The padded shoulders and wide collar gave her an hourglass figure. Her face was too simple; her features too small and too close together for real prettiness. No one would remember her for any of that. What they would remember was her remarkably brilliant blue eyes. Even in the dim light of the cloudy morning, they sparkled as she spoke.

"Thank you Mrs. De Wolfe."

"You used to call me Aunt Connie and must continue to do so, my dear. You are correct, Gabriel, Elizabeth has turned into a very lovely young woman."

Elizabeth blushed and Gabriel flustered and cleared his throat.

"If any woman is to wake my sons from their doldrums, you are the one do it."

He stepped between the women, taking each by an arm, leading them to the stairs. "Remember Cornelia, you wished me not to mention the how and why of your wish for Elizabeth to...well, as you put it 'too stir your boys'." He paused, looked down at Elizabeth's still red and puzzled face. "Cornelia will explain while we breakfast."

"Oh yes, of course. Forgive me, Elizabeth. Really, it is all innocent!"

Gabriel, Elizabeth and Cornelia joined the Woo's in the breakfast room. There was polite chatter as they filled their plates and Sue Lyn poured out the steaming hot, strong tea.

"Where is Mrs. Lucci, Gabriel?" Cornelia asked Gabriel when they settled at the table. "I would prefer she not hear what I..." She stopped and looked to the doorway as Isabelle joined them.

"I am here!" Isabelle said crossing to the buffet table. Elizabeth noticed how pale she looked. Dark circles that had not been there the day before clouded her pretty face. "I am never excluded from conversations in Gabriel's home, Mrs. De Wolfe." Isabelle almost sneered at Cornelia. The deep dislike between the two was obvious. With a plate of plain toast and black tea, she took her place next to Gabriel.

Cornelia rolled her eyes. "Then, hopefully you have finally learned how to keep a secret." She responded with heavy sarcasm. She moved in her chair slightly turning her back on Isabelle and looking towards Elizabeth, Sue Lyn and Lee. "First and foremost I must make it perfectly clear that neither my sons nor my husband are in any way involved with the horrific murders. I say that not simply because they are my family but because I know these men completely, most likely better than I know myself. They have their faults, as we all do, but there is not a cruel bone amongst them."

Isabelle made an ugly sound, a disgusted grunt. "Some women are blind about their men. I also know your sons very well. They are not innocent angels, they are just men."

"I am all too aware how well you know my sons...."

Gabriel placed his fork down with more noise than needed. "Isabelle! Cornelia!" He began with anger, took a deep breath and lowered his voice. "Please! Isabelle, let Cornelia speak uninterrupted."

Isabelle shrugged turning her attention across the room and out the window.

"Thank you, Gabriel. I simply want to say this little speech to put this matter to rest once and for all. Gabriel brought certain worries to me shortly after the last terrible murder. Mind you, he did not accuse my family and of course, he would not. He pointed out to me that it was just very likely the murderer of these poor women lived on our Estate. I did not agree and still do not. I know my family and staff very well. That maniac could have come from anywhere. I am pleased to say that Gabriel has finally agreed to leave the matter in the hands of the authorities. It is no longer a subject I wish to discuss with anyone."

Isabelle sighed.

Cornelia turned her amazing eyes towards Elizabeth. "Elizabeth, I must apologize for my excited outburst earlier. It had slipped my memory that I had instructed Gabriel to withhold certain aspects."

"Shouldn't I know all before being offered this employment?"

"That is exactly what I thought." Sue Lyn put in and ignored a look from her husband.

"It was just that certain matters should be discussed female to female. Did Gabriel tell you the basics of my sons?"

"He did."

"It is really a very simple thing, my dear! My husband and I want grandchildren. What could be more natural? I will explain in detail. Owen, the oldest, is in a marriage in name only. Five years ago, Ruth his wife, moved out of their bedroom and refuses to let him anywhere near her. Time and time again Owen tried to draw her close again but..., "Cornelia shook her head, "to no avail. Now it seems he has given up and immersed himself in his work."

"Granted Ruth must live in a wheel chair, the result of an illness but her doctors say she could easily conceive and bare a healthy child. There will be no grandchild from that union, I am sure."

Elizabeth thought about the mistress and child Gabriel had mentioned. Even if Cornelia did know about this child, in her narrow, restricted world the child would not count.

“Owen must be made to see that a divorce is essential and that there is a world of suitable females for him. After all, he will be thirty on his next birthday. He needs to have a beautiful female around, in the most appropriate way so he may realize the passion he is missing.”

“Then there is Steward, one of my twins. They are twenty-six years old. Steward is a sad disappointment to his parents. He has fallen in with the most unsuitable London crowd. They call themselves ‘anarchists’. They spend all night drinking and talking about how to bring down the Government and destroy the upper class. Even with my limited understanding, I do not fail to see how much Steward enjoys from this hated society. He does not work and lives a lavish life style supplied by his father.”

“The females he knows...well, there is not a suitable wife amongst them and at least I thank God that Steward does not seem to be interested in any of them that way. This sort of female does not marry but does supply any man with the benefits of marriage. He says that society women bore him to tears with their lack of knowledge of the truth of the world. I need Steward to meet a modern woman of class and manners, a woman with a brains and beauty, someone who will entertain him at arms length.”

“Now we come to Randall!” Cornelia moved on to the one who was obviously her favorite. Her face glowed as she spoke of him. “From the very moment he could speak his father and I knew that he was a gifted child. Randall excelled at every turn of his education. He has a marvelous mind. This last summer he graduated in the top five of his class at Cambridge and earned his medical degree. Shortly after that, he received an offer of residency at St. Luke’s Hospital, a very prestigious opportunity.”

“You will understand our shock and dismay when he came to us a few months ago and declared he had changed his mind about being a doctor. If that was not bad enough Randall says he will convert to Catholicism and become, of all things...a priest!” Beside Cornelia, Isabelle snickered quietly. “Can you believe it?” Cornelia looked around the table. “What ever has happened to his mind? We are not Catholic. We are proud Church of England, Protestants and it is that Church who baptized all my children.”

“Conversion is very possible, Cornelia.” Gabriel said.

“That is ridiculous! How can one change their very nature that way? I cannot wake up tomorrow and simply claim, ‘I have decided to be a man!’ No matter what silly words I would utter, I would still be a woman. It is not possible for Randall to lower his status and become Catholic. Even the one Catholic in our group must agree with that.” Cornelia looked at Isabelle.

Isabelle threw her napkin on the table and stood suddenly. “I will respect your guest, Gabriel because that is what you wish and this is your house.” She looked down her nose at Cornelia. “Come to my house, Mrs. De Wolfe and I will prove to you just what a fool you are!” With a great flutter of noisy skirts, Isabelle moved across the room and sat on the window bench.

After a moment of stunned silence Cornelia, red faced turned to her host. “I can see that your influence on Mrs. Lucci has not changed her. I had hoped it would.”

With a bland face, Gabriel looked from Isabelle to Cornelia. “Could we please get on with it?”

“Where was I? Oh, yes! If Randall thinks himself a priest of that Church, there will be no grandchildren from him and his father would likely disown him. Elizabeth, I

wish you to wake Randall to all that will sacrifice for no cause at all. I am sure you will be easily able to do this with simple flirting. Randall has always had an eye for a beautiful red head such as you."

Isabelle muttered something most likely not flattering in Italian.

Elizabeth sighed. "I will try, Aunt Connie, but there is much more to a person religious beliefs than things physical."

"We are all mature women. We all know just how important 'physical' matters are to a man. Randall has forgotten that is all and needs a gentle nudge." Cornelia said firmly.

"I have a question, if I may." Lee spoke. "I have the distinct impression that the De Wolfe family and the Leighton family were close."

"Margaret and I were very good friends and had been so since we were girls."

"How is it then that Elizabeth does not seem to know your sons?"

Cornelia flustered slightly obviously uncomfortable with the question. "Margaret had her reasons for not bringing Elizabeth to Wolfe Manor. I understood them completely. My husband and I were always welcome at the Leighton household and did get to know Elizabeth very well."

Gabriel turned to Elizabeth. "If you are agreeable with 'stirring up the De Wolfe men' you will be staying at the De Wolfe home as guest. Cornelia and Ted have brought you to stay in your home to assist you out of your recent difficulty. That way you can spend time easily with Owen, Randall and Steward. As I feel in a way you are now my responsibility Lee and I will be staying at the Manor as well." He smiled. "Just to give you support."

Isabelle laughed but said nothing.

"You will pretend to meet us for the first time so you will have to be very careful what you say to us when others are around. Lee will go to the De Wolfe Estate later on today. You and I will go tomorrow. I will leave you discreetly at the local train station. Cornelia will be there to meet you."

"I understand." Elizabeth said thoughtfully.

Cornelia stood. "Good. We have all that settled. I should leave. By the way, Elizabeth, as you will be working more or less for me and Gabriel I will match whatever he plans to pay you."

"Good heavens, no!" Elizabeth said quickly. "My salary is far more than fair."

"No, I insist. I would not feel right otherwise."

"Take the money, Elizabeth." Gabriel encouraged. "The De Wolfe's are loaded to the gills."

"But really...."

Cornelia interrupted. "Then would it be better if I made a lump sum donation to a charity of your choice?"

"Yes, Aunt Connie, if you insist on paying me that will be for the better."

Cornelia turned to Isabelle. "And you? What will you do to keep busy while Gabriel is away? Not the usual, I hope!"

Isabelle stood, glaring down at Cornelia. "If you were not such an old woman I would put you on your ugly backside. You may have Gabriel fooled but not me! I know just what a bitch you really are. See your guest out, Gabriel. Then please have a coach

prepared for me. It is far past the time for me to go home.” She left the room, closing the door loudly behind her.

“Very thin skinned, those Italians!” Cornelia spoke to all in general. “However, I too must go! Come along Gabriel. I will see you tomorrow then, Elizabeth!” She took Gabriel’s arm and left the breakfast room.

“My goodness!” Elizabeth looked to Lee and Sue Lyn. “Do they always go on like that?”

“Yes!” Lee shook his head. “Thank God Gabriel keeps them apart most of the time.”

Sue Lyn took an envelope from her purse, smiled and raised her eyebrows. “Gabriel says you were reluctant to take this money. I think you and I should spend the afternoon doing a little dress shopping. When was the last time I bought something new, Lee?”

“Ages!” He turned to Elizabeth. “You will need new things, so you must not be shy.”

Elizabeth smiled and nodded at Sue Lyn. “I will be ready in less than a blink!”

Elizabeth was waiting for Sue Lyn when Isabelle knocked on her door. Without waiting for reply, she stepped into the room. As pale and as tired looking she had been earlier, there was no trace of it then. She wore a red velvet suit. Black mink trimmed collar and cuffs. An elaborate matching hat sat on the most stylish angle. Bright white ostrich feathers draped down from the hat and formed a perfect frame for her oval face. She smiled radiantly at Elizabeth.

“I wish a word with you if you have a moment.” She said stepping up to Elizabeth, standing a little closer than the other woman found comfortable.

Elizabeth resisted the urge to back away. “Of course.” She returned the smile.

“May I ask you...are you a virgin?”

“Pardon me?” She had heard Isabelle well enough but could not believe the nerve of the question.

“I said, are you a virgin?” Isabelle repeated the words clearly and slowly as though she was speaking to a child.

“Are you?” Elizabeth met the black eyes with an angry glare.

“Of course not. If I was I would be too embarrassed to say so!” She lifted Elizabeth’s left hand and looked at the engagement ring. “If you are engaged why were you homeless?”

“I really do not see how any of this is your business, Mrs. Lucci. However, I have nothing to hide. My fiancée is dead.” The brutal words still cut her to the core. Facing this pain unnecessarily added to her anger.

“Well, my instinct tells me that you are not a virgin and that is just as well.”

“Will you please leave my room? This conversation is ridiculous and I am sure that Gabriel is waiting to take you home.”

“He will wait. I will not leave until I have said all I need to say. First I want to warn you about Owen De Wolfe.”

Elizabeth stood rigid and silent.

Isabelle sighed, her tone softer. “We need not be enemies. I warn you about Owen because I wish someone had warned me about him so long ago. He is like Gabriel...” She paused, turned from Elizabeth and studied her hair in the mirror.

“Owen is an amazing man; maybe even more so than Gabriel. All women fall for him. Contrary to what his idiot mother says, he is not a lonely man. He is an expert at seduction. If he sees a woman he wants, he has her. He will want you, have no doubt! And you will find him difficult to resist.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Lucci. I am sure I can keep him in his place.”

“No, I know females like you. You mean well but your niceness is almost stupidity. You meet a man like Gabriel or Owen and you think it is love at first sight. You do not see the difference between love and lust.”

“You need not worry about what I know or do not know. Unlike some females I turn a blind eye to unwanted sexual advances.”

Isabelle ignored the insult. “Gabriel is smart and sly when he seduces. You will hardly notice his words and actions before you want him.”

“You must know some very simple-minded females. Believe me I am not one of them.”

“Your confidence is no defense. Will you be so cool when Gabriel wants to take you to his bed?”

Appalled Elizabeth struggled to keep her temper. “I doubt he will try!”

“I know my man, you do not. Of course, he will try. He has been fascinated with you for some time. That is the real reason you are here.”

“So you say. I can not be held responsible for the fantasies of others.”

Isabelle shrugged. “He will try and you will give him what he wants. You will be weak for him, that I can tell. However, I do not care. That is what I want you to know. You may have sex with him. That means little to me. Sex is only an act of the nervous system. Just be aware that he is my man and no matter what he will always be mine. He has a curious passion for you but it is me he loves. Very soon we will marry and he will never look at you again.”

Imitating Isabelle actions, she looked at her left hand. “I do not see an engagement ring.”

“We are not engaged. That will change. I am now more or less twelve weeks with his child. I have not told him because that would interfere with this enquiry. I will tell him when it is over. Gabriel is an honorable man. He will marry me before the child is born. Then sex with you will mean nothing to him. You will not tell him what I just told you because if you did he would not think so sweetly of you.”

Elizabeth gasped, for a moment stayed quiet. Finally, in words little more than a hiss she said. “What an appalling woman you are! If Gabriel falls for your age old trick and marries you he could only expect a very unhappy life.”

“Perhaps I am appalling but I am not a naïve child like you. I will keep him and he will be happy because, unlike you frigid British females I know how to please a man truly.” She stopped briefly as Sue Lyn joined them. “Gabriel is addicted to the sex I give him. That will hold him. No matter what it has always held him.” Isabelle smiled at Sue Lyn and left the room.

“Oh dear!” Sue Lyn said as she looked at Elizabeth’s furious face. “I am so sorry! Isabelle can sometimes be a shockingly difficult person.”

“Sometimes! Do you know what she told me?”

“I can imagine.”

“She actually had the gall to give me permission to sleep with Gabriel.”

Sue Lyn closed her eyes and shook her head. "Are you going to tell Gabriel?"

"No, of course not. I would not lower myself or embarrass him. But," Elizabeth paused and straightened her hat, "Mrs. Lucci may have made a serious misjudgment and underestimated me. Shall we leave for our shopping trip, Sue Lyn? I am in the mood to buy some very lovely clothes."

And shop, they did. There was hardly a dress shop, haberdashery, and shoe shop or lingerie boutique on High Street they did not visit. After a brief stop for lunch, Elizabeth decided to make one last purchase.

"Something I have always wanted." Elizabeth said to Sue Lyn as she ran a single strand of pale gray pearls through her fingers. "Father told me he would buy me pearls to wear on my wedding day. 'To honor your new life' is how he put it. They are so lovely! Do you think I should buy them, Sue Lyn?"

Her companion smiled. "Well, you certainly have a 'new life'. Buy them. The color will go so well with your skin tone."

The hustle and bustle of traffic delayed their ride home. Wagons of goods, driven by harried deliverymen, coaches with women in amazing hats jostled for position. Men walking with purpose, women with bundles and small children hanging on their skirts all made far better time. Everything was alive with color and movement.

Elizabeth's mind wandered back to the distressing conversation with Isabelle. The last thing she wanted was a problem with Gabriel's personal life.

"Is Mrs. Lucci always so outspoken and aggressive?" She asked Sue Lyn.

A moment passed before Sue Lyn answered. "Isabelle is in a terrible situation. She is so passionately in love with a man who no longer needs her but only in the most basic way. Can you imagine how terrible that must be, knowing how easily he could find a replacement for her."

"Then Gabriel does not love her? No, I am sorry; I should not have asked that. That is not my business."

Sue Lyn sighed. "It mostly will be your business before too much longer. He did love her but no longer. Gabriel is wrong to keep her hoping but he is only a man."

"That is sad. I suppose I would be irrational as well, were I in her shoes."

"I like Isabelle. She is my friend but in all honesty, she brought this on herself. I cannot imagine life if Lee ever stopped loving me."

"Tell me Sue Lyn, do you believe in love at first sight?"

Sue Lyn smiled. Her delicate ivory skin reddened slightly. "I do because it most certainly happened to me. I loved Lee with all my heart the very first moment I laid eyes on him."

"Do tell me about it!" Elizabeth encouraged. "I could certainly use a happy story!"

"Well, I was just turning nineteen. My father was a junior official in the Chinese embassy. My mother ran a local sandwich shop. It was my duty to bring father his lunch. I was coming down the embassy steps and ran into two men. One is only a blur in my mind. I had a vague impression of an older man with a thick, wavy stock of bright white hair. The other man...oh my Lord he did catch my attention. He was very tall, much taller than most Chinese men were. He had the broadest shoulders. However, it was his handsome face that took my breath away."

"That was the first time I ever set eyes on Lee Woo." Sue Lyn paused and smiled at the treasured memory. "I was so taken that I nearly fell down the rest of the stairs and was half way up the street in the wrong direction before I knew it."

"I had no idea who he was but I could not get him out of my mind. Everyday when I brought Father his lunch I would hope to run into him again but I never did. Eventually I mentioned him and how I felt to my mother."

"Did you? Oh my, what did she say?"

"She said that it seemed it was far past time for her and my father to find me a suitable husband. That did not help me much!"

"No, I guess it did not."

"However, fate must have its way. Not too long later, I was walking on Bank Street and came up to the Old Rose Theater. The play was something called 'The Juggler's Wife'. I stopped dead in my tracks at the poster on the billboard. It was the actor named Cecil Berry and there was no doubt in my mind he was the older man that day on the embassy steps."

"The ticket seller was most helpful. Yes, she said, she did know the big China man. His name was Lee Woo and he was an assistant and bodyguard to the actor Berry. 'Why?' she asked me and smiled. 'You got a thing for him?'"

"I think I only stammered some silly my answer. 'Well,' the ticket seller went on. 'Mr. Woo is here every night when the play is on. You can catch his eye if you really want to!' I am certain that was the best advice I ever had or will have."

"I used my meager savings and bought some pretty dresses. Every night for a week, I came to see that silly play. However, do not ask me what it was about I have no idea. I came to the theater early so that I could sit mid front row."

"Occasionally I caught a glimpse of Lee, once right off stage before the play started. Another time during was during intermission as he spoke with some of the audience. That time I made sure to make eye contact with him. He smiled a little bit but quickly looked away. One day he was standing with the ticket seller when I purchased my ticket and I have often wondered if she said something to him."

"That was Saturday night and the final night of the play. I was terribly upset. By tomorrow, the amazing Mr. Woo would be gone and I would have no idea how to find him. I knew I had to find the courage to make a bold move that very night."

"Did you find the courage?" Elizabeth asked when Sue Lyn paused for breath.

"Good heavens no! I was so discouraged I stayed in my seat during intermission. Imagine my shock when Lee suddenly came up and sat down beside me! He leaned very close and said, 'Tell me and help me win a bet. Is it Cecil Berry you come every night to see or is it me?'"

"Oh my Lord!" Elizabeth laughed. "I would have died with embarrassment. What did you say?"

"I gathered all the courage I had and it was not much. I said that I most certainly did not come to see a wrinkled old man. Lee smiled broadly and I swear my silly heart skipped a beat. 'How much did you win?' I asked him. 'Five pounds!' he answered. 'Berry is always a fool for a sucker bet. Tell you what; why not help me spend my winnings?'"

"I met him the next day in a park not too far from my home. I could hardly have him pick me up at home! It was a beautiful spring day. The apple blossoms bloomed

and petals fell around us as we walked in the park. We sat on a bench. 'So what would you like to do today?' he asked. 'You decide. All of London is yours. What is your heart's desire?'"

"I think it was the word desire that set me off! And God only knows how such an innocent virgin as I was then found that courage! I leaned forward and whispered in his ear. Lee does sometimes have the dumbest facial expression. He certainly did then. He just sat there with that blank face looking at me."

"Did you hear me?" I asked after a moment.

"I am not sure." He mumbled so I whispered again.

"You must tell me." Elizabeth was enthralled with Sue Lyn's story. "What did you whisper?"

Sue Lyn blushed but answered anyway. "I simply said, 'Make love to me!'"

Elizabeth laughed and chapped her hands. "How wonderfully brave. Did he ever come out of his shock?"

"Yes, after my second attempt. He quickly stood, took me by the hand and I had to fairly run to keep up with him. We were in his apartment and he was kissing me before I had a chance to catch my breath. However, he was not at all pleased when it came clear to him that I was a virgin. 'I will take you home, Sue Lyn!' He said with his most stern voice. 'Why?' I asked teasingly. 'You told me I could have my heart's desire.'"

"Lee was surprisingly angry. 'God almighty! Do you even have the slightest idea what you are talking about? I do not make a point of deflowering silly virgins.' He paused and tried to compose himself. 'Sue Lyn you should not waste this gift you have. Give it to the man you love!'"

"I turned his face to mine and looked him directly in the eyes. 'That is what I am trying to do!' I said. I kissed him very passionately. I really had no idea what I was doing but I think Mother Nature took over. Six weeks later Lee and I were married. That was eight years ago. I think I am a very lucky woman."

"What a lovely story, Sue Lyn. Thank you for sharing it with me." Elizabeth thought then about how similar Sue Lyn's first night of love was like hers, innocent and eager virgins, and temporarily reluctant men. They were similar but different in a very important way. Sue Lyn still had the man she loved so much. God had taken Peter from her. She decided not to share her own story with Sue Lyn. The ending was too hard to bear.

Just ahead of them, a wagon full of potato crates lost a wheel and toppled over. The harried driver shouted orders to his startled helper. The Hansen that Elizabeth and Sun Lyn road jerked to a halt, blocked firmly in place.

Sue Lyn leaned out the window. "Blast! Lee wanted to leave for the country before teatime. I do want to say goodbye to him. Should we walk? Random House is only a half mile or so."

"Yes! Anything is better than sitting here."

Sue Lyn paid the driver and left him to bring their parcels to Random Hall.

"If we go this way," Sue Lyn motioned to a park entrance, "we will avoid the crowds some what and make better time."

For a while, they walked in silence, strangely like old friends, comfortable to share time and space without conversation. Elizabeth was aware that Sue Lyn often looked her way.

"Elizabeth, all day I felt that you wanted to ask me something. You should remember that I am not from your stifling society."

"Stifling?"

"Oh my, yes! In high society every word, every question or action must be weighed against all possible ramifications. Even the simplest compliment should be carefully considered. Tell me, if you had a close friend who...lets say was very ill with an incurable disease, would you be able to easy say 'How are you today?'"

Elizabeth thought for a moment. "No." she answered quietly. "That would remind the person of their miserable place."

"That is so ridiculous! How in heavens name do those people communicate? Ask me your question, if I know the answer I will tell you."

Elizabeth smiled slightly. "Well, it is difficult to put into words. All of this really is so odd and if it was not happening to me I would say it was impossible. Yesterday morning I had no hope, no home, no money and no family. I was truly lost. Now, a day later I have a beautiful place to live, interesting employment and a new wardrobe. Is it too good to be true? Should I trust Gabriel? I really know nothing what so ever about him. What kind of man is he?"

"Ah, yes! It is odd. Does the other shoe drop, you wonder. Gabriel is a very complex man. He is many things; a man of extremes, some are good some not so. He has great passion. Everything he does he does to the extent he can."

"Then tell me his extremes. I do not really have the time to find these out for myself."

"Gabriel has a powerful sense of loyalty. To his friends, lovers and employees he gives absolute loyalty. He expects the exact thing in return. He demands such loyalty it can be very difficult at times. However, as he has done for you nothing is held back to help. As hard as that can be at times, next to Lee, Gabriel is the finest man I have ever known."

"Now I have a question for you, Elizabeth. Are you attracted to him? Of course, he is a very handsome man. The women adore him. I swear if it were possible, there would be a line up at the door. Apart from his obvious appeal do you feel a need for him?"

"Goodness, no!" Elizabeth answered a little too quickly, her blush putting the lie to her words.

"Well he certainly has a need for you. As obsessed, as he can often be for a woman I have never seen him act as he has for you. Something happened a year ago between him and Isabelle...." Sue Lyn paused, shook her head and seemed to change her mind. "I remember your father's trial. He went every day with Mr. Lucci, sometimes on his own. I believe you were the main reason he did that. He had Lee follow you so he would know where you were and in some way, how you were doing. That is how he knew you were staying with your aunt. There were a few months when he lost you. He was angry, frustrated and generally a pain."

"He showed that openly?"

"Very much so. Gabriel does not hide his feelings."

“That must have been very difficult for Mrs. Lucci. I could not stand for my man to fret over another woman.”

“Poor Isabelle must take what he offers. Certainly, she was angry and they did argue about it but Gabriel would not back down. He swore all he wanted was for you come and work with him. I think he convinced himself that that was a fact but no one else.”

“I was there the night Lee came home and told Gabriel that he had found you at the Three Bells. Gabriel was thrilled. Thank God, Isabelle was not with us then. He was like a child on Christmas morning. He had been paying for your storage space, as you know, and the next day he had your things brought to Random House. I had to immediately begin the preparations of your rooms.”

They had reached Barley Street. Random House was just around the corner. Sue Lyn took Elizabeth by the arm and stopped. “I will be frank with you, as you say you do not have much time. Have no doubt he deeply wants to have an affair with you.”

Elizabeth looked away. She did not want Sue Lyn to see what might be in her eyes.

“It will not be very long before he tries his seduction. His sexuality is powerful in him. He wants you and when he goes after something he goes completely...sometimes even foolhardily.”

“I would never, for any reason be with a man who is already...involved. What am I to do about it?”

Sue Lyn smiled and turned Elizabeth to face her. “That all depends on what it is that you really want. Come along I had better get home before I lose my own man!”

As they rounded the corner, they saw Lee standing with obvious impatience beside a Jackman coach.

“One thing I will say and probably shouldn’t!” Sue Lyn shrugged, smiled and pulled Elizabeth closer so she could whisper. “From what Isabelle tells me and she tells me everything,” she rolled her eyes “Gabriel is as fine a man in bed as you would ever hope for.”

“But, Sue Lyn, I am not hoping for a man that way. I am happy as I am!”

“Ah well then, just say ‘no’ and you will stay happy as you are.”

Chapter Five

It was late in the afternoon before Gabriel returned to Random House. He and Elizabeth enjoyed their evening meal with Gabriella. No matter how hard Gabriel tried to change the subject she continued with her idea that they should marry. Elizabeth could not help but smile at Gabriel's embarrassment.

"A penny for your thoughts. Maybe more if they are truly interesting." Gabriel asked when he had finally corralled the youngster into her bed. Elizabeth was sitting in the window seat of the parlor, looking intently up at the bright full moon. He crossed the room, stopped at the drinks cabinet and poured a measure of whiskey. "A brandy?"

She sighed. "No thank you. You may as well keep your penny. You would find my thoughts tonight rather depressing. I was thinking about my parents...marriage, adultery, and lies."

He sat near her, stretched out his legs and sipped his drink. "You truly had no idea and about Tony and your Mother?"

"Not a clue. You must think me so naïve?"

"No, I think you were just an innocent. You took life at face value. Wouldn't it be nice if that was all there was to it?"

"I do not understand...."

"If life and people were just as they seemed. No dark secrets held for years. Why can't we simply mean what we say and say truthfully what we do?" He frowned. "I am not sure if that made any sense."

"It did. Truth at all costs, do you really think that would make life better? Aren't some truths just as painful as the lies that would cover them?"

"No, Elizabeth. I do not think so; at least not from my point of view. A lie is a spiraling thing, gathering misery as it goes along. I demand the truth and also give it."

"Then you are a rare man. Tell me, did Tony really love my mother. Did she love him or was it just sexual?"

"Tony loved her and she him. Yes, they loved each other very much."

"My poor father!"

They sat in silence for a while. The fire crackled and a wall clock ticked. Gabriel stood, placed his empty glass back on the tray and sat next to Elizabeth. "I have to tell you something that will not be easy for you."

"Oh God, what now?"

"I hoped you would not have to know this but that was foolish on my part. You need to know the absolute truth about your parents."

"Do you not think I know enough? I was much happier thinking they were in love and had a lovely marriage!"

"You need to know more. If I do not tell you may find out in an unfortunate way."

"Go ahead then." She turned to face him.

"Have you ever heard of a man named Pierre Desjardin?"

“No. Not that I can remember.”

“I am not surprised that you have not. Those who knew him had no reason to be proud of that fact. Desjardin died twenty years ago. He was professor of English and History at Cambridge. Imagine the lowest person you can and he was a hundred times worse. He was a master of the black occult. He worshiped Satan and all he stood for. Any sin, any vice, any debauchery...these were his. I will not soil you by telling you in detail the things he did but tell, Elizabeth do you have a grasp of the kind of monstrous things I am speaking about?”

“I think I do.” She answered quietly.

“Right. Four years ago, your mother came to see me. I was still in my ministry.” Elizabeth noticed how he turned the gold wedding band he still wore as he spoke. His eyes dark and his voice so serious she began to fear what she was about to hear. “I told you that I was very close to her and Tony so I knew of their affair, although, of course until that day we had not spoken of it.”

“Margaret told me that she was in love with Tony and wanted to divorce Henry. Because of my knowledge of Tony at the time, that worried me. Tony was still married to Isabelle and as far as I knew, he had no plans to divorce her. They had an open marriage; either of them could openly have other lovers.”

Elizabeth shook her head slowly.

“I know! It is hard to fathom, that is a fact. I doubt very much that they were ever in love with each other, not real love! Tony always had some female on the go and after a while, he would grow bored and move on to the next. I was afraid that was the case with Margaret.”

“But that day she clearly told me she was deeply in love with Tony and wanted to end her marriage with Henry for him. If it is any consolation to you, Elizabeth, I think she was well intentioned as far as your father went. She said she wanted him to be free to find someone else just as she had done.”

“Carefully I tried to discourage her. Think of your child, think of the scandal...you have only known Tony a short time. Those are the things I told her and then finally I said that I doubted very much Henry would give her a divorce.” Gabriel took a deep breath and let it out quickly. “She said then that she had proof of things Henry was involved with that would ruin him if they came out. If he would not let her go easily she would threaten him with exposure.”

“What things? What proof?” Elizabeth demanded.

“A few months before she came to see me Margaret had sorted through old boxes in their attic, gathering clothes and items for our charity sale. She came across a pile of old books and under them; she found a locked tin box. She did not remember ever seeing it before and was curious. She broke the lock. Inside she found old papers from Henry’s days at Cambridge, exam remarks, that sort of thing and two diaries.”

“Well? What was in the diaries?”

“They were written during Henry’s days at Cambridge.” Gabriel paused, cleared his throat. “Desjardin chose certain of his students and brought them into an evil organization he called ‘The Circle of Mendes’. My father, Samuel Jackman, Theodore De Wolfe and Henry Leighton were his favorites. The diaries cover a four month period over the Christmas time of 1870 and the terrible ceremonies and sacrifices....”

For moment, Elizabeth stared at him. A slow, nervous smile spread across her face. "My father a Satanist? That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard." She stood, walked a few steps away then turned back to Gabriel, her voice higher, her face bright with anger. "Did you hear what I said? My father was not an evil man!"

Gabriel shook his head sadly. "It has been only days since Caroline and Herbert Underhill told me the same thing about my own father. Everything I know about my father screams at me that this cannot be true, but...!"

"But! How can you even slightly believe this slander?"

"I have my own reasons for the doubt that is now growing in me about Samuel Jackman." He walked up to her, placed his hands on her shoulders. "Elizabeth, Margaret gave the diaries to me for safe keeping. I read them and still have them to this day. They are explicit and dreadful. Do you want to see them?"

"Yes!" She pushed his hands away. "They will not be in my father's hand."

"Margaret said it was his hand and she would know. I doubt very much that she would have brought this to my attention if she had not been certain."

For a long while she searched his eyes for any sign of a lie, giving him a chance to pull back and withdraw this newest nightmare. He did not move or break her challenging stare.

"This is not fair." She finally spoke. "Father is dead, he cannot defend himself. Why are telling me these things?"

"That is a very good question. Please come and sit with me and I will tell you the rest."

"No!" She said defiantly knowing she sounded petulant but did not care.

"Please, Elizabeth. I may need you to help me through all this as much as you will need me. Sit with me and listen."

She sighed and let him direct her to the settee. "You may talk but I will not believe a word of it."

"As I said, I only recently learned about the possibility of my own father's place in that low world. I am just as confused and doubtful as you are. According to the diaries, Theodore De Wolfe was very much a part of 'The Circle'."

"So?" She snapped at him.

"I saw him last week. He came by here and was fairly close to drunk. He rambled on at me about needing my help. I really did not listen very well. I have no use for the man at the best of times and I had other things on my mind. He came close to begging me to come to the Estate and help him get rid of an evil spirit. He said it was the spirit of Desjardin and that he was back for revenge and his 'dues', whatever they may be. As we..."

"I do not believe in ghosts."

"It could be that before all this is over you will believe in a great many surprising things. You would be wise to suspend that skepticism for the time being. As I was saying, we will be going to the Estate tomorrow to begin our investigation into the murders. Our fathers were involved with Desjardin; I am as close to certain of that as I can be. If his angry shade is there, well, you should be prepared."

"Prepared for what? More fairy tales?"

“Desjardin was murdered at the hands of De Wolfe, Leighton and Jackman. If this is true the revenge spoken of may fall down on to you, the De Wolfe children and me.”

“Give me the diaries!”

“Are you sure? The things they did...nothing left to the imagination! Do you really need to read them?”

“Shitting Hell Gabriel, give me the bloody diaries and let me find the truth for myself or never speak to me about any of this again.” She stood, fear, anger and shock adding to her anger.

“Language!” He muttered quietly.

“Are you going to give me those... she shuddered and lowered her voice, “diaries or not? I am not a simpering virgin.”

“Fine then, Elizabeth, do not say that I did not warn you. Follow me.”

He led her across the hall, took a ring of keys from his pocket and unlocked the study door. She followed him inside. He locked the door behind them and turned on the gas lamps. The room was completely different in style and feel from the rest of the house. It was tidy, unlike his upstairs office, masculine in every detail. There was none of Sue Lyn’s flare for color and texture. The furniture was plain and dark mahogany, the pieces large and antique. The floors were bare and shining wood. A white bear skin rug lay in front of the large, cold fire place. The walls were lined with copper paneling. The air was rather stale, smelled of beeswax, cigarettes and the aroma of Gabriel. This room was very much the essence of the man.

The only wall decoration was a life size portrait of a lovely woman. She was not posing with the usual small smile or serious interest of most popular portraits but smiling so broadly she must have been laughing. Her green eyes sparkled with humor, long golden hair hung down naked shoulders. This was Helena Jackman. There was no denying the powerful beauty of Gabriel’s late wife. Elizabeth felt small and inferior.

She studied the painting and was only vaguely aware of Gabriel as he opened a wall safe, then closed it again.

“My late wife, Helena.” Gabriel said quietly as he stepped beside Elizabeth.

“She was very lovely.”

“Yes, she was. Owen De Wolfe is the artist. Helena was carrying Gabriella at the time.”

“Was she as happy as she seems?”

He smiled, “I like to think so. Perhaps you might have liked her. She was much like your mother, a proud woman, very aware and comfortable with her femininity. I adored her. I was completely faithful to her and her to me...!” His voice trailed off. Elizabeth looked at him and saw that he was suddenly uncomfortable with his frankness. All of the anger from just moments before drained from her.

“I loved my Peter like that. I would have been completely faithful to him as well. I guess people like you and me are a dying breed in this day and age.”

“Maybe so.” He had two small but thick books in his hand. She took them and opened the cover of one. Inside the front cover, in very familiar handwriting was ‘December 1870. These are the private words and experiences of Dr. Henry Leighton.’

“It is his writing.” She closed the book and looked up at Gabriel. “It is a well known fact that young men do very foolish things in their university days.”

He nodded. "It is late. Take them to your rooms. Remember I am just above you if you need to talk to me. Have no fear of waking me." He walked her to her rooms, said goodnight and left her.

Elizabeth left the books on her bedside table. "Foolishness!" she muttered and went about the process of preparing for bed. All the while, she could hear Gabriel moving around his bedroom directly overhead.

Gabriel paced restlessly around his bedroom. Had he made a mistake telling her about her father's dark past? Why had it seemed so important that she know? It could very well be that this business about Desjardin returning was little more than Ted's guilty conscience. His unusual friendship with Elizabeth was very new; would she hold it against him for bringing yet another misery down on her? Was she as strong as she seemed or was it a fragile pretense? More than anything else, he wondered why he felt such a powerful need for this woman. He told himself repeatedly to keep his distance, to give her a chance to recover. Now he had exposed her to more of life's filth. He had read the diaries and even with his jaded view, he was appalled. He was far from sure she could handle it. By the time, Elizabeth crawled into her bed and began to read the first of the journals Gabriel was listening at the other side of the secret door into her room.

Very quickly, she recognized her father's turn of phrase and written sentence structure. He used initials instead of names when he mentioned companions. The one in charge he referred to as D, there was also constant reference to J, W, CF and SF. She wondered if that was Desjardin, Jackman and De Wolfe and thought it most likely. Not too many pages turned before the foul nightmare that had once been the secret life of Henry Leighton opened to her in vivid color. Not only had he chronicled the why and the how of the ceremonies of the Circle of Mendes he relished in the smallest details.

Their victims were obtained in various ways, some taken from the St Giles and Seven Dials areas on London. Leighton described them as the unwanted and useless of society. To 'The Circle' members their very existence was nothing more than a stain. Their sacrifice at least gave meaning to what would have been a life that accomplished nothing. When they wanted a young virgin, they went to brothels. Large amounts of money passed hands. No victim lived to tell his or her horrific stories.

Leighton wrote of the rapes that were a large part of every ceremony in graphic and lurid in detail. He described those that suffered, their bodies, the dreadful things done to them and their reactions with pride and wonder. He placed the clearest detail on his own actions and reactions. There was no doubt he relished and relived these deviances as he wrote them. The final and most vicious act, the murders of their captives was a deeply sexual event for him. Not once did he show the slightest remorse.

With the turning of each page revulsion spread through Elizabeth. She ignored the voice of reason that she need not read on. In her mind's eye, she saw the smiling, gentle face of her father. She remembered the joy of every Christmas morning as he pretended to be Saint Nic. Every Sunday, rain or shine and with obvious pride he took his wife and daughter to church. Henry Leighton was a man respected and loved in every aspect of his life. How could this be the same person? The man who wrote these words was a monster. Could it really be that that man was her father?

She read on to the final page. On the inside cover, painted in what seemed to be blood was an inverted cross. Her mind spun, her stomach turned. She took both books, moaned with disgust and anger and threw them across the room.

All the while, Gabriel stood silently listening. He did not hear anything until she threw the books. He heard the whine of the bedsprings and a slight scraping sound he could not identify. The next sounds he knew. Huddled over the empty washbasin Elizabeth retched and vomited. Gabriel rested his forehead against the cool wood of the door. He wanted so much to go to her, to help her and to hold her; instead, he turned and went quietly back to his room. Intrusion on her then would only help him and add to her mortification. He lay on his bed hoping Elizabeth would come to him, hoping that she might need him as much as he needed her. Eventually he fell asleep.

It was after six and still dark when Elizabeth woke. She yawned and stretched. Her empty belly and her head ached. She stayed in bed for a long while thinking about the dreadful things she read the night before. Had anything in her life been real? Her parents' happy marriage was a false front. The man she loved and admired deeply was a Satan loving murderer. Had either of her parents ever given a single thought to how any of this would affect their only child? Obviously, they had not. Shivering and hugging herself, she slid from the warm bed. She reached under the bed and slid out the porcelain pot.

"I'd wait on that for a bit if I were you!" A voice from a dark corner said to her. She gasped, jumped to the side and stubbed her toe on the foot of the bed. "Jesus shittin' Christ!" she exclaimed hopping on one foot to keep her balance and holding the injured foot. "Who the Hell...? Gabriel?"

"Yes." She could hear he was smiling. "You have the mouth of a sailor. That is very colorful language for a lady!"

"I might be more of a lady if there wasn't a strange man hiding in the corners of my bedroom." She sat on the bed and turned up the lamp wick. "You made me break my bloody toe, you idiot! Look!" She held up her foot for him to see. The little toe stood off on an odd angle.

"Not broken, just dislocated." Quickly he grabbed the foot and before she could react, he pulled on the toe, snapping it back into place.

She grunted with the pain, pulled her foot away and took a swing at him. He ducked, caught her arm, brought it down to sit on his lap and held her arms in place. "Let me go!" She demanded angrily straining against him.

"Only if you promise not to hit me! If I am to be hit by a woman it should be for more than a feel of her foot."

"Alright!" She rolled her eyes and relaxed. He opened his arms and she stood looking down on him with as much dignity as she could muster. "Do you mind telling me what you are doing?" She paused, turned and looked towards the door. "I locked that door. I know I did. And that one is locked too!" She pointed to the secret door. "How did you get in here?"

"What do you want to know? What do I want or how did I get in here?"

"Both!" She slipped into her robe, tied it with meaning.

"I could not sleep. I wanted to talk to you."

"It was so! Then why didn't you talk to me, instead of sulking in a corner like some kind of pervert?"

"You were sleeping. I sat for a bit and fell asleep myself until you woke just now." He stopped speaking for a brief moment and stared intently at her. "Nothing perverted in that is there?"

She sighed, all the anger melted away. "I am sorry for swearing." She spoke quietly. "I suppose I have heard too much of it in the last few months. Normally that is not me!"

"I figured that." He stood with his hands on his hips.

"What did you want to speak with me about?"

"You read the diaries?"

"I did."

"And?" He asked with frustration.

She sighed and sat down on the bed. "I am sorry! I know what you want and I am being difficult. I am not feeling very well this morning. I read the diaries and it seems as though Henry Leighton wrote them." She paused. "If he did participate in those ... things, well, my only regret is that he did not hang for them."

He looked at her doubtfully.

"No, that is truly what I feel. Were you not going to advise me not to take the sins of others on myself?"

"Something rather similar, yes."

"Well, there is no need. I was upset, I admit that!" She shrugged "This is a new day and we have things to do. I have no expectation of running into the ghost of Pierre Desjardin or any other ghost for that matter. I am going with you to De Wolfe Manor to 'stir' the De Wolfe and help you find a killer. That is all that I will keep in my mind!"

He nodded slowly. "If that is so..."

"It is. I am not as weak as people seem to think I am."

"Good." He sounded relieved. "I think I can sleep properly now. I am going to my bed for a few hours. We will be leaving at eleven." He crossed the room to the panel doorway. He pushed the knot twice and the door slid open. "I am sorry but I will not be at breakfast with you."

"That is fine. I promised Gabriella that I would breakfast with her."

"Did you? That is kind of you, Elizabeth." He stepped into the pitch-dark passage and pulled the door closed behind him. She heard his footfall on the stairs and then above her as, she assumed, he got to his bed.

"What a very odd man!" She mumbled and rubbed her sore foot. She took the washbasin into her washroom, dumped it in the toilet and ran the water for a bath.

She had just finished dressing and doing her hair when the woman known as Nana Parks knocked on her door and stuck her head inside.

"Excuse me, Miss Leighton. Gabriella says you promised you would breakfast with her. Just thought I had better check..."

The door swung all the way open and Gabriella stepped in. "Hello!" She smiled brightly at Elizabeth.

"Good morning, Miss Jackman!" Elizabeth returned the smile, to the nanny she said. "Yes, we do have a date for our morning meal."

"Hmmm..." Mrs. Parks looked doubtful. "Just so you'll know. She has to eat all her porridge and egg. Not a scrap left on her plate." Looking down at the child, she added. "Nothing left on your plate or in your pockets. Remember, I will have a look!"

"Did you really put your food in your pockets?" Elizabeth asked after Mrs. Parks left.

“Uh-huh! Only if I do not like it. Then I give it to Blackie!” She took Elizabeth by the hand and pulled her into the hallway and towards the stairs. “Come on, we got to eat the porridge while it is still hot or it gets lumpy.” She shuddered. “And then it is awful!”

Gabriella would not settle at the table until Elizabeth had the exact meal as she had, right down to the tall glass of milk. After adding extra sugar, they finally began to eat the lumpy porridge.

“I like you.” Gabriella said with her mouth full.

“Well, thank you. I like you too.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to be by Mommy?”

“Your father and I explained to you last night. People who marry must love each other and that takes time. I think you are very sweet and that it would be wonderful to be your mother. I just have no plans to marry your father.”

“I know that!” Gabriella rolled her eyes. “But you could think about it. I don’t mind. He is very funny you know. He will tell you bed time stories. And when Nana Parks is not watching he will give you candy.”

“That would certainly be something to look forward to, indeed.” Elizabeth’s heart went out to the lonely and precious child. “Just for now why not be happy that I am your friend? Wouldn’t that be almost as good as being your mommy?”

Gabriella looked doubtful. She shrugged and shoveled in more porridge. “Daddy is going to go away today. Are you going with him?”

“I am. We have business to see to.”

“Are you going to tect Daddy?”

“Tect?”

Gabriella nodded. “I mean...pro tect. Are you going to protect him? Heather says that you have to pro-TECT each other.”

Surprised, Elizabeth blinked a few times. “Your father is a grown man. I doubt he will need anyone to protect him.”

“Heather says so and she is never wrong.”

“Who is Heather? Does she work here?”

“No!”

“Is she a friend then? A playmate?”

Gabriella shook her head and laughed. “She can’t play. She does not have any arms, silly! Just a head. Up there!” She pointed to the air above her right shoulder.

“Oh, I see! An imaginary friend. You do have a vivid imagination!”

“No, I don’t.” Gabriella said flatly.

“Do you know what imagination is?”

“Yes. I use my ‘magination when I pretend Blackie is on fire and I squirt him with the garden hose. He doesn’t like that much!”

“I wouldn’t think he would.” Elizabeth watched with surprise as Gabriella looked up over her right towards only air and ceiling. She puckered her mouth and shook her blond curls.

She turned back to Elizabeth. “Heather says you aren’t listening. So I got to tell you this....” She paused moved her eyes side to side as though listening. “Heather says that God did not take Captain Race...Pace from you. The captain chose his own day of death before he was born.” Gabriella’s voice and tone had changed. She sounded much

older and sadder. Stunned by what she had heard, Elizabeth wondered how she could know about Peter. Had she been listening the morning when she spoke about him? She was certain that she had never told a soul about her anger at God.

“Have you been listening in doorways?” She asked.

Gabriella frowned. “No. Why?”

“How do you know about my friend dying?”

“I told you. Heather told me. She talks all the time. She is a real pain.”

“Maybe you....”

Once again, the girl looked up into the air. She turned back to Elizabeth sitting taller in her chair. “Heather says you are still not listening.” She leaned closer to Elizabeth and whispered. “She won’t go away until you listen to her!”

“I cannot listen to someone speak who is not here.”

Gabriella cut Elizabeth short. “Your Mommy is in heaven with the Captain and they like the pearls you bought yesterday.”

Elizabeth gasped. Sue Lyn must have told her about the pearls and she had told her mother was dead. “Mrs. Lee told you about the pearls, didn’t she?”

“I already told you, Heather did.”

Elizabeth decided to change the subject. “Do you like to go to the zoo, Gabriella?”

“Oh, I just love the monkeys. One time a monkey peed all down Daddy.”

Elizabeth laughed. “Now that would ruin a suit, no doubt. I was wondering if you would like to come with me to the zoo.” She stopped and sniffed. The room suddenly filled with the strong scent of roses. She looked around. There were no flowers of any kind. “Do you smell roses?” She asked the little girl.

“Uh-huh! Heather does it. She makes everything stinky!” Gabriella finished the last of her egg and pushed her plate arms length away from her disgust. “I don’t like eggs!”

As every second passed, the fragrant aroma grew stronger. Very puzzled and with a small amount of undeniable fear Elizabeth left her chair, crossed around the table and stood to the right of Gabriella. The girl turned sideways in her seat, clicking her patent leather shoes together. She smiled, looking at Elizabeth then to the area just above her. She nodded and pointed. “She wants me to say this so you better listen this time.” Gabriella was clearly getting bored with the whole thing.

She took a deep breath and began to repeat words only she could hear. “On Oct 7th 1885, when you were a child of five, Margaret Leighton gave birth to a baby boy. It was a very difficult birthing and the baby was still born.” Gabriella frowned as Elizabeth gasped. She continued in voice and words much older than any child could mimic. “His parents gave him the name Jeffrey Watkins Leighton. Watkins was his mother’s maiden name. The bodies of his parents now lie on either side of him.”

Elizabeth almost fell into the chair next to the child. She took the tiny hands in hers.

“What does ‘still born’ mean?” Gabriella asked.

“The baby was dead at birth.”

“Oh, that is so sad!”

Elizabeth leaned forward catching the child’s eye. “How do you know all this? Do not tell me it was ‘Heather’! I do not believe in ghosts!”

“Heather is not a ghost. She is just a face who likes to talk to me. Anyways, she is gone now. Are you mad at me?” Gabriella asked, then very aware of Elizabeth’s distress.

“No, of course not! I am just. Well...confused!”

The door opened and they joined by the nanny. “Well, well! Look at those empty plates. How ever did you do it, Miss Leighton?” she asked as she reached around in the little girls pockets.

“I didn’t do anything. Gabriella just ate. Tell me Mrs. Parks, do you smell roses?”

“Oh that. Yes, odd isn’t it? Happens all the time I guess we have all gotten used to it. Come along, Gabby! Mr. Jackman will want a nice visit before he leaves and I have to do something with you hair.”

Elizabeth took a last look around the room. She knew that Gabriel had investigated her life and he had obviously done a very thorough job. How in heavens name had Gabriella learned all that? For that matter, why would she make up the strange story of an invisible friend? The child was certainly too young for anything devious. Eventually Elizabeth decided that Gabriella must have somehow over heard her father discussing her and her parents with someone and that Heather was just a figment of the lonely child’s imagination.

At a quarter to eleven, Elizabeth’s luggage was loaded onto the coach. She waited for Gabriel in the front hall and took another careful look in the full-length mirror. She wore one of her new outfits. It was a tight fitting, hunter green traveling suit, flared at the skirt and jacket bottoms. She liked the way the high standing collar, trimmed with white lace drew attention to her slim neck. The very extremely low-neck line was not familiar to her but it was very much in style.

Vita helped her with her hair and encouraged her to wear her mother’s emeralds. “If they’d be mine I wear ’em all the time. And if you don’t mind me saying, Miss Leighton you do look pretty. If I were a man I’d sure give yer a second look!” Vita giggled and scurried off down the hall.

Elizabeth heard Gabriel coming down the stairs. She resisted the urge to turn from the mirror until he was directly behind her. He stopped in his tracks, raised his eyebrows and looked her up and down. “My Lord! You make a man glad to see the day, Elizabeth!”

She laughed. “Thank you but must you really sound so shocked?”

He took her arm and led her to the doorway. “Not shocked, no that is not the word.”

“Then what is the word? Or had I better not ask?” She leaned against him slightly.

“Better not ask. I would not want you to take another swing at me. You might connect this time!”

“You are not going to let me live that down, are you?”

He puckered his mouth in the same manner as his daughter. “No, most likely not.”

“Then, Mr. Jackman, I suggest the next time you want to spend time in my dark bedroom, at least have the decency to let me know you are there.”

He laughed. “That is my promise.”

They settled in the coach. Gabriel sat across and opposite from Elizabeth and stretched his long legs on the seat. "It is a long run!" He explained as they pulled away from Random House. "Two and a half hours. I hate long trips. I get restless."

"It is a good thing then that you have a lot to tell me." She removed her gloves, laid them and her purse on the seat beside her.

"I do?"

"Yes. How exactly does one get another to admit to being a murderer?" She threw her hands up. "If this maniac is a De Wolfe, how in heavens name do we find it out?"

He nodded. "Just talk and flirt with them as you would normally do with any man."

"I am not sure I do all that much flirting. At least I have not in the last year."

"You have done a wonderful flirt with me, my dear. I think it comes naturally to a beautiful woman. Just have conversation." He paused and looked at her intently, suddenly seemed interested their conversation. "Under no circumstances are you to ask any of them anything at all about the murders. You know nothing about them and if they bring up the subject, you may show only slight interest. You must understand that at least one of those men is a very dangerous individual!"

"At least one?"

Gabriel shrugged. "It could be one man working alone or two working as a team. It is not unheard of. Elizabeth all you have to do is be yourself. Owen and Randall are interesting and intelligent men. Steward is spoiled, lazy and a drunk. Ted, well, I have nothing good to say about him. Every one of them would have a go at you if they had a chance. Ted taught his sons well and not everything is admirable. He may have even taught one or more of them to rape and murder. I want you to have that in your mind every minute we are at Wolfe Manor. I would rather you bring me nothing at all than have you risk your life." He paused, turned his face quickly and cleared his throat. If he had intended that she not see the passion in his eyes, he failed.

Elizabeth wondered what Gabriel was feeling deep down under the handsome carefree manner. If he believed this murderer was also the murderer of his wife this hate would burn completely. Would there be any room in his heart or mind for anything else? Peter died on the battlefield so in a way, he was murdered but this murderer had no face or name...except for God! She wanted to tell Gabriel that she understood his pain and that he was not alone in that misery. She longed to share with him but knew she could not. It was too soon.

Gabriel began to speak again. "As I am a stranger to you we will have to be seen as that. We will need to be very careful how we communicate anything about the investigation. Cornelia will give us rooms with adjoining doors. That will help."

"Won't that raise eyebrows?"

"Maybe but we will ignore that. I need to keep an eye on your safety."

"Are you certain that Cornelia is not protecting her sons with her denial? Do you trust her?"

"Trust her? I rarely trust these days, Elizabeth. However, I do know her. She and my mother were very close. Cornelia has been in my life one way or the other for as long as I can remember. When my wife died...." Gabriel's voice deepened, it seemed he

had to push out the words. "Tony Lucci and Cornelia saw me through the nightmare. She is a bull dog and refused to let me give up as was in my heart."

"I am sorry, Gabriel. I did not mean to remind you of your loss."

"No. You asked a very sensible question. I wandered off the track."

Elizabeth hoped that Gabriel was correct about Cornelia. As a man, he would not understand the powerful maternal instinct. She decided it would be a good idea to keep a close eye on the mother of the family.

"Is there anyone of them that gives you more cause for concern? If you know this family so well you must have some idea which of them might be so unhinged."

"Honestly, Elizabeth, I am too close to see that. I suppose my feelings have somewhat clouded my judgment. That is what I want you to do for me. See them as they are and show me."

"I understand. I will do my best."

"Good!" he smiled and pushed his hands through his hair. "Now what will we do to pass these long hours? I hate bloody long, boring trips."

"Well, I find it very entertaining to watch the scenery."

"You do?"

"Yes, I wonder who lives in the houses. Who works in the shops? Who is walking along the street with bags of goods? What sort of people are they? What kind of lives do they have? Where are they coming from and heading to? I love to watch the countryside as the miles pass by! Farmers, children and animals! You may make a face if you want but really it is all interesting and entertaining."

He leaned on his side resting on his elbow. "People, trees, houses! I would fall asleep very quickly. I would much rather spend that time watching a lovely female. You watch your flora and fauna and I will watch you. Is that a fair deal?"

"That is silly. You are not going to sit there and stare at me for two hours. Do not be such a little boy!"

"A little boy does not, never mind! Anyway, why should I not enjoy the pretty vision you spent so long preparing. If you cooked a lovely roast would you hold it under my nose and then expect me not to smell it?"

"That is not the same thing and you know it! It is not immoral to smell a roasted beef."

"And would it be immoral for me just to look at you? What is the harm in that? I cannot hurt you with my eyes, can I?"

"I would be more concerned on what was in your mind."

"My thoughts are mine and would not harm you either."

"But they are locked away in your mind. I cannot know them. I would much prefer to know what you were thinking if it was me you were studying."

Gabriel sat up. His eyes and smile wide. "Are you saying that I can look at you all I want just as long as I tell you what I am thinking?"

"If you must stare at me I have the right to know what you are thinking. If not...then look somewhere else."

"You are being very provocative, not that I am complaining. My thoughts are hardly fit for a man," he laughed, "and certainly not fit for a gentlewoman. I would have to censor my thoughts so much all that remained would be prepositions and verbs."

"Oh well! Then what can I do? You shall just be bored."

"There is a word game we could play, if you have the courage. Should I tell you about it?"

"A word game that requires courage? Tell me!"

"Right. It is simple. I would be free, without any sort of repercussions to tell you one thing I would very much like to do to you, apart from the most obvious. Whatever it is, you must take it without insult. Then you must do the same. We will see which of us has the most interesting courage."

"What is the prize for the winner? There must be one or I will not play!"

He laughed. "Well, the winner gets to actually do their 'one thing'. No resistance and no slapping! I will win of course!"

"Really? You are very sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"A life time of experience."

"Go ahead, then, Gabriel, tell me one thing you would like to do to me."

"No anger or slap on your part?"

"I will keep my hands to myself...and you will do the same."

He rested his head back against the seat back. She watched him closely as he seemed to study her. His eyes traveling from her face to feet and back again. It was a pity, she thought, that he would not share those thoughts with her. It was far out of line but she had to admit to herself that she would have loved to hear them. A while passed before he spoke and when he did, his voice was a low, slow whisper.

"What I would love to do right now..." he took in a deep breath through his teeth. "is place my hands on either side of your waist and then raise them so that my palms just rested on the sides of your breasts. I would pull you to me; place my face on the delightful place where your neck meets your shoulder. I would take a very deep breath to know your scent and I would run my tongue up your neck to know your taste." Briefly, he closed his eyes. Elizabeth was fascinated. When he opened his eyes, again they were dark and hazy. "To know those things, Elizabeth would thrill me."

She smiled. "Yes, I think it would thrill me as well. Now I have to think what I would do to top that!"

"Take your time. I certainly do not want you to rush." He turned his face slightly to the side, watching her intently from the corner of his eyes. "I think I will really enjoy having you think about me."

"You may enjoy my words more; Gabriel and I do not need to take my time. I know exactly what I would like to do."

"Go ahead, then!"

"First of all I would stifle the foolishness of female modesty. Then, what I would like to do...love to do is continue to play this game with you, because I can see and sense your arousal, Gabriel. I can see it in your eyes and in the short, sharp breaths you take."

"I would love to uncross your carefully arranged legs so I could see what you wish to hide. I'd open the front of my dress, loosen my corset ties and unbutton your trousers and give you the freedom you no doubt need about now."

"I would watch as you exposed my breasts and held them in your warm hands. When I was sure your arousal was complete, I would lift my skirt so you could slip off my underwear. I would slide my right leg here." She leaned forward and ran her hand up the outside of his left thigh. "My left leg here." Her other hand she ran up his right thigh. She held her hands in place for a moment, her face so close to his she could feel his hot

breath. "Then, lovely man, I would ride you all the way to Wolfe Manor." She sat back, smiled, not moving her eyes from his face. She had taken a chance, a big chance and completely astounded by her own words. "That is what I would love to do, Gabriel."

Gabriel's face froze in amazement with her first sentence. He did not move and hardly seemed to breathe. He was captivated and stunned by her words. A long and silent moment passed before he took a deep breath. He lowered his head, looked at her from under his brows. "Well, Elizabeth." The slow wide smile spread across his face. "I think it is fair to say 'you won'. Do I dare to hope that you will claim your prize?" He uncrossed his legs. As much courage as she had had in the moments before, it failed her then. She did not move her eyes from his face.

"I will hold my right to claim that prize in a better time and place."

"Are you just a tease then?" There was no anger in his question. "If you are you should know I take great pleasure from a tease. Fires me up, as they say!"

"Not a tease, Gabriel. Just a sweet preview of what might be one day, when and if all things are right. But," she moved and sat next to him, "for now, it is only fair that as the runner up, you may claim your prize if you wish."

"Oh, I will claim it, have no doubt!" He placed his hands on her waist but not on the sides as he had said but on her belly. He brought them up to her breasts, cupped them and looked deeply into her eyes. He waited to see if she would move away. She did not.

He raised his hands to her shoulders, pulled her close pushed his face against her neck. His face, lips and breath seemed to burn her skin. It was only then that she realized just how much she had stirred him. As he said he would do he inhaled deeply and ran his tongue up her neck. She felt him shudder slightly. In a movement, so sudden and powerful she had no chance to react; he held her head firmly in place and kissed her. His lips had barely touched hers before he pushed his tongue into her mouth. The kiss was long and extremely passionate. She was lost in the powerful moment.

Gabriel sensed he could take more than his prize allowed but he did not. He pulled his face back from hers, his hands still on her cheeks. "You will be sure to tell me, won't you, if ever the time and place is just right?"

She only nodded, not sure that she could trust her voice.

Once again, he gave her his wonderful smile. "But in the mean time please feel free to tease me any time you want. I fear I will be putty in your lovely hands." He released her and she moved back across the carriage.

They traveled in silence for a while. She could see his face reflected in the window beside her. He watched the scenery pass and every so often a slight smile crossed his face. She had taken a chance, and had succeeded in raising her standing with him. As much as she had surprised him, she had also astounded herself with the knowledge she wanted him most likely as much as he wanted her. She knew then that it was going to be very difficult not to become 'the other woman' between him and Isabelle Lucci. No matter how much he might stir her she would never have him unless it was over with her. Her mood slipped as she thought of the child Isabelle said she was carrying. If she were being truthful, would Gabriel do the honorable thing?

They stopped for lunch at a roadside Inn. "I have eaten here before. Would like me to order for you? They've a wonderful steak and kidney pie...if you're that hungry. I am!"

"Yes, Gabriel, please do. I am famished." She sat quietly as he ordered the meals, beer for himself and white wine for her.

"I want to thank you for your kindness to my daughter."

"Oh that is easy! Gabriella is a lovely child. She has such a wonderful and interesting imagination."

He glanced up at her quickly. "You have met Heather already?"

"Yes. I had an imaginary friend at her age, as well. Mine was a boy named David."

"Isabelle believes Gabriella is communicating with a spirit guide."

"What do you believe?"

He frowned and ran his hands through his hair. "All I know for sure is that Gabby often knows things she should not know in the normal course of things. Years ago I would have easily agreed with Isabelle...now, I am not sure what I believe."

"It is the same for me, Gabriel. Faith and belief used to be so much easier. After this last terrible year, I question so much. Maybe in time and with my new friends things will get brighter."

The food and drink arrived and for a while, they ate in silence.

"Gabriel, I have been wondering about Cornelia. Does she know about The Circle and her husband's part in it?"

"She does but she has never spoken to me about it."

"How does a woman stay with a man after learning...?"

"Does she know he was in his youth a rapist and a murderer?" He said the last few words with force.

"Oh My Lord. That had not occurred to me. If he has done it before, why would he not do it again?"

"Yes or perhaps he taught his sons as he was once taught by Desjardin? That is why I insist that you always be aware and very careful. I do not mean to seem over dramatic but you must always keep in mind whoever this murderer is, he is insane. Insane does not mean stupid. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a very small handgun. Under cover of a napkin, he handed it to her. "Do you know how to use a gun?"

"I never have but how hard can it be? Aim and shoot!"

"Aim well and shoot fast. This is the safety switch. It is on now, do this and it is off. Remember it will not shoot if the safety is on."

Elizabeth nodded. She had not expected this. The cold weight of the gun sent a shiver down her spine. "I will keep it in my purse."

"No! That is not good enough. I have seen women with their purses. They leave them all over the place. You need only turn your back for a second and you will be unarmed. A pocket is no good either. Anyone brushing against you might feel it. Wear it in your corset."

"But I do not usually wear one."

"You will from now on. Do you have corsets with you?"

"Yes."

"Put the gun in your corset under your breast. Left breast if you are right handed."

She smiled. "But then I will be lopsided."

“Well, you will just have to shove a sock in the other side. You will figure it out. For now keep it in your purse but put on a corset as soon as possible. When you sleep I want it near you, under your pillow is best.”

It was just before 3pm when they pulled to a stop behind a row of yew trees. The Madsen Worthy train station was just beyond the trees.

“Still ten minutes or more before the London train. They are very often late.” Gabriel said and watched as she played with the chain strap of her purse and bit her bottom lip. “Are you nervous? It would be natural if you were.”

“A little.” She nodded.

More than a little, Gabriel thought. “I am as well.”

“Are you?”

“The beginning of an investigation is always the hardest time. It gets better when you have things on the go. Remember to come to Lee or me at any time you feel any sort of threat. He and will have a room directly across from yours. I would feel better if Sue Lyn was with us to help keep an eye on you but because of her condition Lee does not want her involved and of course, he is right in that!”

“Her condition?”

He smiled. “She is tiny so it is hard to tell. Sue Lyn is six months along with their first child.”

“My! Another baby on the way....” It slipped out before she had a chance to think.

“Another?” He looked her up and down with wide eyes.

“Good heavens, no! Not me! Lord! One of the girls at the Three Bells mentioned to me that she thought she was pregnant, that is all.”

Elizabeth could tell Gabriel was doubtful with her explanation. That did not really matter to her then. She was sure Isabelle would soon tell Gabriel and it was not her business.

“You will be fine, Elizabeth. Lee and I will keep a close watch on you.”

“I am not worried about my safety, well, not too much. I am worried that I will somehow let you down. I owe you a great deal.”

“No, you owe me not a thing. I am just grateful you joined our small group.”

“I was wondering why me? What I mean is why not have Isabelle do what you want me to do. I do not mean to insult but she may be better with ‘handling men’ than I am.”

There was no mistaking the change in Gabriel. The encouraging smile slipped away. He sat back in the seat and sighed. “You saw how Isabelle and Cornelia feel about each other. Isabelle is not welcome at the De Wolfe home. No there is no place for Isabelle with us in this.” They heard the whistle of an approaching train. “Well, what do you know, it is on time. That may be a good sign. Do you see that large brown coach...just the end of it there parked by the station house?” She followed his eye. “That is Cornelia’s coach. She is waiting to meet you off the train. Once the passengers disembark you mingle with them.”

“Right! Shall we go then, Gabriel?”

Elizabeth waited beside the station house while Gabriel piled her luggage on the racks. The 2:30 London train came in view around a turn in the track, pulling noisily to a stop.

"You will be fine!" Gabriel whispered to her, winked and headed back towards the yew trees.

"Yes, of course, I will be! I have been through far worse!" She muttered, pulled her jacket into place and stepped onto the platform.

Cornelia walked towards her, her driver not too far behind. "Elizabeth!" Cornelia called rather loudly as she approached and hugged Elizabeth. "My Lord! Haven't you grown into a lovely young woman?"

"Thank you, Aunt Cornelia! It is good to see you again."

They waited in the De Wolfe coach as the driver secured the luggage.

"That should fool anyone who might be watching. I doubt anyone is or that they will care but just the same!" Cornelia smiled. Elizabeth could smell rum on Cornelia's breath. She wondered if the alcohol was the way she handled what she knew about The Circle and her husband. "Now tell me, why is it that when your aunt died and you had no place to live that you did not come to me?"

"Well, I did think of contacting you but I had not seen you since Mommy's funeral. I rather thought you would not want much to do with me...just like all the others."

"God in heaven, Elizabeth! You should know I am not 'like all the others'. That is why Margaret and I were so close. We rebelled against those high society bitches." She laughed and patted Elizabeth's hand. "Oh, they saw to it that we paid dearly for our individualism but we did not care. I have no need for their boring, stuffy dinner parties. Please tell me you know that if you are ever in difficulties again you will come to Ted and me. You will always have a home with us."

"Thank you, Aunt Connie."

"How are you, Elizabeth? You look rather pale."

"Just a little nervous but I will be fine."

"Well, that is understandable. I suppose all this must seem very strange to you."

"Very. I am so thankful for all Gabriel has done for me. I will do my best for him and you."

"Of course you will. I have never known a female yet who did not do her best to please Gabriel Jackman. Do not take that the wrong way. It is just that he can be a hard man to resist, whatever he wants."

"He does have high hopes. However, I know he already has a woman. That may not mean much to most in this day and age but it does to me."

"Really? Ah well then, if you reject him, it would be a good thing to tame his massive ego. May I ask you how you would feel if he was not attached to the fat Italian?"

Elizabeth could not help but smile. "Well, he is certainly very handsome and charming. He is funny and does not seem to take himself too seriously. That is very boring. He is also different...it is hard to put into words."

"Oh, I agree. Gabriel Jackman is very different from most men. If I were twenty years younger and not so inclined to be faithful, he would catch my eye in many ways." Cornelia laughed and shook her head. "May I speak with you about Gabriel in complete confidence and frankly?"

"Yes, of course."

“Last summer, Gabriel, Lee and Sue Lyn came to the Estate for a few weeks out of the hot city. Gabriel was not at all like himself. He was in such a terrible mood and sulking.”

“I was concerned and asked Sue Lyn what was wrong. She told me Gabriel had developed almost an obsession about some young woman. He had been watching her from a distance and had recently lost her whereabouts. It seems that left him in a real funk. Eventually she gave me your name as the young woman. Gabriel is already half way in love with you, Elizabeth!”

“Goodness, he is not, Aunt Connie. We have only known each other for a few days.”

“No, that is not true from his point of view. Apparently, according to Sue Lyn he has had his eye on you since he first saw you years ago with your Mother. Of course, you were far too young and then he fell in love and married Helena.” Cornelia frowned and looked closely at Elizabeth for a moment. “And you never really noticed Gabriel? Very odd, you must be blind, my dear!”

“I had Peter so I guess I was blind to all other men.”

“Ah, Peter Pace! Now there was another wonderfully attractive man! Where was I? I know Gabriel Jackman very well. He is befuddled with you and in a way afraid to over step his bounds or he may lose you. Has he made any advances on you?”

“Almost the very minute we met. He does not seem afraid to me.”

“You did not sleep with him?”

“No! I told you. I am not interested in being hurt or hurting Isabelle Lucci! I will not be a refreshing pause for him when she is not around.”

“You could take him from her with the snap of your fingers if you really wanted to and God in heaven I wish you would snap those pretty fingers. I do hate the cow that much!”

“Would you tell me why you feel that way?”

“Just between me and you...just over a year ago, Gabriel asked her to marry him. She told him she needed time to think about it. Thinking was not all what she had in mind. That very same day he caught her in bed with another man. The same day...the same bed Gabriel had just left. What do you think of a woman like that?”

“I think she is a fool.”

“Like minds, we have!” Cornelia agreed with emotion. “He should have dropped her right then and for several months he would not even speak with her. Now, he still keeps her because he cannot abide an empty bed. Like most men he finds it hard to see past his next lay.” She paused for a moment. “Excuse my boldness. I hope I do not insult you. I just say what I think, that is all. My husband says I sometimes have a foul mouth.”

“It is not foul to speak one’s mind, just difficult.”

“You could easily replace Lucci in Gabriel’s life. Believe me he is a man who very much wants to love. He has been hurt badly twice, one with the death of Helena and then by the Lucci woman. Men are easily frightened with it comes to matters of the heart. Women bounce back quicker. What you need to do is well; sort of dangle yourself in front of him like the carrot on the string. Give him a very good idea of what he is missing and all he needs to do is be free of his current unpleasant mistress.”

“Oh well, we will see what the future brings.” Elizabeth said, thinking that from the little she knew about Gabriel he seemed an honorable man. He is the sort of man who would not willingly and knowingly allow a child of his to be born a bastard. Because of that, she would have to keep a very close hold on her feelings.

“There!” Cornelia pointed as they came to a break in the tree line. “That God awful monstrosity on top of that mountain is Wolfe Manor. You were there once as a child, do you remember?”

“Very vaguely.”

“Isn’t it ugly?”

“It certainly is imposing. But ugly?”

“I love my husband but not his house. I live here only because I have to. It is far too big to fill with happiness. A few grandchildren would at least add some laughter. Randall must give up this ridiculous idea to become a Catholic priest.”

“I will do my best, Aunt Connie. I fear that it would be easier to take a man from another woman than from his God.”

“Of course. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church has no claim on Randall De Wolfe. If he must serve God, he can do it within the Church of England. Then he can marry, live like a normal man and have children.”

“Do you have any idea why he decided to convert?”

“None what so ever!” Cornelia answered too quickly.

“If I can learn the reason it may make it easier to break the spell. Could you tell me what is the problem with Owen’s marriage? Do you know the reason why his wife pushed him away?”

Cornelia sighed, a cloud passed over face. “He has a problem similar to that of Gabriel. Owen greatly loved Ruth when he married her. It was a complete and passionate love, as Gabriel had for Helena.”

“Ruth lost a baby after a horrific birthing. Afterwards she became very ill, almost died and when she recovered, she had lost the use of her legs. It would have been better if Ruth had died with her baby. Her soul certainly died that terrible day. Almost immediately she blamed Owen and turned against him.”

“She helped him conceive the child. How is it his fault? There is no fault in these tragedies.”

Cornelia nodded. “True, but that is not the case in her bitter mind. She refuses to have any physical contact with her husband and never speaks to him except to chastise.”

“The lack of the physical contact gives Owen reason for divorce.”

“I know but he is frozen with guilt. Any woman with an ounce of pride would set him free. However, not Ruth, she exists now only to make sure Owen is never happy. It infuriates me that he allows her to do this but he refuses to speak with me about it. As much as I hate the Lucci thing, I detest Ruth many times more. She holds Owen to his promise to stay by her until death. She refuses to let him be free to love again.”

“You want me to break the hold Ruth has on him?”

“Exactly!”

“Good Lord! That could take some long time...!”

“Not for a women of beauty and talent.”

Elizabeth sat in silence for a while. She was more nervous than ever and not at all sure that she had the required beauty and talent. Could she turn one man away from

chastity to God, another from a cold, hated wife and a third away from the whiskey bottle? Perhaps she had bitten off far more than she could chew.

The road twisted and turned as they made their way up the steep mountainside, eventually turning and coming to a halt in the courtyard.

"There is Randall!" Cornelia smiled and motioned to a well-dressed, well-built young man leaning in shadows against the stable gates. "He said he would wait to greet us." She leaned closer to Elizabeth. "Now tell me, woman to woman, would a man like not be wasted in such an unfriendly church?"

"Well, with my limited experience," Elizabeth paused and looked with meaning at Cornelia. "If he does not have a true calling that would be a waste." She watched Randall as he stepped up to the coach door. He was no more than medium height for a man but his wide chest and obviously powerful shoulders gave him the appearance of strength. He had thick chestnut colored hair brushed back accenting a high forehead, broad face and square chin. His cheekbones were high, his nose straight and a little long. For a male, his lips were very full. She doubted he was happy with that.

Cornelia sat forward, repairing to step from the carriage as soon as Randall opened the door. Very lightly, she touched the younger woman's hand. "You must stay within your limited experience, please dear. Anything else would break my heart."

Randall smiled at his mother as he helped her down the folding steps, the smile genuinely warm and friendly. Elizabeth thought that he was indeed handsome, in a bold and rugged manner. It was not until she saw his eyes, the same brilliant sapphire eyes as his mother that she noticed just how appealing he was.

"Randall De Wolfe, Miss Elizabeth Leighton. You two did meet but that was when you were just children." Cornelia beamed at him as he helped Elizabeth down from the coach.

"How do you do, Miss Leighton? I am very pleased to meet you for a second time."

"Thank you, Mr. De Wolfe. Since we have met, could we use first names? Why should we be so formal?"

"That makes perfect sense. I am very pleased to meet you again, Elizabeth." He smiled and turned his brilliant eyes down to his mother. "I am glad you are back, Mother. A war is about to break out in the kitchen."

"Oh no! Not again!"

"Apparently the potatoes are not the right kind for what chef has in mind. Housekeeper says, 'Make do!' in her most proper Scottish frugal way. Mrs. Beaver says 'What do you know about cooking? Go about your dusting!'"

"I had better get in there. Elizabeth, I apologize. Randall will see you to your rooms." With a dramatic flash of skirts Cornelia disappeared through a side door.

Randall turned to Elizabeth and shrugged. "I hope you do realize you have come to a house full of lunatics, staff included." He took her by the arm and led her towards the front entrance.

"Good! I'll not be bored then, will I?"

"Not a dull moment."

Elizabeth stopped suddenly as she had a full look at the huge, dark and cold looking gray structure. "My goodness! What an imposing building!" The lowering sun cast a dull, pewter luster over the dozen of windows above them.

He followed her gaze. "You may say it. Father says that De Wolfe Manor is like an aging courtesan ...but perhaps I had better not explain why he says that."

"No, go ahead. I must know how your dramatic home is like an aging courtesan?"

"Just remember you asked. It is too big, well worn and well used on the outside but still warm and welcoming on the inside."

Elizabeth laughed. "That is funny."

"Most women might find that shocking or some such silliness."

"I guess I have a modern sense of humor. How many rooms are there?"

"Well that is a matter of dispute! This is only the main building, the other wings run around out of sight that way. When we were boys, Owen decided to once and for all to determine just how many rooms there were. He, Steward and I raided the linen cupboards, made off with all the sheets and cut them into strips. The parents were away for the day, you see! We took our strips and hung one from one window in each room. The plan was to count them and get some idea the number of rooms. Surprisingly, we found that there were still several sets of windows without markings."

"Then you missed some rooms?"

Randall shook his head. "No. We were very careful not to. Every room, every window, at least in this main part of the house was noted."

"Then...there are hidden rooms?"

"It seems so! Walled up, plastered and wall papered over."

"Did you not want to get in them or at least find out why?"

"Yes, it did occur to us but the parents returned home to see their fine linens fluttering out the windows. They were none too pleased...."

"I should say not!" Elizabeth smiled and Randall led her through the entrance.

"The subject was quickly squashed but I have always wondered why these rooms had become secrets."

"Oh, how lovely!" Elizabeth exclaimed turning in a circle in the large gathering hall. An extremely elegant crystal chandelier sparkled over the black and white, marble-checked floor. The well polished, dark mahogany paneling held gold framed paintings and reached high up to a domed dark blue ceiling glittered with a thousand silver stars. Two ornately carved staircases circled the area. "Is the rest of the house as beautiful as this?"

"For the most part, yes. My mother does the old tart up rather well."

Elizabeth did not hear a door open or the approach of two men behind her.

"I see what you mean, Randall. A very friendly courtesan, beautiful and not at all past it!"

She turned suddenly when Owen De Wolfe spoke. "Have we missed an interesting conversation with a lovely stranger? You must fill us in, Randall!" He was taller, slimmer and slightly older than Randall. His hair wavy and black, his jaw a little less square and shoulders not quite as broad. Their faces were so similar; the unbelievable sapphire eyes would have been identical but for the warmth and humor in Randall's and the cold sadness in Owen's.

"Owen De Wolfe, our long lost childhood friend, Miss Elizabeth Leighton. We have already established the choice to use first names."

“How do you do...Elizabeth?” Owen took her hand, held it a second too long and ran his eyes from her face down and back again. “Mother will have to explain to me why you have not been here before and very often.”

Gabriel, smiling broadly, took a step forward and to the side, almost between Owen and Elizabeth. “Gabriel Jackman. Elizabeth. I am very pleased to meet you.”

“And you as well, Mr. Jackman.” All nervousness gone, Elizabeth was thoroughly enjoying herself.

“Am I relegated to Mr. and my friends more honored?”

“Not at all, Gabriel! That would hardly be fair.”

“Musgrave!” Randall called to the butler coming silently down the hallway. “Miss Leighton has arrived. Please see to it that her baggage is brought to her room.”

“I have done that sir. I was wondering is Miss Leighton wishes a tea brought upstairs.”

“Tea would be very nice, thank you!”

“Then I will show you up to your rooms.” Randall took her by the arm and up the stairs.

“Well, Gabe!” Owen leaned close to his friend returned to the study. “I think things are going to liven up around here, don’t you?”

“Isn’t she a little young, even for you?” Gabriel asked.

“If she is old enough to look like that, then she is old enough for me.” Owen poured two whiskeys handed one to his companion and drank his.

Gabriel nodded. “Maybe so, in your own house and under your wife’s nose? You live dangerously, old friend.”

“Some things are worth the effort.”

Randall led Elizabeth down the hallway to an open bedroom door. Elizabeth’s suitcases were lined up beside the bed. “Mother named all the guest rooms after various flowers.” Randall spoke with an effort of a smile spoke from the doorway. “Can you guess?”

“Well, bedspread, canopy, curtains and wall paper, all white. Here and there, touches of bright yellow, it is very feminine. I would have to say daisies.”

“Correct and feminine is the word. A man would smoother under all those frills.”

“I doubt that, Randall. You do not have to stay in the hallway. It is your home, after all.”

He smiled and nodded, crossed the room and opened another door. “Your sitting room, tiny but comfortable.”

She followed him. A fire burned brightly in the fireplace, on either side were two comfortable high backed chairs with a circular table and settee in between. A beautiful painting hanging above the mantle drew her attention. A female child sitting in a field of wild flowers looked demurely up to the artist.

“How lovely!” She exclaimed. The painting signed with O. De Wolfe seemed so real, so alive with color she felt she could feel the breeze and smell the flowers.

“Owen painted this?”

“Yes, surprising, isn’t it? Owen is not really an ignoramus. I apologize for his rudeness, Elizabeth.”

“I have known worse. Sadly, men often speak that way to attractive females. I do not understand just what it is they hope to accomplish. On the other hand, maybe I do.

Owen De Wolfe will be disappointed in me.” She stopped speaking as a maid pushed in a tea trolley.

“Thank you, Janet. I will leave you to enjoy your refreshment.”

“No, do stay, Randall. Look there are two cups and a very large pot; more than enough for two.” She smiled at him and sat in one of the lush chairs. He nodded and sat across from her.

“Would you be wishing for me to unpack your bags for you, Miss?” The young girl asked as she poured the tea.

“No thank you. I will be fine.”

“Then you’ll not be needing me as maid? Mrs. De Wolfe said I should tell you I was available.”

“Well, Janet only for hair and buttons. I am at a useless standstill with my mop of hair. Are you any good with a mess such as I have?”

“Mrs. De Wolfe has me do her hair over her own personal girl.” Janet offered proudly.

“Then if you have the time in the morning I am sure I will need a hand or two. I think I am fine for tonight’s diner.”

“Oh yes!” Janet remembered another message from her mistress. “Diner will not be until nine tonight. There’s been a kaffuffle in the kitchen...again.” She sighed and left the sitting room.

“I will starve by that time. Thank goodness for this.” Randall took a long drink from his teacup. “Thank you for being so kind about Owen. I hope that he controls himself for the rest of your stay but I doubt it. He and his wife suffered a tragedy a few years back. They should be well over it by now...but they are not.”

“Aunt Connie told me about the loss of their child and Ruth’s illness. It must have been a nightmare for them, for all of you. With Ruth in a wheel chair, the nightmare continues. Who can say just how they would react?”

“True! Walk a mile in my shoes, as they say! Now Ruth has turned bitterly against Owen. She has taken that whole foolish curse issue to heart and blames him for not telling her about it.”

“Curse?”

Randall sat forward, his elbows on his knees. He licked his lips and shook his head. “Bloody ridiculous! I would not waste your time.”

“No, tell me, please. I have no belief in them, of course but still they are fascinating.”

“Alright, if you insist, Elizabeth. The story does not at all speak well of my ancestors. It began 200 years ago with my great, great, great Grandfather Hugo De Wolfe and his wife Margo. They were the first generation of De Wolfe’s to live on this mountain and began the building of this strange and rambling house. Hugo and Margo had produced seven daughters and it is with the birth of their eighth daughter that the sad story begins.”

“Eight daughters! Goodness Randall, however did the De Wolfe men survive all those frills?”

He narrowed his eyes, and then laughed with her. “Anyway, back to my story. Hugo was not at all satisfied with not having an heir. He must have been truly desperate because he consulted a local gypsy. She considered herself some sort of witch, perhaps

not so wise for the times. She told Hugo she had the power to ensure his next child would be male, of course only if he agreed to pay her. Hugo agreed. She would receive half then and half upon the birth of healthy male."

"The fly in the ointment was Margo. She did not want any more children. Her doctors seriously warned her that she might not survive another confinement. No amount of cajoling by her husband would move her, not even the threat of divorce."

"Hugo went back to the gypsy for a refund of his money. She was quicker than he was and convinced him that he still had a son and heir coming to him. All he needed was a different female." Randall paused for breath and finished his tea.

"But an illegitimate child would not inherit either...would he?"

"That is true and Hugo felt he did not have the time or want for divorce or the hunt for a new wife. The gypsy would not be outdone of the money. Now here the story gets rather ...well, rough! Just so you will be warned."

"I am warned. Please go ahead."

"Hugo could still have his son and heir but he would have to impregnate his own sister. She and her husband lived here as well. The boy, even though he would be Hugo's bastard, would also be Hugo's nephew and heir."

"But...!" Elizabeth sat stunned for a moment. Randall resisted the urge to smile. "Wouldn't this child be considered the child of the sister's husband?"

"Not if the cuckolded husband disowned the child as not his. As they say, the law is an ass! Even more so then than now, it seems. Hugo offered sister and brother-in-law a great deal of money and to their shame they agreed."

"But certainly Margo didn't?"

"She did not know the child was actually her husband's until well into the pregnancy. She was mad with rage and jealousy."

"I am not surprised!"

"Me as well, Elizabeth. It seems that Hugo and his brother underestimated the extent of this rage. One dreadful night, just weeks before the child was due to be born, Hugo and brother-in-law left the mountain. Servants heard the terrible fighting but no one stepped in. The men returned in the predawn and found similar nightmares in their bedrooms."

"Hugo found Margo dead, hanging by the neck in a suicide. Brother-in-law found his wife dead, on the floor of their bedroom, her throat cut ear to ear. Her belly also sliced, the baby, a boy, never born lay beside his mother."

"Sweet Jesus!" Elizabeth exclaimed in a voice barely a whisper.

"Well, someone had to be blamed, someone had to pay the price and it was certainly not going to be the rich and powerful De Wolfe family. The gypsy was arrested and charged with enticing incest, enticing murder, fraud and worst of all, for that time, witchcraft. She had no defense and was burned at the stake for the sin of witchcraft. Before she died, she cursed the De Wolfe family. For all time, as she put it no child would ever be born and survive in De Wolfe Manor."

"But surely, Randall, no one would consider such utter foolishness seriously!"

"It is hard to believe but from that time on, my mother included, no De Wolfe baby was ever born in this house."

"Except for Ruth's baby?"

“Exactly! The only child born here in over two hundreds years and she was still born.’ Randall lit a cigarette. “Ruth swears that Owen never told her about the curse and blames him. He says he did and that she laughed it off. Whatever is the truth it remains that they hate each other and neither will give the other freedom to move on with things?”

“In this day and age, Owen and Ruth must see how the ‘curse’ had nothing to do with their heartache.”

“That is hard to say. Neither of them is rational. Ruth stays bitter and cold in her wheel chair. Owen makes it very clear to her that he whores around and not so very long ago these two people loved each other dearly and swore to God they would do so for ever.”

“That is so sad. Is there no end to it?”

“I can not see an end, Elizabeth.” Randall stood and smiled slightly. “Now that I have completely depressed you, I will leave you to unpack and rest. Would you like me to come back and escort down stairs just before nine. You will never find the dinning room on your own.”

“Yes please, thank you, Randall.”

The village of Madsen Worthy spread in a semi-circle around the base of Wolfe Mountain. Lee borrowed a horse from the De Wolfe stables. He rode along the Worthy High Street to the far end of the village and Madsen Arms Inn.

He tied off his horse and walked around to the rear of the pub. There was a small courtyard, storage shed and a wall of wooden barrels that conveniently blocked the view from any one watching from inside Inn. Lee followed a well-traveled pathway into a thickly wooded area. Lee knew from the police notes that it was at the half way mark on this path where the eighteen-year-old Mary O’Neal had come to her grisly end on August 2nd, 1894. From there no one in the pub or in the row of cottages at the end of the pathway would have seen the crime.

Lee closed his eyes; the setting sun was warm on his face. The soft breeze of the afternoon was picking up cooler, with the threat of rain and carrying the aroma of cooking fires. Content people going to or come home from their days work, preparing meals for their families. They were simple, hard working, God-fearing people. Rape, torture and murder did not have a place in their lives. The brutal end of Mary several years before was now just a sad memory. Did it ever occur to them that this lunatic could still walk amongst them?

He stood briefly in the doorway of the popular drinking establishment and squinted into the dim corners where some locals sat at tables. It was too dark for him to recognize anyone but he smiled and nodded just in case, crossed the room and leaned against the bar.

“Hello, Mr. Woo!” Mrs. Jones, the wife of the proprietor of the popular local gathering place smiled at him. “It’s been a long time!”

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Jones. I am visiting at the Estate for a while. A little of your best would go down just right.”

She poured a mug of thick, warm beer, slid it over the spotless bar top and took payment. He took a long drink. “Lord that is good, Mrs. Jones. Best for miles around, I am sure! Take one for yourself.”

“And how be the pretty Mrs. Woo? She didn’t want to pay a visit to the Arms?”

“Sue Lyn is staying in London this time. I did not want her to travel. We are expecting our first child this coming winter.”

“Well, well! Mr. Woo, congratulations on that. Next one is on the house.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Jones. In all truth I have been thinking about moving my little family out to live in this country side and away from the violence of the city.” He watched with surprise as she drank half her pint in one gulp.

“Live in a rough part, do ya?”

“No, it is very nice where we live but still it is the city. I long for peace and quiet.”

Mrs. Jones frowned and sighed. “Well, Mr. Woo, I am not one to be bursting bubbles but you should know, we’ve had our share of misery and murder here too. Guess there is no getting away from it.”

Lee looked doubtfully. “Murder? Here in Madsen Worthy?”

“Oh yes! And you may well look surprised but I was ‘ere when it happened.”

“I’d be interested in hearing about it, if it isn’t too painful.”

“Usually I don’t speak about it,” Lee doubted that very much. “But from me you’ll get it from the horse’s mouth, as it were, and not from those that don’t know but like to think they do.”

“Probably for the best that you tell me then, Mrs. Jones.”

“Well....” She leaned her huge breasts on the bar top and began the story she had told many times before. “I’d been working here about a year when it happened but I weren’t wed to Mr. Jones then so I had a small room at top of house and back. I woke up early that day and found coppers and the like all abouts. From my little window, I could just see where they found the body, back in the laneway. Poor Mary O’Neil, same age as me I guess, eighteen or so, all beat up, cut up, raped and dead.”

“Good Lord! That is terrible. Did they ever catch the felon?”

“Na! You know how it goes. They tried to pin it on a local boy but he didn’t do it. Mary was a nobody. They don’t care all that much, do they?”

“Did you know the poor lady well?”

Mrs. Jones nodded eagerly, stopped her story briefly for a pull on the taps. “Your free one, Mr. Lee. Yes, I knew poor Mary very well.” She handed Lee his beer, another for herself and again did her magic disappearing trick with hers. “She and I were thick as thieves. Told each other everything, we did. She were so pretty, Mr. Woo! Tall and slim, what a body she had! Not fat, like me! But that is fine, cause I am just the way my old man likes ‘em.”

“And that is the most important thing, isn’t it, Mr. Jones? So, I am intrigued, tell me about the poor Mary!”

“Same old story. She was so pretty and had all kinds of men after her. And most of them had other things in mind. Do you know what I mean?” Lee nodded. “But for the most part Mary was a good girl. There was one local fellow, Stan Burke, she had been visiting with him almost since she was a girl and he wanted to marry her something fierce. But she started letting her pretty face go to her head....” She laughed at her pun, took a deep breath and continued. “She started disappearing like for hours at a time, sometimes for all afternoon on her day off. She would not tell anyone where she was going but I could tell she were real happy! One day, Mrs. Harper saw her getting out of a fancy coach carriage back down the road a piece, hoping not to be seen, I guess.”

"Mary must have found a new man."

"No doubt about it. And real big on him she was too. Poor Stan was half-mad trying to make her stop whatever she was doing but she told him if he went on too much she'd stop seeing him completely. He took it, poor sod. He were that gone on Mary. So this goes on for a few months then sudden like Mary is all down in the mouth. Caught her crying in back room one day. She wouldn't tell me much, only that she was a fool and first time she saw Stan again she was gonna tell him she'd marry him right away."

"Guess the new fellow broke it off."

"Suppose so, Mr. Woo!"

"And you don't think that Burke did the murder?"

"Stanley...na! He ain't never hurt a fly. He died not too long later. Drank himself silly and took a bad fall at the gristmill. So you see there is bad all over, if you're not careful." Mr. Jones shuddered at the memory. "And be careful up on the mountain."

"Why is that, Mrs. Jones?"

"Well, I shouldn't say cause they be your friends. But there are those of us in the village that think that murder and others since then fall down one of the De Wolfe men."

"You are serious aren't you? I can see it in your eyes."

"Deadly so!"

"They all seem very nice and normal to me."

"How well do you know Steward De Wolfe?" She whispered eagerly.

"Well enough, I suppose. However, I have not spent as much time with him as the others. Don't tell me he is the one the locals think is responsible?"

"I shouldn't say but will for the sake of your wife and babe and you maybe moving out this way so you should know. He is a mean one, he is. It has been a long time since my old man has let him in here."

"Is it just gossip or does anybody know anything for fact?"

"The fact that Steward De Wolfe is black hearted is not gossip! Too many of us know it all first hand. One of the cooks from up the mountain, Mrs. Beaver is a cousin of mine and so I get it all straight from the horses' mouth...so to speak. I will tell you what she told me but mind you never heard it from me. I'll not want trouble with the likes of him."

"You never said a word to me on Steward, did you Mrs. Jones?"

She smiled. "Not a word." Once again she shifted her breasts on the bar and leaned closer to Lee. "There's a maid up there by the name of Janet. She is personal girl to the lady of the house. Her and Mrs. B talk a lot. Janet's alright but she ain't too bright, especially about men and the likes of that. Steward will have a go at the maids if they'll let him and Janet did. Mrs. B told her it weren't a good idea but the silly cow seems to have thought he had a real thing for her. He had a thing for her, that's a fact but it weren't nothing more than a roll in the hay. So then a few months back Janet tells Mrs. B that she ain't gonna do it with him no more."

"Found wisdom, did she?"

"Na! She said he got rough and hurt her bad. Mrs. B asked her how but she wouldn't tell me. Janet were real shook up. And there is more...back in the September Janet takes a head fall down the stairs and breaks her arm. She says that Steward pushed her but he says no, she just lost her balance when he rushed past her. He wanted his parents to send her off but the Mrs. won't hear of it. Janet's her favorite. I'd be right

scared if I was Janet. There've been others murders since Mary and I think he is down for all of them."

"Good God! How many murders have there been around here?"

"Well, lets' see...four starting with Mary but maybe more."

"More?"

"There is some of us that thinks that the fall that killed Stanley Burke was no bloody accident. If anyone knew anything about why Mary got herself killed it might be him. Somebody might not have liked that too much."

"And you think that 'somebody' was Steward De Wolfe."

She nodded. "Think it and would bet money on it, Mr. Woo."

A patron called to her. Overhead thunder rolled.

"I'm off then." Lee put some more coins in her hand. "Thanks for the warning. I will be sure to keep my eyes open. I had better get back before I am drenched."

Lee found Gabriel with Owen huddled over a chessboard in the sitting room.

"Lee!" Owen smiled and pushed away from the table. "Do you know Gabriel cheats at chess? What do you think of a man who will do that?"

"It is beyond me why anyone even bothers with that damn game. How many games did you lose this time?" Lee asked.

"Three. I hardly call it losing when your opponent cheats."

Gabriel laughed. "Well, your mind was certainly not on the game. So where was it?"

"The hell if I know. I have not been able to focus on anything for weeks. I am four weeks behind on Lady Eugenia Hockley's portrait. Mind you, it might be easier if she did not make me want to vomit every time I look at her."

"You're not doing that old sour puss, are you? Looking at her for hours on end would be enough to give any man nightmares."

"Yes, Lee and there is that as well. I have had nightmares almost nightly. I have not had a good night's sleep in ages." Owen stood and pulled on his jacket. "The same stupid dreams over and over again."

"Grandmother Woo used told me when I was a child that you break a dream by telling someone about it and it won't come back again."

"Did it work?"

"It did sometimes, Owen. What are your dreams about?"

"The murders!" Owen exclaimed. "Mary, Chloe, Alice and Daisy! Over and over again. As clear as though I was standing there watching. I must be losing what is left of my mind. I have just been telling Gabriel all about them so we will see if your old Grandmas plan works on me. I am going to try and rest before dinner."

Lee waited for the sound of Owen's footfall to fade away before he closed the sitting room door. "How the bloody hell do two men have the same nightmares?" He asked Gabriel.

Gabriel shook his head. "I have no idea. But they are the exact same down to the last detail."

"Did you tell Owen you are having the same dreams?"

"No. There is no point. For all I know he could be the murderer."

"But you do not think that, do you? Is that based on friendship or fact?"

"Both...neither! I cannot be truly objective here. That is why most of this investigation will be up to you and Elizabeth."

"You must have some leanings? I would be interested in hearing them."

"My 'leanings' run to Ted and Steward. That could easily be just because I dislike the both of them."

"You are not the only one who thinks Steward is the killer. I have just had a long chat with Mrs. Jones down at the 'Arms'." Lee repeated all that she had told him.

"Well, that is interesting. I think I will have a little talk with Janet."

"Do you think she will tell you anything?"

"Janet is a fountain of knowledge about this place and loves to talk about it all."

"Yes, but this is all very personal. She may be too ashamed."

"I have my ways." Gabriel smiled but it faded quickly. "But you could be right. Maybe I will have Elizabeth talk to her. I have to tell you something I learned at the Underhill's the other night."

"I thought something was up, Gabriel. You do a terrible weak poker face."

"Caroline Underhill was close to my father, closer than some people thought they should have been. In that relationship, he confided things to her. Henry Leighton, Theodore De Wolfe and Samuel Jackman were Desjardin's right hand men in the 'Circle of Mendes.'"

Lee's jaw dropped slightly. The face of Gabriel's old and docile father came into his mind. No man seemed less of a Satan worshiper. "Are you sure?"

"Not yet but believe me I will find out. Nonetheless I have complete faith that Caroline would not have lied to me about any thing as terrible as this. It cost a great deal for her to tell me. What ever the truth is she certainly believes my father was up to his eye balls in that misery."

"I don't know, Gabriel." Lee paused, lit a cigarette, and gave one to his companion.

"Why would a man get involved in all that? I mean, for Christ sake if a man wants drugs and orgies he doesn't have to turn to the devil!"

"The only one who can answer that now is Ted. It will soon be time for him and me to have a long talk."

"Past it, if you ask me. So," Lee scratched his head, "your father and Ted were responsible for some very nasty acts and now you and he are sharing the same nightmares. I would say there was a connection there. Has Elizabeth mentioned nightmares to you?"

"No, not yet."

"Gabriel I think it is time you let me read Leighton's diaries. Did you bring them with you?"

Gabriel stood. "Yes, I guess you had better know the depths of the evilness. I let Elizabeth read them."

"Why?"

"I thought she needed to know the truth about her father. Now I think I may have made a mistake."

"How did she take it?"

"Not well. She threw up. And now she says it is none of her concern."

"They made her sick?"

“Oh yes and they will shock you as well. I will give them to you after dinner. You will not want to eat if you read them before.”

After Randall left, Elizabeth sat for a long while watching the dwindling fire. The wind at picked up and rain lashed against the windows. She thought of Ruth and Owen. Could she ever turn completely against a man she loved? Would she ever be so hollow that to cause misery to a man once loved was all she lived for? Where was the God everyone professed to honor and love? If he was so all loving and caring, why did he allow Owen and Ruth to suffer in their never-ending nightmare? There were no answers for her then; it seemed to her then that there would never be answers. There was just pain with no reason and solution.

Eventually, she stood, crossed to a door beside the fireplace and knocked lightly. There was no answer so she opened the door and stepped into what was Gabriel's room. She turned up the gas lamps. As feminine as her bedroom was, Gabriel's was austere, solid and masculine. Someone had already unpacked his bags. His dinner suit lay on the bedside.

She ran her hand down the fine silk lining of Gabriel's jacket. The quality was excellent. The label said that the suit was designed and hand made for the man who wore it. It was clear that Gabriel was a very wealthy man. That was unusual for a man whose occupation had most recently been a religious minister. She decided it must have come from an inheritance and that it was really none of her business.

The sound of far off thunder woke her from her daydream. Through the window, she saw the black night sky light briefly with lightening. Elizabeth felt cold and alone. Something about her conversation with Randall troubled her but she could not quite put her finger on it.

The door from the sitting room opened. “There you are.” Gabriel said and smiled at her.

She looked around suddenly remembering that she was in his bedroom. “I am sorry. I should not be in here...I was looking for you. I guess I was lost in thought.”

“Not to worry. My bedroom is yours anytime.” He stopped catching the look in her eyes. “What's wrong?”

“I am not sure.” She tried a smile and shook her head. “Randall told me about the ‘curse’.”

“Did he? Yes, it seems every old family has at least one. Superstitious foolishness but interesting considering what happened to Ruth and her child. Tell me your first impressions of Randall and Owen.”

“They are both equally as handsome as you are so that must gall you somewhat.”

He raised his eyebrows and smiled. “Not in the slightest, Elizabeth! Fair competition is welcome. Now, I am being serious, a first impression with female intuition on their type of man is what I am asking for.”

He watched as she sat down on the bed, removed her shoes and absentmindedly ran her feet over the thick carpeting. “Well, my first reaction is to say that Randall is nice and that Owen is not. However, you want more than that. Randall is a gentleman, he would ask politely and take no for an answer. I feel he is a very lonely man...maybe depressed is more the word. When he left me before I swear, he left a cloud of depression over me. For no reason that I can see I felt so alone...very odd!”

“Now as to Owen, well...he would ask and if he received a ‘no’ he would simply translated it to meaning ‘maybe, ask again and again until the answer is yes.’ But he is more than that isn’t he?”

“I am asking you to tell me.” Gabriel pulled off his jacket and tie, opened the top button of his shirt and sat down across from her. She noticed the shoulder holster and gun and wondered quickly where she had left her purse.

“Is he still in love with Ruth?”

“No, not in the way he should be or used to be. I think I told you that Ruth was a very successful actress before she married Owen. That success not just based on her beauty but also on her talent. She was a damn fine actress, had a powerful singing voice as well. She gave it all up for her marriage and that is the way it had to be but now it seems all she has are memories and thoughts of what might have been and no ideas of a future.”

“As far as Owens goes, it is as if he owns her and that is good enough. Ruth has a very nasty mouth and uses it against him; she humiliates him at every chance. They must divorce, Owens knows that but he will not face it.”

“You told me yourself he is unfaithful. Is that not enough cause for her to be angry at him?”

“Good Lord, Elizabeth. She will not let him touch her. How long is a man supposed to go without a woman?”

“If she is in a wheel chair, it is hardly her fault. Certainly he should have made some attempt to hide his affairs from her.”

“Yes, but the doctors told Owen it is only the loss of her legs. She still has all the needed feelings in her body. If she wanted to she could very easily enjoy her marriage to Owen.”

“Oh...well that is a very different thing.” She slipped her shoes back on and stood. “Then she is a fool for pushing him away and he is a fool for not divorcing her. Perhaps they would rather suffer together than say goodbye forever. The long and the short of it is...that so far I do not see anything in either man that frightens me.”

“I will go and unpack and maybe rest for a while before changing for dinner. Randall will come for me so you need not bother.”

Chapter Six

It was just before nine when Randall knocked on Elizabeth's door. She took a last look in the mirror. The dress she chose for that night was a simple blue-black silk, very tight until just past the hips with a dramatically flared skirt. She wore a white lace bolero jacket with red trim and tiny black crystal buttons. The effect was strikingly feminine and alluring. As Gabriel had instructed she wore the hated corset, the small, deadly gun held tightly in place under her left breast. It was uncomfortable and dug into her skin.

"Randall." She smiled at him as she opened the door and stepped out into the hallway.

He returned the smile and for the first time, that she had been able to notice, he did as men usually did; took a long look down and up her body. "Well...!" He shook his head, blushed slightly and took her arm.

"Do you do that often?" She asked as they walked down the hallway.

"Do what?"

"Start to say something and then change your mind? I would like to know what it was you decided not to say."

"Would you really?" He stopped at the top of the stairs. "First sight of you then reminded me of a poem. It is long and silly."

"Tell me at least some of it. Then, maybe not, if it is 'silly'. Do I look 'silly'?"

"Oh, good heavens no! I say that because the writer had very little talent. Alright, I will tell you the first two lines. "If she had more beauty it would hurt my eyes. If she spoke, bird song forever dulled. If she kissed me...! No...that is the third line."

"You've started it, you must finish. What would happen if she kissed him?"

From down the hall a door opened and closed. They turned and saw Gabriel coming towards them. Downstairs the dinner bell sounded.

"Saved by the bell." Randall whispered to her.

Gabriel stayed slightly behind as Randall brought Elizabeth to the small crowd waiting in the gathering room. Cornelia stepped forward.

"Elizabeth. How lovely you look."

"Thank you." Elizabeth answered feeling more than a little uncomfortable with all the eyes on her.

"I understand you have already met Owen and Gabriel. I will introduce you to the rest." She had barely finished speaking when a barrel of a man came forward and stood beside her.

"It is good to see you again, Elizabeth. My Lord you are so like your lovely mother." Theodore took one hand in both of his.

"My husband." Cornelia added looking up at him with pride.

"Thank you, Uncle Theodore." There it is, she thought, the original of the masculine, handsome square jaw that had repeated in his sons. Theodore De Wolfe was an imposing man. Everything about him was overly large. He was not as tall as Owen but he had a wide and strong looking body. He had an amazing thick stock of snow-

white hair, wonderfully styled mustaches connected with sideboards. Bright, intelligent black eyes sparkled as he looked down at Elizabeth.

Cornelia moved Elizabeth along the line that had formed. "My son, Randall's twin, Steward."

"That is me, Elizabeth...Randall's twin. But I am much more than just that I assure you." As far as she could tell, the only difference in the two men was that Steward had jet-black hair. Elizabeth nodded and smiled.

Cornelia moved Elizabeth to the two women standing across from the men. "Our daughter Jane." Her voice was flat and uninterested.

The handsome traits that Theodore had passed down to his sons did not sit so well with his female child. The wide, square face and body robbed Jane De Wolfe of any chance of femininity and prettiness. Her only redeeming possibilities were her mother's beautiful eyes and thick, shining hair. "I am so happy you are here, Elizabeth!" Jane gushed. "It will be such fun to have a female around here my own age. These men are boring as peas."

"We will have some fun talks." Elizabeth agreed.

"And last but not least," Elizabeth and Cornelia stepped up to Ruth. "Our daughter-in-law, Ruth." More interest this time along with great dislike. Cornelia did very little to hide her feelings in her voice.

Ruth looked up at Elizabeth, did not smile but managed to convey a welcome in her soft brown eyes. She wore a plain gray dress; her long blond hair pulled back and tied in a ribbon. Ruth had not attempted to dress up but that did not take anything from the fact that she was a very beautiful woman. "How do you do?" She offered a slim, cool hand. Elizabeth noticed a large diamond wedding ring on her left hand.

Lastly, she walked up to Lee. Cornelia introduced him as a friend of Gabriel's as well as the family.

"Well, can we eat now?" Steward asked. "I am famished."

Ted led the group into the dining room and they took their places. For most of the meal, the conversation followed smoothly from country life, to city life, from politics to modern theater. They all knew very well of Elizabeth's recent tragedies. No one mentioned a word of any of it. It was during dessert when things went decidedly very badly.

"Have you seen any of our Owen's art work, Elizabeth?" Steward asked. "He is the only one of us with any sort of real talent."

"Yes, I have. That one there, Owen...." She motioned to a large, gilt framed portrait of Cornelia and Ted hanging on the wall above Owen, "is it yours?"

He nodded and smiled broadly. "Yes, in honor of my parents thirty years of marriage. Do you like it?" he asked with the excited enthusiasm and pride of a child.

"Oh my Lord, Owen, it is wonderful. And if you do not mind me saying so, Aunt and Uncle, not only is it an absolute likeness it shows your love and dedication."

"It does, doesn't it?" Ted beamed at his wife. "I am a lucky man to have been blessed with such angel for a wife." He raised his glass, winked at Cornelia and she blushed. "And such a talented son."

Elizabeth continued. "The lovely painting in my sitting room...it is as if you can reach out and touch the child."

Owen frowned. "Not too sure which one that is."

"Titled, 'Dream Child'." Randall put in.

"Oh yes! One of my early works."

Ruth spoke for the first time since they sat for the meal. "Owen painted that one before we were married, Elizabeth. He was of a much more romantic nature back then. Such a pretty face and all that curly blond hair; done in such a way one could not tell the sex of the child. His 'Dream Child' as he told me was his idea of what his own child might look like one day."

"It is a beautiful painting." Elizabeth said. The room had suddenly grown cold, the mood unhappy and expectant.

"So tell me, husband," Ruth moved only her eyes towards the other end of the table and to Owen, "is the 'Dream Child' correct or even close?"

A few seconds passed before Owen spoke, his eyes cold again and fixed hard on Ruth's face. "Pardon me?"

"You do not understand my question? I will phrase it better. Is your year old son, the bastard you ironically call Noah anything at all like your 'Dream Child'?"

Cornelia gasped. Owen dropped his fork and his jaw.

"No, I suppose it is not likely." Ruth sneered at him. "You little 'tar baby' most likely has the frizzy black hair and disgusting skin of his mother. Seriously, Owen, female niggers will mate so easily, they are such whores, do you really have any idea just who the father is? Couldn't it just as likely be the chimney sweep?"

Several things happened all at once. At either end of the table, Ted and Owen stood. Owen stood so quickly he knocked over his wine glass; it spilled across the table and into his mother's lap. With rage on his face he moved towards Ruth. Gabriel and Randall stood and blocked his way.

"Get out of my way." Owen bellowed at his friend and brother, trying to push them aside.

Ruth backed her wheel chair slightly away from the table, she laughed. It was a strange cracking sound. "Owen you always were such a fool!"

"Ruth, shut up!" Ted yelled and moved in front of Ruth. "How dare you speak like that in my house?"

"Why Ted?" Ruth asked him with mock innocence. "Why should a wife not speak the truth? Or is this the first time you heard of the dark bastard who might be your only grandchild? Drown him in a bucket like the unwanted creature he is, that is my advice."

Cornelia covered her face with her hands, sinking down into her chair. Jane rushed to Ruth and pulled the wheelchair back from her enraged father. Elizabeth, sitting next to Cornelia put her arm around the mortified woman.

"Shut your filthy, fucking mouth!" Owen still fought to get past Gabriel. Lee stood and took a place beside Gabriel.

Gabriel stood his ground, took Owen roughly by both arms. "Stop it, for Christ sake this what she wants."

"Randall, take Ruth to her room." Ted ordered.

Randall looked nervously from Owen to Gabriel. "It's alright." Gabriel nodded to Randall. "Go. Owen will not do anything...."

Owen pushed Gabriel away with disgust but did not move again towards his wife. Randall wheeled Ruth out of the room, followed by Jane and Steward.

Ted turned to Elizabeth. "Will you please stay with my wife?" Elizabeth nodded, holding Cornelia who was then sobbing. He turned to Owen. "Owen, come with me!" he started for the hallway and when Owen did not follow, he stopped but did not turn around. "Owen!"

Owen glared at the stunned faces, then left the dinning room and caught up with his father.

Ted closed his study door, poured two large whiskeys and handed one to his son. "Sit!" he ordered. "And stifle that anger. It does not stand with me! Sit and tell me what I need to know!"

"Tell you what? What do you need to know? Do I have a mistress or is she black?" Owen sat across from his father and drank his whiskey.

"Christ Almighty! Do not play silly shit with me. Under the circumstances, I would be greatly disappointed if you did not have a mistress. Ruth brought that on herself. I want to know about the child. Is he yours, not saying that your woman is unfaithful but she is not your wife."

"Noah is my son. I have no doubt in it."

"I know many married men not that sure."

Owen sighed. "Certainly he is Negro like his mother but he also very much looks like me, Father."

Ted smiled, pulled out his cigarette case and lit one. "The blue eyes?"

"Yes."

"Then your Noah must be a remarkable looking child. Nevertheless, that does not change the fact that he is illegitimate and not your heir. Tell me about his mother. Do you support her as you should?"

"Of course. You remember the London house I bought last year." The older man nodded. "Her name is Leticia Proux. She is French woman and an excellent artist. She and Noah live there...and they will stay there, unmolested by my lunatic wife."

"How did Ruth find out about them?"

"Damned if I know. She must have had a detective put on me. I could ring the bitches fucking neck." Angry again, Owen stood and began to pace the room.

"I can sympathize with that but what you will do is what I have told you to do for a long time now. You will divorce Ruth and marry a suitable woman. She has refused her bed to you; you have more than enough grounds."

"That would give her just what she wants. Her need for complete and total self pity would be satisfied and it would all fall down onto me."

"That is ludicrous and you know that. To punish her you keep yourself and your mother and I in misery. Is that what you plan on doing for ever?" When Owen did not answer his father continued. "What are your feelings for the Proux woman? You do understand that you cannot marry her, I hope!"

"I do not love her. I do not want to marry her nor she me. She is a very modern woman. She does not want to marry."

"Modern maybe, but not all that thoughtful for whatever children may come along. Owen, you more than anyone else know the responsibility of your vast inheritance. I am not a young man any more. I need to see your heir."

"Father, I may never trust enough again to marry anyone."

“What does trust have to do with it? Love or trust! Save that for time and some other female to give you. You already have a wife. The doctors say she could easily produce a child, a healthy one this time.” Ted tossed his cigarette into his whiskey glass, stood and walked up to this son. “You have rights as her husband, take what is rightfully yours and make that bloody woman give you a legal heir.”

“Ruth will not let me anywhere her...”

“As I said you have your rights and she owes you!”

“You are talking about rape?”

“Call it what you want. Do not look at me as if I am some kind of monster. If Ruth will not be seduced, then just do what you have a God given right to do, at least until she is pregnant. If not that then divorce the bitch and find a proper wife. Do something Owen, divorce or rape just do something and do it now.” Ted sighed and sat down behind his desk. “You should know this; it may help you find your balls. Your mother’s heart is much worse.”

“What?” Owen asked with quiet surprise.

“We found out a few months ago and she made me promise not to tell her children. Any sudden shock could bring on another attack and that could easily be fatal.”

“Christ.” Owen slid into a chair. All the color drained from his face.

“So, you see, there must be no more scenes like tonight. From now on Ruth will take her meals in her room. And you will do something about this mess!”

Gabriel and Lee watched as Janet and Elizabeth helped Cornelia onto her bed, removed her shoes and covered her with a blanket.

“Have you taken your medicine this evening?” Gabriel asked with gentle concern as he pulled the drapes.

“Yes, I have, Gabriel.” Cornelia answered weakly. “I am so sorry, Elizabeth...!”

“No, it is alright, do not worry about me. Just please rest.”

“Stay with her, Janet until she is well enough to prepare properly for bed. Mr. De Wolfe will be up shortly, I am sure.”

“Yes, sir!”

“My goodness, the poor woman is shaken to the core! How sick is Cornelia?” Elizabeth asked Gabriel when they and Lee settled in her sitting room.

Gabriel studied his hands, turning his ring a few times. “Cornelia is fine. Granted she is upset now and with good cause but there is nothing too seriously wrong with her. Her heart is not strong and she must take medication but not as bad as she pretends.”

“Well, that is not fair to do to her family!” Lee put in.

“It is just another way she gets attention. I believe it is a mental disease called hypochondria. Over the years she seems to have had every illness known to human kind.”

“She is pretending?”

Gabriel nodded. “For the most part, yes! However, she does truly think she is ill. I think Ted knows the truth but he goes along with it to more or less keep the peace. More than once I have seen Cornelia use the ‘illnesses’ to control her children.”

“Well, I don’t think it is right to cause them worry to get them to do what she wants. And it certainly does not seem to work with Ruth.”

“Ruth is impulsive and does not care a fig about anyone else! God only knows how Ruth found out about Leticia and Noah. And damned if the bitch does not know just how to enrage and humiliate Owen!”

“There is no excuse for what Ruth did at the table but I think I can understand her jealousy. After all, Owen is still her husband and do not look at me like that. I know she is not being a proper wife and will not sleep with him.”

“This has gone on for years, Elizabeth! This is not just a temper tantrum that lasts a few days or weeks but six very long years. He was patient for over two years before he took a mistress. That is far longer than I would wait.”

“I have to agree with Gabriel.” Lee put in. “That is not a marriage; it is one long, never ending torture. Owen should have stopped this long ago, as any man would do.” He stood and walked to the door. “I am tired and off to my bed. You’ll bring me that reading material, Gabriel?”

“I put it in your night table.”

“Right. Good night, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth sighed. “I guess I am not as much as a modern woman as I like to think I am. No matter what Peter could or would do I would never have been unfaithful to him.”

“You are still young and naïve, that makes it easy to be so noble. Life will teach you reality, it always does.” Gabriel leaned forward, took one of her hands, and kissed it very gently. “Just the same, even though it was only for a brief time Peter Pace was a very lucky man.”

He was going to say more but stopped as they heard footsteps coming down the hall. There was a light knock on the door and a voice, “Elizabeth, are you up. It’s Randall!”

Gabriel put his finger to his lips, stood and went quietly into his bedroom. She opened the door. Randall looked disheveled and unhappy. He had a half-finished large whiskey in his hand. He had a vague look to his eyes and she wondered just how many glasses had gone before this one. “I am still up.” She smiled at him. “Though I am tired, I just don’t feel like I will sleep too much. Please come in and talk to me for awhile.”

He followed her and took the chair Gabriel just left. “I want to apologize for that very distressing scene. I wish I could say it was an anomaly but these disasters happen almost daily. It has to end. Father is talking with Owen right now. I hope that my brother will finally shit or get off the pot! Sorry!” he lifted his glass. “Too much of this.” He put it on the table and pushed it away.

“It was upsetting. Owen and Ruth seem to hate each other”

“It is hard to believe but they were once so very much in love that it was almost embarrassing to be in the same room with them. You never knew just what you were going to see when walking in on them. I have to say that it was an eye-opener for a young virgin male...that is a fact.”

“What will they do? Should they not divorce?”

“They made a promise to God...for better or worse.”

“But this is not a Catholic family. They can divorce. If Owen has another woman and a child...what else could Ruth do?”

“She could forgive him and have sex with her husband. God, I should not have come here. You should not have to deal with any of this. I have had too much to drink.

I don't drink much but when I do it goes right to my mouth." He stood and turned towards the door. She moved quickly and took his arm.

"Please do not leave. Sit and talk with me for a while longer." She led him to a small settee and sat beside him. "I understand that you are a medical doctor. That is a remarkable accomplishment. You must be so proud."

"I did receive my diploma and degree a few months ago. However I am not practicing yet."

"Aunt Connie wrote such glowing things about what she saw for your future. Will you soon be going into residency?"

"I should be going just after Christmas but I may ask for a later date. However, that is a long, sad story. I am sure you do not want to hear more of this family's misery."

"Well, of course, I do not mean to pry."

"We should try and talk of happier things, Elizabeth. I see you wear an engagement ring. Is your great day not too far off?"

She stopped, froze for second realizing that she had forgotten to take the ring off.

"That is not a happy subject either, Randall. My fiancé, Captain Peter Pace, died in South Africa over a year ago. I just have not found the courage to take the ring off."

"I am sorry for mentioning it."

"You could not know. However, tell me about yourself. Such a young handsome doctor, you must have a special person...or is that prying too?" She smiled at him.

"No special person any longer, she died. We are book ends, are we not?"

Randall retrieved his glass, finished it and sat again. "How did your Peter die?"

"He was killed in the battle of Roué Lone."

"That is sad but at least it was an honorable death! I suppose if one must go to pass with honor is at least something. My lady died in shame and disgrace and every bit of it was my fault."

"How? My Lord, I will never learn. I am always asking too many questions. Please forgive me."

"No, I will tell you. Why not?" He was clearly feeling the effects of the unfamiliar alcohol. "Her name was Amy Walcott. I met her during my first year at Cambridge. She working in the library and I was completely taken by her from the first second I saw her. Do you believe in love at first sight?"

She smiled, remembering her conversation with Sue Lyn. "Yes, I do. I am a terrible romantic."

"There is nothing terrible about it. I loved Amy from that sweet moment and it was a very long time before she would even give me the time of day." He laughed, turned in the seat and placed his arm along the back of the settee. "You know, it was a full year before I could convince Amy I was not a complete and total moron so she would join me for a meal?"

"A stubborn lady."

"Very!" He laughed and rolled his brilliant eyes. "Eventually but not with out damaging my ego Amy returned my love. For a couple of years we were very happy. We planned to be married this last summer as soon as I obtained my degree. Last Christmas Eve I made my proposal so we could make our engagement official."

“Looking back now, I can see that Amy was not herself that night. She was more reserved than she should have been but as usual, I was too full of myself to pay much attention. She accepted me, would marry me and that was all that mattered.”

“One week later I learned what had bothered her on Christmas. She was suspicious before but certain then that she was in the family way. Maybe Amy had been right all along. I was a moron. Had I noticed how incredibly unhappy she was that night...well, things would have turned out much better. I was furious at her and myself. I raged on and on about how foolish we had been. I did not want a child then. I wanted my career on the go before any children. Before she left me that night and without even realizing it I broke her heart and spirit.”

“Several days passed. I was busy with exams, she knew that and as before she would not bother me at those time so I did not think much about her absence. Middle of the night a police man came to my room and told me I had better get to St. Mary’s Hospital.”

“Amy had had an abortion; it was more like a butchering. The doctors told me they could not stop the bleeding. Amy was dying and there was nothing that could be done to save her.”

“Randall. I am so sorry!” Elizabeth could hardly bear the pain that seemed to flow from him.

“I stayed with her, of course, too shocked to really understand it all. She was conscious to the end. She begged me to forgive her. She begged God to forgive her. Amy was a Catholic. The last thing she said to me was to hold her so God would not take her to Hell. She died in a massive pool of her blood. That spilled blood was my fault as much as if I had been the one to cut her.”

Elizabeth looked at him blankly for a brief moment. The story so sad, such pain that was unnecessary she could not stop her tears. They ran down her cheeks before she even knew it.

“Oh Jesus, Elizabeth, I did not mean to make you cry.” He touched her face and wiped the tears away.

“None of that was your fault, Randall. You must not ever think that.”

Still holding her face, he pulled her to him and kissed her. At first, it was not a passionate kiss, just a gentle touching. Her need to comfort him and his need for ease from the pain that had racked him for so long quickly brought them to a surprising and powerful kiss. It was not until she felt his hand move down her shoulder and perhaps towards her breasts and the hidden gun that she pulled away and stood from the settee.

“Shit, I am sorry!” Randall stood, took a step towards her and then backed away. “I don’t know why...! I shouldn’t drink!” His face was bright red with embarrassment.

“No, it is alright. I let you. I am just tired. Maybe you should go!”

He closed his eyes, nodded, turned and went to the door. He took one look at her and left. Almost immediately, Gabriel opened his door, crossed the sitting and turned the key lock.

“What did you do that for?” She demanded. “Randall is embarrassed. He will not be back.”

“Did you kiss him?” his smile tinged with anger.

“What?”

“You did, didn’t you? Something happened in that silence.”

“Why didn’t you look through the key hole, if you are so inclined? Isn’t it enough for you to listen?” She was amazed at his anger.

“Don’t be an idiot. I have to know what is going on.”

“You want me to find out about these men, if any of them is a maniac, right? Cornelia wants me to wake them up...! What do you want me to do, read their minds and throw a bucket of cold water on them?”

Gabriel laughed then, as before his mood changed quickly. “Bloody hell, you are dammed good aren’t you?”

“Pardon me?” It was her turn to be angry.

“For someone who is a hairs breath away from still being a virgin, you are a very talented woman.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“You are going to tease me and sleep with Randall, aren’t you?”

“No, I am not. I am here to earn my pay and I am not going to sleep with anyone, not Randall and not you. Anyway, I thought you told me you liked the tease.”

“Oh, I do like the tease and I saw just how much you liked it too. You were not acting today in the coach.”

“You are an attached man. Mrs. Lucci made that very clear to me. I will not come between you and her.”

“Elizabeth, do you think Isabelle would have been at all pleased at your response to my little ‘game’? Would she think you were not between her and me if she saw the powerful heat you built in me?”

Elizabeth raised her head and looked down her nose. She could think of nothing to say.

“No she would not. Believe me; you are already very firmly between Isabelle and me.” He stopped, shook his head and sat down. “God! What is wrong with me? I am making a complete fool of myself!”

“Maybe you are too quick to anger but I do not think you are making a fool of yourself.”

“Yes I am. I told you to flirt with Randall and now I act an idiot about it. I have no right to speak to you that way. It will not happen again. I have an irrational, over-powering need to bring you close to me.”

She turned and walked to her bedroom door. Without turning to look back at him she said, “If that is true, then it is a shame about Isabelle.” She did not wait for an answer and quietly closed the door behind her.

Another strange bed, in another strange room Elizabeth found that sleep was a difficult comfort to find. Randall’s sad story repeated in her mind and the dreadful raw pain had flowed from him and stayed with her. She could easily see why he blamed himself. It would be difficult not to. Had he not been under the influence it was highly unlikely he would have told her his story and she wondered how that would sit with him when they met again.

Amy had been a Catholic, was that and her heart breaking death the reason why Randall had decided to convert and become a priest. He had not mentioned that part to her so perhaps it was not as firmly in his heart as Cornelia believed it was.

She thought of the absolute hate and rage that passed between Ruth and Owen. On Ruth’s part, it seemed as though she was deliberately provoking her husband and on

Owen's part, he was all too ready to jump for it. Why in heavens name did they still occupy the same household? It was very clear that Owen hated her, was that hatred enough to drive him to commit terrible acts such as rape and murder. It was possible however, the first two murders happened before they fell apart.

Her mind traveled from place to place, from the decrepit Three Bells, to the elegant and colorful Random House and now to the mysterious long halls of the De Wolfe Estate. Faces, some familiar, most new rolled along one after the other. Cornelia and her beautiful eyes, Gabriella and her pretty pout, Isabelle and her angry arrogance, Lee and his serenity, Randall's deep sadness and Gabriel's stunned look after she met the challenge of his carriage ride game. She thought of these people, their homes, problems, and her new life. Not once did she allow her father's awful written words enter her mind.

Before finally falling into a troubled and dream filled sleep, she thought of Gabriel. If he was as jealous of her attention to Randall as he seemed to be then it was a problem. She realized as she lay in the warm and comfortable bed that she had been surprised and slightly pleased to see his reaction. Very briefly, it crossed her mind that as much as she did not want to admit it to herself Gabriel had been right. She was very attracted to him.

She rose early, dressed quickly and knocked on Gabriel's door. He was still in his bed, sitting and smoking a cigarette when she entered.

"I thought you would be up by this time." She sat in a chair near the door. "We should talk before we begin the day."

He nodded. His voice was quiet and tired. "It might be wise for you to spend some time with Owen today. He will be still very upset from last night so his guard might be down but be careful."

"I will. Gabriel we should talk about...well, your jealousy."

"What?"

"You were jealous last night about that kiss."

He laughed and that was not what she expected. She felt her cheeks redden. "Not jealous, Lizzie! Surprised is more the word."

"Do not call me Lizzie! Randall kissed me. He was very nearly drunk. It is important to me that you understand that I will do all I can to get information from him and his brothers and father too for that matter but I will never, for any reason sleep with any of them."

"I know that. I apologize for my anger last night and my quick tongue." He snubbed his cigarette. "Sometimes I am too flippant and rude. Please do not mistake that for a lack of respect. I have great respect for you and do understand what you have been through."

"Do you?" she asked doubtfully.

"Yes, I do. Captain Pace died shortly before your mother's murder and your father's trial and death. During this last year, you have lost a very great deal, your family, so-called friends and your home. I doubt you have even had the time to mourn for any of them. Mourning must be met face on. You must know it for what it is and deal with it."

"Then, what is it and how do you deal with it? I thought that it was just time that healed."

"Time! No. Time with no healing makes a person bitter. From my point of view, mourning Helena meant accepting that I would never see her again. I was unbearably lost and lonely. I dealt with it by taking new lovers and then," he shrugged, "settling on Isabelle."

"But that is just sex."

"Do not underestimate the healing powers!" He smiled again shook his head. "I know it is very different for women. Women with self-esteem rarely use sex just for the physical comfort of it. And for a while I did love Isabelle."

"Only for a while." She knew it would not be wise to let him know she was aware of Isabelle unfaithfulness.

"Yes, only for a while and it was long enough. Now, Lizzie I am about to slide out from this bed and get dressed. I am naked..."

She smiled. "I will go and have breakfast."

"Pity! No teasing for me this morning?"

"Do you want me to leave or not?" She smiled and remembered Cornelia's advice to hold herself out like a carrot. It had sounded silly at the time, but not so much then.

He threw the covers back and got from the bed. "That is up to you. I am not ashamed of my body."

She resisted the strong urge to turn away, summoned up courage and ran her eyes once down the length of his body. "I can see that."

He returned her smile, amazement in his eyes. "You have more courage than I thought."

"It does not take courage to look, Gabriel. Looking is the easy part."

He took a step towards her. "Shouldn't I get to see you naked too?"

She held up her hand and laughed. "Now that is just silly! You obviously wanted me to see you naked, I have!"

"Well, that is not fair!"

"You are awfully childish for such a physically grown up man! I am going for breakfast." She was still laughing when she stopped in her bedroom for a last look in the mirror. She ignored her fast beating heart and the fact that she very much enjoyed looking at him.

It was not until she was on the first floor foyer when she remembered she had no idea where the breakfast room was. She wandered for a bit, looking for a maid to direct her and finally found herself in a large, ornate parlor. The room was almost over crowded with furniture. Here and there were vases of brightly colored silk flowers, the real thing no longer available. Figurines, framed photographs and shawls lay across every table and chair. She stopped and picked up what was obviously a wedding photograph of Owen and Ruth.

She was sitting, her beautiful bead and lace wedding gown spread out carefully around her feet. Her hair, styled in the simple twist of that year, and decorated with a delicate spray of flowers. Owen stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders. They looked so young, alive and happy.

"Ruth was indeed lovely." She mumbled.

"Yes, she was." She had not heard Owen come in the room and walk up behind her. She was startled and turned quickly to face him. "Sorry. I did not mean to startle you, Elizabeth."

She smiled. "I was looking for the breakfast room and found myself in here." She put the photograph back into place. "Have you been married long?"

"Obviously, far too long." He looked at his wedding photo with cold flat eyes. Anger tightened his jaw. "I apologize for that awful scene last night. I am sure it is painfully clear to you that my marriage is a pathetic sham."

"Aunt Cornelia wrote to my mother often. I know some of the differences."

"Differences! That is an understatement. But I am sure you did not come here to get embroiled in our miseries...."

"No and I do not mean to pry but sometimes an outsider can lend a helpful ear." She turned and walked to windows over looking the garden. He was standing too close, not taking his intense sapphire eyes off her face.

"There is not much to tell." He moved beside her. "Ruth lost the use of her legs after giving birth to a still born child. She blames me and I let her. My father wants me to divorce...."

"And you want to reconcile?"

"Good heavens, no!" He laughed. It was a flat and humorless laugh. "The marriage is over. We stay in the same house and make each other miserable. Neither of us seems to want to change that. Perhaps we are insane."

"Or maybe you cannot face the time to say goodbye for ever. If your love was a powerful force, your memories must be wonderful. The final goodbye...well," she shrugged and remembered the last time she saw Peter. He was smiling down at her from the train as it pulled away. That was their goodbye and the memory of that was crushing. "Closing the book on those memories would take courage."

Owen touched her arm and turned her slightly to face him. "Courage? I never thought about it that way. That is all I lack then. The courage to say to Ruth once and for all time that it is over."

Elizabeth shook her head. "I do not know what you should say to Ruth. But you should close that book, don't you think?"

"How old are you?" he asked suddenly smiling again.

"Twenty one in a few weeks." She returned the smile. "Do you not know that it is rude to ask a lady her age?"

"Of course. However, I think you are young enough not to be too offended. For some one so young you are very wise."

"Not wise, not really. I am just a thinker. That is what my father told me anyway. He said I would make an interesting wife. 'A man,' he would often say, 'must have a thinking and thoughtful female. Empty headed prettiness runs a man quickly to boredom and another bedroom.'"

Owen raised his eyebrows and was about to say something when a coach pulled to a stop just below the parlor windows at the front entrance way. "That is for me, I am afraid. I have to spend a few hours off the Estate but when I return later this afternoon I wonder if I could show you around the grounds...if no one else has done so by then."

"Well, yes that would be nice."

"Until then!" Owen nodded and left the room.

"I still do not know where the breakfast room is!" Elizabeth muttered, stepping out into the hallway and running into Ruth. It was clear that she had been listening at the doorway.

"I am on my way there, Elizabeth." Ruth smiled up at her and wheeled forward. "Follow me, if you try to find it on your own in this wandering mess of a building you may get for ever lost."

"Good Morning, Ruth. Yes, I am famished. It must be the country air."

"That or something else!" Ruth's smile turned cold. "It is only fair that I warn you about my husband. If he offers a walk in the garden it is not only the greenery he is interested in."

"Really? Thank you. I will bear that in mind."

"Yes, of course you will. There is so much one has to bear in mind, isn't there?"

Ruth looked Elizabeth up and down, the cold smile slipped away. Ruth wheeled the chair in a circle, headed down the hallway and Elizabeth walked behind her. She could not help but think what a thoroughly unlikable woman Ruth de Wolfe was.

The breakfast room turned out to be directly across from the dining room. Elizabeth was pleased to see they would not be alone. Randall sat at the table staring bleakly down at an untouched plate of eggs and sausages. Jane, sitting next to him, looked sulky and mad. Steward with a cup of tea sat in the window seat looking out towards the terraced gardens. Randall stood when they entered. Steward did not.

"Good morning, Randall." She nodded at him.

He looked quickly at her and sat down again. "Morning, Elizabeth." He said quietly. He had dark circles under his eyes and a gray cast to his skin. He looked much like someone with a hangover.

Elizabeth crossed to the buffet table, taking a large fruit bun and poured a glass of milk. She sat across from Randall. "How are you feeling?" She whispered to him. Steward and Ruth were at the buffet and he was preparing a plate for her.

"Like something the cat dragged in!"

"A bit hung over?"

He rolled his eyes and nodded his head.

Jane giggled. "Randall can't drink at all. I can hold it better than him."

"So what are your plans for your first day on the grand De Wolfe estate?"

Steward asked as he and Ruth took places at the table.

"I have no plans." Elizabeth answered, spreading fresh butter thickly on her bun.

"Yes, you do! Don't be shy." Ruth grinned at the men. "She's agreed to go for a walk with Owen. He wants to show her the gardens. I did warn the girl that that will not be all he tries to show her. I do wonder which view she will like the best."

Randall was about to speak but Elizabeth cut him off. She was embarrassed and furious. "I have also been warned about you." She glared at Ruth. "At first I wondered if those warnings were not exaggerations. How someone could be such a bitch was beyond me...but now I see how, very clearly."

Jane snickered.

Ruth narrowed her eyes. "Do not underestimate a bitch just because she is in a wheel chair. However, go ahead, fuck my husband if you want. Compare him to all your others and I am sure you will be disappointed. I was!"

“Ruth!” Ted bellowed from the doorway. Everyone at the table jumped. “How dare you! I am so very sorry.” He added to Elizabeth. His face was bright red with rage. “I have had enough of you.” He slammed his hand on the table. “Pack your things. You are leaving my house.”

“What?” Ruth looked up at him defiantly. “You can not make me leave. This is my home.”

“No. This is the home of my son....”

“And I am his wife.”

“Not for much longer and thank the Lord for that. He is right now on his way to my lawyer to begin long overdue divorce proceedings.”

“I will never divorce him.” Her defiance faded quickly. She had gone very pale; her eyes darted like a frightened animal.

“It is not up to you. You gave him grounds. We will all testify that you refuse to be a wife to him.”

“Daddy, you can’t make her go! Please!” Jane pleaded.

“Be quiet Jane. Go to your room.”

“You need not worry, Jane. I won’t go!”

“You will. As I said, pack your things. You will leave here for my London apartment this weekend. After the divorce, it will be up to Owen where he puts you. On the street, if he has any sense left! And,” Ted stopped briefly struggling for control. “For the rest of this week you will stay in your rooms, even for your meals.”

Randall touched Elizabeth arm and motioned for her to follow him out of the room. She gave Ted a small smile and left the room. They did not speak until they were in the library.

“Well, I guess I have to apologize, yet again.”

“No. Please not again. It is not necessary and not your fault.” She could not help but feel bad for him. He looked utterly miserable.

“Thank God she is leaving. She won’t go without a fight though!”

“It doesn’t seem like it.”

“I want Owen to have her committed. I have the papers ready and can sign them any time Owen agrees.”

“Really? Is she that bad? I mean, she is not violent, is she?”

“The loss of her child has driven her insane.” Randall answered after a moment of silence. He stood. “I need to walk this handover off. I would be pleased if you would join me.”

“Yes, of course.” She took his arm.

“We shall have to get some warmer clothes. From the looks of the heavy sky I’d say it might snow.” He smiled at her, “I promise I will be a gentleman...unlike last night.”

“To be honest, Randall, the kiss was very nice. It was very unexpected, but sweet.”

He laughed. “Nice! Sweet! Good Lord. That was not the effect I was hoping for but at least you are not mad.”

Gabriel found Cornelia with her breakfast in her bedroom. "How are you feeling this morning, Cornelia? You are looking better." Gabriel sat across from her, helping himself to a piece of toast.

"Much like myself." She smiled at him. "I do not know why I fell apart like that. I used to be able to handle these difficulties so much better. I must be getting old."

"Not in the slightest. You are as young and lovely as ever."

"Such a kind liar you are! How is Elizabeth doing?" Cornelia asked.

"Very well!"

"Very well? What does that mean?"

"She has only been here a few hours and has already had an effect on Randall."

"Good!" Cornelia clapped her hands. "What do you mean by 'effect'? Have they slept together already?"

"Jesus! No! Elizabeth does not intend to sleep with any of them. I thought you understood that?"

Cornelia studied the very familiar, handsome face. "Young, healthy people who are attracted to each other... after all, Gabriel, this is a new century. How would you feel if she did start an affair? I know you have certain strong feelings for her, you told me that yourself, remember?"

"As I said, she will not. She thinks she still loves a dead man. That is a hard bond to break, especially when she has not even had the time to grieve for him."

"I know you too well, Gabriel. You would love to be the one to break that bond and I am sure you have already tried."

He smiled at her. "You are sure are you? What do you think I am? I have a woman, remember?"

"Do not try to tell me that you are faithful to the Lucci female!"

Still smiling, Gabriel shook his head. "I have always marveled at your subtleness, Connie! Do not worry about my sex life and I will not concern myself with yours. Or maybe I should. Tell me does old Ted still get it up?"

She laughed. "Is it ever down? My old goat is worse than ever. It is your love life I think about, not your sex life. On the way back from the train station yesterday I had rather a long and earnest chat with Elizabeth."

"Oh dear! I am afraid to ask."

"She more or less admitted to me that she is interested in you. You have a good chance to win her heart if you do not continue to botch it up."

"All I have done really is given her employment and a place to live and maybe a little strong flirting but no more than that."

"You also let Lucci plant herself firmly in Elizabeth's mind. Now she can hide from her feelings behind that wide backside. She feels she must not think of you as a man because you belong to another. Nonetheless, she does know she has these feelings. You, no doubt made it clear to Elizabeth that in your mind your relationship with Lucci is not a serious one. So Elizabeth feels safe to sit by and do nothing. That is so much easier than daring to start an affair with a man like you, believe me!"

"Why? What is so difficult about me?"

"Oh Lord, are you really so empty headed on the needs of women?"

"Apparently! Fill me in."

"It is easier to do nothing because she intuitively knows she could very well fall in love with you. Isabelle is not a threat as far as your heart goes. Do you understand?"

"In a way. So what should I do about it?"

"Elizabeth needs to see you with a woman she would feel is a threat. A woman you might be in love with. You should go and get Suzanne Beryline."

"That would not be a good idea."

"Yes, it is. Go and get her, bring her here and let Elizabeth see you with someone who is her equal in looks and manners; not the charging cow that Italian thing is. Do not sit there and try to look innocent. I know very well that Suzanne is another of your mistresses."

He looked at her from under his brows and spoke slowly. "How do you know that?"

"Suzanne told me."

"Do you females talk about anything other than sex?"

"Yes, of course. I am just trying to help you. Bring her here for a few days. Do not flaunt your affair that would be mean. Elizabeth will figure it out on her own. Trust me, Gabriel if she sees you with Suzanne she will be upset at first but eventually it will 'stir her' into action."

"No, Cornelia. I do not use people and play tricks to get what I want. If Elizabeth comes to me it will only be because she wants to."

"Then you will wait a long time."

The door opened and Ted joined them.

"I had a serious talk with Owen last night." He sat at the small table and patted his wife's hand. "He has finally seen the light and just now left for London to begin divorce proceedings."

"Thank God for that." Cornelia said with relief.

"I told Ruth."

"How did she take it?" Gabriel asked.

"She was livid, then scared. Frankly, I do not care. She will be moving into the London flat. She will not be able to upset my household any more. Tell me Gabriel, have you met Owen's French female?"

"Yes, of course. She is a gentlewoman, kind hearted, intelligent and a gifted artist."

"There can be no question of marriage." Ted said firmly. "I hope she realizes that."

"Why is that Ted? You have never met her. Should her skin color really mean that much?"

"Whether it should matter or not is irrelevant. The fact is that it does matter. I will not allow a colored daughter-in-law!"

Gabriel caught a look from Cornelia. He held back his temper for her sake.

"Well, you need not worry too much. Leticia does not intend to marry. She values her freedom...."

"But she lies with a man and makes a child. That does not speak well of her being a gentlewoman, Gabriel."

"She honors Owen and they care for each other. That should be enough. Ted, it may be time to shed narrow-minded ideas. Are we not all God's children?"

"We are but that does not make us equal." When Gabriel sat silent Ted changed the subject. "I am rather pleased that Elizabeth Leighton is here. It has only been a few hours but Randall is showing great interest in her and her with him."

Cornelia smiled and did not look at Gabriel. "I did notice that they chatted a fair bit at the dinner table last night."

"Oh, it is more than that. When I came in here last night, I saw Randall leaving her sitting room. It would have been better if he had stayed but nonetheless he was in there. Maybe next time he will stay longer." Ted beamed. "And that is not all, I just saw them walking arm and arm in the garden. I have to admit I am seeing that son in a much brighter light."

Gabriel stood suddenly.

"Is something wrong, Gabriel?" Cornelia asked innocently.

Gabriel ignored her and looked at Ted. "I sent my coach back to London. I will need to borrow a horse."

"Yes, of course, but..." Gabriel left the room before Ted could finish. "Well I will be jiggered, Connie, where is he going so early and in such a hurry."

"I am not sure but I wouldn't be surprised if he is on his way to Suzanne Beryline." She smiled at her husband. "And you shouldn't be surprised if we have another house guest very soon."

Gabriel rode for thirty minutes, southeast, passed the town of Bolton and then back out into the country side once again. As he traveled he cursed himself for ignoring Suzanne for the last month. She wrote to him twice saying she missed him and complaining of loneliness. He had been too busy with Isabelle to make the long trip from London to Honeysuckle Cottage and he knew that was going to cost in many ways.

"Is Miss Beryline home?" He asked as he handed Ted's stallion to Suzanne's handyman.

"Yes, Mr. Jackman."

As an afterthought, he stopped half down the walkway. "Is she alone?"

The young man smiled and nodded.

"Shit." Gabriel muttered and banged the doorknocker. He half hoped she was out or busy. A moment passed and he knocked again. He heard a window above him open and jumped aside just in time as a bucket of water spilled towards him.

"Suzanne! Open the door. I have to talk to you." He called up to the angry and very pretty face that glared down on him.

"Go away!" She yelled and disappeared, slamming the window shut.

He banged the knocker again. "I am not going away so you might as well let me in." He called through the seam in the door.

"I do not let strangers in my house!" She slammed her hand against the door. Gabriel knew the next time she did that it would most likely be on his face.

"Look! I can explain...or would you rather I just yell at you through the door. I am sure your neighbors would love to hear what I have to say." As he spoke, his voice got louder and louder. The door still did not open. "I am sorry I ignored your letters and no I have not grown tired of..." He did not finish when the door open and he was pulled roughly inside.

"You are such an idiot!" She glared up at him, her hands on her hips. "When I say go, you go!"

"I pay the rent on this house, Suzanne. I can come and go as I want." He leaned down and kissed her cheek. "And I am happy to see you too!"

"Fine then, stay but I am not talking to you."

He shrugged, walked past her into the parlor, poured a brandy and sat down.

"Go back to your fat wop!"

"I thought you said you were not going to talk."

The housekeeper peered around the corner of the room. "Good morning, Mr. Jackman!" She beamed at him. "Would you like me to fetch some refreshments, Miss Beryline?"

"No!" Suzanne said sat heavily in a chair as far away from Gabriel as possible. She crossed her legs and swung her foot with impatience.

"Sandwiches and strong tea would be very nice, Mrs. Willard. I have not eaten much breakfast!"

"Yes sir!"

Gabriel watched Suzanne silently for a while. Her long, thick blond hair hung down her back in loose curls. She wore a pale blue skirt and plain white blouse and from previous experiences, Gabriel guessed she wore very little underneath. She was pouting, sulking, and looked very much like spoiled child.

"Go ahead then, tell me your lies!" She turned her eyes in his direction.

"There is no reason to lie. I have been busy and when I am not busy I am with Isabelle."

Suzanne made a face he had seen before; a torrent of abuse usually followed it.

"Be careful, Suzanne." He warned his voice heavy with warning. "Do not push me too far." He finished the last of his brandy. "I cannot be running up here all the time. I told you to get a flat in London. You insisted on living in the country."

"You and your precious city!" She stood and walked to a long mirror. "I am sick and fed up with being lonely."

He smiled and walked up behind her. "It is sick and tired, not sick and fed up." He pushed her hair from her back and ran his hand down her neck, took the gold chain she wore in his fingers and dangled the large ruby pendant as he looked at her in the mirror. "Maybe you are not so much alone, my love. This is new. I know I did not buy it for you. Did Dr. Lance Black buy it for you?"

Gabriel saw the sudden flash of her eyes and felt the intake of breath. "I hardly know the man. Why would he buy me anything?"

Gabriel slid one arm around her waist and pulled her body against his. "You know him well enough to spend weekends in his London house and he knows you well enough to spend many happy hours here with you!" He raised his hand and cupped a breast. She pushed it away. He kissed her neck, inhaled deeply and whispered. "What is the matter, Suzanne? Has Black spoiled you for me? Should he take over your expensive up keep?"

She sighed and let her body fall back against his. "It is not the money, Gabriel."

"What then? Why push me away? Is he a better lover?"

She turned and threw her arms around his neck. "God Lord no! Lance is like weak British tea, you are like powerful Russia vodka!" He laughed. "Will you stay for the afternoon? I will make you glad you did!" She pulled his hands onto her breasts.

"Oh, I'll stay and you will make me very happy. I am sure of that." He kissed her and they parted suddenly as Mrs. Willard brought in a tray loaded with a large teapot and fish sandwiches. She placed it on the table, giggled and left the room.

Gabriel picked up the tray. "Upstairs?" he asked, she nodded and followed him.

Suzanne stretched across the foot of her bed, watching Gabriel as he ate. "I will move back to London as soon as possible. Then, you will see, I will take you from Isabelle once and for all."

"Well," Gabriel shoved the last half of a sandwich in his mouth. "You can try!"

"I will need some money for rent and new furniture."

He raised his eyebrows. "Then sell that ruby. That would be more than enough."

"No! I like it. You give me the money."

"Ask Black for it. I have no doubt he would like to have you nearby. Does Mrs. Black know about you? No, I guess not."

"But if I ask him for an apartment he will want too much from me. He has already told me not to see you any more. Men! Do this, do that!"

"Did he?" Gabriel laughed. "What did you say to that?"

"I told him jump it."

"Maybe you mean 'stuff it'."

"Jump, stuff, it is up to him. He is sweet and gives me wonderful gifts but I like you better."

"I should hope so!" He wiped his mouth and tossed the napkin on the tray. "Do tell me why?"

"Well...you are much prettier; Gabriel and you make love like an angel." She smiled and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Enjoy fucking with celestial beings, do you?"

"Only when I am with you...."

She watched as he removed his jacket and gun holster. He placed them aside and opened the top buttons of his shirt. He sat back into the wide, high back chair and motioned for her to pull off his boots. She crouched on the floor and pulled one off easily. With the second boot, he tightened his foot until she had a firm pull on it and relaxed suddenly. She fell on her backside.

"You did that on purpose!" She complained.

"Sorry, love!" He laughed and pulled her onto his lap. "I could not resist it. But that was your punishment for letting me find out about Black."

"I thought you believed in honesty."

"I do. I found out. You did not tell me. I do not like it when people try to deceive me." He sighed. He was far from in the mood to deal with Suzanne but he knew he would have to pacify her if he wanted to bring her smiling back to the De Wolfe Estate.

"Why not open your pretty blouse." He whispered and ran his hand up her skirt. As he thought, she was not wearing underwear. She smiled and sighed as he slid his hand between her thighs. Gabriel watched as she opened the blouse. Her small, feminine

hands shook slightly. She dropped the garment to the floor. He held her waist with a free hand and pushed his body up against hers.

"You will have to make up to me for your lack of judgment, Suzanne." He licked her breast and sucked her nipple into his mouth.

"What would you like?" She ran her hands through his hair then pulled his face from her breast and kissed him passionately. "Tell me, my love." She repeated.

"Something tells me you are thirsty...drink a little vodka, you have not done that for a long time." He watched as she opened his trouser buttons.

"Too long." She freed his penis and ran her tongue up the length.

Gabriel lay back in the chair and closed his eyes. He loved this form of comfort and Suzanne was an expert. Usually she could bring him to release easily but not that afternoon. No matter how he tried, his mind wondered back to the coach ride with Elizabeth the day before. It was her he wanted, her tongue, her passion and the need for her body that seared him. When he was finally done, Suzanne sat on the bedside. She was puzzled and alarmed by the delay in his satisfaction.

"Very well done, sweet Suzie! Do you want me to make love to you?" He asked her unaware of her worry.

"Can you?"

His answer just a look from under his eyebrows.

She nodded and pulled a large shallow washbasin out from under her bed. She slid it next to Gabriel, moved his lunch tray and replaced it with the full wash jug, jasmine scented soap, washcloths and towels. Taking much longer than necessary, she opened the skirt buttons, then slowly lowered the skirt and stepped away from it.

Gabriel watched intently she poured half of the cold water down her body. Starting with her neck, she rubbed the soap into a thick lather and spread it over her body. She rubbed her breasts as though to clean them but much longer than needed. From experience, she knew how much he loved to see her touch herself.

As she did this, she carefully watched his face. She followed his eyes and lowered her soapy hands to follow the line of his vision. She was shivering with the cold but knew that this would also excite him.

After a moment, he slid one hand under hers and the other on to her breasts. She gasped and he knew that she was more than ready for him. He stood and poured the remaining water across her shoulders and down her belly. She handed him a towel and whispered. "Dry me!"

He tossed the towel aside. Sat back into the chair and pulled her dripping body over him, one leg on either side of his. He held her, a little more roughly than usual by the hips and with one sharp, strong movement Gabriel was inside Suzanne. She gasped with the pain of forceful entry and let her body fall onto his. Gabriel did not notice. He was back in the delicious coach ride with Elizabeth and she was claiming her prize.

When they were finished, Gabriel carried her to the bed, lay beside her and was very quickly asleep. She lay very still, watching the gentle rise and fall of his chest. It was not the first time that he had hurt her, but the first time that he had not noticed. He had not been with her, not in his mind, she knew that and for the first time in their relationship, Suzanne was scared. After a while, she also fell asleep.

In less than an hour, Gabriel woke. Carefully and quietly, he slid from the bed and dressed. He was in a terrible mood. There was none of the usual elation after sex.

He looked at Suzanne as she slept on her face, half of her naked body visible from under the blanket then back to the wing backed chair where he had fallen for the lure of his burning need for Elizabeth. He was angry with himself for using Suzanne to succumb to his desire. This was a weakness that he tolerated far less in himself than he did in others. He knew he needed to come to grips with his feelings for Elizabeth and the sooner better than later.

Suzanne was the daughter of Percy Beryline. For nearly three decades, Beryline worked his way up through the London Police Force. On his retirement ten years earlier, he had a wealth of friends and contacts on either side of the law. He opened a very successful private inquiry office. This human wealth he used for the good or the bad of whatever case he was working on. Gabriel had had a few cases in common with him and they had reluctantly worked together. He learned quickly that he was right not to wholly trust the man. Beryline played and worked solely for his own good. He would land on the side of the case that best suited him. The honest outcome of a case was not very important to him.

He sat on the bed and woke Suzanne. "Wake up, Suzanne."

"You are dressed. Are you leaving so soon?"

"We need to talk."

"You are still mad at me because of Lance."

"No, I am not. I do not give a pig's ass who you play with, Suzanne. I care about the fact that you hoped to deceive me."

"Oh Lord! I knew you would find out. I wanted to make you jealous. That is why I was too open about it."

He sat silent, staring at her. When he spoke, again his voice was heavy with threat. "What a shame. I thought you were wiser than that. Never play games with me." He took her hand, holding it so tightly she winced and tried to pull away. "All you have succeeded in doing is making me wonder if it was a mistake trusting you." He dropped her hand.

She looked down her nose defiantly. "You can trust me. I have shown you that too many times. Haven't I even gone against my own papa for you?"

"Only when it suits you. Like father like daughter."

"I am on the side of the man who pays my bills. That is you Gabriel. Sometimes I think Papa would let me starve."

"True. Percy is on a case right now. Tell me everything you know about it. And do not hold back, remember, as you said I pay your bills."

She shrugged, pushed away the blankets and stretched. "Can't we talk another time?"

"Suzanne!" he snapped at her.

"Fine! Papa is in France. He is looking for something. It is some sort of book and he has been looking for it for a very long time...off and on!"

"Any names in connection with this book?"

"Well, the man who wrote it had a common French name, something beginning with a Des. Maybe it was Desjardin."

"Did he tell you anything else, no matter how small, or silly, it may still be important?"

"No, there is nothing, Gabriel. Except that I was not to tell anyone where he was or what he was doing."

"Right. Now get dressed and pack your things."

"Why? Where am I going?"

"I want you to come and stay at De Wolfe Manor for a while."

"But I cannot just go dancing in there."

"Not dancing in, it is waltzing in."

"What difference is it?"

"Just do as I say. I am going into Bolton for a while. Be ready to leave when I return. Have your carriage ready as well. I have only a De Wolfe horse with me." She watched sulkily as he pulled on his boots and left.

Forty minutes later Gabriel stood at the garden gate of a Bolton cottage. An old man on the porch dozed under a large straw hat. He woke and sat up as Gabriel came down the walkway.

"My Lord! Gabriel Jackman, is that you?"

Gabriel smiled down at the familiar face. "In the flesh, Stanley. How are you?"

"Well enough for an old man with one foot in the grave. Come inside. I have some excellent Scottish whiskey. Puts the British dog piss in the shade that is a fact."

"You know the way to treat a guest." Gabriel said after a swallow of the golden liquid.

"You know, Gabriel, just yesterday I was thinking about you and your family. I heard about the fire and your parents' tragic passing. I am so sorry!"

Gabriel nodded. "You and father were good friends. He often spoke about your younger and wilder days back at Cambridge. You were an assistant professor there, weren't you?"

Stanley Hitch nodded eagerly, happy to relive memories. "Twelve years as personal assistant to Pierre Desjardin. But with that bastard I was more of a slave."

"I was hoping you could tell me about him."

"Are you on a new case? Cannot involve him; he has been dead long years now."

"Some cast long shadows even after death. He may be a part of my new interest. I am not sure. I need to know all I can."

"Well, you have come to the right place. God only knows he did his best to make my life miserable for the whole I worked there." Stanley was animated; wise faded blue eyes sparkled under thick lids. "He was a low life, a drinker, whore monger, gambler and drug addict. Nevertheless, he was an excellent teacher and charming when he wanted to be. The Dean of School was completely hoodwinked by him. Must have been or they would have fired him long before."

"If my facts are true he was married and had children."

"Desjardin had a wife, his second one when I knew him. They had a daughter. She was French and lived Paris with her mother. I met her a few times. I think her name was Serena or something like that. She was a true beauty, that one. Ivory skin, black hair and eyes. I mean completely black eyes. Very strange, if you ask me. I think she must have been no more than sixteen but all dressed up and acting like a woman and not a very nice woman either. Desjardin told me he had high hopes to marry her off to some rich Italian Count."

"I think he succeeded in that. Tell me about Desjardin."

“Well, he kept his wife in Paris and believe me, that suited Desjardin very well. He did not miss his lady wife all that much with the parade of women he had coming in and out of his rooms.” Gabriel saw a shadow pass over the old man’s face. An unhappy memory most likely the cause and he wanted to know what it was.

“Something in particular to do with these females?”

“Very particular, young man. I am talking of murder, a murder never punished, at least not in this sad world. In all that I failed a female I cared for and to this day I cringe at my weakness.”

“If this has to do with Desjardin it might help me a great deal if you tell me about it.”

Stanley finished his glass and provided refills. “Her name was Nell Belmont. She worked as cafeteria cashier at Berkley Hall House. Sweetest, prettiest, purist thing you ever saw Gabriel. Eyes that could eat a man to his soul; Lord knows they ate at me.’ He paused, lost in times decades before.

“Just so you won’t think too badly of me that was before I met and married my wonderful Rose. Maybe you know what this old fool is going on about. There are some women...well, you just want them so badly that you hardly know which end is up and end up just standing there like an idiot or worse. God in heaven, Gabriel I could have loved Nell Belmont so well and forever if I had had the balls. If you ever meet a woman like that...well take it from an old, lonely man find your balls.”

Gabriel smiled slightly and nodded.

“I saw her every day in the cafeteria and eventually found enough courage to ask her out. For a while I saw her regularly, a few shows, long walks and one day I even found what I needed to actually kiss her. I wanted far more than that but had marriage in the back of my mind. In those days you took the women you loved to her marriage bed as a virgin, not any more, I am sure.”

“Our casual meetings had gone on for some weeks when I noticed a change in Nell. She was terribly sad, distracted and the like. When I asked her about it, she would say it was my imagination. Then one day she stopped coming into work. She had quit I was told, just like that with no warning. She lived with her father in a near by flat so I went to see him only to get the door slammed in my face. He was a useless drunk and known to be a violent man.”

“The rumors started quickly as nasty gossip always does. They said that Nell was with child and had gone north to live with her Grandmother. I was devastated. Who had done this to her? I knew it certainly was not me. I was also certain it was very unlikely she went to any man’s bed willingly...not Nell. She was a true virgin if there ever was one.”

“Then I remembered one night when she and I were out walking on Main Street. It was quiet; there were very few people about when down the block we saw Desjardin turn the corner. Well, Nell froze then pulled me aside into a doorway and we stayed there until after he passed by. Of course, I asked her what the matter was. She said nothing until I pressed her and then she told me she did not like Desjardin because he had tried to touch her!”

“I was furious and threatened to let him know it. She begged me not to. He would have her fired from her job and she had to work because it was their only income. Of course, that would have been the end of my employment, as well. I believed her when

she said nothing bad had happened...what a fool I was. Hell, Gabriel, more than anyone else I knew how he was with females. 'No' was not a word he took easily."

"So you think Desjardin raped her?"

"Yes and there is more. About a week after Nell went away they found her father hanging by the neck in their flat. He left a suicide note blaming his death on the shame his daughter had caused him. That was taken as fact, the inquest ruled death by his own hand. He was buried and all was over in a few days."

"But..." Gabriel encouraged.

"Nell had confided in me that her father could not read or write. It was her idea that maybe I could someday teach him. She also said that no one knew he was illiterate but her."

"Then it was murder and not suicide and the note was left by the murderer and you think that was Desjardin."

"Yes. It was several days after the inquest when I learned about the note. I went to the local police but they only said that I must be mistaken. The death of the drunken brute Belmont meant little to anyone and so that was that. Not too long after that I met Rose and my young mind moved on shamelessly."

"Did you ever have any proof that it was all up to Desjardin?"

Stanley sighed. "I guess a few years passed when the subject of unwed mothers came up. He said they were trash and a shame on society and should be strung up along with their parents who had not taught them any better; not proof but still...!"

"And you never saw Nell again? You did not look for her?"

Stanley hung his head and shook it slightly. "I should have, I know that now. I should have found her, married her and raised her child as my own. But I was a young fool and had Rose to keep my mind and body occupied."

"When was all that? How old would this child be now?"

"Well, let me see. He or she would be thirty-five. Now that I have no wife and little to do, I think about Nell every day. Whatever happened to her I pray she finally found some happiness."

"Do you know where the grandparents lived?"

Stanley thought for a moment, rubbing his wrinkled forehead. "Yes, now that you mention it, maybe I do. Nell once told me she had relatives north...a place called Steeple Hill. Are you going to look for them?"

"Maybe, Stan. If the child was Desjardin's it would be worth my while." With a promise to write, Gabriel left Stanley. Before returning to Suzanne he stopped and sent Isabelle a telegram.

Chapter Seven

Lee rose late that morning. After reading the Leighton diaries, relaxation and sleep were elusive. Even if only a portion of what he read in those pages was truthful, Henry Leighton had been a truly evil man. Had he lived long enough to face the gallows for the murder of his wife, even if he was innocent of that crime, he surely deserved his fate.

As he washed and dressed, he thought of Gabriel. It was highly likely that the initials referred to in Leighton's writings were those of Theodore De Wolfe and Samuel Jackman. It would be hard enough to see one's own father as such a creature but even more difficult that the man had pretended so much piety. His parents raised Gabriel to follow with pride in his father's footsteps. This must be a very bitter truth. His heart went out to Gabriel and to Elizabeth.

Lee carefully hid the books in the lining of his suitcase. He was in no mood for breakfast or conversation. He wandered outside to the back terrace, found a secluded chair in a corner, sheltered by large marble plant pots and sat. From an open window he heard voices.

"They can not do this, Steward." Tears of rage and frustration fell down Ruth's face. "I will not be divorced and cast aside like unwanted furniture."

They were in first floor rooms allotted to Ruth when she'd left Owen's apartment. Steward lay on the bed and Jane stood behind Ruth, gentling touching her hair.

"I warned you that you were pushing them too far." Steward sneered. "Why in Gods' name couldn't you just keep your bloody mouth shut? When I told you about the nigger and her bastard you said you would not let on that you knew."

"What would you do? Just sit by and play sweet?"

"No. You should have done what I said three years ago when you first found out about Owen and his women. Offer a quiet and easy divorce for a great deal of money. Owen would have gone along with that back then. However, you'd rather have the misery and no money. As it is now Owen and the old man are so furious you will be lucky not to be stuck in a fucking shack some place."

"You have to do something!"

"What can I do? You should know, Ruth, Randall wants to have you committed."

"What?"

"I overheard him talking to Owen about it a while ago. Owen would not hear of it. Shame on the family, I suppose. Christ, Ruth, I warned you repeatedly. Why is it you can not keep your big mouth closed?"

Ruth put her hands over her face; silent sobs retching through her body. Jane leaned over the chair and ran her hands up and down her back. "It is alright, Ruth. Steward and I will help you." Jane looked up at her brother and then to the night table. "Don't just sit there like a bloody lump."

He rolled his eyes, took a key chain from his pocket, unlocked and opened the bottom drawer. He pulled out a long, flat velvet box. With another key, he opened it. Inside was a syringe, several full glass phials and a leather strap.

"Come along, Jane." He snapped as he inserted the needle into one of the phials. "Roll up her sleeve."

"Sit up, sweet heart." Jane pushed Ruth back to sit against the back of the chair. "We will have you feeling better soon."

"Hurry up, fix the sleeve."

"I can't, Steward. It is too tight to roll up." Jane sighed and began to open the row of buttons down the front of Ruth's dress.

He watched as Jane removed the upper dress. Needle marks and bruises ran from shoulder to wrist on both arms. Jane took the leather strap and tied it tightly around the upper arm. "Her veins are a mess." Steward complained. "Bring her closer to the window so I have more light."

Outside the open window, ten feet down on the garden chaise Lee sat listening to every word. He laid his head back and closed his eyes as though sleeping.

"There! That one is good enough. Hurry up Steward." Jane insisted. Still standing behind Ruth, Jane ran her hands along her cheeks and down her neck. Ruth gasped with pain as Steward pushed the needle into the swollen vein. "That's it, that's right, Ruth." Jane leaned down and whispered in her ear. "Now you will feel better...just a few seconds."

Ruth let her head fall back against Jane's face.

Steward laughed. "Who is going to feel better, I wonder!" He replaced the drugging equipment back into the drawer, locked it and sat back on the bed.

"Shut up!" Jane hissed at him. "Can you feel it now, love?" She whispered as she slid her hands down to Jane's corset. Ruth moaned as the powerful narcotic numbed her pain and deadened her senses. Jane kissed the drugged woman's neck as she pulled the corset ribbons open.

"Come on, my sick little sister." Steward smiled, moving along the bed and closer to the wheel chair. "Show me those lovely tits."

Jane slid her hands inside the undergarment, wrapping her fingers around Ruth's breasts. "Go away, Steward! Leave us alone."

"Like as Hell! I paid for the cocaine. I get my go too!"

"You know what will happen if you stay and Mommy said you couldn't fuck me anymore just in case you give me a baby."

Ruth's eyes rolled back into her head. She cried slightly as Jane pinched her nipples.

"I am not going to fuck you, Jane!" He leaned forward, pulled down the sides of the corset and pushed Jane's hands away. "I am not drunk enough for that but I am going to have a piece of our nice Ruthie." He smiled and made a slight hissing sound. "And she is nice...I know you agree with that!"

Jane sat down on the floor beside him. "You like me too, don't you Steward?" She slid her one up his leg and onto his lap. "You know what I was dreaming about lately?"

"I hate to ask!" He sat back and gave her room to touch him.

"I was remembering when I was a little girl and you'd take me into the bushes and make me do things to you." She was breathing harder, her face red with passion. "I hated it then but you taught me how to like it. Why don't we go back to the bushes, Steward?"

He pushed her hand away. "I thought you were more in love with pussy than cock." He stood, picked up Ruth and placed her on the bed. He pushed Ruth's dress up and slipped off her underwear. "There's a fine one right here."

Jane smiled and lay down beside Ruth. "Christ! Isn't she so beautiful, Steward? She reminds me of Chloe! Do you remember how much you used to like to watch Chloe and me? I remember once when you got so mad because you were too drunk to get it up!" Jane laughed and pushed her body against Ruth.

Steward shook his head, angrily taking Jane by the hair and pulling her away from Ruth. He climbed on the bed, straddled Jane, holding her arms in place with his legs. "It could be, you mad little bitch, that you remember too much. I told you what would happen if you did not learn to forget."

Frightened and confused she wriggled and tried to push him off. He rose, let his full weight fall down, and crushed the breath out of her. "Stop struggling." He hissed at her. "This you can remember. Whatever I tell you to do; you do it, right then and there. Do you understand?" He put his face next to her ear, grabbed her breasts and squeezed hard. "Don't make a sound." He squeezed with all his strength. He felt her tense with the pain. "Not a fucking sound." He sat back, glaring down at her, not lessening his fierce hold. Tears rolled down her cheeks. "You know what I will do to you if you make me too mad...or bore me, right? I will do more than bite your tits!"

She nodded, gasping for air as he pressed his legs against her lungs. "And right now your dyke aggression is making me angry and boring the shit out of me. I will tell you who to fuck and when! Is that clear?"

She nodded again. Her face turned dark as she fought to breathe.

"I have Ruth, not you." He let go of her breasts, eased his weight so she could take in air. Jane gasped and he fell back down on her again. "From now on you don't have sex with anybody unless I tell you. You talk far too much. Hell knows what comes out of your ugly mouth while you are fucking. I am going to get off you now and you are not going to move, are you?" He lifted off her and off the bed. Frozen with fear, his sister did not move.

Not taking his eyes off Jane, he stood between Ruth's legs and opened his trouser buttons. "I do the fucking, little sister. Watch and be lucky with that." He whispered, crawled on the bed and pushed himself inside Ruth.

Outside Lee felt his stomach turn. Back in the house, he took a whiskey bottle from the parlor and went back up to his room.

Suzanne was waiting in her coach when Gabriel returned. Several suitcases were strapped to the luggage rack and Ted's black stallion harnessed to the back.

"My Lord, that was fast!" Gabriel climbed up beside her.

"Fast! You have been away almost two hours."

"Was I...shit!" he stuck his head out the window. "Get on with it, driver! I did not mean to be gone all this time." He complained more to himself as he settled and the coach lurched forward.

"I am sorry for detaining you, Gabriel!" She said with mock sarcasm. "You used to like spending the whole day with me. Now you make love to me and run off to Bolton. What is great and wonderful in Bolton?"

"It was business."

"You are on another case? I want to help."

"Suzanne, I do not need your help. Your involvement is the last thing I want. I have enough to do to keep my eye on Elizabeth." He immediately wished he could learn to keep his mouth shut.

"Who is Elizabeth?"

"She is a friend and not your concern."

"Friend! Ha! I was only your friend once remember? If you have another woman...! God, isn't two enough? You are a whore! Take me home."

"Elizabeth is not 'another woman'. She is, as I say, just a friend."

"Then why do you have to keep eyes on her?"

Gabriel was getting angry. "Because I like to look at her that is why."

"Then I guess I will not tell you what I remembered while I was waiting so long for you! You can just look at your Elizabeth and try to guess what I know."

"Tell me, Suzanne, what would you do if I stop sending your monthly checks? Do you really think Lance Burke will be so generous? He has nowhere near the money I have. In addition, all the money he does have comes from his wife. How long would it be before you would have no choice but to sell that ruby, or this very expensive dress?" He ran his hand down the very large, purple velvet sleeves.

She pouted. He took her face in his hand and glared into her eyes. "Fine!" She smiled, sighed and relaxed into the seat. "If you are going to be like that... I will tell you. Since I do not know what your case is or even if you are on a case I can't even say if this will help you."

"That is my problem."

"It was a few days before Papa left, on the week end he came to stay with me. On Saturday afternoon Theodore came over and Papa told me to go to my room because they wanted a private talk."

"And of course, as usual, you did just what you were told to do." Gabriel smiled and spoke with sarcasm.

"For a while. It was boring just sitting there. I stood in the hallway and listened. Theodore was leaving. He said, 'Do your best Percy. I cannot express to you just how important this matter is. Years have past, all wasted. I am now down to a few precious weeks. I must have the Chronicle. It is the least I can do to repair some of the awful things I have done and I owe it to my children.'"

Papa said, "I know, Theodore, it has been many years. With this latest lead, I am more hopeful than ever. I have a very good feeling this time." Theodore left then."

Gabriel rubbed his brow and ran his hands through his hair.

"Does it help?"

"We will see. Now listen, Suzanne. I need you to promise me that you will not tell a soul that you have told me any of this."

She nodded. "And you will ask for my help if you need it?"

"I will. You have been dependable before. Do not let me down." He put his hand on hers and smiled. "Just be yourself while we are at De Wolfe Manor. Do not ask questions and be nice to Elizabeth."

She rolled her eyes and sighed. "If you say so."

In the afternoon, Randall took Elizabeth for a ride. They rode along for a mile or so when Randall pulled his landau to a halt at the end on a narrow dirt road. "There are steep steps down the meadow and river." He said as he took a horse blanket from the storage. "I hope you do not mind. I can hold your hand and guide you if you would like."

"No. I can hold onto the railing. I will be fine." She followed him down the rather rickety wooden steps. She thought she saw him turn quickly once and perhaps he had looked at her ankles as she held up her skirts. She smiled slightly and did not mind. It was almost an innocent act, as a boy might do and not the leering stare of most men.

They stopped at the far side of a meadow. A narrow river rushed past and turned sharply dropping off into a waterfall. Across the river set in a semi circle of willows, was as old brick water mill.

"Oh, this is so lovely and serene, Randall." She gasped as she looked around. "It does make me think of a Constable painting."

He spread the blanket, helped her to sit and sat beside her. "It is rather pretty, isn't it? My brothers and I used to swim here as boys. Now I come just to sit and think."

"What is the name of the river?"

"River Three...don't ask me why 'three' no one seems to know. It runs back up that way for a mile or so then through Wolfe Mountain and comes again at the base of Madsen Worthy."

"Is the mill not in use anymore? It is very overgrown."

"Not for a few years now. There is a new mill just beyond the mountain."

They sat in silence for a while, listening to the waterfall and the wind rustling the leaves over head.

"If there is a Heaven I am sure this is what it must be like. Can you imagine, Randall, a place of perfection and total peace? Could there really be a place forever as beautiful as this where no one is ever sad, hungry or scared; a place where nothing bad ever happens."

He smiled and nodded. "If the whole world was happy, secure, well fed, with sturdy roofs over head...yes that would be Heaven. However, there is no Heaven this side of the blue sky. That is a fact."

"You do not think so? Surely this peaceful place is at least Heaven like?"

"In sight, yes but not so if you know the history." He pointed towards the mill. "Murder was the reason they closed that mill. Now the story says that he haunts here. We have at least a hundred ghost stories in this part of the world."

"Murder?"

"A local fellow from Madsen Worthy worked there. A fellow by the name of Stanley Burke, he fell into the grinder and died what must have been a terrible death."

"Why do you say it was a murder?"

"Apparently he was over heard having a heated argument in there with some unknown person just moments before his body was found. Unfortunately, the people

who heard the argument could not say what they were fighting about or who the other person was. The cops put it down to an accident. However, the law enforcement around here consists of a few lazy, drunks. It is so much less for them to do if they call it an accident.”

“But his family, surely they must have complained.”

“He did not have any family.”

Elizabeth sighed. “It is so hard to believe murder found its way here.”

“Well, it did and many times over the last seven or eight years.”

“Really?”

“Four women beaten, raped and killed.”

“Good God! Was anyone ever caught?”

He shook his head. “Three of the victims worked in the Manor. The last murder happened just a few months ago, back in the summer. Her name was Daisy Mott. She was a sweet girl. I think she was about fifteen or sixteen years old. She fell out an attic window. This time the idiots put it down to suicide.”

“You do not agree?”

“Not in the slightest and I have many reasons. The section of the attic where she fell is not in use. There was no reason at all for her to be up there and not to mention most of the staff will not go anywhere near there. They firmly believe it to be haunted.”

“Still, Randall, she could have been there for some reason you do not know of. I mean if one has suicide in mind does it really matter to them where they go to do the thing? Did anyone see her being pushed?”

“No.” he paused and pushed a lock of hair from his face. “Early morning on the day she died Daisy came to see me. I am afraid I was busy working on a paper and did not give her the attention I should have. She was very nervous, ringing her hands and stuttering. I ask her what was wrong. She said she had something she needed to tell me since Owen was not around. I said go ahead tell me. She was afraid she would lose her position for saying whatever it was. I remember thinking it was most likely that she had seen someone stealing from the housekeepers’ petty cash or maybe even that Housekeeper had gone back to drinking again and was helping herself from Father’s wine cellar. I think Daisy had finally found the courage to tell me when Mother came in the room and that put an end to our conversation.”

“So you think someone might have pushed her out the window because of whatever it was she knew?”

“That was my opinion. I told the police about it all but they haven’t the sense it takes to put two plus two together.”

“How horrible! That poor child. And the other murders?”

“Well, the first one was seven years ago. It was the weekend of Owen and Ruth’s wedding. Her name was Mary O’Neal and she worked as barnmaid at a local water hole. There was only a short walk from that place to her home but it was through a wooded area. After closing that night, she took a pathway through those woods to go home. They found her body the next morning. As I said, she had been beaten, raped and murdered.”

“The third murder happened two years ago. Alice Clegg was one of our cooks. It appeared that she was taken from the house and then killed in the same manner as poor Mary.”

“How can a man do such a thing? He is surely insane.”

“Sometimes, Elizabeth, I do get so sick of hearing that. A person who is so evil that he can do these things is labeled ‘insane’ and they are locked away some place then forgotten. Certainly, they are evil and insane but putting it all behind us does nothing to keep it from happening again. How many more like him are just waiting for the chance to strike? How many commit these crimes, time and time again and never get caught?”

He turned on the blanket to face Elizabeth, his face bright with passion. “A woman’s body is such a miraculous thing, by far greatest creation of our Lord. Just think about it; she takes a seed so small even our most powerful microscopes cannot see it. Her body nurtures this seed and the greatest of miracles happens when she gives birth. Then with her body, she continues to feed this new person. With her mind and heart and then after years of hard work and powerful love she presents an adult man or woman to the world. What a wonderful blessing is the female body!”

She smiled. “What a lovely to say!”

“It is not a flattery. It is what I truly believe. There is the miracle of birth but there is also the passion a female body has for the lowly male.” He stopped. “I am sorry. I am getting carried away.”

“No, please continue. I am fascinated.”

“Well...it is powerful draw, a man to a woman, there is none like it, for a normal man that is. The right female with the right body can hold a man forever. Such power the female has, if she only knew it!”

Elizabeth smiled. “My mother used to say something just like that!”

“Did she? Smart woman, your mother!”

“Why do you look so angry?”

“I knew what terrible things were done to Mary, Daisy, Chloe and Alice and countless other women throughout man’s sad history and I am appalled. Sometimes I am ashamed to be male. These monsters are only fit for studying and dissection so their flaws are clearly revealed. Only if that is done can we ever find a way to stop all this mayhem.” He paused, smiled and sighed. “I am sorry. I do get very passionate about it all, especially now that I am considering continuing my medical studies in the mental science of an alienist. That is the study of diseases of the mind.”

“Yes, I know what that is. Then you have decided not to convert to the priest hood?”

For a second he looked at her blankly and then laughed. “How in God’s name did you find out about that? No, let me guess. My mother?”

“Yes. Aunt Cornelia is so terribly upset. I do not think she is too fond of the Catholics in general and then of course there is the need she has for grandchildren. As a priest you certainly could not give her any.”

He narrowed his brilliant blue eyes. “And that is the main reason why I would never become a Catholic priest. I have no intention of living my life without a pretty wife.”

“Then why does Aunt Cornelia think you very much have it in mind?”

“Oh my Lord! You have no idea how my life was with my encouraging mother these last half dozen years. She seemed to think it was her duty and her God given right to find me a ‘suitable wife’. The problem was that she seemed to feel suitable was...well, bloody damn boring. Goodness knows where she dug up all those dowdy,

prissy virgins that she paraded before me! Is there a place in London where one can rent them?"

Elizabeth laughed. "So, to stop her you told her you had decided to become celibate. That was naughty. Do you have any idea how distraught over it all she is?"

"I do and I was going to set her straight, eventually. I was also angry at her for her behavior over Amy and my engagement to her."

"She did not approve?"

"Amy and her family were working class. I love my mother but that does not blind me. At times, she can be terrible snob although she will swear she is not. I will point that out to her when I tell her the truth of my plans but not yet. So please, do not mention it to her. I will enjoy the freedom from her dull parade for awhile longer."

"She will be greatly relieved, I am sure. With all that in the back of my mind I suppose I was even more surprised when you kissed me last night."

"Really? Perhaps you thought I was looking for a last fling or two before taking my vows."

"Well, I certainly thought you were looking for something. But, as you said, you were almost drunk and not yourself."

"I was almost drunk but not numb with it. I would have done a lot more than just kiss you if you had not had the common sense to stop me."

"Common sense! Some women would say I was a fool who simply lacked courage. I have to admit that I sometimes wish I was not such a coward."

He took her hand and gently kissed it, looking up at her from her his brows. "If there is anything I can say or do to help you find that courage I hope you will tell me. I would be more than happy to help!"

"Would you? Such a gentleman!" She laughed, stood and walked away. Over her shoulder, she said. "For now we had better get back. I am getting cold. This thin coat is not suitable for such a chilly day and as it is we have missed teatime."

He sighed, stood and rolled up the blanket. He mumbled something unpleasant about tea and caught up with her.

Cornelia was standing in the entranceway when Gabriel came through the front door. "Well, there you are finally." She put her hands on her hips. "You took your time and you have missed tea completely. It was only me, Ted and Lee."

"Where is everyone then?"

"Owen was not back from London in time. I have no idea where Steward and Jane are, or Randall and Elizabeth for that matter. They left for a ride hours ago. Is it too much to ask everyone to be here for a civilized tea?"

"Apparently it is. I am sorry I was not here, Connie. I had to make a stop in Bolton and it took some time to convince Suzanne to be reasonable."

"Is Suzanne's here? Where is she?"

"She is outside in her coach and stubbornly refuses to come in unless you personally invite her."

"Oh my! What a silly child." Cornelia rushed towards the door. Then stopped and turned back to Gabriel. "I almost forgot. Ted is in his study. He said if you came back to tell you he would like to speak with you. You go on then. I will take care of Suzanne."

“Gabriel!” Ted looked up from the paper he was writing. He closed the folder, removed his spectacles and stood from his desk. “You are back, finally. What would you like?” he asked looking towards a well-stocked drinks trolley.

“No, thank you, Ted. Cornelia said you wanted to speak to me.”

Ted poured a large brandy and ignored Gabriel’s attempt to get to the point. “Sit! Do not stand as though a soldier at attention. My home is your home.” Ted laughed and seemed to find his last remark humorous. “Did you manage to obtain the pretty Miss Beryline?”

Gabriel did not answer right away. He took out his cigarette case, lit one and took a long haul first. “She is here. Cornelia is showing her to her room.”

“Well, I suppose she will help to keep you occupied while you are here. She is fine enough for a man to put out an effort...but then I rather think you have long ago had that pleasure. Tell me just how many women do you need at one time; Isabelle Lucci, Suzanne Beryline and God know how many others.”

“As many as I can get. I am not an old man...so I handle them all very well.”

Ted did not flinch at the implied insult. “Does Isabelle know about the cottage you rent for the housing of Suzanne?”

When Gabriel did not answer and just smiled slightly Ted continued. “Not that I blame you, not one bit. When I was your age, I had my own share of lovely women that is a fact. Nothing stopped me when I came across a pretty set of eyes...and breasts.”

“Not even your wife?”

“I was not always a married man. After my wedding I became as tame as a kitten but before that Henry, Samuel and I were tigers on the prowl. Your father, God rest his soul, had his pick of the women. If I were you, I would leave off with Suzanne for a bit and have a go at Elizabeth Leighton. God in heaven she is lovely, so like Margaret.” Ted raised his eyebrows, his black eyes challenging Gabriel. “I am glad she is here. She seems to be having a remarkable effect on our Randall. They have been together all day and I have to say he had a look to him at luncheon that was certainly not priestly. Hopefully she will live up to her mother’s reputation and give Randall more than a friendly hand shake.”

Gabriel was aware that Ted was baiting him and wondered what he thought he would accomplish. “Margaret was a fine and moral woman.”

“Not when Tony Lucci was in the room. Good God she was old enough to be his mother.”

Gabriel shrugged. “She loved him and he loved her. That is all that matters.”

“How gentle and sensitive you are, Gabriel. I wonder how Henry enjoyed having his wife give Lucci what she would not give to him. Margaret’s moral fiber seemed to have many holes.”

“She gave to her husband exactly what he gave to her.” Gabriel leaned forward, his arms on his legs, meeting Ted’s stare. “For a long while she did all she could to overcome her knowledge of Leighton’s dark past. What woman could forever turn a blind eye to the ‘Circle of Mendes’?”

Ted stood so suddenly most of his drink spilled to the carpet. He ignored it, turned his back on Gabriel and walked to a window. “So you do know about the Circle.” His voice was quiet, the challenging bravado gone.

“Yes I do. As each day passes, Ted, more and more people know of that foul group. That must cause you no end of worry. Perhaps you are hoping to curtail your own involvement. Is that why you wanted to speak with me? Are you hopeful I will help you keep your terrible secret?” He stood close behind Ted and saw the tightening of his body. “Just so you will know I am all too aware of my own fathers’ sins. They do not fall down onto me. Maybe I should just tell it all to the world. Wouldn’t it be easier for an old man like you just to beg forgiveness and be over with it?”

Ted turned back to Gabriel. He was pale, the intense eyes then frightened. “You won’t do that! That would kill Cornelia, not to mention what general knowledge would do to the futures of my children... your close friends and what of your future and your daughter. No, you would never do that!”

“Are you so sure?” Gabriel took another step forward, glaring at Ted. “Do you not think that to me that meeting the justice of God is more important than friendship?”

“How pompous and self righteous you are!”

Gabriel shook his head. “Is this what you wanted to talk to me about?”

“No. I need your help. I told you before when I came to see you.”

“You were drunk and rambling. I had no idea what you wanted. Frankly Ted, with what I know about you it is impossible to see you as a man worthy of my help. Do not expect me to trust you, Ted. You will waste your energy and my time.”

Ted stepped away from Gabriel. He slipped more coal in the dwindling fire. “Yes, of course, you would be a fool to trust me. I am not asking for trust.” He took a cigar from his pocket and lit it with shaking hands. “It has been twenty years since I left all that behind, the same for your father. We made our vows and paid high penance.”

“So say you. Those are easy words from a murdering rapist! Did you know that Leighton was foolish enough to write very detailed accounts of the sins committed by the Circle? No, I can see by the look on your face you did not. He referred to you and Father by initials, hardly a disguise. Tell me, Ted, how many children you raped in the name of Satan. Tell me, how many acts of sodomy and torture does it take to turn a man forever away from God? What did you enjoy more, the sacrifice or the orgies? Maybe it was presence of the demon. Did you have sex with him as well?”

“Stop it, Gabriel.” Ted dropped heavily into a chair.

“Then tell me why I should help you. Do not give me Cornelia as your reason. It would take far more than that. If I was wise I would leave here today and never return.”

“You have no choice but to help me...and succeed. If you do not, then everyone you love, before, now and forever will die. The same sits for Owen, Steward, Elizabeth Leighton and Tony Lucci. Margaret and Helena have already died. Ruth just barely escaped with her life and that is strange to me but then Owen no longer loves her so that could be why. Death will soon come to the secret son Lucci keeps in Scotland. Noah and your sweet Gabriella will die. Anyone loved by you and the others will die!”

Gabriel’s anger faded slightly. Ted’s terrible predictions froze him to silence.

“You have nothing to say to that? Then tell me do you know about the dedication ceremonies?”

“In graphic detail.”

“Good. That will save us some time.” Ted took a deep breath and briefly closed his eyes. “If the Devil accepts the child offered in the dedication the child and mother will live but their souls belong to the devil. If the child is rejected he or she and

sometimes the mother die. Over the years, we did seventeen dedications with three rejections.”

“What did you receive in return for these souls?”

“Luck.”

“What?”

“We received financial luck. Everything we put our hands to came back to us many times over.”

“You were born wealthy.”

“I was, yes, but I wanted more. Doesn’t everyone want more? Almost immediately, we discovered two more very successful diamond mines. At that time, your father had his first assignment but it was only a poor village parish. A year after you were born Samuel was given the most prestigious and wealthy London congregation. We were near to the end of our infatuation with Desjardin when Elizabeth was born and dedicated. Henry became physician for the family of the Duke of Fairfax and that world opened up for him. Samuel and Henry invested in my mines. Every penny they put in came back a hundred times over.”

“And you need not look at me like that, Gabriel. You judge me! Look at you in your expensive handmade silk suits! Do you regret that fortune that gives you your wonderful London mansion? Are you so bloody minded that you would walk away from all that?

If you do, then you are a fool.” He narrowed his eyes and leaned closer to Gabriel.
“Would you give up your very special abilities?”

“There is nothing special about me.”

“Oh Christ, Gabriel! There is nothing about you that I do not know of.” Ted sighed, smiled and relaxed back in the comfortable chair. “The actual procedure you use I do not know because you only do this when you are alone, but when you want to be in another place you will be there instantaneously. You have able to this since your earliest days. Deny it if you want but Cornelia and I witnessed it with our own eyes.”

“At first, it was a very disconcerting for Samuel and Susan. Once when you were about two years old, your parents and you were visiting here. You went missing from our nursery. At about the same time a police officer found you wandering about the London zoo. It was a good thing Susan always kept your name and address sewn into your clothing. One Christmas morning I found you playing with Owen and the twins in their nursery. You had gone to sleep in your bed in London.”

“It was dangerous in many ways. Not only with the possible danger to yourself but had this strange talent come to public knowledge it would bring very unwanted attention. It quickly occurred to Samuel and Susan that you only ‘disappeared’ when you were alone. For several years your parents stayed with you night and day, taking turns sleeping.”

“You were five, Owen was six and you were playing in the old stables. The nanny who should have been very closely watching the two of you was meeting with one of the grooms. You crawled inside an old iron trunk and Owen secured the lid. Obviously, you were not too happy but Owen could not get the lid off again. Owen was at first too frightened to tell anyone what he had done. Thankfully, it was a rusted out thing and there were many air holes. Eventually when pressed for your whereabouts

Owen confessed. Samuel and I rescued you. Do you remember any of that?" Ted asked, when Gabriel did not answer he continued.

"It was clear you could not 'move through' iron otherwise you would certainly have left you miserable prison. Samuel had the walls in your bedroom and nursery lined with iron and iron bars placed on the windows. When he had Random House built, he had the walls of every room lined with lead. That helped to hold you in place until you were old enough to understand to control this ability and to keep it very much a secret."

"I also know about the ability you have to change the mood of the people who are near you. You do this regularly. I have seen you do it many times. That must be how you are able to control your females so easily. Once when Cornelia and I dined with you and Isabelle at your home she became furious at you for some joke you told at the dinner table. It was just some silly comment about Italians but it rubbed her the very wrong way. I watched with interest. Her face was bright red; she said something no doubt unflattering in Italian. You simply looked at her; briefly closed your eyes and she relaxed completely, suddenly laughing in agreement with your joke."

"I am aware of what I can do but not what your point is here."

"Right...to the point!" Ted sighed and finished his glass. "This is the difficult part. I was there at the dedication when you were born. We were all worried about what the outcome would be that day. We knew you would be different before you were born but we did not know if those differences might also be in appearance. The Devil never accepts a child that was not a perfect human specimen."

"Why would I have been different?"

Ted took a deep breath. "I was also there when you were born and when you were conceived."

Gabriel sat forward. "What Hell are you talking about?"

"Leighton was there as well. I had hoped that you would never have to learn of this. The truth of the matter is that Samuel Jackman was not your biological father."

"That is a lie!" Gabriel jumped to his feet.

"No, it is the truth. Why would I make up such a thing? Susan and Samuel tried for years to conceive. However, doctors had warned them that Samuel's childhood illness most likely left him infertile. Susan was desperate for a child of her own."

"Shut your fucking mouth..." Gabriel's angry voice rose. Ted stood and took him by the arms.

"Do you want the truth or not? I am not speaking badly of your mother. Susan was a kind and loving woman and did this on her husband's instruction. Samuel decided that since he could not give her a child...another man would. He chose the man." Ted ran his hands through his thick white hair. "Do you understand just how much a man must love a woman to allow this? God in heaven Samuel loved Susan that much!"

Gabriel did not answer. He was too stunned to think.

"For a month we met every night. Samuel waited in another room. Henry and I were in the bedroom to attest to Samuel afterwards that nothing other than intercourse happened."

"Nothing other than intercourse! Fucking Hell, Ted, what could be worse?"

"That was how Samuel wanted it; it must be just the physical act necessary to give his wife her baby. Susan was devastated, mortified and Samuel pushed her to it each time."

"I do not need to know that. Who was my father?"

"I think you know that already. Who else could have passed on those special abilities? The man Samuel chose was Pierre Desjardin."

Gabriel closed his eyes and fought to control an anger that had no present source. Nothing he could say or do to Theodore De Wolfe would change anything. As much as he would never have admitted it to another living soul, he had always wondered why he and Samuel were so very different in look and manner.

"So, I am the bastard of a murdering maniac. Of all the men why did Father chose him?"

"No, Gabriel you are the son of Samuel and Susan Jackman. After you were born, Samuel arranged a secret adoption. Believe me your last name is well and truly Jackman. I am sure the documents are still in his lawyers files."

"What does a piece of paper mean?" Gabriel lit a cigarette. "I have Desjardin blood in my veins. Then, I suppose, if all this is true Jackman blood would not have been that much better. Then it is from him I get what you call 'special talents'?"

Ted nodded slowly. "That is why Samuel chose him. Remember in those sad days we were very much under his spell, for lack of a better word. He had shown us what he could do...that and so much more. Through him, we had linked, we believed in Satan. There were a great many of us who believed that Desjardin was the son of Satan."

"And that was what Samuel wanted for me?" The shock was fading; a new hatred was falling into place. "That was how much he loved my mother? He loved her so much he wanted her to give birth to another son of Satan. Is that what you call great love, Ted?"

"No, not from the right side of things where I sit now but in those days...well, perhaps we were just as insane as Desjardin. You know the story; he used drugs and sex to lure us to keep us under his spell."

"Tell me, Ted. I have often wondered how you manage to hold you head so high. Are you so completely evil you are blind to the truth?"

Ted flinched. "And you wonder the same thing for Samuel?"

"He may have been worst of all of you. He was a man sworn to the word of God. What a shameless hypocrite."

"In all your wondering did you ever ponder how Desjardin died?"

Gabriel shrugged.

"It is another long story."

"I am sick of this, Ted! Give me a very short version."

"By 1880 we had grown enough, Henry, Samuel and I to finally see him for what he was. We drugged and drowned him. We killed the monster, does that not count?"

"I doubt it very much. However, if it helps you sleep at night, so be it. I think you are an old man and too much of a coward to face your sins!"

"No, I face my sins every day when I look in the mirror."

Gabriel stood; looked briefly at Ted and shook his head slowly. He paced the length of the room, looking without seeing the opulent decorations. He remembered Caroline saying that Cornelia had a way of listening to conversations that Ted had in his study. He wondered if she was listening then. Under the circumstances, he would not be surprised. After all these years, did she finally deserve to know the complete truth?

Would she want to know it? Gabriel knew her well. She was an intelligent and strong woman. She would rather have the painful truth than cower behind delusions.

He stopped his pacing beside Ted. His head pounded with anger and hatred. The heavy weight of the pistol under his arm was very appealing.

"Does Cornelia have any idea of what a truly pathetic and despicable man you are?"

Ted cleared his throat. "If you mean does she know about the 'Circle....'"

"No." Gabriel interrupted his tone heavy and threatening. "I mean does she know that in your youth you were a rapist, a sodomite, a blaspheming, Christ hating murderer?"

"I will not discuss her right now. I still have issues to work out."

"Alright...then tell me how you managed to do the dedication ceremonies for Elizabeth, Owen and myself. There is no fucking way Margaret, my mother or Cornelia would have been gone willingly into this."

"It was not necessary to have both parents agree to or attend the dedications. The mother or father was enough. Unwilling mothers were simply drugged briefly and their babies taken to the grotto."

"And my mother? Was she drugged?"

"Why? Susan is dead. After all this time how can that be important?"

"Just tell me."

"Susan knew everything. She came to the ceremony willingly. Nothing would stop her from pleasing her husband and having a child."

Gabriel moved so quickly Ted did not see him coming. He took Ted up from his seat by the front of his jacket and threw him. He landed in front of the fire, hitting the back of his head on the stone guard. Gabriel was on him fast, took his head in his hands and hit it once more hard against the guard. "Listen to me, you miserable piece of shit. My beautiful wife died because of the likes of you and a few miserable men and as God is my guide she will be avenged." He dropped Ted back onto the floor.

"Then you won't help me? If you don't, we will all die."

"First," Gabriel spat at him. "I am going to find out if all this is the truth. I am not fool enough to take your word for it. Then we will talk about what I will or will not do."

"Gabriel, we don't have much time..." Gabriel did not hear the rest. He had had enough of Ted and wanted too much to use his pistol.

He found Lee in his bedroom.

"Lee, do you know where Elizabeth is?"

"She is still out with Randall." One look at Gabriel told Lee something was not right. "What is wrong, Gabriel?"

"I will tell you later. I will be away in London for a few hours. Go and stay with Cornelia. She may be upset and I do not want her alone right now. When Elizabeth gets back, I want you to keep your eye on her, as well. Just so you will know I brought Suzanne Beryline here."

"Good God! Why in heavens name?" Lee shook his head. "Never mind! Right now, I am not interested in your female problems. I found out something you should know."

"Go on."

“Early this morning I sat in the garden. I did not realize it right away but I sat under an open window that I am certain led to Ruth’s bedroom. Ruth, Jane and Steward were in there and I could hear every word that they were saying...unfortunately.”

“What did you hear?”

“Ruth must have just learned that Owen was finally going to divorce her. She was very upset. At first, it seemed as though Jane wanted only to comfort her but that did not last long. Christ, Gabriel, they drugged Ruth and I think she must have been in another world because I did not hear her say another word. But one Hell of a lot of words passed between Jane and Steward.” Lee finally had Gabriel’s complete attention. “After they drugged her both of them had sex with her.”

Gabriel’s jaw dropped. He stood in silent and stunned amazement.

“Both of them molested Ruth.” Lee repeated. “It was clear this was something they had done before. It was also very clear Jane and Steward had sex together and had been doing so since Jane was a girl.”

“Fucking hell!” Gabriel looked around the room, ran his hands through his hair and sat on the bedside. “Are you sure? Could you see them?”

“I did not need to. They were very vocal about what they were doing. Now, apart from the sickness of it all it was also clear that Steward was in control. He is a vicious piece of goods, Gabriel. I do not know exactly what he was doing but he was certainly hurting Jane. He threatened her to kill her for ‘remembering too much’! When he was done with that, he raped Ruth.”

“Then, Lee, I would say it is most likely Steward who is ‘mountain murderer’.”

“That is certainly the impression I got.” Lee paused. “And perhaps more than that. Steward told Jane he would do more than bite her breasts.”

Gabriel closed his eyes and let out a long breath. “Likes to bite, does he?”

“Yes and I think tells us a lot. They are mean and no doubt insane. Those dreams you have been having...you told me that there were always two attackers.”

“And,” Gabriel stood, “one of them was very much in control. That one did the rape and the murder. The other just watched and enjoyed it all greatly. That could very well be a female.”

“It was very clear that Steward certainly enjoyed hurting his sister. Shit, Gabriel he was having sex with her when she was just a child! Where were their parents while all this was going on?”

“They were too busy with the talented Owen and genius Randall. Simple-minded Stewart and ugly Jane were housed and fed and little else. What we need now is proof.”

“Are you still going to London?”

“I have no choice. More than ever, I want you to keep watch on Elizabeth. She has already spent time with Owen and Randall and may have it in mind to move on to Steward.”

“That would not be a good idea. I would not even want her alone with Jane. I assume you will not be traveling by coach.”

Gabriel did not answer. At the door, he turned back to Lee. “I will be back as soon as I am able but I doubt that I will be here for dinner. If any one asks for me just say I am resting with a headache.”

Back his bedroom Gabriel turned the keys in both doors. He sat on the window seat, closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind. With all that he had learned that

afternoon that took longer than usual. He visualized Isabelle's home and focused on her bedroom. He saw the room was quiet, dark and that Isabelle was asleep on the bed.

Isabelle's doctor warned her she would need to get as much rest as possible for the next few months. The frequent séances were draining so for the time being she had greatly scaled back her meetings, seeing clients one at a time and several days in between sittings.

After lunch, she told her maid that she should not be disturbed for the afternoon. She closed her bedroom drapes. She removed her clothes and stood naked in front of her mirror. She ran her hand across her belly. She had a naturally round shape, never having a flat stomach so she did not show yet.

For the hundredth time she wondered what Gabriel's reaction would be. Certainly, he would be surprised, maybe a little angry with her for waiting so long to tell him. He had told her that he would like to have a son one day and all her powerful instincts told her the child was a boy. The anger would fade quickly. Gabriel's mood changed with the breezes. Then he would be thrilled and would insist on marriage.

She slept for a while and woke with a start when she felt the weight of someone sit on the bed.

"It is alright, Isabelle! It's me!" Gabriel whispered.

"God! You scared me." She rose onto her elbow unable to see his face in the dark room. "I thought you were not going to 'drop in' on me like that any more!" She asked with a slight laugh. She turned on the gas lamp. He was pale and drawn. "What is it, Gabriel? Is something wrong?"

"Maybe. I have to go to Bartholomew Street. I need the old clothes."

She got out of bed, pulled on her robe and sat watching silently as he slid the old trunk out from under her bed. As usual, there was a lot she wanted to say but she recently and finally learned that there were certain times when she should keep her thoughts to her self. She could sense that this was one of these times.

Gabriel stripped down to his underwear, tossing the expensive clothes and gun holster on the bed. From the trunk, he pulled a great coat, a jacket, shirt, trousers and work boots. Each garment was mismatched, thread bare, dirty and torn. When he had redressed in the foul trousers and tattered shirt, Isabelle handed him the gun holster and watched closely as he strapped it into place. She hated it when he felt he had to wear the pistol, nevertheless she was glad he did wear it. That done he pulled on the worn tweed jacket.

"Do you have any of those peppermints, Isabelle?"

Isabelle nodded, took a paper sack from her dresser and handed it to him. He put in his pocket.

"And I bought two new mystery books. She must have read the others by now."

He smiled slightly. "That was thoughtful. Thank you!"

She took a large brimmed leather hat from the trunk, stood behind Gabriel, slid the hat into place and pushed his long hair up inside the hat. She stepped in front of him, smiled a small, unconvincing smile and wrinkled her nose. "You smell terrible."

"The effect I was aiming for, I am afraid."

"You will be back to change?"

"Yes, but I cannot stay."

She nodded and helped him into the filthy overcoat. "A cloak fit for a king." She said with sarcasm.

He frowned at her. "As ratty and as disgusting as this thing is, Isabelle, it would be a prized possession for a man freezing on the mean streets where I am headed."

"I know. I am sorry. I was not thinking." She lowered her eyes then looked back at him with worry. "Why do you have to walk there? Why can you not just show up there like you do here?"

"You know the answer to that. It is easy for me to see if there is anyone else but you in this room. I cannot be so sure about the house on Bartholomew Street. I have to go this way."

He opened the bedroom door and stepped out into the hallway.

"Gabriel!" She called to him as he walked away. He stopped but did not turn around. "I love you!" She said in a voice barely a whisper.

Without reply, he descended the stairs and left the house.

It was raining but Gabriel did not bother to try to flag down a cab. A cab driver would not pick up someone as seedy as he looked. He walked quickly and within half an hour, he turned the corner onto Bartholomew Street. It was not actually in the dreadful Seven Dials area but cross Morgan Avenue was the roadway that was the first spoke of the Seven Dials warren. In his disguise Gabriel was just another of the faceless, miserable people who lived in and on those streets. Their lives were brutal, mean and most often short. He walked with his head and shoulder down, never looked to the right or left. He ignored the beggars and prostitutes.

Forty-two Bartholomew had at one time been St. Andrews Church. Forty years of neglect and abandonment left the once dignified building ramshackle and over grown with ivy. Once a church where people gathered to honor their God now the rectory was a small brothel run by the Keaston family and the hiding place of Susan Jackman. With a quick look the right, to the left and behind he stepped onto the walkway that led to the rectory door.

He knocked, saw a shadow pass the eyehole but the door stayed closed.

"Come on, Keaston! Open the bloody door!" He called out. "Fucking moron!" Gabriel muttered, pulled a ring of keys from his pocket, turned the lock and stepped inside.

Two barely dressed females sat on a settee by a large fire. Gabriel ignored them, pulled the frightened Keaston out from behind the door.

"What is the matter with you?" Gabriel demanded angrily, smelled the whiskey and took his answer. "You've been drinking! I told you what I would do if I caught you drunk again!"

Arthur Keaston was larger than Gabriel. Even with that and the whiskey to buoy him Keaston made no effort to pull away as Gabriel held him roughly by his shirt. Previous experiences with Gabriel advised him better. "I ain't drunk, Mr. Jack. I only had a few!"

"A few after you finished the bottle." Gabriel hissed with disgust and pushed Keaston back. He slid down the wall to the floor and stayed there.

Gabriel turned to the prostitutes. "Rose, how long has he been drinking this time?"

“Dunno!” She answered. She knew that Gabriel was not a john but from force of habit, she lay back exposing more of her body. She would not tell him anything about the brutal young Keaston for fear of yet another beating.

Gabriel shook his head, walked passed them and into the kitchen. He turned up the gas lamp and had a good look around. The room was clean and more or less tidy and there were signs of a recent hot cooked meal. He opened the larder and found it well stocked.

From a small back room, he heard the sounds of a man and woman engaged in some sort of sex act. He wanted nothing more than to open the door and expose the hypocrite he would find there. The locals did not have the funds for the females in the brothels. They found cold satisfaction in alleys with street whores. This John was likely a so-called gentleman slumming from another part of London. He would no doubt have a family and innocent wife waiting at home. No matter what disgust and anger Gabriel felt, he could not do that without bringing unwanted attention on the house.

He went back into the front room. “Where is your mother?” He demanded of the Keaston still huddled on the floor. He did not answer but pointed up the narrow staircase. Gabriel took them two at a time. Without knocking, he opened the first door and stepped inside.

Betsy Keaston was a whore in her youth when a man might still pay for her slight beauty. All beauty faded quickly in her small world. For the twenty years, she earned her living off the bodies of other women.

Gabriel did not hate or even feel disrespect for these women. They only did what their mothers and grandmothers had done to house and feed their children. As proud as a woman might be, as much as she loved her husband and hated the humiliation of the perversions of strangers she would not sit by and see her babies cry with hunger or freeze to death on the stinking streets. Gabriel had more respect for these females than he did for the feigned ignorance of the wives who waited in comfortable warm homes for the men who defiled their marriages. Their were some who truly did not know what their men did those nights, even many who had no idea that such things as buying sex of any kind was possible.

However, the vast majority knew very well the how and the why of their husband’s absences. It was acceptable as long as no one dared to speak of it. It was acceptable because these ignorant women believed a true gentlewoman and wife made no sexual demands of the men. In fact, these ‘true ladies’ had no sexual needs except to create children. It was far better for their delicate sensibilities if their men took appetites away from them and to the streets. All that mattered was that this shame not be exposed. The family name never linked in any way with the seedy streets.

Betsy Keaston stood quickly when Gabriel stepped into her bedroom. “Mr. Jack!” she exclaimed. With one hand, she straightened her skirts and with the other pushed into place gray and black grizzled hair. “Didn’t know you was coming to-night. And look at yer, all drippin’ and cold like. Gimmie yer ‘at and coat and I’ll ‘ang ‘em by the downstairs fire.”

“Why are you letting Arthur drink?” Gabriel demanded angrily. He tossed the hat and coat at her. “I told you what would happen if he started that again. I cannot risk him talking too much in his cups.” He had warned them before that he would fire the lot of them if Arthur continued to drink. He was all too aware if he did that he would have

no one to take care of his mother. The only redeeming feature was that Betsy knew that if it were not for Gabriel her only child would be in prison or hung by now. The people of the East End had their faults but they were loyal to those who helped them. Help was a very rare thing.

“Ord, Mr. Jack!” Betsy picked up the wet garments and made a fuss of shaking and straightening them. “I don’t let him drink! The fool got into me private stash on ‘is own and I never lets him go out on ‘is own. Yer know that. He’s too stupid and e’ll get ‘is head bashed.”

“Where is George?”

“Sleeping, ‘e is!” She nodded to a door across the back of the room.

“Is he drunk as well?”

“Nah, George ain’t ‘ad a drink in years. He’s on night shift. Starts at midnight.”

“Right.” Gabriel backed down somewhat. There was a look of desperation and cold fear in her eyes. He had seen that look too many times. The woman who knew murders personally, thieves and whores driven insane by life, liquor, and had faced them down without a blink, shook with fright at the thought of Gabriel being displeased. The same pathetic look he had seen in the eyes of friends and foes in the Seven Dials, St. Giles and the Haymarket.

When he began his investigatory work, he cultivated and enjoyed this power. Fear was the ultimate control and he used it well. As much as he still needed it, now this power repelled him. He was weary to the bone of pretending to be what he was not. “Get rid of all your liquor. Not another drop of it in this house, do you understand? Tell that moron son of yours to keep his filthy hands of your girls. I do not want to see another black eye on them.”

Betsy nodded eagerly.

He pulled a wad of pound notes from his pocket and tossed them onto a near by table. Betsy eyed them greedily but did not move to them. “Relax, Betsy.” He sighed. “Your cozy business is safe, for now! I pay you well, more than you are worth so I insist you follow my rules to the letter.”

She dared to smile. “Would yer fancy a drink, tea, mebbe?”

“No, thank you.” He glanced at the ceiling. “How is she doing?”

“Not bad, not good. Same as ‘fore. Coughing more though. Thought she were goon lose a lung other day. ‘Er needs a way outta this ‘elling place, Mr. Jack. Stinkin’ air is killin’ ‘er. Needs back into country!”

“No signs of strangers about worth mentioning?”

“Nor a one and I keeps me eyes open.”

Gabriel left Betsy and went up another narrow, creaking staircase.

The small attic room was clean but sparsely furnished and that because the large bed took up most of the space. An armchair sat under a tiny round window. A desk, chair and washstand placed near the foot of the bed and butted up against them was a tall, narrow dresser. Stacks of newspapers and books cluttered the desktop. The wall shelves held more books and framed photographs of Gabriella. A bright fire crackled in the small fireplace and the room was warm. The woman in the bed was sleeping and snoring lightly. Gabriel placed the books, bag of candies on the nightstand, and sat in the armchair.

His thoughts went back seven months. One warm night at the end of May fire ravished and the raised the country home of his parents. Gabriel identified his father by his wedding band and a scar on the back of his left wrist. That was all that was left of the man that was recognizable. There was no sign of his mother's remains in the rubble of the house. Gabriel and Lee found her hiding and terrified in a local church a few hours later.

A log in the fire hissed bringing Gabriel back to the present. He nudged the side of the bed with his foot.

Susan Jackman woke, saw her son and sat up quickly. "Gabriel! How nice! I wasn't expecting you until next week."

"How are you feeling?" He asked and did a poor attempt to return her smile.

"Very well, better every day." Her pallor, sunken cheeks and dark eyes gave those words the lie. Gabriel was not surprised. His mother lied all the time. He often thought that she went out of her way to tell a falsehood, even when the truth would not bring her any grief.

"Are the Keaston's looking after you as they should."

"They take excellent care of me. For all her rough exterior and sad circumstances Betsy is an angel, even if her halo is slightly rusted." She laughed and noticed the gifts beside her. She took the treat bag and opened it. "Peppermints, my favorites! How thoughtful you are."

"Isabelle bought them and the books."

"Then you must thank her for me. I do not know how I would stand the boredom if I did not have my books. What I would like right now is a cigarette." She looked at him hopefully.

Gabriel lit two cigarettes and handed one over to her. "You know what they say about a woman who indulges in tobacco."

"I wonder who 'they' are, Gabriel. Who ever they may be, their ideas do no longer apply to me. How are you? I have to say you are looking rather bleak."

"How much longer are you planning on staying hidden here like some scared mouse? Seven months is a long time to hide from whoever or whatever you are afraid of."

"I told you that before. I will not have to be here for that much longer. I am hoping to spend this Christmas at Random House with you and Gabriella. I think of that everyday. It is what keeps me going. Tell me, how are Ted and Cornelia?"

"Well enough. Every time I see you ask me about them. Why is that?"

"Just... well, they are my friends I miss them. It is not easy for me, you know. All my friends and family, but for you, think I am dead. No, it is not easy!" Her forced smile and cheerfulness faded under the weight of his dark, unwavering stare.

"It is odd because I do not remember you ever referring to Cornelia as a friend. Certainly not for these last few years."

"I like her well enough; perhaps I did not understand her casual manner."

"Not a big enough snob for you, is that right?"

Susan sighed and rubbed her forehead. "Gabriel, I can see you want to start an argument with me. I do not understand why and I would rather that you left and came back when you are in a better mood."

"I am not going anywhere." He said flatly. "I had an interesting evening with the Underhill's recently."

"Oh Lord! Why do you insist on seeing them? You know how much I dislike Caroline. You should turn your back on them for my sake."

"You don't want to know about our conversation?"

"No, I do not. Anything that woman says is most likely a lie. You have no idea what she put your father and me through."

"I do know. We will talk about that, but later. First I want you to tell me about the about the 'Circle of Mendes' and Father's place in that evil organization?"

Susan gasped and slid back onto her pillows.

"Before you tell another lie to me, Mother, you should know I am aware of a lot."

"What an unholy bitch Caroline Underhill is! Whatever she told you I am sure she lied and exaggerated to turn you against me."

"I doubt that. I am sure she told me the exact truth."

"Then if you know so much why bother me with these terrible memories. Why are you going on about all this now? You are giving me a headache. Go away!"

"Tell me what happened the night of the fire."

"I told you after it happened."

"You were dazed, confused. Enough time has gone by you might see things clearer. I have the right to know and you will tell me." There was threat and force to these last words.

"Fine! Then I will tell you and relive the worst time of my life. If it makes you happy!"

"It does."

"It was late May and a very warm Sunday night. Samuel and I were in bed. He was sleeping but I could not. Samuel had a lot of pain that day; his illness was that much worse. Sleeping was his only respite. I did not want to wake him so I went downstairs to the kitchen to make some warm milk."

"As you know, Samuel and I were very generous with our staff. They all had a full twenty-four hours off every week and would most would leave Sundays after Church. That night there was no one home but my husband and me."

"I lit a candle, pulled on my robe and went down to the kitchen. I put a pot of milk on the stove and turned up the gas. It was so hot inside, stifling. I decided to step outside for some cooler air. It was rather nice outside. I wandered across the garden to the edge of the woods...then the explosion happened. I vaguely remember lifting off the ground and landing in the brush."

"That is all I remember, Gabriel until you and Lee found me in the Church hours later. It was a gas leak, my candle and the lit stove that caused the explosion and my poor Sammy died." She was crying then.

Despite of his mood and the fact that he was then certain she was not being completely truthful, he wanted to go to her and hold her. However, he knew he had her cornered and frightened and this might be the only chance he ever had to get any truth from her.

"And since that time, Mother, you have insisted I keep you hidden. No one but Isabelle, Lee and I know you are still alive. Did you choose this as a hiding place because it was once a church?"

“No.”

“It is just a co-incidence then that you hid in a church after the explosion and you are still hiding in a church? Do you really think I will believe that?”

Susan sniffed, raised her head and looked down her nose at her son. “Maybe I no longer care what you believe!”

“Then I should go and not come back. How long do you think the Keaston’s would look after you if I stop paying them?”

“You would not do that!”

“Yes, I would. I will do that this very night if you do not tell me the whole truth. I want to know everything about the Circle and my place in it.”

“But it is gone, Desjardin is dead. There is no place for you in it. How could there be?”

He closed his eyes briefly. She was going to fight this and he was ready for it. “Caroline and Father were lovers and I think for a very long while.”

“What,” she whispered, “did Caroline tell you. What lies has she filled your head with?”

“She told me the truth and that is far more than you ever did. She and father were lovers and he told her a great deal. The other night she told me. Father was a member of the ‘Circle of Mendes’ with Ted and Henry and you knew all about it.”

For a long while, they sat in silence. When she spoke, again she sounded tired and old. “They were young and foolish men doing reckless things while in university. That is not so unusual.”

“Young and foolish! Christ, Mother. We are not talking about a few drunks with local girls who should have known better. We are talking about, rape, torture, sodomy, murder and Satan Worship. How can you sit there and pretend such ignorance, when a normal woman would shake to the core with shame for her husband and her self?”

“I do not shake because I have no idea what you are going on about. They had drunken parties with prostitutes and that is all.”

Gabriel stood and sat on the bed and lifted her to sit with her back against the headboard. He forced eye contact. Every time she tried to look away, Gabriel gently and firmly brought her eyes back to him. “Henry Leighton left diaries that he wrote at the time. They are in detail. I will tell you about the death one young girl named Rose.”

“No!”

“Nevertheless I will tell you anyway. It could be that you were there and might fill me in where I go wrong. Rose came to the grotto eagerly, just a prostitute on a job or so she thought. Of course, she was not a virgin. They only needed them for the special ceremonies, such as a baby dedication. But you know all about that, isn’t that right?”

“Please...! Do not do...!” Her sentences trailed away.

“You can imagine the scene, the only light from thirteen black candles and a large fire burning in the pit, the air thick with incense, their prized huge crucifix hanging above them, upside down.”

“Henry sedated her so they could prepare her for the ceremony. Desjardin, as always was in charge. He removed her clothes and cut off her hair, all that they threw into the fire. They placed the still unconscious girl into a tub of very hot water. They were

concerned that she might have vermin. Jackman washed her thoroughly, according to Leighton; Jackman enjoyed that part so they let him have at it, every time. This done they tied Rose to a wall rack, her hands above her head, her feet spread. Then they doused her with freezing water to wake her. Her horrified reactions were important.” Gabriel stopped to give his mother a chance to react. She said nothing, tears streaming down her face.

“De Wolfe made the first cut. Not a deep cut and in a line under her breasts, so the blood would run down her body for the raping. By this time, Rose knew she was in very deep trouble. She pleaded, begged and cried. Jackman led them in prayer. I can imagine what it was and to who it was aimed. Desjardin raped her first. He was always first; it was his place of honor.”

“Then Leighton cut her, long gashes from shoulder to nipple. He placed a noose around her neck and tightened it all the while he raped her. This done he released the noose. They did not want her to die too soon.

“Now I get to dear father.”

“No, Gabriel, please. I do not need to hear this.”

“Why? Were you there as part of it all? The ‘Circle’ had some highly placed female members. Were you one? Yes, you do need to hear it in my voice. Father had special tastes and since he was the ‘holy man’, they always agreed. They let Rose fall from the rack. Father held her head and threatened her not to bite him. I am sure you know just what he wanted her to do to him. Apparently it was his favorite. Unfortunately for our poor victim she did bite him.” Gabriel stopped. “Are you ready to tell me what I need to know yet, Mother?”

“I cannot.” She gasped. He could hardly hear her.

“Right, father was not too pleased with poor Rose. Can you even begin to imagine the horror she was going through. I can. I am sure she knew she was going to die. There was no righteous God there to protect her that is a fact. There was no help from the holy man who held her. Jackman threw her on to her belly. They all knew what he was going to do, he had done it so often, you see. De Wolfe pushed her knees up under her blood soaked body; he and Leighton held her in place while your husband sodomized her.”

“Knowing that and so much more I am almost glad that Samuel Jackman was not my father. Except for the fact that the man you took was many times worse. Did you not know any decent men, Mother?”

Susan went limp. Gabriel let her slide down onto her pillows. She had stopped crying, just lying there staring up at Gabriel.

“This hell on earth continued until 3 am; always at that time their victims died. Desjardin sliced open her neck. How the poor creature was still alive until that point, I have no idea but according to Leighton, she was.”

“The two diaries cover a four month period. They describe the deaths of four young girls and two men. How many people did they kill over their eighteen year partnership?”

Gabriel took in a deep breath. The anger, fear and resentment drained from him. He leaned down and rested his head next to his mothers. The pillow felt cool on his burning face. He turned his face towards his mother; she had not taken her eyes off him. “Please tell me, do you know who killed my Helena?”

She took a deep breath. "All I ever wanted was to have a baby, Gabriel. I loved you so much and I still do. I do not know who killed her but I am certain it falls back to those miserable days. It is the same for the murder of Margaret Leighton. It must be."

Gabriel got up from the bed slowly. He was more exhausted than he had ever thought possible. He stood for a while looking out the circular window. It was raining harder. Somewhere down the road, a woman was yelling. He sat back into the armchair. "Is Gabriella in danger?"

Susan shook her head. "Yes! Any one you love!"

"So that is why you would have the world think you are dead? Did it not occur to you to help me protect my child?"

"How could I tell you that without telling you it all? Anyway, I know you keep her safe."

"So you were going to just wait in hiding here and go on hoping that someone else I love so dearly was not going to be slaughtered? Do you have any idea what I will do to you if anything happens to Gabriella because you are too full of fear and shame to tell me what I need to know? I need to end this Mother so that more people will not die. Tell me or as God is my witness I will leave and never return."

She nodded. "I will tell you everything. Yes, I was a member of the 'Circle' but for a very brief time and only to try and break Samuel free from its hold. Do you think God will ever forgive me, Gabriel?"

Chapter Eight

It was dusk when Cornelia crossed the terrace patio, went down the stone steps and into the back garden. The air was still and cold.

She stopped suddenly and turned. "I know you are following me Lee." She smiled as he approached. "If that is how you track your culprits it is a wonder that you ever catch anyone."

"I was not following you Cornelia, just watching with an eye to your safety."

"Who would harm me in my own garden? Wouldn't I be safe here?"

"With a murderer still on the loose, it is not a given that anyone here is safe at any time. I am sure you are aware of that."

"Am I? Well, maybe so!" She took his arm. "Then come and sit with me for a while in the Japanese garden. I often go there to think, especially in the evening. Tonight, I would enjoy some company. Tell me Lee, where do you stand on the subject of revenge."

"Usually I am firmly behind the aggrieved individual. Still my opinion changes depending on the circumstances."

She laughed. "Spoken like a politician. What you are saying is that in certain cases personal revenge is acceptable."

"Only if justice cannot or will not be served. It is the best for all involved if justice comes through the police, the lawyers and the courts. However, it must all end in true justice and that must be equal for everyone, no matter status or wealth. If one man or woman is above the law then in my mind the entire system is for naught." They reached the secluded Japanese garden and sat on marble seats. "That is my humble opinion."

"And Gabriel's as well. You are very noble men, your hearts and minds are in the right places but I wonder how practical you are. If we all regarded each other as complete equals, I doubt there would be very much crime. Doesn't a man rape to show he thinks he is superior and to humiliate the lesser victim? A person who steals another's property must believe he is more entitled to the property than the other is. A killer sees their life as much more valuable. And social equality is a fine thing but it will never be, not without the eradication of all greed, sloth, illicit lust and hypocrisy. Do you ever foresee that happening?"

"Cornelia, you are thoroughly depressing me. Tell me, are you thinking of obtaining some revenge of your own?"

She shook her head. Lee followed her gaze up to the huge dark silhouette that was her home. "No," she laughed. "It is just my mind wandering as it often does."

He decided to change the conversation. "This is certainly a lonely place when night falls. Where is everybody? I could not find a soul."

"Well, Randall and Elizabeth came back a while ago. Randall is presently doing his best to frustrate and probably delay our dinner again by begging for sandwiches. Owen finally came back from the London lawyers and suggested that Elizabeth join him in his studio. Ted is sulking and drinking in his study. Ruth is staying in her rooms and thank

God for that. Jane and Steward could be anywhere. I rarely know where they are. Jane may be with Ruth, sadly they are very close.”

In many ways, Lee thought.

“Gabriel brought Suzanne Beryline here to-day. I just spent a few hours with her and beat her thoroughly again and again at cribbage. She is a delightful young thing. I think that when Elizabeth has done her magic on Randall I will try to get Suzanne and Randall together. They would make a perfect couple. I do not know why I did not think of it earlier. I know she is pairing up now with Gabriel but he is besotted with Elizabeth so it is just a matter of time before he is finished with Suzanne and that fat Italian. And far as where Gabriel is right now. I have no idea. Maybe he is with Suzanne.”

Lee sighed. “I cannot see why he brought her here. If he has his mind set on Elizabeth. Bringing another mistress under her nose is not going to endear him.”

“Ah yes, but he thinks having Suzanne here might make Elizabeth jealous and stir her into action.”

“That does not sound like Gabriel. I wonder if someone put that idea into his head.”

She smiled. “Like all men Gabriel needs a push now and then. If I know women and I do, believe me, this will work, eventually.” She paused turned and looked up to Lee’s broad, strong face. “You are a very lucky man Lee.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You love your wife and she loves you. That is the greatest blessing God gives us...along with healthy children of course.”

“We are very happy. Sue Lyn is the perfect female for me. I used to hope to marry either brains or beauty never dreaming I would find both. And now, Cornelia, we are even more blessed.”

“How is that?”

“Sue Lyn is soon to present me with my first born.”

“Oh Lee! That is wonderful news.” She clapped her hands and surprised Lee by quickly leaning over and kissing him. “Congratulations. When is Sue Lyn’s day?”

“The Doctor thinks we will have a have a Christmas baby.”

“Does Gabriel know?”

“Well, naturally he does. He is my good friend and we live in his house. I could hardly show up one day with a bundled baby and say, ‘Look what I have!’”

Cornelia laughed. “That is a great joy for you and Sue Lyn. A baby! What I would do if one of my lazy sons reproduced! What a happy day it will be to hold a grandchild.”

“Jane and Sebastian Ridley are to marry soon. Maybe you will get your wish through them.”

Lee noticed a shadow fall over her face. “Yes, well, that is if I can keep Jane in line. Is it too much, Lee, to ask a daughter to keep such a wonderful man happy?”

“You are having a problem?”

“Ha! Jane has never been anything but a problem! Her father has left her rearing up to me and the Lord knows I have done my best but Jane can be so head-strong. I cannot tell you how many times I have had to smooth Sebastian’s ruffled feathers as far as she is concerned. She just does not seem to understand that a man who looks like that and with the wonderful future he has before him can have his pick of so many

females...and as much as a mother hates to say it, most of the those females are much more appealing than Jane! I will not relax a minute before their May wedding day!"

"I have never met the man but there is talk about his political success. I see his man in the papers almost daily."

The shadow lifted. Cornelia glowed. "There is no doubt about it Lee. That man was born for greatness. In a few short years, he will be Prime Minister! You mark my words, Lee Woo! And if I can keep my idiot daughter under control she will be standing beside him."

"You have had a strong hand in aiding Ridley from what I have heard."

"Oh yes! He has been like another son to me!" She stood. "Come along. I am shivering. On the way back I will tell you all about Sebastian Ridley."

Elizabeth knocked on Gabriel's door. When she did not get an answer, she turned the door handle and found the door locked. She could not see light from under the door. She went back to her room and found Janet standing in the doorway.

"You rang, Miss Leighton."

"Yes, if you are not too busy would you help me with my hair? There is still two hours until dinner but I would like to do it now. I am wind blown from a long ride this afternoon." She sat at the dressing table and began to pull the pins from her hair.

"Not busy at all, Miss!" Janet answered. She brushed Elizabeth's hair smooth. The thick auburn hair spread in gentle curls half way down her back. "You've such lovely hair, if you don't mind me saying. Why not leave it down and show it off like?"

"Really? Oh, I don't know if I should...maybe not."

"I always think the ladies put here hair up all the time because it is ratty and they don't want anyone to see it. If I had a head full like yours, I'd show it off when I could. I could just pull it back on the sides, like this." Janet brushed the sides of Elizabeth's hair back and looked down into the mirror. "I'll put this bit in a nice braid and leave the rest to make the ladies jealous. Miss Beryline is here and if you ask me, she needs someone to make her jealous. Thinks she is the best there is, and I don't care if I should not tell!"

"Miss Beryline?"

"Yes, she's a 'friend' of some of the gentlemen." Janet rolled her eyes into the mirror. "And Mrs. De Wolfe likes her but I don't know why. She is pretty all right but not a candle to you. If I was you, I'd leave me hair down and wear something right sexy for dinner to night."

Elizabeth smiled. "You know, Janet that is exactly what I will do. I have an oyster Persian silk, brocade dinner dress. It is tight and cut so low I dare not bend over."

Janet nodded happily. "Then I'll just finish this braid for you." Elizabeth saw her wince and rub her left arm.

"Is something wrong with your arm?" Elizabeth asked.

"Broke it back in the fall when Mr. Steward pushed me down the stairs and it ain't healed completely just yet."

"Pushed you down the stairs?" Elizabeth turned and looked up at the young maid. She could see that Janet wanted to say a lot more and needed a little coaxing. "Good Lord, why would he do such a thing?"

"Cause he were mad at me. He said I lied and that I just slipped when he rushed past me. I can still feel his hands on my shoulders. He wanted me sent off but the Mrs.

knows her boys and he is the worst. She gave him heck and a half and I stayed put. Mr. De Wolfe told him to leave the maids alone or he couldn't come back here no more."

"How terrible for you, Janet. Why would Steward do such dangerous thing?"

Janet lowered her voice and stood closer to Elizabeth. "I'll tell you because you are new here and the ladies should know about the men around them, I always think. But please do not tell a word of it! I am dead scared of getting into more trouble."

"Yes, please do. It seems like all the De Wolfe men are rather flirty."

"He pushed me down the stairs. He wanted to kill me and that cause he were mad at me." Janet paused and went very red. "I were a bit of a fool back in the spring and well...you know!"

Elizabeth knew all too well of the sons of the houses often took advantage of the more gullible staff members. When things went wrong and they always did, the servant always took the pain. Janet was indeed very lucky to have Cornelia as her mistress.

Janet continued, obviously eager to share her sad story. "It is just that he were always so nice to me. I been here since I was only twelve and Steward always treated me so sweetly. Everybody said he was a no good but I didn't see it. Then last spring he told me...." she hung her head in shame.

Elizabeth's heart went out to her. She closed the bedroom door and put her arms around the slim shoulders. "It is not your fault Janet. The lowest things that men do are the crosses that all women must bare. He told you he loved you, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did and I believed him. Wasn't I a stupid fool? How could a man like that, so handsome and rich ever really love a house maid?"

Elizabeth continued to hold her. She did not respond to the question. The answer was too common and ugly.

"So I let him...do what he wanted. I guess he told cause soon some of the other maids got right mean and started to tease me. I told them he loved me. They all laughed at me and Mrs. Beaver warned me not to get in the family way. They would send me off then for certain."

"I think I can guess the rest of it, Janet. In time you pressed Steward to prove he loved you. Did you tell him he needed to marry you?"

Janet nodded and wiped away a tear. "He laughed at me and told me I was an idiot. That broke me heart, it did. So from then on, I tried to push him away. He ain't a man who likes that and sometimes, when he could get at me he did it anyway."

"Oh my dear I am so sorry! Are you saying he raped you?"

"Yes and worse."

"What could be worse than rape?"

"He hurt me but never so the marks could be seen."

Elizabeth's heart beat faster. She needed to know more. It would be an intrusion on the girls shame but she had no choice but to ask. "What did he do to hurt you?"

Tears followed freely and Janet wiped them away angrily with her sleeve. "Some times he burned me with a cigarette if I won't move just right. Then when he were doing it he would bite me hard, until he drew blood. He liked that so much, I could tell!"

Elizabeth gasped and made busy finding a hanky so Janet would not see the effect these words had on her. She gave the hanky to Janet and waited while she blew her nose. "Where did he bite you, Janet?"

Janet raised her head, sniffed and straightened her apron. "I don't care not really. That man is a monster and I am glad he didn't marry me. I've a new man, John. He works in the village and he treats me right. He does love me."

"Well that is good, dear. If he is a good man, keep him near. They are rare. I need to know Janet, where did Steward bite you?"

"On me breast. John says one day he will kill Steward De Wolfe. I beg him not to cause I could not lose him and go on."

Elizabeth took a deep breath. "Look, Janet, this is important. Do not tell anyone what we talked about here, promise?"

"I won't. Ain't something I usually gab about. Don't know why I did today." She forced a smile. "Must be coming unglued."

"One more thing, be very careful around Steward from now on. Try very hard not to ever be alone with him. It could be that he is a very dangerous man."

For a silent moment, the two women locked eyes. Knowledge passed from Elizabeth to Janet, all class differences vanished in that moment. They were simply two young and vulnerable females fighting the same enemy and fiercely holding onto pride and dignity. When Elizabeth looked away, she knew that Janet understood. She cleared her throat. "Do you know where Mr. Jackman is?"

"Having a rest. I heard Mr. Woo telling Mrs. De Wolfe that Mr. Jackman had a head ache."

"Oh, I see! Well, I will speak to him when he is feeling better. I am going to see Owen's studio. If you hear of anyone asking for me will you tell them that is where I am?"

"Yes, but you ain't walking up there on your own are you?"

"Why shouldn't I? He gave me directions."

"No. We ain't none of us goes up there alone. It's bad haunted up there."

"I don't believe in ghosts. I am sure will be fine."

"You may not believe in them, Miss Leighton but they believe in us. They's up there alright I seen the boy with my own eyes, twice."

Elizabeth smiled. "I had better hurry or Owen will think I am not coming."

"Want me stay at the bottom of the steps to see you get there in one piece?"

"If you want, yes, that would be nice of you."

"You'd best bring this." Janet held the wick of a candle into the gas lamp flame and handed the candlestick to Elizabeth. "Them stairs up there are as dark as a witch's arse."

The stairs up to the fourth floor were indeed dark. Her candle did very little to push back the blackness. When she reached the top of the stairs she heard Janet whisper, "Be careful, please, Miss!" She turned back to answer but the girl was gone.

To the left two gas lamps lit small areas of the walls but did not reach to the floor. To the right the hallways vanished into a solid blackness. Despite her resolve that she would not to be frightened Elizabeth shuddered and moved quickly down the very dim hallway to the left. Her footfall echoed and, she thought, it sounded far louder than it should.

Two large double doors at the end of the hallway opened and Owen stepped out. Light from in his studio flooded around him "I was afraid you had gotten lost." He smiled at her. He was wearing gray, paint stained trousers, an open necked white shirt and a

well-colored painter's smock. A streak of bright green powder ran down the side of his face.

With the light from the studio, she saw the long, dusty and bare hallway. A few of the many doors were open but they were certainly not inviting. Strips of wallpaper hung over like strange tree braches.

"Dreadful isn't it?" Owen asked following her look.

"Well, it is not very nice." She moved past him quickly. The brightly lit large room was comforting, even more so when Owen closed the door.

"Some day when I own this place I am going to have that hallway gutted and completely redone. A few rooms at the other end I am going to have bricked over altogether."

"The haunted rooms?" She asked with a smile.

"Are you a heathen unbeliever, Miss Leighton?" He returned her smile with a teasing one of his own.

"I prefer to leave the ghosts and goblins for the children." She turned and walked the length of the large L-shaped room. Tall windows ran the length of the wall and appeared to continue as the room turned the corner. "You get the morning light?"

"Yes, an east and south view. It is perfect. You will have to excuse the clutter, though. The maids won't come up here to do their magic. I do what I can but things do have a way of piling up on me."

Along the wall, opposite from the windows, ran a long counter and down the middle of the room an equally long table. The tools of a successful artist cluttered every inch. The smell of the oil paints, powders and cleaners took her back to her childhood, happily playing at her mother skirts in her studio.

"I think that must come with the occupation, Owen. My mother's own studio was very much like this." She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. "My Lord!" She looked back at Owen with sparkling eyes. "The memories...from the smells, the sketches and canvas boards are so real."

He took a few steps closer to her. "I am sorry, Elizabeth. How thick I am! I should have thought of that before asking you up here."

"No, it is lovely, really! Those memories are so wonderful, so precious to me. Any thing that stirs them is a gift."

"That is good then." He paused and watched Elizabeth as she moved along the counter. Every so often, she stopped and ran her fingers thoughtfully over an unfinished sketch, straightened a row on mismatched brushes or tightened the lid of a jar. Habits from a happier time and for a while he let her enjoy the memories.

She stopped at three finished and dry paintings leaning against packing crates. With true awe, she complemented them. She was surprised to see he blushed slightly at her praise.

"Thank you. They are off to the framers in the morning." He leaned against the table, crossed his arms over his chest. "So, I thought you promised me that I would show you the grounds. I hear you abandoned me for my younger brother."

"Randall and I went for a walk this morning and when you weren't back by mid-afternoon, so when Randall offered, I accepted. Randall was very charming and entertaining."

“Oh was he? Good for Randall.” Owen smiled broadly. He teased her with his brilliant, beautiful sapphire eyes. “Do you have no knowledge of the weak ego of the struggling artist?”

“Sorry. To be honest I completely forgot that I told you we would go out together.”

“That does not help much!”

“You are hardly a struggling artist and I have the distinct feeling it would take much more than missing a walk with me to hurt your ego. If it will help....” She stopped speaking at the sound of footsteps in the hallway.

Owen opened the door. “Hello.” Lee smiled at them. “Mind if I join you? I need a place to hide or I’ll be trapped into playing cribbage with Cornelia.”

“You had better come in Lee. When Mother gets cribbage on her mind, she is relentless. You are safe here, though. Wild horses could not drag her up here.”

“Good evening, Mr. Woo.” Elizabeth nodded at Lee. “Not a fan of cribbage? I rather enjoy the game.”

“Oh, I like the game well enough. It is just that Cornelia plays fast and loose with honesty when she counts her pegs.”

“Fast and loose is putting it nicely Lee. I doubt my mother has ever won a game honestly. Run like the wind if she ever suggests we all sit down to a ‘nice game of poker’.”

The three moved back across the room stopping here and there discussing various sketches and finished and half-finished paintings. At the far end of the room, they came to an easel with a very large painting under a tarpaulin. A fine layer of dust lay on the cover.

“Your work in progress?” she asked.

“No. It is finished...well, as close to finished as it ever will be.”

“Do you mind if I look?”

“Better not. It is a rather explicit nude.”

“Male or female?”

“Good Lord! Female, of course! No one paints nude males.”

“And thank God for that.” Lee put in.

“Why not? If a woman can show off to the world her lovely body, why not a male? I think I would very much enjoy a well painted nude male.” The naked image of Gabriel flashed quickly through her mind. “And most certainly if he is well put together.”

Lee cleared his throat.

“Really?” Owen laughed. “Then you had better learn to paint and do you own. Because I am not going to sit for weeks staring at some...well, never mind. Go ahead look if you want but do not say I didn’t warn you.” He lifted the heavy tarpaulin and threw it aside.

The painting was almost life size. The subject sat on a settee facing the artist, her legs slightly parted, and her head resting on her arm. Her long, black hair hung down slim white shoulders and parted around one breast. She was very pretty with ivory skin and large green eyes. Her look was sad and terribly lonely. All but the background was finished and dry.

“Oh my, this is lovely, Owen. Why haven’t you finished it?”

"I suppose I lost interest and the heart. Mary, the model, died. She was brutally murdered not too far from here several years ago."

"Mary O'Neal? The barmaid?"

"Yes." He answered with surprise. "How did you know about that?"

"Randall told me. We were talking about good and evil and the subject led to the murders."

"Little brother spends the afternoon with a beautiful woman and tells her about murders! Is there any wonder Randall often looks so lonely, Lee?"

"I think I would try to have a more pleasant and interesting conversation."

"Well, it was interesting and so very terrible, Mr. Woo. So you were working on this when she died?"

"Not exactly. I had to let her go and that was a few weeks before her murder. It was a shame too, she was by far and away the best model I had ever come across."

"Was she? Well yes, she was very pretty."

"She certainly was." Lee agreed eagerly. Elizabeth fought back a laugh.

"Not just that. It was her total confidence and lack of inhibitions that made her an excellent model. Other females I have worked with can be very difficult."

"Did she have a lot of experience? I mean as a model?"

"No this was her first job. Perhaps that was part of the problem."

"Then what was the problem? Why did you let her go?"

"I had Mary in mind as a model for a long time before I approached her. She was a true beauty but I waited until she was eighteen. She agreed but made me promise that we would keep the employment as secret as possible. It made sense to protect her reputation. When I needed her to pose she walked to a nearby village. I would pick her up and bring her here. At the end of a sitting I would take her to a turn in the road just outside Madsen Worthy and she would walk the rest of the way home."

"I paid her very well and cash at every sitting. Everything went well for several months. We were near to the end of the project when she made it perfectly clear to me that she thought there was more between us than there was. It was a surprise to say the least. Never once did I act in any way other than her employer. I reminded her that I was an engaged man. In fact Mary had met Ruth."

"Ruth did not mind you having a nude model? Artists have a reputation when it comes to their models." Lee asked.

"Not this artist. I was very much in love with my fiancé, she trusted me and then I would not betray her. In addition, I do not sleep with my nude models. I find that intimate knowledge takes the edge off the work. It may sound odd but maintaining the mystery seems to help bring the work to life."

"That does not sound odd, not at all." Elizabeth turned and studied the sad, lovely face. Why was she so sad? Did she sense the man she had fallen in love with did not return her feelings? Had she a feeling of her pending doom? "And the murderer was never caught?"

"Not that I ever heard of. I hope perhaps that they caught him at least for something else. It does not sit too well to think that creature is still walking freely. I often wonder on that." He paused and pulled the tarpaulin back into place. "Perhaps your conversation with Randall about good and evil was not unusual. The night Mary met her horrible end we were having a wedding rehearsal here and the dinner party afterwards."

We were all so busy and having a grand time. Ruth and I were so happy and at the same time, just down the mountain a fine young woman....” His voice trailed away. He cleared his throat and smiled down at Elizabeth. “Enough of that misery!”

Elizabeth noticed another much small painting of a nude, on the floor and leaning against the wall. The woman in it was blond, pretty and smiling. The dress she wore was open and her breasts exposed. “This one is pretty, as well.”

Lee leaned past Owen to look at the painting. “Isn’t that Suzanne Beryline?” he asked. “I did not know she was one of your models.”

“She was for a while last winter. Gabriel found out about it and that was that. Seems the lovely Suzanne must only disrobe for Gabriel and then the motives are hardly as noble as producing fine art.”

Lee watched discreetly as Elizabeth placed the painting back where she found it. She turned her back on the men as they spoke and feigned complete interest in newspaper flier advertising the best possible framing experts. Lee saw her reflection clearly on the window glass. There were two red circles on her cheeks. Her hand shook slightly as she examined the advertisement.

“Apparently,” Owen continued, “Gabriel brought her here this afternoon and she is to stay for a few days. I doubt we will be seeing much of him.”

“It is a good thing for him that Cornelia will not let Isabelle in Wolfe Manor.” Lee said flatly. The pain he had seen in Elizabeth’s face surprised him. He expected jealousy and even anger but not hurt.

Elizabeth turned quickly and smiled up at Owen. “Tell me, does a painter’s model make much money?”

“Well, some do. It depends on how pretty they are and if they will do a nude. The nude models can make twice as much as others and earn a very good living.”

“Do you have many models that will ‘do a nude’?”

“I have a few. However, it is hard to get them to come all the way out here every day for weeks. Mother wouldn’t let them stay here, God only know what she thinks they will do her household once the sun goes down!”

“Are you working on a painting now?”

Owen shook his head. “I cannot seem to find my inspiration right now. It happens.”

“Then,” Elizabeth clapped her hands and looked from Lee back to Owen, “Let me be your inspiration. I will pose nude for you.”

Owen’s eyebrows went half way up his forehead. Beside her, she felt Lee’s body tighten. “Pardon me?” Owen asked.

“You heard me. I have a lovely body or so I have been told. I am not closed up with inhibitions and I very much need the money.”

“But you understand you will have to sit nude?” Owen asked stupidly in his surprise and amazement.

“Yes.” She answered slowly, smiling at his reaction. She completely ignored Lee as he slipped slightly behind Owen and tried very hard to catch her eye. “I take off all my clothes, sit or lie down, whatever you want and you paint what you see. But if you think I am not built well enough, I assure you my breasts are far nicer than hers.” She waved her hand towards the painting of Suzanne.

"Oh...well, that is something, then!" Owen stuttered and tried to collect his thoughts.

"If you are not sure, I will show you." She moved her hands to the buttons that ran down the front of her dress.

"I am sure that would not be necessary, Miss Leighton." Lee said quickly and touched her arm. His eyes were wide and Elizabeth had to fight to hold back a laugh.

"I will take your word for it, Elizabeth." Owen ran his eyes the length of her body. "I am a fairly good judge. I am sure you are perfect for the work. If you have the courage...!"

"Of course! I have no false modesty. So you will hire me as a nude model then?"

Lee coughed and ran his hands down his face.

"Yes, we will give it a try. Before I begin a painting, I will have to do dozens of sketches. Those alone can take several days. We can begin with them and if you still feel comfortable, we will discuss a painting."

"And you will pay me and not expect anything sexual?"

"Without the slightest doubt." Owen grinned broadly. "When would you like to start?"

"Do you need the morning light for sketches?"

"No."

"Then we could start tonight, after dinner! I will come up here around ten, if you want!"

"Certainly! I will have paper and charcoal ready."

"Oh, this is so exciting!" Elizabeth smiled at Lee. "Who knows I may have found a career. I should go now though and change for dinner."

"Should I see you down to your room?" Lee asked and without waiting for an answer led Elizabeth to the doorway. He held her arm firmly. They did not speak until they were in her room with the door closed.

"Why did you do that?" Lee asked angrily.

"Do what?"

"Don't play silly poker with me. What did you hope to prove with all that malarkey about posing nude?"

"It is not malarkey, Lee! If other women do it why shouldn't I?"

"There is a very good reason why. You do remember that it is very likely that one of the De Wolfe men is a sadistic murderer. Do you really think it wise to sit naked, alone in a closed room with any of them?"

"Well," she rolled her eyes and opened her wardrobe, "Owen is not the murderer and Steward is. I have no doubt about it."

"Why, what did you find out?"

She repeated what Janet told her earlier. "Happily, I am sure that vicious breast biting is very rare and it points directly at Steward. But it is not anything we could take to the police as proof, is it?"

"It would have a place in collective evidence if Janet would testify in court to what Steward did to her."

"Do you think she would?"

"From what you say and what I know I say that would depend on what Cornelia wanted her to do." Lee paused and ran his hands through his thick, black hair. "I think

you are right about Steward. Earlier today I overheard a very disturbing scene between him, Ruth and Jane.”

“Oh really?” Elizabeth asked casually as she smoothed the oyster brocade dress over the bedside.

Lee sighed. “Come, sit and listen to me.” He motioned to two chairs under the window.

“What happened?” She asked, sitting with him and sensing the seriousness in his tone.

“Steward and Jane were alone with Ruth. They drugged her and sexually molested her. It was painfully obvious that this was something they often did and also obvious that sex between that brother and sister was common and had gone on for years.”

“Dear God!” Elizabeth gasped. She was going to ask Lee if he was sure but there was such a firm certainty in his face and voice she did not.

“It was also too clear that Steward has a mean temper and uses pain as a control. I am sure you will understand why you must stay away from him and Jane. There is no need for you to spend any time alone flirting with Steward. It would be a very dangerous and fool hearty thing.”

“Of course.”

“Good. Now back to this matter with Owen. I understand completely what made you offer yourself up that way....”

“Lee, do not make it sound so illicit. You heard what Owen said about not having that sort of closeness with his models. Are you saying he was lying?”

“No, I am not. I know that that is the truth. He chooses not to see his models in a sexual way. They are professional females and he hires them with that very much in mind. You are not a model. You are a lovely young women who has offered to remove her clothes for him. Take your clothes off and you will see how quickly he puts his pencil down!”

“Are you trying to tell me you think he is a rapist too? Are they around every corner?”

“Steward may have had a partner but I do not believe it was Owen. Elizabeth, you do not understand as much about men as you think you do. You do not have enough years behind you for that. Men like Owen and Gabriel have had a great deal of experience with women....”

“You are telling me they are male sluts? That much is very clear, even to me!”

“No, I mean that they know how to get just what they want, when they want it. Owen will not try to rape you, not only because that is not his nature but also because he would not have to. He would simply seduce you.”

Elizabeth sighed. “I understand your concern Lee but truly if he tries anything I will slap his face and leave.”

“If he tries anything you may decide you do not want to leave.”

“Maybe so Lee, but would that be so very wrong? Owen is getting a divorce. He is handsome, rich and charming. And from what I can see it seems like every woman has a lover but me.”

“I saw your face when you found out about Suzanne and Gabriel. It was more than anger and jealousy. You were hurting and would only be if you cared for him.”

“Goodness Lee! Gabriel’s bed is a very busy place. There would not be any room for me.”

“Listen to me. I will tell you this and I should not. Gabriel brought Suzanne here to make you jealous. It was a stupid idea and I think Cornelia put it in his head. He wants you. He is not ready yet to end it with Isabelle. Just give him time to come to that.”

“She is going to have his baby.” Elizabeth lowered her eyes. They burned with unwanted sudden tears.

“What?”

“She made a point of telling me that this morning. She also told me to go ahead and have affair with Gabriel. She did not care because it would just get me out of his mind and that he would very soon marry her!”

“She could be lying. It would not be the first time.”

“Will he marry her, if it is true?”

Lee shook his head and took her hand. “I cannot say if he will marry her or not. However, I can say that he does not love her and he believes he loves you. That I can say because he told me so. He would not be best pleased with me for telling you but sometimes one has to step over the bounds of friendship for the better cause.”

“If he loves me, he has an odd way of showing it. Where is he right now, in Suzanne’s bed?”

“No, he is not. He was not feeling well and is resting until he feels better. If you do not believe, check for yourself. Suzanne’s room is just across the hall from Cornelia’s.”

“I would not lower myself.”

“So you have too much pride then? Tell me, Elizabeth, I know that you hardly know Gabriel and that all this is very unusual but do you have true feelings for him?”

“Yes, Lee. However, it hardly matters. He has a family with Isabelle.”

“So along with pride you will be so very noble. This may hurt but I will tell you anyway. I saw your mother many times with Tony Lucci. They were completely in love with each other but she did the noble thing and stayed with her husband. With what you know now will you still say she did the ‘right’ thing? Take my advice and give Gabriel a reason to choose his love over false duty.”

“So it is only sex that will make him do that?”

“He is only a man. He must know exactly what he will lose if he marries Isabelle.”

“Please leave Lee. I have to change for dinner.”

He stood. At the door, he turned back to Elizabeth. “With affection for the woman my good friend loves, I strongly advise you to tell Owen you have changed your mind about posing nude for him. Pose, if you want, but for Heavens sake, keep your clothes on!”

By the time Elizabeth had changed into the chosen dinner dress, made sure the gun Gabriel gave her safely secured in corset and brushed her hair it was fifteen minutes left until the diner bell.

She crossed into the sitting room, took two sheets of writing paper and the letter opener from the desk. After checking the door and finding it still locked, she slid the papers under the door and directly under the lock. She inserted the point of the letter

opener into the lock, pushed it gently until she heard the key fall to the floor. Slowly she pulled the papers back and soon had the key in her hand. As quietly as possible, she unlocked the door and opened it. Light from the sitting room fell across the empty bed.

"Sleeping is he, Lee? Well maybe so, but not in his bed." She muttered as she walked into the room. Was he with this Beryline woman? Would he have the gall to be so brazen in a house where he was only a guest? If so, that would show little respect for Cornelia.

She told these things to herself. They were easier to accept than the pain lurking in the back of her mind.

She opened the sliding cupboard behind the door where the maids would have placed his hat and coat. They were not there. It could be they had not yet brought them up to his room but that was not likely. If he had left the Estate, where had he gone and why had Lee lied about it?

Two hours passed before Gabriel left Bartholomew Street. The driving wind and rain had turned to sleet. By the time that the welcoming light from Isabelle's front room came into view, he was sodden wet and frozen to the core. He was not surprised to see her silhouette at the window waiting for his return.

Isabelle hung the dripping wet clothes on the drying rack in her kitchen. She poured steaming tea into a large mug. She topped it off with a large measure of rum and a tablespoon full of thick cream. Onto a plate, she sliced thick slabs of roast pork, cheese, bread and butter. She took the tray up to her bedroom.

Gabriel sat where she left him, wrapped in blankets beside a large fire. "Isabelle...I am fine, really I am." He protested weakly as she placed the food and drink on a small table next to him. "Mind you, that all does look rather good." He took a long drink of the rum tea.

"You will eat and drink all of that before I let you leave. I insist or you will catch your death of cold." She sat on the hearth carpet, pulled her knees up to her chest and looked up at him. "How silly to walk on such a terrible night as this."

"No cabby would have picked me up, not dressed like that. I needed to think anyway and I always think better on my feet." He spread butter on the bread, covered it with pork and cheese and took a mouthful. "Thank you. This is good."

"How did your visit with your mother go? You were much longer than usual."

"Well enough. It took a while before she gave me what I went there for."

After a brief silence, she asked. "Why are you upset? Do not say that you are not because I can feel it."

"It is nothing you need to worry about."

"Gabriel! That is not fair. You know I will worry more about what you do not tell me."

"There are a great many things you do not know and in this case that is for the best. Too much knowledge can be a dangerous thing."

"I only want to help. How can I do that?" She closed her eyes and shuddered. "I can not help it if I feel your anguish."

Gabriel sighed. "Almost forty years ago three young men who were close friends defiled God and brought shame on their names. They formed an association with a man by the name of Pierre Desjardin. Desjardin was a drug addict, a sadomasochist, a rapist

of men, women and children. He was a murderer and that many times over. He was a devil worshipper. Imagine, Isabelle, the worst that a man can be and you will see Desjardin.”

“These three young men were Theodore De Wolfe, Henry Leighton and Samuel Jackman. They joined Desjardin in all his vices and evilness. They assisted him in ceremonies of dedication to the demons and Satan. They gave their group the name ‘The Circle of Mendes’.”

“Your father?” Isabelle whispered. “But I knew him. He was the sweetest, kindest man. That cannot be!”

“You knew Samuel as an old and weakened man. By that time he believed he had left all that far behind and was once again a true man of God.”

“Your tone says you do not believe that.”

“The terrible things he did should have brought him to the gallows, Isabelle. If God forgave him, I have no idea. From my humble point of view many times forgiveness is a mistake and shows only weakness.”

“But how did they escape justice? If they murdered...surely they would have been found out.”

“There were other members of the ‘Circle’; highly connected men, ready to protect Desjardin and the other members at all costs simply to protect themselves. Most of them are now deceased. For now, that is all I will tell you.”

“This thing you can do, going from one place to the other instantly...is that because of your father’s evilness?”

“I say that is very likely.” Gabriel moved beside her on the bed. “Now, Isabelle, there is something else we have to talk about.”

“Yes?” She felt a familiar cold fear run down her back.

“I have tried to talk to you about this before but I always let you distract me....”

“Gabriel....”

“No, listen to me.” He snapped at her. “Will one of my females please just listen? I told you before that there is no real future for us. It is time for you to accept that I have other lovers and that I no longer love....”

“I am going to have a baby!” It came out before she could give it a second thought. She had to stop him from the words that would break her heart.

“What? You’re pregnant?”

“Yes!” She answered with defiance and searched his eyes for signs of joy. They were cold and flat.

“God almighty. How far along are you?”

“At the beginning of four months. My doctor says he will be born early in April.”

“Am I the father?”

“Gabriel!” She stood and he pulled her back to the bed.

“Under the circumstances, Isabelle, I have the right to ask.”

“You are his father. I told you I do not have any other men.”

“His?”

“The baby is a boy. I can sense that. Just think, Gabriel, you will finally have a son!”

“Why have you waited so long to tell me?”

"I wanted to be completely sure. I wanted to hear it without doubt from my doctor and I guess I have been afraid to tell you. Are you not happy? I am Gabriel. I am so very happy to give you a son."

He looked into her sad and frightened eyes. "I have too much on my mind for 'happiness' right now. You were wrong to keep this from me." He looked up at the wall clock. "I have to get back to the Manor. We will continue this conversation soon."

"Yes, Gabriel. Soon, but first you have to think about the future of your new child."

She watched in thoughtful silence as he dressed. Maybe telling him now was the right thing. Maybe this would keep him away from Elizabeth Leighton.

"Did you get my telegram?"

"Yes. I telephoned Inspector Wesson. He will let me know when he has something to tell you."

Gabriel sat at her desk, found pen and paper and began to write. "Do you know about a creature by the name of Aamon?"

"Aamon! Gabriel he is a powerful demon. One of the most powerful there is. What does he have to do with all this?"

"He was the demon the 'Circle' summoned. I cannot believe I am actually saying these things! It is all insanity...it must be!"

"God, please Gabriel, whatever you think you have to do, you must not. It is not your fault what your father did!"

"I know that. In normal times I would agree, walk away and shake their dust from my feet."

"Well?"

"It could be that the death of Helena falls down to all this. And many more people will die if I do not stop this matter."

Isabelle lowered her head. There was no argument to fight Gabriel on that. No one knew more than she did how much Gabriel burned for revenge for the death of his wife.

He finished his letter and sealed it in an envelope. "Now, once I am gone I want you to pack your bags and go immediately to Random House."

"Why?"

"Give this letter to Willard. He will take care of you. You are to stay with Gabriella, day and night. She is to sleep with you, eat with you. You will bathe her, be with her when she uses the washroom. Never leave her alone. And she is not to leave the house, even for one minute. I trust her life to you, do you understand?"

She nodded and took the letter.

"Good. I will telephone you tomorrow morning." He opened the bedroom door. She kissed him and stepped out into her hallway.

It is too soon, she thought, for him to mention marriage and he has too much on his mind, poor man. It will come to him what he must do soon enough. After a few moments, she went back into her bedroom and was alone.

Elizabeth stepped out of Gabriel's room and into the hallway. She went down the hall, stopped near that door and took off one of her shoes. If someone saw her standing there, she could simply say she was checking a loose heel. She listened and after a while,

she heard what sounded like a drawer shut and a woman clear her throat. If Gabriel was in there he was not talking.

She was putting on her shoe when Randall came up the stairs. He smiled brightly as he came up to her. "Good evening, beautiful Elizabeth. May I see you down to dinner?"

She returned the smile. "Yes, of course...."

The door to Suzanne's room opened and she stepped out into the hall. "I thought I heard voices. Hello Randall. How nice to see you again!" She looked from him to Elizabeth.

"Suzanne! I did not know you were coming. It has been a while. How are you? You look lovely as usual."

"I am like I look, Randall." Suzanne spread her hands down her brilliant white beaded gown and turned in a circle. "Am I right?" She asked in her broken English.

"Without a doubt." Randall turned to Elizabeth. "Miss Elizabeth Leighton, Miss Suzanne Beryline."

"Ah, yes!" Suzanne flashed a dazzling but cold smile at Elizabeth. "You are Gabriel's little friend; the one he must keep an eye on. That is interesting, Miss Leighton, you must find the time to tell me why."

"Well," Randall spoke quickly and stepped between the two women. "Shall we go down to dinner? If I do not eat soon my stomach is going to be making some rude sounds."

They were almost at the head of the stairs when Gabriel came out of his room, buttoning up his dinner jacket. Elizabeth was astonished. Suzanne dropped Randall's arm and went quickly up to Gabriel taking his. "There you are. Are you much better? Did your rest help and your aching head gone?"

"Very much myself." He answered Suzanne and nodded at Elizabeth and Randall.

Randall went slowly down the stairs letting Gabriel and Suzanne get far ahead of them. "I had no idea that you were 'Gabriel's little friend'." He whispered to her. "Just how many 'friends' does that man need?"

"Now, do not be silly, Randall!" She leaned close pushing her breast against his arm. "I hardly know the man. And I doubt that at the end of a day he would have the energy left for me."

"I see." Randall smiled down at her. "Now, I on the other hand, have boundless energy, day or night."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. Younger than him, you see. And very few 'little friends'...sadly!"

Elizabeth laughed. It felt good. She saw Gabriel turn and look at her with curiosity and that felt good too.

They joined the rest waiting in the gathering room.

"You two have met then?" Cornelia asked looking from Elizabeth to Suzanne.

"We have." Suzanne answered, smiling brilliantly at Elizabeth.

"Well," Cornelia led them into the dining room, "as Ruth will not be eating with us any longer I have rearranged the table seating. We will have a lovely, peaceful meal."

Elizabeth was not too pleased with the seating. She had Jane at her left and Steward across from her. Randall sat at her right so she was able to direct most of her dinner conversation with him. Across the table and at the far end Lee, Gabriel, Suzanne

and Cornelia shared conversation and laughed a great deal. Ted and Owen ate their meal for the most part in silence.

It was during dessert when Jane began to speak to Elizabeth about her up coming wedding.

“Did you know, Elizabeth that I am to be married in the spring?” She touched Elizabeth’s hand lightly as she spoke. Elizabeth resisted the urge to pull her hand away.

“I believe Aunt Cornelia mentioned it to me. Will you have the ceremony here?”

“Yes, on the 5th of May out on the main terrace. It is going to be such a grand affair. Father is spoiling me wonderfully. Aren’t you?” Jane turned her sparkling eyes to her father.

“I am.” He spoke for the first time since they sat. “It is costing a small fortune and then some.”

“But just think, father,” Steward joined in, “from that day on our Janie will be off your hands and firmly in the hands of poor Sebastian Ridley. I think that would be worth a fortune.”

Jane smiled at Steward. “You are such a tease, Steward. I will miss your sense of humor.” She turned back to Elizabeth and leaned close. “You must come to my wedding. I will send you an invitation. Sebastian will charm you completely. He is a MP, you know.”

“He is.” Cornelia joined the conversation. “MP for Buxton South and even for such a young man he is up and coming in British politics.”

“Yes, Mommy.” Jane beamed. “Sebastian is a favorite of Mr. Gladstone’s. They say that since Mr. Gladstone is getting on in years he relies heavily on my Mr. Ridley. We have great plans, Sebastian and I. It could very well be that Sebastian is some day sitting in Mr. Gladstone’s chair.”

Steward sputtered and laughed and continued to laugh until he became aware of his parents stern looks. “Oh Lord. Janie! You have got to admit the thought of you as the Grand Dame of Downing Street is rather funny.”

“You should hope I do get there, Steward. It could be one day that Sebastian and I are the only people who can save you from the gallows.” Jane sneered as she spoke.

Steward sat back in his chair and glared at Jane. For the rest of the meal he did not once move his eyes from his sister.

It was a great relief for Elizabeth when the men stood to leave for their brandies. She begged off retiring with the women to the front parlor by saying she was tired and needed her bed.

The men gathered in the games room. Owen and Randall set up the billiards table. Ted and Steward sat at the chessboard. Gabriel caught Lee’s eye.

“I think I will go outside and walk off some of that excellent meal.” Gabriel spoke to all in general.

“I will join you.” Lee offered.

They walked in silence until they reached the far end of the terrace. “How did your meeting with Mrs. Jackman go? I am assuming that is where you went.” Lee asked.

Gabriel took a deep breath. “Not tonight, Lee. I need a few hours to think.”

“Cornelia had a telegram from Tony.” Lee said once they had struggled against the breeze to light cigarettes. “He is moving back to London.”

“It is about time. Is he coming here?”

“Yes, his train will come in tomorrow afternoon. How did you know?”

“I wrote to him last week and told him he might be needed here and from my long talk with my mother...well, we will need him.”

“For the murders or the ‘Circle’?”

“Both. I think we shall soon see Lee that there is a very fine hand that guides us here and that both matters are connected. There are very strange days ahead of us.”

“That is most likely so but you have a more immediate problem to deal with.” Lee squinted at his watch. It was 9:30. “As a matter of fact you have only half an hour to keep your Elizabeth from doing something rather stupid.”

“My Elizabeth, is she? Why? What is she about to do?”

Lee cleared his throat. “If she meant it and I think she did, she is about to go up to Owen’s studio and take off her clothes; all of them, bloody fucking ‘nude’ was the word they used.”

After a stunned silence, Gabriel smiled slightly. “What did you say?”

“Earlier I was with them in his studio. Elizabeth came across that painting Owen did of Suzanne.” Lee paused and looked at Gabriel with narrowed eyes. “Why the hell did you bring her here? How was having your second mistress around going to convince Elizabeth...”

“Lee! What happened?”

“They were looking at Suzanne’s portrait. Owen told her very clearly who and what Suzanne was to you. He even went so far as to tell her you were most likely in her bed right then and there!”

“Well, isn’t he being helpful!”

“That is only half of it. We had been discussing his nude models. She was hurt Gabriel, not just jealousy or angry. The pain of learning about Suzanne was plain for me to see. So she decided with the usual odd female logic to offer herself up as a nude model.”

“Did she? Well, she has more balls than I thought. So, she kisses Randall and takes her clothes off for Owen. Lee, I have to admit it, I may be losing my touch!”

“I have no idea what you are smiling about. Sometimes Gabriel, you are as thick as a brick! Anyway, Owen was stunned at first but quickly caught on to the idea. I did my best to talk her out of it but she is a stubborn one! Owen told her that he does not have relations with his models and she somehow thinks that will apply to her. You know as well as I do what will happen if she goes up there and takes her clothes off.”

“Yes, he will have a much more interesting night than I will. Owen will get a fine viewing but he will not go after her.”

“Good Lord, Gabriel, you cannot tell me you actually believe that load, do you? Christ, Owen is even worse than you are!”

“Thank you very much! The only thing that Owen takes seriously right now is his artwork. Unless she gives him a heads up sign, he will not try anything. Did she really say she wanted to pose nude?”

“Yes, I thought I made that very clear. She was very enthusiastic and even offered to show off her breasts right then so he could see they were better than Suzanne’s.”

Gabriel laughed. "There is quite a woman in that sweet little body. Once she finally lets it all free, someone and by someone I mean 'me' is going to be a very happy man."

"And so," Lee continued, "what are you going to do to stop her? Maybe you should just go to Owen and tell him it is out of the question."

"What? And miss out on a delightful evening's entertainment? Are you mad? Why should Owen have all the fun?"

"What are you going to do?" Lee asked wearily.

"What time is it?"

"Ten minutes to ten!"

Gabriel stepped back, looking up the side of the huge building, a light shown from Owen's studio. "I had better hurry up or I will miss the first act."

Back in her bedroom Elizabeth's mood had taken a down turn. She was having second thoughts about her earlier bravado in the studio. Perhaps Lee was right after all. The idea of her ever posing naked was ludicrous. There was no telling just how Gabriel would take it all and she did not want to fall in his opinion. She would simply tell Owen she had reconsidered. She would pose for him if he wished but she would keep her clothes on.

She was wondering if Gabriel was back in his room when there was a knock on her door. She opened the door quickly and before looking to see who it was, she spoke, "Gabriel, I...! Oh, Owen! I thought you were...someone else!"

"I gathered that." He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the doorframe. "Are you determined to completely crush me?"

She had to laugh at his feigned pout. "You are rather silly, aren't you?"

"No doubt in that, Elizabeth. I thought I would walk you up to my studio. If you thought that stairway was scary before you wait until you see it now."

"Yes, well, I would like to talk to you about that." She stopped talking at the sound of Suzanne's loud voice came down the hallway.

"Oh my, Cornelia!" Suzanne laughed. "The things you say! I will tell Gabriel, you know. He will agree, I am sure but he will be shocked."

Elizabeth smiled up at Owen, stepped out of her room, closing the door behind her. "Shall we get started, Owen?" She took his arm. They walked towards the stairs. Cornelia and Suzanne turned and looked at them. "I am always excited to try something I have never done before." As they turned up the stairs, Elizabeth smiled and nodded at the two females.

"You do realize the impression you put out then, do you not?" He whispered down at her.

Elizabeth shrugged. "I can not help it if people misunderstand."

At the top of the stairs she took a few steps into the pitch dark abandoned hall to the right. Owen held up his lantern surrounding her with a pale circle of light. "I was wondering about the so-called ghost. Where do you see it?" she asked.

"The first time, I came out of my studio and he was standing exactly where you are now." Elizabeth took a few steps closer to Owen. "He was as solid as you are in appearance. He stared at me for a few seconds. I just stood in terrified stupidity. He turned, walked down into the darkness and disappeared. It was not until he turned that I saw the knife he held in his right hand."

“Why didn’t you go after him? He could have been a lost neighborhood child.”

“Wild horses could not drag me after him! That was not a living child, Elizabeth. He was walking, yes, but his feet were at least six inches off the actual floor.”

“Really? Well, that is odd!” She moved quickly into the studio and Owen smiled and followed her.

“So Owen, what do we do first?”

He closed and locked the double doors. “What we do first is talk. I think you should reconsider your decision to model for me.”

“I don’t understand. I thought you said I was just right for nude modeling.”

“Just right in body, yes but are you really certain this is what you want to do? Do not think that you have to go ahead with this just because you said you would. We all say things and then think wiser a little later on. If you were trying to make Randall or maybe Gabriel jealous, that would be a mistake. Especially with Gabriel, he would see through that in a second.”

“I have no interest in either of them. My only reservation was that you might think I had something sexual to offer you. As long as you know that is not the case, well, I want to do this.”

“And when we meet tomorrow morning over the breakfast table am I going to get a slap?”

“Not a chance.” She looked around the cluttered room. “Do you have any alcohol? I wouldn’t mind a drink.”

She followed him down to the far end of the room. From an overhead cupboard, he took a bottle of whiskey and a glass. “Only whiskey, I am afraid. I can go and get you some brandy if you’d like.”

“No this is fine.” She poured two inches and swallowed it in one mouthful. “That is not too bad.” She wheezed at him, stifling a cough.

He nodded. “Over here,” he motioned to the back section of the L-shaped room, “I have my props. This settee, the stools, the love seat and the various rugs are where my models pose. The large wall mirror helps when I need to change perspective. On the rack are costumes, shawls, laces, wigs and the like.” He stopped and smiled down at her. “You will not need a wig that is certain. You have the most beautiful hair.” Elizabeth could tell he resisted the urge to touch her hair.

Beyond the rack and on an angle to the stool and settee was a large Oriental screen. She followed him behind it. There was a table and a hook on the wall that held a silk dressing gown. “After you remove your clothes put that on.”

“Alright.” She said trying to keep the nervousness from her voice.

“Usually I tell the models where and how to pose. Since this is your first time I will let you choose where and how you want to sit. I will not at any time touch you, Elizabeth.” Owen said the last very quietly and with conviction. “Now, if you are still sure, you may go behind there and remove you clothes.”

“I will have one more drink, first.” She moved back to the whiskey bottle, poured another large measure and drank it.

Owen shook his head and crossed to a small table and chair set up near the stools and settee. On the tabletop were several sketching pads and a tray of charcoal and pastels.

“Well, here we go then.” She smiled and went behind the screen.

It was not until she had removed her dress that she remembered the small gun tucked inside her corset. She slid it under the dress. She removed her undergarments and folded them carefully. The air was cold on her naked skin but the whiskey was already having an effect and numbing her senses. Her hands shook as she pulled on the dressing gown. "Don't be silly," she chided herself "you are a woman, after all."

She stepped out from behind the screen. "All ready." She smiled at Owen and crossed to the prop furniture. "What now?"

"Decide where and how you want to sit and remove the gown. That is all. But first, I want to ask you a question. It is rather personal but I think I should know this."

"Yes." She leaned on the back of the settee. Her head was spinning slightly and her heart was pounding.

"Are you a virgin?"

She laughed. "Why does everybody keep asking me that? And why do you need to know?"

"If no man has ever seen you naked...well, you should keep it that way. If you are saving yourself, and you seem like a virgin to me, for a special man then I should not be the first man to see you naked." Owen frowned. "I am not sure if that made any sense."

"It made perfect sense and you are very nice to wonder about that. No, I am not a virgin. I have already been seen naked by a special man." She took a deep breath, let the gown fall to the floor. She glanced at Owen. He was slicing the end of a stick of charcoal with a knife and deliberately not looking at her. She sat on the tallest stool, crossed her legs and held on to the sides of the stool seat.

Several seconds passed before Owen looked up. For a while, she watched him as he studied her. His eyes moved over her, and then his hand moved across the paper. There was no change of his expression. As every minute passed, the whiskey took the edge off her natural reserve.

"Well?" she asked.

"Well what?"

"Don't you compliment your models?"

"About what?" He kept drawing all the while he spoke. His concentration on what he was doing and not what she was saying.

"Do you think I have a good body? You could say something, you know!"

He rested the charcoal on the side of the pad and looked up at her from under his eyebrows. "I am very aware that you have a delicious body, Elizabeth. Do you really want me to think so much about that that I feel I should speak about it?"

"Oh, I see! At least tell me if you think my breasts are better than Suzanne's?"

He smiled broadly stood and picked up the portrait of Suzanne. He held it beside Elizabeth. His eyes went from the painting to Elizabeth's and back to the painting again.

"Yours are much nicer." He said firmly and placed the painting face down on the table, retook his chair and picked his pad.

"In what way?"

"For one thing, yours are bigger. I prefer bigger breasts. Your nipples are dark and hers are light. Dark is more alluring."

"I see!"

"Change your pose, please." He asked as he flipped to a new page.

“What should I do?”

“Try the settee. Lie down. I would like to do the length of your body.”

“No doubt!” She laughed, stood, stretched, and lay down on the sofa. She put one arm behind her head and left one foot on the floor. “How is this?”

“Not bad. Bring up your right knee. Yes, that is good. Now relax and try not to fall asleep.”

“Why would I fall asleep? I am not drunk, you know.”

“No, of course not.”

She lay for a while listening to the sound of his hand and charcoal move across the paper. “Do you know how old I am?” She asked and did not wait for an answer. “I will be twenty-one in three weeks. Most women my age are married and have babies, well, one baby anyway! I do not even have a man.”

“That is hard to believe.”

“It is true; there is not a man around available for me. I have had only one lover. Would you believe I have not been made love to in fifteen months? Isn’t that sad?”

“It is sad and equally hard to believe. Where have you been living? In a monastery?”

She sighed.

Owen turned another page. “Roll onto your right side and let your hair fall down the side. Yes, that is perfect.”

“Do you enjoy this side of your work? I mean having naked women laying about anyway you want?”

“Of course I am just a man, after all. As I said, I try not to think about sex at times like this. Although right now your conversation is making that rather difficult. Could we please not talk about sex?”

“I like talking about sex. Actually, I even like sex a lot. The only man who wants me already has a female. I will not help a man be unfaithful.”

“That is understandable. You want to be number one.”

“Exactly! Do you think that is too much to ask for?”

“No. Have you ever given him a strong taste of just what he is missing? Give him something he will remember the next time he is with her.”

“I have been told that a few times lately. I do not like games like that!”

Some time passed and Elizabeth lay quiet, many ideas running through her mind.

“I want to do your back now, Elizabeth. Will you sit on the high stool with your back to me?” She did that. “Pull your hair to the front. Yes, now that is rather nice. I do like a feminine back.”

From where she sat, Elizabeth could see behind the changing screen. She did not notice that the shadow behind it was darker in one large area than it should have been.

“Your admirer...is he anyone I know?”

“No! Good heavens no!” She giggled and hiccupped. “Sorry. I always do that when I have been” She stopped speaking when Gabriel moved from the shadows out to the sides of the screen.

“Gabriel!” She whispered in stunned, frozen surprise as Gabriel, with a wide smile, walked towards her.

“Shit!” Owen stood suddenly when he saw Gabriel. The sketchbook fell to the floor.

Gabriel stopped briefly in front of Elizabeth. "Very nice!"

"What the bloody hell are you doing, Gabriel?" Owen demanded angrily rushing to Elizabeth; he picked up the robe and wrapped it around her.

Gabriel smiled at Owen. "Watching, listening. You my old friend are going to have to teach me to draw." Without another word, he walked across the room, unlocked the door and left the studio.

"I am so sorry, Elizabeth." Owen turned to Elizabeth, and then walked back to the screen. "I had no idea he was here. How did you not see him?"

"Did he say 'watching, listening'?" Elizabeth snapped out of her mortified trance.

"Yes but how the bloody hell did he get in here? That damn door is always locked when I am not here."

She glared at Owen, pulling on the robe and tying it tightly. "Watching and listening was he?" Embarrassment slipped to growing anger.

"Wait." He moved after her as she headed for the door. "What about your clothes?"

"I'll get them tomorrow."

"What are you going to do?" He followed her out into the hallway.

"Kill him, what do you think?" Elizabeth called over her shoulder.

She ran down the stairs, across the hall, through her bedroom and the sitting room. Stepping on the paper she had left on the floor, she slid across the room and landed on her back at the foot of Gabriel's bed.

"Are you alright?" He asked looking over the bottom of the bed.

"You!" She said angrily and a little breathlessly as she scrambled to her feet. "You are a pig!"

"No, I'm not!" He shrugged and sat back leaning against the headboard.

"Yes you are! You are a pervert and pig!" She waved her finger at him angrily.

"Well, I can see why you say pervert but not pig." He slid down the bed and leaned towards her. "I have to say, lovely Elizabeth, your body is even more luscious than I dared dream. I have to give it to Owen. He is a fountain of will power. When you were lying on that settee, fairly asking for it, I can't tell you how much I wanted to...."

Elizabeth moved so fast he never saw it coming. She pulled her arm back, made a proper fist as her father had once told her and brought it with a resounding crack against the side of Gabriel's head. He went off the bed and onto the floor.

"Are you alright?" She sneered and mimicked him.

He moaned and sat up, holding the left side of his face. "God, you've got quite a hit for a woman." He crawled back onto the bed. "I may have deserved that."

"You did! With all the women in your life are you really so desperate that you have to hide in shadows to see a naked female. Are you ten years old?" She paused paced the room and glared at him. "Damn Gabriel...you brought Suzanne Beryline here, no doubt to fill in for Isabelle when I would not, so why not just go have another look at her."

"I could have, yes but it is you I want."

She stopped in front of him, unaware that the front of the robe had slipped open. "Did you really think that sneaking around like that was going to get me into your bed?" She followed his eyes and pulled her clothing into place. "Christ! You never stop, do you?"

He raised his eyes up to her face, fixing his eyes into hers, his left eye already swollen and half-shut. "You can relax now. I am very sorry! Please give me a chance to explain."

She sighed and despite herself, felt the anger drain away. She went to the washstand and placed a hand towel in the cold water. "You should be sorry. You have no idea what an idiot you made of yourself." She rang out the water and brought the cloth back to the bed. "Lie down." He did and she gently placed the towel on his face.

"I looked like an idiot?" he muttered. "At least I had my clothes on. Please sit. We have more important things to talk about." He patted the bed beside him. "And keep your voice down. I am getting an awful headache."

She sat in a chair.

"Yes, well from what I learned today, it could very well be that Steward is the murderer. Did Lee tell you what he over heard this morning?"

She nodded. "What has that got to do with you being a pig and a pervert?"

"Just listen to me. I have reason to believe that Steward had an accomplice. We do not know who that person is. As much as I doubt it, that person could be Owen. When I learned what you had in mind I wanted to be there for your protection. You may find that hard to believe but it is true." Gabriel sat up and tossed the towel away. "I also admit to a little jealousy. Maybe I should have stayed hidden, kept my eyes to myself and just left when you and Owen were gone. However, I am only human and the opportunity was more than I could resist. Now, please come and sit beside me and tell me why you had such an outlandish idea in the first place."

She sighed and did as he asked. "Owen told me that artist models, especially those who will do a nude, make a fair living. I have reason to believe that my employment with you well be short lived. I have to think of my future. I would die before I would work in a place like the Three bells again, Gabriel."

"I have no intention of ending your employment with me. Why in heavens name would you ever think that?"

"I cannot say specifically but things happen, things change! Mrs. Lucci made it more than clear that she did not want me around you."

"I do not give a damn what Isabelle wants!" Gabriel said with a sudden flair of anger. "Oh Lord, she told you about the baby, didn't she?"

Elizabeth nodded. "She said I had her permission to sleep with you because it would ease your curiosity. She did not care because soon you would marry her and that you would never touch me again because you would never break your wedding vows. She also told me that you did not know she was with child."

"She just told me today. She was right in only one thing. I would never break my vows, but that will not be a problem because I do not intend to marry Isabelle, ever!"

"It is not my business, Gabriel but you must think of the child."

"The child will be cared for and will never want for a thing. I do not give a fig what others may think or say because I have an illegitimate child. I will be a loving father to him but I will never marry Isabelle. No matter how many children she may have. I no longer love her and she is very aware of that. I assume that talkative others have told you why I stopped loving her?"

"It was mentioned to me."

"I ended our affair right then and there and I should have kept it that way. Isabelle is very persistent and I was weak but I made it very clear to her that things would never be as they were."

She lowered her eyes and shook her head. "She is certain you will marry her once you get used to the idea. If you do, it is just a short time before she forces me away. I suppose force would not be necessary. I would never stay near a married man who had an interest in me."

"Elizabeth, listen to me!" He took her face in his hands and lifted her head to look at him. "I will never marry Isabelle. How could I when I love you so very much?" She gasped; he put a finger on her lips. "Just listen to me. I was not going to tell you this now because I am aware that it is far too soon for you to know if you care for me but I think I can feel that you have at least a sexual passion for me and that is a fine start. It is very old news for me. I love you, Elizabeth." He kissed her. It was a gentle, soft kiss and the only way for him to hold back his intense passion.

When he pulled back, he continued speaking. "You may find this hard to believe but I do understand and respect why you keep your distance from me. I promise you this; as soon as possible I will free myself of all my other females. When they are gone, if you will have me, I will have no other woman but you. Will you give me the time to clear away these issues?"

Elizabeth's head was spinning from his words, her previous anger and the unfamiliar alcohol. She knew she needed time for clear thought and he needed time to prove the truth of all he said. An image of Isabelle's defiant and confident face flashed through her mind. This would certainly break her heart but none of that was truly Elizabeth's fault. "I will, Gabriel. May I ask you one question?"

He smiled and winced when the smile reached his injured eye. "Of course."

"Why did you bring Suzanne here?"

"There were two reasons for that. I was foolishly hoping it would make you jealous...."

"It did!" she interrupted.

"That was a mistake and I am sorry. However, more important than my foolishness is the fact that her father works for Ted and I suspected that they were up to something I needed to know about. From what I found out tonight, I was correct in that. I support Suzanne financially and more than anything else she loves my money and that even more than her loyalty to her father. She will tell me whatever she learns. I wanted her close by for easy access to what she knows."

"Then you had better not end your affair with her right away. If you do you may lose that source of information."

"But she will still expect...." he let the rest of this trail away.

"This thing that you suspected Ted and Mr. Beryline were involved in, does it have anything to do with the things our fathers did?"

"I think so."

"How important is this? I have the feeling there is a lot you have not told me, Gabriel."

"It is very important, Elizabeth. The lives of many people are at risk."

"Who?"

“Owen, Tony, you, me, Gabriella, Owen’s son Noah, and Isabelle because she is carrying my child.”

“Oh my Lord! What is going on?”

“We will talk as a group tomorrow when Tony arrives and after I have had a few well chosen words with Ted.”

“Then you will need to keep Suzanne happy for the time being.”

“Elizabeth?”

“Gabriel, we are not a couple and we will not be one until you are free of all your entanglements. In the mean time, do what you have to do and I will do what I have to do. Do not try to deceive me and I will not try to deceive you.”

He frowned and winced again. “What do you mean you will do what you have to do? I do not know if I like the sound of that!”

She smiled and touched his hand. “It is very late and I am very tired Gabriel. I want to sleep now.”

“You did not answer my question.”

“May I sleep with you tonight?”

“What? Yes!” he answered very quickly.

“I mean ‘sleep’...just sleep!”

“God, you are a miserable woman, Elizabeth.” He shook his head. “That cut me.”

She laughed. “You will survive. Is it wrong for me to want to lie naked and sleep beside the man who loves me?”

“No nightgown?” he asked with the childlike enthusiasm she had grown to enjoy.

“I will be completely naked.” She opened the tie of the dressing gown but held it closed. “But you must not try to make love to me.”

“You are mad, I can see that clearly now.”

She put her arms around his neck and let the gown fall open. “Do you really love me, Gabriel? If you do, it would be so easy for you to give this one thing.”

“You are also an unholy, talented tease.”

“You enjoy it thoroughly, Gabriel.” She stood and let the gown fall to the floor.

“You cannot have me the way you want, at least not for the time being but you could make me happy and let me sleep with you.”

After a moment, he stood and pulled the bedding down. “I will not get a moment of sleep and you know that. Do you know that you ask too much and that I am thoroughly angry with you?”

Elizabeth smiled and slipped into his bed.

“I am keeping my bloody trousers on!” He sat on the bed, pulled off his boots and socks.

“If you insist. I promise I will not touch you.”

Gabriel threw his shirt onto the bedpost and turned off the gas lamps. “Well, that settles it.” He crawled into bed and lay with his arms folded over his chest. “I have fallen in love with a bloody lunatic!”

She leaned over and placed her head on his pillow. “Gabriel.” She whispered.

“What?”

“You are a very special man. You are kind and I think for the most part honest.” She kissed his cheek and backed off to her side of the bed. “You are by far the most handsome man I have ever seen. When and if we do make love, it will be heavenly.”

Gabriel smiled, rolled onto his uninjured side and quickly fell asleep.

Outside in the hallway, Lee backed away from Gabriel's door. "Well, thank God for that! Now maybe we will get some work done!"

Ruth woke with a start. "Who is it?" She asked struggling to see the approaching figure in her dark bedroom.

"It's me." Jane answered. She partially opened the drapes. Moonlight flooded the room.

"Go away!"

Jane sighed and sat on the bedside. "Please do not be mad!"

"You think I don't remember anything when I am drugged, but I do." Tears ran down the sides of Ruth's face. "You promised me that you would not let Steward touch me again. You watch and enjoy it. You are as sick as he is. Go away. I never want to talk to you again."

Jane tried to touch Ruth's face and had her hand pushed aside. "What can I do Ruth? How am I to stop him? You know what he will do to me if I argue with him."

"You like it when he hurts you!" Ruth grabbed Jane's hand, her fingers digging into the flesh. "Oh God, what am I going to do? Once the divorce is final, Ted will put me out. Owen will only give me the meanest money. You are going to marry Ridley and forget all about me."

"No, I am not, Ruth. How can you say that? Haven't I looked after you all these last years?"

"I know why you do it. I am not a fool. You and Steward are always doing things so kindly. But doesn't that change when my door is closed?"

Jane slid closer on the bed and wiped away the tears with her fingertips. "Ruth, you used to like it and you know that. You wanted him to do anything he wanted." Jane slid her hand down, pushing the strap of the nightgown off the slim shoulders.

"Remember how you used to tell him and me what to do?" She smiled and laughed quietly. "God, you were so bossy, wonderful and beautiful."

"Well, I do not like it anymore. I hate him."

"Do you hate me as well? I will die if you say that is so."

Ruth looked up into the beautiful blue eyes, surrounded by the flat, homely face. She longed to say what was really in her heart, to tell Jane that the very sight of her was repulsive and that she often thought how it might better to face a life time of abuse from Steward than a minute alone with her. However, Jane paid for the cocaine. If the payments stopped, Steward would not bring it to her. The need for the drug was stronger than the need for dignity so she would hold her tongue. "No, Jane, I do not hate you. I am scared for my future that is all!"

"You needn't be! You will come and live with Sebastian and me and it will be wonderful. Just think about it. Steward will never be able to get at us and Sebastian will be away in London a fair amount of the time. What freedom we will have! And," Jane slid into the bed and pushed her body against Ruth, "when he is home, Sebastian will join us in bed. You cannot say you do not love it when he sexes you! I know you are half way in love with him and he loves to watch us. He needs you and that will keep you with me."

Chapter Nine

It was just after dawn when Gabriel stepped through the swinging doors and into the kitchen.

“Oh Lord, Mr. Jackman! You didn’t half scare me! Goodness! What has happened to your face?”

“Good morning, Mrs. Beaver.” He smiled slightly. “Yes, I know I look like a monster. A lunatic hit me.”

“Well, that is just terrible. I hope you hit him back. It is the drink, you know. There is far too much of it that goes on around this house. Have you come for some ice? It will take down the swelling.”

“It is too late for that now. We’ll just have to let nature take her course.”

“Did you hit him back? I hope so!” Mrs. Beaver stood with hands on her extraordinarily wide hips.

“I thought about it, Mrs. B, but sometimes it is best to turn the other cheek.”

“If it was Mr. Steward you go back there and give him what for. Far past time for him to get his comeuppance.”

“What I would like, before you get too involved in breakfast, is a lovely large pot of tea to take back upstairs. I have a stinking headache and tea helps sometimes.”

“And I’ve a kettle on the go right now. You sit right there, love and I’ll get a nice tray ready for you.”

Gabriel sat at the large well-scrubbed table. “I am sorry to be such a bother.”

“You are not a bother. You’ve always been a gentleman with me and rest of staff.” She placed a tray on the table and on it a cup, saucer, small jug of milk and pot of sugar. He wondered how he could get a second cup without raising eyebrows.

“You have worked here a very long time, haven’t you, Mrs. B?”

“Going on thirty-seven years now. Would you believe it? I was only fifteen when I started as kitchen maid.”

“Now you’ve the reputation of being one of the best cooks around. Cornelia has often told me how others have tried to win you away. You have been very loyal to the De Wolfe family.”

“Ah yes, and now Mrs. De Wolfe is having a hell of a time trying to get an experienced cook to take my place. I told her I’d stay until she did but I hope it don’t take too much time longer.” She took a loaf of lemon and poppy seed cake from the larder, sliced thick pieces onto a plate. “You will like this cake, if you like lemon.”

“I do, very much. Are you leaving here?”

“I got me a man, Mr. Jackman! Twenty years a widow and finally one man takes a second look and he’s good man, steady employment and a house. What do you say to that?”

“I say good for you and congratulations. The family will miss you and you will miss them as well no doubt.”

“Not so much as I would have a few years back. Now I think I will be glad to go.”

“Really? I am surprised. I thought you were happy here.” He watched her as she began to nervously clench and unclench her hands. She sat at the table and looked at Gabriel with large and angry eyes.

“There is some in this house who ain’t what they seem to be. There’s bad in this house. Real bad...not just the facts that some of them can’t stay in their own beds but dark evil. They do it and nothing is ever done to stop them.”

“Are you talking about the murder of poor Daisy Mott?”

“Poor, sweet Daisy! Yes, her and the others. No justice will ever come for the likes of us downstairs of the house. Them upstairs they protect their own, they do. I am sorry and don’t mean to insult being as you was born with a silver spoon and all that so you will not understand. Believe me it is a whole other world down here!” The kettle began to whistle. Mrs. Beaver went about the ritual of tea making. When her back was turned, Gabriel slipped a mug into his jacket pocket.

“You truly believe they will not find the murderer?”

“Believe it and know it. They don’t care and don’t want to know who did it. Just another dead servant so what does it matter.”

“You care, as do I and very much. As long as people care and do the right thing I believe there is always hope.”

She covered the teapot with a cozy and the whole tray with a clean white cloth. “There you go, Mr. Jackman. Hope it helps your headache.” She smiled at him, squinted at his black eye and shook her head. “You are a very nice man and I know these people are your friends but I should leave here and never come back. That is what I am gonna do.”

“Thank you, Mrs. B.” He picked up the tray. “Could it be that you know something about the ‘mountain murders?’”

She stood silent for so long he thought she was not going to answer. When she did speak, her voice was harsh with disgust. “Doesn’t matter if I do, nobody will do anything. Nobody would believe me.”

“I would believe you and I would do something about it.”

“Tell you what, Mr. Jackman, I will speak with my Bob. He’s very worried about me as it is. If he says I should tell you what I know, then I will. Then it is up to you to do what you say you will.”

Gabriel left the kitchen. “Good Morning, Mrs. Pritchard.” He nodded to the housekeeper as she passed.

“My, my, Mrs. B! What ever happened to Mr. Jackman? It has been a long time since I saw a shiner like that.”

“I dunno. All he told me was that a lunatic hit him. In this house that could be just about anyone.”

“Probably Mr. Randall gave him the poke.” The two older women were joined by a maid, obviously proud with new gossip.

“No!” Mrs. Pritchard shook her head. “Not him. He’s a lamb, if you ask me.”

“Go on then, tell us, Alice. I can see you are busting to.” Mrs. Beaver encouraged.

“Well, I was just in Miss Leighton’s room to light her morning fire, like Mrs. De Wolfe told me to and she weren’t in her bed. Doors wide opened across her sitting room and there she was ... sound asleep in Mr. Jackman’s bed.”

“I’ll be jiggered!” Mrs. Pritchard smiled.

“They’s always switching beds around here. We all knows that. He is sweet as candy, that man. I’d not say no if he looked my way. She were with Mr. Randall all day yesterday and they was walking arm in arm and the like. I figure he thought he had first go at her and weren’t too pleased she took up with Mr. Jackman. Mind you,” Alice added, rubbing her hands through her hair. “I’d have a hard time trying to choose between them.”

“You’ve high hopes then girl.” Mrs. Beaver said with a frown. “You’d best be about your own business, Alice, and leave them to theirs.”

“You see, Mrs. B.” the housekeeper leaned closer to her friend, “there’s more sex going on here than in a bloody brothel. Anyways, you’ll have to adjust your menu for tonight. Mr. Lucci is coming for a few days so there’ll be yet another guest at the dinner table.”

“Oh, not another one! I have had to stretch the larder already with Miss Beryline coming unexpected. There is nothing for it but for me to make a run down to the village. I will need more chops and custard that is a fact.”

“I can send one of the girls.”

“No and thank you but I should go. Scully is more thief than butcher. I’ll not be with any more of his shoddy goods. I’ll go down right after breakfast is done.”

Down the hall, the listener slipped quietly out from the butler’s pantry and up the stairs.

With more noise than necessary, Gabriel slid the tea tray on the nightstand. He cleared his throat and nudged the bed. Sprawled on her face, Elizabeth did not move. He lifted the bottom of the mattress an inch or two and let it fall.

“Heavy sleeper, are you?” He sat on the side of the bed and slowly began to pull down the blanket.

“Stop that and leave me alone. It is the middle of the night.” She mumbled into the pillow.

“It is not, you know. It is nearly seven. I brought tea and cake.”

“Why don’t you go and ...!” She lifted her head and looked at him through a mass of tangled curly hair. “Hell, look at your face. Did I do that?”

“You are a very aggressive drunk, my dear.”

Holding the blanket up to her chin, Elizabeth sat up. “I was not drunk and you asked for it.”

“I did, yes and if you were not drunk, how do you explain your very provocative conversation with your artist?”

She thought for a moment. “Did I really tell him...?”

“Did you tell him that no one has made love to you for fifteen months?” Gabriel smiled. It was lopsided and painful. He took the mug from his pocket, poured out the strong tea and added the cream and sugar. “Yes, you did. You felt it necessary to add that you quite enjoyed sexual activity. Sadly for you, Owen had his mind in his work or he would have certainly taken you up on your invitation.”

“But it was not an invitation. Oh well, I guess I will just have to add Owen to my growing list of people to be avoided at all costs.”

“Here.” He handed her the cup. “Drink this. It will make you feel better. You look almost as bad as I do.”

“Thank you very much!”

“You need not worry too much about Owen. If you were not drunk, you were tipsy. I doubt he took you very seriously. He most likely had a good laugh.”

“Gabriel, if you are trying to make me feel better, it is not working. Could we please change the subject? What do you want me to do today? I was thinking I might try to strike up a conversation with Jane. Although I have the feeling it will not be pleasant.”

He nodded. “It is a sad, sick and sorry world we have.”

“Gabriel, not everyone is involved in incest and raping cripples. Thank God for that! Do you have any suggestions on how I should approach Jane?”

“For a start, most certainly keep your clothes on! Right, sorry, I could not resist that.”

“I have decided to ignore you when you are acting like a mushroom.”

“Just get her talking about men. That should lead easily on to her brothers. It would seem natural for you to talk to her about them. Do not ask anything about Steward. We will see what comes out on its own.”

“Alright. That comment she made about her someday keeping him from the gallows was odd, don’t you think?”

“Very odd, Elizabeth and did you notice his reaction? He was furious at her. She went dead white and did not say another word for the rest of the meal. She could be turning against him. Steward could see her now as a liability and if so, we need to find out what she is willing to say about him soon. She will talk to another woman a lot easier than a man.”

“Are you thinking Jane was involved in the murders?”

“Yes, so you must not let your guard down. For as long as I can remember, I have had very prophetic dreams. For the last few months, I have had the most terrible nightmares. I am at the scenes of the four murders. Except for the fact that I am not able to see the faces of the murderers I see everything in vivid detail.”

“In the first three murders there are at least two assailants. There could be one more but I am not sure on that. The fourth murder I saw only one. I cannot say this delicately and will not try. Two people subdue the victim and they are both sexually abusing her but one is very much in control and only that one does the rape. The other...well seems to enjoy watching, does various things but does not rape. It is the rapist who does the murder. It could very well be that those two are Steward and Jane. From what Lee learned yesterday, I would say that was very likely. What ever you do, do not leave the house with Jane or her brother and when you talk with Jane do it in the parlor or some other room that is easily seen into.”

Elizabeth shook her head; the image in her mind was too ugly. “I almost forgot. Yesterday I had a conversation with Cornelia’s maid, Janet. She told me that she and Steward had been having relations starting last spring and when she tried to end it, he forced himself on her and bit her breasts until they bled. She said in the early fall he pushed her down some stairs and she broke her arm. It could be that she would testify against him.”

“She might, Elizabeth but it would certainly end her employment here. If he pushed her down the stairs then I would say that he very much wants to see the end of Janet. She is lucky to still be alive.” Gabriel paused. When he spoke, his voice was thick with warning. “Now you understand why I gave you the gun. If Steward De Wolfe is what I think he is, he is a danger to any woman. You must be extremely careful.” Elizabeth suddenly remembered that she had left the gun in her clothes up in the studio. She had to get it back as soon as possible and decided not to tell Gabriel how foolish she had been to leave it behind.

“I will be, Gabriel.”

“Lee and I will be keeping an eye on you, as much as possible but I need you to also use your brains. What you did last night was stupid...” He stopped waited for her to argue. She did not. “I understand you were jealous over Suzanne and that was partially my fault. You will see me talking and the like with Suzanne and you must not do anything so foolish again.”

Elizabeth pulled up her legs, leaned her head on her knees and smiled at Gabriel. “Talking and the like? What does ‘the like’ refer to?” She let go of the blankets, letting her legs hold it in place and slid one hand onto his knee.

He looked down at her hand and back up at her face. “For the time being, as you agreed last night, I have to keep her more or less happy with me. I need her on my side, so to speak.” Elizabeth raised her hand slightly up her leg. “I will try to avoid being alone with her as much as possible.”

She moved forward, lowered her legs and let the blankets drop. “You promise?” She whispered and began to move her hand in small circles.

He narrowed one eye; the other already completely closed. “Stop it.”

The circles had reached the upper inside of his thigh. “Do you really want me to stop?”

“Yes!” He leaned back, leaning on his hands, his eyes on her breasts.

“Gabriel, if you do not want me to touch you, then all you have to do is move my hand. Go on, I dare you to push it away.”

“No, my sweet tease, I dare you. What is the depth of your courage?”

“You think I won’t?”

“I doubt it.”

She smiled, pushed her face against his neck and sucked his skin into her mouth. Making one last circle, she rested her hand on his lap. Gabriel shuddered, gasped slightly and fell back onto the bed. He reached up and held her head against his neck. More circles with gently firm pressure. She sucked harder, thrilling at his smell and instant reaction.

She lifted her head and whispered into his ear. “Should I move away now?”

In one quick movement, so sudden and strong she had no chance to react he pulled her on top, holding her hips in place with one arm around her back, the other he held her head with his lips against her. “Do you not think, Elizabeth,” he whispered, his breath hot into her mouth, “that it might be possible to push your tease too far?”

“Is it?” She ran her tongue over his lips. “You tell me.”

“Yes, it is possible, my love. I am only a man, after all.”

“I am sure you could force me, Gabriel, but won’t it be so much tastier to have me when I want it as well.”

“You want it now, you lovely little bitch.” He hissed with frustration and fascination, pulled her head down and pushed his tongue into her mouth. He kissed her for a long while and she responded with her body.

She pushed his hair away from his face and gently touched his swollen cheek. “Yes, I think it would be wonderful to make love with you. Do you understand how much I want to turn my back on my pride...if only for a little while?” She sighed. “If you want so me badly; I could do that to make you happy. I could choose my passion over my pride!”

He studied her face, not loosening his hold on her body. “It is pride then? Explain!”

She laid her head on his shoulder. “All these women, they have so many men. Is it wrong or too old fashioned for me to have only one man and that man have only me?”

He relaxed his grip. “God, I must be losing my mind but no, it is not wrong. Never let go of your principles and integrity, no matter how much a man sweats, swears and begs.”

She reached up and quickly kissed him. “Thank you. At least we can have fun like this.” Slowly she slid off him and sat beside him smiling.

He took a deep breath and sat up. “You call that fun?”

“Yes, I do Gabriel. It is marvelous and you know it.”

Gabriel reached down; picked up the dressing gown she dropped on the floor the night before. “Please put this on. Yes, I agree it is marvelous, as you call it and you are so damned good at what you do.”

“I just want you to remember me as you go through this day.”

“Right! I see!” He moved from the bed and into a chair. “Do you actually think I will have anything else on my mind?”

“Most likely not.” She stood and pulled on the dressing gown. “It will be the same for me, Gabriel. Nevertheless, we must not be too distracted. Before I go and get dressed I would like to ask you a question?”

“Only if it has nothing to do with sex.”

She nodded. “Far from it. Actually, it is about God. With you being an ordained minister maybe you can help me understand.”

“I am afraid I have fallen far from that place, Elizabeth but I will try. What do you not understand?”

“If there is a God ...well, these evil things that people do, the rape, murder, torture and all the misery, why does He allow it? The people like Jane and Steward, so evil and remorseless, why does He not stop them?”

He stood and looked out the window. The sun had risen completely and it looked as though it would be a beautiful day. “If there is a God why does he allow evil. When the innocent Mary O’Neal walked down that pathway, her murderers waiting for her, why did He not send a legion of angels to protect her? In university, we were told that was so we all could learn. Without true evil we would not see the righteous.”

“You sound as though you that is not the way you see things.”

“My Helena was murdered. By now you most likely know that. When they found her body, I went to make the official identification. A friend of mine, fellow by the name of Wesson was the detective in charge of the case. I insisted on being alone when I did this and he agreed.”

"She lay on a morgue table with a sheet up to her chin. Her long, yellow hair clotted with black dried blood. They had cleaned her face somewhat but I could see where tears had run through her blood. It occurred to me then, in such vivid detail that while she lived those last terrible hours she knew she was going to die and never see her child and me again. Those were her tears of mourning for us."

"In those moments I felt my heart break as though a sword had run me through. I suppose in a way I also lost some of my mind. I needed to see what she had suffered. In that crazy minute I remember thinking that if I saw her pain I might take it from her and my lovely wife might just come home with me again."

"I am not the one you should ask about God, Elizabeth. You see, I pulled the sheet away." He turned and looked back at Elizabeth. He did not try and hide his pain or the single tear that ran down his face. "I cursed God that day and every day that followed for months. I have not taken that curse back and cannot. Forgiveness does not come easily for me, if at all. I still believe but God and I are far apart."

Elizabeth touched away the tear. "Maybe when this is all over Gabriel you and I will find God again. Do you think that is possible?"

"Maybe so. I live in hope. Without hope of all things we are just walking dead."

Back at Random House Gabriella pulled Isabelle into the dinning room. 'Look, Sue Lyn! Mrs. Lucky is green again!'

"Sh, Gabby!" Isabelle tried in vain to quiet the talkative child.

"And she just threw up in the potty. You had better put her back to bed. She's sick!"

"Is that so?" Sue Lyn watched as Isabelle lowered herself slowly into a chair.

"Yes," Gabriella continued and crawled up into Sue Lyn's lap, "she told me not to tell you but Daddy says I should never lie."

"I did not ask you to tell a lie, Gabby. I just asked you not to say anything."

"Same thing." Gabriella sulked.

Sue Lyn fixed her dark eyes on Isabelle. It was a while before Isabelle lifted her face and met the gaze. Sue Lyn asked a silent question and Isabelle nodded.

"Oh God, Isabelle! How long?"

"Four months."

"Does he know?"

"Yes. I told him last night. Everything is fine. He will fix things as they should be."

"Is that what he said?"

"Yes, of course."

Sue Lyn saw that Isabelle truly thought that was so but a cold hand of doubt crossed her heart.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Woo." Mrs. Willard stuck her head around the door. "Inspector Wesson is here to see you and Mrs. Lucci. I put him in the study. It is quiet and private in there."

"Thank you, Mrs. Willard. Will you take Gabriella to Mrs. Parks?"

"Yes, Mrs. Woo." She took the child by her hand. "Come along, dear."

"Bye!" Gabriella smiled brightly at the two women and disappeared into the kitchen.

"Perhaps you should go back to your bed, Isabelle. I can speak to the Inspector on my own." Sue Lyn offered.

"Thank you, Sue but no. Gabriel wants me to speak to him with you and that is what I will do."

"Good morning, Mrs. Woo, Mrs. Lucci." Inspector Wesson stood as the women entered the study. He was smiling broadly. A large brown envelope sat on the table near him. "I do hope you will forgive my early morning telephone call and intrusion."

"Of course, Inspector. Gabriella brings early morning to this household every day and you are not intruding." Sue Lyn returned his smile and nodded that he should retake his seat. "May I offer you some refreshments?"

"No but thank you very much. My good lady just filled me with a very full English breakfast." He patted his round belly.

"You seem quite pleased, Inspector. May I assume you have brought us something to pass on to Gabriel?" Isabelle asked getting right to the point of his visit.

"I have a great deal for you to pass on, Mrs. Lucci. I have to admit that when you first spoke to me on this matter I was very doubtful. After all, to find information on an illegitimate child born over thirty years ago, in a small country town, seemed highly unlikely. Records on these children are scarce now and almost nonexistent three decades back. But not with this fellow!" He patted the envelope with one fat well-manicured hand. "We have a wealth of information here and I think Gabriel will be very pleased."

"Do tell us what you learned, Inspector Wesson." Sue Lyn noticed Isabelle's hand shook slightly and small beads of sweat had come out on her forehead and decided to take over the conversation for her.

"Well, all I was told was that the child was born to one Nell Belmont and her hardly more than a child herself, in the village of Steeple Hill. From there this is what I learned; the baby was a boy and named at birth Steven Belmont. He lived with his mother in the home of her elderly grandparents. He was only a few months old when his mother seems to have disappeared from his life. I have further inquiries going on about her as we speak, assuming that that is what Gabriel would want. Steven lived with his great grandparents for three more years. When his wife passed on Mr. Belmont could no longer look after the child. He was placed in a London orphanage. Far luckier than the vast majority young Steven was quickly adopted by a wealthy and powerful family. His name officially changed to Sebastian Ridley."

"Sebastian Ridley!" Isabelle sat forward. "My Lord! I know him and so do you, Sue Lyn. We met him through the family of Theodore De Wolfe. Sebastian is engaged to their daughter Jane."

"Yes, he is." Wesson agreed. "And since Gabriel is presently investigating four murders done on or around the De Wolfe Estate...well, whatever it may be it seems as though he may be on to something."

"It is interesting, indeed." Sue Lyn added.

"To be honest ladies, I too have met Ridley and I thoroughly dislike him and wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him. He runs his political platform very successfully on his so-called very humble beginnings. Even going so far as to flaunt his illegitimacy as proof that he is a 'man of people', a hard worker who knows what it is like to be down and out. That, ladies is a load of horse patties, if you will excuse me."

"Why do you say that?" Isabelle asked.

“There was nothing humble or poor about him. Since he was brought into the Ridley family, he has lived as every other rich person in this country. He has never toiled until his back broke, slept on hard, cold streets or missed a single meal. He is a phony of the first order.”

“Ridley was twenty-one when he married a much older and, of course, extremely wealthy woman. The silly old fool died in less than a year. She had no children, just a few far off relatives. She left her money to the always-lucky Sebastian Ridley. And, as you say he is again marrying money.”

“Money and stupidity.” Isabelle said with emotion. “Jane is as thick as she is ugly. Ridley will get what he wants from her then leave her for some fancy slut, no doubt. That is really no more than Jane deserves. She is vicious, empty headed and mean, like her mother.”

Inspector Wesson cleared his throat. “Ah, yes, that may be so but I do not know the family at all well so I can not say.”

“Well I know them, Inspector and apart from Owen and Randall they are all as mad as hatters and I do not like my man being there. I could tell you stories....”

“Lee is very keen on the subject of politics” Sue Lyn interrupted her friend, “and I have often heard him mention the name of Sebastian Ridley. Lee told me that even though Ridley was instrumental in bringing in the forty hour work week and cleaning up the last of the workhouses he is still not too sure what to make of the man. He has ‘feelings’ about some people, you see, Inspector and about Ridley they are not good feelings.”

“Your husband is very perceptive, Mrs. Woo. As a younger man Ridley had scrapes with the law, minor things for the most part, drunken brawls and the like. He was picked up several times in illegal gambling joints and once even in a raid on a brothel. The Senior Ridley had power along with his money and bought the lad out of many difficulties. Ridley is thirty-five now and through out these last ten years he does seem to have a very clean nose. If he is up to anything illegal now, I have not been able to find it. I will keep on looking though.”

“It sounds as though he will fit in just right with Cornelia and some of her brood.” Isabelle continued with her theme. “I must thank you for all this and I will pass it on to Gabriel when he telephones here today.”

“You are most welcome, Mrs. Lucci. And please pass on that I am continuing to search what I can about the birth parents of Ridley. Do you know if Gabriel will be in London at all in the next few days?”

“One never knows with Gabriel. He has a habit of popping up unexpectedly.”

“If he does then please tell him I would like to see him, at my work or home, any time.” The Inspector stood and handed the envelope to Isabelle.

“Yes, of course. I will see you out.”

“I am curious, Isabelle, why do you feel so strongly against Jane?” Sue Lyn asked when the Inspector was gone. “Has she made advances on Gabriel?”

“Yes, of course. You heard what he said about her the other day. She will have sex with anyone, man or woman.”

“Jane is a lesbian?”

“Yes, she is disgusting.”

"Now that is not like you Isabelle. Surely, you know other lesbians. I do and they are fine women. They do not have the same needs as most females but that does not necessarily make them bad people."

"I know that Sue Lyn. It is not because she is a lesbian that I hate her. I hate her because she will do anything to get what she wants. Nothing is out of bounds for her. She has caused me very great embarrassment."

"She made an advance to you?"

"Several times, Sue Lyn. It was not just a suggestion; she tried to blackmail me into sleeping with her."

"How?"

"I will tell you but you will be embarrassed."

"I am not a child."

"Sometimes you act like it."

"Isabelle!"

"Fine, I will tell you but do not be mad at me. The first time was about two and one half years ago. I was staying at the De Wolfe manor as a guest of Owen. He and I were...well, involved but it was ending and we were both seeing other people."

"Gabriel was there and I was so taken by him. I had been like that about him for some time. Gabriel and I had been flirting all day and I suppose he got it into his head that I wanted him..."

"I wonder why?" Sue Lyn teased. "Sorry, Isabelle, please continue."

"Gabriel suggested that I come and see him in his bedroom that night and I went. I went back to my own bed before dawn and woke up to see Jane sitting on the side of my bed. The front of her dress was open."

"Good Lord." Sue Lyn shuddered. "What did you do?"

"I didn't get a chance to say much before she told me that she wanted me to have sex with her right then and there and that if I did not she would tell Owen that I had been with Gabriel."

"How did she know?"

"She claimed she listened at his bedroom door. She knew exactly what we said and from that she knew what we did. She must have been listening the whole time I was with Gabriel. I have had some terrible experiences, Sue Lyn but that was one of the worst. Other times, men or women I do not like have tried to have me and if they were really awful it would leave a bad taste in my mouth but then...those few minutes with Jane I felt more than repulsion. I was disgusted to breathe the same air as her."

"I told her to go ahead and tell Owen. Jane was furious; she even tried to force herself on me. I had to push her off the bed. The next morning she went right to Owen and told him. He told her to get stuffed and gave her a blast. God, Sue Lyn that was our first time together and it was spoiled by that cow."

"What did Gabriel say?"

"He gave her a blasting too. He told her to find her own women and leave his alone. He and Owen were angry but not as sick about it as I was. Gabriel told me I was over reacting but he does not feel things like a physic." Isabelle paused and sighed. "And along with that, Gabriel told Owen what he had in mind for me before he asked me to come to his room and Owen said it was fine with him. That hurt me and I never went with Owen again. Men! Sometimes they are so stupid."

“That is true. They refuse to grow up. Well, I can see why you hate Jane....”

“That is not the end of it. Last Spring Gabriel and I were at the De Wolfe estate for the engagement party of Jane and Ridley. One morning I was unlucky and had to eat breakfast alone with Jane. She told me she still wanted to have sex with me and thought about it often. I told her to forget it and that if she tried another trick on me I would tell her mother. Do you know what she told me?”

“No?”

“She said, ‘Don’t be silly, Isabelle, who do you think taught me to love females?’”

“What?”

“That’s what she said. I swear to God. She said Cornelia often brought her to a special London brothel, bought women for her daughter, watching and sometimes joined in. What do you think of that?”

“But it could very well be that Jane was making that up just to keep you from going to Cornelia. I have known Cornelia for as long as I have known Gabriel. She does drink too much and can have a foul mouth but....”

“Sue Lyn, I am physic. You know I can often see the pictures people have in their minds. Jane told me that about her mother and a memory came into her mind. I saw it. It was just as she said. Now, Sue Lyn, you see why I hate those people. Have either of those women ever made advances on you?”

Stunned, it took Sue Lyn a moment to take it all in. “No. However, there was one day when something strange...well, it is hard to put into words, Isabelle. There was a telephone call for Ted. I went looking for him and found him in Cornelia’s bedroom. She was sitting at her dressing table and Janet was brushing her hair. Janet is her maid; you know. Ted was sitting at the window watching them. It was all very respectable, nothing out of place at all. But it was all so quiet when I walked in and I had a very odd and uncomfortable feeling.”

“I told you before Sue Lyn, you have physic abilities. You should let me train you. You were sensing that something had happened or was about to happen.”

“You mean between them, the three of them? God...no!”

“Why do you say, ‘God, no’? If Cornelia is a lesbian and sick in the mind with it, do you think her husband would not know? Do you think that Ted De Wolfe would not want to join in if she would let him? Of course, he would! Owen told me about his father’s mistresses. The man is a whore!”

“Did you tell Gabriel about all of this?”

“No. I was too embarrassed. He cares for Cornelia greatly. I did not want to hurt him.”

“You better tell him, Isabelle. He needs to know the truth about all of the De Wolfe family.”

Elizabeth dressed and did her hair as Janet said she should. She pulled the sides back and left the rest to hang in lovely waves down her back. She chose one of her new dresses. It was a pale, ivory green with an over skirt of emerald green lace. She liked the way the dropped neckline and waist gave her more of an hour glass figure. She was not going to but changed her mind at the last minute and put on her emerald earrings and

pendant. They were suited more for evening wear but as her mother had often told her, rules, especially in fashion and lovemaking should be broken.

It was not until she took a last look in the long mirror when she spotted the pile of clothes she had left in the studio the night before piled neatly in a chair by her bed. Everything was there but Gabriel's gun.

"Oh Hell!" She cursed and had a look through the nightstand just in case whoever brought the clothes might have placed it there. It was not there. Would Owen still have it or did someone else take it? If Owen kept it why would he? Most likely, she decided so he could give it to her personally and ask why she had brought it into his studio. The worst might be that he was going to take it to Gabriel. Since the Jackman name was engraved across the butt that was very likely. She had to get to Owen before he got to Gabriel. She had no idea where his bedroom was so she decided to try the studio.

She stopped suddenly at the foot of her bed; from there she could see across the sitting room and straight onto Gabriel's bed. The two doors between her room and Gabriel's room had been open all night and morning. Whoever brought the clothes and placed them on the chair certainly saw that she was not in her own bed and may have seen her in Gabriel's bed. They may have even been witness to their sexual play that morning. She was embarrassed and angry but decided to deal with that later. First, she had to see if the gun was still in the studio. It could be, she hoped against hope that in the dark shadows behind the screen Owen had simply not noticed it.

She went quickly up to the third floor and down the hall to the studio doors. Other things occupied her mind and not the horrid dark hallway behind her. She knocked lightly on the door and tried the handle, to her relief found it was not locked. She stepped inside and silently closed the door behind her.

"Owen? Are you here?" She called out. "Thank God!" She whispered when no one answered. She went to the screen and moved it. There was the table and chair but no gun.

Had Owen simply moved it to a safer place? She looked through the costume rack, into the hat and wig boxes but still no sign of Gabriel's gun. She went through some of the many drawers that lined the long table, still with no luck.

It was then she spotted a small pile of charcoal sketches, the ones that Owen did of her the night before. She studied them with amazement. It was fascinating to see her body through the eyes of a man and she was not displeased. For simple, quick sketches, they were exquisite in line and detail. She glanced at the settee and posing stools. What would she do if he asked her to pose again and maybe even start a painting? She had to admit she had enjoyed posing but was that the alcohol, most likely and Gabriel had requested, only half jokingly that she keep her clothes on. It would all depend, she decided on just what was happening with Gabriel and Suzanne. There was no longer any denying it hurt her when she thought of it but she had to face the possibility that he may have to at the very least be 'friendly' with her if he wanted to keep her as a source of information.

In her mind's eye she saw Gabriel and Suzanne chatting and laughing at the dinner table the night before and wanted nothing more right then but to go up to Suzanne and tell her in very clear words to stay away from Gabriel. She would love to tell her that any day now, she will give him what he wanted and from then on, she and Isabelle would

be out of luck! Maybe soon, but not this day. She would have to continue to look for Owen.

She was crossing back to the doors when she heard the sound of footsteps along the uncarpeted hallway. It was most likely Owen. It would be embarrassing that he would find her in there but at least she would be able to talk to him about the gun. The footfall stopped at the door. She waited for it to open. A few seconds passed and the door did not open but whoever it was had not walked away either. Were they waiting for her to leave?

Silently she went to the door and placed her head against the joining. She did not hear anything but had the distinct feeling that someone was standing there.

"Hello!" She called out. "Who is there?"

The hallway was silent.

"I know someone is there. I heard you walking. I am not opening this door until you identify you self." There was no reply.

She was growing angry and slightly frightened. The image of Gabriel warning her that she must be very careful and always armed flashed across her mind. She cursed herself for losing the gun. On the long and cluttered table, she spotted a large pointed spatula and picked it up.

She put her hand on the door handle, turned and pulled sharply but the door would not open. With both hands on the handles, she tried again. Whoever was on the other side of the doors was holding them.

"If you think this is humorous ..." she stopped as two things happened simultaneously. The dead bolt, near to the floor, slid into locked position as though with unseen hands and more footsteps came down the hall. These were light and quick, like the steps of a child. Now much more frightened than angry, Elizabeth backed away from the door.

She heard the sad and lonely cry of a child. "Mommy?"

Elizabeth knew that there were no children living in the De Wolfe Manor. She also remembered what she had thought was the ludicrous story of the ghost child. Her heart pounded. She was only vaguely aware that the air in the studio was freezing cold. Her breath floated like steam around her head.

"Mommy!" This time the cry was much louder and angry. The door handle turned and the door rattled.

"Go away!" Elizabeth called out. "I am not your mother."

One more time the child cried out for his mother. His voice sounded so painfully lost and sad. "Mommy...Mommy...please, Mommy."

Despite her growing terror, and the very likely possibility that the child who cried for his mother was long dead, Elizabeth stepped back up to the door. Even with the fear of what was out in that awful hallway, her heart hurt for the sound of a crying child. She rested her hand against the seam where the two doors joined.

"Listen to me," she spoke softly, her lips stuck to her teeth. "I am not your mother. She is not here any longer. You shouldn't be here either!"

"MOMMY!" This time the cry was a tremendous roar. It filled the large room and seemed to shake the walls. Pain ripped through her hand. She pulled it back, the blade of a knife showed through the crack and rammed up and down with force. Blood spurted from her palm. Elizabeth looked at her hand and back at the now blood stained

door. She could feel the faint coming. She backed to the table, held onto it and slid to the floor.

"Elizabeth! Come on, wake up!" She opened her eyes. Owen was leaning over her dropping water onto her face. She was lying on the settee. She jumped quickly and tried to get to her feet. "No you don't!" Owen took her by the shoulders and pushed her down.

"You are not going anywhere just yet."

Gasping and fighting the urge to vomit she lifted her hand. It hurt terribly. Owen had wrapped it in a handkerchief. A small amount of blood had seeped through the cotton cloth. Owen draped the cold wet towel over her forehead.

"What the Hell happened to you?" he asked.

She moaned. "I am going to be sick."

"That is alright." He said softly. "There is a bucket by your feet. Just try to relax and breathe slowly." She let him slide her onto her side and heard as he pushed the pail nearer to her head. "Calm your breathing or you will vomit."

She felt for his hand and held onto it. "Please don't leave me." She whispered.

"I won't. Just close your eyes and concentrate on your breathing. Slowly! That is better." For a long while, he sat silent and watched until the color began to return to her face.

"I think I am better now." She muttered, rolled onto her back, sat up slowly. "My hand hurts so much!"

"It is a fairly deep cut and it bled a fair bit but that is always the case with a hand wound. It is not bleeding any longer and will not as long as you stay calm. However, you may need stitches. Randall will have to have a look at it. Now, what the hell happened to you?"

She looked over his shoulder to the blood stained doors. "How did you get in here? The bolt at the bottom was locked."

"Well, it wasn't when I arrived."

"Oh, God...!"

Owen could see she was getting upset again. "Just be still and quiet for a moment." He took a rag dipped it in the water and went to the doors. He wiped away the blood from the door and the puddle from the floor.

"Was it the child?" he asked quietly as he sat beside her.

"I guess so. I did not see who it was. I came up here...looking for you. When I wanted to leave, I could not get the doors open. I heard someone out in the hallway. There was no answer when I spoke to them." She paused for breath.

Owen took a silver flask from his coat pocket. "Take a sip. It is brandy and it will help."

She took a sip and then a larger swallow. He took the flask away from her.

"I heard a child crying for his Mommy. God, Owen it was so sad. I wanted to open the door and help him."

"I have the feeling it is a damn good thing you resisted those maternal urges!"

"I do not remember too clearly. I think I told him I wasn't his mother and that he didn't belong here." She looked at her hand. "I must have rested my hand on the crack in the door. There was an awful sound. He yelled for his mother so loud...the rest of the house must have heard it."

Owen shook his head. "I did not hear anything."

"I guess he must have pushed the knife through the crack. Jesus, Owen! What...?" Her voice trailed off.

"Let's not deal with those questions now. I think you will find there are no answers. I am going to take you down to your bed and go and get Randall."

"No, please. I do not want anyone to know."

"Look, you have to have a doctor take a look at you. You fainted." He gently touched the side of her head. "You have a lump so you must have banged your head. You bled a fair bit. You may need stitches and iodine in case of infection. You will see Randall and that is all there is to it."

"But they don't have to know what really happened. We can say I cut my hand on a glass. I will see Randall but that is what we will say."

"Look, Elizabeth, everybody knows about the ghost child. We have all seen him. But you are the first person he has hurt."

"Please?"

"Yes, alright for now. However, we will talk about this more later when you are feeling better. If that ...thing has become a danger and it certainly seems it has, we have to do something about it." He picked her up and carried her down the stairs. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and waited until he was sure no one was around, then took her into her room and laid her on her bed and covered her with a blanket. He took a glass from the washstand and smashed it against the fireplace fender.

"That will add some truth to your fib. Now, before I go and get my brother you will tell me the story behind this." He took Gabriel's gun from his pocket and held it up for her see.

"Shit!" She mumbled. That problem had completely left her mind.

"Shit, indeed! This is Gabriel's pistol and I want to know why you brought it to my studio last night. Were you going to shoot me if I got too friendly?" He smiled but there was little humor in the smile.

"No, of course not. Gabriel told me to keep it in my corset and I forgot it was there until I took my clothes off."

"Gabriel told a woman he has just met to carry his gun in her underwear and she agrees. I wonder why that sounds a little odd."

"It is the truth." Gabriel said stepping into the bedroom from the sitting room. He walked slowly up to the bed, took the pistol from Owen and lifted Elizabeth's bandaged hand. The wound was bleeding again and the stain much bigger. He glanced at the pile of broken glass and with a lopsided frown glared at Owen.

"Good God!" Owen smiled in spite of Gabriel's obvious anger. "She said she was going to kill you and it looks as if she almost did. You mean to tell me that tiny female did that to you?"

"Just tell me what the bloody hell happened to her?"

"Don't ask me. I have to go and fetch the house doctor. Ask your gun-carrying friend. Maybe you will rate the honest version." Owen stopped at the door. "At some point today, no doubt after you two get your stories straight, I would love to hear why my new and very enthusiastic nude model felt she needed to be armed when she posed for me!"

Elizabeth pulled the blanket over her head.

“Well?” Gabriel asked angrily as he pulled the blanket away.

“I do not feel well, Gabriel. Not now.”

“I don’t give a fig how you feel, Lizzie! How did you get hurt and why did he have my gun?”

On top of everything else, she did not need his anger. Despite herself, Elizabeth began to cry. Gabriel rolled his eyes, sighed and sat beside her. “There is no need for tears.”

“Yes there is. I have had a terrible morning and now you are mad at me.”

“Look, I just need to know how you were hurt. I am not mad any longer.”

“Promise?”

“Elizabeth!” He snapped at her and took a deep breath, “Just tell me what happened.”

She sniffed, blew her nose on his hanky and began her strange story.

“Good morning, Mrs. Beaver.” Cornelia smiled at her head cook and watched as the woman her long woolen coat. “You are off early today?”

“Morning, Mrs. De Wolfe. Yes, I have to pick up a few things so dinner will go round better. Menu wasn’t planned for so many.”

“Ah yes! I am sorry about that. Rather a full house for a change. Mr. Lucci will arrive on the afternoon train. Best make sure you have all you need for at least a few more days. I am holding onto my lovely guests for a while this time.”

“Well, I’ve a long walk. I’ll be off!”

“But why walk? Not when you have so much to carry. You must take the clip or wagon.”

“I thought I might, but I don’t like to bother the boys to hitch up the clip.”

“No, no, I insist. That is why we pay them. Do you want me to speak to them for you?”

“Oh, that is alright, Mrs. De Wolfe. I tell ‘em. Yes, I will take the clip. Hate all those damn stairs.”

Cornelia stood on kitchen steps until she saw Mrs. Beaver climb up into the clip. She smiled and waved as the woman clicked the horse and rolled away. Mrs. Beaver was half-way down the twisting road when she pulled the horse to a halt.

“Oh dear.” She said as she climbed down to the roadside. “What has happened? Do you need some help?”

Elizabeth had just finished her explanation when Randall knocked on her bedroom door. Gabriel stood, placed the gun in the bottom drawer of the nightstand, went silently into the sitting room and closed the door.

“Come in.” Elizabeth wondered if Gabriel was listening at the other side of the door and decided he most likely was.

“Good morning!” Randall placed a large, black leather bag on the foot of the bed. “Owen, said you hurt your hand?” He looked down at the broken glass.

“Good morning Randall. Yes, I can be so clumsy sometimes. I was holding a glass and I tripped over the carpet, cut my hand and banged my head.” She turned her head and pointed to a lump on the side of her head.

Randall pushed the bedroom drapes wide, flooding the room with the bright morning light. She winced and covered her eyes. Randall studied her head wound.

"How are you feeling right now?"

"I have a head ache and my hand hurts."

"Are you dizzy or sleepy?"

"No."

"Have you thrown up?"

"Almost, right after I came to from my faint."

"You fainted? You did not mention that."

"Oh, I guess it must have been from the sight of the blood...!"

"Stand please, Elizabeth."

She did. "Oh no, look at my dress!" There was a large bloodstain on the skirt. "That is ruined."

"Take a few steps." She walked to him and back to the bed. "You are sure you are not you dizzy at all?"

"Yes."

"Alright, lie back on the bed again, please." He smiled and winked. "Rather hoped I might say that to you in a different context."

"Your bedside manner, Doctor, is rather forward." She returned the smile, watching as he carefully pulled away the make shift bandage.

"Well, you know what they say...nothing ventured, nothing gained."

"I suppose that depends on what you hope to gain, Randall. How does it look? I will not need stitches will I?"

"You will if you want it to stop bleeding, Elizabeth. That is a deep cut and it is over an inch long. Are you left handed?"

"No and I do not want stitches."

"Just one and I will do it right now but first you should have something for the pain." He pulled a green bottle from his bag and poured a measure into the cap.

"Laudanum, great stuff to take the edge of any pain. Here drink this."

She swallowed, shuddered and handed him the cap. "I hope it is not going to make me dopey."

"It most likely will. You should feel the effects very quickly."

"Oh dear! I wanted to keep a clear head to-day."

"Don't worry. You probably will not get too sleepy just a little happy. I will keep my eye on you and I promise not to let you go too far astray."

"Happy? I almost forget what that feels like."

"Me as well, Elizabeth."

She relaxed completely as the powerful drug took over. Randall pulled a sterilized needle and thick black thread from his equipment.

She looked at the needle and hiccupped. "I don't like the look of that thing. It is far too big. I know it is going to hurt!"

"Said the vicars' wife on her wedding night!"

Elizabeth laughed and hiccupped again. "You are funny. I like a man who can make me laugh. My mother always used to say 'a man who can make me laugh could make me do many things'...or something like that."

On the other side of the sitting room door Gabriel rolled his one good eye.

Randall smiled. "Now I know why I always liked Margaret Leighton. She was a woman with fire and imagination. Do you have her fire and imagination, Elizabeth?"

Randall took her wounded hand, placed it face up on the bed and knelt on the floor.

"Oh, I have no idea. Maybe! You tell me. Do I make you feel as though I have fire and imagination?" Feeling the full effects of the drug, she was almost purring at Randall.

"Well," he inserted the needle into her flesh and under the open cut, "when we kissed," he pushed the needle out the other side of the cut, "you inspired me with fire and imagination. How did it make you feel?"

Gabriel mimicked his question.

"Let me see!" She giggled. "I was surprised and, well...maybe I had better not tell you."

Randall pulled the thread so the wound closed and tied two firm knots. "That is not fair. I told you how I felt and you won't share with me." He cut the ends of the threads and took a bottle of iodine and bandages from his bag.

"Well... the kiss was lovely and made me feel very much like a woman."

Gabriel put his hands over his face and shook his head.

"Made you feel like a woman?"

"Yes. Does that make any sense? God, I am so sleepy. I thought you told me I would not go to sleep. When are you going to do my hand?"

"All done, Elizabeth." He tied off the bandage.

She held up her hand and tried to focus on it. "I never felt a thing."

"Also said by the vicars' wife, the following morning."

Elizabeth laughed even louder. "Oh dear, how sad for the poor lady." She yawned and frowned. "What the hell did you give me? I don't want to sleep."

Randall closed the curtains. "Sorry. You will sleep for at least a few hours. It is for the best."

"Shit!"

"Same to you, see you later, Elizabeth." Before he had the door closed behind him, she was asleep.

Gabriel was strapping on his shoulder holster when Lee knocked lightly and stepped into his room.

"Suzanne is looking for you. Apparently you promised to meet her in the breakfast..." Lee looked at Gabriel, stopped talking briefly, blinked a few times and looked away, "room. Did you have a rough night?"

"Suzanne can get stuffed. You have no idea where I am."

"Alright. Where will you be?"

"I will be in the studio for a while. I want you to stay with Elizabeth. She has been hurt..."

"What?"

"She will be fine. Randall had to give her some stitches and put her out with something. Stay with her until I get back to you. She will tell you what happened when she wakes up and no matter what do not let her go anywhere alone."

"I thought I would be seeing you fairly soon!" Owen said when Gabriel walked into his studio.

"What was Elizabeth doing up here?"

"My guess is that she came up here looking for your gun. I came in and found her out cold on the floor by the end of the table. Did Randall have to give her stitches?"

Gabriel nodded. "She's resting." He walked slowly around the table following a few small blood drops and more at the side of the settee.

"I do not care what the old man says I am going to call in a priest to exorcise that thing. Obviously, it has figured out how to cause harm; time to send it to Hell where he belongs. From now on, there will be no more females up on this floor."

Gabriel picked up the sketches Owen did of Elizabeth. Owen watched as Gabriel looked carefully at each one.

"She is a fine looking woman, isn't she?" When Gabriel did not answer, Owen continued. "She is sweet, too. Not stuck up like most these days. Is there any reason why you would not like it if I tried to get to know her better?"

Gabriel put the sketches down and sat on the side of the table. "Do you really need yet another female?"

"The pot calling the kettle black. Look, Gabriel, we have spent the last few years trading females and so far it has worked out fine but that means little to me where your friendship is concerned. If you do not want me to go after Elizabeth, you had better answer my question."

Gabriel smiled slightly. "She says you are 'handsome and all that' but she prefers Randall."

"Did she say that?"

"Yes, she did. How the mighty have fallen."

"Oh well...handsome is a start. It could be that Father Randall is having second thought about the celibacy problem. For Christ's sake, Gabe, spit it out, will you?"

"We have a lot to talk about, Owen. First all, so there will be no confusion, Elizabeth Leighton is mine. Not as an affair but much more, if she will have me. We are not lovers yet. She wants me to be free of all my females before she will come to me. I respect that and will give her what she wants."

"I see. You are willing to do that, so you must be very serious about her."

"I am."

"Good!" Owen smiled. "It is far passed time you found a good one. Speaking of that, I do not think Isabelle will go easily."

"No, that will be very difficult. I do not want to hurt her but she is already hurting as she waits for the end."

"I am not taking her off your hands. I had enough trouble with her before."

"She is pregnant."

"Fucking hell, Gabriel! Does that not change things for you and Elizabeth?"

"Why should it? You had a son and did not marry his mother. It is a sad story but I do not love Isabelle and she knows that." Gabriel thought for a moment and ran his hands through his hair. "But you have given me an idea. Have you ever had a go at Suzanne?"

"No." Owen laughed. "I told you before when you learned she was posing for me. I do not have sex with my models."

"She is not posing for you now...."

"Are you saying you want me to take Suzanne off your hands?"

"Yes."

"Well, she is certainly pretty, intelligent and was very friendly with me several times. I stayed away because she was your concern. I will give it a go." Owen laughed, "Solely for the sake of our friendship, of course."

"How noble of you! For now, I do not want her to know I would prefer to end our affair. I need her still to tell me whatever she can about a case her father is working on. Just keep her busy and happy."

"I will, if she will have me. I can only try."

"Do your best. Now you and I have much more important and serious things to discuss."

Owen sighed. "I thought something was up. Hopefully you will explain why Elizabeth came up here with your gun."

"She works for me now and is living in Random House. I gave her the gun and told her to have it with her at all times. She, Lee and I are here not for a visit but on an investigation into the mountain murders."

"It is about time! When we spoke about it after the death of Daisy, you were not inclined. Has something happened to change your mind?"

"Yes. The wounds on the murdered women here and those on Helena are very similar. There are other reasons but that is what triggered me."

"Good Lord! You are thinking that it was the same felon?"

"I am starting to believe that. It is early yet, though. You should know that I am doing this investigation without the knowledge or consent of your parents and I very much want it to stay that way."

"I see." Owen paused, took out his cigarette case, offered one to Owen and lit his own. "Then you think the killer is one of us?"

"I do not 'think' one way or the other yet. I keep an open mind. Can I count on your help?"

"You want my help? How can you be so sure I am not the murderer or at least involved if only to protect the family name?"

Gabriel shook his head and smiled. "You have your faults, my old friend and I am not blind to any of them however you are not a murderer, insane or otherwise. And as far as family name goes, the scandal will be horrible but not as bad as letting the murderer go free to kill again."

"I will help in any way I can. The first thing I will tell you is that it is not Randall."

"I know."

Owen nodded slowly. He stood and looked out the window across the terraces and gardens that ran down the gentle back slope of Wolfe Mountain.

"There is something else we have to talk about." Gabriel said after a moment.

Owen sighed and came back to his seat. "More joy, no doubt!"

"Far from it. What do you know of 'The Circle of Mendes' and Pierre Desjardin?"

"Not much. Some foolish Hellfire type thing my old man was involved with he was in university. Desjardin was the leader of the group."

"Not so much foolish, Owen. Evil and very deadly is more like it. Samuel Jackman and Henry Leighton were also members in very high standing and that group held firm for at least twenty years. You and I were ten years old or thereabouts when the group fell under Henry Leighton's leadership."

"Your father? Elizabeth's father? What do you mean by evil and deadly?"

"Tony Lucci is coming here today. He is involved with all this as much as you, Elizabeth and me. I will explain everything this evening."

"Fuck, Gabriel that is not good enough. I want to know now."

"I understand your frustration but you have something more important to do right now. Does Leticia have a telephone?"

"Yes, why?"

"Call her and tell her to pack what she needs for a least a few days," Gabriel shrugged, "maybe longer. She and Noah are to go to Random House right away. Tell Leticia she must go. Do not take any argument and once she is there she and your boy are to stay inside at all times. I have protection there and they will be safe."

"That is not necessary. They left last week for a months stay with her family in France. Safe from what?"

"Murder."

"What the hell...!"

"Save you anger, Owen for a more appropriate time and that will certainly come." Gabriel took Leighton's diaries from his jacket and handed them to Owen. "They are Henry's diaries from that time. They are very difficult for anyone to read, more so you, I am afraid. In the second of the two books you will find a very detailed account of your own birth." Gabriel leaned forward and placed his hand on Owen's arm. "It will not be easy for you but when you have finished reading them you must not go to your parents with what you have learned. Do not say anything to anyone. Come to me if you need to talk. The lives of the ones we love count very much on what we do now."

Owen, his face flushed with anger and confusion, simply nodded.

"I suppose you are angry with Elizabeth over losing the gun?"

"Oh yes. However she is new to all this so I will not make too much of it. I am thinking that I should send her back to Random House. Still and you must understand this as well, Owen, there is extreme danger here for those you and I love. It is the same for Elizabeth and Tony."

"Shit ... Noah and Gabriella?"

"Yes. Where is your pistol?"

"In my wall safe."

"Is it in good working order? Do you have a shoulder holster?"

"Yes and yes!"

"Put it on and keep it on. I should go and have a few words with Suzanne."

Gabriel smiled. "Remember..."

"Keep her busy and happy." Owen returned the smile. "It is a burden, but I will do my best."

Gabriel found Cornelia, Randall and Suzanne in the parlor. "Before any of you ask," he said as he crossed the room and sat beside a bowl of chocolates, "yes, I have a black eye and it is no ones business how I go it." He put several pieces of the candy in his mouth and glared around the room.

After a moment of silence, Suzanne cleared her throat and spoke with a sulking tone. "If you had come for breakfast you wouldn't be hungry."

"Sorry Suzanne, I overslept."

Cornelia spoke next. "Randall told us that Elizabeth cut her hand and that she is resting. How is she? I wanted to go and see her but Randall said she should sleep."

"I told you, Mother, Elizabeth is fine, just rather sleepy. I am sure she will be up and about in a few hours." Randall put in.

"Why should Gabriel know or care how she is?" Suzanne asked with even more of a pout.

Gabriel stood and dropped a handful of the candy into his pocket. "Do not sulk, Suzanne. It is boring and childish. Come." he leaned over and took her hand. "I want to talk to you."

"Gabriel, Ted wants a word with you. Talk about sulking! He hasn't said hardly a word to me in days." Cornelia said with a look of exasperation.

"Tell him I am busy. I will talk to him later."

"Shall we go to your bedroom?" Suzanne whispered as they went up the stairs.

"No, yours. I always prefer a ladies boudoir."

Suzanne closed and locked the door behind her. She put her arms around Gabriel's neck. "I thought you might come to see me last night."

Gabriel smiled. "Good Lord, Suzanne! After yesterday afternoon, I thought you might like a rest from me."

"Did I drain you too much?"

"I am only human, just a man. I need to rest, you know." He put his hands on her hips. "I may come tonight, if you are good to me now."

"Oh yes? What would make you happy?" She slid her hand down his back. "I could give you a lovely, long kiss there, like I did yesterday."

He kissed her on the neck and gently backed her away. "That is very tempting however I have a busy day ahead of me!"

"But it would make me so happy to do it, Gabriel. I can finish you in five minutes or less if you relax." She pushed his hands away and leaned hard against his body.

"Five minutes! That is for little boys and old men." He stepped away from her, sat in a chair and lit a cigarette. When he spoke, again his voice was stern. "A lovely offer and I am more than tempted but I am working right now."

She sighed and sat on the side of her bed. "Then why did you bring me to my bedroom?"

"To talk, privately. Have you heard from your father since we got here?"

"No but Theodore did."

"Yes?"

"I was near by when a maid told him he had a telephone call from Mr. Beryline. I went down the hall and listened. I missed some of what Theodore said but Papa must be in London because he is to meet Theodore at the St. James Club tomorrow morning. He seemed excited."

"Did you catch a time?"

"Well, Theodore said something about meeting for breakfast. Does any of that help?"

Gabriel snubbed out his cigarette, smiled and sat beside her. "Very much! Do not tell anyone any of this, do you understand."

"My lips are glued."

"Sealed...your lips are sealed. But not right this minute." He pulled her to him and kissed her. She returned the kiss with passion. Elizabeth's face flashed across his mind. For him the kiss went cold, his interest in it only acting.

He said as he stood from the bed. "I will see you later, Suzanne."

"You will." She called after him as he left her room.

As he walked down the hall, he shook his head and pushed his hands through his hair. Could he not even kiss another woman without thinking of Elizabeth? Now even that simple kiss filled him with guilt. He decided not for the first time he had to get this business over with quickly and be free, as Elizabeth wanted. He loved it when she teased him but she was getting bolder each time. He needed to make love to her soon and ease the painful passion that was quickly becoming too difficult to hold in check.

Quietly he stepped into Elizabeth's bedroom. Lee had lit a fire and sat half-asleep in an armchair by the fire.

"Any sign of life?" Gabriel whispered.

"Well, she grinds her teeth and talks in her sleep."

"Yes, I noticed all that last night. She is a very noisy female." Lee followed Gabriel into the sitting room.

"I take it that you slept with her last night?"

"Sleep is the word some might use. And sleep was all we did...that is, she slept and I did not."

"Is she stubborn, not interested or are you losing your touch?"

"None of that. The woman is a lunatic."

"As they all are."

"I have had a brief talk with Owen. He knows we are here to investigate the murders. He has offered to help."

"Then obviously you do not see him as a suspect. To be honest, I never had Owen down to it."

"It'd stake my last dollar on Steward and Jane. We must not forget there could have been a third killer. That person may have been from this household or not. For all of it we need proof."

"We will get it. There is always something."

"I gave Owen Leighton's diaries to read."

"That is most likely a very good idea. I spoke to Sue Lyn just after eight. They had just had a call from Wesson. He was on his way to meet with them."

"And Willard's men."

"Two outside the house, two behind and two inside."

"Good. Now, did you happen to see Steward or Jane so far today?"

"Yes, they were at breakfast with their parents."

"How did they seem to you?"

"Same as usual. They had all but finished eating when I arrived. Jane did all the talking and always about herself. Steward sat silent, as did Ted. Cornelia seemed angry at Ted, or at least they did not speak to each other."

“Steward said he was going into the village to buy some cigarettes and do some other shopping. Cornelia asked him to pick up the local paper. Jane said she was going with Steward. She said she was going stop by and see Andre...who ever that is and told her parents that she and Steward might not be back until lunch time.”

“What time was that?”

Lee thought for a moment. “I went downstairs at eight. I would say they left at 8:30 give or take a few minutes.”

“Do mind staying on as baby sitter for a while longer?”

“Not at all. Elizabeth is rather entertaining for someone who is sound asleep. What are you going to do while I sit on my thumbs.”

“Have a look around the rooms of Jane and Steward. At some point today I will have nice chat with Ruth. What did she say, Lee?”

“Who?”

“Elizabeth. You said she was talking in her sleep. What was she saying?”

“She wants...very much wants chocolate.”

“Really? That is interesting. I shall have to buy her some.”

Lee smiled. “Problem was, Gabriel, that it was Randall she was asking for chocolate.”

Gabriel frowned and winced.

He was leaving Elizabeth’s room when he ran into Owen. “I thought I would stick my head in and see how Elizabeth is doing?”

“She is sleeping off the effects of Randall’s pain killer. I have Lee keeping his eye on her. I think she is fine.” He pulled Owen to the side. “Lee just told me that Jane and Steward are off in the village so I am going to have a look around their rooms. Want to join me?”

“Very much so.”

“Good. I have to make a quick telephone call to Isabelle first. I will use the telephone in the housekeepers’ office. It is the most private telephone here.”

“Isabelle is having a morning nap.” Sue Lyn told Gabriel a few moments later on the telephone when he asked for Isabelle. “She is not too well in the mornings these days. It is called morning sickness!” She waited a moment and when he said nothing she added, “She wanted me to tell you what Wesson told us.”

“Well, at least that means he had something to give us. But first, how is Gabriella?”

“Very well. She is playing on the floor beside me.”

“Remember everyone is to stay inside at all times.”

“Yes, I know. Lee made that very clear. What is the matter, Gabriel? That much Lee will not tell me. Does it have anything to do with the De Wolfe murders?”

“Do you think I will tell you if Lee will not?”

“No, I suppose not. I just do not think it is fair.”

“It is not fair. The thing is, Sue Lyn, I will know much more tomorrow. I will be at the house for the lunch and I promise I will tell you and Isabelle much more than I could right now. Will that do?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Now tell me what Wesson learned. Did he find out anything about the child of this Nell Belmont?”

“You have a strange look on your face, Gabe.” Owen said when Gabriel rejoined him a few minutes later. “Good news or bad?”

“Interesting, that is certain. Maybe good, I will see. What is your opinion of Sebastian Ridley?”

“Not high. He is as bent as any politician is these days. He is a womanizer and I am sure he is only marrying Jane for her money.”

“I have only met him once or twice. Yes, I thought he was a bit dodgy as well. Too good to be true, most likely. He does seem to have many people hoodwinked. How do he and Ted get along?”

“Fair enough, I suppose. However, he is very popular with Mother. She seems to think light shines out his back side.”

“Well. Shall we get on with our look around before your brother and sister return?”

“Steward always keeps his door locked but I know how to get in through the terrace doors.”

Gabriel followed Owen outside to the far end of the wide terrace that surrounded the back of the main floor.

“A while back Steward had the lock on the inside door changed but foolishly did not think of these doors.” Owen pulled a ring of keys from his pocket. “And I have the key!”

“Good, that will save me from having to pick the lock.”

“Can you do that?”

“Lee taught me. I am not as good as he is, though. There is not a lock around that he cannot open.”

After a last look around, they stepped into Steward’s bedroom.

“Tell me Gabe...just what did Lee do for a living before he came to work for you?”

“Don’t ask! Just know that he is one man in this world who still holds his word and his friends above all else. That is sadly very rare.”

“True! Well, here we are. What do we do first?”

“You stand at the door and listen. If you hear anyone coming, we get out the way we came.”

Gabriel looked around the large, well-furnished room. He noticed first the absolute lack of anything that spoke of personality or decoration. There were no photos, mementos or knickknacks of any kind. The mantle over the fireplace, the top of the long bookcase, the dresser top and nightstand were bare but for a lamp and a candleholder. All of the available wall space, where anyone would show his or her personality in some form or other, was naked. The only visible sign that anyone actually lived in the room was the shaving gear set in a neat line across the back of the washbasin and beside it a hairbrush.

“I know Steward has an apartment in London. How much time does he spend here?”

“At least one week in every month. He has no choice if he wants father’s monthly handout.”

“Is that his only source of income?”

“It is his only legal source of income. What do you smell, Gabriel?”

Gabriel nodded as he tried the top drawer of the nightstand and found it locked. "I noticed it right away. Fucking opium! That stink never goes away. Does he sell it as well as use it."

"No doubt about that. For a while, he even had the nerve to have people come up here to pick up the shit. I put an end to that fast enough. Now I suppose he runs that business from the apartment."

Gabriel took a narrow case from his jacket pocket and from that took out a thin, flat metal rod. He inserted it into the lock, turned it a few times, the lock turned and Gabriel pulled the drawer open.

"Hell!" Owen smiled. "I have to get one of those."

"It's called a 'Betty'. One of my favorite females. Take a look in here." Gabriel nodded down to two handguns. "This one is a .38 RF Hood Pocket Revolver, single shot and, my friend it is very accurate and deadly. The other is a 320 CF Bulldog revolver, Belgian, I believe. It is a five shot."

"Brother does mean business, doesn't he?"

"I'd say!" Beside the weapons and behind two boxes of ammunition was a small black bottle. Gabriel picked it up. On the pale yellow label were a skull and crossed bones and Chinese writing.

"Too bad Lee isn't here. I'd like to know what that is."

"I can tell you right now, Owen. The Chinese symbols read, 'to kill the rat'."

"Rat poison?"

"Arsenic to be exact. In this form, it is many times more deadly than the usual kept in the tool shed. One small drop of this could kill any man. I doubt Steward had rats in mind when he got his hands on this."

Gabriel closed and relocked the drawer.

The second drawer was empty. The third held hundreds of professionally made photographs. They were all of women, mostly naked and in various and extremely sexually explicit poses. Many of them had the women bound with ropes and chains. Some of the photos had males acting out various tortures and engaging in very real sex acts with the females.

"Bloody sick little bastard." Owen swore as Gabriel closed and relocked that drawer.

"As difficult as it is to accept, Owen, at least now you have seen with you own eyes the truth of that man."

"I have known it for as long as I can remember. I think I am just beginning to see the depths of his depravity."

"Perhaps!" Gabriel took a quick look through the bookcase. It was no surprise to find several obscure books on sadism and masochism. One entire section was devoted to anarchy and revolution. A large, dog-eared copy of 'Death of a Queen' by Summers Winlock took place of honor, center, upper shelf.

"That book was banned years ago. It is about the benefits of the assassination of Queen Victoria and the end of the British Monarchy" Gabriel explained. "But that," he turned and pointed at the large roll topped desk, "is what I really need to have a good look through."

The locked desktop was open in seconds. Owen stayed listening by the door while Gabriel sorted through the neatly stacked bills and receipts. Other than the fact that

Steward spent a great deal of money on clothes for himself and gifts, no doubt for female friends he found nothing of interest.

“What I need to find is personal correspondence. You would be surprised the risks people take with the letters they keep.”

“Try the bottom drawer on the right.”

“Well, well, look at this.” Gabriel said as he lifted out from that drawer a large pile of letters. “How did you know where it was?”

“Just a guess, really. That is where Mother keeps her correspondence in her desk.” Owen paused, sighed and added. “You may not know this Gabriel and under the circumstances....”

“Go on....”

“Steward and Jane take after their mother in many ways.”

Gabriel stopped sorting through the letters and looked at his friend. “I doubt that, Owen.”

“We should talk about that at another time.”

“No, tell me now.”

“I know you care about Mother and she very much cares about you. However you have not lived your whole life with her as I have.”

“Perhaps, but it is more than clear that she mothered you and Randall and ignored Jane and Steward.”

“They were not ignored in all areas, especially Jane.”

“Hell, Owen spit it out. Forget about my feelings. If you are referring to Jane being a lesbian, remember I know about the stunt she tried to pull off on Isabelle. What does that have to do with Cornelia? I doubt that Cornelia even knows about it. She would be appalled as any mother would be.”

“Yes, of course, forget I brought it up.”

“Christ Owen!”

“I guess it was just over a year ago. I was suspicious about Jane and Ruth. They were always together. Hell, Jane was more like a personal maid than a relative. I learned that Jane was aiding Ruth in her nightly bathing. Jane never does anything unless there is something in it for her. I put two and two together but wanted to know for sure that it added up to four. One night I watched at Ruth’s bathroom window.”

“And?”

“They bathed together. I did not watch long. It was actually sickening.”

“Shit, Owen! And you never said anything?”

“To Ruth? No, why should I? I could not care less what she did. However, I did tell Mother. She was drunk and most of the time she is, she just hides it well. She laughed and said she was glad that Ruth was at least getting some kind of happiness. I was furious and demanded if she had no care about her own daughter. She told me that I was far too old fashioned. She said that to be truly fulfilled a woman must have a female lover. They were always so much more attentive to the needs of another woman. She proudly told me that she had had many lesbian lovers and that father knew and approved. From the first signs that Jane was turning into a woman, Mother taught her how to ‘be a lesbian’.”

For a while, Gabriel sat in silence. Anger turned to shock and disgust. He went back to sorting and reading some of the letters. There was nothing of interest so he put the pile back in the drawer.

"I want a look around Jane's' room." He said quietly. "We will go out the way we came so you can lock the door after us."

"I am sorry, Gabriel." Owen whispered as they crossed the terrace towards the back entrance. "I never wanted you to know about certain sides of my mother."

"You had to tell me. I realize that. I must know the truth. If there is anything else...you should tell me as well." As they reentered the building and walked to Jane's room Gabriel wondered if he should be as open with Owen as he wanted him to be. Should he tell Owen that Jane was not the only one molesting his soon to be ex- wife? Owen might not care about what Ruth and Jane did but he would not be so carefree if he knew that Steward drugged and raped her and had probably been doing that for some time. No, this was not the time for him to know that. The time may come soon but it was not right then.

Jane's bedroom was the opposite in every way from Stewards. It was a mess of frills, laces and feminine things. Not the things of an adult female but much more like a young girl. Every available space covered with stuffed toys, figurines and dolls.

"She collects dolls." Owen explained as he watched Gabriel look around.

"Christ, does she still play with them as well?"

"I wouldn't be surprised."

There was no bookcase and not a book in view. The dresser top and nightstand were a clutter of makeup, combs brushes, hair ribbons and perfume bottles. Gabriel went quickly through the drawers. He ignored the provocative under garments and closed the drawer quickly. Owen had had enough embarrassment for the time being.

"I was hoping she might keep a stash of letters from Ridley. But it doesn't seem..." Gabriel stopped as he caught sight of a small silver tray on a lamp table by the door. On it was a pale green envelope.

"The morning mail." Owen said. "The maid leaves it here for her. Jane would never remember to pick it up on her own."

"It is from Ridley." Gabriel said with a grin. "And look, 'Urgent' is scrawled across the top. Well, if it is urgent we had better have a read. Do you agree?"

"Completely."

Gabriel tore open the envelope and read aloud:

Jane,

First of all, when I telephone I do not expect to be told by a servant that you are not taking my calls. That will never happen again.

Now on to this other matter! I thought it done with, but apparently, you need more instructions. Under no circumstances will Ruth De Wolfe come and live in my home after we are married. I thought I made that perfectly clear. I told you when I agreed to our engagement that your relationship with Ruth would have to end well before the wedding. That time has long past.

It may have been a diversion but it was certainly nothing more than that. Did you not tell me that you used her just for your own enjoyment and that you thought of her

as a pathetic cripple and an idiot? You are playing a very dangerous game in many ways! Now you are telling me that you love her. That is not acceptable.

She may have had her place in your ridiculous life before our engagement but as I have told you often, you are to do nothing that would be a cause of embarrassment for me. More than anything else, I have my career to think of and that is far more important than your illicit whims. When and if I let you indulge your need for female 'companionship' I will choose the woman, the time and the place. That will never be Ruth De Wolfe.

Along with that any future connections I have with Ruth will be none of your concern.

As far as I am concerned, your outrageous demands have placed our engagement in jeopardy. If you continue to disobey my orders, there are many other very willing females available. Above all, you should know how important our marriage is to your family. Cornelia will be more than furious with you if I end the engagement. I doubt that is what you want. On top of all that have you considered what Steward will do if he learns just how much you have displeased Cornelia and me?

I will be arriving at the Manor in the early afternoon and I am expecting to find you a very changed woman. I will want this letter back from you.

Ridley

"Well, Gabriel, that is very interesting. It seems Jane is in some difficulties."

Gabriel folded the letter and put it in his pocket. "I have to wonder why Steward would care if Jane displeases MP Ridley? Too bad for her she will not get to read this letter."

Chapter Ten

Elizabeth woke with a start and sat up quickly. "Lee! Is that you?" She squinted across the dim room.

"Back to the land of the living, are you?"

"What time is it?" Slowly she slid her legs over the side of the bed and stood.

"It is just after one in the afternoon."

"Hell, I wasted the whole morning. Where is Gabriel?"

"Hopefully he is about somewhere and working on the case. Most likely he is trying to find you some chocolate."

"What? Why? God, I feel terrible. What was it that Randall gave me?"

"Most likely laudanum. It is a powerful combination of opium and alcohol. Some people love it. How is your hand?"

"It hurts but at least I am no longer bleeding. Just look at my dress! Do you have any idea how much it cost? A man could feed his family for a year." She shook her head with disgust.

"I will wait in the sitting room while you change and then we will go down for lunch. You will feel better when you have something in your stomach."

"Elizabeth, Lee! There you are. We are all just about to go in for lunch."

Cornelia smiled as they entered the parlor. Jane, Steward, Randall, Suzanne and Gabriel stood near by. "How is your hand, dear?"

"I am alright, Aunt Cornelia. I am just so clumsy sometimes."

"Well thank goodness for Dr. Randall! Well we should go in but I must warn you all that lunch is little more than a cold buffet. Mrs. Beaver went to buy some groceries a few hours ago. For some reason she has not returned yet. I have no idea what could be keeping her."

"You know Mrs. B. She is such a gossip. She probably started gabbing to a friend and forgot her time." Jane offered and headed into the dinning room.

Elizabeth walked up to Gabriel and Suzanne. "I am so famished a cold buffet sounds delicious. I did not manage to have breakfast."

"Really?" Suzanne put her hand around Gabriel's arm. "I rarely eat breakfast. I do not wake up early enough, do I Gabriel?"

Stupid woman, Elizabeth thought as she followed them across the room. Put your mark on him all you want. Very soon, I will easily wash it away for good.

They milled around the buffet, filling plates with sliced meats, cheeses, pickled eggs and buttered rolls. The sitting was random and Elizabeth found herself unhappily between Steward and Jane.

"Is Owen not eating?" Lee asked.

"He said he had something important to read." Cornelia answered. "And Ted has just left for London. He has a meeting there first thing tomorrow and decided to go and stay at his club. He has been so distracted lately. I do hope that this meeting whatever it is will clear his mind."

“So tell me, Elizabeth,” Steward leaned close and she resisted the urge to back away, “besides your wounded hand, are you enjoying your stay in the deadly boring countryside?”

“Oh, I do not find the country boring at all, Steward. It is a lovely relief to be away from the city for a while. If I had a choice, I would much prefer to live in the country.”

“Not me! I had more than enough of trees and the like while growing up. I miss the hustle and bustle, the restaurants and theater.” As he spoke, he ran his eyes around her face, with a very quick look down her cleavage. “Would you not miss the theater?”

“It has been a long while since I have been to the theater, almost two years and I can’t say that I miss it all that much.”

“I have not missed a single play....”

“I doubt very much that Elizabeth likes the same artsy and totally worthless things that you do, Steward.” Jane interrupted.

“I like the theater well enough, do not misunderstand. Since the death of my parents, I have not had anyone to go with. I suppose I could go alone but that does not seem like much fun.”

Steward folded his napkin and dropped it over his plate. “I tell you what, Elizabeth. I will gladly take you, if you will give me the honor.”

“Lord!” Jane rolled her eyes.

“Shut up, Jane. You will have to excuse my sister. She is so easily jealous. It has been ages since Ridley has taken her anywhere. When are you going back to London?”

“I really have no idea. I will go when Aunt Cornelia has had enough of me.”

“Then you will stay forever.” Cornelia smiled at her. “It is so nice to have so many happy, young faces around me again. Since I have no grandchildren to fill my days I do get lonely!”

“Mother, not again!” Randall spoke quietly.

“Before you leave, whenever that is, you must give me your address. I will take you to such wonderful theaters and restaurants you will never miss the country again.”

“Yes, that would be nice, Steward.” All the while they spoke Gabriel stayed silent. Elizabeth was very aware that he listened to every word.

“Are you finished eating?” Jane asked suddenly. “Won’t you come with me? I do so want to show you my wedding dress. It has been ready for months but I am thinking about having extra beading done. I would love your opinion.”

“Yes, please do go, Elizabeth and talk Jane out of more beads.” Cornelia nodded at Elizabeth. “The dress is prefect and beautiful as it is.”

“Come on, then!” Jane took her hand and almost pulled her from her chair. “You will agree with me, I am sure. But mind you don’t look too closely at my room, it is rather messy.”

“Excuse me, Mrs. De Wolfe,” the family butler looked past Jane and Elizabeth to Cornelia. “Mr. Ridley is here. Should I put him in the parlor?”

“Sebastian is here!” Cornelia left the table and rushed ahead of Jane who was still holding tightly onto Elizabeth’s hand.

As she was pulled out of the room, Elizabeth glanced over her shoulder and saw Gabriel and Lee exchange glances.

Sebastian Ridley waited in the foyer as the three women approached.

"Sebastian!" Jane laughed happily. "I did not know...." The laugh died when he glanced at her. It was a very brief, cold and angry look. Jane froze dead in her steps.

"Cornelia, please excuse my intrusion." He turned his back on Jane, smiled and bowed slightly to her mother.

"You are never an intrusion, my dear!" Cornelia beamed at him and seemed oblivious to his reaction to Jane. "It is always a delight to have you here. I have someone here you must meet right away."

"This lovely lady, I hope!" He turned to Elizabeth.

"Yes! This is Elizabeth Leighton, the daughter of my dear friends, Henry and Margaret Leighton."

"Margaret's daughter? My Lord yes!" To Elizabeth's surprise, he took her hand and kissed it lightly. "You are a true beauty, so much like your darling mother."

"Thank you, Mr. Ridley." Elizabeth could not help but blush. "Did you know my mother well?"

"Well enough to miss her greatly. I am so sorry for your loss. Margaret was an amazing woman and a genius in her talent." All the while he spoke Elizabeth was aware of Gabriel and Steward watching from across the hall.

"Elizabeth has promised to stay with us for a very long while so you will have many opportunities to speak with her, Sebastian." Cornelia took his arm and led him into the parlor. He looked over his shoulder and gave one last charming smile as Cornelia closed the door behind them.

"Are you alright?" She asked the ashen faced Jane.

"No. I think I need a drink!" Jane whispered, her embarrassment quickly slipping into anger. Again, she took Elizabeth's hand, pulled her along the hallway past Gabriel and her brother.

"Where are we going?" Elizabeth asked.

"To my bedroom. You are going to see my wedding dress. Sebastian can be an ass, I couldn't care less!"

Elizabeth heard Steward laugh; it was not a pleasant sound.

"Looks like little Janie beat me to the goodies today, Gabriel. Oh well, there is always tonight or tomorrow...it does not matter to me. But be damned if I do not get a piece of that lady before I go back to London." Steward said quietly to Gabriel when Jane and Elizabeth disappeared around the corner.

"Do you really think so?" Gabriel leaned against the wall, his arms folded over his chest. "I wouldn't think she is your type. I do not see Elizabeth Leighton as a whore."

"I do not restrict myself to whores, Gabriel. Once in a while I like a challenge. Don't you? I mean fucking Suzanne any time you want must get a little tiring. You cannot tell me you would deny a go at rather innocent Elizabeth. That face and body might be worth the time and effort it takes to seduce someone who is not a whore." He raised his eyebrows, his sapphire eyes dark. "It takes my breath away just thinking about the things she needs to be taught. It is too bad you brought Suzanne here. Oh well, even more for me...and maybe Jane, if it is her lucky day. From the looks of Ridley Jane will not be getting too much joy from him."

Gabriel took a deep breath and controlled his temper. "You have very high hopes. Perhaps you would be better off to stick to your whores. I doubt you have anything Elizabeth would be interested in."

Jane closed the door, climbed onto her bed, sitting cross-legged. "Sorry about the mess. I do not much like the maids mucking around in here so it is up to me."

"My goodness, look at all the lovely dolls." Elizabeth walked slowly around the room here and there picking up a doll to look at it. "You have so many."

"Daddy got most of them for me when he was traveling on business. I have some from France, Spain and Italy. The one you are holding is from southern Africa." Jane leaned over the side of the bed and brought out a half-finished bottle of whiskey. She pulled the stopper and took a drink right from the bottle. She wiped the top of the bottle with her skirt and offered the bottle to Elizabeth.

"No thank you it is far too early for me." She noticed Jane's hand shook. "You are upset over Mr. Ridley?" Jane nodded. She is frightened as well, Elizabeth thought. "Men can be very difficult at times."

"Yes! I hate it when he is mad at me. I try so hard to make him happy. Mommy says it is my duty to make him happy. But she does not know how hard it is when Sebastian and Steward start to argue about me."

"The strain of family tensions can be very difficult. Do Mr. Ridley and Steward not get along?" Elizabeth sat on a chair next to the bed.

"Most of the time they get along just fine, especially when they want to tell me what to do! I am never allowed to do what I want."

"Have you and Mr. Ridley been engaged long?"

"We became engaged last spring but I was dedicated to Sebastian when I was twelve."

"Dedicated?"

"Yes but I am not allowed to talk about that." Jane rolled her eyes. "Mommy and her stupid secrets!"

"Well, I do not mean to pry. I thought since you seemed rather isolated up here you might like another female closer to your own age to talk to."

"Oh, I do yes, very much. That is why I want Ruth to come and live with us when Sebastian and I marry. I am going to be very lonely with Sebastian away in London most of the time."

Elizabeth wanted to hear more about her dedication to Sebastian. "Is a dedication ceremony much like an engagement party? It sounds so romantic. However, twelve is so very young!"

"Romantic?" Jane laughed. "Not in the slightest. I will tell you about it if you promise not to tell any one."

"I will not tell a soul, I promise."

Jane slid across the bed, dropped her legs over the side and put the whiskey bottle on the night table. "Well...you see, I did not know anything about it either. It was the night before my thirteenth birthday. Daddy was away in Africa. I was asleep when Steward and Mommy came and woke me up. They looked so serious I thought something terrible must have happened. I had just finished my first monthly cycle. You do know what that is, don't you?"

"Well yes, of course I do."

“Mommy told me that that meant I was beginning the process of becoming a woman. It was a very important time and that I had to get ‘popped’ quickly so my breasts and hips would grow properly.”

“Popped?”

Jane looked at Elizabeth with surprise. “You know...someone had to take my virginity and fast or I’d not blossom. Didn’t they do that for you?”

“No.”

“Well, maybe that is why your tits are a little on the small side.”

“They are not!”

“Yes, they are. However, do not worry. They will grow if ever you start having sex.”

“I...never mind! Just tell me about the ceremony.”

“Mommy explained to me that Mr. Ridley had decided to consider me to one day become his bride so it was his right to pop me. They were going to take me to him right away and I was a little scared because I had never done it. I had done other things, many times but not ‘that’! Mommy helped me to get dressed and Steward gave me this thing to drink. It made me relax.”

“Steward drove the carriage and I sat in the back with Mommy.” Jane smiled and took another swallow from the whiskey bottle. “They were being so serious. It is no wonder I was very scared. Mommy told me not to worry because she would be there to look after me. It would hurt just a tiny bit but was as it should be and from then on, sex would not hurt any more. She told me just how important it was that I cooperate and never tell anyone, especially Daddy. After an hour or so, we stopped and Steward got in the back with us. He gave me more of that green stuff to drink and I got so sleepy.”

“Now things are blurry in my mind. I think Steward had to carry me....” Jane paused and took another swallow from the bottle. Her eyes were bright, slightly glazed and she had begun to slur her words. “They took me a large, dark room. There were many other people there. I could hear them talking and laughing.”

“Then Sebastian must have come in the room because everything went quiet. He wore a black gown and looked so handsome. I think he is the most handsome man in the world! He kissed me on the cheek and gave me a gift.” Jane pulled a chain out from under her dress. On it was a gold heart shaped locket. “I always wear it. Mommy helped me to stand and Sebastian took off all my clothes. I remember it was so cold in there. Mommy and Steward made me sit in a large tub of warm water. Sebastian watched while they bathed me and I think I remember someone reading or praying but it was not in English.” She stopped and squinted at Elizabeth. “Maybe I should not tell you any more cause I do not want to hurt your feelings.”

“Why would it hurt my feelings? I find it all fascinating.” Elizabeth decided not to add appalling and disgusting.

A strange, thin smile spread across Jane’s face. The almost childlike innocence that had radiated from her face vanished. She looked older, angry and mean. Elizabeth was suddenly very aware of the gun uncomfortably tucked into her corset.

“It would hurt your feelings because your Daddy was there.” Jane’s thin smile turned up slightly at the corners.

“My father?”

“He was there! We had ‘meetings’ all the time after that and he was always there. Sometimes they needed a Doctor.” Jane snapped angrily then quickly checked her voice and brought back the nasty smile. “Doctor Henry lifted me out of the bath and laid me on a bed. Sebastian watched as Doctor Henry checked me to make sure I was truly a virgin.”

Elizabeth gasped and backed further into the chair as Jane leaned closer to her. “I told you that you were not going to like this part. Anyway, he told Sebastian I was ‘as I should be’.” Jane laughed. It was the same laugh as her brother. “So, Sebastian pushed my legs open and fucked me.”

“My father was not there!” Elizabeth argued but Jane just smiled again and nodded her head.

“Mommy and Steward just watched but lots of other people started having sex then too. I could tell by all the noises. When Sebastian was done, Doctor Henry gave me a needle and the next thing I know I was back here in my bed again.” Jane waited for Elizabeth to say something and when she did not she continued. “I wish he hadn’t given me that needle because I think lots of wonderful things must have happened and I would so love to remember them.”

Elizabeth wanted to call her a liar and leave the nasty creatures’ bedroom. Nevertheless, Jane was half way drunk and talking. No matter how badly she felt she needed to hear whatever she could for Gabriel. She did not know that Gabriel was on the terrace, hidden by a hedgerow and listening at the French doors.

“It could be Jane, that the drug Steward gave you made you imagine all of that. My father would never have had a part in the rape of a child.” Even as she said that, she remembered what she had seen written in his hand. Raping a child was just one of many horrible things her father had great interest in. “I cannot see Aunt Cornelia sitting by and watching such a thing happen to her daughter, no never, not for a minute.”

“Well, he did and she did too! Mommy and Dr. Henry were always there. In the beginning, they drugged me but Mommy wanted me to know all about sex, so I could keep Sebastian happy, so she let me stay awake. Didn’t your Mommy teach you about sex? Maybe that is why your tits are small and you are angry right now.”

“No, of course she did not. My father is dead and you should not make up terrible things about someone who has passed.”

Jane shook her head sadly. “Elizabeth...did you ever see your Daddy naked? Maybe you did. If so, you will know he had a long scar on his left hip, shaped like a V. How do you think I know that? He used to like screwing Mommy while he watched Sebastian and me. I could never really understand that because Aunt Margaret was so pretty and Mommy is so ugly. Then maybe it was just for the fucking...! Isn’t that what everything is all about, in the end? There were many times, when Sebastian was feeling generous he would let me do things to Dr. Henry. Once he even had the doctor fuck me. Too bad you were not there, Elizabeth, I would so love to have a look at your tits...they may be small but I will bet they are lovely!”

“You are disgusting.” Elizabeth spat at her, stood and walked towards the door.

Jane moved quickly and leaned up against the door blocking Elizabeth’s path. “Have you ever had sex with a woman?” She asked breathlessly. “We could do it right now and. right here. I would like that so much.”

“Move out of my way!”

“Come on, Elizabeth! Why not try it? How will you know if you do not taste it? If you are as nice as I think you are, I might let Sebastian fuck you and you would really like that. He is amazing in bed. You need to learn to do it some time. Don’t be such a frigid thing and maybe you will find a man of your own.”

That was it for Elizabeth. With all her anger and force she slapped Jane’s face. She spun and lost her balance but moved quickly back in front of the door. “Oh...!” She narrowed her eyes and snarled. Her voice was heavy and threatening. “Why are you so angry? You wanted to hear what happened and I told you. Maybe I should hit you. You might like it, too! Have I offended your virgin ears?”

“Every part of me is offended by you! Get out of my way. Or would you rather I took your dirty story to your father?”

Jane raised her eyebrows. “Your own dear Daddy was a large part of my dirty story, do not forget that. If I wrote a book, Dr. Leighton would be a main character. But what can you expect from a doctor turned murderer. You would be surprised what my Daddy knows and does not know right now so go ahead and tell him. That would make Steward very mad and you do not want to do that. He has already told me he is going to have you. You make him mad and he will not do it the nice way!” She moved slowly away from the door, not taking her eyes off Elizabeth. As Elizabeth stepped past her to the hall, Jane took her arm and held it tightly. “Listen Elizabeth! I do not see any reason why we cannot be friends. Come back and see when the house is asleep and I will do to you what your Daddy liked to do to me and Mommy!”

Elizabeth shrugged off her hand and walked away.

“Now, my dear, tell me what is wrong and do not say ‘nothing’. If looks could kill I would be less a child right now. What has Jane done now?” Cornelia handed Sebastian a brandy and sat across from him.

“Where is Theodore?”

“He is in London and will not be back until tomorrow. We can speak freely.”

“It is this blasted Ruth thing! I thought I had heard the last of it but apparently not.”

Cornelia sighed. “Tell me what happened.”

“She wrote a letter to me full of plans about Ruth coming to live with us after we are married. I told her time and time again that that is out of the question and I thought you were going to take the matter up with her.”

“I did. We had a long talk and she finally agreed to drop those plans. You know how she is; she will say anything to end an argument and then do what she wants.”

“Well, believe me before I leave here today she will do as I want.”

“Then, perhaps Sebastian, you should tell me exactly what is it that you want? You say that you do not want Ruth in Jane’s life, you want their relationship to end.”

“Yes, that is what I want! How have I not made that clear?”

“Oh good heavens! Do you really think that I do not know what you are doing when you disappear into Ruth’s room with Jane for such long periods’ of time? You are having sex with the both of them. Jane has told me that much and that you have asked for those encounters. Jane is a simple-minded creature, so very easily swayed. She believes she is in love with you and Ruth and your actions these last few months gave her

reason to think she could have both of you. She will not be broken of that dream quickly.”

Sebastian stood and glared down at Cornelia. “I made a mistake, didn’t I? How could I know Jane was going to like it so much? It is very clear that she prefers Ruth to me. I would just as soon not have to bother with Jane and have no inclination to fight in any way to keep her. So you had better do something and fast. You are the one who taught her to be a dyke!”

“Your anger right now will not help, Sebastian. I may have brought her to understanding the pleasures of intense female company but I did not make her lesbian. Believe me, this is something women are born needing. This is very natural for her.”

“Then there is nothing for me to do but to end our engagement!”

“You do not mean that.” She patted the settee for him to come and sit beside her. “Calm yourself. Sit and tell me what is really bothering you.”

“Yes, I do mean it, Cornelia and stop treating me as though I was a child. This is all down to you. You know I do not love Jane. I can barely stand to look at her. It was out of my affection for you that I went along with it.”

“Affection for me and my money! How far would you have gone in your career without my backing and my money?” Cornelia spoke in a calm even tone and seemed untouched by the anger from the man. “You do realize that if you end the engagement you will not get another penny from me.”

“I have more than enough of my own money and you know that.”

“Is it enough to get you to Downing Street? No, of course it is not. Just as I doubt you will be Gladstone’s favorite if you no longer claim the De Wolfe’s as future in-laws. Ted and I would not be at all pleased with you.”

“Fuck, Connie!” Sebastian said down beside her. “I am just so bloody tired of it all.”

Cornelia studied his smooth, handsome features. There were a few lines of worry and flecks of gray in his light blond hair. He was so like his father. Being close to Sebastian brought her back to the wildly happy days of her youth, a time when anything was possible and great feats always worth the cost. She put her hand on his. “I thought something was wrong. You have been very distant lately and it is not solely because of Jane. You have handled her fine up to now. So tell me exactly what is going on in that lovely head of yours.”

He turned slightly in the seat to face her. “I am thirty-five years old and I had yet to have a single thought of my own.” He paused, waiting for her to argue. She stayed silent. “For fifteen years every thing I learned or thought, every person I met...anything a person does in their normal days was dictated by my father. After he died, you took over. It was always the same thing. I was born for politics. If I ever showed the slightest interest in anything else, it was squashed immediately.”

“Well, my dear, I was just carrying through with your fathers wishes. Up until just now, I did not know they were not your wishes as well. When I rescued you from your difficulties years ago, you were very happy to live up to what Pierre saw for you. Am I wrong?”

Sebastian sighed. “No. I was young, confused and the prospect of great power thrilled me.”

“And now?”

"Now I think often about freedom. Is it wrong for me to think of a life made up of my decisions? Is it wrong to want to know what it is like to love a woman?"

"No. All of that will come and soon. Tell me honestly, Sebastian, are my suspicions correct? Do you have feelings for Ruth that are stronger than just sexual?"

"How the hell would I know? You tell me. You have told me everything else I needed to think for all these years."

She pushed her fingers through his hair. "You are hot. Are you in a heat? When did you last mate? You know that you must not go for more than a day or so."

He shrugged. "It has been a few days. I guess it was last week when I was here with Jane. If you think I get any real satisfaction from her you are delusional."

"A week? How many times have I told you that you must sex at least once a day. You know what it does to you if you do not." She put her hand around his neck and down his shirt. "Oh Sebastian, you are dripping with sweat. My poor boy! You must not do this to yourself. You have other females in London. Why aren't you using them?"

"I am too tired and bored to deal with the seduction." He closed his eyes and relaxed as Cornelia ran her cool fingers down his neck. She loosened his tie and opened his collar buttons.

"What you need, my dear, is a pure, simple fuck! It has been a very long time since we spent some lovely time alone together, Sebastian. You need not worry about seducing me. I am more than ready for you."

He smiled. "I am very hot."

"Then perhaps we should find a quiet, lonely place somewhere and see if we can't make you feel like yourself again. What do you think?"

"I think you talk too much. Yes, let's see what you can do for me. I need something to improve my mood."

Elizabeth was half way up the stairs before Gabriel caught up with her. She stopped as he put his arm around his shoulder. "Are you not afraid that Suzanne will see that?" She snapped at him, her face white with rage.

"Sh!" He whispered in her ear and led her to her bedroom. "I was listening." He said quietly as he closed the door.

"What? Why?"

"You do not think that I am going to leave you unprotected with either Steward or Jane, do you? Sit down; you are shaking like a leaf."

She sat near the small fire, watching as he added more coal.

"You heard it all?"

He nodded and pulled the opposite chair next to her and took her hand. "I am so sorry, Elizabeth."

"It is not your fault. I pushed her to tell me. I just did not know...."

"No, I am sorry for bringing you here. I want you to go back to Random House immediately. You will be safe there and you are certainly not safe here."

"No Gabriel. I will not go."

"You will, I insist. I will not take the chance that anything would happen to you." His large almond eyes were sad and concerned.

"You cannot make me go. I am here as a guest of Cornelia."

"And she is as insane as the rest of them, from the sounds of it."

“Frankly, I think Jane was making it all up just to shock and upset me. You can’t tell me you believe all that rubbish!”

“I do and you do as well. You read the diaries. Listen to me, Elizabeth. I brought you here to assist with the De Wolfe murders. That was plain and simple. Lee and I have done this sort of thing many times. I understood the kind of danger involved and with your sensible co-operation, I was sure I could protect you.”

“And so how has that changed? If it is because of what happened last night I have learned my lesson.”

“No, it is not that. I am starting to believe there is a connection between the mountain murders, the ‘Circle of Mendes and the murders of Helena, Margaret and Pierre Desjardin. As the daughter of Henry Leighton, one of Desjardin’s killers, you could be in danger as well. I do not want you to spend another night in this house. Random House is well guarded. You will be safer there.”

Elizabeth stood, crossed the room and looked out the window. “You, Owen, and me...we are children of the murderers?”

“Yes.”

“Then explain it to me why I should not allowed to do all I can to see this matter to an end? Is it because I am a woman and that makes me weak. As you heard and read, my father was as much a disgusting sinner as was your father or Ted De Wolfe. If Jane was telling the truth, he was an active, evil bastard right up until he died. I have as much a responsibility to the terrible things he did as you men have to your fathers. You may think poorly of me because I am female, that does not make me weak or invaluable.”

Gabriel went to her and turned her to face him. “Elizabeth! Please listen to me. I do not think poorly of you in any sense. My own weakness makes me do this. My feelings for you are so strong. I cannot, will not take the chance that anything might happen to you. You must leave this mad house. You must believe me when I tell you that I love you!”

She smiled up at him, reached up and very gently touched his swollen cheek. “And you listen to me, Gabriel Jackman. I think I am falling in love with you too! In my heart and soul, I know I must be here to help you. If you really and truly insist then I will leave but you will be denying me finding my own peace.”

“What did you say?” His eyes were wide with amazement.

She smiled and put her arms around him and pressed her body against his. “You heard me correctly. I am falling in love with you, Gabriel. I would never have believed such a thing was possible before but from the first moment I met you at Random House I felt the start of very powerful feelings. No matter what the cost my place is with you.”

They kissed. The kiss went from happiness to deep passion. When it was over, he held her tight in his arms. “God in heaven! I must be the world’s biggest fool but you can stay but just for now. I may change my mind at any time and if I do, you will be back at Random house very quickly. Remember, Lee and I must know where you are at all times. You are not to go anywhere, even to the toilet without telling either of us.” He slid his hand over her left breast.

She smiled at him.

“Just checking. Keep your clothes on and the gun available. When you are in here on your own always lock the door behind you and never for any reason go anywhere

with Jane or Steward. We will have to sleep in the same room. I will sleep on the floor, if you wish."

"Oh dear!" She laughed. "Why on the floor? That is silly. Why shouldn't I sleep in your bed as I did last night?"

"Yes, you could sleep with me but you will wear a nightgown and no more teasing! Bloody hell! I never thought I would ever say that!"

"No teasing? I will wear a nightgown but I do not think I could avoid a sweet tease. I love the look on your face when you want me."

"God, Elizabeth, have some kind of mercy. Please leave my body alone." He laughed. "Did I really say that? Could it be that your lunacy is catching?"

Lee knocked and walked in. "Sorry!" He said as Elizabeth moved away from Gabriel. "I could come back later, if you wish?"

"No, come in Lee. I asked Lee do try to listen in to Cornelia and Ridley. Did you hear anything?" Gabriel asked.

"I did. However, I would rather not tell you in front of Elizabeth."

"Lord, Lee, after what I just went through with Jane I doubt anything will ever shock me again! But I could go in the other room if you...."

"No, Elizabeth wants to be a part of this, Lee. Tell us what you heard."

"Well, to make a long, sordid story short, Sebastian does not care in the lightest for Jane. He is marrying her for the money and not sure if he is still willing to do that. He is tired of Cornelia's hold over him and has doubts he even wants to be a politician. Cornelia says he is just frustrated because he is not 'mating' often enough, her word, not mine. She offered to make his feel better. He was agreeable and they went off to find a quiet place."

"Cornelia and Sebastian Ridley are lovers?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes and I would say they have been for years." Lee turned to Gabriel. "I am sorry. I know how much you care for Cornelia."

Gabriel shook his head. "I cared for her and that is quickly changing. I just do not understand how I could have been so blind."

"Maybe you were just too close to see it."

"Well, I see it now, Lee!"

"Why the interest in Sebastian, Gabriel?"

"Sebastian Ridley is Pierre Desjardin's son."

"Good God! How did you find out?"

"I had a conversation with a fellow who was Desjardin's valet thirty odd years ago. He gave me an idea and I had Wesson do some searching. Ridley was born out of wedlock to a young girl named Nell Belmont. Isn't it bloody interesting, Lee, that years later he is about to marry the daughter of Theodore De Wolfe?"

"And up to his hilt in an illicit affair with Ted's wife."

"Who could be more interested in avenging the death of the father than his son? Wesson is going see what else he can find out for us. As a Member of Parliament Ridley's life should be an open book. I am going to see Wesson tomorrow. If Ridley's life is not an open book there will be good reasons for that."

"Is it possible" Elizabeth looked from Lee to Gabriel, "that Cornelia and Theodore do not know that Ridley is Desjardin's son? I suppose that is unlikely?"

“Highly unlikely.” Lee answered. “That would be stretched the art of coincidence to the limit. They know exactly who he is. From what I just heard, I would say Cornelia has been a part of Ridley’s life since he was a boy. The fact that they want their only daughter to marry the son of a man they claim to have hated is very interesting.”

“I know you also cared for Cornelia, Elizabeth, but with what we know now I am afraid that caring has been much misplaced.”

Elizabeth sighed and nodded. “I know Gabriel. If she has been the main source of knowledge for Jane...well, that explains a lot. How is it possible for her to fool so many people for so long? Everyone loves Cornelia.”

“Well, not everyone. Isabelle hates her. I cannot count the number of times she told me not to trust and that she was an ‘evil bitch’. It seems I should have listened to her.”

“Now, I am most interested in Mrs. Beaver. Is there anything new on that, Lee?”

“As of ten minutes ago she had not returned. She left just before nine this morning. It is now almost three, five and a half hours is a long time.”

“And Jane and Steward also left here at around 8:30?” Gabriel asked.

“Yes. They were going to do some shopping in the village. Cornelia asked Jane to pick up the local newspaper.”

“God!” Elizabeth briefly closed her eyes. “You don’t think they might have done something to her do you? Why would they?”

“When I was getting our tea this morning I had a chat with Mrs. Beaver. I brought the conversation around to the murders. She spoke as though she knew something. She had not spoken to the local police because she did not trust them. I told her that if she told me I would make sure the information got to the right people. She decided she would consult her fiancé and if he said so she would tell me. At the time, I was only moderately interested. Mrs. Beaver is a gossip and greatly exaggerates her stories. However, someone could have over heard our conversation.”

“By some one, you mean either Steward or Jane?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes, or someone else helping them. I think, Elizabeth, it is time for you and I to have a visit to the village. If Mrs. Beaver made it there, someone saw her.” Gabriel took Ridley’s letter to Jane from his pocket and gave it to Lee. “While we are away, read that and try and have a friendly chat with poor Ruth. She must be as lonely as hell locked away in her rooms.”

“Wait here with Lee, Elizabeth. I will come and get you when I have a clip ready.”

“I am sorry, Lee.” Elizabeth said when Gabriel left them. “I think you will get rather tired with having to baby sit me.”

“Oh, I do not mind all that much.” He smiled at her.

He helped her as she pulled on the dark rose velvet jacket that matched her skirt. “Gabriel wants me to go back to Random House. I refused to go. I cannot just walk away and hide. The terrible things that my father did are as much a responsibility to me as are those of Gabriel and Owens fathers.”

“I agree completely.”

“You do?”

“Yes. Just do as Gabriel tells you and”

“I know.” She smiled. “Keep my clothes on and the gun in my corset.”

“What I was going to say was, yes, Henry Leighton did some horrific things but none of them are worth you risking your life.”

Forty minutes later Elizabeth and Gabriel entered ‘Scully’s Meats and Sweets’ on Madsen Worthy’s High Street. The aromas of all manner of baked goods greeted them. Loafs of bread, still warm from the oven, six fresh baked fruit pies and steaming meat pies lined the counter top.

“Look Gabriel, pork pies still hot from the oven.” She looked from the delicious pies to three neatly dressed tables at the front of the shop.

“You did not eat much lunch did you?”

“And no breakfast at all. My tummy is rumbling like an old sailor’s snore!”

“Not a pretty picture.”

Arthur Scully joined them. “Mr. Jackman! It has been a while.” It was clear when Scully greeted them that he decided quickly that the bearer of a black eye most likely lost the fight so best not to mention it.

“Good day, Arthur. My friend and I are famished. Two of those pork pies and a jug of cider; the stuff with a soul, please, not the one you keep for the old maids.”

“Yes sir!”

“I am sorry, Gabriel. I know you did not plan on stopping to eat.” Elizabeth said as they sat at a window table.

“Don’t be silly. I cannot be seen...or heard going around with an old sailor, can I?”

“I was going to eat lunch but it was hard to with Tweedledum and Tweddledee on either side of me.”

“I noticed.”

Outside, across the road a pretty, young woman hurried along. She had a small child on each hip. They were obviously brother and sister, beautiful, healthy and happy children. Elizabeth thought of Jane and Steward. One time they had most likely been just like those children full of pure wonder and excellent possibilities. Had they grown into a team of raping murderers? How could such a thing happen? Had they really worked together that very morning, maybe only an hour before they sat at lunch, to take the life of an innocent woman?

“You are thinking about Jane and Steward?” Gabriel asked.

“I am trying to understand why....”

“Do not waste your energy. Were they born that way? Did someone teach them to be what they are? It is most likely a little of both.” He shrugged.

“You know, I hit Jane.”

“Is she going to look like me?”

“I slapped her face. It did not have the effect I aimed for. Good God, Gabriel, she liked it.”

“She is the masochist. Steward is the sadist. I suppose they feed off each other.”

They sat silent as Scully approached with a tray of loaded plates, glasses and a mug of cider.

“I wonder, Arthur,” Gabriel asked as Scully placed their meal before them. “Did Mrs. Beaver happen by here this morning?”

"Not as I can say, Mr. Jackman. I did not open until the noon hour. Our May gave us a grandbaby last night. We had a bit of a sleep in."

"Well, congratulations!"

"She may have gone to visit with a friend to wait for the shop to open." Elizabeth suggested after Scully disappeared back into his kitchen.

"That was three hours ago and she knew she would be needed back at the house for luncheon."

"It does not look good, does it?"

"For now we will eat and try not to think of murder and madness." Gabriel took a large mouth of the delicious pie. "Come on, it is wonderful."

"Where to now?" Elizabeth asked when the meal was finished and they were back on the roadside.

"Tobacconist on the corner. I need some cigarettes and you need some chocolate."

"I do?"

"So I have heard. You like chocolate, do you not?"

"Yes, very much. It is rather a weakness of mine."

"Then I will buy you a very large box."

"If I keep eating pies and chocolate I will certainly put back on the pounds I lost."

"That is my intention. I prefer women with a little meat on their bones." It slipped out before he had a chance to think and it did not go over her head.

"Yes, so I noticed." Elizabeth let go of his arm. "I have heard that some men like the rolls of fat to hold on to. I think it must be rather disgusting!"

"Sorry!" He whispered as he held open the door of the tobacconist.

"Hello, Mrs. Bailey." He smiled at the old woman busily sorting through a stack of newspapers.

"Good day....oh my Lord, Mr. Jackman, what has happened to you?"

"I punched him in the eye." Elizabeth said stepping ahead of Gabriel and up to the counter top. "He was trying to look at me when I was naked and unaware he was in the room. I did not much like that."

Momentarily stunned, Mrs. Bailey gathered herself, stood from her stool, folded her arms over her belly and frowned at Gabriel. "Well! Someone should be ashamed of himself. I knew your mother, Gabriel Jackman. I am sure she did not bring you up like that."

Gabriel cleared his throat. "Can I have two packages of Imperials and a large box of chocolate creams, please?"

"I suppose you can." She replied after a heavy silence that lasted more than a few seconds. She turned her back on them to reach for the cigarettes.

Gabriel looked at Elizabeth with one wide and surprised eye. She shrugged and looked out the window.

"I was wondering," Gabriel asked the indignant woman as he paid for his purchases, "did Jane De Wolfe stop by for their papers yet today?"

"No." Mrs. Bailey answered. She bent and searched through her pile of newspapers. "There's three for up there. I ain't seen none of them for a while."

"Thank you, Mrs. Bailey." Elizabeth smiled as they turned to leave the shop.

"You hit him in his other eye if he tries anything else, young lady!" Mrs. Bailey called after them.

"You know, Elizabeth. I think I could easily grow to hate you." He smiled at her as he clicked the horse forward. "I just hope that makes us even."

"Not even close! You had at least a half an hour's look at me from all sorts of angles."

"You saw me naked, too! Christ, we sound like such children!"

"I saw you for only a few seconds, in a half dark room and only from one view. I am sure I did not get any of the clear detail as you did. You still owe me, Gabriel."

"Alright then, what do you want me to do to make up for the rest?"

"I will think about it and let you know."

Suzanne was stepping into her dress when Owen barged in. She jumped, slipped and fell onto the bed. "Shit, Owen, quell est le problem avec vous? Did you forget how to knock?"

"Sorry. Suzanne, I have had a terrible day and the evening looks as though it is going to be worse. When it is all done I want a woman in my bed. I want that woman to be you. Are you agreeable?"

"That was very blunt." She pulled on the dress and began the long process of doing two dozen small buttons. "Are you drunk or mad?"

"Not mad and maybe a little drunk." He sat on the bed, pulled her onto his lap and slid his hand up the side of her neck. "So answer my question. I need a woman. Are you in the mood?"

She pushed him away roughly and stood. "Vous etes au chochon."

He smiled. "That is not what you said to me last spring."

"You have no idea what I just said. Please go away. I already have a man."

"You told me I was a pig. I will not go away and do not even try to pretend that you do not know about Isabelle!"

"So Gabriel chooses to lay a fat wop when he can not have me. That is his silliness, not mine."

"Gabriel has other lovers and you repay him with faithfulness. Come on Suzanne, I may be a pig but not a stupid pig." He pulled her to the bed beside him. "I remember what you said to me, over and over again, when I was trying to do your portrait. Do you remember?" She pouted and did not answer. "You ask me if I got an erection when I painted naked females. I did not answer so you asked if I had one right then, as you put it...is it hiding under your apron?"

"Yes, that is what I said and did you respond? You said your mind and body did not connect when you were working. That was not what I wanted to hear, Owen!"

"Well Suzanne, I am not working now."

"Maintenant vous voulez que je dort avec vous?"

"That is what I have in mind, yes." He turned to face her, placing his hand on her thigh.

"I can not. Gabriel is your best friend and I do not want to make trouble."

"Then ask him for his permission. He may be in a generous mood."

"I do not need his permission for anything I do. He does not ask me if he can sex the wop."

"You are a free woman then." He slid his hand across her stomach and gently circled one breast. "Come to my bed Suzanne and show me these lovely ladies again. I promise my mind and body will work as one."

"Well, you are a very pretty man. I did think it would be nice...."

"Tell me something wonderful in French." He leaned over and ran his lips up her neck.

"Je pense que vous etes tellement beau. Je dois avoir des rapports sexuels avec vous."

He sighed and his hot breath on her neck thrilled her.

"I will be in bed by one a.m." He kissed her gently on the lips. "I will be waiting for you."

"Lee! Yes, please do come in!" Ruth closed her book and wheeled away from the window.

"I thought you might enjoy some company."

"Well, I do feel rather like I must be on the moon. I must admit though I may have asked for it."

"Perhaps you could have found a better time and place to speak to Owen about Leticia, I certainly agree with that."

"I have done a lot of thinking this last twenty-four hours, Lee. I am not sure I understand it all and why I did what I did but I do know that I have been terribly wrong to hang on to my life here. I wanted to make the De Wolfe's as miserable as me but...I think when all is said and done I will be very sorry for that."

"Most likely so, Ruth. You sound like a person who has made some decisions."

"Do I? Well, I am a person who finally realizes it is time to make decisions. Owen is filing for divorce and Ted wants me to move into his London flat until it is all settled. At first I was livid but now...." She paused and moved her hands through the air. Lee noticed they shook. "I have no reason to stay here. In fact, I will be very happy to get out of this house. When Jane and Sebastian are married, I will go and live with them. Far from my first choice but you know what they say about beggars!"

"Owen will give me only what he has to. He hates me and I do not blame him. Owen and I will be free of this pain, finally. It will be very difficult for everyone to believe but I do hope Owen finds happiness as well. He really is a good man. Do you think he will ever forgive me for all I have put him through?"

"Time and distance will help. Once you have been living apart for a while, he may forgive. However, what has brought on all this wisdom?"

She shrugged. "For a while now I have been in love with a man who claims to have feelings about me. I have held back because I have been afraid to press him to prove it. It may be that I finally have the strength to face this."

"I hope you do and that you are successful."

Ruth smiled and Lee saw the beauty that she truly was. "I know he cares for me but I am not sure just how much and if he would give up a great deal to be with me. I will see!"

"So along with that, you have at least Jane and Sebastian Ridley to help once they are married."

"It could be, Lee, that that marriage will not happen. So much depends on what Sebastian really wants."

"Oh, I see! Then it is safe to say that Jane has a few problems?"

"She does. Please Lee, do not tell her or anyone else. Maybe I should not have said anything! Jane is...well, not always stable in her mind. It may sound terrible but for now I need Jane to help me."

"I have no intention of saying anything to anyone. I have no love for Jane to be honest or her brother, Steward."

"They are a strange pair and that is a fact." A shadow passed over her face.

"They along with their parents can rot in Hell!"

"You have no need for their forgiveness as well as Owen's?"

"Would you ask the devil to forgive your sins?"

"You think Ted and Cornelia are devils! I can see they are of the rich and spoiled breed, especially Steward and Jane, but are they really that bad?"

"Have you got a cigarette, Lee?"

He lit two and handed her one.

"Tell me why you and Gabriel are really here?"

"Not just a friendly visit?"

"Maybe...but I am wondering. When Gabriel was last here, in the summer, poor Daisy Mott was murdered. He wanted Cornelia to let him do his own investigation. I know that because I heard them talking. I used to listen to a lot. Cornelia was adamant that Gabriel not do so."

"Right, that is all true."

"Now you and he are back. There is no occasion as there usually is for Gabriel's visit."

"To be truthful, Gabriel just wanted a break from Isabelle. She will not come anywhere near this place. Gabriel has found her demanding lately...."

"So he brings Suzanne here for a safe interlude away from his main mistress? Why not stay with her in the cottage he rents for her?"

"As I said Isabelle will not come here."

Ruth laughed. "And why are you here? To hold his pants for him while he lays Suzanne?"

"Knowing Gabriel I am fairly sure he just drops them on the floor."

"I am sorry. I am being facetious. I will accept your story."

"Why the interest in our motives, Ruth?"

"I know things about the De Wolfe's that would curl the socks of the most hardened whore house madam."

"Well, should the need ever arise I will pass that on to Gabriel." Lee paused as footsteps came along the hall and stopped at the doorway. There was no knock on the door. Ruth did not seem to notice. "I am glad you have resolved the matter of the divorce. It is very difficult to let go but we cannot really face the future without doing so."

"Maybe we will all find some peace and happiness. I do not think that that is too much to hope for."

A quick knock and the door opened. "Hello, you two!" Steward smiled and stepped into the room.

“Steward.” Ruth nodded. She maintained her pleasant happy smile. The only reaction she had that Lee could see was the tightening of her hands on the arms of her chair.

“Teas’ on in the parlor and Mother has sent me out looking for victims, mostly Jane. I thought she might be here with you. Sorry, Ruth, you are not wanted for tea!”

“I am sure I will survive without it, Steward.”

“Lucky you! Wish the old man had the balls to banish me to my room. Any idea where Jane is?”

“Out there.” Ruth nodded towards a window and the terrace. Wrapped in a shawl Jane sat on a stone bench. She appeared to be looking away from the house, across the sloping back gardens to the horizon. “She has been there for a while. She does not look happy.”

Steward smiled and looked back at Lee and Ruth. “Ridley was here. He was rather irked with his bride to be about something. Ridley left without a word to his beloved and that probably for the best as far as Jane is concerned. I do not think those would have been words of love. I do wonder what Jane has done now, don’t you Ruth?”

Ruth’s face drained of the little color it had. “It is none of my business, Steward.”

“Isn’t it? Funny, I could have sworn it was. Anyway, I shall have to drag her in. Lucci has arrived and Mother gathered everyone for her stupid tea ritual. You had better come; Lee or poor Lucci will be left in the clutches of Mommy. Lord knows where Randall is and Gabriel has wandered off somewhere with Elizabeth. That leaves the door open for Owen and he is all over sweet Suzanne.”

“Poor Steward.” Ruth sneered up at him. “How did you let those two ladies slip through your fingers? That is not like you.”

“The day is not over yet, my dear. Coming Lee?” Steward spoke over his shoulder as he left the room.

Lee stood. “Shall I come back and see you later, Ruth?”

“Yes, Lee. That would be nice.”

“So, Lee!” Steward stopped half way down the hall. “Got it in your mind to fuck the cripple, have you? I am surprised. Mind you, it is interesting and almost worth the effort.”

Lee closed his eyes briefly and shook his head. “Your constant efforts to shock and anger are pathetic and juvenile. To my mind, you are little more than a fool and a coward. Do what you were told and fetch your sister.” He pushed passed Steward knocking him slightly off balance and disappeared down the hall.

Gabriel and Elizabeth had begun the long ride up De Wolfe Mountain when He asked her how her wounded hand was.

“It hurts but at least it is not bleeding. Do you think it was Steward or Jane who attacked me?”

“Neither of them.”

“What?”

“Think about it. What time did you go up to the studio?”

“I am not sure. Somewhere between eight and nine...oh, Hell!”

“That’s correct. Unless I am happily wrong at that point in time they were involved with poor Mrs. Beaver.”

"Then who? Not Cornelia? Why would she want to hurt me?"

"She was with Lee."

"It was not a ghost, Gabriel. That is childish foolishness. I will never believe that."

"That is up to you but at least hear my opinion. First, twelve females live and work in the Manor House. Not one of them will go to the fourth floor and it has been that way for as long as I can remember. Are they all inflicted with foolishness?" She did not answer and he continued.

"You told me that you were crossing the room to leave when you heard heavy footsteps in the hallway."

"They were certainly not a child's' steps."

"No they were not. There could be two spirits up there now. The boy has been there for over a hundred years. His name was James De Wolfe. He was the son of the middle son of the household at the time. His mother died and his father quickly married the mistress he had kept during his marriage. Apparently, she was a nasty piece of goods. A year after the wedding the mistress turned wife found out that her husband had yet another mistress. She had become the woman she had replaced."

"That does happen."

"Yes. The new wife went mad and took it all out on the one person her husband loved. In that hallway, she killed the five-year-old child by slitting his throat. A few months later she was hung."

"It is my opinion that James is locked in that terrible event and place. Perhaps because he had no idea what happened to him or he had no knowledge of what death was and where he should go...who can say to that! Up until now, he has ignored males and only scared the Hell out of females. Somehow he has learned how to harm and that is what is truly terrifying. Pray that he never finds his way out of that hall."

"The second ghost is a male and rather new to the house. Isabelle sensed him and she is never wrong about these things. She felt great evil with him. He could be teaching the boy and it may have been his footsteps you heard. He may have held the doors closed to frighten you. You put your hand on the crack between the doors and that is when the child cut you. You also said the inside bolt closed on its own. You fainted and then Owen found you. The bolt was not over then. How did that bolt move on its own twice?"

"I have no idea. However, aren't ghosts supposed to be able to go through walls and the like? That is what I have read. Why didn't James just come through the door?"

"He can only do what he believes he can do. The same is for living humans. All he knows is that space he died in and the rage for having his life taken from him. If this other ghost is teaching the boy...well, Owen is right; it is time to exorcise these things."

"Well, I guess I need to actually see a ghost before I can say I believe. Could we go in through the back of the house? I would like to get to the room without running into anyone."

"Laudanum repeating itself on you, is it? You are rather pale."

"It must be. I am suddenly so very tired."

He nodded. "That's the laudanum. Mind you, you did rather enjoy the effects for the first few minutes. You were flirting with Randall...again!"

"Oh God, please be quiet."

“Do you remember?”

“Yes! I have to wonder why it is I spend so much time and energy on making a total fool of myself.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. I doubt very much Randall thinks you are a fool. Quite the opposite is more like it. I will be greatly worried if he ever buys you chocolate.”

“Why does everyone keep bringing up chocolate?”

“Here!” Gabriel placed the boxes of chocolate creams on her lap. “Just remember I bought some for you first.”

They found the harried housekeeper rushing around the kitchen.

“Since you are in the apron I take it there is no sign of Mrs. Beaver yet?” Gabriel asked.

“No, Mr. Jackman. We are all getting very worried. Mrs. De Wolfe will call in the police if she is not here by six.”

“And a fat lot of good they will do. Do you know if Mr. Lucci has arrived?”

“Yes, they are all in the parlor finishing up tea.”

“Good. We will go up the staff stairs.” He said to Elizabeth and led her to the side of the kitchen.

Mrs. Partridge looked down her long nose and clicked her tongue with disapproval. A kitchen maid giggled.

“I feel bloody awful.” Elizabeth complained. She kicked off her shoes and fell down on her bed. “I was fine just a few minutes ago.”

“That is the nature of the drug. Do you want me to get Randall?”

“No, I just want to sleep.”

“I will wake you in time for dinner.”

Gabriel closed the sitting room door, locked it and put the key in his pocket.

“What did you do that for?”

“I want to go and see Tony. I have no idea where Lee is and I do not want to leave you completely unprotected. I will lock this door when I leave.”

“Is it necessary to lock me in?”

“No, perhaps I am just locking someone out. You’ll be fine.”

Gabriel was locking the outside door when Randall stepped from the staircase. “I thought I would check on Elizabeth. How is she doing?” He asked and frowned as Gabriel pocketed the key.

“Sleeping off the nasty potion you gave her, Doctor.”

“Yes, but it is far better than the pain she would have had without it. May I ask why you have locked her door and taken the key, Gabriel?”

“Certainly. I know where she is and that she is safe. In this household right now Elizabeth’s safety is my priority.”

“I see. Then should I assume that you and she are close? I do not mean to pry but I find her to be an interesting woman.”

Gabriel smiled. “Randall, she is a very interesting woman. You do what you have to do and so will I. The rest is up to Elizabeth.”

Randall returned the smile. “Fair enough. Tony Lucci is here and has asked for you.”

“Where is he?”

"I think Mother put him in the last room on the left. He could be there now."

Gabriel walked a few steps away and then turned back. "Any ideas on your missing cook?"

"Not a one. I will be glad when Mother calls in the police. Something is not right about this."

"True!"

"Well, look what the old moggy dragged in!"

"Gabriel! How good to see you again. Has it been nine months?" Tony Lucci shook Gabriel's hand and slapped his shoulder.

"Good to have you back again...you are back again, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am. For the good or the bad, whatever the future holds, I am here to face it."

"That is good news. I am going to need your help!" Gabriel closed the bedroom door. He sat and stretched out his legs and yawned. "I had better get some sleep tonight."

"Something keeping you up? I have to say that even for your style that last letter was very cryptic. "You wrote, 'Tony, I think that this might be the time to come back to England. I may need your assistance. If you do return and soon go and stay at the De Wolfe's.'"

"That couldn't be helped. I could not be sure only you would see the letter."

"Would you now tell me why I am here?"

"I will explain that and a lot more tonight. You, Owen, Elizabeth and I will meet in my rooms and you will learn a great deal and all of it rather miserable."

"Ah, something to look forward to then? Cornelia told me that Elizabeth was here. How is she doing? I have often wondered about her."

"She is doing much better now. Things went very poorly for her after the trial."

"She went to live with a distant Aunt, didn't she?"

"Yes and I kept my eye on her but fool that I was it was not close enough an eye. The aunt died, she lost a place to live and for a while, I lost touch with her. Just a few days ago, Elizabeth came to live at Random House. She will be working with Lee and me on our investigations."

"She is living with you?" Tony asked with surprise.

"No. She lives in my house not with me. I see that muggy Scottish air has done nothing to dull your dirty mind, Tony!"

Tony smiled. "And that translates to the fact that you are hopeful but up until now she has said no. You remember, Gabe, I saw you watching her with your tongue hanging down to your knees. Tell me, did her refusal also come with that black eye?"

"Yes, in a way you could say it did. To be honest with you I am afraid the woman has a strange way of seeing things and some of it may be contagious."

Tony's smile turned to a laugh. "Maybe your apple did not fall too far from my tree. Her mother was a highly spirited female. I earned a few slaps I can tell you."

"She did not slap me, Tony, I was ready for that. She punched me with all force of a man twice her size. She knocked me off the bloody bed."

Tony blinked and rolled his eyes. "What in God's name did you want her to do?"

“Nothing! Well, not too much really. I was just tempted into having a little look! It was a foolish impulse....”

“Never mind! I do not think I want to know. Margaret gave me a black eye once for comparing her to Isabelle. I meant it in a flattering way for Margaret but she refused to see it that way.”

“And I ran into a similar issue today. I will have to think twice with all I say.” Gabriel’s smile faded. “Speaking of which, I have to talk to you about Isabelle.”

“I can imagine she is not too pleased that you have brought Elizabeth into your fold, so to speak. She was very aware of your interest in the woman.”

“I made a mistake taking up with Isabelle again last spring. I was lonely and she is a very beautiful woman.”

“Not to mention very persuasive.”

“However, I have never lied to her. She knows I do not love her any longer. I should have ended it before she got ‘ideas’ firmly in her mind.”

“Then do so now. She will find another man. Isabelle never stayed alone for too long.”

“She’s pregnant.”

“Oh, bloody Hell, Gabriel. That was fucking stupid. Knowing Isabelle, she could have wanted it to happen so she’d have a hold on you. You are not thinking of marrying her, are you? Wait, before you answer that enlighten me, do you think you have a chance with Elizabeth?”

“Yes, I have more than a chance with Elizabeth but she will not commit until I am free of all my attachments. She would never be any man’s mistress, that one! And no, I will not marry Isabelle. Those vows would be a lie. I will see to my child, of course but I will never marry a woman I do not love.”

“Then you have a mess to clean up, Gabriel. Isabelle does not take ‘no’ well.”

“There are more important things to do first. All of that I will explain tonight. Owen has two of Henry Leighton’s diaries. I need you to read them before we meet later.”

“Then I will go and see Owen right away. Tell me, does all this have to do with my Grandfather, the infamous Pierre Desjardin? I have the awful feeling it does.”

“Oh yes. The sins of the fathers resting on the sons, an age old story, Tony!”

It was an hour before dinnertime when Elizabeth woke. She was relieved to find that she was feeling much like herself. She decided to change for dinner and settled on wearing the most beautiful of the dresses she bought with Sue Lyn. It was a sophisticated, skin tight, emerald green Chinese silk. A cascade of large dark lavender roses ran from her left shoulder across the bodice and flowed down the side of the over skirt. The dress had dainty matching slippers.

She brushed her hair into a shining smooth fold that sent her thick curls down the left side of her. The color and cut of the dress accented her slim ivory shoulders and long neck so she decided to forego any jewelry. She was taking a last look in the long mirror when Gabriel unlocked the door and entered.

“If it is anything like you look there is no need to ask you how you are feeling. You look lovely, Elizabeth.” There was no flattery in his voice, just pure pleasure.

“Thank you Gabriel.” She stepped up to him. “You though, should choose a higher collar. I left a mark on your neck and it shows with that shirt.”

He bent and looked in the dresser mirror. "Oh Christ, Lizzie! Yes, I will have to change, won't I?"

"I am sorry. Next time I will aim lower down."

"Will you? Well, that is something, my pretty vampire. Randall is skulking around like a lost puppy out in the hallway. He says he wants to see how you are feeling. I will go and change."

She opened the door to the hallway and found Randall leaning against the opposite wall. "Good evening, Doctor!" She smiled at him.

"Elizabeth." He returned the smile. "I hear you have not been feeling well today. That is hard to tell from looking at you." He lifted her hand and studied the bandage. "I will have to change that before you retire."

"I am fine now."

"Good. May I see you down to dinner? It is a little early but I want to ask you a question before every one arrives."

"Yes, of course." She took his arm. They walked in silence until they reached the gathering area outside the dinning room.

"If you are free tomorrow morning I wonder if I could take you out for breakfast. There is an Inn on the road to Bolton. They do, by far, the best full breakfast in this part of England. I have to go out that way to pick up some books I have ordered ...so if you think you might enjoy the ride and the meal?"

"A full breakfast and a country ride? Yes, I would enjoy that very much."

"I will be leaving at 8:30. Is that too early?"

"Not at all. I will be ready."

They stopped talking as Gabriel and Lee joined them. Not too far behind were Owen, Suzanne and Tony. Tony stopped in his steps when he saw Elizabeth. There was no mistaking the look of shock on his face. Many times lately, Elizabeth heard just how much she looked like her mother but it was until she saw Tony's reaction that she truly felt it. He quickly gathered himself and came up to her.

"Elizabeth, how wonderful you look!" He smiled at her but that smile did not hide the raw pain in his eyes. "May I have a quiet word with you?"

"Of course, Tony." She followed him out to a corner.

Tony took a deep breath before he spoke. "I want to say how sorry I am for the pain I caused you."

"You do not need to be sorry."

"Yes, I do. I should have told you about Margaret and me before you learned the truth in such a horrible way. I was so consumed with grief I thought only about myself."

"It was all such a nightmare. Of course, I was angry but I had been living in the fantasy that my parents had the perfect marriage. I was very wrong."

He turned his face and seemed to be struggling for words.

She placed her hand on his arm. "Tony, my father was a deceiver at the very least and did not deserve her. I know now that you and Mother were very much in love and that you made her a happy woman. That is all that truly matters. I am grateful with all my heart that you loved my mother and gave her happiness."

"Then we are friend's again, Lady Bug?"

"We always have been but please do not call me that in front of Gabriel."

They stopped talking and turned as Jane and Steward came into the room. "We are to go on in and start eating." Jane smiled around the small crowd. "Mommy is busy with staff and Inspector Brock."

"Not him again." Gabriel said with exasperation. "He is as useless as...."

"But he is all they have. Isn't that right, Jane?" Suzanne asked.

"I guess so. Shall we go in?" Jane was clearly enjoying her temporary role as hostess.

Elizabeth was relieved to find that this meal she sat between Randall and Lee. She suspected Randall was behind that and was grateful. Directly across the table Suzanne sat between Gabriel and Owen and seemed to be much in her element.

With the absence of Mrs. Beaver, it was necessary to reduce the evening meal to three simple courses. They were eating ice meringues when Cornelia entered the dining room followed closely by Inspector Brock and a uniformed man carrying a notebook and pencil.

She looked tired. "The Inspector has just a few questions it seems he must ask."

Brock looked around the table. "I will not disturb your meal for too long, ladies and gentlemen. All I need to know for the time being is if any of you had communication of any kind with Mrs. Beaver before she left for the village?"

"I did." Gabriel said as he pushed away from the table and walked up to Brock.

"Yes, Mr. Jackman."

"Between 6 and 6:30 am I had a conversation with her in the kitchen. She was preparing a tea tray for me. Our conversation came around to the subject of the four murders that you have yet to solve, Brock." Brock sniffed and pushed his spectacles up his nose. "Mrs. Beaver surprised me with the fact that she felt she had valuable information that would identify the murderer."

"She stated that she had not brought it to your attention because she believed that nothing would come of it. I told her that if she told me I would assure that it got to competent authorities. She said she would think about it and get back to me. That was just about three hours before she went missing. Does that give you reason to finally act, Inspector?"

"Well, Mr. Jackman, it certainly is interesting. Was there anyone else around at the time you had this conversation?"

"I passed Mrs. Partridge as I left the kitchen. It was still dark and anyone could have hidden in the area and over heard us."

"Does anyone else admit to being up and about at that hour?"

There was no reply.

"Come on, Brock, is that the best you can do?" Gabriel asked with growing anger.

"Now Gabriel!" Cornelia gave him a weak smile. "Do not be mad. I am sure things will turn out for the best. Just as I am sure that no one from this household had a reason to do harm to Cook. No doubt, she had a mishap with the horse and clip. At first light the Inspectors men will search for her down the mountain side and along the village road." She did not give Gabriel the time to respond. "Now if my guests and family do not mind. I have had a dreadful day and have a headache for it. I am going to retire early. Inspector Brock, if you will follow me I will show you out."

"I am sure Mommy is right." Jane looked around the table. "But for a long, cold night Mrs. B will be found safe and sound in the morning."

"On the other hand Jane," Steward grinned at his sister, "maybe Gabriel has the right idea after all. He is a private detective, is he not? Perhaps a mad murderer did way lay Mrs. B. It is terrifying to think how the poor old croon might have met her end."

"Shut up, Steward!" Owen warned.

"I have heard," Steward continued, "although it is difficult to believe in the case of old and fat Mrs. B, that the women who find themselves in the hands of such fiends often suffer unspeakable sexual assaults. Considering the fact that it is unlikely she has had any sort of sex for many years, I wonder if she might have found some enjoyment in it all. I mean, sex is sex. After such a long draught, would not her natural desires light no matter what the circumstances? It may be their last moment but maybe it isn't so bad after all!"

Elizabeth watched Gabriel while Steward gave his disgusting speech. Rage transformed his handsome face to a cruel mask. Slowly he moved back to stand next to Steward. Beside her, she noticed Lee slid his right hand inside his jacket.

Gabriel bent his face near to Steward. When he spoke, his voice was low with threat. "Three years ago 'someone' tortured and killed my wife, the woman I loved and the mother of my child. Have you forgotten about that?"

"No, of course not, Gabriel. How could I? I remember Helena very well. Very pretty, if you like the boring type. I suppose that you must miss her but then life does go on, doesn't it?" He turned his head and leered at Suzanne.

With one solid and furious movement, Gabriel swung his right arm bringing his open hand across the back and side of Steward's head with a resounding slap. Steward flipped back off his chair and fell to the floor like a rag doll. Gabriel kicked him onto his back, picked him up and slammed him against the wall. Owen and Lee stood. Lee with pistol in his hand moved around the table.

"Listen to me, you fucking moron," Gabriel hissed into the half-conscious man's face, "if I find out it was you who killed Helena, you will not have worry about the hangman. I will take care of you myself. Every wound she took, everything thing that was done to her...we will see how much excitement you get from it!" With one hand, he threw Steward. He landed on the tabletop, crashing dishes and cutlery about and scattering the few people left sitting. Jane ran from the room.

Gabriel moved towards the table. Owen stepped in front of him. "That's enough, Gabriel!" He took his friend by the arm. "Enough, for now!"

Cursing, Gabriel left the dining room.

Randall went to his brother and poured a half-finished glass of wine on his face. Steward sputtered and tried to sit. A stream of blood ran from his nose and a cut lip. "He will be alright, unfortunately! Lee, Tony, please escort Elizabeth and Suzanne back to their rooms. Owen and I will see to this fool."

Chapter Eleven

"Do you think I should go in and see Gabriel, Lee?" Suzanne asked Lee as they reached second floor landing. "He was very angry!"

"Well, that is up to you Suzanne. You do what you think is best."

She looked past Lee towards Gabriel's bedroom door. "Maybe not tonight. I do not think he will be in the mood for me. I will just go to bed and see him tomorrow. His mood will be better then." She smiled. Elizabeth thought she looked rather relieved.

"I have to telephone Sue Lyn." Lee said to Tony. "I will be back up to see Gabriel as soon as I am finished."

Elizabeth and Tony went into her shared sitting room. It was dark and cold. She lit the wall lamps and Tony prepared the fire.

"I do not understand, Tony. Is that all it is about for her...just the physical?" She whispered when he was sitting across from her.

"It might be, if I knew what you were talking about."

"With Suzanne and Gabriel. Doesn't she care how he feels in his heart? He is terribly upset and she will not go to him because she thinks he will not want to have sex."

"Oh, I see! You know about Suzanne. To answer your question, yes it is more or less just about sex. Do you have a difficult time understanding that?"

"My Lord, yes! I could never have relations that serious with a man I do not love."

He smiled and nodded. "Then, Elizabeth, you are the right kind of woman for a man to fall in love with."

"Thank you for saying that but I am still confused. May I tell you something very personal that you will keep to yourself?"

"Of course."

"Well, I am 'interested' in Gabriel and he says he is 'interested' in me...but I am not sure if I should trust him. Do you know what I mean? Maybe I am just too immature!"

He watched her for a moment, his brown eyes so dark they seemed black. "I have known Gabriel for most of my life. Not once have I ever known him to lie or to break his word."

She smiled but it slipped away quickly. "What a repulsive creature Steward is! Those disgusting things he said, is it possible he was saying them on purpose to anger Gabriel."

"Of course he was. Helena's horrible murder was nearly the finish of Gabriel. The fact that the murderer goes unpunished is enough to drive him mad."

"Is that the same for you?"

"Very much so! At first, I was certain that Henry killed her. When he died, I was content that was at least some kind of justice but I am not so sure now."

"Do you think as Gabriel does? That maybe Steward did all the murders?"

"I am no longer sure what I think. I have not had a chance to speak with Gabriel yet on any of that. The only thing that is certain in my mind is that when Margaret died the Leighton house was locked tight and there was no sign of a break in. If it was Steward, why did he do it and how did he get in?"

"I am going to go and see Gabriel. I hope that I will not make a total fool out of myself. I have been doing that a lot lately."

"Just be yourself, Elizabeth and you cannot go wrong."

Gabriel was lying on his bed, the room dark.

"Are you in the mood for some company?" She asked, stepping up to the bedside.

He sat up, in the dimness. "I want your opinion on something?"

"Yes?"

"I am thinking that I will involve Randall in the investigation. I know that you 'like' him but from a woman's intuition do you think it would be wise to trust him?"

"Yes, I do trust him but I am not always correct with whom I trust. Why do you want to bring him in?"

"Perhaps he is ready to bring the world down on Steward."

"I saw his face when Steward was...just before you hit him. Randall was appalled as we all were but there was also deep hatred in his eyes. Even still Gabriel, we do not know if Steward killed Helena. It looks as though he has that terrible nature but you still need to be sure."

"And who better to help me get to that than his twin. There is no love lost between them."

"Then I think you should bring him in. However, he will have to know everything."

"True." He stood and took her hand. "Come on then."

Lee, Owen and Randall were sitting with Tony.

"I gave Steward something, as I told him, to steady his nerves." Randall said to Gabriel. "Let's just say he will be out like a light for many hours."

Owen smiled. "He gave the scared little shit a double dose of laudanum."

"Scared? He should be."

Randall opened his black bag, "Elizabeth, I would like to change your bandages."

"What happened to you hand?" Tony asked.

"Just clumsiness on my part. Randall has been very kind."

The four men sat silent and watched as Randall removed the bandage and cleaned the wound. "This will not take much longer," Randall said with slight confusion to his small audience, "and then I will leave...."

"If you could stay, Randall, I would very much appreciate it." Gabriel looked at Owen and Owen nodded. "There are a few issues you may be able to help us with and I fear are very much your concern."

"Yes, of course." Randall looked at Elizabeth and she gave him a small smile.

Gabriel turned to Lee. "If you will move your chair closer to the door and listen for anyone coming. I do not want to be over heard."

"This may take a while so if anyone would like a brandy...." No one did so Gabriel began and spoke first to Randall. "How much do you know about the Circle of Mendes?"

"It was some sort of occult thing that my father was involved with."

"That is more or less all the rest of us knew about it. Did you read the diaries?"

Gabriel asked Tony.

"Yes." Tony answered as he pulled them from his jacket pocket.

Gabriel took the books and handed them to Randall. "These are diaries written by Henry Leighton almost thirty years ago. Margaret Leighton gave them to me. They cover the activities of the 'Circle' over a period of a couple of months. I will need you to read them."

"Leighton wrote in very graphic detail about their foul ceremonies. The people he writes of as TDW, SJ and PD are Theodore De Wolfe, Samuel Jackman and Pierre Desjardin. Desjardin was the leader of this unholy group. The initials referring to females seem to be the first letter of the first name followed by an F."

"Before I continue about the diaries I must go off on somewhat of a tangent. It is believed by everyone here, except for Lee and I that both of my parents died in the fire that killed my father last spring. That is not true. My mother survived. Lee and I found her hiding in a near by abandoned church. Since that time, on her insistence I have kept her hidden."

"A few days ago I learned from Caroline and Hebert Underhill the surprising news that Samuel Jackman was not my biological father. It seems that Samuel was infertile. My mother was desperate for a child. So, Desjardin, being the Good Samaritan that he was stepped up and did the job."

"For God's Sakes, Gabriel!" Tony exclaimed. "Desjardin can't be your father. Are you sure?"

"I heard it right from the horses' mouth, in this case the horse being my mother." Gabriel paused, looked at Randall and Elizabeth. "Not too many people know this because there never really has been a reason to discuss the subject but Tony is Desjardin's grandson." He smiled. "I am not too good at these things, Tony but I think that makes you my nephew."

"I do not mean to insult your mother, Gabriel but are you certain she is telling the truth?" Randall asked.

"Sadly, yes. That proof we will get to later."

"Now I will get back to the diaries. In them, Randall, you will find the description of what they called a 'dedication' ceremony. During this ceremony a demon called Aamon is summoned..." Randall went to speak but stopped when Owen shook his head. "A young girl is raped and murdered, a child is born and that child offered to Satan. If Satan accepts the child, all is fine and he or she goes back to their parents. If he does not accept the offering the baby is never seen by the parents again."

"Forgive me, Elizabeth. I wish I did not have to tell you this but it was during such ceremonies that Tony, Owen, you and I were born."

"No, Gabriel, that is impossible. My mother would never have agreed to such a thing. Never!" Elizabeth argued.

"Agreement from both parents was not necessary." Gabriel looked at Tony. "Did Margaret ever tell you anything about the birth of Elizabeth?"

"She did." Tony stood, muttered in Italian and poured himself a drink from the whiskey decanter. "It was near to her time when Henry took her for a visit to a rented country house. They were alone in the house. She remembered feeling sick after dinner

their first night there. After that, she remembered nothing until late the next day when she woke and the baby already born. Henry told her she had fallen ill and that he had delivered his daughter himself. Margaret was always sad that she had no memories of the birth.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes and leaned back on the settee.

Gabriel continued, “Most likely Henry drugged Margaret and took her to the dedication ceremony. According to my mother, that was often done with reluctant mothers.”

“Now, what was in this deal that would make a father do such a thing? Upon acceptance of the child, the father received great ‘luck’ financially. Tony’s father died just a few months after he was born so we cannot go into that area with him. Owen was born next. Theodore De Wolfe was already a very wealthy man but I guess a lot is not enough for some people. Within a few months of Owens birth, the second and third diamond mines were discovered in the De Wolfe South African property.”

“I was born. Even though he was not my biological father, Jackman earned the same benefits for his efforts. Every investment he made, no matter how risky turned to gold.”

“Seven years later Elizabeth was born. Leighton went from the Madsen Worthy local quack to an elegant practice on Harley Street with Royalty amongst his clientele.”

“Each child when accepted by Satan is given a mark. I have what I always thought was a simple birthmark on the upper inside of my right thigh. It is in the shape of a snake with a rather large head.” Gabriel turned his eyes to Elizabeth.

She sighed and nodded her head. “A snake with a large head, yes, under my left arm.”

They turned to Owen. “On the sole of my left foot.” He said flatly.

Tony removed his jacket. He unhooked his cufflink and rolled up his right sleeve. “Like this?” He asked and held up his arm. Under his elbow, there was a large black mark and shaped just like a snake.

“Exactly like that.” Elizabeth whispered.

“You know, Margaret used to tell me how odd it was that Elizabeth and I had the same birthmark.” Tony said as he redressed. “She was vehement that they were identical and I told her she must be exaggerating.”

They sat in silence. After a while, Gabriel began to speak again.

“After learning all this I began to wonder what was in this for Satan.” Gabriel paused pushing his hands through his hair. “It was simple, according to Mother, the fathers got great wealth and Satan got to keep the souls of the dedicated children. No matter how we live our lives our souls with go to Satan when we die.”

Elizabeth gasped. Randall put his hand over hers. Owen cursed. Tony poured another drink.

“Before we despair too greatly you should all know that there may be a way we can reverse all this. I hope to learn more before tomorrow is done with. However, I have much more to say, tonight.” Gabriel waited until Tony retook his seat. “I realize that all I have to say here does not show any of our fathers in a good light. I apologize for that, especially to you, Elizabeth, but the truth must be told.”

“I understand, Gabriel. Do not hold back on my account. I think I already have a very clear view of my father.”

“Right. Just over twenty years ago, after more than a twenty-year association, Leighton, De Wolfe and Jackman took it on themselves to rid the world of Desjardin. They drugged Desjardin and drowned him in his bath. His death ruled an accident. It seems the laws of the land are very much in check if the money is right.” Gabriel shook his head with disgust. “The murder of Desjardin was a gift to society in my mind, too bad it was not done many years earlier.”

“The ‘Circle’ did not end with the death of Desjardin. Leighton took over and ran it as best he could but it was a much looser, ineffective group. Leighton did not have the connections to the ‘underworld’ and his meetings were for little more than orgies. He kept the foul thing going until the death of Margaret and his imprisonment.”

“Gabriel, may I interrupt with question?” Randall asked.

“Yes, of course. I imagine you have more than a few. None of this will sit too well with a doctor’s scientific mind.”

“Well, I do have a scientific turn to my thoughts but I have lived all my life in a house with at least one ghost so my mind is not closed. My question has to do with the living. If your mother and Elizabeth’s mother knew what their husbands were up to, is it likely that our mother did as well?”

“I would like to answer that, Gabriel.” Owen spoke and turned to his younger brother. “Mother not only knew but was a very active member of the ‘Circle’.”

“A member?” Randall whispered.

“Yes. In those diaries you will find her referred to as ‘CF’.”

“I think you are most likely right in that, Owen.” Gabriel agreed. “When I first read the diaries I could not see that. I have always had a strong affection for Cornelia but with what I know now...! Cornelia was a pivotal member and continued to be when Henry took over. In the early years, the Desjardin years, my mother was also a member. She left after I was born. Margaret only learned about it all after she had married Henry. She was never a member and did her best to bring him away from it all.”

When no one asked anything more, Gabriel continued.

“I have to go back just over ninety years to the time of the infamous Hellfire Club. I am sure you have all heard of them. They were a group of privileged men who got together for strange ceremonies but mostly for the drunken orgies. One of their number was a fellow by the name of Dr. George Morgan. He was a follower of Satan and very deeply involved in the darkest of the Black Arts.”

“He fought for several years to take Hellfire further in that direction but without much success so he and several other members broke away and formed their own group, this being ‘The Circle of Mendes’. They were then as they were later, a group of addicts, sadists, rapists and murderers. It was then and there that they first called up from Hell the demon Aamon” Gabriel looked at Randall. “I can understand how you find this part almost impossible to believe. Any rational man would look to this as madness. It is madness, but this madness is a part of our reality.”

Randall, white faced and stern, nodded but did not speak.

“Within his marriage, Morgan had four daughters, the youngest of these, Mary Rose; he claimed to be his favorite. That is hard to tell, considering all he did to shorten her life and make her last few years a horrific misery. To the outside world, it seemed to be a familiar but sad story. She was fifteen when she found herself in the family way.

To every one who would look past her unearned shame and listen to her she claimed that she had never had a man. And she claimed that fiercely until her death at seventeen."

"Truth of the pregnancy was that Mary Rose, when she was in the time when she could conceive, was drugged by her father and given up to Aamon. The unfortunate Mary Rose had no idea what had happened to her. The son she gave birth to was fathered by the demon Aamon." Gabriel stopped speaking briefly as Tony stood, crossed the room to stand looking down into the fire. "That child was named Pierre Desjardin. He was the half human son of a demon, Tony's Grandfather and my father."

"You say you have some sort of proof?" Randall asked. "Now would be a good time to show it."

Gabriel sighed. "Yes, Randall, you are correct now is the time. Up until this time, only Lee has seen me do this. I had hoped to keep it that way." He sat back in his chair and closed his eyes.

The gathered group stayed silent and watched him. Even with the large fire, the room went suddenly very cold, the atmosphere heavy and tense. Then as in the blink of an eye, Gabriel vanished. The chair that Gabriel sat in was empty.

Everyone, but Lee, stood and uttered astonishment. Elizabeth turned to Lee. "For God's sake, Lee! Do not just sit there! What has happened?"

"Damned if I know, Elizabeth. He'll be back."

The door from Gabriel's bedroom opened and he stepped back amongst his startled friends. "I have been able to do that all of my life." He smiled at the stupefied faces. "Please do not look at me like that. Up until a few days ago, I had no idea why I could do that. No doubt, it is an inheritance from Aamon. You all know me well enough to say that that is all I have of him!"

"That is how you got into my studio!" Owen said with amazement. "Now I begin to understand some of the strange things you did when we were children."

"Yes. As you can imagine there are times when it comes in handy and other times when I wish I did not have this unique ability. It is certainly a double edged sword."

"How many people know you can do this?"

"Not many, Owen, and thank God. Lee, Isabelle, Sue Lyn, Ted, Cornelia. It goes without saying that as my trusted friends, this will go not further." He stood beside Tony. "Do you have any inheritance from Aamon? I would not be surprised if you do."

"Bloody hell, Gabriel!" Tony threw up his hands in disgust. "Is it important to share all this?"

"It is! With what I believe might be ahead of us it is very important that we all know just what we can and cannot do."

Tony took a deep breath and sat on the settee. "Elizabeth, please come and sit beside me."

After a quick glance at Gabriel, she did as he asked. Tony took her injured hand and carefully removed the bandage. He held her hand closer to the table lamp.

"That is a nasty cut. How did it happen?"

"On a broken glass."

Tony frowned. "If you say so."

"I do!"

Tony looked across the watching group. "Like Gabriel I have never done this with any one watching. So if you will all stay quiet and still," He turned to Elizabeth, smiling, "and do prepare to be amazed!"

He placed her hand palm up on his leg and placed his left hand gently on top. He put his right arm around Elizabeth's shoulders. "I am not sure but I do not think you will feel any pain. Just relax as much as possible."

"Tony, what...?"

"Sh!" he whispered. As Gabriel did, he closed his eyes and lowered his head.

Gabriel looked at Lee, shrugged and shook his head. The clock on the mantle ticked away the seconds of a minute. Suddenly, Elizabeth gasped and shuddered. Tony moaned and held the bandage to the palm of his left hand.

"Look!" Elizabeth held up the previously wounded hand. The single stitch that held the cut closed fell to the floor. There was not a scratch on her palm. She turned to Tony. The clean bandage that he had pressed against his left hand was filling with blood. "My Lord! Tony!" she exclaimed.

"It is alright." He said grimacing. "It hurts but..." he pulled away the bandage and as they watched the raw and bleeding wound closed and vanished, the blood on the bandage faded and disappeared, "not for too long."

"Tony," Gabriel stepped up and took Elizabeth's hand, "you can heal?"

"I suppose so, Gabriel." Tony smiled at the amazed faces. "Gabriel, you and I are an odd pair."

"Well, Doctor." Owen almost laughed at the stunned look on Randall's face.

"What does your scientific brain put to that?"

Randall did not answer. He shook his head and sat heavily in the nearest chair.

"But how did you do it?" Elizabeth asked Tony.

"How? Well, I simply make a wish. I wished I had the wound and not you. You all saw what happened."

"Have you been able to do this all your life?" Lee asked.

"Maybe. However, I was ten before I realized what I could do. I was playing in a dilapidated barn loft, a place my parents had forbidden me to go to. The floor gave way and I took quite a fall. I knew that something was wrong but there really was very little pain. I must have been in shock. I managed to roll up my trousers; a bone was broken and pierced the skin. My only thought at the time was that I was in very serious trouble. The stepfather I had at the time was a brute and I knew I would face a strapping. I made the simple childish wish that my leg was fine again. And, right there and right then before my eyes my leg healed."

"I told no one and began to experiment. I am able to heal myself instantly and others if I take onto myself what their problem is."

"Well, Tony, your healing puts disappearing act in the dark." Gabriel said as he sat back into his chair and the other followed. "All these years we have been friends and had no idea..."

"No one but Margaret knew I could do that." Tony's voice was somber. "I could have tried to save her..." He paused and added. "No one outside this room knows about this and I am sure you can all see what trouble it would be if this should get out."

"Our secrets are safe, Tony. Are they not?" Gabriel asked and each nodded or spoke their promise. "Tony, even with our remarkable abilities you and I could do

nothing to protect the women we loved but we may be able to bring them justice after all. And justice for many others, no doubt.”

“Now I have more information to add to all that misery. This will also greatly interest Owen and Randall. Desjardin had another son, born before me. He was born almost thirty-five years ago to a young girl who was living with her elderly grandparents in the town of Steeple Hill. The girl disappeared, the grandparents, unable to care for the small child on their own placed him in an orphanage. He was much luckier than most and was adopted by a wealthy family. His name is now Sebastian Ridley.”

“Ridley?” Owen exclaimed.

“He is a son of Desjardin?” Randall asked. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. It is interesting, is it not that the son of the man that De Wolfe murdered is now engaged to his only daughter.”

“Fucking right it is bloody interesting.” Owen stopped and looked at Elizabeth. “I am sorry...!”

She sighed. “I have been through and seen so much in this past year, Owen, to be bothered by foul language. Please go on Gabriel.”

“I have the ability to transport to another place at will, Tony has the ability to heal and I have to wonder just what Ridley’s special talents might be. It could be that we will very much need to know that.”

“Why?” Tony asked. “Why will we need to know that and what, if anything, does all this have to do with the deaths of Margaret and Helena?”

“And,” Owen added, “does any of this have a connection to the ‘mountain murders’?”

“Good questions. Again, I go back to what my mother told me. Maybe I should add here that my mother’s knowledge on the so-called ‘dark arts’ is extensive. She, Margaret, and Cornelia were very close right from the earliest days of their marriages. It came to a time in those early days that Susan and Margaret went to Cornelia with their then vague suspicions that their husbands were up to something ‘unhealthy’.”

“Cornelia admitted that their worries were valid. She told them in detail just what was going on, along with reminding them just what such a scandal would mean to them and their families if they ever revealed what they knew. She urged the younger women to do as she did and join their husbands. Susan did and Margaret did not. My mother’s name is referred to in Leighton’s diaries as SF. As I said, shortly after I was born, she left the group and spent a great deal of energy trying to bring her husband from the coven. He stayed in the coven until the death of Desjardin.”

“Coven?” Elizabeth whispered.

“Yes, coven! What else would you call a group of very active, very evil Satan worshipers? Now that coven is in its dying days. Of all their members only Ted, Cornelia and my mother remain alive.”

“It is in their laws that when a coven ‘dies’, that meaning that all the original members are dead, loose ends must be tied up. There can be no one left alive with first hand knowledge of just what went on and who had been involved. They call it ‘enfolding the coven’.” Gabriel paused and looked around the faces watching him. “To do that all the remaining coven members and all the dedicated souls must be called in. I do not know just how many souls they gave to Satan but it is very safe to say that Owen, Tony,

Elizabeth and I are very much on the list of those to be 'enfolded'. Enfolded meaning 'dead'."

"So that is the reason why Susan went into hiding?" Lee spoke for the first time.

"Exactly. She knew that the fire was set to get rid of her and her husband. She managed to escape but now waits in mortal fear they will find out she is still alive."

"Who are they?" Elizabeth asked.

"I am not certain but I think 'they' are Cornelia and Sebastian Ridley. If Cornelia manages to complete the 'enfolding' and is the last member she will be granted a sort of reprieve and allowed to live. I suppose I should add here that I believe that Steward and Jane are among those who were dedicated. Owen, Randall...has either of you ever seen the snake like marks on either of them?"

"Jane does." Randall answered quietly. "I saw it when she was a child. It is on the base of her spine."

"In order to survive Cornelia will have to see to the deaths of many people, all the living dedicated souls will have to be sent to the other side, including any of her children." Gabriel looked at Owen. "And any of the loved ones of the dedicated souls who might have first hand knowledge of the coven or children who might have inherited any of Aamon's traits. Gabriella can do as I do...what I call 'transporting'. Tony, I think you will not mind if I ask you now about Robert."

"Shit!" Tony exclaimed. "I have a son in Scotland. His name is Robert. His mother and I were never married. He is thirteen and thrills his friends with his amazing physic abilities. But Cornelia does not know he exists."

"I would not count on that, Tony." Gabriel said. "We can not take anything for granted in this matter. I am not certain but I think it is fair to say that the deaths of Margaret and Helena fall down to this as well. Margaret certainly had knowledge of the coven and Helena knew that I could transport. Either Ridley or Steward or both of them killed Margaret and my wife...maybe on the orders of Cornelia. Believe me I will find the truth very soon!"

"And the 'mountain murders'?" Randall asked after a long, stunned silence.

"I put those down to Steward. Lee, would you tell Owen, Randall and Tony what you heard pass between Ruth, Jane and Steward?"

Lee cleared his throat and moved to the small circle. Gabriel took his place at the door.

"It is about Jane and Steward..." he began

"Of course, it bloody does." Owen said with anger.

"Yesterday morning I overheard Jane, Steward and Ruth. It must have just after Ted told Ruth about the divorce. She was terribly upset and at first, it seemed as though Jane and Steward were there to comfort her but that changed very quickly. I could not see what they were doing but heard more than enough. Steward gave Ruth an injection. It must have been a large doze of whatever it was because from that time onwards I did not hear Ruth utter a word or sound."

"What?" Owen went to stand but Lee held his arm.

"Let me finish, Owen. There is a lot more." Lee scratched his head and looked very uncomfortable. "I am sorry to embarrass you, Elizabeth! There is only one way to put what I heard. I will say it straight out. Both Jane and Steward molested Ruth, sexually. Steward raped her."

This time Owen did stand and so suddenly, his chair fell behind him. He shrugged off Lee's restraining hand.

"You said you did not see!" Randall put in, moving quickly to stand beside his brother. "How can you know what they did?"

"They were very talkative, Randall. I have no doubt as to what was going on. I have seen and heard a fair bit of nastiness in my adult life but more than any other time my stomach turned then. It was almost more than I could do but to go in there! There was a reference to breast biting. That kind of wound was found on the mountain murders and the body of Helena Jackman."

Owen turned and locked eyes with Gabriel. "No." Gabriel said flatly to answer an unspoken question. "I would gladly join you and put the pig in the ground but where would that leave us? It is just as you would tell me. We need the complete facts. Owen, I must know with absolutely certainty who killed Helena if I am ever to find peace."

Owen rubbed his face roughly, groaned with frustration and went back to his chair. He took a deep breath and looked at Lee. "You said you felt that this was an on going thing. The drugs as well?"

"I went to see Ruth today. I cannot help but feel bad for her. We spoke for a while. She was wearing long sleeves but I did see the tail end of bruising stretching down her wrist. The drugs could account for a great deal of Ruth's irrational behavior, is that correct, Randall?"

"There is no doubt about that. Withholding the drug or giving her too much would drive a high strong person to bizarre behavior."

Gabriel left the door and came back to the group. "Today Jane made advances on Elizabeth and Steward has spoken to me in a foul manner about her. As far as I am concerned, they are both mad and very dangerous. Now, I have to leave the Estate tomorrow morning and will be away for several hours. I want to speak with Wesson and go by Random House. I will be back here as soon as possible but I need to know that the four of you will keep your eyes on Elizabeth. I want her to leave and go to the relative safety of my home but she is stubborn and thinks she has a place in all this."

"I do have a place here." Elizabeth said firmly.

"You do, Elizabeth but I agree with Gabriel, you will have to do what you are told." Tony put in.

"For now, she will stay but I may quickly decide otherwise. In the mean time, she is not to be alone with Jane or Steward. As a matter of fact I would like her with one of you at all time, no matter what she says."

Elizabeth stood. "If I am allowed to I would like to go to my bed. I am very tired."

"Alright." Gabriel stood. "I will check your room and make sure your door is locked." After a few minutes, Gabriel returned to the sitting room.

"Elizabeth and I have plans to spend the morning together tomorrow." Randall said, ignoring the slight rise of Gabriel's eyebrows. "We will be off the estate for several hours."

Owen managed a small smile. "I am sure we will all find ways to keep Elizabeth busy and safe."

Gabriel laughed. "Coming from you my lecherous friend, that is not comforting."

"Gabriel...I can see from the looks of your face that the little lady holds tightly onto her honor. I do not need a black eye." Owen stood. "If you are finished with me, what I do need is a lady with little or no honor. I think I will go and see sweet Suzanne."

"Well," Tony said, "I can see that very little has changed at De Wolfe Manor. Everyone is still playing 'Musical Beds.'"

"Not in my bedroom, sadly." Randall said as he stood and walked to the door. "But I am always hopeful." He looked at Leighton's diaries and then at Gabriel. "I will read these and give them back to you in the morning."

"Gabriel..." Tony leaned on his elbow and smiled at his friend. "I think that young Randall has an eye for Elizabeth."

"Really? I had not noticed."

"Oh yes, you did. Do you think Lee, that the charming and very popular Gabriel Jackman may have met competition?"

"Maybe so. Hell must have frozen over."

"If you two clowns have finished I am dogged fucking tired and need my bed."

A half an hour later Gabriel stood at the head of Elizabeth's bed. He could tell by her breathing that she was asleep. Carefully he slid his hand under her pillow and pulled out his gun. He placed it noisily on the night table. She did not wake as he hoped.

"What a heavy sleeper you are!" He whispered as he pulled the covers slightly down.

That woke her. She jumped and turned quickly off her belly, her hand under her pillow.

"It's me." He sat on the bed. "Please do not shoot me! I have had enough trouble for one day."

"Where is it? The gun, Gabriel, it is gone."

"It is on the table. I always move a pistol from under a lady's pillow before I crawl into her bed."

"Do you? You must know some very unsavory females. Go away and let me sleep."

"I thought you were going to sleep with me every night."

"I am a well known liar. Go away!" She pulled the covers up over her head.

"Alright I will go back to my lonely bed. Maybe Suzanne will be on the prowl tonight. She is like that; you just never know when she is going to show up. She was very friendly with me earlier..." He sighed and stood.

She threw off the covers and sat up. "That is not fair, Gabriel."

"I don't know what you mean. I am just warning you that she may have it in mind to pay me a visit. I will most likely send her away...but we did decide I should at least try and keep her happy for a while."

She slid from the bed and leaned against the bedpost.

"Christ, Elizabeth! Don't you ever wear a night gown?" He looked her up and down and cleared his throat.

"Not very often." She smiled, stepped up to him and ran her hand up his arm. "I thought you did not sleep well last night. You must be very tired."

"Oh I am tired. I just want to sleep with you. If I cannot make love to you, please just let me sleep."

She took his hand and pulled him to her bed. "Come on, take off your trousers and get in. I promise I will leave you alone."

He did as she told him and surprised her by quickly pulling her into his arms. "No, do not leave me alone, Elizabeth." He ran his hand over her breasts, pushed his face into her neck and inhaled. "God, do not leave me alone. Do whatever you want with me."

She gasped at the feel of his body against hers and the touch of his lips on her neck. "Maybe not...not tonight Gabriel." She tried without much force to push him away.

"Why?" He sensed her weakening resolve and it thrilled him. "You love to tease me and you know that." He pulled her body tighter against his. She pushed her hips against his. He did not give her a chance to speak and kissed her passionately.

"Please, Gabriel!" She said when he finally let her go. "Stop this...or I will lose my will power."

"That is the point!" He lowered his head and ran his tongue around her nipple.

She moaned, moved her breast into his mouth and held his head. "And if," she whispered into his ear, "we make love tonight, it would be wonderful. But not so sweet for me as it would be if we could only just wait until you are free."

He lifted his head, looked into her eyes. They were glazed with passion and at that moment very sad. "Elizabeth, truly I do love you. I need you, nothing will change that." A single tear ran down her cheek. "Oh Lord, please do not cry."

"I just do not want to be hurt. I am scared, can't you see that?" Now the tears fell freely. "I need to learn to trust you. Is that too much to ask? If it is then, yes, we will make love. Please do not go to Suzanne or Isabelle."

He sighed, rolled onto his back and held her against his chest. He let her cry for a while and felt the tears landing on his skin. "Enough." He said and gently wiped her face with his hand. "Stop the tears; there is no reason for them. You are overtired and I tried to take advantage of that." He moved suddenly, took her face in his hands and smiled. "I felt your desire and God it was so beautiful. Knowing what is surely just around the corner, believe me I will not go anywhere near another woman. That I promise."

She sniffed, hiccupped a few times, curled up beside him and soon fell asleep. He lay for a long while, watching shadows on the wall as the clouds passed over the moon. He said a silent prayer to a God he was no longer sure he believed in.

"Owen! Are you in here?" Suzanne lifted the candle and peered into the darkness. "Il est si sombre."

"Here, Suzanne." Owen answered from his bed.

She crossed the room, placed the candlestick on a table and sat on the side of the bed. "You sit in the dark, alone and smoking! That is not good. Was your evening as difficult as you thought it might be?"

"I will just say it was enlightening. Tell me, do you believe in an afterlife, in Heaven and Hell?"

"Owen, I was raised a High Catholic, what do you think? I do have big hopes that there is no Hell."

"Why, do you think you are headed that way?" Her eyes had grown used to the dark and she could see he was smiling. The amazing sapphire eyes sparkled.

"My mama did. That is what she told me just before she died."

"Why in God's name would she say a terrible thing like that?"

"I would go to Hell because I could not go to my husband, if I ever had one, as a virgin."

"Forgive me for saying this but your mother was an idiot. If there is a God and after tonight, I truly believe there is...well, He loves you. Is a flower less beautiful after you have enjoyed its aroma?"

She smiled and pulled her knees up to her chest. "That is very nice for you to say, thank you. This is a very odd conversation to have with a man who has invited you to his bedroom. But I do not mind, I like to talk to you!"

"You know, Suzanne, you are a very beautiful woman."

"You sound surprised."

"No, I am not surprised. It is just so much easier to see your beauty when you are not on the arm of my friend."

"And you do not feel bad to have the woman of your friend in your bedroom?"

"Do not worry about my feelings. It is your own feelings you must deal with."

She sighed. "I do not feel guilty. I know that Gabriel does not love me. Once I hoped that he would, but no! I protect my heart from men who do not love me. I will love a man one day and I will love him with all my heart. I will be faithful, completely. Anyway, I think he is up to something with that red head."

"Do you really? How can you tell?"

"A woman always knows. It is the way he tries not to look at her when I am there and in the way she looks down her nose at me. Yes, Gabriel is moving away from me and I should do the same."

Owen leaned forward and ran his fingers along the lace on the sleeve of her over gown. "This is nice. It is Irish lace, I think?"

"Yes, it is."

"It would look much nicer lying on the bed. Take it off, Suzanne."

She let the sides fall down and slipped her arms free. It was cold in Owens bedroom. She could feel her nipples react and press against the sheer nightgown. He would think it was for a different reason and she did not mind.

"Do you mind if I open your curtains? J'aime le clair to lune."

"What ever makes you happy?"

With the drapes open and the long window behind her, she knew he could see very clearly through the thin silk gown. "That is a strange smile, Owen, what are you thinking about?"

"I am thinking that you know very well that I can see through your nightgown."

"Do you like what you see?"

"You have no idea how much. Come here, Suzanne."

She sat back on the side of the bed and slid the covers down to his waist. "That is very attractive." She ran her hands across his chest. "Such lovely black fur!"

"Fur!" He laughed loudly. "It is not fur, it is hair!"

"Oh, what is the difference? Hair, fur! It is all the same and yours is tres belle." She pulled the blanket further down. "Owen! You are wearing pajama trousers!"

"Is something wrong with that?"

"Oui, take them off, tout de suite!"

He crawled out of the bed. "You want them off then take them off for me."

It was nearly eight when Elizabeth woke. Very quietly she washed, dressed in her undergarments and a dressing gown. She was inserting Gabriel's gun into her corset when he woke.

"That gun is luckier than I am." He frowned and sat up.

"Which of these should I wear today?" Two traveling suits hung on the side of the wardrobe. "The gray is very stylish but perhaps rather dowdy. The red is very feminine and pretty but maybe more suited for city wear."

"Wear the gray."

She put the gray suit back in the wardrobe. "Why are you scowling?"

"I am not scowling."

"Yes you are. Are you angry because I am going for an outing?"

"I am not scowling and I am not angry." He slid from the bed, pulled on his trousers and lit a cigarette. "You are entitled to go where you want. I only want you to be very careful."

She stepped into the skirt and removed the dressing gown. "I thought you might want to know where I am going."

"You are going out with Randall, something about taking you for breakfast."

"Oh, did he tell you?"

"Of course he did."

She stepped in front of him and turned around. "Please do up the buttons for me. Your eye looks much better. It is not so swollen."

He grunted. His fingers were cold on her back. "There, all done. I should go back to my bedroom before Randall gets here. We do not want him to get the wrong idea." His tone was flat and sarcastic.

"Please tell me what is wrong? Do not say 'nothing' and walk away. That is not fair and well, rather childish. If you are jealous...."

"Jealous? Yes, I am jealous. However, do not worry I have far more important things to think about today."

She smiled and slipped her arms around his waist. "You are jealous! That is so sweet."

"Sweet! There is nothing 'sweet' about how I am feeling today."

"You need not worry about Randall. He will not try anything...well, not too much unless I give him reason to."

"Fuck Randall. Listen to me." He pushed her back but held firmly onto her arms. "I am going to see Isabelle today. I will tell her that it is over between her and me, once and for all."

"If you do that then she will leave your house."

"She will stay where I tell her to."

"If you think that then you do not know women at all. She will be hurt and furious. She will know it is because of me and she will no longer take your orders. Think about it, Gabriel. From what I hear, she is very much a headstrong woman. How will you control her after you tell her goodbye?"

He smiled and rolled his eyes. "How is it that you manage to act like such a child in one moment and then so smart the next?"

“When did I act like a child?”

“Never mind.” He kissed her cheek. “I am going to try to be back by the mid afternoon.”

“What are you going to do today, Gabriel? Is it dangerous?”

“No. I will tell you and the others more when I get back. I also want to spend some time with Gabriella.”

“She is a lovely child. You must be very proud of her.”

“I am. Just before we left, she told me she likes you...even though your hair is a very funny color.”

She laughed. “Oh really? Do you think it is a funny color too?”

“Most definitely. Very strange. Enjoy your day with your new boyfriend.”

Gabriel was surprised to find Tony sitting in his bedroom.

“Well, I thought you would show up at some point.” Tony smiled at his friend. “Not that it is any of my business but I thought you told me you were not sleeping with Elizabeth.”

“Sleeping is all we do, Tony. But last night...I was this close!” Gabriel threw up his hands in frustration. He opened his wardrobe pulled out a clean shirt, dark navy suit and tossed them on the bed.

“Did she hit you again?”

“No, much better than that. She started to cry.”

“Ah, tears. Well, that will do it. If she’s crying it would be my guess she is not too interested in you, after all.”

“It is not that, you idiot! Up until then I had let her have control.” As he spoke, Gabriel washed and quickly shaved. “But I had unleashed a monster. God in heaven, Tony, for a female who has very little sexual experience she is one talented tease.”

Tony laughed.

“That is funny?”

“It is the apple and tree. Margaret was brutal in that area too. There was nothing she liked better than to drive me to frenzy, then roll over and go to sleep.”

“Why do they like to do that?”

“Damned if I know. Must be part of their strange way of seeing things. So you took control as you very rightly should do and she cried?”

“Not exactly. She cried because she weakened and was just about ready. Then she tells me ‘if you cannot wait until you are free then we will do it, it just will not be as wonderful for me as it would be’.”

“Oh, she cut with that, no doubt?”

Gabriel was tucking his shirt into his trousers. “Yes. I have a mind to go today and tell Isabelle it is done with. However, she will bolt if I do that. I need to know she and the child are in a safe place. Not to mention I may still need her physic abilities.”

“Poor Isabelle.”

“I do not want to hurt her, Tony. I told her all these last few months that she was not my only woman and that one day it would end forever! I was a bloody fool to let her back in my life again. Now, Isabelle, Elizabeth and I are paying the price.” Gabriel pulled the straps of his shoulder holster into position. “I am sure you did not come here first thing in the morning to see if I am getting laid so on to more important things. Do you have your gun with you?”

"No. It is still in my London flat. I had no idea my life was about to become rather difficult."

"Well, you can get one from Owen and keep it with you at all times. Steward has two beauties by his bed side, along with a bottle of rat poison."

"Does he really? Needs a taste of his own medicine, that one." Tony smiled. "After what we learned about each other last night it could be, Gabriel, that you and I are just the ones to give him that taste."

Gabriel stopped his rushed dressing briefly and looked intently at his long time friend. "All these years, you and I have been through so much together, good and bad. It is hard to believe that we had such secrets. You are a healer, Tony! Do you have any idea what that could mean to this world?"

"It means that a great many people would want me to keep them or their loved ones from illness or dying. Yes, of course, I think of it often. That would be interfering with the will of God and I would never do that."

"Would you have thought that way if you could have saved Margaret?"

"No. That is another of my nightmares. I would have done anything, at any cost to keep her alive. However, I was sleeping in the peaceful comfort in my bed while she suffered and died. So, as far as I am concerned my so-called 'ability' is useless to me."

"You have many roads to walk down yet. If you and I are cursed with the blood of a demon we have been blessed enough to be able to fight and see this to a better end. That is what I aspire to do."

"May I ask where you are going today?"

"Ted and his man Beryline are having a meeting in Ted's room at the St James Club. I intend on hearing their conversation." Gabriel looked at his watch. "I have to leave now, Tony. Elizabeth will be with Randall for the morning at least but when she gets back..."

"I know keep my eye on her. Until then I think I will go and track down dear, little Janie. It has been a long time since she and I had a heart to heart. I remember her being very talkative, amongst other things, so maybe she will want to share with an old friend about her wonderful romances."

Once he was alone Gabriel locked the bedroom doors, closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. He concentrated on Ted's room at the London club for men. He had only been there once and it was several years before. The image that came into his mind was vague, just lights and shadows. He listened more than sought for a view. The silence and the darkness told him that he could be certain no one was in the room. Along with that, he knew Ted to be a creature of habit. He never missed breakfast and it was served in the St. James dining room between 8 and 9.

He remembered seeing a curtained alcove that hid a small kitchen area; it was there he focused on. It was always the same when he transported. He cleared his mind and concentrated. There was a quick stabbing pain in the top of his head, a brief period of nothingness and when he opened his eyes, he was standing behind the alcove curtain in Ted's room. Very slightly, he moved the drape and saw that he was alone.

As he had remembered, the room was small with just a single bed, a dresser, nightstand and two wingback chairs by the fire. Gabriel was pressed for hiding places. The kitchen alcove would not do because the curtain fell short of the floor by several inches. There was nothing left but to lie flat on the floor and slide under the bed. There

was no more than two inches to spare and once under there he could not lift or turn his head. It was dusty and very hard to breathe. He pushed back as close to the wall as he could. Through a crack where the bedspread met the floor, Gabriel could see across the carpet in front of the armchairs. No more than a minute passed before he heard voices in the hall and the sound of Ted's key in the door lock.

"Thank you for meeting me here, Percy." Gabriel recognized Ted's voice. He saw two sets of boots take places in front of the armchairs. "You understand my need for absolute privacy. At my home I sometimes feel my wife has ears everywhere."

"It is not a problem, Theodore." Percy Beryline answered. "No one knows more than I do your need in this matter for secrecy."

"Have you breakfasted? If not there may still be time for me to send for some."

"I am fine. You know my Belle. I can hardly move without her finding a reason to feed me."

"Good, Then shall we get right down to business, although I am not inspired by your rather bleak tone."

"Well, I do have a great deal to tell you but first I hope to take some time and express my opinion...as your friend. How long have we known each other now, ten years?"

"More like twelve. I remember a time when you and I even discussed the possibilities of your lovely Suzanne marrying my Owen. However, that was before he came across the thoroughly unsuitable Ruth. Suzanne is far more his nature."

"Yes and that was a match I would have approved of. Now she wanders from man to man and wastes her time waiting for Gabriel Jackman." There was a rustle of papers and Beryline cleared his throat. "Before I tell you what I found I have to ask you a few questions. You know that I am very thorough and an expert at what I do. When you charged me with this issue did you think that I would not find more than you wanted me to?"

Ted sighed. "I have already told you so much about my place in the terrible world of the 'Circle of Mendes', the more you found on your own would not be harm to anyone."

"You told me just so much but I need to know much more. You will answer my questions or I will refund your money and throw the file into the fire. I care too much about you and your family to lead you into further misery without good reason."

"Then ask your questions?"

"I judge from the nature of the information that you requested it is your hope to bring down Sebastian Ridley. Is that correct?"

"If what I suspect it accurate then I will not be disappointed."

"Then forgive this little speech. Ridley is engaged to marry your only daughter. He is a tremendously successful politician and very much on the upwards swing in the halls of parliament. The hue and cry on the streets is that Ridley is finally a man for and from the people. Everywhere he goes he draws a crowd and never fails to win even the most disgruntled of them over. I have seen him and the reaction he gets with my own eyes. The poor, the working people of this country fairly seem to adore him. He is destined for Downing Street, if any man was."

"You were born rich, Theodore. I am newly rich and that thanks to you. I have been where those people are now. They so need a strong figure head who understands

them to adjust their world to a livable place and to lead them with hope for their children. What I have discovered would certainly bring Ridley down without hope. My problem is that would it not be better for us to over look certain failings and focus on what he can give this country?"

"I am well aware, Percy, that Ridley has everyone hoodwinked and I am also well aware of how he is able to do this. However, with what you know now your problem is fair enough. I will tell you more about Ridley and that will put your mind at rest. Ridley is as his biological father was. He is an evil maniac and a murderer and follows in his father's footsteps. Is that the kind of man who should lead this country?"

"Do you have proof of what you say? I found none that point to madness or murder."

"Proof and that much more."

"And yet you let your daughter become engaged to him. In fact, it was more than encouraged by your wife."

"At first, I thought like you that he would be good for the people but let's just say I am wiser now."

"Ted, my friend, what I discovered will hurt you. Are you prepared for that?"

After a brief silence, Ted answered. "I have no choice, Percy. This I will tell you, if Ridley marries Jane he will have me quickly murdered and no doubt not too long after Jane will die. He wants her money...my money and that is all. My wife has the burning desire for him in politics. Ridley wants money and has always been her puppet."

"I have been a very poor excuse as a father to my Jane. At best, I ignored her and at worst I pretended not to know the wicked lanes she was being taken down. I am not talking about her lesbianism and yes, I know all about that. That may have been her natural way; I am talking about other things. As I sit here now I am not man enough to tell you what a misery her life has become."

"If my days are numbered, then so be it. I surely deserve all that is coming to me. However, Jane does not. So you must not worry about the worn out feelings of this old man!"

"Right. You knew that Pierre Desjardin was Sebastian Ridley's father and you wanted to know who his mother was."

"Yes!"

"When Ridley was born the female was not yet sixteen years old. She was not married to Desjardin. He had, in fact at the time a wife living in France."

"Ridley's mother's name at the time was Nell Belmont. She lived with elderly relatives in the village of Steeple Hill." As Beryline spoke Gabriel could hear Ted breathing, it was heavy and labored. "The child was still a babe when Nell Belmont seemed to disappear and the child was placed into adoption."

"Bloody hell, Percy! Get to the point."

Beryline took a deep breath. "She was twenty years old when you met her. She was Desjardin's mistress. Two years later, you married her. At the time, her name was Cornelia Belgrave. I am sure you already suspected this but Ridley's biological mother is your wife."

"Are you sure beyond any doubt?" Ted spoke in a bare whisper.

"Cornelia is that man's mother. My connections and sources are impeccable. I saw with my own eyes the adoption papers. Dr. Cecil Ridley adopted James Belmont

when he was three years old and his name changed to Sebastian Ridley. Signatures of the boy's birth parents were Pierre Desjardin and Nell Belmont. And with these same old eyes I saw the official change of name file where, less than a year later, Nell Belmont became Cornelia Belgrave. So Ted, your Jane is engaged to her half-brother. With the fact that Ridley is engaged to and having an fairly open sexual relationship with his half sister you have more than enough to bring the man to the ground without hope of him rising again."

"Unfortunately this would be the same outcome for you. I am sure Ridley could easily prove that Cornelia knew just what she was doing when she pushed half brother and sister together. That would be a heavy stain. It would spread out as far as Owen and Randall. You must think of them."

"I am aware of all that. For the time being I collect facts, then I make my decisions. Do you think it is possible that Cornelia does not know Ridley is her son?"

"She knows, Theodore. The family that adopted Ridley was very close 'friends' with Desjardin. She and Pierre visited the child regularly up until Desjardin's death. She never stopped visiting them. There has never been a break in the relationship between your wife and her son. I do not mean to add to your misery but you should also know that there was also never a break in the relationship between her and Desjardin. They were lovers right up until he died. Is that the reason why he had to die?"

"The reasons for Desjardin's death are not important here."

"I am afraid I cannot see that, Ted. You made it clear that you were trying to save your children from a terrible fate. You asked for my help and I will give it but I need to know everything. Without a total and clear view of what you need, how will I know it if I come across it? If you are worried that I will not keep all your secrets just remember all that you know about my own sorry past. You could hang me just as easily as I could you."

A long time passed but for the ticking of a mantle clock, all was quiet.

"You are right, Percy. I will tell you all I possibly can. Just know that what I leave out is simply from my own shame."

"Go ahead, Ted. You have my word of honor that not a word of this will ever leave this room."

"Well, it is simple and sordid. The outcome of the 'Circle' meeting was an orgy...for lack of a better word! From before our marriage and until Desjardin's death my wife and I willingly shared each other, Desjardin included. Cornelia very much enjoyed having others watch her have sexual relations and I enjoyed watching her. I only wanted her to stop when we decided to have children."

"She balked at that, saying she was being very careful with everyone but me. I was not agreeable. I did the only thing that truly mattered to her. I closed my purse strings tight. She married me more for love of money than anything else and Lord how she did spend it! She towed the line very well after that and restricted herself to only Desjardin and me. I was very thankful that all my children looked like me!"

"We had a ceremony in the Circle of Mendes we called a dedication. It was much like a baptism only we dedicated the soul of the child to Satan. Satan owned the child's soul from then on; no matter how holy a life he or she lived. In return, the father was given success in whatever venture he turned my hand to. In the third year of our marriage Owen was born and he was dedicated."

“Four years later, Randall and Steward came along. Cornelia very much wanted them to be dedicated as well. I should add here that my main reasons for involvement with the Circle were first of all, when I was still very young, for the physical and the financial things that would come my way. As I grew older, I had had enough money and sex and my interest in it all faded. For Cornelia it was much deeper. For her love of Satan was a true religion. Desjardin had twisted her heart and mind completely. I suppose I could have forced her away from it all but, you see, it did keep her busy and out of my hair.”

“Anyway, back to Randall and Steward. She wanted them dedicated and I put my foot down. One son given to the devil was more than paying my part and I had more money than any man could want. However, she is a sneaky bitch, my wife. She knew that the dedication needed only the consent and participation of one parent and Desjardin. Most times, the dedication is done right at the scene and the time of the birth but even that is not necessary. That provides a way around any unwilling parent.”

“We had two nanny’s one for each of the twins. Cornelia insisted on nursing one of the babies, that being Steward. One of the nanny’s, a wet nurse, handled Randall. Most nights, unless she was spending time with me she would take Steward with her to her bed. We had separate bedrooms so I would not be bothered during the night.”

“It was all very simple. She took the child and left the manor House. Desjardin was waiting for her just a ways down the mountain. Steward was dedicated and she was back well before sunrise and I was none the wiser. In fact many years passed before I discovered what she had done. Each child, after acceptance, is marked with a tattoo that could pass as a birthmark. It is in the shape of a snake. They hid Stewards’ in his thick black hair so I never saw it.”

“The following year saw Cornelia pregnant again. I set my heart on a daughter. I had always wanted a female child. I even went so far as to pick the name ‘Sarah’. During this pregnancy, Cornelia complained of illness. She spent a great deal of time pale and in her bed so I believed her. For the last month, she decided to stay in our London flat so that she would be nearer to a hospital, if she needed one. She knows how much I hate the city and told me stay at home. I was to come to London after the child was born. I did as she wanted, having no idea what she really had in mind.”

“If Satan accepts the offered child, he or she is branded and returned to the parents. If he does not, Satan keeps the child and the parents never see it again. Desjardin took Cornelia to his grotto, and my daughter was born. Unfortunately, Satan was not pleased! I never even laid eyes on my sweet girl.”

“Good God!” Percy muttered.

“At first Cornelia convinced me that she was a still born. I wanted a Christian baptism and a burial. Of course there was no body for me take care of so it did not take too long to put two and two together. Cornelia denied it all. She swore on all she could think of that she had not given and lost our daughter to Satan. I went to Desjardin. He had no problem telling me just what had truly happened.”

“That night was the only time I ever laid hands on Cornelia in anger. I beat her. I raped her and the beat her again. I went back into a dark place in my heart that I thought was long gone. I have no idea how she managed to survive that terrible night because I surely wished her dead.” Ted stopped, took a long and deep breath. “It was the next morning when I decided once and for all that Desjardin had to die.”

“Henry, Samuel and I had long since grown very weary of Desjardin. He was making more and more demands for money. The mystical allure he had had for us in our younger and foolish days had faded with the years. We all had very different reasons though. As I said, I had all the money and power I would ever need, the drugs, the illicit sex...none of it had any appeal for me.”

“Samuel’s advance up the Christian Church was rapid. He was rightly worried about the power Desjardin had over him. Any word leaked about Samuel’s darker days would certainly be his down fall.”

“Henry had dedicated his only child, Elizabeth Leighton, the year before and he was firmly where he wanted to be in his profession and financial areas. Unlike Samuel and me, Henry did not repent his connection with Desjardin as he pretended. He wanted an end to Desjardin so he could take his place in the Circle.”

“So the three of you murdered Desjardin. How?”

“Desjardin was near to seventy by that time and in failing health. He had a country house ten miles or so to the north of my home. It was fall, late September and he was staying there. Henry was already there, visiting when Samuel and I showed up for a surprise visit. Desjardin had no idea what we had in mind for him that week end.”

“We had devised a plan that would see us all equal in the man’s death. Henry brought the drug we needed to subdue Desjardin. Samuel put it in his food. I brought the plate to him. When he was unconscious, we undressed him, filled his bath and placed him in the water. Henry and Samuel held his head and smashed it against the back of the tub, as though he had taken a fall. I held his head under the water until Henry was sure he was dead.”

“Carefully we left the house as though he had been there alone, had taken a bath, fallen and drowned in the tub. His death ruled accidental. I had very little worries about that area. My deep pockets are very appealing to many in places of authority.”

“Samuel and I left our sordid pasts and moved onwards, we hoped. Henry on the other hand, had just what he always wanted, his chance to take over control of the Circle of Mendes. Of course, he had none of Desjardin’s special talents. He held the Black Masses and Satan Worshiping ceremonies but to my way of thinking they were little more than reasons for the orgies that always followed.”

“Now back to my wife and the reasons for all this new misery. As I think back now my wife’s reaction to Desjardin’s death was one of utter devastation. She never asked me if I had killed him but I saw it in her eyes. In every way, except for going into black, she mourned him as though he was her husband. I was finished with her, I believed, so I could not care less.”

“A few weeks after Desjardin’s death I told Cornelia that I was going to divorce her. Then she went truly mad. In all our years together I rarely saw her even raise her voice but my God she made up for it that night. When she finally calmed enough to talk, she begged me to change my mind. She would never give me any reason to regret it if I did change my mind or at least that is what she promised. I did not relent. It was at the end of that long and bitter night when she told me she was going to have a baby.”

“She was four months along so I told her I would wait for the child to be born before I began the divorce proceedings. Five months later Jane was born. I was thrilled to have a daughter. In my personal life, I had found an excellent mistress who was devoted to pleasing me. Cornelia knew about it but kept out of my way and busy with

the children and with Sebastian Ridley. It had occurred to me that if I divorced Cornelia my current lady would very much try to take her place and I was in no mood for that so I gave up my plans for divorce and for many years things moved on as they should...or at least that is how it seemed to me."

"A month ago I received a letter from Solicitors Blessing and Mattocks requesting that I see them on an urgent matter. I knew of them vaguely through Henry, as they were his solicitors for many years. It seemed the elderly Mr. Arthur Blessing, who had handled Henry's personal affairs, had been rather forgetful in his last few months on the job. Right after his conviction for the murder of Margaret, Henry prepared a package for me, gave it to Blessing and instructed him that I should receive it after his death. Ten months later while closing down the deceased Mr. Blessings cases the firm found the package. In it was a long letter that was very much an eye opener for me."

"Henry first explained that he very much doubted he would last to meet the hangman and could not wait for the chance that I might visit him. Like most evil men about to meet their maker, he was contrite. He was right with the first bit of that. One day after sealing this letter Henry died."

"The letter was a long and rambling thing and I have already spoken for far too long so I will just give you the facts. A few months after Jane was born, Cornelia went to see Henry. They had no contact since just before Desjardin's death. She told him that she did not believe that Desjardin had died an accidental death by drowning in his bathtub. Of course, Henry was not going to tell her the truth. Henry, Samuel and I had set up alibis before hand and he did not waver from that story."

"Later that year while I was in Africa she went to see Henry again. This time she brought with her Sebastian Ridley. He had just turned fifteen years old. She introduced him only as Desjardin's biological son, the adopted youngest son of Sir Cecil Ridley. Cornelia wanted to rejoin the Circle and bring Sebastian in with her. Henry did not hesitate to accept. Cornelia brought with her my money and Sebastian a fresh, young and pliable mind along with whatever traits he had inherited from his father."

"So for several years Cornelia brought Ridley with her to the Circle meetings. I know the dreadful things he learned, especially under the talented instruction of my wife. If he ever had a chance to be a normal man, she took it from him then. When I was away from the Estate on business as I often was in those days, she would go to the 'meetings' regularly. When I was at home, she would go only when she had an excellent excuse to be away from home. Fool that I was then, I had no idea what she was up to."

"Now I arrive at the place in Henry's letter that most concerned me." Ted's voice was tired and bitter. "In 1886, when Steward was twelve, Cornelia brought him into the Circle. Seven years later when Jane was turned thirteen, she did the same. According to Henry, he, Cornelia and Steward gave her to Ridley at her first meeting. From that time onwards they came with her to every meeting."

"Christ in Heaven, Ted! How did you not know?"

"As I said, I was busy with my own issues. Henry's letter ends with a warning. According to Henry and I believe every word of it, Cornelia paid Ridley a great deal of money to marry Jane. After the marriage and Sebastian has his hands on Jane's money, he is to kill me. That will give Jane her share of my vast fortune. He would let enough time pass that things would not seem suspicious then Jane would die in an unfortunate

accident. So you see, Percy, Sebastian gets the money and Cornelia gets her revenge on me for the death of Desjardin.”

“She wants Ridley to kill her own daughter?”

“Jane means nothing to her mother. Cornelia has told me many times that Jane’s plainness is a constant embarrassment to her.”

“I should also tell you, Percy, Henry’s version of the death of his wife. Margaret told Henry she was leaving him for Lucci and that if he tried to stop her she would tell the world about the ‘Circle.’ Henry went mad, telephoned Sebastian Ridley and told him to come to his house and kill Margaret.”

“And he did it? Was he paid?”

“Apparently my demented wife has convinced Ridley that when he is called to kill he must do so! And you may well look at me like that, my friend, I do not blame you. You do not know the awful world of Satan worship. The belief in an all-powerful evil from his earliest days has made Sebastian Ridley a very dangerous creature. It was also Henry’s opinion that Ridley killed Helena Jackman and that because Cornelia told him to do it.”

“Bloody hell, Ted! Does Gabriel know?”

“No. However, I am going to tell him. He will see to the end of Ridley, have no doubt in that. I will have to gain his trust and so far, I have failed.”

“Well, you can not blame him, can you? As you said, how many evil men say they repent near to the ends of their lives and it is all lies? You have told me that he cares for Cornelia almost as a mother. You will have to make him see her for just what she is and that will not be easy.”

“That is very true! Anyway, Percy, Cornelia’s plans will fail and I will be the one to get the revenge. I will also fix at least some of the misery I have caused. I want to free the souls of my dedicated children and those of Gabriel Jackman, Elizabeth Leighton and Tony Lucci.” Gabriel heard the rattle of paper and saw a brown silk bag fall to the floor. “And with this I will do just that. I owe you so much, Percy! How will I ever repay you?”

“You have paid me more than my worth. I am just happy to be able to assist you. My prayers go with you, my friend. You will keep me informed?”

“Of course. I will see you out.”

Gabriel waited until the sound of their voices faded down the hallway and slid out from the bed. He took the back stairs, crossed the alley to the roadway and flagged down a cab.

During the night, the temperature had dropped considerably and a dusting of snow covered everything. Cornelia watched from the parlor windows as a De Wolfe coach, carrying Randall and Elizabeth, pulled away from the front courtyard.

“I do not think your mother is pleased about us leaving the estate.” Elizabeth said to Randall as she covered her lap with the traveling blanket.

“She’s not. Brock got her up at the crack of dawn and she is as skittish as a cat.”

They rounded the first turn leading down to the mountain road and passed two police wagons. A few men stood gathered around and more moved through the thick bushes down into the tree line.

“Poor Mrs. Beaver! Do you think they will find her, Randall?”

He looked at Elizabeth flatly for a few seconds before he answered. He looked tired, worried and drawn. "Do you want to know what I really think?"

"Of course."

"I think they will find her at some point today but all they will find is her body. Someone over heard her conversation with Gabriel and that was that for her. It is a damn bloody shame. Mavis Beaver is...was a fine, hardworking, kindhearted woman. I am sure she never did harm to anyone in her life."

"Then you believe that a murderer lives in your home?"

"That much is obvious. I am sure that Gabriel, Lee and you think the same thing. Do you really want to talk about murder?"

Elizabeth sighed and shook her head. "You look tired. Did you not sleep well last night?"

"Did you? Watching Gabriel and Tony...!" He took a deep breath and sat back. "All my life I have studied the science of life. The practical, provable truth was reality to me and all that really mattered. Demons mating with humans creating men who could disappear and heal instantly are the stuff of literature. If I had not seen it with my own eyes I would have sworn on a stack of Bibles it was impossible. Today, I feel as though I have no idea what I can stand behind or not." He smiled slightly. "How about you? Do you still not 'believe in ghosts'?"

She glanced down at her healed hand. "I also learned a great deal yesterday."

"So perhaps you will tell me what really happened to your hand?"

"I thought you didn't believe me. I am not a very good liar." Without mentioning why she went up to Owens' studio she told Randall the truth about the morning before.

"Good God! Well whatever it is, it is certainly not a figment of an over active imagination and we have to do something about it. You could have been very seriously hurt."

"An exorcism?"

"Damned if I know! However, we are going after breakfast to see a man who may shed some light on that."

"Really? I thought you said you had to pick up some books."

"I do and he has them. He has the unlikely name of Montague Fitzroy Mountebanks."

"Goodness that is a mouthful."

Randall smiled and nodded. "Everyone calls him Monty. He is a spirit medium and supposedly a very powerful one at that. He retired a while back and runs an antique shop in Utley. He and my father were friends as younger men and he was in university with the old man when all this stuff with Desjardin began. It was about that time when their friendship ended. Tell me, have you ever met Isabelle Lucci? I ask that because Monty used to be her mentor."

"Yes." Elizabeth answered nonchalantly.

"I thought maybe you had. Isabelle does like to make her presence known, especially where Gabriel is concerned." The tired, worry lines on his face eased somewhat as he leaned closer to Elizabeth. "I am going to say something here that may earn me an eye to match Gabriel's...! Will you warn me if you get the urge to clobber me?"

"I am not going to hit you." She could not help but smile.

“Alright, here I go. I am well aware that Gabriel has his eye, the one that still works...on you. I am also fairly certain that you know he has at least two mistresses, maybe more and that would not surprise me at all.” He waited. Elizabeth shrugged as though she did not care. “You do not strike me as the sort of woman who would be satisfied being added to a list.”

“I most certainly am not.”

“Good. That is what I hoped. Then I can assume you are not committed to Gabriel?”

She studied his handsome face, the cool blue beautiful eyes. “The truth is that Gabriel and I are very close. We are not lovers and that is because I do not want a man who is not free. If he does not free himself of all other women,” Isabelle’s determined face crossed her mind, “he will never be my lover.”

Randall smiled broadly. “There, you see, Gabriel and I are so very different. I have no females!” He spread his hands through the air. “Sadly, my bed is so very empty every night. So be warned, pretty Elizabeth, I am going to do my best, in my own quiet way to impress you!”

“I am already impressed. I find you to be a very charming and nice man.”

“Nice! Good Lord, what does that mean? I shall aim for a much warmer reaction.”

She laughed. “Oh well, you can try.”

“I will.”

Tony found Jane sitting alone sitting at the window in the breakfast room. She appeared to be looking across the terrace towards the woodlands. She wore a plain pale blue dress. Her long chestnut colored hair pulled back in a loose braid and tied with a silk bow. How innocent and childlike she appeared. Was it a fact that her mother had turned her into a murdering mad woman?

He crossed to the breakfast buffet. “Good morning, Jane.”

She smiled at him. “Oh, hello Tony!”

“All alone for breakfast this morning?” He took some toast and a cup of coffee and sat at the end of the table.

“Yes. Mommy is busy with Mrs. Partridge in the kitchen. It is very difficult to be without a head cook.”

“Mrs. Beaver will be back. I think she is just off having a romantic tryst with a gentleman friend. What do you think about that?”

She looked at him rather flat faced, then smiled suddenly. “Don’t be silly. Who would want an old bat like that? She is far too old and ugly.”

“Jane, sex is not just for the very young, you know. You would be surprised what some of us old people get up to.”

“Oh, I don’t think you are old Tony. Not in the slightest.” She left her seat at the window and sat next to him at the table. She leaned very close and he had to resist the urge to back away. “And I wouldn’t be surprised by what you people get up to. Do you want to know why I wouldn’t be surprised?”

“Do tell me why you are not surprised?”

“Because I watch when I can but mostly I listen. Late at night or very early in the morning when they are sneaking around changing beds I am always watching and

listening. Do you want to know what I heard this morning?" The change as she spoke then was astonishing. Gone was the chubby child's face, the high-pitched whining voice and the startling innocence of her beautiful eyes. She was much older, wiser, meaner and most unsettling for Tony was that she seemed sexually aroused.

If she wanted to share, he was more than willing to play the game with her. "Certainly, what was going on in the wee hours?"

"Well, I had the feeling something was going on between Gabriel and Miss Elizabeth Leighton...she is just too good to be true and they do have adjoining rooms. Gabriel slept with her but she did not give him much. He was right peeved with her. He said he would go home and end it with Isabelle right away so I guess he wants her greatly. God knows what is wrong with the bitch. Maybe she is saving it for Randall."

"You should be careful with that, Jane. Some people could get very angry at you for invading their privacy."

"Why? It is my home. I can go anywhere, anytime I want. Anyway, it is fun and I have been doing it for years. Once a few years back I was hiding and watching behind a second floor bedroom door when you were staying here with Isabelle." She leaned even closer and ran her fingers along the back of his hand. "What a naughty couple you were, Tony! You both left your bedroom at the same time. She kissed you and went up to Owens' bedroom. I had to know what you were going to do. I thought that maybe you were going to try to watch them. You waited by the stairs for Auntie Margaret and took her back into your bedroom. I stood at your door for a long while. Then, I went and listened at Owen's door. Everyone but poor Uncle Henry had such fun!"

Tony pulled his hand away and fought back his anger. "As I said, you should be very careful with that sort of thing. It could be dangerous for you."

She shrugged. "I don't care. I like to watch and listen. How does it hurt anyone? Anyway, it is so exciting. You cannot tell me that you do not like the same. I will bet you are excited just hearing me talk about it." She paused grinned and slid her hand quickly up his leg. "We could go to your bedroom if you'd like or to mine?"

He took her hand off his leg and placed it on the table. "And what would Mr. Ridley think of that?"

"Sebastian won't know, will he? Anyway, maybe I am tired of him." She stood and made a fuss of straightening her skirts. He could see her mood had quickly changed again and she was then near to tears. "I am tired of him, Steward and Mommy always telling me what to do and what not to do. They just do not understand that I have my own mind. They think I am stupid and weak."

"Then take a stand against them. You have your own money, do you not?"

"Not until I marry or I am twenty-one. I have no friends. Mommy and Steward made sure of that." The tears flowed freely down her cheeks. Tony stood and placed a firm hand on each shoulder.

"You do have friends, Jane, if you will just look for them. Owen, Randall, Gabriel. Lee and I would all help you."

"Do you think I could do that? Could I have my own life?"

"Of course you could. Tell me, Jane what would your life be like if you had the choice?"

She wiped her face, stood, walked towards the doorway and looked back over her shoulder. A slow, mean smile turned to a sneer. "It is too bad all you want to do is chatter, Tony! It is so boring!" She shook her head and left the room.

Gabriel was glad for the twenty minutes ride to Inspector Wesson's office. He needed time to organize his thoughts. He had learned a great deal about Cornelia De Wolfe in the last few days and none of it fit in with the woman he known and loved almost as a mother for all his life. Had she ordered Ridley to torture and kill Helena? His head ached and his heart thundered. If she was behind it all, she was going to pay the price to him.

"Excuse me, Inspector; Mr. Jackman is here to see you."

"Good." Wesson closed some folders on his desk, stood and opened the door.

"Gabriel! Just the man I hoped to see. Come in." Gabriel followed Wesson into his office, sat in chair beside the desk and stretched out his long legs. "You look none too happy."

"I feel a lot of things, Charles and not a one is happy. What have you got to drink?"

Wesson smiled and nodded to a bookcase, a bottle of whiskey sat at the end of a row of books. "A large one?"

"Please!"

Wesson poured two glasses and handed one to Gabriel. "I take it you spoke with the Mrs. Lucci and Lee?"

"I spoke to Sue Lyn yesterday morning."

"Now Gabriel, I know we have a long standing agreement that I not ask any questions and under the circumstances it is for the best. I wonder if this time you might share with me. You wanted information on Sebastian Ridley. He is far up the food chain in British society and ruthless with it. I may need to protect my own neck."

"Yes, I thought of that. I will tell you all I can. First of all Charles, have you ever heard of 'The Circle of Mendes'?"

"Only the very basics. It was some sort of Satan worshiping club run by Pierre Desjardin. I have it on good account that Theodore De Wolfe was once a part of that nasty business. Apparently, the organization fell apart when Desjardin died quite a few years ago. And, of course, we now know that Sebastian Ridley's real father was Pierre Desjardin."

Gabriel pulled Henry's diaries from his pocket and handed them to the Inspector. "These were written by Henry Leighton and will give you a very clear idea of what the 'Circle' was all about. The initials used in those pages are TW for Theodore De Wolfe, SJ for Samuel Jackman. There are other initials but I doubt we will ever track them down. You will also find the initials CF and SF. At first, I had no idea who this person was, only that they were female and a very active participant in their ceremonies and orgies. I know now that CF stands for Cornelia female and SF stands for Susan female."

"What? Are you saying your parents and Cornelia were Satan worshipers?"

"I have no doubt in it. Desjardin did not die from an accidental fall in his bathtub as is believed. He was murdered. Drugged and drowned by Theodore De Wolfe, Henry Leighton and Samuel Jackman. The reasons for De Wolfe and Jackman were to free

themselves of the man, his blackmail and the knowledge of their horrible youths. For Leighton it was simply so he could take over leadership of the 'Circle'."

"Now as to my father. He was not Samuel Jackman because he could not produce children. My biological father was actually Desjardin..."

"Christ Almighty, Gabriel. How the hell?"

"I know that to be fact because my mother, who is not deceased but in hiding, told me so and I have very strong reason to believe her."

"Susan Jackman is alive?" Wesson was dumbfounded and very rarely for him almost lost for words.

"She is. I have kept her hidden from the world at her request since the fire. She has finally seen fit to tell me all she knows. Earlier this morning I listened to a conversation between Ted and his private investigator, Percy Beryline. Cornelia is the centre of most of what I have to tell you. Desjardin was Ridley's father. His mother is Cornelia."

"Cornelia De Wolfe is...was Nell Belmont?" Gabriel smiled slightly at Wesson's reaction. "But she must not know that. I mean does she really know who Ridley is?"

"She knows. She has been very active in his life from the time of the Ridley adoption and much more so once Desjardin died and was not in her way."

"As I said, after killing Desjardin, Leighton took over the 'Circle'. Cornelia joined in with him. Eventually she brought in Sebastian Ridley, Steward and Jane. The diaries will give you some idea just what those young people witnessed and took part in. If Steward and Jane were born sane, I have no idea, but I doubt they are now."

"In the early days of her marriage my mother joined her husband in the 'Circle'. She left after a few years and unsuccessfully tried to bring Samuel with her. She and Cornelia have remained close friends over the years. Cornelia often came to her with her belief that Ted was somehow involved with Desjardin's murder. If it is possible for Cornelia to love, she loved Desjardin and for all these years has harbored the need to avenge his death."

"Just under three years ago, Cornelia spent a weekend with my Mother. Mother confirmed what Henry told Cornelia, that Ted had a part in the death of Desjardin. Cornelia drinks far too much as she did that night and told Mother about her long held plans for revenge."

"Years ago Ted cut Cornelia and Steward out of his will completely. When he dies all of wealth will go to Owen, Randall and Jane. She would be forced to live off Owen's generosity. Cornelia would never let that stand and made her plans. According to my mother, Cornelia had been 'conditioning' and 'molding' Sebastian towards these plans from the time Desjardin died. You will agree, Charles, that a young mind can be easily molded and bent."

"Yes, I have seen it too many times."

Gabriel sighed. "Due to the usual abilities of Desjardin, Cornelia was able to convince Ridley that he was not completely human and that there was more of the 'Beast' in him than he could control. She had him believe that if he was ever called to kill he would have no choice but to do so!"

"All of this Cornelia told Mother. Mother told Cornelia that she very much doubted that Ridley, or anyone for that matter, would believe such a thing. Cornelia said

that she had already successfully tested Ridley. This morning I found out whom he killed to pass that test. My Helena!”

Wesson stood slowly. “You mean to tell me that Cornelia told Ridley to kill Helena and on that alone he did?”

“That and with a large payment for his efforts.”

“But he was in Spain! Or can he do as you do?”

Gabriel sat stunned for a moment. “You know? How?”

“Shit, Gabriel! No man can be in as many places, at any time as you can. I knew there was something very different about you from the first case we worked on. It is best that I know very little about that. Just tell me if Ridley can do the same thing?”

“Yes. It is Cornelia’s plan to have Ridley marry Jane. He will then get his hands on her very large dowry. Then Ridley is to kill Ted. Jane gets her share of a very large fortune. Not too long after that Jane will have a very unfortunate accident. Ridley and Cornelia will have all the money they will ever need and Cornelia will have her revenge.”

Wesson shook his head, lit a cigar and handed one to Gabriel. “I am surprised Cornelia told all this to Susan. Did she not think it would get back to you?”

“I think she knew what a terrible coward my mother is. Nonetheless, I am sure that is why she had Ridley set the fire that was to kill my parents last spring.”

“Then with what you now know... to put it bluntly, why is Ridley still breathing?”

“There is more I need to learn. I may have a stain on my soul and that stain runs to my daughter. I need to know that I have removed it once and for all. I still have some work ahead of me.”

“Then have you learned who the ‘mountain murderer?’ is?”

“Steward De Wolfe with the assistance of his sister, Jane.”

“Both of them?”

“Yes. Lee overheard the two of them drug and sexually abuse Ruth De Wolfe. A maid at the estate accuses Steward of rape and attempted murder. In both cases, there was mention of viscous breast biting. Of course, that was not conclusive. I should tell you that yesterday morning; Mrs. Beaver, the De Wolfe head cook, informed me that she had some knowledge of the murders. I told her she could trust me to help and she said she would get back to me. Three hours later she went shopping and no one has seen her since.”

“Not another one!”

“I am afraid so. Steward and Jane left the estate at about the same time as Mrs. Beaver, telling several people they were going shopping in the village. I checked with the mentioned establishments and no one claims to have seen them. They are hard to miss! When I am done you can be certain, Charles, the ‘mountain murderers’ and the murderers of my wife and Margaret Leighton will be done.”

Chapter Twelve

“Montague’s Curios, Collectables and Rarities. If you want it I can get it for you!” Elizabeth read the gold printed sign as Randall closed the door behind them. “A very remarkable claim.” She whispered.

“Monty’s a remarkable man.” Randall answered and watched as Elizabeth moved down an aisle piled high with bookcases and furniture. While every possible available space was used, there was no sense of clutter or mess. The antique furniture gleamed with fresh polishing, the books lined up neatly and not a speck of dust anywhere.

“I’ll be right out.” A deep male voice called out from a back room.

“It is alright.” Randall answered. “Take your time.”

“Randall?” From her place behind the bookcase, Elizabeth watched as Monty Montague appeared from behind a curtain. He was tall, slightly large around the middle, and had a long, braided black beard. “I thought that was a familiar voice. Good to see you, my old friend, it has been a while.”

“And you, Monty!”

Elizabeth stepped out into view. Monty turned at the sound of her footsteps. He looked at her with amazement, and then a wide smile spread across his face. “And you must be Miss Elizabeth Leighton!” He turned his smile to Randall. “Am I correct?”

Randall nodded and introduced the two strangers properly.

“My Lord!” Monty held her hand as he spoke. “I thought I had finally had a visit from my dear friend. No doubt you often hear just how much you are like your mother... beautiful and talented too, I’ll wager.”

“I have no talent what so ever, Mr. Montague. And as to beauty, maybe not so much!”

“Please, I am Monty to my friends and Margaret’s daughter is most certainly a friend to this establishment.”

“Did you know my mother well, Monty?”

“Yes.” He answered quietly. “We shared many friends, the De Wolfe’s included.” He turned back to Randall. “You’ve come for the books you ordered, no doubt, but surely you can stay and have tea with me. I have just put the kettle on.”

“Of course, Monty. It has been a long time since I have had a cup of your tea flavored mud.”

Monty laughed. “That’s a lie. Do not listen to him, my dear. He is just not used to real Moroccan tea. It is delicious.” He moved to the front of the store, locked the door and turned over the open sign.

A few moments later, they sat with mugs of thick, strong black tea at the back room table.

“So Randall, how do things go at your mountain home?”

“Oh, they are all as batty as hell, Monty. It gets worse every day”

“Ah but you will be away from it soon though. When does your residency begin?”

“January and it cannot come soon enough.”

Monty sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "Right. The air around you two is thick with unasked questions. Why have you really come here?"

Randall smiled at Elizabeth. "You see, didn't I tell you he is physic?"

"Not as much as I was. Not enough practice anymore. I am afraid."

"You remember I told you about the ghost child known as Jimmy."

"I do. He wanders about with a knife in his hand on the abandoned fourth floor hallway. A very sad story!"

"You told me that spirits like him are locked in the moment of death. For the most part they are unaware they are dead or if they are aware they are afraid to move on."

"That is a very short version of a much broader theory but accurate nonetheless. I assume something about this shade has changed."

Randall looked at Elizabeth. Omitting the fact that she had actually been stabbed she related to Monty the frightening experience. All the while she spoke his eyes never left her face. When she finished Monty stood, refilled the coffee mugs, took the pot to the sink and rinsed it. He did not speak until he was back in his chair.

"I fear that little Jimmy is not the only shade in your home Randall. Do you know of any others?"

"Not that I know of."

Monty took a deep breath and shook his head. "There is another. He rages and hides his identity in black robes. This horrible shade is teaching the child. It is obvious, Jimmy has become very dangerous."

"Who or what is this new spirit?"

"He is cloaked." Monty shook his head. "All I see is a dark shadow." He took Elizabeth's left hand, turned it over and leaned down to look closely at her palm. She looked over his head to Randall. Very slightly, he shook his head.

"Are you reading my palm?" She asked with a smile.

"No. But maybe if I did I would get the whole story." He sat back and looked from Elizabeth to Randall. "Look, there is danger and trouble at Wolfe Manor. I feel it like hot waves from both of you. Everyone there must be very careful."

Monty leaned closer to Elizabeth. He did not appear to be looking at her but more around her. He stood suddenly. "There is someone here." He rushed around the room and extinguished the lights.

"What are you doing?" Elizabeth asked nervously.

"There is someone here!" Monty repeated excitedly. "I think it may be your mother, Elizabeth. She is pressing hard on me." Even in the dim light from the windows, they could see Monty had gone very pale and beads of sweat formed on his head. "With your permission I will try and trance for her." The room became icy cold.

"A séance?" Elizabeth sounded skeptical.

"After what you went through can you really still cling to disbelief? Disbelief is only another way of showing fear. Fear in your situation, Elizabeth will only bring danger closer." He looked around the room that was growing colder and darker by the second. "This spirit that is pressing on me...knock three times to prove to Elizabeth that you are here."

Three large booms rocked the room.

"Were you Margaret Leighton in your last lifetime?"

There were three more booms, those even louder than the others were.

Monty looked at Elizabeth from under his eyebrows.

Elizabeth nodded. She was shaking from the cold and growing fear.

“Good! Move closer, we have to lock hands. Elizabeth, I will go into trance. When I lift my head, ask her for some form of validation so you will know it is she without a doubt. If you are not satisfied just let go of my hands that will break the trance. Now just clear your minds and relax.”

Monty closed his eyes and lowered his head. Elizabeth and Randall watched him intently. His breathing became shallow and slow. After a moment, he lifted his head turned to face Elizabeth but kept his eyes closed.

“Elizabeth!” Monty spoke in whisper. His tone was high and feminine.

“If you are Margaret, prove it.” Randall said when Elizabeth stayed silent.

“Lizzie, my pretty little bird, my baby dove!” Now the voice that spoke through Monty was much louder, and to Elizabeth very familiar.

“Mommy?” Elizabeth gasped. Their breath was visible in the frozen air around them.

“Oh my sweet little bird, it is so wonderful to speak with you again.”

All the loss and heartache of the last year and a half flooded through Elizabeth. She was now just a lost and frightened child. “Mommy, please come back. I cannot do this without you!”

“I am with you always and have been all along. I locked the bolt to protect you in Owen’s studio. You see me in your dreams. Now you will know it is truly me. Draw on the love we share for strength and it will see you through this.”

“Tell Gabriel to trust Ted but not to wait for the old man to find the courage. Gabriel must take control and you all must follow his lead, exactly or others will die.” The spirit turned Monty’s head towards Randall. “Randy, I am sorry love, all your concerns are correct. You will lose a lot but it must be.”

Tears streamed down Elizabeth’s face. “Are you with Peter? Sometimes I think you are.”

“Yes. He is standing beside you right now. He says to tell you that you are truly free and must love again.” The feminine tone was weaker; Monty’s deep Scottish accent was coming back. “The medium is weakening. I have to go now. Please... tell Tony I love him. I did kiss his cheek and he must know he made the right choice. Be strong, my little bird and do as Gabriel instructs. I will always love and guide you.”

Monty’s head dropped.

“No!” Randall yelled. “Margaret! Who murdered you? Was it my brother?”

Monty shuddered, and said “Sebastian Ridley” in one long whisper.

The gas flames flared and lit the room. The chill vanished and warmth flowed around them like a comforting blanket. Gasping for breath, Monty rested his head in his hands. Elizabeth stood and swayed. Randall went to her and held her.

“Are you alright, Monty?”

“Yes Randall but I am going to have one Hell of a headache. I always do when the energy is strong and good God was she ever strong! I have no idea what was said...was it Margaret?”

Elizabeth nodded. “Yes. She always called me ‘her little bird, her baby dove’. It was her.”

Randall smiled. "She was the only person who ever dared to call me Randy. Come on. Elizabeth. We should get you back home again. You are shaking like a leaf." He helped her into her coat and led her out of the back room. They stopped at the door.

"Thank you so much, Monty!" Elizabeth smiled up at the unusual man. "I could never tell you how much you have helped me."

"I am just happy I can sometimes help but please..." he looked earnestly from Elizabeth to Randall, "there is danger at De Wolfe Manor. Take care."

Monty watched from the doorway as the De Wolfe coach disappeared down the roadway. A cold wind blew and it was snowing again.

Isabelle felt better that morning. As Sue Lyn had instructed she ate a hand full of ginger cookies before rising. She and Gabriella spent the morning playing and drawing at her small easel.

"Look, Sue Lyn!" Gabriella smiled as Sue Lyn joined them. "I did a picture of Lee."

"Oh my, that is good." Sue Lyn looked over the child to Isabelle. "I do think you captured his rather large head very well."

Isabelle laughed. "Yes, I always thought Lee had a swollen head. *Sembra che un femetto con ghi occhi!*"

"I have no idea what you just said but I most likely agree..." Sue Lyn stopped talking as Gabriella jumped from her stool and made a run for the door. Sue Lyn caught her by the arm. "Where are you going, young lady? You know you have to stay with Isabelle or me at all times."

"Let go!" Gabriella tried to wiggle away. "Daddy's here!"

"Oh, I see." Sue Lyn turned to Isabelle. "She always seems to know somehow. Where is he?"

"In his room."

"Then you stay with Mrs. Lucci. I will go and get him."

"Daddy's here!" Gabriella danced in a circle and clapped her hands. "Are you 'cited cause Daddy is home, Mrs. Lucky?"

Isabelle was tidying her hair in a mirror. "Yes, I am little one. I love your daddy very much and miss him when he is away."

Gabriella frowned up at Isabelle. "If you love Daddy then you can marry him and be my Mommy."

"That is just what I will do."

The door opened and Gabriel stepped into the room. "Daddy, Daddy!" The child jumped into his arms. "Guess what?"

"I have no idea. Do tell me!"

"Mrs. Lucky is going to marry you!"

"Oh Lord! Gabriella, I..." Isabelle blushed and stammered.

He smiled at Isabelle. "How are you feeling?"

"Much better! My goodness, what has happened to your face?"

"Best not say right now." He winked down towards his daughter. "I tell you both though that I am famished. I have not eaten a thing all day and Sue Lyn told me that luncheon is ready. It smells heavenly from here. Shall we go down and see what there is?"

When they had finished eating Mrs. Parks managed to persuade Gabriella to come to her room for a while. With the exception of Tony's astonishing ability, Gabriel told the woman all he had learned the last two days.

"But I do not understand, Gabriel. Why in Gods name would Cornelia want to see two of her own children marry? That is ludicrous... not to mention a terrible sin."

"There is nothing to understand, Sue Lyn." Isabelle said firmly. "Did I not tell you both for years that Cornelia De Wolfe was an evil bitch?"

Gabriel sighed. "Yes, you did but you never did tell me why you felt that way. Maybe if you did I would have listened."

"It is difficult to explain a feeling, especially since I do not always understand that not everyone has these feelings. There is a cold, darkness around some people...an evilness that flows from them and that is very strong with Cornelia."

"Isabelle, from now on when you tell me that you do not like someone I am going to listen."

"I hope so. If Wesson says that Ridley was in Spain when Helena died then he was not her killer. If Steward is as mad as you say then it must be him."

He looked at the confused faces of his companions. "Think about it! If I can transport from one place to another instantaneously why should it not be the same for Ridley? We do have the same father."

"Oh no!" Isabelle exclaimed quietly.

"Yes, of course," Sue Lyn said thoughtfully. "And that would explain how the murderer got at Margaret Leighton. Locked doors and distance is no barrier to him."

"I put the 'mountain murders' down to Steward. He is known to spend time with Ridley and they certainly shared God knows what terrible things in Leighton's 'Circle' ceremonies. The biting issue is something they could have learned and shared there."

Isabelle had gone very pale. "Then, Gabriel, Ridley can get at you too...any time he wants. Gabriel, you are in so much danger!"

"It is just the same for me against him, Isabelle."

"No, no, no!" Tears spilled down her cheeks. "You do not know what else he can do! What if he can do more than just transport?"

Gabriel stood and pulled the sobbing Isabelle into his arms. Sue Lyn discreetly left the room.

"Stop, Isabelle."

"No, I could not bear it if anything happened to you! Please do not go back to the Manor. Stay here with us. You are safer here!"

"And do what; spend the rest of my life in fear and hiding? You know me better than that."

"Then you go to him right now and kill him! Why wait for him to come after you? You say he killed Helena...then you have the right to kill him."

"Yes, I agree with that." He pushed her back slightly and handed her his handkerchief. "And believe me I would sorely love to do just that but I also believe he is just the tip of the ice berg. I must break down this whole matter and kill it to the roots. Those roots most likely run straight to Cornelia De Wolfe and maybe others. I have to know who and everything or those I love and my children will never be safe." He lifted her face gently. "And it seems I will soon have a son to love. I do not want him to spend his life looking over his shoulder because I left loose ends. Do you understand?"

“Yes.” She sniffed and blew her nose. “You know that sometimes when I touch someone I can learn certain things, things that are important to them and on their minds. I met Sebastian Ridley a few times. I can think of a reason to go and see him and shake his hand...”

“No!” He interrupted her with sudden anger. “No, Isabelle, I forbid it. It is far too dangerous. You are to stay here, look after Gabriella with Sue Lyn and nothing else!”

“But...!”

“No! Not for any reason are you to leave this house until this matter is closed. You are carrying my child and you will do just as I say. Not a thing more.”

“Yes Gabriel.” She agreed. “You are right. I just want to help. I feel so useless just sitting here.”

“You are helping. How could I concentrate if I had to worry about my daughter? Speaking of Gabby, I will have to leave soon and should spend some more time with her. Come and walk with me to her bedroom.”

Isabelle nodded and managed a small smile as they moved up the stairs. “So tell me, how did you get the black eye?”

“Elizabeth punched me. She knocked me flat on my back. Mind you, I might have asked for it.”

Isabelle laughed.

“And how is that funny?”

“Well, maybe it is not funny but I am happy for it. If she punched you, it most likely means she is not accepting your lusty ways too well. That is a good thing for me, don’t you think.”

“No, it simply means that like most females Elizabeth Leighton is a lunatic.”

“You know, my love.” She slid her hand under his jacket and up his back. “I will put Gabriella to sleep with Sue Lyn tonight if you want to pop back here and make love with me. I will make you very glad that you did.”

“I have no doubt about that, Isabelle.” He looked down at her large, familiar and very inviting breasts. “Unfortunately, I need to keep my mind and my energies on more important matters for the time being.”

“I suppose so. But we will have to make up for lost time!” She put her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately.

Ruth watched as Jane dressed and brushed her messed hair back into a neat braid.

When she was done, Jane leaned on the bed and kissed Ruth’s forehead. “Oh my, you are shaking! When did you have your last needle?”

“Last night.”

“Do you want me to get Steward? I wish he would give me that bloody key!”

“No, I will just try and sleep. God, I wish I could shed this awful need. I need to be free from this burden.”

Jane sighed. “Yes, I think this will be a long winter. But just think how happy we will be when we are living in my home and free!”

“Yes. It is something to look forward too.” Ruth turned her face so Jane would not see the truth in her eyes.

Jane had been gone a few seconds when Steward stepped out from behind the drapes of the dressing room. “Well, Ruth, you are much more entertaining when you are

not pretending to be a cripple. You certainly gave Jane a good roll. Mind you, I have no idea what you see in my fat and ugly little sister.”

“I am not pretending and you know that. The feeling is coming back to my legs but that has happened before and never lasts. I gave you what you wanted now give me what I want.” She held her arm up for him.

“What you gave me, Ruth, was a pressing need and you are going to have to do something about it.” He took her hand and pressed it against his crotch. “Then you can have your needle.”

“No! The needle first or you can go. Give me the drugs and I will do anything you want.”

“Such a stubborn female! But I am not in the mood to argue.” He unlocked the bottom drawer of the night table. He took deliberate time preparing the needle and strapping her arm. With more force than necessary, he pushed the needle into a vein.

“God, that hurt!” She spat at him. “You do that on purpose.”

“You should learn to love the pain like sweet Janie. You will be surprised just how much fun that can be!”

Ruth fell back onto the pillows waiting for the cocaine to take away her misery.

“Tell me Ruth, do you really believe that Sebastian is going to let you live with him and Jane? Is that what you really want or is it just a hope to get away from me?”

“Yes, I want to get away from you.”

Steward pulled the blankets off her naked body. “What makes you think I won’t be welcome in Sebastian’s home?” He laughed as he opened his trouser buttons. “I like to fuck you, Ruth. You like the drug. We have an excellent agreement and it will stay no matter where you live.”

She felt him climb onto the bed. The drug was taking her to a better place and away from the man straddling her.

Jane looked for her mother. From his bedroom, Gabriel heard her ask a maid where Cornelia was.

“In the front parlor, last I knew.”

Jane found her mother sitting by the front room window with a large needlepoint frame on her lap.

“Mommy, I need to speak with you.” She closed the double doors and sat next to her mother. Gabriel came down the stairs, slipped into the gathering room and stood next to the closed door. From there he could very clearly hear Jane and Cornelia.

“You do look worried! If it is about Sebastian, you need not fret. I have had a long talk with him and he is no longer mad at you. However, you will have to give up on this insane idea to bring Ruth to your marriage home. Sebastian is firmly against that. I am sure you understand.”

“No, I do not understand. I need Ruth and want her with me. I do not understand it all. He loves it when Ruth and I make love. It was his idea to watch us and he has done it dozens of times. He does not complain when Ruth lets him fuck her. He was very happy for that!”

“Do not be naïve, Jane. It was just a temporary game for him. Just a diversion, the kind any man will take...but it wears thin quickly. He is finished with that and I

know he has told you to stay away from Ruth. You will obey him and me, do you understand?"

"Why should I stay away from her?" Jane was red with anger. "She is my friend, Mommy! She is the only friend I have."

"Yes but you have a big mouth. I cannot afford for you to have 'friends'."

"I told you, I never told Ruth anything about what Steward and I do."

"Yes, you have, but I do not believe you. You have always had a problem with lying and talking too much. See what that has cost you! Anyway, the decision is made and will not change."

"What decision? What are you talking about?" There was an edge of panic in Jane's voice.

"I warned you months ago what would have to happen to Ruth. No matter what you say, I cannot be sure that you have not told her far too much and on top of all that, she has become an unbearable burden to the family. I am sorry Jane, but Ruth will have to die. There is no way around it. I would much prefer she was gone now but this business with Mrs. Beaver has been costly. We will have to wait at least a while before killing Ruth!"

"No! Mommy please, do not tell Steward to kill her. She doesn't know anything. She will be away from here in a few days. Then when she is living with me and Sebastian you won't have to see her again!"

"Jane! Have no doubt in it; Sebastian will not have her in his house. I made very sure he was still firm in that before he left here. He insists you stop forcing yourself on her immediately."

"I am not forcing her. She loves me!"

"God, Jane. I am so tired of this! Ruth is not a lesbian, believe me, I can smell a lesbian from a mile away and she is not one. She is only giving you what you want so you will pay for the drugs Steward gives her. Listen to me Jane. I know how it is. You are a true lesbian and that is a rare and precious thing. You have that from me. Maybe it is a curse for us because we have to take a husband and keep him happy. No matter how much you want a female, and for many reasons, you will have to ignore those desires. Sebastian will be Prime Minister one day. How could he have a lesbian for a wife? The day will come when Sebastian is not longer Prime Minister then you can have all the women you want. He will buy you a new woman for every night of the week if you do what he wants for now."

"That could be years and years. No! Sebastian does not love me. He only wants my money and power. I do not love him and I will not lose Ruth. I will never marry Sebastian and I am going to write to him and tell him that right away. And," Jane's voice turned deep and threatening, "if Steward kills her I will tell everyone about what he and I did to these women and how you told us to do it!"

With a sound like a growl, Cornelia brought the side of the wooden frame across Jane's head. The wood snapped with the force of the blow. Jane fell onto the settee. Cornelia pulled Jane upright. "You will do what I tell you to do. You will not let me down. You are just as much a part of those murders as Steward. They will hang you just as quickly as Steward!"

Jane gasped and tried to pull away.

"Listen to me, Jane. You will marry Sebastian Ridley. If you continue to disobey me, I will tell Steward I am not happy with you. You know what he will do to you!"

"Yes, Mommy!"

Cornelia let out a heavy breath, sat down next to Jane. She put her arm around her daughter's shoulders and pulled her head to rest on her chest. "God! Why do you make me do this to you? I just want to be happy. Jane, do you not want to see your Mother happy? You know how bad my heart is. Are you trying to kill me?"

"No...."

"I tell you what I will do. You stay away from Ruth and I will get another female for you." Cornelia pushed a lock of hair back off Jane's face. "I have seen the way you look at my maid. Do you want me to tell her to be nice to you?"

"Will she do it?"

"You know my pretty Janet. She does what ever I tell her to do. Then when you are married to Sebastian, you will have a nice treat waiting for you when you come to visit me. Of course, I will want my only daughter to visit me often. However, you will have to keep it a secret, even from Sebastian...especially from Sebastian. If I think at any time, you are 'talking', I will set Steward on you. You will give me no choice. Now, do want some nice time with Janet?"

"Yes."

"Then you finally do as you are told?"

Jane nodded. "And you won't hurt Ruth?"

"She is safe if you behave yourself. I will be watching you and her very closely, remember that. Sebastian was very angry with you so I want you to write to him and make it very clear to him that you are finished with Ruth. Do that now and show me the letter."

She stopped as the door opened and the butler stepped in the room.

"Excuse me, Ma'am. Inspector Brock has telephoned from the Vicarage. He and his man are on their way back here. He said to tell you they had found the body of poor Mrs. Beaver and could you have the family and guests gathered for him." Gabriel came out of the gathering room and stood to the side of the butler.

"Why? He has already asked us his questions. This is very inconvenient, Musgrave!" She snapped with frustration. "Oh, Gabriel! I did not see you there. Have you heard the terrible news?" She took him by the arm and almost pulled him into the room.

"Where have you been all day? I have been looking for you."

"Here and there, Cornelia. What is it? Have they found Mrs. B?"

"She's dead." Jane said quietly. She was still slumped on the settee. Her face was paper white. Her right hand held across the side of her head.

"Good God!" Gabriel sat down next to Jane. He noticed the broken needlepoint frame on the floor.

Cornelia followed his gaze. "Poor Jane, she tripped on my frame and fell. I think she banged her head. Are you alright, my dear?"

Gabriel moved her hand. A raised purple bruise had already formed across her temple and down her cheek. "That is a bad bruise, Jane. You should put some cold cloths on it right away."

"Gabriel is right. Go to your room and rest. I will come and get you when the Inspector arrives." Without looking at anyone or speaking, Jane stood and left the room.

"What did Brock tell you, Musgrave?" Gabriel asked.

"Only that they had found the body, sir! I assume he will be here any minute."

"That poor dear woman!" Cornelia shook her head. "Johnson, go and tell everyone to come down here. Then tell the rest of the staff what has happened and tell them to be prepared. No doubt Inspector Brock will want to talk to them as well."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Cornelia sighed and sat beside Gabriel. "Gabriel, what am I to do? This has been going on for so many years. Who hates us so much that they would do these horrible things?"

"I will be very interested in what Brock has to say. Interested but not hopeful, he has been useless up until now. Have you ever wondered about that, Cornelia?"

"I do not understand?" She looked at him with her large, innocent eyes. He used to marvel at their beauty; now to Gabriel they were cold as ice.

"Have you ever wondered why he has had so little success finding this murderer? Only one arrest, seven years ago and that came to nothing."

"I just assumed that he was, as you have often said, just incompetent."

"Incompetent or corrupt."

"You think someone is paying him not to solve the cases."

"It would not be the first time, Connie. The co-called law enforcement in this country is dirty to its core."

"But who? Why would anyone want to protect such an evil villain? Another innocent woman is dead, for heaven's sake. When will this nightmare end?"

Gabriel stood and walked to the front windows. Through the breaks in the trees, he saw two approaching carriages; the first a grand and elegant De Wolfe coach and close behind was the police wagon. He turned slightly. He could see Cornelia's reflection clearly in a near by bookcase. "I do not know but I could find out if you allow me to do an investigation."

It was very fast. A flash of intense hatred crossed her face.

She joined Gabriel at the window, placing her hand on his arm. "No, my love! I will think about hiring an outside agency but it is far too dangerous. I could not bear it if anything happened to you because of this misery."

They stood silent and watched as Randall helped Elizabeth down the coach steps, Inspector Brock and his sergeant joined them and the small group headed towards the front door.

Cornelia leaned closer to Gabriel. "Ted will not be back until early tomorrow morning. I want to have an important conversation with you before then. Come to my room tonight at ten." Behind them Lee, Tony, Owen and Suzanne came into the parlor. Cornelia moved past them and out into the front foyer. They could hear her talking to the Inspector.

"Well, Brock, you have more bad news for me, I understand? The others are gathering in the parlor but if you also wish to speak with Ruth, you will have to go to her rooms. I would prefer it if she remained confined there for the time being."

"If you insist, Mrs. De Wolfe." Brock sounded irritated.

"Randall, will you go and find Steward. I will get Jane."

Ten minutes later, they all sat around the parlor with Inspector Brock, notebook in hand, standing before them. He cleared his throat to summon attention and began to speak.

"First of all, I want each of you to write a detailed statement as to where you were and what you did from rising yesterday morning. I will be here for at least another two hours so that will be more than enough time."

"As you all most likely know by now we have very sad news about Mavis Beaver. At 2:45 this afternoon her body was found stuffed into the delivery shoot of the abandoned mill on the river about three miles from here."

He paused, looked across the faces staring at him and continued. "Mrs. Beaver was murdered. She was naked, her hands tied behind her back. Her body horribly mutilated."

"From the condition of the body I say she was dead at least twenty-four hours. She most likely died an hour or two after leaving here yesterday morning. We found her wagon and horse wandering about another mile down the road. On examining the wagon, I found what I believe to be a fresh bloodstain on the wooden boards. It is my opinion that either on the mountain road or just past Mrs. Beaver met her assailant. He subdued her, left her wounded body in wagon, took her to the seclusion of the mill and the terrible deeds done to her. We are currently looking for a powerfully built man, a stranger...."

"Why?" Gabriel interrupted sharply.

"Pardon me, Mr. Jackman?" Brock lifted his spectacles and looked down his nose at Gabriel.

"I said why are you looking for a powerfully built stranger?"

"It would such a man to be able to lift Mrs. Beaver and push her body into the shoot."

"Or two normal sized people. And it is not likely a stranger to this area would know of the old mill, don't you think?"

"I am well aware that you do not approve of my methods, Mr. Jackman. However, I suggest that as a rank amateur you leave the matter to professionals. Your opinion is of little use to me."

"Is that so? Well, it is also my opinion that as a professional you either are a buffoon or corrupt. It is most likely both. I will not waste my time listening to you." Gabriel brushed past Brock forcing the man to step back and left the room.

"I am not finished with you...." Brock yelled after him.

"I am finished with you." Gabriel answered as he went up the stairs.

"Well, Inspector." Cornelia stood. "I think all of this has been rather another bad shock. You have told us what we need to know about Mrs. Beaver. We will present you with the information you requested but for now," she took his arm and led him to the hallway, "I will take you down to the servants. Jane, Steward, you will come with me please."

Elizabeth sighed and stood. "I am going up to see Gabriel. Thank you for a very interesting day, Randall."

"Well!" Suzanne huffed. "I was right about the little red head and Gabriel, after all!"

"Does it matter?" Owen asked with a smile.

She returned his smile. "No, it does not."

Owen took her hand. "Come along, Suzanne. We have to write our reports for the erstwhile Inspector but I am afraid we may have to censor it somewhat."

"One down and one to go." Tony said when Suzanne and Owen left the room.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Randall snapped at him.

"Not important, Randall."

"If you and Elizabeth had an interesting day," Lee asked, "why does she look so miserable?"

"I took her to see Monty. You remember, Lee, Isabelle's mentor." Lee nodded. "He channeled Margaret."

"What?" Tony asked sharply.

"Monty is the best at what he does. I am sure it was Margaret. She gave Elizabeth validation and her message was simple. Elizabeth is in great danger. We will succeed if we do exactly as Gabriel instructs and trust my father." Randall turned to Tony. "She had a message for you. She said to tell you she loves you, that you made the correct choice and that you were right, she did kiss your cheek."

Tony smiled slightly. "Thank you, Randall."

"Don't thank me yet. There is more. Margaret was beginning to fade, losing energy, I suppose. I asked her who murdered her."

"And?" Tony sat forward, his smile vanished and his face-hardened.

"I asked it if it was Steward...she said Sebastian Ridley."

"Fucking hell!" Tony stood.

"That changes nothing." Lee said. "If he killed Margaret then it stands to reason that he also killed Helena. You and Gabriel will get your revenge but with no rash acts."

Tony closed his eyes and shook his head.

"We will meet with Gabriel and see what he learned today." Lee looked from Tony to Randall. "Then we will decide what is to be done."

Gabriel was on Elizabeth the second she stepped into her room. "What is happening downstairs? Is the idiot Brock finished with his pantomime yet?"

"Partially. He and Cornelia have gone to speak with the staff."

"Where is Lee?"

"He is still in the parlor with Tony, Randall, Owen and Suzanne."

"Good. Come on. We will go down the old servants' stairs." He took a lamp from the wall holder and pulled her after him. Midway down the long hall, he opened a door. It squealed on unused rusted hinges.

"Be careful. Hold on to the banister." He whispered over his shoulder and they moved down the narrow, twisting steps.

"Where are we going?"

"It is time to talk to Ruth. I want to do it before Brock gets at her. What I have to tell her will be very difficult. Having a female with me may help."

"What is it you are going to tell her?"

"I overheard Cornelia discussing Ruth's necessary murder with Jane."

"Shit!"

"Exactly what I said! She is an evil bitch, Cornelia De Wolfe." They reached the first floor landing. Gabriel extinguished the lamp and placed it on the floor. "The door to Ruth's rooms is directly to the right."

“What if Brock and Cornelia show up while we are with Ruth?”

“I am just visiting with a friend. Still, I would rather they not see us with her. So I will have to get to the main point rather quickly.” Gabriel put his ear against the door. “It is clear.”

They stepped into Ruth’s bedroom without knocking. The room was dim and stale. Ruth was sitting in her bed wearing only her nightgown.

“Hello Ruth.” Gabriel smiled at her. “Do you feel like having some company?”

“Gabriel?” As though waking from a dream Ruth looked at him with confusion. “Miss Leighton, yes please do....” her voice trailed away.

“Are you ill, Mrs. De Wolfe?” Elizabeth asked as she turned up the gas lamps.

“I am fine.” Ruth attempted a weak smile. There were large dark circles under her eyes and her face was a sickly gray color. “I did have a headache a while ago. But I am much better now.”

“I think I would get very lonely and frustrated stuck away like this all the time. You must have an abundance of patience.” Elizabeth sat on the bedside. Gabriel stood beside her.

“Patience? No, I just try to keep my thoughts on the future.”

“You have plans, do you Ruth?” Gabriel asked.

Ruth sighed. “Jane wants me to come and live with her in her house when she and Sebastian are married...she has it in mind that I will be her companion. Sebastian has agreed and I have to go somewhere!”

“No, he has not.” Gabriel said quietly. He took Ridley’s letter to Jane from his pocket and handed it to Ruth.

She looked at the envelope. “But this is a letter to Jane. Why do you have it?”

“Read it please, Mrs. De Wolfe. It is important.” Elizabeth encouraged. She took the envelope from Ruth, pulled out the single sheet of paper and handed it to her.

As Ruth read, Elizabeth looked at Gabriel. He was watching Ruth closely. His expression was determined and anxious.

“Well, this must be some sort of mistake....” Ruth said with a quavering voice when she had finished. “I mean, he must have written this before he and Jane came to their understanding.”

“Look at the date. It was written two days ago.” Gabriel nodded at Elizabeth. She stood and let him take her place on the bed. “I wish I had the time to be kinder to you, Ruth. I do not. Less than an hour ago, I overheard Cornelia explaining to Jane why she was going to have Steward ‘put an end to you’.”

Ruth did not move or speak. Ridley’s letter slipped from her fingers and floated to the floor.

“This had to be done, according to Cornelia, because she is afraid that Jane has told you about the murders. Jane denies it but her mother does not believe her.” He paused to give Ruth a chance for argument. She still sat stunned; her eyes glued to Gabriel’s face. “Because of the death yesterday of Mrs. Beaver they have had to postpone your killing. Cornelia told Jane she had to stay away from you or else. Jane was not pleased at first but came around quickly when her mother offered to set up future romantic rendezvous for her with her maid, Janet.”

Ruth closed her eyes. “No. God no, Gabriel! Is there is no chance you misunderstood?”

Gabriel sighed and shook his head. "I know this is so very personal, Ruth, but your life is in danger. Are you in love with Jane?"

"Love her? I hate her. She makes me sick to my stomach."

"Then, why?"

Ruth slid back on her pillows. "It is complicated. I cannot think right now. Please leave me alone!"

"No, Ruth! This is too important." Gabriel pulled her to a sitting position. "I will tell you what I think. You listen to me! You and Steward began an affair. Very quickly, Steward introduced cocaine and Jane into your affair. For a while, everything was fine. Unfortunately, the drug took its hold and you were quickly an addict. Steward started to show his mean side. You saw him for the sadist he is. You realized that Jane was more or less protecting you from him so you kept her around because of that. I do not know how or when but eventually Jane told you about the murders. Steward was the murderer and Jane assisted him. Cornelia is the force behind those killings just as she was behind the killing yesterday of Mrs. Beaver. Tell me, am I correct?"

"Yes! God! Yes, you are completely correct. But Mrs. Beaver? She's dead?"

"Yes, she went missing yesterday morning, her body was just found. She had been tortured and killed. Steward and Jane killed her because one or the other of them overheard Mrs. Beaver tell me she knew who had killed these poor women and that she would think about telling me what she knew. As soon as this business over the cook cools down Cornelia will have Steward kill you."

Ruth's eyes darted around the room. She looked like a trapped animal. She put her hands over her face. "Dear God, what am I going to do?"

Gabriel took Ruth's hands from her face. "How long have we known each other, Ruth? Ten years, at least. In fact, I introduced you to Owen. Not something, he thanks me for any longer. Tell me what sort of man you think I am. Tell me how you honestly feel."

She sniffed. "Since Helena died you are different. You are colder, distant and sometimes cruel. You used to be so kind."

"I am much wiser now and I strongly suggest you quickly find some wisdom of your own. You have spent these last half dozen years alienating everyone who ever cared for or loved you. Your cruelty to my very good friend has left me very little reason to care what happens to you. Now you find yourself in a world where the only people who will deal with you are murdering maniacs. Do you have anyone you can turn to for help?"

She shook her head.

"I could protect you and help you out of this nightmare but you will have to tell me all you know and be prepared to testify to it all in Court, if it comes down to that. You will tell me everything you know about the De Wolfe family and Pierre Desjardin. I do mean everything! If you satisfy me, Lee will take you from here tonight to a place where you will be safe. If you lie once or if I sense you are holding back I will turn my back on you and leave you to deal with Cornelia, Steward and Jane. Will you tell me and others what you know?"

"Yes."

"Right. Before we go any further, how long have you known that Steward and Jane killed these women?"

Ruth took a deep breath and lowered her eyes. "Since just a few hours after the death of Chloe Buckley...!"

"Nearly five years? You do realize that if you had done the right thing then three other women, maybe more, would not have died?"

"I know that, Gabriel."

"And you have no excuses?"

"None that are worth saying."

"Good, then you do understand more than I thought. Now this is what we will do. This evening I will have you taken to my London home. You will be safe there and stay there for the duration of this awful matter. What I need is for Cornelia not to know you are gone for as long as possible."

"Yes, I see. Well, I suffer from migraines. When one is coming on I leave a 'do not disturb' sign on my door. No one bothers me, not even to bring me food until I take it down."

Gabriel nodded. "Post that sign at 6 pm and lock your door. Pack your valuables because once you are out of here tonight you will never be back again. Near to the end of dinner, Lee will make an excuse to leave the table. He will come here and take you upstairs to my rooms. Make sure the sign is still there."

"Before we take you to safety you will have to tell all you know to Lee, Tony, Randall, Owen, Elizabeth and me. Are you prepared to do that?"

Ruth narrowed her eyes, hate and resolution replacing pain and fear. "I will tell the world if you want me to!"

"You may have to. Any minute now Cornelia and Inspector Brock will be here to speak with you. Brock is still pretending to do his investigation...."

"He is being paid by Cornelia!" Ruth interrupted.

"That is what I thought. You must carry on as usual while they are with you. It is most important they not suspect you are up to anything."

"Remember Gabriel, I used to be an actress. I will be fine."

"How often do you use the cocaine?"

Ruth's face went red. "Once a day." She motioned to the bottom drawer of her night table. "That is where Steward keeps my supply. It is locked."

"Is it?" Gabriel smiled. "Well, we will see about that." He took his key chain from his pocket and sat on the floor. In a moment, the lock turned and he opened the drawer. He examined the contents of the leather case. "There is a two week supply here. Can you inject yourself?"

"Yes, I have to when Steward is in London. He leaves enough out for me when he goes."

"Then pack this with your things. I need you to stay as you are for the time being but when this is over you will go into the hospital and get off this poison. Do you agree?"

"I do. I never wanted to...." She seemed lost for words.

Gabriel patted her hand. "We have to leave now. I would rather Cornelia did not see us here. Remember, once you hang that sign, do not open that door for anyone but Lee. He will knock lightly four times."

"Thank you, Gabriel."

"There is no need to thank me, Ruth. You will simply repay me by telling me what I want to know."

They were not surprised to find Randall, Tony and Lee waiting in their sitting room.

"Where is Owen?" Gabriel asked. "He needs to hear what I have learned today."

"Off somewhere frolicking with Suzanne." Tony answered.

"Do you want me to go and fetch him?" Randall asked.

"No. I do not want Suzanne to get curious. You can tell him everything later. I am sorry, Randall but all that I learned will be very difficult for you to hear."

"Don't worry about that Gabriel. Owen and I will deal with whatever we have to."

Gabriel nodded and sat.

"Before you begin, Gabriel, would you like for me to pour drinks?" Elizabeth asked.

"That is a good idea. Make them large."

She poured four large brandies and a small one for herself and handed them around.

"Thank you." Gabriel rubbed his head with the cool glass. For a half an hour, he spoke without stopping. When he finished they knew all he had over heard from Ted and Percy and from his meeting with Inspector Wesson, the conversation between Cornelia and Jane and their talk with Ruth.

Through it all Randall sat silent, his eyes fixed on somewhere out the window in the dark sky. Elizabeth's heart went out to him. She wanted so much to reach out and offer him comfort but knew that would be inappropriate and most likely cause him more embarrassment. Instead, she decided to end the silence and move the conversation along.

"Perhaps, Randall now would be a good time to share our day's experience."

"I already told Lee and Tony. You should tell Gabriel."

She told him about the remarkable moments in the back room of Monty's shop. She finished with, "I am sure it was Mother, Gabriel. No one knew she called me her 'little bird. Just before Mother left, Randall asked her if Steward was her killer. She said only Sebastian Ridley!"

Gabriel stood, pushed his hands through his hair and paced the room.

"And," Tony put in, "the message to me was very accurate with recent events. She says we must follow your lead, Gabriel but also trust Ted. That gives me cause to worry. How the hell can we trust the man?" He paused and looked at Randall. "I do not mean to insult...."

"For Christ sake, Tony!" Randall was finally animated. "Owen and I are in no way responsible for the actions of our evil parents and siblings but we are going to do what needs to be done to clear up the matter, no matter what the cost. We will not care about insult."

"With what we know now we can easily handle Ted. When is he due back, Randall?" Gabriel asked.

"He should be back on the morning train."

"Good. That will give us tonight to finish with Ruth and give me time to work on Cornelia. For now, we should all go about our usual behavior as guests and family in this household."

"A penny for your thoughts?" Gabriel asked when he and Elizabeth were alone. "You do not look happy."

"I am just not sure that I see why you trust Ruth."

"I have known her for a very long time. She was once a good woman. It is bitterness and the drugs that changed her."

"Then, as you asked her, why did she not go to the authorities with what she knew about the De Wolfe's. By keeping silent was she not aiding them?"

"Yes, of course she was. She knew that Cornelia was paying off Brock. Cornelia's pockets are deep...who can say whom else she is paying. Ruth most likely did not know whom to trust. What I actually do with her depends on just how open she is with us later."

"What do you mean 'do' with her?"

"If she satisfies me Lee will take her to Random House and I will stand by her until she is well again. If she holds back or lies...she will end up back in her room again. No one knows better than Ruth just what Cornelia and her children are capable of." Gabriel stretched and removed his jacket and rubbed his neck.

"Does your neck bother you, Gabriel?"

"My muscles are a knotted mess from tension and most of that is your fault, Lizzie!"

"Mine! Now what did I do?"

"It is more like what you have not done, my love. I swear by body thinks I have lost my mind. So much passion and not a second of release." He made a mock face.

"Oh, poor Gabriel. If you remove your shirt and lie down I will give you a back rub."

"Are you any good at it?" Gabriel smiled and unbuttoned his shirt.

"I am good at everything I do."

"So you say. So much remains to be seen."

"Yes, it does. Lie down on your bed and I will ease at least some of that tension." She followed him into his bedroom. He lay on his back and smiled at her.

"Don't you think you should roll over so I can get at your back?" She sat next to him.

"The worst of my tension is centered in my front." She put her hands on his side and he jumped. "Bloody hell! Are your hands always so cold?"

"Yes, now do not be a brat, roll over."

He sighed and rolled onto his belly. "Breathe on your hands first...! Damn I said breathe on..."

"Lord, what a baby you are. Be quiet." She lifted her skirt, straddled Gabriel, sitting on his backside and began to move her hands in large circles around his shoulders.

"That is an interesting position you are in." He mumbled into his pillow. "Are you sure you do not want me to turn around?"

"I said be quiet and relax. My mother taught me how to do this. She used to get knotted up from hours at her easel."

After several minutes she leaned down, pressed her chest against his back, rested her head on his shoulder and whispered, "Gabriel?"

He mumbled something she could not understand into the pillow.

“You know, I really do not mean to be the cause of tension for you. You have never mentioned it but there are ways I could please you without having intercourse.”

After a brief silence, Gabriel made a snoring sound.

“Oh, you are not sleeping!” She laughed and gently slapped the back of his head. He rolled over quickly and pulled her beside him. “Not sleeping, Elizabeth. Just bored.”

“Bored!” She tried to sit and he held her in place. “I offered to...! I mean I could do whatever you want...”

“You can not even say it, let alone do it.”

“Yes, I can. I offer to give you a blow job and you say you are bored.” Her face was red with anger and embarrassment.

“Oh, Lord. I have hurt your feelings. I did not mean to do that.”

“Let me go!” She tried to push him away but he held her firm.

“No, listen to me. What you offer is wonderful and only a mad man would refuse but I can hardly be happy with only a bite of the fruit, my tempting Eve. I want the whole apple.”

“Then, as I said, you are a spoiled brat and once again I have made a fool out of myself.”

He relaxed his grip and got up on one elbow. “No, you have not made a fool out of yourself. I love the way you just say what you think, never change that. But do tell me, have you ever given as you so roughly put it ‘a blow job’?”

“Yes, of course. Would I be so stupid to offer if I did not know how to do it.”

“Hmmm...!” He rolled her on her side and held her close. “Was it Pace who taught you?”

“Maybe. It is not your business.” Her anger was fading. He felt her relaxing and no long pulling away from him.

“Are you any good at it?”

“Gabriel!”

“Well, are you? There is an art to it, you know.”

“An art? I doubt that very much. However, I was told that I was very talented. It is too bad you are not interested so you will not be able to instruct me better.”

“Oh, it is an art, my love. A physical love song we could share.” He caught the quick nervous look in her eyes. “Has it ever been done to you? No, it hasn’t has it?”

“Can we change the subject?”

“No, you started it. Have you ever had an orgasm when not in intercourse?”

“Yes, of course.” She answered with a little too much indignation.

An irritated slow wide smile spread across his face. “No, you have not!”

Once again, she tried to sit and he held her in place. “If you think you know everything why do you bother asking? I have had many orgasms in all sorts of ways.”

He laughed. “What a pathetic liar you are! Sweet Elizabeth...there is so much I do have to teach you.” He held her face with his hand and kissed her repeatedly until she stopped fighting and returned his kisses.

“Are you finished embarrassing me?” She asked with a smile.

“For now. You know, now that I think about it maybe you have had a very interesting idea. I tell you what; I will make you a deal.”

“Oh, Lord...!”

"Later, I will let you show me just how talented you are in the area of oral sex but only if you let me show just what I can do first. I will not embarrass you, not in the slightest. I will bring you around gradually, your dignity intact and leave you a much wiser and happier female."

"I don't know if I could..."

"You will and believe me, Elizabeth you will be smiling afterwards." He ran his hands down her body, took her by the hips and held her firmly against his body. "Then you can give me some release because God almighty, I am really going to need it!"

"Well, Brock!" Cornelia closed her study door, leaned against it and fanned herself. "I told you it was a waste of time to bother with Ruth."

"We do have to keep up appearances, do we not? I do have to say poor Mrs. De Wolfe looks ghastly. How long to you think you can keep her prisoner?"

"She is hardly a prisoner. She does have three very comfortable rooms and all the care she needs."

"Care! Christ Cornelia. She is as high as a kite and thin as a rail. God in heaven I do pray I never fall under your dubious care." Brock laughed and pulled out a silver cigarette case.

"What do you want, Brock? You said you wanted a few words with me. Say them and get on with it. I do have a lot to do. Not having a head cook has given me more than I need." She frowned and sat at her desk. "Or it is just the usual? Should I get out my check book?"

"No, keep your generous accounts closed for the day. I have something I want to show you." He took a folded paper from his pocket, straightened it and handed it to her.

Cornelia looked at Brock from the corner of her eye. "What are you up to?" She glanced at the sheet, shrugged and handed it back to him. "It appears to be a bank statement."

"It is one of my accounts. I have several."

"Then from the looks of your bottom line I would say police men do make much more money than I ever thought!" She laughed. "Or should I say 'some police men'. Are there many as rich or as bent as you, Brock?"

He smiled and blew a ring of smoke in her direction.

"Why did you show me that? You have my curiosity." She stood, came to the front of the desk and leaned against it. "Surely you are not trying to impress me with your money? Especially when so much of it comes from my own husband's accounts."

"But Cornelia, it is you who have my curiosity and it is a burning one, indeed. Seven years and now we have the fifth murder." He moved his long legs so his pant leg touched the bottom of her skirt. "What a deliciously evil bitch you are!"

"Really? If that were not such an insult, it would certainly have the sound of a compliment....or do I miss the elusive point. Is it a threat?"

"Oh, lovely lady, from a man who is surrounded by petty thieves and two bit whores in an average day; it is very much a compliment. I do so wonder about your black heart. Is it as cold and dark as your actions or perhaps it smolders with the blue fire of your eyes? I have seen you looking at me all these years and I feel your need."

She moved suddenly from her perch on the desk and went to the window. Brushing past him, she knocked his legs out of the way.

“You think very highly of yourself, Brock. As I have said several times already...what is it that you want?”

He stood, snubbed out his cigarette and stood very close behind her. He slid his hands around her waist, pulled her back against him. “What I want Cornelia,” he whispered in her ear and felt her moving into his body, “is to lay you on your bed, lift away the skirts and petticoats and feel your passion.”

“Why?” She turned her head, letting her forehead brush against his whiskers. “You are at least ten years junior to me. I have seen your pretty mistress. Why do you want me?”

“I want you because unlike any woman I have ever known you fire me....” He moved his hands up and ran them around the boundaries of her breasts. “I want to move into you and your dark world. I want you to bring my cold world alive.”

“Interesting words for a man looking for a simple fuck.”

“Oh, I want more than a simple fuck. I have had my fill of simple fucks. I want to replace the old man whom I am sure no longer pleases you. I want to see you do to me all the things your eyes have promised me all these years.”

“Then tell me what you will do for me...other than keep my black secrets?” She pushed his hands away and turned to face him. There was passion and challenge in her face.

“Anything, Cornelia! Be my mistress and you will never want for anything. My body and soul will be yours.”

She smiled, stood back and looked down his body. “You can keep your soul, David. Believe me if you do step into my world you will need it; it is the offering of your body that tempts me. But before I decide whether or not to take in your promises I must know what you have to work with.” Moving quickly she ran her hands across his crotch and to his belt. She locked her eyes into his and pulled open the belt.

“Suit yourself, my dear. I am sure you will not be disappointed.”

“I have heard that so many times...!” She snapped open the buttons and slid her hand inside his clothes. She pushed the trousers, underwear down and ran her crackling blue eyes down his body. “Oh yes, David...you do have promise. I could enjoy some time with you.”

“I am only just responding to your quick touch and look. I have much more to offer with advanced attention.”

“Tell you what, that old man you want to replace is not coming home until tomorrow morning. Come back to the manor tonight. I will meet you at the east door at midnight and I may let you lay me on my bed and lift my skirts. You understand, it is not a promise but from the look of things...you may put me in the mood to offer that more advanced attention.”

Back in Random House Isabelle paced her room. Since Gabriel left, visions of danger and feelings of doom assaulted her. It was her usual way to be firmly in control of what she received but these were too strong, the pain they left so real she was having a difficult time keeping them at bay.

“Excuse me, Mrs. Lucci.” Mrs. Parks stuck her head around the doorframe. “I just thought I would let you know that Mrs. Woo and Gabriella are sleeping soundly in the Woo bedroom.”

“That is good. Sue Lyn needs to get as much rest as she is able to. We will let them sleep right through to dinner if they do.”

Mrs. Parks smiled. “Have you noticed that Mrs. Woo has finally started to show? It is always like that with the first babe. I was flat as a doorstep then one day I had a belly full of baby! It is a wonderful thing to have a new baby around the house.”

With that, Mrs. Parks was gone and the first of two visions hit Isabelle with such force she collapsed into a chair. She saw Lee sitting by a window, large fluffy snow flakes landed on the windowpane and disappeared. Lee was dressed only in trousers and a nightshirt. His thick black hair was messed and he was smiling broadly. Wrapped in a pink blanket, safe in her father’s arms the newborn female baby wailed a complaint. As quick as it came this vision faded. The happy scene replaced by a nightmare.

In this vision, Isabelle was alone in a large, unfamiliar bedroom. It was very dark, the only light from a dying fire. She moved a few steps forward and saw the bootlegs of a man lying on the floor. Her heart thundered in her chest. In her mind, she screamed at herself not to move any further into the room. She must close down the vision. As though stuck in a nightmare, she moved to the familiar brown boots. Gabriel lay on the floor. What was left of his head lay in a massive pool of blood.

Isabelle moaned as the unbearable first pain of real grief surged through her body. She wrapped her hands around her belly and fell forward onto the floor. “Dear God, no, please no. It must not be!”

When she could collect herself, she stood and closed her bedroom door. No matter what Gabriel wanted, she could not sit idle. Quickly she dressed and did her hair. She chose a sleek black suit. It was very slimming and showed off her ample breasts. She put on her diamond choker and an expensive perfume.

In Gabriel’s room, she looked for the small handgun. It was gone and she knew he had most likely given it to Elizabeth. She would have to go unarmed but that would not stop her. She crossed herself and said a prayer.

She was able to go unseen to the kitchen where she took the housekeepers set of house keys. There were guards at the front and back doors so she went to the side door. She saw earlier that the men frequently circled the house so she waited until one of the men passed by the door. She opened it stepped outside and locked it behind her. That laneway ran the full length of the side of the house. She went towards the back. The large hedge row would keep her from sight of Gabriel’s men.

Once at the main road she flagged down a cab and was very soon standing at the desk of Sebastian Ridley’s secretary.

The curly haired young man looked briefly at Isabelle’s calling card. “I am terribly sorry, Mrs. Lucci but you must have an appointment to meet with MP Ridley. He cannot see people just willy-nilly.” He held the card for her to take back but she ignored it.

“That is alright, then, because I am not willy-nilly. I am Isabelle Lucci and I am an acquaintance of Mr. Ridley.”

He flipped a well-manicured hand and opened his appointment book. “Let me see...I can fit you in....”

“Just tell him that I must see him. It is a matter of life or death that I see him right away. It will rest on your head, Mr.,” she looked down at name sign on his desk, “Black,

if someone dies just because you were too lazy to get off your back side and tell Mr. Ridley that I am here.”

Mr. Black rolled his eyes, looked Isabelle up and down with distaste and disappeared through Ridley’s office door. In less than a minute, he opened the door and stood aside.

“MP Ridley says he will see you. You may go in, Mrs. Lucci.”

“I was going in anyway.” She mumbled as she brushed past him, pushing him out of the way, as she closed the door.

“Isabelle! How lovely to see you again.” Sebastian Ridley smiled as he stood from his desk and came towards her. It crossed her mind quickly that he and Gabriel were half brothers but with Sebastian’s blond hair and strong masculine features, they looked nothing alike. It was his body shape; long, lean and tall, the large bones and broad shoulders that reminded her of her lover.

“Sebastian. Thank you for seeing me. I was not sure that you would remember me.”

“I never forget a beautiful woman.”

“You flatter me.”

“No. I really do remember. We met several times. The last time we met was at the Leighton trial on the day they announced the verdict. You were there with Gabriel Jackman and Anthony Lucci. Let me see,” he wrinkled his nose when he thought, the very same way Gabriel and Gabriella did, “four months and five days before that we met at the birthday celebrations for Lady Evelyn Smyth-Jones. It must have been the fourth time she turned twenty-one.” He laughed and Isabelle joined him. “Such a dowdy life long virgin there never was. Then I must go a few years to the first time we met. That was before my ascent into strict politics and I attended a séance you gave at the site of the Marburg Linen Factory fire. You have a remarkable talent and I was amazed.”

“Well, now it is I who am amazed. You do have such a memory, Sebastian!”

“Believe me; it comes in handy with the world I now live in. You would not believe just how thin skinned most people are. I was about to have my tea and there is more than enough for both of us, would you care to join me?” He motioned to a tray set on a small table beside a comforting fire.

“Yes, that would be nice and I promise not to keep you long.”

“Actually, Isabelle, I am finished for the day. I have all the time in the world.”

“Really?” She sat and removed her gloves. “Your man, Black, made me think you were up to your eyes in business for the day. You do realize that he is a ridiculous pouf, I hope. If you must have a male secretary, you should not have one who thinks he should be female. That might put a bad taste in the mouths of some before they meet you.”

Sebastian laughed again. It was a deep, full and contagious sound. “Oh yes, he is rather too much! I am afraid to bend over around him. Thankfully he is only temporary. My regular is a very lovely lady who is on her holiday.”

She smiled and watched as he poured the tea. He had the same long, graceful hands as Gabriel. A large ruby ring glittered on his small finger. It crossed her mind the terrible things he had done with those hands. Was this handsome, charming and charismatic man a Satan worshipping murderer?

“Black says that you had to see me on a matter of life or death. That does sound rather serious.”

“Oh, I just said that to get him off his backside. I was sure he was a hairs breath away from throwing me back onto the street.”

Sebastian raised his eyebrows. “You lied to see me! That was not necessary, just your name would have opened my office door.”

“Well, I did not know that. I have actually come about your fund raiser for the Hospital of St. Peter.”

“Ah, you read the piece in the Times. Isabelle, what a worthy cause it is. You would not believe the work they do for the thousands and thousands of poor children of this city. The things I saw there brought tears to these jaded eyes of mine. What do you have in mind?”

“I can do a public séance and donate all the proceeds. I have done them before and always call a full house and a fat purse at the end of the day. However, I catch what you said about your now living in a very strict world. I would understand if you could not be seen as connected with anything other worldly.”

He leaned forward, placed his hand on the table letting the tips of his fingers lightly graze the back of her hand. “I do live in the strict and narrow minded world of old time politics but I am successful because I am bringing them, even if they go kicking and screaming, into our new century. If it is legal and will pull money from their fat wallets then we will do it.”

“Really? I was afraid you would say no thank you.”

“No, I say yes please, Isabelle. We will do a public séance and have no doubt it will be like everything else I do, it will be success!” They were boastful, bragging words but his manner was so enthusiastic they were not offensive. “To be honest with you I have a fascination with the thought of connecting with the other side. Think of all human kind could accomplish if we had open a constant connection with the higher powers.”

“I think about that often.” It is no wonder he is so successful, she thought. What a superb actor he is!

“There is something I have often wondered about. May I ask you about it?”

“Of course.”

“You connect with those who now live with the Good Lord but do you also connect with those who live with the Dark Lord?”

“You are referring to Satan?”

“He has many names and that is the nature of the Beast, the Great Deceiver. Yes, I mean that one. Do you ever connect with Hell?”

She thought for a moment. It would be best if she did not show him any weakness. “No, I very much doubt it. To be honest I do not see that there is such a monster or such a place.”

He opened his eyes wide and raised his fine eyebrows. “You don’t? How odd! I would have thought that such a medium as you are you would be so much wiser. No offense intended.”

“You obviously believe, Sebastian. To my mind it is little more than the old church and its way to make us fear and to control us. There are certainly very evil people in our world and when they die they can leave terrible, evil shades.” She rolled her eyes. “But as to a beast that rules in Hell...well, I have never seen proof of such a thing!”

“But would you not be wiser and more powerful if you knew reality? Think about what a force you could be.” His voice dropped, the wide eyes narrowed. He leaned closer. “If your mind is truly open to learning I could prove so much to you.”

Isabelle felt a wave of heat that seemed to emanate from him. Her heart raced. She forced a smile. “To prove the impossible is ... well, not possible.”

He slid his hand on top of hers; the warmth of his hand flowed up her arm and sent a thrill through her body. “If I showed the true enemy of the Good Lord, if you saw with your own eyes the Prince of Darkness, just think how you could advance your work. With that knowledge, you could be a real value to the world. What do you do now but tell people their loved ones are fine and miss them?”

“I do more than that.” Her voice was a whisper. Sebastian turned her hand over, locked his fingers with hers. She knew she needed to pull her hand away but could not seem to move.

“Do you? Oh yes, you tell them where to find a missing will, who stole their locket or if you are feeling daring you tell a man his wife is unfaithful.” He shook his head slowly. “How sad, so very trivial. Is that why God gave you these talents? Just to entertain and make yourself rich? If Jesus died for you is that all you have to give to him in return?”

What if you could see the demons and curses that plague a man and those same evils passed down from his father and will move on to his sons. With each passing, these demons grow stronger and their vicious roots reach out further into this world? What if you could tell every man the truth of this and from that, he could learn to free himself. Would that not put great value to every breath you take?”

Isabelle tried to speak, but the words froze in her mouth. She felt sweat rolling down her neck and between her breasts. Her breath came in small gasps, her eyes fixed into his.

“I could take you there, beautiful Isabelle.”

“Where?” She managed with great effort to ask.

“I could take you to true enlightenment. I can take you to Hell, introduce you to the Dark Prince and bring you back truly ready to help humankind.” He released her hand, sat back in his chair. “Ah, but you are a Catholic, are you not?”

“I am, Sebastian. So you will understand why I do not consort with devils...that is, if I believed in them.”

He gave her his version of Gabriel’s smile. “Oh my! You did not take my teasing seriously, did you? I have notorious sense of humor and forget that it takes some time to get used to.”

“You were only joking?” Isabelle resisted the urge to fan herself with her glove. “It did not seem so!”

“Forgive me. I often forget how sensitive a Catholic is about such things. However you must admit that a physic with connections to both the light and dark side would be a powerful teacher, indeed.”

“I do not think you would find a Christian physic who would ever consider such a possibility. There are more than enough evil people walking amongst us...why go looking for them in such insane ways.”

“Yes, indeed. Why go looking for trouble when it is around us all the time.” He refilled their teacups. “You know, Isabelle, I am rather a physic myself but not as

talented as you are. I could never earn my living at it as you do. I do have my moments though. I would very much enjoy trying to do a reading on you. You could advise me where I go wrong. I see doubt in your eyes.”

“I had to study for years to be where I am now. Some people are just very good at guessing.”

He leaned closer. “Then let me hold your hand again and we will see how well I guess! If you dare to test me...!”

She smiled. “Alright! What have I got to lose?”

“What indeed?” He took her hand and sandwiched it between both of his. Once again, the heat of his touch surprised her. “Bear with me while I concentrate for a moment.” He kept his large pale blue eyes on hers.

“Take all the time you need. It is not always easy to quickly hear through the clutter.”

A moment of silence passed. He smiled. “You inherited your abilities from your maternal Grandmother, although she did her best to stifle your talent. She told you it was from the Devil. She sent you to a strict private school. There you were taught by some rather unhealthy mean spirited nuns.” His smile faded. “One in particular was a vicious piece of goods. They called the old witch Sister Marie and you suffered terrible humiliations under her care. I am sorry for that, Isabelle.”

Isabelle gasped. “How did you know that? I never told a soul”

“Like you, I see a picture in my mind.”

“Well, I think that is enough....”

“I am not finished yet. You have sadness in your heart; a heavy yearning for a man who no longer loves you. You betrayed him and he caught you in the act. Now every time he looks at you he sees you as you looked riding some man you hardly knew!”

Isabelle tried to pull her hand away but he held it tighter.

“Now Gabriel is falling madly in love with another female and you came here with some kind of twisted hope that I might help you be rid of her.”

She wrenched her hand free. “This was a mistake. I should not have come here!” She stood suddenly, her heel catching in her skirt. She fell onto her backside. Sebastian moved so quickly she saw only a blur. He picked her up, placed her against the wall and pushed his body on hers. As much as she tried, she could not move or fight.

“Yes!” He placed his lips against her ear. “You should not have come here. However, you did and now we have to deal with the passion you wake in me.” He ran his tongue down her neck, her shoulder and pushed his face into her cleavage. He licked the sweat, ran his tongue back up to her chin and licked his lips. He held her head, his body holding her firmly in place. “Just think, Isabelle.” His lips moved against her cheek as he spoke. “Maybe it is true. Maybe I could keep Gabriel from the body of Elizabeth! Do you have any idea how much he burns for her? He has not been there yet but he has been so close...so very close! Elizabeth knows his burning need and plays so meanly with him, letting him do everything but what he burns to do. Do you know he has told her of his need and his growing love?”

Isabelle’s mind was spinning, her heart breaking with his words. “No. Let me go...please, just let me go!”

He ignored her and continued to hold her head with one hand and slid the other down to her breast. "Do you want to know their sweet plan?" She shuddered as he pushed his hand under her corset. His hand seemed to burn the delicate skin of her breast. "Elizabeth will not take him inside while you still feel you are his woman. She tells him this while she waits under his body! She says, 'Be free of Isabelle and you will have all of me, Gabriel!'"

"No! Please stop, Sebastian. Leave me alone...."

"Gabriel said, as he licked her nipples, 'I will end it with Isabelle now...this night. I will come back and slide so sweetly inside you!' However, pretty Elizabeth is too smart for that, a smart little bitch, as was her mother. 'You can not do that, Gabriel! If you do, Isabelle will not act, as you want. She will balk and run. You may still need her loyalty for a while yet.'"

Tears began to fall down Isabelle's cheeks. Sebastian stopped speaking, smiled and licked the tears. "Your sweat and tears inspire me...." He pushed his tongue into her mouth. Before she could react, Sebastian pulled his head back. "Do they taste so nice to you? I think so."

"God, please let me go...."

He laughed, pushed the side of her dress down and lifted free one breast. "God can not help you through this!" He looked down at her. "Do you know what will happen once your man lets go just one time inside Elizabeth?" Isabelle's head fell back against the wall, her arms pushing uselessly against his chest. "Just that one time, just that one fuck that he needs so desperately and his body and heart will belong to Elizabeth forever. He will never look at you or touch you as a woman ever again. Even the bastard that is growing inside of you will mean little to him. Is that what you want?"

She stopping fighting, her vision and hearing began to fade as she slid down the wall. He lifted her, placed her back into the chair and knelt on the floor in front of her. She gasped for breath and fought not to faint. Sebastian removed her shoes, lifted her skirt and pushed it up to her thighs. "I said," he continued, "that very soon she will stop her tease and lay with him. She will lock her legs around him and believe me, Isabelle; she will never let him go. Do you see that picture as I do?"

Her tortured mind then filled with his picture as clearly as though she was in the bed with Elizabeth and Gabriel. She could see them, smell them and feel the heat from their bodies. Isabelle moaned and pushed her hands hard into her eyes.

Sebastian sighed, reached up to her face and pulled her hands away. "Oh, poor Isabelle, you do so love the pathetic Holy Gabriel! What a bloody waste of your time and energy." He rubbed his hands across her forehead and the vision vanished. "You need to fuck with me. Gabriel with shrink and fade then, have no doubt." He pushed his hands gently up her silk stockings, unhooked one, slid it off and dropped it into his pocket and did the same with the other.

"But what you want right now is for me to kill Elizabeth...."

"No!" She took a deep breath. Her strength was beginning to come back to her.

"Yes, that is the real reason why you came here today! You told yourself that you had to do 'something' to protect Gabriel but in your heart you wanted me to know he had a new love and hoped I would take her away, permanently."

"No, you must not hurt her."

He leaned forward, placed his hands under her skirt and tightly dug his fingers into her hips bones. "Then it will be as it is written. Gabriel and Elizabeth will marry; she will give him three sons and one daughter. They will live together for forty-two years and during all that long time, he will never look at another woman...and least of all you, the one female who betrayed him. That is what will happen, unless you tell me to end her."

Isabelle pushed him with her foot and he allowed himself to fall back. Resting on his elbows, he watched as she rearranged her clothes. "You are insane!" She spat at him and pulled on her shoes.

"Maybe so, but I am not the one willing to waste herself on someone who sees her only as an occasional receptacle for his sperm."

"I will tell the world what sort of man you are, Sebastian Ridley." She got to her feet, swayed and leaned heavily on the chair back.

"Will you? No, you will not because you do not want Gabriel to know you were here. That would be another betrayal." He stood and brushed his hands. "What you will do is go home. You will think of all we have spoken about and how much you wanted me from just the touch of my hands. Late tonight you will come to my apartment and then we will make our plans." He took a calling card from his desk and slipped it into her purse. "And maybe, if you inspire me again...I may give you something far more interesting than Gabriel ever could."

"You are a disgusting pig. I am going straight to the police."

He laughed. She could still hear his laughter as she slammed his door and went quickly down the hallway.'

Sebastian sat behind his desk, leaned back in his chair and pressed his fingertips together. "What an incredibly beautiful female Isabelle Lucci is! However, Gabriel, my brother, why do you pick such stupid females?"

Chapter Thirteen

Fierce anger buoyed Isabelle until she was sitting in the cab for the ride back to Random House. She was shaking and her stomach turned. It was only the cold breeze, from the open window, that kept her from vomiting. Her hand shook violently as she passed a few coins up to the driver.

"Are you alright, Ma'am?" The elderly man asked. She was pale and perspiration streamed down the sides of her face.

"No, ho fatto un terribile errore. Do-mi sono incontrato con il diavolo."

"Oh caro Dio!" He crossed his chest.

"Sei Italiano?"

"Si Ma'am. Antonio Montesano. Comme posso aiutarui?"

"Dire una preghiera per Isabelle Lucci, per favore. Io ne hanno bisogno."

She leaned on the railing and pulled herself up the steps to the door of Gabriel's home. As she did this one man from across the road, another a few doors down came towards her. A guard standing on the top steps slipped his hand inside his coat.

"It is fine." She whispered up at him. "I am living here."

He stood in front of her. "And you are?"

"Isabelle Lucci. Just knock on the door please. I cannot stand out here all day."

In a moment the door opened, another man she had never seen stepped out with Sue Lyn not too far behind.

"It's alright." Sue Lyn said and quickly reached for Isabelle. "What are you doing?" She demanded angrily as she helped Isabelle into house. "Where the hell did you go? We were so worried. I was just about to call Gabriel."

"Please...no, don't call him! I am fine."

"Where did you go, for God's sake? You know we are supposed to stay put."

"I just...went to my house. I wanted to have a word with my housekeeper."

"Why didn't you just telephone her?"

"I wanted to get my mail, Sue Lyn!"

"You are such a sad liar, Isabelle. You are shaking like a leaf and you look ill to say the least. Where did you really go? Do not say your home because I telephoned there. Your housekeeper just told me she had no idea where you could be."

"Oh Lord, Sue Lyn. I just went for a walk. I felt so caged in. After a while, I started to feel poorly, so I took a cab home. I am sorry for worrying you. That was wrong of me."

Sue Lyn smiled at her friend. "Well, we all feel cooped up. Just do not go out again...please! Come on, I will help you up the stairs and into your bed." She took Isabelle by the arm, helped her slowly up the stairs and to her bedside. She watched as Isabelle removed her shoes and lay down on the bed. "Where are your stockings?"

"I did not wear them."

"You do look so pale. Are you having any pain? Should I send for the doctor?"

Isabelle shook her head. "No, truly, I will be fine if I just have quiet. Please, promise me you will not tell Gabriel I went out!"

"But..."

"No, you must promise me. I cannot rest if you do not."

"Alright, I will not tell him but you must not leave here again." Sue Lyn closed the curtains and quietly left the room.

As exhausted as she was Isabelle could not rest. She was deeply worried about what she had started that day. As she prepared for dinner, she tried to recall just what she had in mind when she went to see Sebastian. Had she really been foolish enough to think she could read him in anyway and obtain information for Gabriel? Surely, Sebastian would never just sit by and let that happen. Should she admit to herself that her real reason for visiting him was that he might somehow find out about Elizabeth? Was she really evil enough to look for her own happiness with the death of her rival? Deep in the darkest places of her mind she knew that that was more than just possible. Those thoughts would have to stay in those dim places. She would never admit such a thing to herself or anyone else.

She was putting the finishing touches to her hair when Gabriella wandered into her bedroom.

"Gabriella! What are you doing out all by yourself? You know you are supposed to stay with me or Sue Lyn at all times."

Gabriella rolled her eyes. "Sue Lyn is just there in her room." She pointed back over her shoulder. "She said I could come and get you so we can go and eat."

"Oh well that is all right then."

"Mrs. Lucky, when is my Daddy going to come home. I don't want him to stay with the wolves."

Isabelle smiled. "We all miss him, sweet heart! I think he will be home very soon and when he is home you and I shall have to try very hard to keep him here, right?"

Gabriella nodded. Her blond curls bobbed around her face. "Heather says you did something very silly today and she is mad at you. Daddy will be too, when he finds out. What did you do?"

Isabelle dropped her comb and turned to face the child. "What did you say? Who is Heather?"

"You know, her!" She nodded to the right.

"Your spirit guide?"

"Yes and she says to tell you that you had better tell Daddy right away or something very bad will happen."

"Well, Gabriella, this time she is wrong. I have had a perfectly normal day. I did not do anything out of place. I have nothing I should tell Gabriel."

"Then you could tell Uncle Lee. He is coming back to night with Ruth and her wolves."

Isabelle smiled. "No there is nothing to tell Lee either. We will not make people worry, so do you think you can keep a secret with me? It might be fun, don't you think?"

The child smiled and nodded.

"And, pretty face, the last name of the family Daddy is visiting is De Wolfe. De Wolfe is their family name. If Ruth is coming here she is not bringing wolves with her."

"Oh!" Gabriella said thoughtfully. "That is good."

“Yes, it is. Come along. We will get Sue Lyn and see what is for dinner.”

The meal went along smoothly. Isabelle kept a smile on her face and her worries far in the back of her mind.

She was back in her bedroom when a maid looked in the doorway. “Excuse me, Mrs. Lucci. There is a telephone call for you.”

Isabelle looked at her watch. It was just after nine. “Is it Mr. Jackman?” She asked hopefully.

“No, Ma’am. When I asked who he was, all he said was that he was the ‘one with the stockings.’”

Isabelle closed her eyes briefly, a feeling of dread flowed through her. “I will take the call in the office. Please hang up the down stairs line.”

She sat at the desk and picked up the receiver. She could hear Sebastian breathing but did not speak until she heard the other line close.

“Yes.” She spoke quietly.

“Good evening, Isabelle.”

“What do you want, Sebastian?”

“That is not very welcoming but perhaps I was not quite the gentleman with you that I could have been. You did bring out the passion in me, my dear.”

“How did you know I was here?”

“Your housekeeper told me that you had not been home for a few days and that she did not know where you were or when you would be home again. Two and two always makes four.”

“So? Why the need to speak with me?”

“I was concerned as to how you were feeling. You seemed rattled when you left here today. I would hate to think anything unhappy might have happened to upset your pregnancy.” Sebastian sat at the open window. He wore only trousers. The cold December wind brought steam up off his searing hot skin. He rested the telephone receiver between his head and shoulder. He ran Isabelle’s black stocking through his hands.

“I am perfectly fine. I am not a child. Rude, aggressive men do me no lasting harm. Now if you are satisfied I will say good-bye....”

He laughed. She noticed how much his laugh sounded like Gabriel’s. “Satisfied? That would be nice but there are very long stretches between the rare moments of satisfaction in my life.”

“How sad for you. Maybe that has to do with your poor choice in females or your impossible arrogance.”

“No doubt. There is usually a woman behind all my problems. What time is it?”

She sighed with impatience. “Just after nine. Do you not have a clock? I am going to hang up now!”

“When can I expect you? I keep no over night staff and will need to listen for your knock.” Sebastian wrapped each end of the stocking around his hands.

“Oh for heavens sake, Sebastian! I am not coming to see you. Wild horses could not....”

He jerked the stocking, pulling it tight. Isabelle gasped as a short, razor like pain shot across her belly.

He smiled. 'Oh you will come here tonight; I have no qualms on that! That pain was not too bad, was it?'

She did not answer but sat wide eyed with her hand on her belly.

"There will be a pain each hour from now on. Each one will get stronger, longer and more dangerous for your child. If you are not here by the fifth pain....ah, well the poor little whelp will slide as a bloodied mess down those pretty legs...."

"Passare per l'inferno!" She hissed a curse at him.

"And then your only hold on Gabriel will be gone forever. Believe me he will not place another of his children inside you. He will be far too happy putting them into beautiful Elizabeth."

She slammed down the receiver.

Back in her room, she paced the floor. "Figlio di una cagna egli Hell freezes attendere oltre." She muttered to herself. "Does he think he can fool me with his lies? That was a co-incidence." Gradually she calmed down. If Sebastian told Gabriel she went to see him she would just deny it. Gabriel would never believe him over her.

At a few minutes after ten, Sue Lyn joined her. Isabelle sat reading by her fire. "Gabriella insisted on sleeping with Mrs. Parks. It seems you snore and I take up too much of the bed. I do not think Gabriel will mind, just as long as the child is not alone. Oh, it is a cold night. Winter is truly here." Sue Lyn stood by the fire, rubbing her arms and smiling down at her long time friend.

"It is." Isabelle returned the smile. "But I do like the winter. Christmas is so close now. I will stay here for all the Season this year. Last year was so terrible. Gabriel was still not speaking to me and I was alone in my house. This year we will have such a grand party to make up for time lost. I will buy Gabriel the most wonderful present. I am thinking that I will buy for him Owen De Wolfe's 'Sad Lady'. You remember it, Sue Lyn. We saw it hanging in the Hamming Studio."

Sue Lyn nodded. "Yes, Gabriel did mention that he likes it. I wonder who the model was, such a sad and lovely face. Hopefully no one else has bought it." Sue Lyn also wondered what this Christmas would really be for Isabelle. She thought of the light in Gabriel's eyes when he looked at Elizabeth Leighton. That same light had once existed for Isabelle but it was long gone.

"No, they must not! It was so expensive; perhaps it will still be there. As soon as all this matter is done, you and I will go there and get it. What are you going to get for Lee? Are you still thinking of that chess set, the one with ivory and black marble?"

"I bought it a few weeks ago. Gabriel is hiding it in his room for me. You know what a child Lee is! He always spoils his surprise by snooping around for it." Sue Lyn yawned and stretched. "I am tired. I think I will go to bed."

"Are you not going to wait up for Lee?"

"No, I don't think so. He said they would most likely not be here until well after midnight. I am sure those big, cold feet of his will wake me when he crawls into bed."

Isabelle laughed but the laugh had not finished before it turned to a cry, as a pain slashed like a knife across her belly going straight from hip to hip. She jerked forward, her book dropped to the floor.

Sue Lyn rushed to her. "What's wrong?" She dropped to her knees and lifted Isabelle face. "Is it your baby?"

The pain left as quickly as it came. Gasping for breath, Isabelle fell back into the chair. Over Sue Lyn's head the large hand of the wall clock moved to fifteen minutes past ten. She moaned and closed her eyes. "No. It is just gas." She whispered.

"Gas? That was more than gas! I will send for the doctor."

"Sue Lyn, I am fine. I saw my own doctor the other day and told him about the pains." Isabelle forced a smile and sat up. "He said the baby was going along perfectly. It is only gas from food that is too rich for me right now."

"Are you sure? Are you bleeding?"

"No I am not bleeding." She got to her feet, carefully hiding her dizziness. "I just need to sleep and maybe watch what I eat."

"Do you want me to help you change for bed?"

"Not at all." She took Sue Lyn's arm and led her to the door. "Do not fuss over me. You go to your bed and I will go to mine."

"You will come and get me if you have another pain? Promise?"

"Yes, of course, I promise. Now get some sleep before your man gets home and wakes you with his cold feet." She smiled again and watched until Sue Lyn disappeared behind her bedroom door.

Isabelle closed and locked her door. From her makeup case, she pulled out her jewelry case and from that she took her rosary. She kissed it, crossed her heart, lay down on her bed and curled up under a blanket. It had been a very long time since she prayed the rosary but she prayed it then, over and over again, as the long minutes of that hour ticked away. All the while in the back of her mind, the vision was all too clear. It was of her, breathless and frightened, standing at the doorstep of Sebastian Ridley's home.

At ten minutes after eleven, she could no longer focus on anything but the very slowly moving hands of the clock. The movement of the minute hand seemed impossibly delayed. Eleven turned to twelve minutes and that to thirteen. Her heart pounded like a hammer in her head. At fourteen minutes after eleven she whispered, "Jesus, please stop Sebastian from killing my innocent child. Dear lord, please walk with me." She fought to relax and lay flat on her back. Fourteen turned to fifteen. She held her breath and waited. Nothing, no pain and fifteen turned to sixteen, then seventeen. She sighed with relief and carefully sat up.

She had one foot on the floor when the pain hit. Like a hot razor, it sliced back and forth across her body. The power of it knocked the breath from her. She fell forward onto the bed, her hands gripping the bedspread so tightly the crucifix she still held cut into the palm of her hand. She pushed her face into the pillow to muffle the sound of the cry she could not hold back. It took a full minute for the agony to pass. Gasping for breath, she got to her knees. She looked at the bloody crucifix, groaned with anger and threw it across the room.

She staggered to her dresser, took a handkerchief and wrapped it tightly around her bleeding right hand. She knew there was nothing she could do but go to Sebastian and she would have to leave soon. If Lee arrived, it might be impossible for her to get away. She would have to do what she should have done that afternoon. Sebastian Ridley was not only a mortal threat to the man she loved more than life itself he was also trying to kill their baby. The cold fear that plagued her all day faded. In its place, the heat of fierce anger filled her veins. She took Sebastian's calling card from her purse, memorized the address and tossed the card into her fire.

She pulled off the light colored evening dress and stepped back into the black she wore that day. The black would hide Sebastian's blood and she was determined it will spill that night. She needed a weapon. She was sure that Gabriel had more pistols hidden around his house but she had no idea where. She knew that Sue Lyn kept a pistol. Lee made sure of that but she could hardly go in and get it.

When she was finished dressing, she made sure she had money in her purse, picked up her shoes and crept along the hallway and down the stairs. She knew one man sat guard in the front parlor. From the bottom of the stairs, she could see a light burning in that room. She stayed close to the wall and out of sight from the policeman sitting and reading a newspaper by the window.

The second police officer was in the mudroom just off the kitchen. It was taking a chance going in there but she had no choice. She had to have a weapon. Through the barred glass of the kitchen door, she saw the dark silhouette of the guard leaning against the mudroom wall. Moonlight lit the kitchen. If he turned, he would certainly see her. She dropped down, lifted her skirt out of the way and crawled across the floor. She stopped at the head cook's station, rose up on her knees and opened the knife drawer. She chose the short but brutally sharp paring knife. It fit perfectly into her purse.

She crawled back across the room and into the passageway that led to the servants' quarters. Back on her feet, she moved quietly through the pitch dark, feeling her way along she counted the doors as she went. If she remembered correctly, the staff kept their outer garments in a small storage room at the end of the hall. She found the room. The curtains were open and there was more than enough light for Isabelle to see what she needed.

A few months back one of Gabriel's drivers left his position. Recently she heard the housekeeper complaining that his clothes were still in the storage room. Isabelle remembered he wore a long, dark grey wool coat. If she could find it, she would wear it. A woman alone at night dressed in her long brown mink coat would stick out far too much. She needed to blend in, to be just another dark uninteresting figure that no one would remember.

It was there, hanging in the corner. She pulled it on. It was the right length but far too wide. That hardly mattered. She pulled the belt tight and pushed her sequined purse into one of the deep pockets. From the rack of females' clothes, she found a dark green scarf, wrapped it around her head and pulled the front down so that a shadow might help to hide her face.

Back into the main hall, she went to the same side door she had left through hours before. She cursed when she saw another guard sitting huddled on a box in the lane way. He was very still, the light snow that was falling landed on his greatcoat, accenting the slow rise and fall of his chest. He was asleep.

Isabelle smiled. Very carefully, she opened the door, stepped outside and closed the door behind her. She still had the housekeepers' spare keys in her purse but she could not take the chance to make any noise so she did not lock the door. Staying in the shadows, she moved down the laneway and turned out into the roadway. She walked for a while in the direction opposite to Sebastian's home.

She hailed a cab and took it to a half a mile from her destination. She kept her face down as she paid the driver and hurried off. It was just after midnight when she knocked on Sebastian's door.

Without the steadying influence of Cornelia on the shaken staff, dinner was a haphazard affair. No one felt much like eating or conversation. Half way through dessert Lee made his excuses and left the table.

He knocked four times on Ruth's door, heard the lock turn and stepped into the semi-dark bedroom. "Are you ready?" he whispered.

"Very much so, Lee." To his amazement, she stood from the wheelchair and took a few shaky steps towards him.

"You can walk?"

"Yes but I am still rather slow and unsteady."

"Why the Hell have you not told anyone?"

She sighed and leaned on his arm. "It happened before, about a year and a half ago but only lasted a few days. When the feeling started to come back this time I thought it was just the same. However, it has been two weeks now and every day my legs are a little stronger. You will not have to carry me, Lee! Isn't that something?"

"Yes, it is Ruth."

Slowly and carefully, he led her up the old servants' staircase, down the hallway and into the sitting room between Gabriel and Elizabeth's bedrooms.

"I am so scared." She admitted as they sat and waited for the others.

"You needn't be. Give Gabriel what he wants and I will see you to safety."

"Yes, and then what? I've no money and my husband hates me."

"Owen is a fair man. You can do a lot to make him feel better about you with what you say tonight. He will see you well set up after the divorce, I am sure."

"Do you really think so?"

"I do but you have a lot to share with us, don't you? My advice to you, Ruth, is do not hold back. More lives could be lost if you do!"

Gabriel was first to join them. The others followed in intervals. Owen was last in. He was clearly uncomfortable and angry. He took a place near the door and back from the others.

"Have you had any dinner, Ruth?" Elizabeth asked. She was aware the other woman's hands shook and how pale she was.

"I am fine but thank you. Gabriel, where should I start?"

"Do you know beyond any shadow of doubt who killed these women?"

Ruth took a deep breath. "Steward De Wolfe murdered them with the assistance in every case of Jane. Also in every case, this was done under the instruction of Cornelia."

Sitting beside her on a small settee Elizabeth felt Randall's body tighten.

Gabriel spoke softly. "I would like you to tell us in detail the nature of your relationship with Steward and Jane, then and now."

Ruth closed her eyes briefly. Her face turned bright red and she continued. "Right from the start I could see that Jane was a lost and very lonely child. As best I could, I befriended her. After the death of my child and the beginning of my illness Jane stayed by my side. When I no longer had a nurse, Jane helped me bathe and dress. In those early days before I knew her true nature I thought she was my saving angel."

"Nearly three years ago I made a foolish, terrible mistake. I initiated an affair with Steward." Under his breath, Owen cursed. Ruth ignored him and continued. "I was

lonely. You all know Steward is only here for one week out of four and sometimes less than that. For six months, or so, things went well enough.”

“It was early March, 1898 when Jane came into my room and caught Steward and me together. Her reaction was strange and horrible. Instead of shock and anger, she was thrilled and wanted us to continue so that she could watch and participate. Steward was furious with her, eventually going so far as to hit her. As he pulled her along with him out of my room I heard her ask him why he was so angry since so many times before he had allowed her to watch him and to join in.”

“Things changed after that night. Steward did not seem to trust me any longer. He always seemed to be afraid that I was going to set Owen on him. He did not believe me when I told him that Owen no longer loved me. It was then when I decided to end my relationship with Steward. He did not take it at all well. He refused to end the affair and took my wanting to do so as an insult. He said I would do just as he and Jane wanted or they would go to Owen. That would give Owen all he needed to divorce me. I felt then that I could not let that happen.”

“Some of my memories of that time are very foggy. I think that Steward had Jane drug my food. I have vague memories of the both of them raping and abusing me. When I was in that semi-conscious state Steward did whatever he wanted, including injecting me with cocaine. Very soon, I became addicted. I had to beg for the daily needle.”

“When Steward was not here, Jane gave me the needle. The price I paid was always the same. I had to have sex with both of them. Sometimes together, sometimes separately while the other watched.” She paused, her face bright red with shame. She looked at Owen then Randall. “I am sorry but you should know that Steward and Jane have been sexually active with each other since Jane was a very little girl.” Randall lowered his head, shook it from side to side. Owen did not move or make a sound. His bright eyes glared at Ruth.

“It was the 11th of April, 1898 near to sunrise when Jane came into my room. She was so excited, animated and for the first time she seemed truly happy. She told me a wild story of the torture and murder of Alice Clarke. She told me that she had tricked Alice out of the house and Steward had subdued her. I did not believe her and thought she had mixed her nightmares with her vivid and disgusting imagination. As the hours of that day passed I realized that it was all the horrible truth.”

“Over the course of the next few days and while Steward was in London Jane told me about the two other murders she had assisted him with. The first was Mary O’Neal when Jane was only thirteen years old. The second was Chloe Buckley almost three years later. I want to say here that I am well aware that if I did the right thing in 1898 Daisy Mott and Mrs. Beaver would be living today. I make no excuses. If I face prison for that then that is what I deserve.”

“And what is the current and true state of your relationship with Steward and Jane.” Gabriel asked after a moments thought.

“I hate Steward and I fear him. He does whatever Cornelia wants! Anything at all! I have deceived Jane into thinking that I love and need her. I allow Jane to think that I am her very willing lesbian lover when actually everything about her repulses me. While she believes this she acts to protect me in ways from her insane brother and pays him for the drugs I so desperately need.”

“Last year I saw that she and Sebastian Ridley could be my way out of this mess and away from Steward and Cornelia. When Jane suggested that I might enjoy it if she brought Ridley to my bed, I agreed. She was right, I did enjoy it and so did he. Jane does not know it but he often comes to me without her.”

“Then it must have been an unhappy surprise to find that he was not going to allow Jane to bring you to live with them?”

“It was but only because during these last few weeks Jane was so convinced it would happen. I know my time here is almost finished. I need a place to live. The last I was alone with Sebastian he did mention to me that he would prefer if I had a place in London so he could be with me without Jane around. He suggested that he would pay the rent but I have not heard any more from him on it.”

“Then you and Ridley are close?”

“Yes. I do not trust him but he treats me a million times better than any other man in my life right now.”

“What are his true feelings for Jane?”

“They are as you suspect. He uses her for the family name and for the money that he gets from Cornelia. He once told me that Jane reminds him of a cow in constant heat! His marriage to her, he says, will last only as long as necessary to further his career.”

“Does Ridley know about Steward and Jane and the murders?”

“I have often wondered about that Gabriel. I can honestly say that I do not know. Cornelia tries to control him but does not have the success she has with Steward. Many times Sebastian has told me he grows tired of Cornelia’s hold over him. Now he is even having second thoughts about his career. Sebastian uses Cornelia just as he uses Jane.”

“In your opinion, does Ridley trust you?”

Ruth thought for a moment. She nodded. “Yes, I think he does. As much as a man like that can trust anyone. He is a very strange man. One minute he seems normal, funny, charming, then in an instant he can be so unbelievably cruel and dark.”

“Have you ever seen him do anything that should be impossible?”

She paused before answering. She seemed confused. “Yes, I guess I have.”

“Explain.”

“This happened three months ago. Sebastian had spent a few days here. Just before he was to leave, he came alone for a visit with me. I was feeling rather low. I needed an injection. He said he would get Jane to give me one. It was then when I told him what I had to do at those times...with Steward and with her. Sebastian knew I had had a relationship with Steward but believed it was long over. He was furious. He told me that very soon Steward would meet his end.”

“He asked me if I knew where Steward kept the cocaine. I showed him the locked drawer. Sebastian laughed, ran his hand across the lock. I heard the lock turn and the drawer slid open. Sebastian gave me the injection. He left then. I watched from the window as he got into his carriage and it left the mountain. Later that night, I woke to find him sitting on my bed.”

“You did not find that strange?”

“Yes, of course I did. He told me just to be glad he was there and that I was not to tell anyone he had come back. He had with him a supply of the same cocaine that Steward used on me. He showed me how to do the injections for myself. I was to use it as often as I wanted but I was to be careful not to let Steward or Jane know I had another

supply. I would have to go to them but not as often. He also warned me that I had to be very careful with Steward, as he would easily kill me. Sebastian did not know it but I was well aware that it was Cornelia who gave Steward his orders.”

“From then on to now Sebastian often comes to me in the dead of night. He comes when I am sleeping and leaves while I am sleeping. No one but I ever seem to know he has been here. Often I lock my bedroom door. That does not stop him. I asked him how he was coming and going like that. He said it was not my worry and sternly ordered me not to mention it again.”

Elizabeth saw Gabriel glance at Tony and Lee. “Now back to the murders. Do you know the reason why Cornelia ordered these women killed?”

“Gabriel, I know everything about these murders. There is nothing Jane likes better than to talk in graphic detail about them to me. It excites her mentally and physically to recall the torture and the suffering. I was a good actress and still am. The acting and the cocaine is the only thing that keeps me from vomiting on her when she touches me.”

“Why were these murders committed?”

“Shortly after Owen fired Mary O’Neal she wrote a letter to Cornelia. She told Cornelia that Owen had forced her into sex and that she was carrying his child.”

“I never touched her!” Owen muttered.

“Mary said that if Cornelia did not make Owen leave me and marry her she would tell the world he raped her. His career was just taking off. Cornelia thought the scandal might ruin him. It was the night of our wedding rehearsal dinner. Cornelia sent Steward down to the village just before closing time at the pub where Mary worked. Jane went with him. Apparently, Cornelia did not know about her involvement until some time later. Anyway, they left and were back in less than two hours and no one noticed they were away.”

“Chloe Buckley was the next to die. She was most certainly with child and the child was Stewards. Those who remember Chloe will remember that she was a sweet but very simple person. She had a mental condition and the mind of a child. Cornelia did not want a bastard grandchild who might also be retarded.”

“Why did they kill Alice Clark?”

“Jane said that it was Stewards idea that she should die. Apparently, Jane admitted to Steward that Alice and she were ‘close’ and that she may have told the cook too much about the previous murders. Alice was a foolish person and tried to extort money from Steward to keep his secrets. They held and tortured her for a full day before they finished her.” Ruth paused and took a deep breath. “That is why it really was not a surprise when Gabriel told me Cornelia had decided I had to die. Jane’s obsession for me was a death sentence in the long run.”

“This past summer they killed Daisy Mott. It was more or less the same reason why they killed Chloe. Steward got poor Daisy in the family way. A few days before she died Steward took Daisy to a London abortionist. She made such a fuss that the man refused to do the job. Cornelia then gave them permission to kill her. Steward lured her to the attic. He and Jane abused her for a while then he pushed her out the window.”

“I have no knowledge about the death of Mrs. Beaver. I did see Jane yesterday and she did tell me that if anyone asked me I was to say she was with me from 9:30

onwards yesterday morning. I did not see her until the afternoon. She did not mention the murder to me.”

“Do you have proof of any of this Ruth?” Owen asked his tone flat and uninterested. “For years you have wanted nothing but misery for me and my family.”

“That is true.” Randall added. “I am not saying you are lying but if it came to court all this would be hearsay.”

“Hearsay!” Ruth exclaimed. “You want proof? Gabriel, have you ever seen any of thee autopsy reports done on these poor women?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, Steward has ‘things’ he likes to do. He bites and it’s usually the breasts. Jane told me how he would go mad on his victims, biting and burning their breasts and genitals.” She paused, shuddered and covered her face with her hands. “But for Daisy, he sodomized each of the women. He bit off completely one of Chloe Buckley’s nipples. He strangled Mary. On Alice’s belly, in her blood, he wrote the word, ‘slut’.” She looked up from her hands. Tears streamed down her face. “Gabriel, are these the things you read?”

Gabriel nodded. “They are.”

She turned her blazing eyes towards her husband, “How could I know these nightmares if they were not told to me by the murderers.”

Gabriel leaned forward and took her hand. “I am sorry, Ruth. We had to be certain.”

Elizabeth poured a brandy, handed it to Ruth and sat on the arm of her chair. “Are you alright to continue?”

“We can pause for a while if you would like?” Tony added.

“No. We must finish this. The sooner I am away from this house of Hell the better. Please go on with your questions.”

“Wait, just a minute.” Randall stood and looked down across at the other men with anger and disbelief. “Have I gone completely mad? I cannot believe what I am hearing! You are worried about how she is feeling?”

“Be quiet and sit down, Randall...!”

“No, Owen. I will not. If you had had any balls, you would have put her in her place years ago. This unholy bitch knew what was going on for all this time and did nothing! She did not so much as lift a finger...fucking Hell, she was screwing with the both of them all the while knowing they were murderers. She’s as bad as they are and as guilty.” He was down on Ruth so fast no one saw it coming. Before any of them could stop him, took her up by the front of her dress and brought the other hand with a resounding slap across her head. She crumbled to the floor, crawled away a few steps and got to her feet.

Randall moved towards Ruth again. Gabriel grabbed him and held him back.

Owen was up then. He took Ruth by her arm and turned her to face him. “You can walk?”

“There! Look!” Randall turned to Gabriel. “See the lying bitch for what she is!”

Owen took her roughly by both arms and shook her. Blood was streaming down from a cut lip. “How long have you been able to walk?”

“Stop it!” Elizabeth pushed at Owen. “She’s hurt, you can see that! Leave her alone.”

Gabriel pulled Elizabeth away. "Gabriel, do something, for God's sake!" She pleaded with him.

"No, Elizabeth, stay out of it."

"She'll be more than hurt when I get through with her." Owen pushed Ruth back into her seat. She was stunned and seemed only partially aware of what was happening.

Tony stepped in front of Owen. "Control yourself...!"

"Get out of my way!" Owen tried to push past Tony only to have Lee come up on his other side.

"Stop, Owen!" Tony pushed him back. "We still need to know what she knows. We are not done with her yet."

"She told us about the murders and her place in it all. What more could we need? I say send her back to her room. Let us see how much pleasure she gets from Steward's attentions in the near future." Owen was still furious but Ruth's bloodstained and now terrified face seemed to bring him back to the situation at hand. He went to Randall took him firmly by the arm and led him to the back of the room.

"I did not hurt anyone." Ruth mumbled.

Elizabeth pulled Gabriel's handkerchief from his pocket and held it to her bleeding mouth. "Yes, you did, Ruth. Your silence was as deadly to future victims as anything Cornelia, Jane or Steward did. That is something you will have to live with for the rest of your life. For now, Gabriel made a promise to you and he is going to keep it!" She looked sternly over to Gabriel. One by one, the men sat down.

"My promise, Elizabeth, was that Lee would take her to the safety of my home if she satisfied me. I am not yet satisfied."

"What more do you want?" Ruth spat angrily.

Gabriel gently pushed Elizabeth aside. He pulled Ruth to face him and held her face in his hands. He fixed his eyes into hers. She gasped; her eyes rolled back into her head and fell back into the chair.

"What happened? What did you do?" Elizabeth asked Gabriel.

"It is alright. Ruth has only fainted. That happens sometimes." Gabriel went into his bedroom and came back with the wash jug. He threw the water in Ruth's face. She gagged, sputtered, and opened her eyes. "Now, Ruth! You will see that some of us are not at all pleased with you and I have a half a mind to agree with them. But," he stopped and gave a quick look at Elizabeth. "I will not break my word."

"How can we believe her?" Randall asked, still angry but under control.

"I think we can now." Tony looked at Gabriel. "You have done something to her...."

"Let's just say, she'll not lie to us."

"For God's sake." Ruth spoke in a barely a whisper. "I did not lie. Everything I said was truth. I told Lee I could walk earlier and I was going to tell the rest of you before I left tonight."

"That is the truth." Lee agreed. "She said that had been able to walk for the last few weeks. Her legs are very weak and she can only do a few steps at a time."

Gabriel turned back to Ruth. "Did you have any other part in these murders that you have not told us?"

"No."

"Did you know they were going to kill Mrs. Beaver?"

“No.”

“Are you in love with Sebastian Ridley?”

“Yes.”

Randall stood again and was about to speak but stopped when Owen pulled him back and shook his head.

“Does he love you?”

“No. He says he does and I pretend to believe him.”

“What are his plans for Jane?”

“Sebastian told me he would be married to Jane for six months and no longer, if he could stand it that long. It is all for the money. He and Cornelia...all for Ted’s money! When they marry, Sebastian will get his hands on the huge dowry. He never said but I suspect that Sebastian has plans to kill Jane.”

“Has Ridley ever mentioned any plans concerning Ted?”

“He hates Ted with a passion. Everyone else seems to bore him but Ted he hates.”

“Did he tell you why?”

“Yes. Sebastian believed that Ted was responsible for his father’s death. He does not speak much about ‘plans’ but he did say that one day soon he and Cornelia would have their revenge on Ted.”

“You said that Ridley was going to kill Steward?”

“Yes, he has mentioned that to me more than one time.”

“Why?”

Ruth shook her head. “It has something to do with Cornelia. I just do not understand a lot of it.”

“Obviously Sebastian and Cornelia are close? How close?”

Ruth looked at Owen, then down at her trembling hands. “Sebastian does what she wants because of all the money she gives him. I know they have had a sexual relationship.” Elizabeth shook her head. Ruth paused, looked at her and then went on speaking. “Jane told me they all used to go to some sort of ceremony and that she had watched Sebastian and Cornelia ‘do it’ several times. I have the feeling that that was a very long time ago. Jane believes that Cornelia is in love with Sebastian and she finds it all rather humorous.”

“Does Ridley have plans for Owen and Randall?”

“Nothing that I know off. I don’t think he has ever mentioned Owen or Randall to me.”

“Does Ridley ever mention me?”

“He told me that you and he are brothers and he seemed to find that humorous. Of course, that is ridiculous. He did say once that you and he would meet head on one day!”

“Did he ever tell you about the ‘Circle of Mendes’?”

“No, it does not sound familiar.”

“Did Ridley kill my wife and Elizabeth’s mother?”

A moment passed before she answered. “He never said and he wouldn’t be likely to, would he? Jane told me he did. She said he used his magical powers to get at them. Jane is insane.”

“Did she say why he killed them?”

"No. She also said he set the fire that killed your parents, Gabriel. I know you all have good reasons to hate me but I am truly sorry for all the pain..." Her voice trailed off.

After a moment Gabriel stood. "Elizabeth, please take Ruth into your room and help her clean and tidy up somewhat." He waited until they were out of the room and then closed the door behind them.

"Right." He looked around the gathered men. "I am certain she has told me all she could. We will most likely have more questions for her. Randall, I want you to go with Lee and Ruth."

"Why?"

"Two sets of eyes on the trip! Do you have a pistol?"

"Yes. Shall I bring it with me?"

"And keep it on you from now on."

"Unless you've something else for me to do, I'd like to go along with Lee and Randall." Owen offered.

"Getting tired of Suzanne already?" Tony smiled.

"No, Tony. Not by half but I must be worth more than babysitting for Gabriel in this matter."

"Of course. Lee is going to stay at Random House. I will feel better knowing he is there with Sue Lyn and I am sure he will as well."

"That is a fact. The men guarding the place right now really have no idea what they might be up against. And I also want to keep a very close eye on Ruth."

"I think that is a damn good idea. God, Owen how can you trust her?" Randall asked obviously still feeling intense frustration.

"I don't trust her. Lee will keep her in line; you need not worry about that. Now, Randall, go and get your pistol. Then you and Owen get a coach ready. Keep it out of sight from the house as much as possible then come back here. Take Ruth's suit cases with you and be sure that no one sees you."

"Well, Gabriel," Tony began when Owen and Randall were gone. "I think it is past time for you and me to pay a visit to Sebastian Ridley. We do not have a modicum of proof against him so it is pointless to go that road. Not to mention I need to handle this matter with my own hands."

"I agree completely, Tony. Tonight would be a good night for all that but, tell me though do you believe it was Margaret speaking through Monty?"

Tony sighed. "Yes. What she said about me making a choice...!"

"And she said we needed to trust Ted and listen to him. He will not be back here until tomorrow morning though and I am loath to wait another fucking minute. What do you think Lee?"

Lee shook his head. "Speaking as a husband, a man who greatly loves his wife...I say go and kill the bastard. Gabriel, you can get at him the same way he got at Margaret and Helena. I have no doubt the good Lord would guide your hand. But also as a thinking man, I say it has been three years since the death of Helena and a year since Margaret...one more night, well, you two tell me would one more night be too hard to bear? If the wisdom of the other side says 'speak with Ted' that is most likely very good advice."

Gabriel pushed his hand roughly through his hair. "We do have some needed answers but far from all. It has been my fear all along that killing Ridley too soon would kill the weed but the roots will still live and grow. There is no doubt that Cornelia, Steward and the pathetic Jane will have to die as well...but is there anyone or anything else?"

"Anything?" Tony asked.

"What about this Aamon creature?"

"Christ, Gabe, you can't tell me you believe in all that?"

"Tony, can you heal human flesh? I can move through time and space in an instant. How did we get like this and for that matter, why did we get these so-called abilities? We are told our souls were given to the devil, maybe so and maybe not but he did not give us these talents. Why would he give us something we could use against him?"

"Then you think they are gifts from God?" Lee asked.

"Maybe so. I need to know absolutely. I have not told anyone this but a few months ago, I began to notice rather odd things about Gabriella. She speaks to a spirit, almost constantly. Someone she calls Heather. She seems to know where things are, where people are and what they are doing when she should not." He sighed and shook his head. "My greatest fear of all was confirmed last summer. She and I were in the garden. She was being cranky and irritable so I had Mrs. Parks take her up to her room for a nap. She very much did not want to go. Parks took her up and was certain she put the child to bed and took her place in a chair in their small sitting room. There was no way Gabriella could have passed the nanny without being seen but twenty minutes after they left me Gabriella was sitting next to me again."

"So Gabriella can do the same as you?"

"Obviously. I asked her how she got there and all she did was shrug her shoulders. She refuses to talk about it."

"If that is what she is doing then she is even more powerful than you Gabriel."

"Why do you say that, Lee?" Tony asked.

"Gabriel has great difficulty passing through metal. Years ago, when Samuel Jackman had Random house built he had the walls lined with lead and iron bars put on all the windows, that was to keep his wandering child at home."

"I know how to get through it all now but it takes great effort and took years to perfect. Gabriella seems to have no problem. That is why I am sure that Ridley cannot get into Random House, except through the doors. I have to get to the reason for all this and find a way to control Gabriella. It is my responsibility as her father to know exactly what is going on here."

"Then we will wait a few more days to take care of Ridley. We will see what the idiot Ted has to say." Tony stopped speaking when Elizabeth opened her bedroom door and brought the pale and shaken Ruth back into her chair.

"Where are Owen and Randall, Gabriel?" Ruth asked. Her face was clean of blood, the front of her dress wet from where they had tried to wash away the bloodstains. Elizabeth had brushed and braided her hair.

"They are arranging a carriage. Then they will come and get you. You should know that once at Random House you will not be allowed to leave it again until this matter is done."

"I have no place to go. There is something more I should tell you. More of Jane's madness, I suppose but I promised to hold nothing back."

"Go on." Gabriel encouraged.

"According to Jane, her mother is being tormented by an angry spirit. When I said I did not believe in such things, Jane was adamant. She said she had seen wounds on Cornelia's body...including bite marks. She claims to have even once seen the ghost in Cornelia's bedroom one time. Jane seems to find it all rather funny. She says the spirit was in life Sebastian's father."

Ruth had just finished when Randall returned. "Owen is preparing the coach by the old stables. It cannot be seen from anywhere in the house. Steward is in the Billiards room with Suzanne. He is teaching her how to play, he is half-drunk, and I think not too far from passing out. Jane is snoring in her bedroom and Mother is in hers. She is not asleep. I could see her shadow under the door moving around." Owen explained.

"Well, let's get going then. The sooner I am back with Sue Lyn the happier I will be. I will carry you, Ruth." Lee picked her up and turned to Gabriel. "I will see you at some point tomorrow?"

Gabriel nodded and watched from the doorway until they were out of sight. He looked at his watch. "Tony will you stay with Elizabeth for a while. Cornelia asked me to come to her room tonight. This should be interesting."

Cornelia opened her door almost at the second he knocked. "Oh, Gabriel! What is wrong?" She asked as he stepped past her into her bedroom. She was dressed a beautiful violet negligee. She smelled of expensive perfume. Her hair was loose down her back, brushed shining smooth with a white silk flower tucked into the side. He noticed a bottle of wine and two wine glasses placed on a table near a small settee at the foot of her bed. She was certainly not planning to spend the night missing her husband.

"Nothing new is wrong. Do you remember, you asked me to come and see you tonight?"

"Oh dear, I did forget." She laughed nervously. "It was silly really. I should not have mentioned it. But when you said that you thought someone was paying off Inspector Brock it made me think about something odd Theodore said to me a few weeks back."

"Yes?"

"The subject of poor Daisy came up and I said it was terrible to think that her murderer was still free to do whatever. Theodore told me that I had better get used to it because that killer would never be caught and it hardly mattered to lose Daisy, she was only a maid, after all."

"That is not like Ted, is it Cornelia?"

"It is in a way. He can be a terrible snob when he wants but he does not show it to everyone. Do you know that my husband is very close with Chief Inspector Williams of Scotland Yard?"

"No, I did not know that. So you do not think he is paying off Brock?"

"Goodness, no! The man is a fool but he is honest, I am sure of that."

"Well, what is it you want me to do with this information. Do you want me to investigate Williams?"

"No. It is just that you seemed to think Brock was hiding something. If anything is going on...Brock is not behind it. I am sure."

Gabriel smiled. "Then we shall just have to hope he gets things figured out eventually. I will say good night, then, Cornelia. I am more than ready for my bed."

She returned him a smile and looked relieved. "Good night, my dear." She closed the door behind him.

Back in his bedroom, Gabriel told Tony and Elizabeth about the conversation. "She is hoping to put me off Brock. I pretended to believe her. Along with that she has 'a friend' coming by tonight. I am sure of it and I want to know whom. I think I will go and sit for a while in her dressing room."

"No, Gabriel. That would be too dangerous. We know what an evil bitch she is...what if she finds you there?" Elizabeth protested.

"I have seen her dressing room. It is jumbled mess of things. I can hide easily and should be able to hear everything. Do not worry, Elizabeth. I can get out as I got in, instantly and unseen."

Tony smiled and shook his head. "That is some talent you have there, Gabe! It must come in very handy at times."

"You have no idea! You will stay with Elizabeth until I get back?"

"Of course."

Five minutes later Gabriel opened his eyes and he was inside Cornelia De Wolfe's dressing room. Through a crack in the curtain that separated this room from the large bedroom, he saw that Cornelia was not in her room. He slipped back behind a row of hanging dresses. If he leaned forward slightly he could see the entire length of the bedroom. He was not interested too much on the visual, but more who it was and what they said. He settled back into the corner, slid down to a sitting position, and waited.

Not too much later, he heard the bedroom door open and Cornelia's childlike laughter.

"You see, David. I told you we would easily get here without anyone seeing us! One could wander the halls of this monstrous place for ages without ever seeing another living soul."

David? Who the Hell is David? Gabriel wondered. He peered through a small opening in the curtain. He could see across to the bed and a small settee but Cornelia and her guest were out of sight by the door.

"Well, you would know, I am sure." A vaguely familiar male voice answered.

"Come and sit with me. I have a lovely wine for us to toast the new and hopefully interesting phase of our friendship."

Gabriel saw Cornelia sit on the settee and the Inspector Brock beside her. Gabriel smiled and slid back into the corner.

"It will be interesting, Cornelia...interesting and so much more. You can count on that."

Cornelia poured the blood red wine. "How confident you are! What a shame it will be if you disappointed me." She handed Brock a crystal goblet.

"Confidence built on so many years of experience, lovely lady."

"Oh well...we will see. So many handsome bulls have left me wanting. Their penises are the focus of their attention when it should be the female at hand." Gabriel had never heard the voice she spoke with then. It was deep, slow and sinister. A shiver ran up his back. "To us David, to passion and to endurance."

Brock nodded and smiled as they touched glasses. "Endurance? Point noted and taken."

"I have to ask you a question, David, before I decide if you are worth the effort."

He laughed. "Ask me anything."

"It is over seven years now since we began our 'understanding'. In all that time, you have never shown any interest in me. What has changed?"

"Believe me; I have had the interest but no wish to be the man who cuckolds Theodore De Wolfe. His lines of power run deep and directly to my supervisor. I like my career and I have worked long and hard on it." Brock shrugged. "If I made an advance on you and you were not pleased you might easily go to Theodore and that would be the end of me."

"Ted is still my husband."

"Yes but up until recently I believed, as you wanted me to, that our arrangement and the money that backed it came directly from Theodore. A few weeks after poor Daisy Mott 'committed suicide' from your attic window I had a visit from your enraged husband insisting to know why we had not brought the killer stalking your staff to justice."

"I see." Cornelia stood and walked to the crackling fire. "What did you tell him?"

"Just what you would expect me to. We were doing our best but without a witness or leads, it was a very long and slow process. So it was obvious to me that you were behind the deal. You alone were protecting the mad Steward...."

Cornelia gasped and turned suddenly, dropping her wine goblet. The contents creating a blood red stain on the pale peach carpet. Brock came over to her and picked up the goblet. "You need not worry. I have known all along that he did the terrible deeds. I have no great need to bring him to justice. I am sure it will find him all on its' own one day, it always does!"

"After my conversation with your husband I decided to do some further research on the lovely Cornelia De Wolfe. You would be surprised at what we can find out if we try. What an interesting society 'The Circle of Mendes' must have been!"

Cornelia raised her eye brows and laughed. "You were going to blackmail me into letting you fuck me?"

"I prefer to think of it as convincing you that you should give me a go. What do you have to lose? Now poor Mrs. Beaver is dead!" As he spoke, he opened the ties to her lace over gown and let it fall to the floor.

Cornelia laughed. "I do like your manner." She took his hands and placed them on her breasts. "And it has been such a long time since I have had such a young and handsome man. But tell me...."

"Oh no! Not another question!" He slid his hands under the low neckline of the nightgown.

"Just one and I should know what I will have in return for all your pleasuring. Very soon the lunatic Steward will have to die, can I count on your help?"

"Your own son?"

"He has served his purpose and is getting harder to control. I will have to tidy this mess up carefully. Will you help me?"

"What a cold and murderous bitch you are!"

“Murderous? Maybe but I have never killed anyone with my own hands, but cold...no, not in the slightest. I am very practical. I do what must be done to get what I want.” She pushed the straps of the nightgown off her shoulders, stepped out of it and stood naked before him. “As I said, will you assist me?”

Brock looked her up and down. “In any way I can.”

Gabriel stepped from his bedroom into the sitting room. Tony and Elizabeth were sitting on the settee; between them was Margaret’s Bible. “That did not take too long.” Tony said. “Let me guess...Connie is meeting with Brock. Am I right?”

Gabriel nodded, sitting down across from them. “How did you know?”

“An educated guess. I noticed the way Brock was looking at Connie today. It was not murder and mayhem on his mind.”

“It is not on his mind tonight, either. Cornelia has been paying him to play the idiot on the murders right from Mary O’Neal. Up until recently, he thought the orders and the money were coming from Ted. He found out that was not so and decided a little black mail would get him into Mrs. De Wolfe’s bed.”

“And she’s going to give him what he wants?” Elizabeth asked with disgust.

“Yes, only she made it more than clear that he did not have to force her. She is more than willing to accommodate him. First, though, he did have to agree to help her when it was time to put the mad dog Steward down.”

“Christ in heaven! Did he agree?”

“Not a moment’s hesitation. Brock has other things on his mind.” Gabriel looked at Tony with a sickly smile. “I may never be able to have sex again.”

Tony shook his head and stood, “Speaking of which I am beat to the core. I shall leave you two to get on with it!”

“Tony!” Elizabeth exclaimed.

“Now, now, Lady Bug! Do not twist my meaning. I shall leave you two to get on with sorting out this mad house.” He kissed the back of her hand and left them.

“Oh, Lord!” Elizabeth rubbed her forehead.

“Lady Bug?” Gabriel grinned at her.

“Now, don’t you start on me. Tony called me that when I was younger. Mother called me ‘Little Bird’ and Tony called me ‘Lady Bug’. I guess he has not noticed that I have grown up.”

“I noticed. Speaking of that...what were our plans for this evening? Didn’t we have something delightful in mind?”

She turned on him suddenly, narrowing her eyes. “What did you do to Ruth?”

“Pardon me?”

“Just before she fainted you were forcing her to look into your eyes, then down she went. After that, she was very ...well, passive with you. I know you did something to her. Is it another of your ‘special talent’s’?”

“It is not important, Elizabeth.” He said flatly and as she continued to glare at him, he added. “Alright, it is important to you. Just tell me why?”

“What did you do?”

He sighed. “I just helped her change her mood that is all. She was scared and angry. I just needed her to relax for me.”

“Have you ever done that to me? Have you ever changed my mood to suit yours?”

"A few times. Not for anything truly important."

"When?" She demanded angrily.

"Shit, Elizabeth, it is not what you think."

"You do not know what I think or maybe you do! When did you 'change my mood'?"

"I did it once in my parlor, but only to get you to relax and then again when we were in the coach on our way up here. I wanted you to play a little but with me so I would not be bored."

Her jaw dropped, she stood and folded her arms. "You are just a dirty old man! How dare you!"

"I am not old!"

"You made me do all that and make such a complete fool of myself just so you'd not be bored and maybe get laid. Don't you have any pride at all?"

"You did not make a fool out of yourself. I could not make you do anything you did not want to do. I just helped you lower your inhibitions. And I didn't get laid, did I?"

"Well, it was very close. You...you just leave my inhibitions alone."

"Was it close? How close?"

"Gabriel!"

"Come on, tell me! How close was it? Were you feeling more than just the fun of the tease?" He grinned again and stood in front of her.

"Oh you are impossible!" She pushed him. He fell back into his seat. She turned and stomped off into her room. Gabriel was right behind her.

She stopped suddenly and he bumped into her. "Please go away! I am very angry with you and I want to have a bath. That is the way I choose to relax, Gabriel!"

"Well, you can be as angry as you want, that is up to you but you are not going anywhere without me. I told you before; if you insisted on staying here you would have very little time on your own." He took her hand pulled her after him across her bedroom, into the adjoining bathroom and locked the door to the hallway. "Go ahead. Take your bath."

"Not with you standing there watching me! You have very high hopes, Gabriel Jackman!"

"Then I guess you will have to stay dirty. I am not leaving you alone! Anyway, have you forgotten, I have already seen..." He stopped suddenly, rethinking what he was about to say.

"What were you...!"

"Look!" He moved quickly around the bathtub to a changing screen leaning against the wall. "I'll put this in the corner and sit behind it." He pulled a chair from the dressing table placed it in the corner and then put the screen around it.

Elizabeth turned the chair so that it faced the corner. "Yes, that will do but I had better not catch you peaking, again!"

"A man makes one mistake...."

She turned the water taps on full and could not hear him. He sat silent then. Listening as she made a great deal of noise preparing her bath. He waited until he heard her step into the water before he spoke again.

"Elizabeth?"

"Please be quiet Gabriel. I am trying to relax."

"No, I will say what I want and you will listen. I realize it may be hard for you to believe right now but I am not a man completely without pride. As a matter of fact, I have a great amount of pride. It may be also true that I am often impulsive and sometimes rather selfish. In the coach and in the studio I was both of those things. I will not alter your mood again. Will you accept my apology?"

"I will think about it." In the long mirror, through the thin cloth of the screen she could see his silhouette.

"One more thing. When the time comes that you are finally willing to have me as a lover, believe me I want you to really and truly want me. Anything else...well, I would never be able to look myself in the mirror again." He sighed. "I am not expressing myself very clearly. I will be quiet now."

Elizabeth smiled slightly and bit her lip thoughtfully. She stood, rubbed her body with the soap and sat back down in the water. She could not help but feel bad for Gabriel. His voice sounded so sad. Could she ever stay mad at him? She doubted it very much. "Gabriel. Do you know what I like about these modern bathrooms that are installed in these old houses?"

"No, I don't..." He sounded confused.

"It is these tubs! They are so huge. You could sail a ship, I swear. Sail a ship or comfortably bathe two people." She watched as he sat up straight and turned his head in her direction.

"Pardon?" He asked.

"Are you thick or deaf?" She smiled as he very quickly removed his clothes, boots, trousers, shirt, pants, and arms flying around. Very casually and slowly, he stepped out from behind the screen. She could not help but laugh.

"Is something funny?" He asked as he slipped into the fragrant, bubble bath.

"You are so much like a little boy and that is so sweet."

"That does not encourage me, my dear. I had hoped you might see me in a more manly way." He stretched out his long legs, placing his feet on either side of her. "What is all this?" He ran his hand through the thick bubbles to push them aside only to have them fall back on the water top again.

"Bubbles. Haven't you ever had a bubble bath before?"

"No." he answered sulkily. "I cannot see you."

"Really? Does that bother you?"

"Yes."

"Oh well. I have found that once one starts to use the soap the bubbles vanish."

He smiled, took the bar of soap and worked it up into lather. He washed one arm, his neck, face, chest, and the other arm, then rinsed off the soap. "I am going to stand now. If you are feeling sensitive, close your eyes."

She shrugged slightly. "No, I am fine! Do, please continue!"

He stood, lifted one leg placing his foot on the side of the tub. He rubbed the soap from his foot to his hip and did the same with the other leg. Elizabeth had never before seen a man bathe. She watched with open fascination.

"Do tell me if you see anything worthwhile, won't you?" He put his hands on his hips and smiled down at her.

"Everything I see is very worthwhile, Gabriel. You have such a beautiful body."

“Beautiful!” he laughed. “No, sweet Elizabeth you are beautiful. I am just a man. There is no beauty in a male body.”

“So say you. To me you are perfect.” She stood. “I want to finish washing you, may I?”

“Feel free. As I said, my body is yours.”

She took the soap, rubbed it around her hands and stepped behind Gabriel. Starting with his shoulders and moving down to his waist, she covered him with a thick layer of soap. “You know, Elizabeth that everyone has a place on their body, other than the usual places, that when touched...well, it is very pleasant and exciting. Did you know that?”

“No.” she took the rinsing jug, filled it and poured the water down his back.

“I shall have to search for yours then! You are very close to mine.” She could hear excitement growing in his voice.

With more soap on her hands, she placed them on his hips, rubbing in growing circles. “Here?” she asked.

“No, keep trying.”

She pulled her hands back to his backside, covered it with soap. “Is it your rather round and feminine behind?”

“Do you mind? No!”

“Well...where?” She stood slightly to his side. “Your shoulders? No?” She placed her hand on the small of his back. He took a deep breath. “There? Yes, it is isn’t it?” She leant down kissed, and then licked that area.

For a moment, he stood very still, then turned and pulled her into his arms and kissed her passionately. “Yes, that is it!” He whispered down at her.

“Then why did you pull me away?”

“For what is left of my sanity, Elizabeth I would prefer not to start what we will not finish. To that, perhaps this bath was a bad idea....” He moved back from her and went to step out of the bathtub.

“No, wait!” She turned him and slid back into his arms. “Gabriel, I meant what I said earlier. I may not have the experience you are used to from your other females but won’t you let me try and please you?” She picked up the soap, made more lather and sat in front of him on the side of the bath. Gently, carefully and thoroughly she washed his genitals. He was only half-erect when she refilled the jug and rinsed away the soap. She put her hand on his cheek. “Why are you holding back? I am so very serious Gabriel! There is no teasing tonight. We cannot make love but why shouldn’t we please each other?”

He moaned, stepped quickly out of the bathtub, pulled her into his arms and carried her back into her bedroom.

“Wait!” She laughed as he dropped her onto the bed and fell down beside her. “We did not dry. Now the bed sheets are wet.”

“They will be more than wet...that is if you are not teasing me!”

She pressed her body against his, ran her fingers across the small of his back. “No teasing tonight. You have such wonderful eyes. I want to see them full of passion.” She pushed him onto his back and slid on top of him. “I want to fill you with lust, and then drain you. Would that please you?”

He kissed her and pulled her body hard against his. He was no longer holding back. "But," he held her head gently by that hair. "I will do you first."

"I told you before...I don't know how to do that." She rested her head on his shoulder. He could feel her hot breath on his neck.

"So all of your orgasms have been by accident in intercourse? How sad and what a waste. I will teach you. Then I will give you orgasms every day in so many wonderful ways. Do you have any idea the joy that would give me...and you as well?" He laid her on the bed and sat crossed legs beside her. "I am going to tell you a story. All you have to do is listen to my voice and let me touch you." He leant down and kissed her nipples. "You want me to touch your beautiful body. I know you do!" He sucked a nipple back into his mouth, felt her gasp.

He could tell that she was scared and his heart went out to her. Nevertheless, she must learn much. It was to his mind a sin that her passions lay dormant. Such a beautiful woman must know the power of her passions; she must feel the fires that waited for awakening. She needed to know the wondrous gifts she could receive as well as give. He was more than happy to be the man to teach her.

For a while, Gabriel stayed silent and ran his hands up and down the sides of her neck, torso and legs. Gradually she began to relax and closed her eyes. Very gently, he kissed her lips. "Now listen to my little story. It is bitter and sweet, a cherished and secret memory."

"It was the day of my fourteenth birthday. My mothers newly hired cook, a Norwegian woman, very pretty and twice my age asked me to come into the pantry and fetch down for her a pot from a high shelf. I was coming back down the stepladder when she reached over and took a handful of my privates. Startled to say the least I jumped and fell off the ladder, banging my head on a shelf."

"I was so sheltered by my possessive mother I was a total innocent. Being of that age my body had growing demands but my poor, confused mind understood none of it. Certain that Anna had pushed me off the ladder I scurried from the kitchen to nurse my bump alone."

"Samuel did carpentry as a hobby and had a work house near the back of the property. On occasions, I would rummage around in there and knock a few pieces of wood together. I was in there later that same afternoon. I did not hear a sound as Anna came up behind me. This time she reached from behind and ran her hand across my lap and once again, I jumped. At least I did not fall down but I had backed into a corner. I turned to her with fear, certain she was out, for some unknown reason, to do me harm."

All the while he spoke Gabriel continued to run his hands over Elizabeth, his fingers only just skimming her skin.

"Oh my!" Anna said. "Mr. Jackman, you are a little skittish!" She took a step closer and opened the buttons down the front of her blouse. "I only want to give you a birthday present." She opened the sides of the blouse. She was naked underneath it. Here I began to reveal to her just what a total moron I was as I kept my startled eyes firmly on her face and said not a word."

"Don't you want to look at my tits?" She asked. She was smiling. I can imagine what she was thinking."

"No thank you!" The idiot child answered her."

“She laughed then, reached up and pulled my head down, held it firmly in place and pushed a nipple into my mouth. Thank God, my fearful mind shutdown and my instincts took over and some how my hands found the power to move and slid themselves onto her breasts.”

“‘That is better.’ She let go of my head and held my hands, moving them as she liked. She backed me up against the wall and again pushed her hands onto my crotch. I had a very full erection. That was something that had confused and plagued me daily. I had no idea what to do when one popped up but knew I very much wanted ‘to do’ something with it. ‘Oh, that is nice.’ She purred at me. ‘Do you know that there is so much you could do with that?’”

“The moron stood firmly silent but at least I did not run away.”

“‘I am going to make you a man, this afternoon. I will show you how to use your penis, as it should be. Have you ever seen a naked woman, Gabriel?’ She asked. I am fairly certain she already knew the answer to that. Still standing with my back up against the wall as though I was stuck with glue I watched as she removed the blouse and let the shirt fall away. That was all she was wearing.”

Gabriel continued to massage Elizabeth and watched her closely. She was breathing deeper and occasionally tried to move her breasts into his hands. “Roll over onto your belly.” He whispered into her ear, held her by the hips and rolled her over. With a leg on either side of her thighs, he knelt above her, lowered his head to the back of her neck and slid his hands under her, onto her breasts. He continued with his story.

“‘Do you think I am pretty?’ Anna asked. At least I had the ability then to look her up and down without being forced. She was indeed very pretty and I did manage to squeak that much out to her. She came back up to me and rubbed her body against mine. ‘Do you know how to fuck?’ She asked me.”

“‘No.’ I finally found my voice, the very great need to learn overcame my fear and freed my body into action.”

Gabriel stopped speaking briefly. He ran his tongue along Elizabeth’s shoulders and kissed her neck. He continued to hold her breasts, lightly pinching her nipples. He lowered down and rubbed his penis along the back of her thigh. He sensed that Elizabeth was lost in his touch and words.

“Over the course of the next hour Anna brought me completely out of my lonely shell. She taught me about my body and most importantly, she taught me a wonderful secret about the magic of the female body. Do you want me to teach that secret to you, Elizabeth?”

She lifted her head, ran her cheek against his, turned her head and kissed him hungrily.

“Do you?” He asked again.

“Yes, Gabriel.”

Gabriel smiled, slid off Elizabeth and lay beside her, the length of his body pressed against her. She was aware that his hands shook slightly as he touched her. She felt the heat of his own passion and it thrilled her as much as his hands.

He slid his hand up her thigh and between her legs. She moved slightly to meet his hand. He moved his index and second fingers into place and rotated them in small circles. Very quickly, he found what he was searching for. He felt a shudder of pleasure

run through Elizabeth's body. She opened her eyes and looked at him with wonder and surprise.

"Sh!" he whispered. "Just close your eyes and let me please you."

She sighed and dropped her head back onto the pillow. She began to move her hips in the instinctive, demanding circle. He followed the movement, his fingers working with her. He laid his head on his forearm and studied her. Her breath was heavy; her cheeks glowed with the blush that always glowed just before the female orgasm. He was fascinated with her and with his own burning desire to do nothing more than please her.

"Gabriel!" She moved towards him, slid her tongue across his lips and pushed her way into his mouth. "Please?"

He held her firmly in place with the strength of his forearm and increased the pressure and movement of his hands. "No." He answered with every ounce of will power he had. "We will make love as you wanted...when I am free."

With a moan of passion and frustration, she sucked his tongue into her mouth and continued to suck on it as wave after wave of orgasm flowed through her. He thrilled at the power, force and length of her orgasm.

Eventually she dropped her body back onto the bed; let her head fall onto his arm. She gasped and shuddered as he pressed his fingers one last time against her and removed his hand. "That was wonderful..." she kissed him gently and rolled her body against his. "Thank you."

He smiled that slow, lopsided smile, held her by the hips and pushed hard against her.

"Now Gabriel," she wrapped her hands around his penis. "It is your turn."

He rose on one elbow, took her head in his other hand and guided her down his body.

Sue Lyn woke as Lee crawled into bed. She pulled herself to him and kissed him for a long while. "Lee, I missed you so much!" She whispered and held him tightly.

"Well, with a welcome like that I think I will go away more often."

"No! You will stay right here with me in this bed for the rest of time."

He laughed and pulled the blankets around them. "That sounds just fine with me. May I get up to use the bathroom once in a while?"

"Yes, but only that! How did it go with Ruth? Is she here, Lee?"

"Yes. I put her in the front room. The key is on your dresser."

"You locked her in?"

"Yes, I had no choice. Trust is not something we can afford to hand out too liberally right now. Anyway, she did not seem to mind. She said she felt safer that way."

"I do feel bad for her. She has lost so much. Did she have a lot to say?"

"A very great deal." Sue Lyn lay silently beside him as he recounted to her all that he and Gabriel had learned in the last few days.

"Good God!" She said mostly to herself when Lee had finished. "Cornelia is behind it all? Poor Gabriel. He cares so much for her."

"Cared for her, he does not any longer. You know Gabriel, most of the time he hides his feelings very well. He was upset for a while. Now he just wants justice and to see an end to the matter."

"Do you have any proof to take to the authorities?"

“Not one thing. If there ever was any, I am sure Brock got rid of it. You know how Gabriel and Wesson work. If it is possible, the courts do what they should. If the road to normal justice is blocked, well...Gabriel takes another route.”

Sue Lyn sighed. “It is such an evil world.”

“No, Sue but there is some very evil people who must be stopped at all costs.”

“I am so proud of you, Lee. Please promise me you will be so careful.”

He smiled and kissed her forehead. “How is every thing around here?”

“Well enough now but Isabelle left the house for a while today.”

“What? Why? Where did she go?”

“Lord knows! I found out she had left just before she came back. She looked shaken and ill to me. She made up some story about going to her house. I had to help her to her bed. She made me promise that I would not tell Gabriel. You will tell him.”

“Oh, I will. You can count on that.”

Chapter Fourteen

Sebastian opened the door, stepped to one side and made a sweeping motion with his arm. "Come in, Isabelle." She stepped passed him into the foyer, turned and watched as he closed and locked the door. He wore only black leather trousers, no shirt and nothing on his feet. A stocking hung from a belt loop. "How wise of you not to wait too close to the bitter end. I have been accused of not following my own rules and being far too impatient."

She followed him into the sitting room. It was a large, somewhat narrow room. There were very few lamps lit, most of the light came from a high fire burning brightly in the huge fireplace. The furniture was abundant, crowded and very opulent. Every window was wide open. A cold winter wind blew the drapes into the room. When he made no effort to take her coat she tossed it on a chair.

"I suffer occasionally from an over heated constitution, thus the open windows. The fire I prepared for you, as you are not doubt more coldly blooded than I am. Will you have a brandy with me?"

She looked at the brandy decanter and shook her head.

"You think it is adulterated in some way?" He placed on long, slender hand on his chest. "I am wounded! But perhaps you are more intelligent than I first thought." He smiled and took a new sealed bottle out from his drinks cabinet. "You open and you pour. Then I am sure that you will feel safe."

Still silent she took the bottle from him and did as he requested. She put his glass on a tabletop, took hers and walked to the fireside.

"A toast to our new friendship, perhaps?" He brought his glass and stood close to her.

"We are not friends!"

He laughed. "Oh well, that is a disappointment. Maybe I can change your mind." He sat and motioned for her to sit beside him. She took a chair instead. "Do tell me why you do not see us as friends, Isabelle. Maybe I can find a way to fix the flaw."

She took a large mouthful of the brandy, taking her time before speaking. "I am here as you so fiercely wanted. Now tell me why?"

"No friendship for us?"

"It would be a cold day in Hell, Sebastian!"

He raised his eyebrows and laughed. "A very rare day, indeed!"

"I assume you wanted me here to force me into having sex with you..."

"Do you?" He interrupted her harshly. "Do you really think I have to force women to pleasure me? I saw your reaction to my touch this afternoon. It is the same for every woman. Once touched they are hard pressed to get enough of me. It may sound big headed but I am not. Most of the time, I find it all very tiresome. I prefer a woman with a quick and fine mind over anything else."

"Then why am I here? I want to get back to my home."

“Your home? You are staying at the home of Gabriel. That is not your home. You are a guest. Under these circumstances, I have to wonder why?”

“We are still friends so I often stay in his home.”

“How generous that friendship must be. It must be very generous indeed for you to be ‘just friends’ and also carrying his bastard.” He moved to a chair next to Isabelle. She was amazed to see that in the freezing cold room sweat ran down his chest. He leaned so close she could smell the brandy on his breath.

“Tell me, Isabelle. Does your passionate Italian heart not break for the loss of charming Gabriel? You do not have to lie to me. He loves beautiful Elizabeth, not you.”

“No!” She snapped at him. “He does not love her. He loves me. He only wants to fuck her.” It was out before she could stop herself. She closed her eyes and rubbed her face.

“Well, now I am completely confused. If I am to kill Gabriel’s loved ones, as you have in the back of your mind, who should I kill...her or you?” She looked up at him slowly. The constant cocky smile was gone. He was deadly serious. Burning fingers of fear ran up her spine.

“You do not have to kill any of us. What have we done to you?” She dug her fingers into the fabric of her purse and felt the sharp blade of the knife. He was too close and watching her every move. She would have to wait and hope for the right time.

“Aren’t you wondering what Gabriel and Elizabeth could be doing right this minute. I know they are both at the De Wolfe manor. I saw them there.” He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his forehead and chest. “The house is quiet now, everyone is asleep. She is a delicious little thing. I know what I would be doing if I was Gabriel.”

“What do you want from me?”

“But then I am not Gabriel, not even close. He is an honorable man, a ‘holy man’. He lives to do the right thing and he expects people to be just the same with him. I suppose his great flaw is that he refuses to forgive injustice. Not a forgiving bone in his body, is there Isabelle?”

“Are you going to get to the point...ever?”

“Well, I am! Give me time. As you saw, I get visions too! I see such interesting pictures. Hell on earth, Isabelle he was so furious the day he caught you being so terribly unfaithful to him. I think that if he loved you, deeply loved you, he should have strangled you right then and there. Perhaps he decided to keep you around until he found his way to Elizabeth. Something is better than nothing.”

“You know so much, Sebastian. You think you are so smart! That was a very long time ago. We have put the bad times far behind us.” She shrugged and struggled for words. “As I said, I am well aware of what he wants to do with Elizabeth....”

“It is not just sex. Gabriel is like me that way. The females adore him. He gets all the sex he needs. He has a pure passion for Elizabeth. It is not the kind of passion that ever fades even after a thousand fucks. Nor would it fade if he never fucked her. I told you before he has plans to marry her. Does that not break your heart?”

“Alright, you win, Sebastian. Gabriel loves Elizabeth. You made your point. It has nothing to do with me.”

"Of course it does. Would you not like to see the last of her? If she were gone, Gabriel would take you back again and maybe, who knows, in time you may have enough bastard children that he might decided he has to marry you."

"Christ! Just do what you want to bloody Elizabeth Leighton. I do not give a pig's ass what you do to her. I am going to leave now." She tried to stand; he pushed her back into the seat.

"I am not finished with you yet." He pulled her by the hair and pressed his lips against hers. "Tell me to kill her. It is that simple. Just say 'Sebastian I want you to kill Elizabeth Leighton'. Just say it and your heartache is finished."

"No!" She tried to pull back but he held her fast. "I will not be a part of your evil plans."

"This is just as much your plan as mine. You came to me today hoping I would catch on to Gabriel's new love and sets my murderous sights on her. You started this newest game, my dear; I played my hand now you take your turn. All you have to do is put voice to your desires."

"Why? I did not tell you to kill Helena or Margaret but you did...."

Sebastian's expression went in an instant from surprise to shock and anger, and then he smiled. He let her fall back into her chair. "Well, well! You do disappoint me again, Isabelle. Just how many serious mistakes do you make in an average day?"

Isabelle stayed silent. Her heart thundered. Danger and anger flowed from Sebastian in waves.

"You really should learn to think before you speak. Think and check facts before you make such accusations. If you had bothered to check facts, you would have found out that from May to December 1897 I was employed as the aide-de camps for Lord Swanson, the British Ambassador to Spain. Helena Jackman, unless I have forgotten, died early in October. During those eight months, I did not set foot on British soil. Lord Swanson is a difficult man to work for, very demanding. I had no time for myself. I am sure he would attest to that if it ever came down to it." Sebastian stood and walked to one of the opened windows. He leaned on the sill. Isabelle watched with frightened amazement as the cold wind raised steam off his skin. After a moment, he sighed and turned back to her.

"Now, let me see! When did Margaret die? I was at her funeral...that was September 10th 1899. Her murder happened the Saturday night before that." He smiled and came back to stand beside Isabelle. "That entire weekend I hosted a house party for Elmira Houston in her Cambridge home. Elmira would certainly remember as I spent two delicious nights in her bed. I may have left to use the washroom and I do recall leaving Elmira for at least a half an hour to bathe but that was certainly not enough time to travel to London, murder and then travel back to Cambridge. So tell me, how in Heavens name could I have killed these two lovely ladies?"

"You did kill them! You can do just like Gabriel! You travel anywhere you want in the blink of an eye. Gabriel knows all about what you did to Helena and he is going to make you pay. You will be sorry...Sebastian Ridley." She snarled at him. "Compared to him you are worthless. You are nothing but shit in my eyes and soon the world will see you for the maniac you are!"

Then in a rage, Sebastian pulled Isabelle to her feet; her purse and the brandy glass fell to the floor. She struggled and broke away. He pulled her back to him by her

hair and pushed her back into the chair. "If I did kill those bitches, believe me, they suffered. Gabriel is almost as much of a fool as you are. Poor Gabriel, he does so trust Cornelia. It is enough to make me laugh. In reality and just between you and me, Cornelia hates Gabriel with her own special and very strange powerful passion! She could not stand to see him so blissfully happy. She said to me, "Kill the bitch Helena, Sebastian. Make her suffer.' That is just what I did!"

Isabelle froze with fear and disgust.

"And Margaret? Yes, I killed her. Henry telephoned me at the Houston home. "I want Margaret dead, Sebastian. Kill her tonight!" What a coward he was. He could not even kill his own wife. What do you put to a man like that? Sadly, I had very little time to enjoy myself. Elmira was waiting for me to finish my bath and come back to her. That was a damn shame. What a beautiful woman Margaret was! However she always underestimated what a weasel her husband was. She told him she was leaving him for Tony Lucci and if he tried to hold her back, she would tell the world about his very sordid pastimes. Perhaps she should have left that last bit out." Sebastian smiled at the memory. "The thing was I had my own very good reasons to hate Henry Leighton. How sweet it would be if he was blamed for my murder."

"Henry, the coward he was, took a sleeping draft and went to his bed. I wandered around the Leighton house for a bit and found the tie for his dressing gown and used it strangle poor Margaret. I did more but I am sure you do not want to know the details."

"Of course Henry could not leave well enough alone. Before the household woke, he went into her room, opened her wall safe and took away her jewels. I suppose he thought the authorities would take that to mean the murder was a part of a robbery. It is too bad that he lacked the balls to have a good look at his dear dead wife. He would have seen the tie and removed it."

"So ...who told you to kill me?" Isabelle hissed at him.

"No one...yet! I have nothing against you Isabelle. As a matter of fact, for a very long time you have fascinated me. There are many things I would like to do to you, my dear, hurting you is not one of them ...unless you make me hurt you. Do try and not do that! At this moment, all I want is to hear you say, "Sebastian I want you to kill Elizabeth Leighton."

"No. I will not! Never!"

"That is a shame. Why must we do this the hard way?" He reached down and pulled her stocking from his belt loop.

She stood and ran towards the door. It slammed and locked before she got to it. She backed up against it then turned to look at the windows. One by one, they shut.

Sebastian laughed. "You will not get out of here until you please me. Say it and you walk away unharmed."

"Go to hell!"

"I have been there. Not my favorite place." He wrapped the ends of the stockings around his hands. "Say it...I am giving you one last chance."

She moved a few steps towards him and spat.

"That was not very feminine." He held the stocking over his head and pulled on it hard. At the same, a horrendous pain ripped through Isabelle with such force she screamed, fell to the floor. Waves of vomit flowed from her. Sebastian stood and walked slowly up to her.

“Stop it...please stop it!” She managed to gasp at him. “You are killing my baby.”

“Don’t care in the slightest. That pain will not stop until I release the stocking and I will not do it until you tell me what I need to hear.”

“God, help me!” Isabelle screamed out.

“He is not in this house. Say it!”

“Sebastian...” she gasped. “I want you to kill Elizabeth Leighton.”

He smiled and dropped the stocking. Immediately the agony ceased. “Now if you had only done that in the first place!” He helped Isabelle to feet and led her to a chair. She moaned and cursed him in Italian. “Just sit and rest for a bit. I will pour you another brandy.”

He picked the brandy glass off the carpet and went back to the drinks cabinet. With his back to the semi-conscious women he took a small vile from his front pocket, opened it and poured the clear liquid in the glass. He turned and held up the newly opened brandy bottle. “You see, it is the new bottle. No poison in it.” He poured some into the glass and stirred it with his finger. He handed it to Isabelle.

“I don’t want it.” She pushed his hand way. “I did what you want, now let me go home.”

“Drink it, I insist. You will need it for strength. Drink it and I will get a cab for you.”

She tried to take the glass but her hands shook too much. Sebastian held it to her lips and kept it there until the glass was empty. He sat down beside her. “We will wait for a bit, until it warms your blood. You know, you really should be feeling very happy right now. Your sweet redheaded rival has a day or two to live. Maybe not that long. It should not be too hard to get my hands on her.”

“You are insane.” Isabelle mumbled and slowly got to her feet.

“Perhaps it runs in the family. Might be even a touch of it in your little bastard.”

Isabelle began to sway. She looked at Sebastian with stunned eyes. “What was in the brandy...?” She slid to the floor.

Sebastian sat on the dirt floor of the small, dimly lit room. The cold stonewall felt wonderful against his naked back. Several hours had passed since he shackled the unconscious Isabelle’s arms and legs to the bed that was the only furniture in the room.

She groaned as he tightened the chains but did not wake. Sebastian sat on the bed beside her, turning her face towards him. “Poor, lovely Isabelle, so much in love with a man who needs her only when there is no other to accommodate him.”

He pulled a knife from his trouser pocket and flicked the long, razor sharp blade open. Careful not too cut her he ran the blade down the sleeves and shoulders of her jacket, flicked away the buttons and pulled the garment out from under her. He ran the tip of the knife through the lace edges of her camisole. He lay the knife down, ran his hands down the sides of her body, and slid them under the camisole onto her breasts. He smiled, took the knife again and cut away the camisole laces. With the tip of the knife, he pushed away the fabric. “Isabelle, you do not disappoint me at all!” He moaned, leaned forward and ran his tongue around one nipple and then the other.

Again, with careful attention not to harm her he cut away her skirt and under slip. His hands shook slightly as he sliced the sides of her black lace underwear and garter belt. He stood back and moved around to the bottom of the bed. Rivers of sweat rolled

down his chest and back. He bent forward and pushed away the sliced pieces of lace. For a long while he stood, rigid and silent as he studied her naked body. As though waking from a trance, he shuddered, walked around the bed and sat on the floor.

For three hours he did not move but sat frozen in deep thought, watching the gentle rise and fall of Isabelle's chest. When, finally his decisions reached and his mind made up he stood and went back to the bed.

He sat beside her, smiled and ran his fingers through her thick black curls. "Fuck, Gabriel! You are even a worse fool than I thought. Such beauty should be appreciated or left for those who can." He ran his tongue across her lips, and then whispered "Wake up, Isabelle" into her ear.

Immediately her eyes opened. Instantly in panic, she squealed, pulled hard on the shackles and lurching her body so high Sebastian fell off the bedside. Laughing he got back to his feet. "An interesting movement but save it for a appropriate time."

"Let me go! What...?" She stopped speaking, looked down at her naked body. "Pig!" she hissed at him, turning her face in his direction.

He moved quickly, squeezed her face as he held it. "Spit at me again and I will cut your tongue out." His tone was such that Isabelle had no thought but that was just what he would do.

"I would not waste my spit. Rot in Hell where you were born."

He shrugged. "You think I was born in Hell? Maybe so, I would not be the slightest bit surprised." He sucked in a deep breath, closed his eyes and laid his hands on her breasts. He shuddered as a thrill ran down his body. Isabelle gasped as the searing heat of his hands spread around her breasts in pulsating circles.

"Very nice, is it not, sweet Isabelle? Do I not have a magic touch?" He sat back on the bedside. "What a wonderfully beautiful woman you are! Every time I see you I think how fortunate my brother is. To have a body like yours so available and wanting! Now I think what a fool he must be to choose the tiny red head. I much prefer these round full ladies." He squeezed her breast and smiled as she moaned.

"Is that a moan of pain or pleasure?"

"If you are going to rape me, get it done with!" She glared at him. The powerful sedative he had given her made her head spin. Anger was temporarily holding the fear in check.

"Rape you? No, I never rape. That is the disease of Steward. I need...must have encouraging response and never fail to receive it." He leaned back, ran one hand up the inside of her thigh and rested his hand between her legs. He watched the quickening rise and fall of her chest and slid a finger inside of her. She swore again and pulled her body as much as she could away from him. He pulled her back into place and held her there. He ran his tongue across her belly and looked up at her.

"A boy! How nice for Gabriel! A son to match his charming blond girl child." He slid up Isabelle and rested his head next to her breast. "And after he is born, your beautiful breasts will swell with milk for him. There will be far too much of it for one small baby. Will you let me take my fill? I would so love to do that! I could feed off you and make love to you at the same time. What a thrill that would be!"

Isabelle froze, watched with stunned shock as Sebastian bared his teeth and ran them across the flesh of her breast. She remembered how Gabriel described to her Helena's horribly bitten and mutilated breasts. Fear took the place of her anger. She felt

him take a deep breath. He slid his tongue up one breast and sucked the nipple into his mouth.

Too terrified to move and still under the effects of the powerful drug he had given her she drifted away into another time and place. It was Gabriel on her breast. In this better place and dreaming of the man she loved, her body relaxed. Several minutes passed before Isabelle gasped and came out of her trance. "No! Please, Sebastian, stop this and let me go. I have never done anything to you."

He sighed. "Sadly, that is true; you have never done anything to me. Now I need you to remedy that. Do you want to know why I sweat like this?" He pushed his saturated chest against her breasts.

"No, leave me alone!"

"But you should know. I need you to understand why I have no choice but to enjoy your beautiful body. It has been a few days since I have had a woman please me. That is far, far too long! My body heats like this! That is the price I have to bear for the pleasure I can give with my simple touch. Your God gives you talents without price, mine does not. We pay highly for every gift." He sucked air in through his teeth. "I need to fuck, Isabelle!"

"Then go to Jane or some other slut!"

"Jane! She is repulsive. I have found peace and enjoyment with Ruth but I grow tired of the complications I find up on that mountain. Neither Ruth nor Jane satiates me completely. As far as other women go...well, you are the one I want Isabelle. So, tell me, what would you enjoy that would also give me the release I crave?"

Isabelle began to cry.

"Stop the foolish tears. They do not affect me in any way. I am not going to hurt you. I am going to give you pleasure far better than my weak brother ever could." He climbed on the bed and sat between her legs. He held her in place with one hand and slid his other hand between her legs.

She raised her head, glared at him with hatred. "You want me! Then rape is the only way you will ever have me. I will never take you willingly. Compared to Gabriel you are nothing, a pathetic mouse, not a man. In his worst days he is a hundred times the man you could only dream to be!"

Sebastian made a sound like the growl of a bear. He lurched forward throwing his weight on top of her and pinned her under him. He held her head by the hair, forced his lips on hers and pushed his tongue into her mouth. She bit down hard. He jumped back still holding her by the hair with one hand the other he brought down across her face with a resounding slap. He sat on her, raised his hand and hit her again. She moaned with pain, her eyes rolled back in her head. "No!" he shook her head violently "You will not pass out on me! And you will not goad me into raping you."

"I can't breathe!" She managed to hiss at him.

He slid his body back, his knees bent and the back of his thighs resting against the inside of her legs. "That was very foolish of you, Isabelle." He was struggling for control, his breath coming in grunts. "I do not like it when my women make me mad."

"I am not your woman. I will always be Gabriel's woman! Nothing you could ever do would change that."

"Is that so? Then I guess I shall have to teach you reality. I would much rather you relax and just enjoy...."

“No!” She yelled at him, again pulling her body to the side.

“But since you insist on making what should be lovely and easy, difficult...” He reached into his trouser pocket, pulled out the black silk stocking and wrapped the ends over his hands.

“Oh God, no! No! Please I will do what you want...anything, just do not hurt my baby.”

“Hurt your baby? No, if I pull this one more time I will be killing your baby. He will just slide out of you. Is that what you want?”

“No. I will stop fighting you. Please, Sebastian, do anything, anything at all! I beg you not to kill my baby!”

He frowned, held the stocking over his head, watching Isabelle closely. She closed her eyes and began to pray in her native language.

“Oh, fucking hell, don’t start that gibberish!” He laughed and rolled his eyes. “Now where was I before you foolishly distracted me?” He slid his fingers back inside of her. “So tell me, do you want me to kill your bastard?”

“No!” She gasped. “Just tell me what you want. Release my hands and I will do all you need!”

“Right now, it is not your hands I need.” He moved the palm of his hand against her in small circles. He leaned over her, kissing and licking his nipples.

Isabelle groaned with anger and frustration as the incredible heat of his hands sent thrills through her.

“Do not feel bad for enjoying this! You do not have the power to fight this passion. You are after all, only human!” He ran his tongue up, along her shoulder and neck. He felt her breath coming quicker and hot on his face. He whispered in her ear. “Tell me you do not like this?”

She pushed his head away with hers. “You seduce with magic. You disgust me. My body responds to the magic, not to you.”

“The magic and I are all the same. I am the magic. You want my magic and me right now and that is what I need.” He sat back, still moving his hand in her. He watched as she closed her eyes and fought so hard not to respond to him. She would move with him, then groan with anger and lie still. He held his hand still briefly and then moved it again. Each time her response was quicker and stronger. He let this continue for several moments, thoroughly enjoying watching her losing her battle.

“You are wet and so very hot, Isabelle.” He said his voice thick with passion. “I think it is time for me to satisfy our passion.” With one hand, he unbuttoned his trousers and pushed them down his thighs. “Look at me, Isabelle!” When she did not, he pushed his fingers harder into her. “I said look at me.” She lifted her head, tears falling from her eyes and looked at him. “Are you ready for me?” He glanced at the black stocking that hung over the footboard.

“Yes.” She gasped at him.

He removed his hand and watched with pleasure and amazement as she lifted her body and moved as much as possible towards him. He leaned forward, pushed his penis against her. Isabelle arched her back, crying out with passion and rage as he entered her.

It was a long while before Sebastian collapsed on her. Laughing, he ran kisses up her neck. “I always knew you would be wonderful.” He whispered breathlessly in her ear; let his body slide off her and lay beside her.

Isabelle opened her eyes. She looked around the gray stonewalls. Where were the paintings and the colorful tapestries? There were no windows. Wasn't there gold brocade curtains? She raised her head and looked down her body. Why am I naked? She turned her head and studied the face so close to hers. The long smooth face, the wavy blonde hair and thick mustaches was familiar but he was not Gabriel. He must be Gabriel! No, this is not right, something is very wrong here.

There was so much trouble, too much pain to bear. She pulled inside her mind and knew it time to leave this place. She would close down the sorrow, guilt and shame once and for all. It was better to walk through the silent, blackness of her mind. She pushed back further and further and found a place and time of safety and happiness.

She was back in her parents' bakery. The aroma of fresh baking, the familiar shop with shelves of bread and rows of pastries, her mother in her floured apron all soothed her. She watched as her mother locked the shop door and pulled down the wooden shutters. 'Well, Isabelle, another day is done. You have done very well. Now you can rest!' Mother said that every closing time. She smiled at her mother turned and walked through the kitchen to the dark back room. She climbed up in Father's rocking chair and pulled her mother's shawl around her. Near by a large pot bellied stove crackled, hissed, and sent out comforting warmth. Yes, I will keep the shutters down. I will stay in this place where I am safe and there is no such thing as heartbreak. I did well. I will stay here and rest.

Sebastian watched her slow steady breathing. He ran his fingers lightly through the puddle of sweat that had gathered between her breasts. She will be angry when she wakes. She will accuse me of rape. He stood from the bed, adjusted his trousers and smiled. Yes, she would certainly say it was rape, if only to escape the truth. Perhaps he would remind her that she had two, maybe three orgasms. He would tell her that he was witness to so many rapes, he had lost count and those women did not orgasm.

He took the shackle key from his pocket, moving around the bed and opened the four cuffs. She stayed in the same spread position. He shook her head slightly. "Isabelle, you can move now." She did not respond. "What a heavy sleeper you are or perhaps you are acting. I have to get a few things we need for the day." He pulled her arms down to her sides and closed her legs. "I will not be long."

At one end of the room, he pulled a bolt lock open and pushed on the heavy hidden door. For a while, he stood quietly listening, and then stepped out into his cellar. He pushed the door, hidden by selves back into place. Moving slowly and quietly he went up the stairs. When he was sure that he was alone in the house he went to his bedroom, washed and dressed. He took a small handgun, set of handcuffs from his dresser, and placed them in his coat pocket. He rolled the quilt from his bed and went back in the cellar prison.

He managed to get the semi-conscious woman to a sitting position, wrapped the quilt around her and pulled her onto his lap. "I think, Isabelle, that perhaps I may have given you a little too much sedative." She mumbled in Italian. Sebastian smiled. "I doubt that was a thank you. Oh well, it will wear off soon enough. However, now we should leave here before your hot-headed Gabriel comes looking for you. You should feel honored as the first guest in my new home. No one even knows I own it, so we will not be disturbed." He held her face to his chest and closed his eyes. Together in this

impossible manner, Isabelle and Sebastian traveled thirty miles to the master bedroom of Paddocks Hall.

He placed Isabelle in his bed and studied her sleeping face. "It is too bad you missed the ride, my dear. You would have found it interesting." He held her chin and shook her face gently. "I don't know if you are truly sleeping or pretending. It really doesn't matter."

He took a set of handcuffs from his night table snapped one bracelet around her wrist and the other to the framework of the headboard. "I have to leave for a few hours." He lifted the covers, looked down her naked body, and smiled. "Maybe not that long. You will wake then, believe me!"

Sebastian sat at the open window in his London office. Off to the east a dawning gray began to creep over the on the horizon. Below his window, the great city was slowly waking. If he was capable of love, it was certainly in him for this time of day. What would the coming hours bring? What new faces and new possibilities? Who would whisper in his ear that the Prime Minister's office just a hairs breath away?

The heady excitement, the dream of this ultimate power was what he lived for...or at least that was what his mother and before her his father, told him. 'You were born for this mighty office, Sebastian. I promised this to your father. He waits and watches for you to make this happen. Together you and I will succeed and honor his wishes.' For almost two decades, this and various other versions had been Cornelia's daily speech to him.

Lately Sebastian's thoughts had often traveled back to his early years, the years when Pierre Desjardin controlled every aspect of his life. Every person he met, every book he read, every opinion he formed dictated by his father and enforced by the highly paid Ridley family. Yes, politics and his need to see his son in power had been what Desjardin wanted.

He remembered his fathers' words. 'You can and will bring this country back to the great glory it once had, Sebastian. You have abilities and talents that no other man has but you must learn to harness them for only your benefit. Cornelia wants you to turn to your dark side. She says only that way will you ever have all you deserve. She is a fool, son! Never listen to all her ranting. I have used the Dark Side for wealth and for play. It was well worth it for me but I had no other calling. You do. If you wallow in the evil as your Mother wants, you will end up like me, with a lifetime of wasted energy. That is why, Sebastian, I never let her have a single moment alone with you. She would twist and turn you to her madness and I could never allow that.'

Sebastian lit a cigarette, blew a smoke ring and shook his head. Well, Father had certainly been right. She did take him to the Dark Side. She did make him twist and turn with the whims of her madness. Under her hand, he learned all too well would he could do. At first, she controlled him with sex. Now she had the power of her wealth to hold him in check. So many times, he lost count; with Cornelia's insistence, he had crossed the boundaries his father so often warned him about. Now the dark side had as firm a hold on him as Cornelia. Certainly great power was just around the corner for him.

That morning as he watched London wake and slowly come to life, he wondered what good was all the power to him if he never had a single moment of freedom. He wondered what he would have done with his life if he had had different parents. Would he still have burned for power? Would he have killed Helena Jackman or Margaret

Leighton if his mother had not taught him for years and years when called to kill, he had no choice? In a rage, he had made Isabelle call for the death of Elizabeth Leighton. Was that a mistake? It may have been but he had sensed the moment that Isabelle entered his office that the death of Elizabeth was exactly what she wanted. If Elizabeth was the latest object of Gabriel's love, it was only a matter of time before his mother called for her death. What would happen if he ignored the call for Elizabeth's death from Isabelle? Only the next few hours would tell.

He laid his head back, closed his eyes and thought of the beautiful Isabelle and how she had so foolishly walked into his life. She was terrified that he was going to kill her and she had good reason to feel that. Taking her had not been the usual game, but something he truly wanted, needed, and did not want to kill her. Now for the first time in his life he had to make his own decisions and he was unsure of just what to do.

It was very dangerous to try to keep her. Nevertheless, with what she knew about him, he could never let her return to her life. No, he would have to decide and quickly either to kill her or move her very far away and never let her free again.

Gabriel would look for her when they found she was missing and now it was obvious Gabriel knew that he had killed Helena. Many times Cornelia warned him to avoid a confrontation with Gabriel but it seemed that was unavoidable. It was also very likely than other people knew he was a murderer. If Isabelle and Gabriel knew, others would also. The more he thought about it, it was clear to him that he would have to leave London. There was no evidence that pointed to him but still the scandal would ruin his career. He was surprised as he thought about it just how little that bothered him and surprised also at just how tired he was of it all.

Elizabeth waited with impatience in her sitting room. "For Heavens sake, Gabriel. I am famished. Why can't I just go down to the breakfast room without you?"

"Randall will be here as soon as he is dressed."

She rolled her eyes and began tapping her fingers on the arm of the chair. "He takes as long as a woman. Where are you going? I thought you wanted to speak with Ted?"

"I do. His train does not arrive until eleven. That gives me over three hours. I am going to visit my mother."

"You must be so tired of just waiting around. I cannot say I blame you."

"It is in the nature of this business. Often it is more a matter of 'just waiting' for the suspects to make an error. Sometimes one is able to push them into the error. That is what I have in mind."

She sighed. "With all I now know it will be difficult to smile and be friendly with Cornelia, Jane and Steward when I see them today."

"You have to act as you normally would. That is very important. Do you understand?"

"Yes, of course, I do!"

"And Randall will stay with you all the while I am away." Gabriel stood and pulled her into his arms. "It put a smile on your handsome doctors' face when I asked him to stay with you today."

"He is not my doctor." She smiled up at him.

"You could do worse than Randall De Wolfe. He is younger than I am and richer. He has a proud profession. He will not be dragging his loved ones into constant danger. And of course he is free of obvious female attachments."

"Gabriel! Randall is all that you say and it might have been different if I had not met you. However, you are the man I want and you will not get rid of me that easily. You'll not pass me off onto Randall the way you did with Suzanne to Owen."

"How did you find out about that?"

"It was very clear. She stopped sniffing around you and has been stuck like glue to Owen and you did not bat an eye."

"You are very observant. I will have to remember that."

"Won't you miss her attentions?"

"Our affair was temporary. Suzanne knew that. She can be very pleasing but I have my eyes on another woman."

"Really? Anyone I know?"

"A female who gave her man a wonderful treat last night."

"Hmm...did he enjoy 'the French thing'?"

"The French thing?"

"That is what they used to call oral sex a long time ago, back in the Tudor days."

"Who told you that?"

"My mother. She told me all she knew about sex. She did not want me to have any unhappy surprises or miss out on anything."

Gabriel laughed. "I always did like Margaret. What a woman she was! And yes, I enjoyed 'the French thing' so much. However, Elizabeth, I am only a man. Last night and for the second time, you asked me to break my promise to you. The woman I love wants me to take her and I said no! If you do that to me again I will lose what little is left of my sanity. The next time you passionately ask me to make love to you, believe me I will do so."

"Well darling, you wanted to excite me and that is what you did. Can I help it if I react to you in the way you want?"

There was a knock on the door.

"That will be eager Randall. I will see you off with him and I will be back in a few hours. Remember under no circumstances go any where without him or Tony."

"What about Owen?"

"I think he has his mind on other things."

"Gabiella is done with her eggs, Mrs. Lee. She is finishing up her meals very well lately." Mrs. Parks stood proudly behind the youngsters' chair.

Sue Lyn put down her fork and smiled across the table. "I have noticed. You are doing very well, Gabby!"

"Would you like me to take her up to the nursery?" Mrs. Parks looked from wife to husband Woo.

"What do you think, Lee?" Sue Lyn asked. "It will be alright, don't you think?"

Lee nodded.

"But I want to go and play in the yard!" Gabriella insisted. "Blackie and I are tired of the nursery."

“But it is so very cold outside, Gabriella; surely you do not want to freeze your cat?” Lee pulled the sulking girl up onto his lap.

“Yes, I do! I want to freeze my cat!”

“Oh my, look what I almost forgot!” Lee pulled a small box of golden taffy from his coat pocket.

Gabriella clapped and made a grab for the candy. Lee held it up over her head. “Only if you go, like a good little girl, and play quietly in your nursery. Will you do that?”

She jumped off Lee’s knee. “Yes! I am making some drawings for Daddy. I can finish them.”

Lee winked and handed Gabriella the candy.

“Lee, you will spoil the child!” Sue Lyn said when nanny and child were gone. “You are going to be such a wonderful father.”

“No I won’t Sue! I will be gruff, mean, and carry a very big stick. All my children will shake with fear when I walk in the room.”

Sue Lyn laughed. “Not my big teddy bear! And what do you mean ‘all your children’?”

“I rather enjoy the process of getting you in the family way so I think we will have six children, three boys and three girls. Boys first, please, Sue if you can arrange it!”

“Six! You do have high hopes! I think maybe three at the most.”

“We will see. So far, you have been completely unable to resist me. I will get my six babies I am sure of it.”

Sue Lyn stood from her seat and walked to a window. “Speaking of not being able to resist...how are things between Gabriel and Elizabeth?”

“She has not punched him in the last day or so, that must be a good sign.”

“Was it Elizabeth who gave him the black eye? Why? What did he do?”

“Well, she was posing nude for Owen and Gabriel decided he would hide in the studio and watch. Elizabeth was not too pleased and let him know it.”

“Good Lord! Why was she posing nude for Owen?”

“She was upset that Gabriel brought Suzanne Beryline to stay at the Manor.”

“Why in all that is sane would he do that?”

“To make Elizabeth jealous. There must be something in the air up that mountain. Everyone runs around acting like a lunatic.”

“Then Gabriel has not been successful?”

“Do you mean has he had sex with her yet?”

“Yes!” She came back to her seat and looked very earnestly at her husband.

“Maybe. I mean it is not as if I was in the room with them all the time. Gabriel has her on his mind more than he should and when they are together, Elizabeth watches every move Gabriel makes. She never takes her eyes off him. You are a woman; tell me, what does that mean?”

Sue Lyn looked away for a moment, then back to Lee. “She likes what she is seeing, very much and she is already feeling very possessive about him. Poor Isabelle.”

“We have had this conversation before, Sue. From a man’s point of view I would say that Gabriel is in love with Elizabeth. If any man deserves to find happiness, it is Gabriel. Speaking of this, why is Isabelle not up yet?”

"I thought I would let her sleep in. Whatever happened yesterday she was poorly when she got home. Sleeping can only help."

A kitchen maid stuck her head around the doorway. "I have taken a tray up to Mrs. De Wolfe, Mrs. Woo. Should I begin to clear the dishes now?"

"Yes, thank you, Rose." Sue Lyn answered and turned back to Lee. "I should take some tea and ginger cookies up to Isabelle soon or she will feel much worse when she does get up. I will take a tray up to her as soon as we are finished here."

"I can do that for you, Mrs. Woo. Save you with all them stairs." Rose offered.

"Yes, that is a good idea Rose. Thank you. Why not do that now? Mr. Woo and I will take in the dishes."

"Aye, Ma'am."

"And, Sue Lyn," Lee continued on his theme, "I will have to insist that Isabelle tell us where she went yesterday. I will do my best not to upset her."

Ten minutes later Lee and Sue Lyn were busy with the dishes when a flustered Rose came into the kitchen and announced "Mrs. Lucci is not in her room, Mrs. Woo. I've looked in the washroom and Mr. Jackman's office, she is nowhere!"

"Shit!" Lee exclaimed rushing down the hallway. He took the stairs two at time going directly to Isabelle's bedroom with Sue Lyn close behind.

Rose had opened the drapes. The bed was slightly rumbled but had certainly not been slept in and as the maid said Isabelle was not there.

"Where the Hell is she?" Lee demanded.

"I do not know, Lee." Sue Lyn opened the wardrobe. "It looks as if all her clothes are still here."

Lee turned to Rose who stood nervously in the doorway. "Tell the guards. I want this house thoroughly searched." Lee picked up the dress Isabelle had tossed on the bed when she changed the night before. "Is this what she was wearing yesterday?"

"Yes! Look Lee." Sue Lyn pointed down at the stained bedspread. "What is that stain."

He touched it, rubbed his fingers together and smelled them. "It's blood!"

She gasped and sat down heavily on the bed. "It is the baby. It must be. She has gone to the hospital."

"But why would she not wake us? Why go alone?"

Sue Lyn shrugged. "She has been so upset lately what with one thing and another and has been acting strangely. You had better telephone Gabriel right away."

"I spoke to him just before we ate. He was leaving to go and see his mother. He would have left by now."

"You don't know where she lives do you?"

"No!" Lee answered with clear frustration.

She stood and leaned on his arm. "I need to lie down for a bit, Lee. I think I took the stairs too fast."

Lee took her back to their bedroom, helped her onto the bed and covered her. "You stay here and rest." He spoke softly and kissed her cheek. "I will telephone Isabelle's house. Maybe she went there."

Sue Lyn took his hand. "You don't think she is there or at the hospital, Lee, do you?"

“What I think is that Isabelle was able to leave here twice yesterday. I have no idea where she went and I need a few words with these bloody guards.”

“Do you think Ridley has her?”

“Surely Isabelle would not be so stupid to have anything to do with him.” It was a statement but sounded more like a question. “Look, Sue, your only concern right now is to care for yourself and our baby. There is nothing we can do until we speak to Gabriel.”

Susan Jackman sat at the only window in her small bedroom sanctuary, as she would often do to wile away the morning hours. She enjoyed watching the comings and goings of the passersby. There were the workers rushing to their daily employment in the earliest hours. The roadway congested with wagons and carts loaded with their days deliveries. A little while later came the cooks, housekeepers and restaurant owners with their lists of needed groceries. Then homemakers were next, often children tugged at their skirts, with their plans for the evening meals. All were so busy with their purposes and very unaware of the great gift of freedom.

Susan wondered if she would ever know freedom again. Would she ever be able to just pick up her purse and head out to the shops or drop by a friend’s house for tea? It was highly unlikely. What was likely was that very soon she would die in her self-imposed prison. At least, she decided, Gabriel would finally be free of the burden she placed on him. She rested her head on the high backed chair and cried quietly.

“I’ll take your tray now, if yer finished with your breakfast, Mrs. Jackman.” Betsy Keaston said coming into the room and stepping around the bed. “Oh dear!” She stopped as she noticed the tears and Susan’s attempt to hide them. “Is something wrong, dearie? Is it that pain again? I can send for a doctor...!”

“No, Mrs. Keaston. I am fine. Just a little lonely and worried about my son, that is all! No doctor needed.” Susan dabbed her eyes and blew her nose. From the dark shadow along the side of the wardrobe, Gabriel stood silent and listening.

“Ah well, of course you are lonely. Stuck away up here all by yerself all the time like this. I’d be batty as Hell.” Betsy tried to smooth down her frizzy hair. “If I ain’t steppin’ out of line, I’ve got plenty of time for a chat.”

“I’d like that Betsy. Please, sit and talk with me.” Susan forced a smile and watched as Betsy pulled the chair out from under the desk and sat down.

“I ‘ave three sons of me own, Mrs. Jackman. I know what a bleeding worry they is!”

“I have only the one child. I wanted a house full of children but that did not happen. I was married for years before Gabriel finally came along. I cried like a baby the first time I held him in my arms. I love him so much!” Susan twisted her golden wedding band as she spoke. “When he was a boy it was so much easier to control him. Now he is a man and does just what he wants.”

“Would yer want ‘im any other way? A man should know his own mind. And Mr. Gabriel Jackman is a fair and kind man! Mind you, there is more than a few around ‘ere that fears him. Don’t cross ‘im, I said to my Stanley and you’ve not got to worry. Might if I ask if he be married?”

“He was. Her name was Helena and such a lovely girl she was, lovely inside and out.” Susan paused and rubbed her forehead. “And God knows how much Gabriel loved

her. They had one child; a girl, a girl so much her mother. A lot of Gabriel died with Helena.”

Betsy nodded. “What happened to her?”

“She was murdered.” Susan answered so quietly Betsy could hardly hear her.

“Good Lord. Poor Mr. Jackman.”

“They never caught the murderer and Gabriel burns with hatred. He left his church and blames God. You should have seen him in his pulpit, Mrs. Keaston! What a powerful calling he had. I was so proud of him; I cannot express the way my heart grew. I pray every day he will put the need for revenge behind him and go back to the church.”

“Well, that be a nasty open book he cannot turn his back on, I guess. Might he go back if they caught the fiend?”

“Maybe he would, if he survives. My son is head strong and impulsive.” Susan paused, searching her companions face. She seemed to make a decision. “May I trust you keep a confidence?”

“I know how to keep me mouth shut.”

“I know who murdered Helena. I dare not tell Gabriel. He would go after the killer himself.”

“Dear Lord! Well, he has no faith in the police. Can’t say I blame him. Them that aren’t crooked are too lazy by half.”

“Gabriel could never win against this monster. I swear he is not human. He is a monster, a creature directly from the pits of Hell! Gabriel does not understand the danger he is in and I am too much a coward to tell him.”

Betsy sat quiet for a moment. Susan had gone very pale. Beads of sweat had formed on her head. “Then pray for courage, Mrs. Jackman. I think you know you should tell him. The truth always rises and sets us free! Least ways that’s how I see it.”

Susan took a deep breath and let it out very slowly. “I would rather have my son hate me than have him...” Her voice trailed away.

“Would you like me to help you back to bed for a bit, Mrs. Jackman? You be as white as a sheet.”

“Yes, I should try and rest. I did not sleep for more than a few minutes last night.”

Betsy made the older woman comfortable, closed the drapes, took the breakfast tray and left the room.

Gabriel waited until the slow steady breathing of his mother told him she was asleep, then moved out from his hiding place and sat in the armchair. In his nearly thirty years of life this was the first time he had ever heard his mother say that she was proud of him and that she loved him. Was it too little and too late? He decided he would give her time for a short sleep and then put that love to the test. Not too long later, he reached over and touched her hand.

“Gabriel?” She smiled and squinted as he pulled open the drapes. “Oh my! What has happened to your face?”

“Elizabeth Leighton punched me in the eye. She is very high strung.”

“Elizabeth Leighton! I remember her as such a sweet little girl.”

“Well, she is not little any more and occasionally has problems being sweet. But all being said, I might have deserved the punch.”

“I hope you are not running amuck forcing yourself on unwilling females!”

"Not yet but that is most likely just around the corner."

"You did come here in the normal way, not dressed like that."

He shook his head.

"I thought you were not going to 'pop' in like that here. What if the Keaston's find you up here? They will certainly wonder how you got in here."

"I have far more important things on my mind now. Did you really believe I would not find out that it was Sebastian Ridley who killed Helena?"

Her reaction was intense and immediate. She sat, grabbed his arm and held on tightly. "You can not fight him, Gabriel. You must not even try. You do know what he truly is."

"You think that my brother and I are all that different?"

"Of course you are. You are a good man, a Holy man. You are like me. God only knows what sort of dreadful, inhuman creature gave birth to Sebastian."

"She is a dreadful creature. That much is certain but she is all too human. His mother is Cornelia De Wolfe."

For a brief moment, Susan looked at her son as though he was no longer speaking in a language she could understand then shook her head. "Don't be ridiculous! I have known her over thirty years. I know all her children and Sebastian is not one of them."

"Ridley was born when Cornelia was only sixteen years old. She was living with her grandparents. She disappeared for a while and the Ridley family, friends of Desjardin adopted the child. Why else would Cornelia put so much time and money into him?"

"But, Gabriel... Samuel told me she and Sebastian were lovers!"

"And that impossible idea is also fact. To answer your next question, Cornelia knew he was her son. Tell me how long you have known that Ridley killed Helena."

She sighed. "I found out last winter. At the start of Henry Leighton's trial, he wrote to Samuel, asking him to come and see him. Years had passed since Samuel spoke to Henry. I very much did not want Samuel to go but Henry wrote it was a matter of life or death so of course Samuel went to Henry. Henry seemed to know his end was very near and wanted to bare his soul."

"Did he? Well, now you will do the same and tell me all that Leighton had to say." Susan saw the fire in her son's eyes and knew she had no choice.

"After the death of Desjardin Henry ran his own version of the 'Circle'. They had no demon to call on and they did not use sacrifice. Their meetings were little more than Black Masses and orgies. Cornelia brought Sebastian to the meetings; at first when he was only fifteen."

Gabriel nodded. "She also brought Steward and Jane. Jane was just thirteen when Cornelia first gave her to Ridley to do with as he pleased."

Susan closed her eyes briefly as if to block out an unbearable sight.

"Henry told Samuel that he very much needed to see you and that he wrote to you."

"He did. I was busy night and day trying to keep Tony Lucci sane and alive. I had no need to speak with Margaret's murderer."

"Henry was responsible for her death but he did not kill her. On the night that Margaret told Henry their marriage was finished and that she was leaving him for Tony, Henry telephoned Sebastian and asked him to kill her. That is what Sebastian did."

Sebastian will kill and with impunity, only if asked! And Gabriel, Sebastian was also the cause of Ruth De Wolfe's illness and the loss of her baby!"

"What?"

"Did you know that Ruth and Sebastian were lovers before she met Owen?"

"No I did not. Please continue..."

"Henry told Samuel that if Sebastian was capable of human love he had it for Ruth. For some reason that Henry did not know Sebastian ended their affair about a year before Ruth married Owen."

"When it very near the time for Ruth to give birth Sebastian gave her some sort of poison. The child died and she ended up in her wheel chair."

"Why did he poison her? Was it jealousy over Owen?"

"No, I do not think so. It is as I said; he would kill if asked and only if asked."

"Then who asked him to kill Ruth?"

"Cornelia De Wolfe. I know you care about her Gabriel but she can be a brutal and heartless bitch."

"Why would she want Ruth dead?"

"As I told you the other day, Cornelia told Henry that she had been ordered by the ghost of Desjardin to kill the loved ones of the dedicated souls. At that time, Owen loved Ruth. Ruth did not die, obviously and there has not been another attempt to kill her, which may be because Sebastian has 'feelings' for..."

"I need to hear it from you. I need to know the truth. Who told Ridley to kill my wife?" When she did not answer right away, he narrowed his eyes. She backed away as far as possible. Gabriel's face was so close she could feel his breath.

"Cornelia!" Susan gasped. "Who else?"

Gabriel sat back in his chair, silent and hot with rage.

"I am so sorry, Gabriel! It was the same...to kill the loved ones of the dedicated." Gabriel did not respond. Susan did not need to wonder what was on his mind. "You must not confront Sebastian. He is far too powerful. He has the Satan of his father in him. He would surely win over you. As her only parent, you must think of Gabriella."

"Mother!" Gabriel shook his head vehemently, his voice thick with emotion.

"Ridley and I may have two very different mothers but, as you well know we share the same paternal blood. There is little difference between him and me."

"That is not so. You are a man of God, a true man of the Lord. Sebastian is a devil, a maniac and a killer."

"Then tell me what do you think happens to the murderers Lee and I route out? Have you ever wondered about that?"

"Well, you give the evidence to Wesson..."

Gabriel laughed a short and nasty sound. "If there was evidence and a way to get these felons to the courts of mankind they would not be free and in need of my attention." As Gabriel spoke, he stood; he removed his jacket, his cuff links, his shoulder holster, his boots and his belt. "Ridley serves his lord and I serve mine. The effects are the same. I will show you just how much of Desjardin there is inside me. Prepare yourself. Do not be frightened. I will not hurt you." He went to the door, pushed over the bolt lock then went back to the foot of the bed.

"Gabriel? No, please....!"

“Be quiet, watch and learn what I inherited from the man you choose to Father me.” He turned his back on her, lowered his head and let his mind fill with the image of his dead wife.

She watched in silent, horrified fascination as Gabriel changed in shape and size. He grew at least a foot taller, his back and shoulders stretched the cotton of his shirt to its limits. The cuffs of his sleeves then half way up his arms. Thick thigh muscles bulged in his trousers. A terrible smell of unwashed human skin and sulfur filled the small room. Gabriel turned to face his mother.

Susan stifled a scream with the back of her hand. Gone was the delicate, handsome face, in its place was the elongated dog like face of Aamon. He fixed yellow snake eyes on her. He opened his mouth slightly, exposing long needle sharp fangs. Gabriel moaned, rolled his large head and turned it towards the fire that had almost died away. Two beams of light shot from his eyes and the fire roared to life again. He raised his gaze to three candles sticks on the mantle. Their wicks flamed. He moved around the bed, he took up a pewter jug, held it between his thumb and index finger. With no effort, he folded the jug as though it was made of paper. Swinging his head slightly from side to side, he turned his awful eyes back to the terrified woman.

“Hello Susan, it has been a while. I see from your expression that you are not happy to see me. Such a shame! I do like to see my old friends...”

Susan managed a weak whisper. “Gabriel?”

“He is in here somewhere.” The demon pointed to his head and laughed. I come when he calls for me, just as I did for his father. Isn’t it comical? I think so. The demon and the holy man! Gabriel tells Wesson what he knows to be fact. Wesson tells him to do what must be done...then I do it.” Aamon closed his eyes, instantly Gabriel was back as she had always seen him.

Susan groaned and fell back onto her pillows.

“I am sorry I had to do that to you.” Gabriel said as he redressed. “I need the truth and so do you. As I said, I will fight Ridley and believe I will win.”

He came back to the bedside, slid Susan back under the covers and rearranged the pillows under her head. She was in shocked silence, staring blankly and breathing heavy. He lifted her head to face him and locked his amber eyes into hers.

“Relax!” He spoke softly and pushed her messed hair back off her brow. “It will be fine. I promise you.”

Out in the hallway Betsy rattled the door handle. “Mrs. Jackman, are you alright?” She called out. “I can hear a man’s...” She stopped as Gabriel pushed back the bolt and pulled open the door. “Oh, Mr. Jackman! I did not hear you come in!” She looked past him towards the bed.

“Then you must be more vigilant, don’t you think? My mother is going to rest now. In the next day or so I will be sending a coach for her.” He looked back at Susan and she nodded weakly. “My driver will have a check for you. You will be more than satisfied, Betsy!”

“You have already paid us more than we have earned, Mr. Jackman.”

“This is not for what you have done. It is to ensure you will forget you ever set eyes on either of us. You and your household will forget us very quickly, won’t you, Betsy?”

“Never heard of yer!” Betsy smiled, laid her finger along side of her nose and bustled off down the stairs.

Susan felt Gabriel sit on the bed beside her. He put one hand gently on her shoulder. “You should have been at Random House right from the start of this mess. From now on you, Isabelle and Elizabeth are going to do exactly as I say.”

She looked at him over the bedclothes. “Elizabeth? Before...” she paused, recalling a memory that was only a few months old but seemed faded as though years had passed. “I think last winter sometime you told me that you were attracted to Elizabeth. Are you and she...?”

Gabriel smiled. “Lovers? Not yet. But soon, I hope.”

“Gabriel, do you love her?”

His smile faded. “I have her well protected. Ridley will not get anywhere near her.”

This mother sighed, rolled away and closed her eyes. In a moment, she felt his weight lift off her bed. She did not have to look to know he was gone.

Tony found Cornelia dressed for travel and waiting for her carriage in the front foyer.

“Lord!” he said playfully as he came up to her. “I finally found someone and from the looks of it you are off too!”

“Ah, poor Tony! You should have joined Owen, Suzanne, Randall and Elizabeth for their outing. I am sure they would not have minded.”

“Hardly, Cornelia! A fifth wheel is not the role for me.”

“Well, it is beyond me why a man like you spends so much time alone! Take my advice, Anthony Lucci; all you have to do is ask. I am sure a great many females would love to fall at your feet. You would be surprised...and pleased.” Cornelia had always flirted with him in this manner. Up until that moment, he had laughed it off. Then as she leaned close and whispered to him, he saw just how serious she was.

“Perhaps! I guess I shall have to try it and see what happens. With the lack of available women, I guess I will have to settle for Gabriel and Lee. Do you know where they are?”

“No actually, I have not seen either of them since last night. Poor Gabriel! He does so want to get his hand in on Brocks’ investigation. It is for the best though that this matter be left to the professionals.”

“I am going to spend the afternoon with Visalia Hawthorne in Utley. To be honest, she and I will get pleasantly looped and flirt mercilessly with her wonderfully handsome butler.”

“Maybe I will go and see Ruth... or Jane.”

“You might be out of luck there as well. Ruth is having one of her ‘head days’ so Jane is sulking angrily in her bedroom.”

“Head days?”

“She gets migraines and hangs a do not disturb sign on her door. They can last for days. If you go in there you’ll likely have a vase thrown at you, silly cow!”

“Oh. Well, is Ted back yet? He owes me a game or two of chess and he is the only one I can ever beat.”

“Well, my husband is home and is presently working in the study. He and Steward just had their usual argument. Steward wants his allowance so he can go back to London and Theodore insists he stay until Sunday. It is always the same story. That is why I am going to see Visalia. I am so tired of it all. Theodore should just give him the money and let him go about his business. That is what I think!”

Tony smoothed his thick whiskers thoughtfully. “Cornelia, there is something I should tell you.”

“Yes?”

“Yesterday, Jane and I had a very odd conversation. At first, I thought I would keep it to myself but after a night sleep, I think I should tell you or Ted. She sounded so desperate and so completely serious.”

“Lord, what has Jane done now?”

“Not so much what she did but more likely what she might have seen or heard. Does Jane ever get up very early and well...wander about?”

“She does not sleep well. Why?” Cornelia shrugged.

“Well, she was very upset and close to tears when I came across her. I did my best to comfort her and of course, I asked her what was wrong. She let on to me that she knew ‘something’ about the murder of Mrs. Beaver and the other murders. She was vague and confusing. She was contemplating telling what she knew but did not know who to share it with.” He watched Cornelia closely and saw a hardening in her eyes. “I said she must go to Inspector Brock with what she knew immediately.”

“Yes, of course, if she truly knows anything. Unfortunately, Jane lies for attention all the time. I am sure you know that Tony.”

“I do, but she was so completely devastated. She at least believes she knows something. Her reaction to my suggestion that she go to Brock was equally odd. I swear she jumped as though hit. She said she could never do that because Brock was in on it all and that he was being paid to turn a blind eye.”

From the corner of his eye, Tony saw Cornelia lean heavily on the center table. Her usual ruddy complexion turned pale.

When she stayed silent, he continued. “Jane went on to tell me that she was frightened and felt trapped here. She might tell all if she could get away from here first. It could be that she saw whoever it was listening to Gabriel’s conversation with Mrs. Beaver. What do you think?”

“What I think is that Jane has an overactive imagination. You could very easily have misunderstood what she thinks she saw. Either that or she is again playing for attention.”

“Would you like for me to have another word with her?”

“No!” Cornelia answered a little too quickly. Outside in the front courtyard a De Wolfe coach pulled to a halt. “I will talk to her when I get home. If there is anything to it I will go to Inspector Brock. Just, please Tony, do not mention any of that to anyone else. It is so embarrassing when she does these things.”

“I won’t say anything, Connie. I just wanted you to know so you could do what needs to be done.”

She was frowning as she went down the front steps. Tony smiled, waved and the coach pulled away.

Tony was still smiling when Gabriel stepped out of the drawing room “Could you hear it all, Gabriel?”

“Every word! Well done, Tony, you should have been on the stage.”

“Actually I hate to admit it but it was fun to see the bitch begin to sweat.” He laughed. “Must be the dark side coming out in me!”

“No doubt. It never ceases to amaze me just how fast the rats will turn against each other. Now we shall have our talk with Ted.”

“We?”

Gabriel smiled. “Don’t you want to free your soul and not rot in Hell?”

“You cannot tell me you believe that it is possible to ‘give souls to Satan’. It is a load of impossible malarkey!”

“You can heal; I can travel through time and space. The entire world would call that impossible malarkey. I choose to see this matter cleaned up in every detail. You are as much a part of this as I am.”

“Too bad Elizabeth and Owen are not here as well. She is off with Randall. Did you know that?”

Gabriel nodded.

“She is spending a great deal of time with Randall. Does that not bother you?”

“Elizabeth is free to spend her time in any way she sees fit. For now I need him to help protect her.”

“And later?”

“Later she will be busy with me.”

“Leaving for lunch, then off to Whitehall, MP Ridley?”

Sebastian finished buttoning his over coat, arranged his hat turned to his secretary. “No, I am going shopping then to my home.”

“But you never miss Friday voting, sir! Are you not feeling well...if I may ask?”

“I am fine, better than I have been in a very long time and the country will not fail if I miss a Friday vote, will it?” Sebastian paused and looked at the younger man out the corner of his eyes. “Tell me something, Mr. Black.” He took the seat at the front of the secretaries’ desk and leaned on his elbows. “Have I ever told you what a remarkable sense of smell I have?”

“No, I don’t think so!”

“Well, I will tell you now.” Sebastian leaned over the desk and inhaled deeply. Mr. Black backed away slightly. “So, Black you are a vegetarian. I say you have not eaten beef or fowl in years. You drink wine...to excess. You have a dog, an old mutt and a cat. The place where you live was painted not too long ago. Occasionally you use opium. You are a homosexual...”

“No sir! I most certainly am not!”

“Of course you are, Black.” Sebastian smiled and touched the side of his nose. “I can smell that above all else. In fact you have never even touched a woman. You have a new man in your life. I smell a powerful need so I do not think you have actually had sex with him yet but Lord, you want to.”

“I am not...”

“You know, you and I are not really all that different. You cannot allow yourself to be what you really and truly are. If you did, society would see you in prison. It is the

same for me but with more severe consequences. I am not a sodomite but if my true nature ever known they would want to see me swing on a rope. I am tired of a great many things, Black and it is far past time to do something about it.”

Sebastian stood. “I may be back on Monday morning, but maybe not.” He took another shorter sniff at Black and shuddered. “Have second thoughts about that new fuck, Black. Actually, you had better send him packing fast. His syphilis reeks so bad I can smell it from here.”

Tony and Gabriel found Ted dozing and snoring in his desk chair. He startled and sat up quickly as Gabriel and Tony came up to him.

“Tired, Ted?” Gabriel asked.

“I did not have much sleep last night, too many unpleasant things on my mind.”

“Maybe we will soon be able to finish it all. Then we will all sleep much better. I want Tony with us for our talk. His soul is in jeopardy too...according to those who believe.” He and Tony took seats across from Ted.

“You sound as if you do not, Gabriel. I am surprised.”

“There are evil beings in this world of all sorts, that much is obvious. If there is a type of after life, I have never seen anything to prove it. My beliefs right now hardly matter.”

Ted gave Tony and Gabriel expensive cigars and brandies. When they settled Ted began to speak. “Our conversation the other day went very badly. It was my fault and I apologize to you for my foolishness.”

“That is not necessary. We were both hot tempered....”

“It is necessary. I want you to understand that there is a great deal more at stake for me here than regaining lost souls. If this nightmare unfolds as it should, my life will be over. I may have nothing left but to try to maintain some dignity for the futures of Randall, Owen and Jane.”

Gabriel and Tony exchanged glances but stayed silent.

“I fought my own knowledge for so long it has driven me half-mad. That is why I acted poorly. Being away these last few days had given me a chance for clear thought. Now I come home and find another innocent woman dead...! It is well past the time for me to find my balls.”

Almost verbatim Ted repeated his conversation with Percy Beryline. His small audience listened carefully and did not let on that they knew it all.

“So,” Ted continued, “my wife thinks she has bested me every step of the way...perhaps she has but she will not succeed with her ultimate goal. The marriage between Sebastian and Jane will not happen. He will not kill Jane or me and he will not get his hands on my money. I will also free the dedicated souls.”

“You sound like a man with a plan.” Gabriel said when Ted stopped his speech and sat back in his chair.

“No, Gabriel, you are the one with the plan and I very much want to see you succeed. I will help you bring justice to Cornelia and Steward and you will help me free the dedicated souls.”

Of all that Ted might have said this was something that Gabriel did not expect. He was genuinely surprised. “Perhaps you should tell me why you think I have a plan, Ted? What can I do about the so-called lost souls? I truly have no clue.”

Ted smiled. "You are wise not to trust me. Your plan is to stop my murderous, insane son and his unholy mother. You know they are responsible for the terrible murders around here, including the death while I was away of Mrs. Beaver. You also know that it is not likely the laws of the land will ever catch up to them. That is what you do, Gabriel Jackman. You clean up the mess our corrupt system will not. If all works out as I hope you will have your justice and I will free the souls."

A full minute passed before Gabriel spoke. "Ted, you have certainly surprised me. You do play the fool very well. If I did have such plans...well, as you said it would be wise for me not to trust you. Give me a reason why I should."

"I can do that. Am I right in assuming you two are aware of the existence of a demon by the name of Aamon?"

"We do." Gabriel answered quietly.

"I will try and not make this too long and confusing but it is important you know as much as possible about him and his deep connection with Desjardin. I was for all those years Desjardin's right hand man so I am an unhappy wealth of this information. The benefits that came to the members of the 'Circle of Mendes' came directly from Aamon."

"He needed to be pleased and very often. His pleasure came in young human females. These he would rape and kill, in either order. He preferred virgins and of course, they were not the street prostitutes. When ever possible we would give him just what he wanted, although it was so much easier and safer to get whores."

"Desjardin and his helper, an imbecile by the name of Bob, traveled the country to obtain these girls. Unscrupulous madams with access to virgin females were the main source. Most of the time, Bob would go off on his own, from city to town, and hire a suitable prostitute...as young and as pretty as possible. Virgin or whore he brought to the grotto and each was murdered. This went on for almost twenty-five years, so you can imagine how many victims there were!"

Ted stood and lifted a painting from the wall. Behind it was a wall safe. He opened it, brought out a very large, leather bound book and placed it on the desk. "You have two of Henry Leighton's diaries. They pale in comparison to what I have finally obtained. In his later years, Desjardin compiled his own journals into one very large and detailed manuscript. Unlike Henry's diaries, there are no initials, no obscure references to whom might have done what. Every foul deed committed by Henry, Samuel, our wives, myself and many others is down in very clear language. The facts, times places, names of the prostitutes and innocents we murdered...even the cities they lived in and the places they were buried, are all there."

"For two years Desjardin used this as a source of blackmail against the richest of the Circle members." Ted shrugged. "So Henry, Samuel and I killed him. Unfortunately, we were unable to find the book. It has taken many years and a small fortune but Percy has finally found the thing and gave it to me yesterday. This is it." He handed the book to Gabriel.

Gabriel, with Tony looking over his shoulder, read the first few pages. He flipped to the middle read some more and then the last pages. "Well, Ted, you were certainly a very busy man." Gabriel spoke, his voice thick with disgust.

“You may hate me for my sins but it will be no more than I hate myself. Very nearly, every page contains the deeds and workings of Cornelia and me. I need to know if this would be enough evidence for you to bring the authorities.”

“If the facts check out, that being the missing females and finding their buried bodies, it would be enough to hang her, you and any other remaining members of the Circle.”

Ted gave an ironic laugh. “Of all the members still living at the time of Desjardin’s death only Cornelia and I are still breathing. I give you the book so that you may use it if I fail in any way to do what I will promise you here. Cornelia is away visiting a friend for the day. When she returns I will kill her. I claim the right to her death because of the loss of my Sarah, for the insanity she brought to Steward by ordering him to do the mountain murders. That done then I will take my own life. I will leave behind a letter of confession to all that is in that book and the killing of my wife.”

“Are you too much of a coward to face the hangman?” Tony asked.

“No, I am not. This would serve justice and I would take it, as I deserve no less. However, my death that way would be a terrible waste. I am the last living father of a soul dedicated by Desjardin’s coven. I can do a ritual. It is a simple thing. Once done it frees all the souls ever dedicated by Desjardin. Anniversaries are very important to the dark side just as they are to the light side. My death, at my own hand will only free the souls if it comes as the clock strikes midnight on the anniversary of Desjardin’s death. That midnight is this one coming.”

Gabriel refilled their glasses. “So you and Cornelia are the last living members of that coven and all the members must die. What will happen to people who quit the coven? Surely there must be some who did?”

“You may check with the death records, if you wish, Gabriel and you will find that every one listed in any manner in that book is now dead...with the exception of Cornelia and me.”

“Did Cornelia have them all killed?”

“No. Age and time took down most of them. However I am sure that at least some of them fall down to her.”

“I see. Tell me what makes you think Cornelia and Steward killed those women?”

“I don’t think it; I know it to be fact. I do admit to being very blind to it all until Daisy died. The day she died Daisy came to me. She told me she had just spoken to Randall but that he had not listened to her. She told me that Steward had been abusing her. I knew she was not lying because I had once seen him with her. Although it certainly seemed to me at the time, that she was a very willing participant. It was because of that that I did not truly believe her when she told me she was afraid Steward was going to kill her. A few hours later she ‘fell’ from the attic window.”

“Then I began to listen to and watch Cornelia and Steward whenever I could. I have no doubt she told him to kill those women and he did. I was waiting for the book from Beryline before doing anything about it. I needed to be certain about what I had to do to free the souls. That information is located on a page I have marked for you. It is a bloody shame though because if I had not waited Mrs. Beaver might still be alive.”

“That is most likely a fact. Where was this book all these years?” Gabriel asked.

“Desjardin had several homes and properties in France and Italy. Percy and I believed the book lay hidden on one of these properties. We searched off and on for years. When I learned the truth about Cornelia and Steward, I knew I had to finally stop them because it was not likely justice would come to them any other way. I stirred Percy back into action. He found the book hidden in the cellar wall of a long forgotten Desjardin house in the French countryside.”

“So, Gabriel...Tony, will I be given the time to clean up my mess and free your souls from the hand of Satan? If I fail to do any of it, that book will hang my wife and me. You can do as you please with Steward.”

Gabriel glanced at Tony. Tony read the silent question and nodded his agreement.

“I am sorry Ted but there is still something you do not know and should.”

Gabriel was interrupted when a maid knocked lightly on the door and opened it. “Excuse me, Mr. De Wolfe but there is a very important telephone call for Mr. Jackman from Mr. Woo.”

“Damn!” Gabriel stood. He knew Lee would not call for a slight reason. A sense of dread ran through him. “I will take it on the main floor hall. Tony, will you tell Ted?”

Tony nodded and waited until Gabriel closed the study door before he began to speak.

“Cornelia did tell Steward to kill and he did as he was told but he was not alone.”

“What? I do not understand.”

“For every murder and in every aspect of the murders he had a willing helper in Jane.”

Ted stood slowly, his face turned red with anger. “That is a lie.”

Tony sighed. “Ted, you and I have been friends for as long as I can remember. I have no reason to lie to you.”

“No, Tony. Jane is spoiled and neglected but she is not like them!”

“Christ Ted, you said you had been watching Steward. Was it not close enough to see his comings and goings with Ruth?”

“Now what are you getting at?”

“A few years back Ruth and Steward began an affair. He demanded things she was not happy with especially when he wanted to bring Jane into Ruth’s bed. When Ruth refused, he began to use drugs on her to gain her compliance. That drug was cocaine and now she is thoroughly addicted. When she is in the throws of the drug Steward and Jane do what they want with her.”

“Ruth takes on Jane because she wants to.”

“So you are at least wise to that end of it. However, Ruth hates Jane. She accepts Jane simply because Jane helps to protect her from the very nasty side of Steward.”

“Ruth is a liar. You know that. She will do or say anything to cause Owen misery and embarrassment. Shall we go and confront the bitch, Tony?”

“She is no longer here. Last night, after she told this disgusting story to a group of us we took her to a safe place...far from Jane and Steward. The things she knows could only have come from Jane. Steward is mad but he is not stupid enough to tell anyone what Ruth knows.”

Ted breathed heavily and leaned on his desk. “Jane is a good girl.” His voice was barely a whisper.

“Perhaps she might have been ‘a good girl’ if she had not spent her tender years being abused in every way possible by her brother and her mother but she is far from ‘good’ now Ted. More than once she has offered herself to me and I think you will find the same stands for Gabriel or any man who might give her attention.”

Ted shook his head and slipped back into her chair. “Nothing will ever...” Ted stopped as Gabriel returned.

“What is it?” Tony asked seeing the distress on Gabriel’s face. “What has happened now?”

“It’s Isabelle! She is missing from Random house.”

“Oh God!” Tony stood and stepped in front of Gabriel. “You told me she was safe.”

“She was and still would be if she had not been foolish enough to sneak out twice yesterday. The second time, sometime after ten pm, she never returned. Lee just found one of Sebastian Ridley’s half-burnt business cards on the floor of her room. Somehow, Ridley has been able to lure her away.”

“Fuck and hell, Gabriel! Could he know about the baby?”

“What baby?” Ted asked. “Gabriel, you haven’t got her pregnant have you?”

“Yes, I have!” Gabriel snapped at Ted. “We all make bloody mistakes, don’t we Ted?”

“But you are no longer in love with Isabelle. Everyone who knows you knows that.”

“That will not matter, Tony,” Ted said, “Not if Ridley finds out about the child. A child is a loved one. If he has had her since last night I doubt very much she is still alive.”

Gabriel turned on the older man, pulling him to his feet by his clothes. “You know so much about this fucking madness, these are your matters as much as mine. Why the need to kill the ones we love?”

Ted pushed Gabriel away. “Your souls belong to Satan. Pure, real love is not acceptable. Along with that what better way to turn a man to the darkness and to keep him there than to take away those he loves. Any child or woman loved by you, Owen, Tony or man and child by Elizabeth will always be in grave danger. That is until tomorrow night and I do what I have to do.”

Gabriel growled. “I should blow your brains out right now.”

“Go ahead. Then kill Cornelia, Steward and Sebastian. All of Desjardin’s coven will be gone. However, I warn the two of you never to love again because you will only be giving those females a death warrant.”

Tony pulled Gabriel by the arm away from Ted. “Right now we have to concentrate on finding Isabelle. If she is still alive we have to find out where she is.”

“He was looking to buy a new house...one in the country. I think he bought one.” Ted spoke quickly.

Gabriel turned back to Ted. “Where is this house?”

“I don’t know. I know he was looking for a place. I set up the bank account for him to buy a home. I only asked him that it be near by here so that we could easily see Jane when they were married. If anyone knows where it is, Cornelia will. I can force the location out of her when she returns tonight.”

Gabriel thought for a moment then turned to Tony. "Did you tell him about his sweet little girl?"

"I did. He doesn't believe me."

"Jane is not a murderess. Nothing either of you say will convince me of that."

"Is that so, Ted?"

"Yes, Gabriel, it is so!"

"Then you need to hear it from a more knowledgeable source, later. Before you kill Cornelia, I want a few words with her. She will tell you about Jane and more. Be sure that I have that opportunity, Ted. I have to leave here for a while but tonight you will hear what you need."

"Tony, Elizabeth and the others are back from their outing. Find some way to get Suzanne away from Owen and tell them all what has happened to day. I will be back as soon as I am able."

"Where has he gone?" Ted asked once Gabriel left the study.

"Where else, Ted, to try and rescue Isabelle. If anything happens to her or Gabriel..."

Ted rolled his eyes and fell back into his chair. "Are you really all so blind? Is the writing on the wall so hard for you to see?"

"Yes it is! Why not read it to me. Ted?"

"I was with Desjardin the night that Samuel told him he had succeeded getting Susan pregnant with Gabriel. Samuel was ecstatic. Desjardin was subdued and that was very much not like him. Later I asked him what was wrong. He said only that he had looked into Susan's eyes and seen the end of everything he had created."

"I asked him if he was going to kill Susan before the child was born. He said it would be pointless and impossible because it was written and unbreakable. I never did know just what he meant."

"A few years later I asked Desjardin why he was not interested in Gabriel as he was in Sebastian. There was no aspect of Sebastian's life that Desjardin did not control. Gabriel was his child and Desjardin refused to see him. He answered that between himself and his daughter, Serena they had created powerful servants of God. It made no sense to me then but now...! Together you and Gabriel cannot fail but I wonder how many more people will die before you and he realize that."

Gabriel locked his bedroom doors, hid Desjardin's book, sat quietly and did his best to relax. Lee told him that he had called Ridley house and learned that as it was Friday the MP would be busy all day at Whitehall.

In his mind, he went back four Christmas's. Ted, Cornelia, Helena and he had gone to a party at the Ridley home. He blocked the image of Helena dancing in Ridley's arms, smiling up at the face of the man who would torture and kill her. He concentrated on the areas of the house he saw that night. Past the end of the long great room there was a curtained alcove and beyond that a ladies powder room. He decided that was where he would arrive. If Sebastian were at home, he would not likely be in that room. If there was any female in there, well, she was in for the surprise of a lifetime.

From the sitting room next door, he heard the sound of Elizabeth and Randall laughing. Gabriel closed his eyes and when he opened them, he was alone in the small dark powder room. He stepped quietly out into the alcove and peered through the curtains. There was no one in the great room. He crossed the room to the closed door to

the hallway. He opened one door slightly and listened. He heard the voices of two women coming down the hall from the kitchen.

"If yer leaving now, Lovie, I'll walk along as yer go. Got to get to the shops and get me old man's dinner or he'll 'ave another fit on me."

"It's after two and ten to two is all Mr. Ridley pays me for. Mind though, I did more than my share today. You should have seen the mess of vomit on the front room floor!"

"What?"

"Big, stinkin' puddle it was, too! I 'ate to think of how it got there! On the floor not to far away were a pretty ladies purse."

"Maybe Mr. Ridley will tell you what 'appened when you give 'im the purse."

"Like as 'eck! I don't say no more to 'im than I have to. I left it on his drinks cabinet. First place he goes when he comes home."

The other women laughed. "He does like 'is booze, that one does! Mind you, he isn't half 'andsome. All that money and 'is looks you'd think he 'ave a wife. Come along, let's not twaddle on gossip."

Gabriel heard the back door close and watched from the window as the two housekeepers went down the laneway and disappeared down the street. He went to the drinks cabinet and picked up the black sequined purse. He recognized it as Isabelle's immediately. It was one of her favorites and she used it often. He opened it and took out the only thing inside, the small, sharp paring knife.

He knew then that she must have come there to kill Ridley. "God, Isabelle!" He sighed, shook his head, put the knife back in the purse and the purse in his jacket pocket.

For over an hour, he searched Sebastian's home.

In the master bedroom, on the night table was a photo of Ruth, framed in gold. Written near the bottom was 'For my love, as we wait for happier days.' Between the photo and the glass was a lock of blond hair tied in a ribbon.

In the bottom dresser drawer, he came across a pack of letters from Ruth. They were carefully wrapped in silk and tied with a leather strap. He read several of the latest letters. They were the passionate thoughts, needs and fears of a woman who was very much in love. He put the letters in his jacket.

He searched through the rest of the drawers. He found nothing more of interest, nothing in connection with a newly purchased home.

Hanging behind the master bedroom door Gabriel found a holster and gun. He smiled, emptied the bullets and put the gun back in the holster. "Might be glad I did that not too far from now!" He muttered to himself.

The attic was a mess of cluttered dusk covered boxes. A thick undisturbed layer of dust covered the floor. It was obvious no one had been up there for a very long time so he did not waste much time there.

He found the door to the cellar just off the side of the kitchen. In less than a minute, he had the locked door open. Unlike the attic, the cellar was tidy. However, for a few pieces of disused furniture, a trunk and a wall of shelves with old books the large space was empty. Once again, the layer of dust on the books told him months at least had passed since anything they been disturbed.

Gabriel saved the study for last. This room he searched thoroughly. He looked through every drawer. Any locked drawer was quickly opened. He came across a large

double-sided folder, bills on one side, and receipts on the other. It seemed that Sebastian had very expensive tastes in food, alcohol, clothes and females, according to the amount of money spend on jewelry and flowers. Gabriel doubted any of those gifts went to Jane. From the receipts, it also seemed he paid all his bills on time.

Underneath that folder was a leather envelope and in it two current bank account books and several going back for years. From the oldest book to the most recent there was a monthly deposit of 500 pounds and that, no doubt was from Cornelia. The second book was an account of one deposit of 5,000 pounds made only six weeks before. Under the Ridley's name and the account number was, 'PSA account'. Gabriel knew the initials stood for 'Privately Supervised Account. The account was Ridley's but the money was under the control of another person.

In another locked drawer, he found large stack of paper money and another gun. That gun he also emptied.

Gabriel then turned his attention to a letter on the desktop. He recognized Ridley's handwriting and dated the day before.

Dear Celeste,

Dec 4, 1900

I have decided that it is far past time for us to end our long-standing connections. I have no doubt that this will be the cause of some pain and confusion for you but I am also sure that in time you will see the wisdom of my decision.

I admit that I will miss certain aspects and the funds you give me but your controlling nature costs me more than I receive from you. Our recent arguments brought me to this sad conclusion. We no longer have anything in common and I am weary of you. With all that, I hope you will understand that unless you and I or members of your family meet by accident socially, we should have no contact what so ever.

I appreciate the kindness you have shown me over the years and will keep a fond place for you in my heart. It will cost me to move on from you but it must be.

Sincerely, Sebastian

Gabriel laughed. "Oh, fucking hell, Ridley! There is a high hand that guides me after all. This is exactly what the doctor ordered."

He searched around for the things he would need to alter the letter. First, he took a ruler, pencil and scissors and very carefully cut away the heading and date. The body of the letter was far enough down that the placement still looked fine.

Sebastian's handwriting was simple, small and without flourish. Gabriel practiced writing 'Cornelia' in his style several times and with the same pen and ink as the rest of the letter he successfully wrote her name at the top of the page.

Gabriel lit a candle, folded the paper and slipped it into an envelope. He melted a few drops of sealing wax and sealed the envelope with the Ridley seal. When the wax was dry, he put the letter in his pocket. He put the room back exactly the way he found it. He had not found the location of the country home but his visit was well worth the time and effort.

Several moments later, he stepped out of his garden shed and frowned at the startled guards. "Any problems...other than losing Mrs. Lucci?" he asked.

"No sir!" The elder of the two answered quickly. "We all are so very sorry about that, Mr. Jackman. How was we supposed to know she was gonna do a bunk like that?"

"Useless pieces of shit! Stay on the ball."

In the house, he found Sue Lyn and Lee sitting in the front room. Gabriella was asleep on a settee by the fire. From the look on their faces, Gabriel did not have to ask if there had been any news on Isabelle.

"Any luck at Ridley's?" Lee whispered.

"No but Isabelle was there. There is no doubt on that. He is not stupid enough to keep her there for too long." Gabriel sat at the letter desk, wrote on the paper and handed it to Lee. "This is the address where I have been keeping my mother. Please send a carriage there for her tomorrow morning."

"She is willing to come out of hiding?" Lee asked with surprise.

"She has no choice." Gabriel smiled and looked at Sue Lyn. "I am sorry to put all this on you, Sue Lyn. It will all be over with soon enough."

"No Gabriel. It is not a problem for me. Just please find Isabelle and stay safe."

He nodded. "I want to speak to Ruth. Does she know that Isabelle is gone?"

Sue Lyn took the key to Ruth's bedroom from her pocket and handed it to Gabriel. "No we decided not to tell her. I have brought her all her meals so she has not spoken to anyone but me."

"Speaking of meals, I have not eaten a bloody thing all day. Would you have cook make up some sandwiches for me." Gabriel smiled down on his daughter. "Is she behaving herself?"

Sue Lyn nodded. "She is always an angel, Gabriel, but she is asking for you."

"Poor little sparrows fart. There is so much she does not understand and much more she must never know. I will spend some time with her before I go back to the manor."

Gabriel nodded to Lee to follow him out into the hallway. He quickly explained to Lee all that had passed that day at Wolfe manor.

"Do you believe Ted?" Lee asked dubiously. "Would he really kill Cornelia and take his own life? What about Steward and Jane?"

"All very good questions, Lee. I would not trust the old bastard as far as I could throw him but he did give me the book. He refuses to believe that Jane had anything to do with the murders. We will see. Right now I am focused on Isabelle."

Ruth was standing by the window of the bedroom when Gabriel entered. Sue Lyn had helped her bathe and wash her hair. It hung loose like a golden shawl across her shoulders. She turned and smiled at Gabriel. She reminded him of the beautiful women she had been and clearly still was. Was the shadow of Steward and Jane already lifting off her?

"I have been standing and walking all day, Gabriel!" She said excitedly. "Maybe this time it is permanent."

"Let's hope so Ruth. Did you take your needle today?"

"No. I may have to soon though but I will put it off an extra hour every day. That will help."

"I am sure it will. I need to know where Ridley's country home is."

“Why?” She asked. Her smile faded.

“Last night he abducted Isabelle. I have to find her and that hopefully before he harms her. There is something else you should know. This will hurt, Ruth but you will never heal without the truth. When you lost your baby, well, that was because Ridley poisoned you and of course he did that because Cornelia told him to.”

Ruth moaned. It was the long, terrible sound of hope ending.

“Listen to me. I know you love him. However, he is not the man you think he is! Surely you see that?”

“Yes, I do. I have fought so hard to stay blind to it all!”

“Do you know where his new home is?”

“No. I swear I do not know. Could you find where it is through the Land Registry? Aren’t these files open to the public?”

“Yes but unfortunately they are not open on Fridays. I cannot just wait until Monday. If he hasn’t already killed Isabelle I doubt he will keep her waiting around until next week.”

Ruth sighed, shuddered and lay down on the bed. “I doubt he will kill Isabelle. He often told me how beautiful he thought she was. He said that one day he would take her from you. He would often say things to hurt me. Now, with the way things are Sebastian will be able to sense that you do not love her.”

“So you do know about all that?”

“There is no point in pretending any more. Yes, Jane told me. The stupid, fat bitch told me everything! As I said, I tried very hard not to believe her. Up until now I had succeeded. Jane said that Sebastian does not like to kill and tries to fight the urge. He does it because he has to...if someone tells him to kill.”

“What happened to him if does not answer the call to kill?”

“Who knows? As far as I can tell, from what Jane told me, he has never fought the call. She rose up on one elbow. Tears ran down her face. “You are going to kill Sebastian, aren’t you? Of course you are! I know how much you loved Helena. Helena and Margaret were kind, decent women. They did not deserve what Sebastian did to them. You must kill him!”

Gabriel nodded, sat on the bed and put his arm on her shoulder. She was trembling. He could feel the heat of her skin through her dress. She was burning up. “Do you want me to help you with your needle?” He asked softly.

“No. I could not bear to have you see me that way. I will be fine on my own.”

He was at the door when Ruth called to him. “Gabriel, please be very careful. You must succeed.”

Chapter Fifteen

Isabelle was dreaming. She stood beside a pot-bellied stove. Despite the roaring fire, the room was cold. A small female child sat curled under a bright yellow lace shawl on a large rocking chair. Shiny black curls framed the child's sleeping face. Such a pretty girl, Isabelle thought. The small face was familiar but the knowledge of just who she was, stayed just beyond reach.

Not in the room but not too far away, a baby cried. The child stirred. She would wake if something did not quiet the baby. A door opened, someone holding the crying baby stood in silhouette. The sleeping girl woke. She sat up quickly, looked at Isabelle and screamed.

At the sound of her own scream, Isabelle woke. She tried to sit, the pain from the wrist cuff pulled her back to the pillow. She looked at the handcuff, lifted the covers and saw her naked body. Fear slipped in with the confusion that clouded her mind. She sat slowly, holding the covers up to her chin and peered into the darkness. Across the large room, she saw the silhouette of a man standing in the doorway.

"That is some scream you have, Isabelle!" He put his pistol down on a dresser, turned up a gas lamp and walked across to the bed. "I heard you two floors down. But at least you are finally awake."

"Where am I?" Isabelle whispered, holding the blankets and pushing back against the headboard.

"You are in my very new and beautiful home. Mind you, I bought it furnished and it is not really my taste." Sebastian answered. He smiled and glanced around the room. "What do you think?"

She looked around the large, masculine room and slid back onto the pillows. "God, I feel so sick. You poisoned me!"

"No, I did not. However, I may have given you too much sedative." He sat on the bedside. "You have a hangover. It will pass. In addition, you could not have eaten for almost twenty-four hours. I am not much of a cook but I will bring you some supper later and you will eat all of it."

"What kind of a madman feeds his victim before he kills her?"

"It is not my plan to kill you, Isabelle." Sebastian turned his cold, pale blue eyes on her. "But keep in mind that I do not suffer fools for too long. You made a serious mistake coming to me. You hoped to trick me or worse." He laughed but there was no humor in the sound. "At first I was furious then I realized how pathetic it was. You were not thinking, you were acting out of desperation and unrequited passion for Gabriel."

"I am not desperate...I love Gabriel and he loves me!"

"As I just said, I do not suffer fools well. In Gabriel's mind, body and soul I am his sworn enemy. Believe me when he learns of our intimate experience, when he learns the man he hates most in this world has been inside you...he will never go there again."

"You raped me. How can he blame me for that?"

"It was an act of sex that in the few moments before I entered you, you very much wanted. That is not rape. However, you believe what you want. In the quiet place in the back of your mind, you know the truth."

"I don't care what you say. Gabriel will find out where you are. He will come here and kill you. That is all that matters."

"Yes, he will be here eventually, I am sure of that. It is far past time for him and me to put matters to rest. Do not be too sure on who will kill whom, Isabelle. Gabriel has a powerful helper but his pride makes him too weak. I am not burdened with foolish human pride. I will use all I have without hesitation."

"You have nothing, Sebastian." Isabelle tried to hit out at him but the handcuff that secured her to the bed kept her from reaching him. "Compared to Gabriel...you are nothing."

He smiled and pulled the blanket away from her breasts.

She yanked it back again. "Pig!"

Sebastian stood and threw the blankets on to the floor. He lifted a set of handcuffs already attached to the foot board, pulled her down by the foot and snapped the cuff around her ankle.

"Is that the only way you get sex?" She yelled at him. "With chain and rape? It is true. You are nothing! Gabriel will win."

He opened the buttons of his shirt and took it off. The black stocking wrapped and tied around his arm. He looked down at it and then smiled at Isabelle. "Are you sure you want to fight me?" He removed his boots and trousers.

"Sebastian, please do not do this!"

The blazing fire and single gas lamp went instantly black. The temperature of the room began to drop.

Isabelle closed her eyes. She stayed still as Sebastian laid on top of her, his skin searing hot on hers.

"Why not, Isabelle? I know I pleased you last night. Do you not want to feel that way again? I do!"

He held her head with his hands, lightly touched his lips against hers and whispered. "Who was your father, Isabelle? Was he a baker, named Paulo? A simple man with eight children? A devout man who went to mass every day." The French doors leading onto the balcony blew open, a frozen wind swirled around the bed.

He kissed her with growing passion, slid his hands down over her breasts, pushed her legs open. He pushed his head against hers making her turn to the open doors and again began his whispering. "Was your father a righteous man? He is long dead and rotting in the ground?"

Isabelle watched as a thick, black cloud carried by the wind settled by the bed. It grew solid taking a human shape. She gasped with fear and pain as Sebastian pushed inside her. "What would your father do if he was here now? Would he help you...or me?"

The shadow took on a more distinct form. She could make out a black cape, long white hair and eyes that glowed red. A scream rose in her throat. Sebastian put his mouth over hers, the sound of the scream passed from her into him.

"This," he panted into her ear and held her hips to move with his, "is my father. And believe me, he is not here to help you."

It was late afternoon when Gabriel returned to the De Wolfe manor. He stepped from his bedroom into the sitting room to find Suzanne standing impatiently at the doorway.

"Well!" She put her hands on her hips and frowned up at him. "I knew you were in there. Why didn't you answer my knock?"

"I was asleep. You know what a heavy sleeper I am."

"I have hardly seen you for one minute since you brought me here." As she spoke, Gabriel opened the door to Elizabeth's room, saw that she was not there then closed the door. "May I please have your attention, Gabriel? I have to talk to you about something important."

"I am sorry, Suzanne. I have a lot on my mind." He sat on the settee.

"Yes and your mind is full with things other than me!" She pushed some of her blond curls into place and sat next to him. "I have to tell you something and I want you not to go and make trouble."

"I do not make trouble; it just seems to follow me around. What do you have to tell me?"

"I have decided that we cannot be lovers any more."

He resisted the urge to smile. "Why is that?"

"I have found someone else. I think he likes me more than you and he has time to keep me happy."

"I assume you are talking about Owen?"

"How did you know?"

"He has been sniffing around you like a randy puppy dog and you are obviously rather pleased to have him do that. You are not one who hides her feelings, my dear."

"You do not seem to be very upset!" She pouted at him.

"Well, make up your mind. Do you want me to be angry and 'make trouble' or not? Look, Suzie, are you happy with Owen?"

"Yes, very much. He is a wonderful lover."

Gabriel winced. "That is more than I need to know. If you are happy, that is all that is important to me. Owen is a very good friend to me and if you are making him happy too, then I approve of your choice."

She smiled and kissed his cheek.

"But," he continued, "if I am not getting anymore of your loveliness you do know that there will be no more monthly checks."

"Of course. I am not silly, you know. Owen is going to put me in his London flat. It will all work out very nicely. And," she glanced at Elizabeth's door, "now you are free to chase after your red headed friend."

"You think I am interested in her?"

"You also act the randy puppy dog when she is in the room. You have a problem with her though, Gabriel."

"In what way?"

"Well, I spent most of the day with her and Randall. He likes her a lot. He is not all hands and lips like you. He seduces with charm and flattery and that is a powerful thing. She likes him in return. If you want her for yourself, you had better make yourself

known to her or she will take him. She is thinking about it already. That was very clear to me and Owen today.”

“You do not think she will approve of me being ‘all lips and hands’?”

“Lips and hands have their place but a woman needs to see what is in a man’s mind as well as what is in his trousers.”

Gabriel laughed. “I will miss your outspokenness!”

“But we will always be friends...please, we must be friends.”

“Yes, we are going to stay friends. I may need your advice on what a woman needs.”

“Good and you must ask me. You will need my help to keep Elizabeth out of Randall’s bed. Now I must go and dress for dinner.”

“Where is Owen? I suppose I should put his mind at rest about you and me.”

“He is in his studio.” She kissed him again and fluttered out of the room.

Gabriel found Owen sorting through a stack of sketchbooks.

“You look like a man with a fair bit on his mind.” Owen said as Gabriel approached.

“I have just been graciously cast aside by Suzanne.”

“Oh!” Owen smiled. “She told me she was going to speak to you. She was very afraid you would ‘punch me in the nose’.”

“Treat her well, Owen. As well as a beautiful body and expensive tastes she has a very large heart and it would break easily.”

“Don’t worry. I rather fancy her. I think I will keep her for as long as I can. You do not look happy. I assume that means you have not had luck over Isabelle.”

“So Tony had a chance to speak with you. Did he also tell Elizabeth and Randall?”

“Yes. Poor Isabelle! I do not understand how Ridley was able to get at her.”

“Isabelle went to him.”

“Shit! Why in God’s name?”

“She told me earlier that she would go to him and try and pick up whatever might be in his mind. I told that was out of the question. That female never listens to anything I tell her.” Gabriel pushed his hands through his hair. “Perhaps she thought she could kill him. I found her purse in his house this afternoon. The only thing in it was a small kitchen knife.”

Owen closed his eyes and shook his head. “She has always been headstrong and impulsive. What are we going to do about it?”

“Those of you who pray need to do so. Ridley has obviously moved her somewhere. I heard that he recently bought some house in the country. Do you know where it is?”

“I did not know he had one. If anyone knows, it will be my mother. Maybe you and I should go and put the fear of God into her.”

“Cornelia is not here. She left this morning.” Gabriel stopped, took a deep breath and looked steadily into the eyes of his life long friend.

Owen looked away. “What else is there I should know?”

“I have been able to verify most of what Ruth told us last night...”

“How?”

“From my mother. She did not die in the fire. Since that time I have kept her hidden at her insistence. She finally confessed to me that she has actually been hiding from Cornelia. I learned more that you should know. Six years ago, Cornelia told Ridley to poison Ruth. It seems he always does just as she says. That is the reason for your child being still born and Ruth’s illness. He is responsible for that as well as the deaths of Helena and Margaret. He killed Helena on instructions from your mother and Margaret on instruction from Henry.”

For a long while Owen did not speak. He stood stiff and silent, looking out the window. When he turned back to his friend; his voice was harsh with rage. “Do you know why?”

Gabriel shrugged. “Something about killing the loved ones of those dedicated.”

“Then it seems to me that more people will soon meet their ends and that the sooner the better. I want a dog in this fight, Gabriel. I will help you in any way you need.”

“Good! With Lee in London to see to Sue Lyn and Gabriella, I will be calling on you for help, you can be sure of that.”

“I am sorry for the pain my mother has caused you. I know how much you loved Helena. Just as I once loved Ruth. Did you know the baby was a girl?”

“No.”

“We named her Mary Rose after Ruth’s mother. She was perfect...beautiful. She had light yellow hair like Ruth. We buried her in the family cemetery. I watched my mother cry over the grave. Gabriel...put the bitch down, if that is your plan, because if she is still breathing this time tomorrow I will kill her myself.”

“Cornelia De Wolfe is a woman in her last hours, Owen. Now, do you know where Elizabeth is?”

“She is with Randall and Tony in the games room. Randall was going to teach her how to play snooker. As you wanted, he is not letting her out of his sight.”

“How helpful of him!” Gabriel muttered with sarcasm.

Jane was asleep on her bed and snoring nosily as Gabriel crossed her room. He lit the gas lamps and nudged the foot of her bed. She rolled over and blinked up at him.

“Gabriel?”

“Shouldn’t you be getting dressed for dinner?”

“I am not hungry. Go away! I want to be alone.”

“That is not like you, Jane. You are usually the first one at the dinner table. Aren’t you at least going to bring a tray to Ruth?”

Jane sat up, her eyes swollen from crying. “She has a headache. She won’t see me or eat until it goes away.”

Gabriel sat on the side of the bed. “If something is wrong perhaps you should talk about it!”

“Everything is wrong! All I want is to be happy. They won’t let me. They all hate me and I hate them.”

“Who do you hate?”

“My family that is who! Do this, do that and when I do it they still tell me to go away.”

“Have you told Sebastian how unhappy you are?”

“Oh!” She threw her hands up in the air. “He is the worst of them all. All he thinks about is keeping Mommy happy. I will tell him he should marry her! He doesn’t care in the slightest about making me happy.” She narrowed her eyes and moved closer to Gabriel. “Do you know what he did?”

“No.”

“He told me I could have Ruth come and live with us so I won’t be lonely. Now, he has changed his mind and said I cannot even be friends with her. He is just jealous.”

“Why would he be jealous?”

She smiled. “Because Ruth loves me and I love her far more than I love him.”

“Are you sure about that Jane?”

The smile slipped away. “Yes!” She paused. “Sure about what?”

“Are you sure that Ruth loves you?”

“She is the only person in the world who does. Mommy says she will give me Janet but I am so tired of doing just what everyone else wants! I do not care what Mommy and Sebastian say. I am going to be with Ruth!”

“I don’t mean to add to your misery but it is time for you to know the truth.” He reached into his jacket and brought the half-dozen letters he had taken from Ridley’s home and placed them on the bed. “The one on the top will tell you all you need to know.”

She looked at the letters and clearly recognized the handwriting but did not pick any of them up. “What are they?” She asked quietly.

“Love letters from Ruth to Ridley. Do you not want to read them?”

“No!”

He took the top letter and opened it. “Then I will read it to you. Ruth wrote this letter just one week ago.”

“Dear Sebastian,

Thank you so much for your last letter. Your beautiful words buoy me as much as your visits. It came today at just the right time and helped to dry my tears.

I had to endure yet another long morning with Jane. I know you tell me I have the strength to deal with her for the time being and I will do so but it is such a nightmare. Your delightful surprise visits in the middle of the night are the sunshine for these dark days.’”

“There!” Jane interrupted. “That proves it. These letters are not from Ruth. It is a lie just to hurt me. Sebastian does not come here in the middle of the night. How could he? He lives hours from here. Steward wrote that letter. He can do anyone’s handwriting. You should see the way he forges checks to Daddy’s bank accounts!”

“Christ, Jane! Think about it. Why would Steward make up all this and send the letters to Ridley? Does that make any sense? For that matter, why would Ridley keep the letters if they were not from Ruth? Believe me; Ridley does come here whenever he wants to. Now, be quiet and listen to the rest of it.”

“Sebastian, no one knows more than you do that I am not a lesbian. I am sick to my very soul every time she touches me. You are right that she protects me from Steward. Nevertheless, it is so very hard to take their perversions. The only thing that keeps me going is the firm knowledge that one day we will be together and only with each other

forever. When times are at the darkest I remember your beautiful face and gentle touch and the powerful love I have for you makes my heart fly.'

'I know and understand how much your ambition to be Prime Minister drives you. And what a wonderful leader you will make for our country. You will bring power and glory back to this great land.'

'You need Cornelia's money and power, without that you may not receive that which should be your destiny. It is my part to keep Jane happy so she will not reject marriage to you so for all that and for the love of you, I endure the idiot Jane and her mad brother. I count each day until you and Jane are finally married and I will be free of her and living in London.'

'My heart will ache knowing that you have to sleep with her so much more than now but I will find ease in the fact that she disgusts you as much as she does me. Then the day will come when you can be free of her. You will be Prime Minister I will be standing beside you.'

'Please come to me tonight Sebastian. I need your touch to erase the feel of Jane.'

My heart is yours forever, Ruth.'

As he read Gabriel felt the tension building in Jane. When he finished he handed the letter to her and watched as she re-read every word. Her hands began to shake violently. Tears filled her eyes. She took the next letter, read it and the tears began to fall. If Gabriel did not know what a monster she truly was, he would have felt sorrow for her. She took an open whiskey bottle from her night table, swallowed several times and wiped away the tears with the back of her hand. "How did you get the letters?"

"That is not important now, Jane. I just thought you should know the truth of the situation"

Jane got slowly from the bed.

"Where are you going?" He asked when she turned towards her door.

"To see Ruth...! This cannot be real. There must be some mistake."

"She is gone."

"Gone? How can she be gone?" She gaped at him.

"She is no longer here. Most of her clothes and luggage are no longer here either. Perhaps Ridley finally could no longer stand to hear the sadness of the woman he loves. Perhaps he brought her to stay in his new country home."

Her stunned surprise was turning to anger. "No! Sebastian is not that stupid. He knows if he does not keep me happy and marry me, Mommy will no longer help him. No, he needs me." She was no longer crying. Her eyes were narrow slits. Her homely face set into fierce ugliness. Gabriel wondered if that terrible image was the last thing her victims saw in the seconds before they died.

"Maybe so, but right now you do not look very happy to me. Go and see for yourself if you do not believe me!"

Jane bolted from the room and ran down the hallway. Gabriel followed and waited until she was around the corner before he knocked on Steward's door.

Steward opened the door and frowned at Gabriel.

"Good. I am glad you are here!" Gabriel said with feigned concern.

“Why? What do you want?”

“I am in the unfortunate position of having to give Jane some very unpleasant news.” Steward stood straighter, looking past Gabriel to Jane’s open door. “She has just learned the truth about Ruth and Ridley. She is upset.”

“What truth? She already knows he is fucking her. She is there when he does it.”

“Not every time. Jane has just read love letters from Ruth to Ridley. Her true and strong hatred for Jane is very clear in the letters. They have planned a future without Jane.”

“Shit, Gabriel! Why the Hell did you give her the letters?”

“Because from the sound of the letters I’d say Ridley plans on doing away with Jane not too long after they are married. Ruth is gone...”

“What? How can she be gone? She has nowhere to go and no money!”

“I would not be surprised if she is with Ridley. She is gone, her things with her. Jane is in her room right now, checking on that. I have more to tell Jane. I just wanted to make sure you were here if she falls apart and from the looks of her, she just might. Stay in your room. I will get you if I need you.”

“Why don’t you just mind your own bloody ...” Gabriel turned and went back into Jane’s room. He smiled as he heard Steward curse and slam his door.

Gabriel removed the pistol from his holster, placed it in his right hand pocket and waited for Jane to return. In less than a minute after that Jane came back. She ignored him and paced her room, wringing her hands. He heard the creaking of the floor as Steward moved from his room and stood outside Jane’s door.

“Do you know where Ruth is, Gabriel? I have to talk to her!”

“Why would I know where she is? For that matter, what is there left for you and her to discuss? It is obvious that they used you. Ridley was only going to marry you to keep Cornelia happy and that just long enough to get what he wants. Do you think he would have simply divorced you? No, he wants your money. You would have had an accident. He would have the money and Ruth.”

Jane walked slowly towards Gabriel. To his amazement and revulsion she seemed to bare her teeth. “I want to talk to her.” There was a pause between each word. It was very clear it was not talking she had in her mind.

He brought out the pistol and held it in her direction. “I am intrigued, Jane! I have never spoken to a murderess before...what do you want to do to her? The same things you did to Mary, Chloe, Alice, Daisy and poor old Mrs. Beaver?”

She gasped and sat heavily on the bed. “I did not kill them!”

Gabriel did not speak but looked at her doubtfully.

“It’s true! Steward did it. Mommy told him to and he killed them all. I never touched them!” Jane crawled up on the bed and sat crossed legged like a child.

“Oh, come now!”

“Well...if I did hurt them it was because Steward made me! He made me help him. I didn’t want to.”

“How could he make you do such things?”

“Oh, you don’t know what he is like! Steward is insane. He gets so excited when he hurts women. He hurts me if I do not do just what he wants.” Her mood and manner had changed again. The anger and frustration instantly vanished. She grinned, looked up at him from under her eyelashes and spoke with the innocence of a child. “I hate him.

He hurts me when I do not make him happy. He rapes me.” Her white face turned suddenly bright red. “He burns me with cigarettes and bites me!”

“Then I would say you had every reason to want to be rid of him. You know they will hang him. Why did Steward kill these women? Was it solely because he likes to hurt?”

“No! Mommy tells him to do it! She gives him lots of money for it too! She makes us tell her everything we did. She got mad when Steward killed Daisy because we did not hurt her enough. We were here in the house and maybe somebody would find us. Mommy is so sick of Steward too! She said she was going to have him killed very soon.” The twisted grin was back. “I’ll be rid of him then!”

“So it is safe to say that Cornelia is not as fond of Steward as she is Randall and Owen?”

Jane snorted. “No, she hates him!”

“It seems she only needed him to do her killing. Is that what you think?”

“Yes and now he likes it too much. She is afraid he will go off and start doing it without her knowing and that could get us caught.”

“Has Cornelia mentioned any plans or dates for killing Steward?”

“No but it will be when Steward is in London. She does not want any more people killed around here.”

Gabriel laughed. “No I suppose she doesn’t. Poor Steward! Is Sebastian the one she wants to kill Steward?”

“No, I don’t think so. She will hire someone else to do that. She’s got some thugs in London who work for her sometimes.”

“Lord, Jane, he is your brother, after all. You should at least warn him.”

“Warn him! If he is dead he can’t hurt me anymore.”

“Well, I guess that is it for the lunatic Steward! Were you there then he killed Mrs. Beaver as well?”

“Yes! He made me help him. I do not care who knows anymore. If I tell what I know will the police leave me alone?”

Gabriel shrugged. “It is possible. It depends on how helpful and truthful you are.”

“I will tell them everything.”

“All right Jane, now tell me why you really want to see Ruth?”

Instantly the child disappeared. She slid off the side of the bed, stretched her body and leaned against the bedpost. “What do you think, Gabriel? She laughed and lied to me! If she thinks she was disgusted by me before; I will show her the true meaning of disgust.” She looked at the pistol and shrugged. “If you take me to her I will let you watch and maybe do things...! Have you ever fucked Ruth?”

“No.” He answered quietly, fascinated and appalled by what he was witnessing. He wished he could see the look on Steward’s face.

“Well, you would enjoy it. She does have such lovely tits. All we have to do is give her a needle then she is so sweet!” She was almost purring then.

“I do not hurt people Jane. That is your game. However, I could try and find out where Ruth is for you but you have to please me first.”

She nodded slowly and ran her tongue across her lips. “What do you want?”

“What is the exact location of the country house Ridley has recently purchased?”

“Why?”

“If you ever want to see Ruth again, tell me where it is?”

She shrugged. “I can’t do that because I do not know.”

“Why am I not surprised to hear that? How the Hell could you not know where your own home is?”

“I don’t know because I have never been there. It is near here and that is all I know. Sebastian was going to have it refurbished and done up beautifully for me as a wedding present. I was not to see it until my wedding night. Isn’t that romantic?” She said the last with heavy sarcasm. She bit her lip thoughtfully, went around to the other side of the bed and lay down on her belly. “You know, I do know something about Sebastian you would really like to know.”

“I am only interested in his country house.”

“What I know is far more important than that.”

“Tell me.”

“When I see Ruth, I want to see her alone!” She snapped at him.

Gabriel stood. “I am growing rather bored of this foolishness. You are wasting my time!”

“Wait! It was Sebastian who killed Helena.” She watched him closely waiting for a reaction that she did not get.

Gabriel sighed. “Yes, just as he killed Margaret Leighton and for the same sort of reason. It is old news Jane.”

“Fuck!” She slammed her hands on the bed. “I can get Sebastian wherever you want so you can kill him. Isn’t that more important than his bloody house?”

“I will deal with him when and how I want.” He stood, put his hand on the door handle and heard Steward moving back into his room. “Best not tell anyone about our little conversation Jane. You would hate it if I told a cop other than Brock about you and Steward.”

“I will find out where the stupid house is....” Jane said more but Gabriel ignored her and left the room.

In a blinding rage, so powerful Steward could just barely think he packed his suitcases and hid them under his bed. He took the diamond earrings he had stolen from his mother a long time before, put them in his wallet, a loaded gun in his pocket and two full syringes in another pocket. That done he went to the stables and prepared his carriage with the things needed for that night’s work.

“Need any help, sir?” One of the stable hands asked.

“No, Stanley. Going somewhere?” Steward asked when he noticed the boy held a small satchel.

“We all are! Mr. De Wolfe had given the bleedin’ lot of us the whole weekend off.”

“What?” Steward looked at the huge, gray and bleak looking De Wolfe manor. “Everyone? The house staff too?”

“Aye! And we’s not to come back before Monday morn. Something must be up, if yer ask me! We all think it has something to do with poor Mrs. Beaver!” Stanley smiled, tipped his hat and headed off down the road.

“Oh, ‘something is up’, Stanley! That is a fucking fact.” Steward muttered. He finished his preparations and went back to his room to wait for his mothers return.

Randall and Owen sat in the gathering room, waiting for the others and the dinner bell.

“Why so quiet, Owen? That is not like you?”

“Can’t you feel it?”

“Feel what?”

“The atmosphere around here is different.” Owen shook his head. “It may be my imagination, sometimes I can not tell the difference. My artistic side says this is a house in waiting.”

“Will your rational side try explain and that to me?”

“I saw Gabriel an hour ago. If he has in mind what I think he has within the next day are going to see this come to a head and it is not going to be pleasant.”

“You are right in all that Owen.” Tony said as he and Elizabeth joined them.

“Gabriel is doing what he does best. When he is done this ‘house in waiting’ as you call it Owen will be clean of its madness and justice will be served.”

“What do you mean by ‘what he does best’, Tony?” Elizabeth asked.

“Well, do any of you remember the case of Lord John Hendricks just over a year ago?”

“Vaguely.” Randall answered. “His wife killed him in self defense, is that the one?”

“Yes. It all started years ago. It seems that Lady Wilma Hendricks was not so inclined to keep herself only for her husband. John found out about that most recent infidelity. With the help of his valet, he killed the lover. They dumped the body in a laneway. No questions asked... a few maybe, but no one dared to carry it too far.”

“Two years later another of Lady Hendricks ‘close’ male friends met an untimely death. He fell off a horse on the Hendricks Estate. This time the coroner found the death to be foul. This lover had received a massive blow to the front of the head, not likely to happen in the fall from a horse. This time a few more questions were asked but still at the end of the inquiry the death was ruled an accident.”

“A year and a half later, yet another young man went missing. Well, Gabriel and Lee assumed Wilma’s latest conquest was dead. He was certainly missing and no body ever found. This time Wesson called in Gabriel. Gabriel’s mother was a cousin of our friendly Lady Wilma. So he got well into the family unit easily. It was very easy for him to get to the truth of the matter. When Gabriel was certain without any doubt that Hendricks and his valet were murderers he set the two men against each other.”

“As I said that was all too easy. Wilma was then sharing her favors with the very foolish valet. Poor old John went mad and killed the valet with staff looking on. Gabriel warned Wilma what was afoot. When John came after her she shot him and with Gabriel’s help got off with self-defense.”

“So that is what Gabriel is going to do? Set Jane and Steward against each other.” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes.” Tony tuned to Owen and Randall. “And Cornelia and Ted! I tell you too all that because you are both my good friends. Gabriel will not be thinking of your

feelings at this time. His mind is on finding Isabelle, hopefully alive and seeing Sebastian Ridley dead.”

Owen shook his head. “Listen, Tony. If that is the only way to bring down justice and stop our brother and sister, so be it! If the laws of our land are too weak or too corrupted, I have no qualms with this way. The end here certainly justifies the means. Do you agree Randall?”

“For Gods’ sake, yes!” Randall spoke with force, his eyes unbelievably bright with emotion. “I hope that Gabriel knows we are here to help him”

“Just stay armed and stay very alert. Owen, after dinner, you will stay close to Suzanne. Keep her out of the way in your rooms. Randall, Gabriel wants you and me to come to his rooms at ten. He will have to leave and wants us to look after Elizabeth. Tony paused and looked intently at Randall. “With what you now know about how and why Helena died you can understand why Elizabeth could be in danger.”

Randall looked at Elizabeth and then back to Tony. “Yes, I understand.” He stood. “I am going into the dining room.”

Tony turned to Elizabeth. “You should have gone back to Random House when Gabriel told you to. It is not like him to be so weak.”

“No! I wanted to be here. I thought I could help him.”

“Then you will do completely as you are told. You will be with Owen, Randall or me at all times until all this done. I would just as soon pack you in a coach and send you back to London. I could do that. Gabriel will listen to me!”

“No, please Tony! I could not bear to leave here when Gabriel is in so much danger. I need to be with him.”

“Is that really so?”

“Yes, it is! Why are you mad at me?”

“You mean the world to me Elizabeth, as does Gabriel. He and I have been through hell together these last few years. I think I can see a better light in his eyes. That light is because of you....”

“I have had a terrible time as well. I think that Gabriel will help me be happy again.”

“When will you please tell me what you are playing at with Randall?”

She looked at him with surprise and then smiled. “Oh dear! That was all a part of our original reason for coming here. Cornelia was bothering Randall all the time to marry and produce a grandchild. He thought it would stop her in her tracks if he told he had decided to become a Catholic priest instead of a doctor. She wanted me as she put it to ‘stir him up’.”

“Good Lord! And have you ‘stirred him up’?”

“Not in the way you are thinking. I like Randall very much however I am not interested in him in any way but as a friend.”

“Well, thank God for that! Still, you might want to tell Gabriel something to put his mind at ease. I sense he is distracted by you right now and that is not helpful.”

They stopped talking as Gabriel and Suzanne joined them. Suzanne stood behind Owen, resting her hand on his shoulder. Gabriel gave Elizabeth a small quick smile and turned to Owen. “I just spoke to Ted. He is staying in his room. Cornelia will not be home until after dinnertime. Is that natural?”

“Yes. She often stays out until nine or later.”

“What about Jane and Steward?” Suzanne asked as they settled at the table with Randall. “Are they not eating dinner?”

“They know where the dinning room is.” Gabriel answered gruffly.

While the soup was being served, Suzanne studied the silent, troubled faces around her. “Will someone please tell me what is wrong? If anyone says ‘nothing’ I will hit them. Gabriel, you are investigating the ‘mountain murders’ are you not?”

Gabriel pushed his hands through his hair. “My main concern right now is Isabelle. Last night Sebastian Ridley abducted her. He is the murderer of Helena and Margaret.”

She dropped her spoon. “Mon deux! That is horrible. He is a killer. Are you sure, Gabriel?”

“Completely.”

“Oh, poor Isabelle! Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Just follow instruction from Owen. It is for the best that we all stay in our bedrooms as soon as dinner is finished. I do not want anyone wandering around the hallways.”

“We must all pray for...” Suzanne stopped as Jane, wearing an amazing array of flowing Ivory silks came into the room. Only Elizabeth and Suzanne were aware that she was actually wearing her wedding dress.

“Pray for what, Suzanne?” She asked smiling broadly, sitting next to Gabriel.

“I was saying that so many of us are not grateful for all we have. We must pray for those who have so little.” Suzanne answered.

“Oh! Well I never pray for anyone but myself.” Jane laughed and rang the table bell so loudly most at the table jumped.

“Christ, Jane!” Owen scolded her.

“Why is everyone so jumpy? I want my soup!”

For a long while, Jane controlled the conversation and that for the most part was her talking to Suzanne about her upcoming wedding and the wonderful man who would soon be her husband. It was a bizarre and unsettling scene. Several times Tony tried to change the flow of the conversation but without help from the others, Jane rambled on.

It was during dessert when it all became too much for Elizabeth. “I know how lucky I am to marry a man like Sebastian. Goodness, I am not a fool...!” She paused looking for a second too long at Suzanne then shifted her eyes but not her face to Elizabeth. “I know I am not as pretty as some women who would be glad to have Sebastian, so he will occasionally stray. That does not bother me. All men stray, even those with pretty wives.”

“Not all men.” Gabriel said with a sour tone.

Jane laughed. “Oh hell, Gabriel. Yes they do! All men think they are such Romeo’s. We have four Romeo’s right at this table. You, Gabriel, are the worst of the lot. Your list of conquests must be a mile long! Now that Suzanne has moved on to Owen, I do wonder who is to be next on that list. Some silly bitch, no doubt, too stupid and skinny for her own good.”

“Shut your bloody mouth, Jane!” Owen yelled at her.

Elizabeth stood, her face flaming with anger. She threw her napkin on the table. “I am going to my room. Something in here smells terrible.”

“I will go with you.” Gabriel stood and followed her.

At the doorway, Elizabeth turned back to Jane. "Just so that you will not wonder too long, Jane, I am sure whoever is next in Gabriel's life she will not be obnoxious, ugly and fat!"

Jane was about to respond. Elizabeth turned away and quickly passed through the gathering room and headed towards the stairs.

Owen stood and moved beside Jane. He took her spoon from her hand. "You are finished. Get up and go to your room!"

She looked him up and down with raised eyebrows. "I will not. You cannot tell me what to do. Why don't you go and play with Suzanne!"

Owen pulled her from her chair, held her by the shoulders and shook her. "When I tell you to do something...you will fucking obey me!" He took her hand and pulled her after him.

Tony stood. Randall put his hand on Tony's arm, caught his eye and shook his head. "Leave it, Tony! It is far past time for someone to put her in her place."

"Let go of me!" Jane whined, tried to pull away without success.

"Do you have nothing to do?" Owen yelled to some curious staff watching from the kitchen. "Get your things and get out of here, as you were told."

Jane fought him all the way to her bedroom. "I am going to tell Mommy!" She spat at him as he pushed her onto her bed.

"You will stay in here until the morning!"

"I will not...!" She ducked and covered her head as he raised his arm.

Owen took a deep breath. "You will. You leave here and I will make you wish you were never born. Do you understand?"

"Fuck you, Owen!"

"I swear it, Jane! I will wring your bloody neck! Do you understand?"

She shrugged and backed down. "I am still going to tell Mommy."

"Good. I have more than a few words for that bitch, as well!" He left her, slamming the door behind him.

"Well done!" Gabriel smiled at Elizabeth when they were in her room.

"That ridiculous cow! She is lucky I did not punch her!"

She followed him as he checked each of their three rooms, locking each door to the hallway. "You know what she is wearing, don't you?"

"A rather grand dress?"

"That was her wedding dress!"

"What? Are you sure?" Gabriel moved her aside a few steps and frowned as he pulled his large, heavy bed away from the wall.

"I know a wedding dress when I see one. What are you doing?"

"Desjardin was blackmailing Henry, Ted and my father with a detailed, hand written account of their sordid activities." A decorative tapestry hung behind the bed. Gabriel pushed it aside and pulled out Desjardin's chronicle. "Ted gave it to me."

"Yes, Tony told us about it." Elizabeth looked over his shoulder.

Gabriel sat on the bed, opening the book to a page marked by Ted. Across the top of the page, in beautiful, elaborate hand was 'Dedications'. Listed underneath in order of date were the names of child and his or her parents. Gabriel ran his finger down the list of names. His name was there, along with Tony, Owen, Steward, Jane and Elizabeth.

Following that was a shorter list, included in it was the name, Sarah De Wolfe. The only parent listed was Cornelia De Wolfe. After each of these names was a black smudge.

"They must be the rejected dedications." He said looking back at Elizabeth.

"What was done with those babies?"

"I hate to think. From what I know about this garbage they were most likely malformed in some way...club foot, hair lip and the like."

"Some of those listed as dedicated must be dead by now. Do you really think their souls were sent to Hell?"

"No, I do not."

"Then how do you explain the fact that your father, my father and Ted all became so very successful after we were dedicated?"

"Maybe, Elizabeth, it was just simple hard work with the very usual amount of luck. If there is an all loving and protective God who sees us as his children, would He allow them to rot in Hell because of the selfishness of their parents?"

"No, I suppose not. Do you truly not believe in God? You have said that you do not but you also contradict yourself."

"I do not want to believe in Him. As I just said if there is a God who loves us...!" He paused and shook his head. "I saw the body of my wife. I know what Ridley did to her. I know what Steward and Jane do. If there is such a God, why does he allow this to happen?"

"But the things you and Tony can do, how do you explain that? Who can say whether you obtained these abilities from God or Satan, but they certainly came from somewhere. They are not normal talents."

Gabriel was reading and did not answer her.

"What are you reading?" She asked trying to follow the direction of his eyes.

He pointed to a paragraph at the end of the lists. "According to this, all the dedications will be freed on the deaths of the last remaining coven members."

"Ted and Cornelia?"

"Yes. Ted wants the opportunity to kill the evil bitch tonight and then he will take his own life..."

"Good Lord! Are you going to allow that?"

"Of course! There no doubt that Mr. and Mrs. De Wolfe are unpunished, vicious killers. Ted freely admits that everything written here is true. You read your fathers diaries and you know what they did to their victims. If you read this, I am sure you will find that there were dozens of victims. It does not matter to me how Cornelia dies, just that she do so!"

"So many people have died, Gabriel! When will it end?"

"Unless I am mistaken and I doubt that, it will all be behind us in the next day or so."

She watched as Gabriel closed the book and placed it on a near by dresser. She thought how tired and sad he appeared. "I am so sorry about Isabelle. Is it correct what Tony said, did she go to Sebastian on her own?"

"She must have." He took the small purse from his pocket and handed it to Elizabeth. "That is Isabelle's. I found it this afternoon in Ridley's front room. Look inside."

She opened the initialed clasp and pulled out the knife. "Did she take this for protection?"

"Or to try to kill him, most likely that, if I know Isabelle at all."

"Gabriel? You are not thinking that this is your fault are you?"

"Of course it is, Elizabeth."

"How? If she went on her own accord after you warned her to stay at Random House, how is your fault?"

"If I had been man enough to end our affair completely, as I should have done a long time ago she would be safe and sound right now. Every damn time I tried to end it she would use sex to distract me. I knew just what she was doing and I was too selfish to argue."

"All that may be true, only you can say for sure. Nevertheless, you did not make her do something so foolish and go to Sebastian. She knows the truth of the man."

Gabriel smiled, lay down on the bed and patted the pillow beside him.

She smiled back at him. "What have you got in mind now?"

"It is not what you are thinking, my lusty friend. We have a few moments of peace before the storm that I am sure is about to begin. I want to just lie here for a while." He pulled her onto the bed and held her.

"Did you enjoy your outing today?" He whispered in her ear.

"It was nice. It was interesting to watch Owen and Suzanne. They certainly do seem to enjoy each other very much. He did make her laugh a lot."

"That is a positive sign, is it?"

"Oh yes! Laughter for a woman is very important. As I told you, Mother always said that the best orgasms are begun by laughter."

He smiled and held her close. "Hmmm...I do like the things Margaret taught you. That was a very wise female. So tell me, did Randall make you laugh today?"

"Occasionally, but it was more a chuckle than a laugh." She gently pushed his long hair from his face. "And I would so much rather it was you who made me laugh."

"Then I shall have to bone up on some hearty jokes. I want you to have a very good laugh every day, maybe twice on a day when I am at my funniest!" He stopped and looked at her with amazement as tears filled her eyes and dropped onto the pillow.

"What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"I'm not!" She tried to turn away from him but he held her in place.

He ran his hand across her wet cheek. "What is this then?"

"Oh God, Gabriel! I am so scared!"

"We all are. It will be all over soon."

"No, you don't understand. I am terrified I will lose you! I could not bear it." She was crying openly. "I have only known you for such a short time but I feel as though I have loved you forever. Please promise me you will always come back to me."

He smiled, wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly against him. "With you waiting for me what kind of a fool would I be not to come back?"

"Promise me!" She insisted.

"I promise I will always come back to you. No matter what the cost I will never leave you." He lifted her face up to his. "I love you, Elizabeth. Never doubt that, not for one minute."

She put her hands on his face, looked intently into his eyes and whispered, "I love you."

He kissed her, gently at first, then with growing passion.

They lay quietly for a while. Gabriel sensed Elizabeth was falling asleep. He heard the hall clock chime ten times. Very carefully, he slid his arm out from under her head, picked up Desjardin's chronicle. He was stepping into the sitting room when Tony and Randall knocked on the door.

"Very punctual!" Gabriel smiled and whispered. He pointed to his bed. "Elizabeth is sleeping. Is Cornelia back yet?" he asked Randall.

"She just telephoned. She always does before returning." Randall looked at his time piece. "If they leave right away as she said they will be here in thirty minutes or so."

Randall looked pale and shaken. "Are you all right?" Gabriel asked.

"Anticipation, that is all!"

"Listen Randall, no one would think poorly of you if you do not wish to be involved in this, they are your parents and siblings. You could leave for a day or two."

Randall shook his head. "That is exactly why I must be here. If I have to spend the rest of my life trying to make sense of it all, I need to be here when it ends."

Gabriel slapped him on the shoulder. "Are you both armed? Ridley is busy with Isabelle but if Cornelia tells him to come after Elizabeth, he will try. You both have seen what I can do. Ridley can do the same. He could be anywhere in the house at any time. Locked doors mean nothing to him. You must keep that in the forefront of your minds at all times! If you see him, do not hesitate. Give him a bullet to the heart or head immediately."

"But if Isabelle is still alive and he has her hidden somewhere, if he is dead he cannot tell us where she is."

"Believe me, Tony, he would never tell us where she is. Not a chance in Hell on that. Now, I am going to speak with Ted and wait for Cornelia. That bitch and I will have business. After that, I cannot say where I will be or when I will get back. You two stay here with Elizabeth until you hear from me again. I do mean, stay with her. I do not want her alone even in the bathroom..."

"Well, that is not going to be easy." Tony smiled.

"I don't care what you have to do. If she needs to piss, I want you with her. Remember, she is naïve and stubborn...do not give her an inch! And watch out, she has a nasty right hook!" He took one last quick look at the sleeping woman on his bed and left the room.

Gabriel found Ted staring into a large fire in Cornelia's bedroom. He sat down across from the man, slid the Chronicle out of sight, under his chair, and pointed to a half empty whiskey bottle. "You'll be no use to anyone drunk, Ted."

"There isn't enough whiskey in this house to dull my mind these days, Gabriel...unfortunately. Help yourself. It is the best money can buy. Smooth as a beautiful woman's tits!"

"I plan on drinking myself into oblivion in a few days. Right now I need only to talk to your bloody wife."

"Is that why you brought the book?"

"Yes."

"This should be interesting. No one wants that thing destroyed more than she does. Have you changed your mind or is Cornelia still the mess I should clear up?"

"I have not changed my mind. Cornelia telephoned and according to Randall she will be here soon. You should know that I will do all I have to, to get what I need from her. I will not be light on her because you are here."

"Christ, Gabriel. Her infidelities, her lies, the money, none of that even fazes me. What she did to my children does. She gave my daughter to the hands of Satan! Do what you want to her. I will go back to my dark side. I will help if needed. I will watch and enjoy!"

"Suit yourself. However, stay out of my way. You will hear some truth and many lies come from me. One truth you should know is that Ruth is no longer here. I moved her last night. She will not be back again." Gabriel sighed. "You will not be the only man in here tonight who turns dark."

"Gone, is she? You do have plans! Believe me; I will not be in your way! Cornelia has been rather skittish lately. Perhaps she can sense that something is up! She carries a small handgun with her at all times. It is in her purse when she goes out; otherwise it is on her person."

"Armed, is she? I will have to do something about that."

"I am curious, what is there left that you need to hear from Cornelia?"

"I want to know where Ridley is. It is far past time to put another mad dog down."

Ted shook his head. "She is devoted to the bastard. She would die before she would speak against him. You will need all your dark side."

"I am not worried."

Steward watched his mother's return from the windows in the dark parlor. The weight of his pistol in his coat pocket was comforting. He would not kill her now but he was sure that by morning's light she and Jane would be dead.

"Oh dear, Musgrave. You did not have to wait up for me!" Cornelia handed the butler her hat and coat.

Steward moved silently closer.

"No, Ma'am but I thought I should talk to you about something."

Cornelia sighed. "What is wrong now?"

"Mr. De Wolfe has instructed all the staff to leave...take the week end off, as he put it. I thought I should check with you before too many of them leave. Most have gone already!"

"What? All of them?"

"Yes, ma'am, even the gardeners and stable staff. They are not to come back before Monday morning."

"Why in heavens name?"

"Should I stop the rest from leaving?"

"No. If Theodore has told them to go, I cannot change that. We will have to make do. Where is my husband?"

"In your rooms, Mrs. De Wolfe." Johnson turned to the two girls standing politely behind him. "I did manage to hold on to Nora and Janet just in case you needed them."

"No, they can leave, thank you anyway." Cornelia went up the stairs and Johnson down the hallway.

"She don't look none too happy!" Nora whispered to Janet.

"No and it ain't likely to get much better. I just brought two bottles of whiskey up to Mr. De Wolfe. He's sitting there with Mr. Jackman and they don't look too happy either. Air's thick enough to cut with a knife."

"Something's up round here, mark my words."

"Now, that Gabriel Jackman. I'd give him a chance and a half...."

"Yer'd have anyone who asked and he'd never look at yer!" Nora laughed.

"Girls!" Johnson bellowed from the kitchens.

"Better go, before he has a fit!" Janet smiled and pulled her friend after her.

Steward came out from the shadows of parlor. He went up to his mother's room and stood listening at the doorway.

Cornelia glanced at Ted. "Sorry that I am later than my usual time, Theodore. We were just having so much fun. Visalia had her new grandchild there. What a joy the baby is!" She dropped her hat and purse on her dressing table. "Oh, hello Gabriel! I did not see you sitting there. I do hope you two are not arguing again!"

"No, Connie." Ted answered. "We have come to an understanding."

"Good! Now Theodore, I just saw Musgrave. He says you gave every member of the staff the day off tomorrow and told them not to come back until Monday afternoon. Have you completely lost your mind? What were you thinking?"

"My mind is certainly in question, I agree. However, the staff is in great distress over Mrs. Beaver. I felt the time away from here would be good for the lot of them. We can do for ourselves for once."

"Well, I am not cooking a bloody thing. I hope you men know how to make sandwiches because that is all you will have tomorrow! So, what were your two talking about before I came in?"

Gabriel stood, looking down at her. "What were we talking about? Good and evil. Life and death. Jane, Steward, Ridley and you!"

Cornelia looked quickly at her husband, then turned back to watch Gabriel. He crossed the room, locked the door and put the key in his pocket.

She stood. "Gabriel? What are you doing? Why did you lock my door?" She looked again at Ted. He was staring into the fire. She took a few steps towards her dressing table.

"I prefer not to be disturbed when I am working."

"Working?" She took two more steps backwards. "You are in an odd mood, tonight. I can tell that something is not right. Will one of you please tell me what is going on?"

She was obviously trying to get to her dressing table. Gabriel picked her purse, opened it and took out a small, ivory handled handgun. "Is that what you want?"

"No, why would I need my gun?" She struggled without success to keep nervousness from her voice. "Ted insists I take it with me whenever I go out these days. Isn't that right, Theodore?"

"I have not mentioned that thing to you in years. You have it with you at all times. You sleep with it under your mattress."

“Ted!” She exclaimed moving back to stand in front of him. “Why are you lying?”

Gabriel put the small gun in his inside pocket and took out his own pistol. “Sit.” He said and pointed it at her.

“I will not!” She answered angrily. “You will leave my house immediately, Gabriel!”

Ted moved so suddenly she did not see him coming. He took her by the shoulders and pushed her back onto the settee. From behind a vase on the mantle piece, he took out his own pistol and pointed it at her head. “This is my house, Cornelia. Gabriel has more place here than you do! He has questions for you. I advise you to answer them all quickly and truthfully.” Keeping his pistol pointed at her head, he sat across from her.

Cornelia glared at him through narrowed eyes. In a language that Gabriel did not understand, she spat a torrent of words at her husband.

Ted smiled. “She is threatening me in Latin.” He said to Gabriel not taking his eyes off Cornelia. “You have nothing to hold against me anymore, Connie. Do not waste your energy. What you need to do now is tell Gabriel what he wants to know and hope that he does not have the sight of Helena’s tortured body in his mind.”

“You drink too much, Ted? Maybe you are hallucinating. What a shame.” She smiled and shook her head.

Gabriel went back to his seat, his own gun still pointed at her. “Ridley recently bought a country home. I want its exact location.”

She snorted a small laugh. “We all want many things! Only the smartest of us get them. Do you really think I will tell you that? If you do then you are not one of the smart ones.”

“So what you are saying is that you will protect your murdering, incestuous son to the bitter end, is that right?”

Just for a second her expression changed, her jaw dropped and a flick of fear crossed her eyes. As fast as it came it went. “You are as insane as Theodore! Sebastian is not my son.”

“Your name was Nell Belmont. You were fifteen when you and Desjardin conceived Ridley. With the help of Desjardin, you killed your father and made it seem as a suicide. You were living with your Grandparents when your bastard was born. You disappeared for a while, three years or so. Cecil Ridley, a faithful member of Desjardin’s coven, then adopted the boy.”

“Until Desjardin died your contact with Ridley was only through his father. You had very little say in the upbringing of your son. You wanted him brought to the dark world you loved. Desjardin wanted a different life for him. He wanted great things for Ridley and from his earliest days pushed him towards the highest office of the land.”

“Once you were free of Desjardin you did bring Sebastian very much into your evil world. He has been many things to you, not the least of which, your lover!”

She sat stiff and silent for a long moment; her bright eyes then narrowed to slits. When she did speak, her voice was full of hatred. “What a dirty mind you have, Gabriel.” She shook her head sadly and clicked her tongue. “It occurs to me that if you are able to obtain all that information, even though most of it is in error, surely you can find out where this country home is on your own.”

"Last night Ridley abducted Isabelle Lucci. No one has seen or heard from her for twenty-four hours."

The look of bored distaste on her face slipped slightly. "Well, that is ridiculous. I doubt he even knows the female. She hardly travels in his world!"

"Oh, he has her, have no doubt in that. Ridley has been very busy since he took Isabelle. It seems your pet has broken his lead."

Ted laughed. "Well said, Gabriel!"

Cornelia looked up at the wall clock, crossed her legs and swung her foot.

"Are you bored?"

"Yes."

"It is a shame you were not here today, Cornelia. You would have a great deal to occupy your thoughts tonight." Gabriel reached under his chair, pulled out the Chronicle and placed it on his lap. Her reaction seemed almost instinctual. She stood, moved towards Gabriel, stopping as Ted stood and cocked his pistol. "Sit down and stay there!" He pulled her roughly by the arm. She fell back into the settee. Her cool manner melted. Her face reddened her eyes wide and frightened.

"Christ Ted! That is Desjardin's Chronicle. What is the matter with you? We have been looking for that bloody thing for twenty years. How can you just stand there? Point your pistol at him, not me!"

"So I take it you know what is in here?" Gabriel asked.

"Give me that fucking book...now!" Her voice cracked with emotion.

"Not a chance. Great reading, this thing! It is more than enough in it to hang you and Ted. Those were Ridley's words when he handed it to me earlier."

"What? Sebastian gave you the Chronicle? I do not believe it!"

"It was his way, as he put it, of severing his ties with you, once and for all. It seems he is tired of dancing on your ropes."

"Liar!" She yelled at him.

"It is true, Connie!" Ted said. "I saw it all. You could say our game is up!"

"No! You are trying to trick me. It will not work. Sebastian loves me and does exactly what I tell him. He will marry Jane. He will be Prime Minister."

Gabriel took the letter he had prepared in Ridley's study and handed it to her.

"Then you had better read this."

With shaking hands, she took the letter, examined the seal and tore open the envelope. As she read the contents, Ted looked discreetly at Gabriel with questioning eyes. Gabriel smiled slightly.

She finished reading. The letter slipped from her hands. "No... it is not real." She gasped.

Ted picked up the page and read it. "It is real, Connie. As I said, I was here when he gave this and the book to Gabriel."

"After that," Gabriel continued, "he had Ruth pack her things and they left together."

Cornelia's jaw dropped, she got slowly to her feet. This time Ted left her alone. "As Ridley said when he and Ruth were leaving, 'tell my mother I have finally decided it is time to have my own life and that far away from her and Jane. Do what you want with that blasted book Gabriel. Hopefully the courts you value so highly will hang the bitch

and I will finally have peace.” Gabriel looked at his watch. “That was eight hours ago. They are well on their way to France or wherever by now.”

“Ruth?” Cornelia whispered. “No, he would not....”

“Oh by the way.” Gabriel smiled. “We were all pleased to see that Ruth is after all these years able to walk again.”

“She is still here. Sebastian will marry Jane!”

“His own sister!” Gabriel shook his head. “Who is the one with the dirty mind? However, if you need to see for yourself, shall we take her down to Ruth’s room, Ted?”

In the hallway, Steward moved to the stairs and went to his bedroom.

“A very good idea.” Ted answered. He took his wife firmly by the arm. Gabriel opened the door. He stayed close behind the couple until they were in Ruth’s bedroom.

Gabriel opened the gas lamps. “You see, Cornelia. She is gone.”

She broke from Ted’s hold, rushed from the bed across to the dressing room and bathroom. Quickly reaching a panicked rage she threw open the wardrobe, pulled drawers, dropping them to the floor. She paused, then as though a thought occurred to her and ran to the night table. She pulled hard on the bottom drawer. It flew out and landed on the floor.

“You!” She flew at Ted. Gabriel held her in place by the back of her dress.

“You are enjoying this, admit it! Ever since you made such a fuss over Sarah, all you ever wanted was to see me fail.”

“Should we go back upstairs, Gabriel?” Ted asked ignoring Cornelia.

By the time they were back in Cornelia’s bedroom, she was subdued in actions but both men felt the force of her rage. She collapsed heavily on the settee. “It is all ruined! All my hard work, for nothing. All my dreams finished.” She moved forward. Ted held his gun in her direction. “I just want a drink.”

“No! Go on Gabriel. I think you now have her complete attention.”

Gabriel sat across from Cornelia, with the Chronicle on his lap and his gun pointed at her head. “It is interesting and telling how you have learned your daughters’ fiancé is just off with another woman and you have not once wondered how she is doing.”

“It is telling, is it?” Her voice was thick with sarcasm. “Give me one reason why I should care what happens to that demented cow!” Over the top of her head, Gabriel saw Ted’s face grow harder. “All of this misery, all my work a failure and it is her fault, as much as Ted’s. I taught her how to keep Sebastian happy! Would she obey me? Like as Hell she did! She had to have Ruth and Steward, the moron he is, insisted that Ruth take her on.”

Gabriel smiled. “How angry you must have been when Jane brought Sebastian to Ruth’s bed!”

“No. I was not angry. Sebastian loved it. He was happy with their escapades. How was I supposed to know he would develop some sort of obsession with Ruth? I told Jane repeatedly not to insist on bringing Ruth into their marriage. He was furious at the idea.” She threw her hands up in the air. “I should have seen that was because he wanted the bitch for himself.”

“So to get rid of you once and for all Sebastian gave me this book. You do realize that there is more than enough evidence in here to hang you.”

“And Ted!” She snapped and shot her husband a look of pure hatred. “You were as mean and eager as I was. You got old, weak and pathetic. Stand there looking like a betrayed husband if you want. It may fool Gabriel but not me. You knew I was bringing Jane and Steward to Henry’s meetings. You knew just what they were learning there and you turned a blind eye. You were always too busy with your fucking diamonds and whores.”

“I did not know Cornelia. If I did, you would be long dead and I may have saved their sanity.”

“No, Steward was born mad.” She turned back to Gabriel. A sick slow smile spread across her face. “Jane was only five years old when I caught him fondling her in the bushes. I told Ted. He beat Steward until he was half-dead. Did it stop Steward...no! Ted should have finished him off. He kept at Jane every chance he had.” She shrugged. “I was determined that Jane would go to Sebastian a virgin as soon as her cycle began. It had to be that way. So what else could I do? I taught Steward the ways to relieve himself with Jane without fucking her.” She stopped, brushed invisible crumbs from her skirt and pulled it into place.

Standing behind her Ted raised his pistol to her head. Gabriel caught his eye and shook head.

“Anyway, it worked out very well. We turned ‘relieving Steward’ into a kind of game for Jane. She was confused and reluctant at first but soon came around. She began to love the attention. By the time she was eleven she hunted him down daily to play their game.” Cornelia laughed. “She was worse than a bitch in heat. I made them realize I had to be with them every time, though. I had no choice. I had to be certain they did anything but intercourse.”

As appalled and disgusted as Gabriel was he needed her to keep on talking. “Why did you want Ridley to rape his sister?”

“It wasn’t rape, Gabriel. By the time, Steward and I brought her to Sebastian she was more than eager.”

“It was a part of Jane’s betrothal to Sebastian.” Ted got to the true point of Gabriel’s question. “There would have been many people there to testify that she went to him as a virgin and they would have watched to make sure intercourse was completed.”

“That is correct.” Cornelia smiled at Ted. “It is too bad you were not there. Back when you were still a man the ceremony would have made you very proud.”

Gabriel cleared his throat. “Why did Desjardin not let you have a place in rearing Ridley?”

She thought for a moment, and then shook her head. “That is none of your business.”

“I know the answer to that, Gabriel.” Ted took a long drink from the whiskey bottle

“Shut up, Ted!”

“I am the one with the gun. You shut your ugly mouth and keep it shut. In hindsight, it is all too clear. Desjardin spoke to me a lot about Sebastian. He had great plans for the boy and none of it had anything to do with the Dark Side. He firmly believed that for Sebastian to reach the highest goals he would have to be pure of soul. I felt at the time that it was also some kind of experiment on Desjardin’s part.”

“Pierre was a fool!” Cornelia interrupted with vehemence. “A leopard cannot change his spots. Those born to and for Satan, stay that way. Sebastian could no more become pure than I could become a man.” She stopped the tirade when Ted again cocked his gun.

“Desjardin kept Sebastian completely isolated from the world. Cornelia only saw him with his father right there. She had free reign once Desjardin was dead. She swooped down on the boy like the bat out of Hell that she is. It does not take much imagination to imagine the things she taught him. As he grew to manhood, she kept him under her thumb with my money. Sebastian took to his Dark Side very well but held fast to his political leanings. The De Wolfe money and connections were all he needed. You should also know, Gabriel that this woman was very much in love with her son. They were indeed lovers. I saw them together. I did not care enough about Cornelia for that to bother me.”

He turned to his wife. “You knew that once Sebastian was a man he would have any number of beautiful females ready to take him away from you for good. While his mind was so young and pliable, you convinced him that he had to marry Jane. Only if he did that would you continue to give him money and then when he was moving ahead in the world the marriage to Jane would keep the De Wolfe support he so needed. His marriage to Jane would give you permanent access to him. My death and Jane’s death would give you access again to my money.”

Ted looked back at Gabriel. “Things appeared to be going Cornelia’s way on the surface but that was not so. Desjardin’s death did not truly free her of the man. Desjardin was not at all pleased with what she was doing to his son. In the truest sense of the phrase, Desjardin haunted Cornelia. Haunted may be too small a word. Her demented abuse of Sebastian brought Desjardin up, raging from the depths of hell.”

“I have seen him here several times. He waits for the night in the old chapel on the top floor. Do not ever let any one tell you that a ghost cannot hurt you, because they can. Once they realize that they have the power to move things, the dark ones can be very dangerous. So many times, I saw cuts, burns and bruises on my wife. She made ridiculous excuses but I knew who really put them there. Do you still argue this, Cornelia?”

She sat forward, looking intently at Ted. “Yes! You don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Now, here is something else that will interest and no doubt disgust you Gabriel. There is another reason Cornelia was forever pushing Jane into Ridley’s bed. Shall I tell him, Connie or do you have courage?”

“You think you know so much, Ted! You have never been anything but a fool!”

Gabriel shrugged. “Go on, Ted. I am all ears.”

“Cornelia learned how to destroy Desjardin’s spirit. It was no any easy task. She needed a baby born from incest. The child she would offer as a sacrifice but before that, she would have to destroy the remains of Desjardin’s work. She would need to see to the deaths of all those dedicated. The murder of these people at the hands of a coven member would remove them from Desjardin’s list of successes. Gabriel, would you open the Chronicle to the listing of the dedicated souls.”

Gabriel did this.

“We could only make one dedication a year and that is what we did. The list is nineteen names long. Of that list only you; Tony, Owen, Steward, Jane and Elizabeth are still alive. Along with all her other business Cornelia has been occupied these last years seeing to the murders of the rest of the list. For the first few years she had helpers, low life’s, who would do just what she wanted for relatively little money. After one or two murders, she would dispose of them as well.”

“I have given all of this a great deal of thought lately, as you can imagine. She is a clever murderess, our Cornelia!” Ted continued with sarcasm. “Ten years ago she began to have Steward do the killing, always with money as a reward. Not one time did the shadow of suspicion fall on her or Steward. Very remarkable!”

“Things began to slide from her firm grip six years ago....” Ted stopped speaking waiting for Gabriel to catch on to his train of thought.

“Six years ago? That is interesting!” Gabriel glanced quickly at Cornelia then turned back to Ted. “Let me see if I can add something here. Cornelia wanted Ridley to commit his first murder. The attempt failed and Ruth lived. Is that when things started to go wrong?”

“Exactly and very wrong, indeed! She wanted him to try again but he would not. He had feelings for Ruth. That triggered a sort of rebellion in Sebastian, perhaps the waking of reality in his mind. Did he finally sense that he was far from his own man? That is very likely. They began to argue a lot. She was giving him more and more money. Days would pass when he would not take her calls or see her.”

“Meanwhile, she kept on with the elimination of the dedicated and grooming Jane to marry Sebastian. She waited and hoped that Jane would conceive but it did not happen. That was yet another frustration for Connie.”

“Three years ago she called for Ridley to kill Helena. You know the results to that, Gabriel. Then Henry called for Sebastian to kill Margaret. Cornelia knew nothing about it until after the fact. She must have been enraged. This murder gave more strength to her oldest son. I hate to think of how much she had to pay him to become engaged to Jane!”

“Well!” Gabriel smiled at Cornelia. “You were losing control in many ways weren’t you? The headstrong Jane was growing in power over Steward. Was it your plan that she aid Steward when he committed the ‘mountain murders?’”

“Of course it was not my plan. I had no idea she was even with him when Steward killed Mary!” Gabriel saw Ted flinch. “She just had to be there, had to take what she could from these stupid women...!” She stopped suddenly, aware of what she had just admitted to. She narrowed her eyes, glaring at Gabriel with mad hatred. “You think you know so much, don’t you. Gabriel Jackman, the high and mighty failed priest, always searching for justice. No justice for your bloody Helena though is there. How you suffered all these last three years, knowing the man who raped and so horribly killed her still enjoyed his life. You had no idea he was right under your nose.”

Gabriel felt the beginning of his own unique rage. The back of his head began to throb, his vision and hearing was becoming much sharper and heavy sweat rolled down his face. This was his last point where he could be in control of the changes. He let that moment pass.

She leaned back and folded her arms over her chest. “So you know that Sebastian killed Helena! Why haven’t you killed him? Why did you let him walk out of here

today? Are you afraid of him? You should be. As Ted said, he took to the darkness very well. What a talented man he is! A vicious, mean and powerful monster one minute, in the next moment he can make any women very glad she was born. If he did take Isabelle I am sure he pleased her...just before her killed her."

Gabriel smiled. "You cannot gaud me Cornelia. Save your breath. So, as you say Isabelle is most likely dead. Then tell me where he would have taken her. You may as well tell me now. He has left you to hang and with this book you will surely do so, so why protect him?"

Cornelia thought for a moment, and then shrugged. "He had several houses in mind. If he has chosen one, I know nothing about it. As you say, he no longer shares everything with me. He did mention a house called 'The Paddocks.'"

"That could be true, Gabriel. I have kept my eye on the account I set up for him to buy a home. The amount has stayed the same."

"Ted is always so generous with his money." She rolled her eyes. "However Sebastian has more than enough money of his own. He could easily buy a house without going into Ted's protected account. He could not close on a house brought from that account without Ted's approval. It could be that he did not want us to know where the house is."

"If he did take Isabelle and I hope it did, she will be in his London home. There is a hidden room in the cellar. The doorway is behind a wall of shelves. All that is in it is a bed with chains and shackles. I have been in it and I know its use. It was there that he killed Helena before he moved her body and now most likely your Italian bitch. If he ever goes back, I suppose he will have to buy yet another new mattress." She laughed. "My Gabriel! Doesn't it cost a woman a great deal, if she falls in love with you?"

Gabriel took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He stood, put his pistol in his pocket, walked around to Ted and placed Desjardin's book on a nearby table. "Watch this for me for a while Ted. I am going to need both of my hands." He stepped back into a dark corner.

"You do not scare me. It is obvious you two plan on killing me and I do not care. Without Sebastian I have no reason to live." She spat at him. "You are nothing compared to him. He may balk now at his true nature but believe me he will not be able to hold it back for long. He will come back and kill the both of you." She stood, frowning as Gabriel removed his jacket, gun holster and trouser belt. "You are going to rape me?" She laughed. "I did not know you were interested. All you had to do was ask. I would let you fuck me any time."

"Rape you!" It was Gabriel's turn to laugh. His voice was then a strange, deep and crackling sound. "I'd sooner fuck a bitch dog. You are far too ugly for my tastes."

"Is that so?" She sneered. "There is still something you do not know, Gabriel. Sebastian was not alone when he killed Helena. Like Steward, Sebastian had a very willing and excited helper."

Gabriel lowered his head, looking at her frown under his eyebrows. Cornelia, deep in her rage and fear, did not notice Ted's expression as he backed away from Gabriel. She was too far away then to smell the stink of Aamon as he began to flow into Gabriel.

"Do you know who that helper was?" She folded her arms in front of her, reached two fingers between the buttons of her dress, into a split in the seam and around a

jack knife. "Me! I just had to be there. What a beautiful female she was. I had often wondered what she would be like...naked and terrified. She did not disappoint either of us. I could see why you wanted..." She stopped her tirade. The familiar, horrifying stench of the demon Aamon reached her.

Gabriel, with his dark side visibly and mentally in control stepped out from the shadows. The half man, half demon Aamon moved slowly towards Cornelia.

"Ted...!" she gasped, backing against the wall.

The naked soul of Gabriel waited in a far corner in blackness of the mind of Aamon. He held his right hand out before him; saw in it the glowing, beating heart of Helena. Again and for the thousandth time he pleaded that God would give her back to him. In his left hand he saw the vision of her smiling face. "Oh Gabriel!" She reached out, not quite touching him. "I do love you so!" He lowered his head and fell to his knees. Tears fell down and turned to steam on his chest. The pain of his loss was as though it was new and all he would ever again feel. "Lord," he cried out into the mind of the demon, "take me from this misery. I can no longer carry it!"

He felt her coming then. Her sweetness enveloped him. He lifted his tear stained face and watched as Helena stepped from the pitch darkness and walked up to him. Her golden hair and pale blue gown seemed to float around her. A violet ribbon of cool light flowed from her, swirled around him and soothed his burning hot skin. "It is all right, my love." She whispered. He felt her fingers gently touch his cheek. "I am clean of that terrible time. I have only memories of you and our Gabriella. You must go on and be happy."

Gabriel shook his head. "Happy? That is not possible. Where is your justice? Why were you taken from me? Was I not a good enough man? No, without you I am nothing!"

"I am not gone from you, Gabriel. In your pure heart and love, I still live. I am always with you. You are beginning to love again and that is what should be. Go and live your life with Elizabeth, raise our daughter and only smile when you think of me...no more tears. That is my loving wish for you."

"Not without justice for you. I am only a man. I refuse to live without that!"

She leaned forward and kissed him lightly. "God has given you the chance to take that what you must have. Justice is here and moving close. Take it, finish it and move on to the other evil thing. Do what you must! That written by God is unbreakable. Take your justice, then walk on and be happy." She searched his eyes, found what she wanted, smiled and faded away.

Gabriel wiped his face and walked forward. Closed his eyes and looked through the mind of Aamon into the mind of Cornelia. He saw in one horrific flash her memory; Helena naked, bleeding, and crying, Ridley crouching between her legs, Cornelia lying in the blood beside her. Gabriel opened his eyes and screamed with rage. The scream flowed from him and out of Aamon. Gabriel slipped into place in Aamon's consciousness, aware of all.

Mad with fear Cornelia screamed at her husband, "Ted...help me!"

Ted slipped further back.

Aamon continued his slow approach. He made a hissing, snake like sound, baring his needle sharp teeth. "You played with Gabriel's woman...now, shall I play with you?"

“No. I did nothing to her. It was Sebastian. He killed her!” In one very fast movement she flicked open the knife and pushed it into Aamon’s forearm.

Aamon looked down at the knife. It shot out of his arm and fell to the floor. There was no bloodied hole. He made a sound like a laugh. Cornelia tried to run passed him. He caught her, lifted her by the neck and held her above him. “How did Sebastian kill her? Did he cut her? Like this?” He pushed a claw into her cheek and pulled it down, splitting her face to her chin.

Cornelia screamed, kicking at him.

“No, not like that?” With one movement, he tore away the front of her clothes, exposing her breasts. “Was it like this?” He opened his mouth, pulled her head around so she could see his teeth. He lifted her higher and sunk his teeth into her breast. She screamed again, this time it was the scream of a horrified animal. Aamon pulled back, spat her flesh onto the floor.

Cornelia hung limp, blood running from her face and body. “God help me! God help me!” She muttered repeatedly. Aamon laughed and shook her as though she was a doll. “You cry for God! Stupid woman! I am your God! You made me so a very long time ago.” He dropped her, picked up the knife, and then turned her on her belly. He leaned down and hissed into her ear. “I would fuck you now, as you had your puppet do to Helena Jackman, but the sight of you repulses Gabriel...so, I will not see him suffer that. There will be no last fuck for you, Cornelia.” He pulled her arm up behind her back until he heard it break. Holding her by the broken arm and her bloodied body, he brought the half-conscious woman across the room to her husband. With the horrible sight so close, Ted seemed to snap out of his stupor. He took the knife from Aamon.

“No, Ted! Please help me!” She moaned at him, the sound blurred with pain.

Aamon pulled her head back by the hair. “End her while she can still see your face.”

Ted narrowed his black eyes and locked them into Cornelia’s beautiful blue eyes for the last time. “This, Connie, is for my children...!” He held the knife against the side of her neck, pushed it into the flesh and pulled it across. Aamon dropped her. She gasped out a gurgle, shuddered and lay still. Her blood spilled in a dark halo around her body.

Ted backed away, holding the knife in front of him.

“I will not kill you, Ted! Your last murder will be your own.” Aamon turned and walked back into the shadows. A minute passed and Gabriel, as Ted had always known him, walked forward. He was drenched with sweat and blood.

“Gabriel?” Ted stepped forward slowly.

“He is gone.” Gabriel’s voice shook as he spoke. He could feel Cornelia’s blood drying on his face and hands. “Water? I need to wash. Do you have any clothes here that I can change into?”

Ted pointed to the curtained dressing room. “There is a wash stand...!”

Gabriel put his head and hands into the soothing cold water. When he stood, it was red with Cornelia’s blood. He leaned heavily on the stand. His heart still thundered in his chest. He lifted his head and looked in the mirror. It was true, he thought, revenge was a hollow victory. He was numb.

Ted had covered the body with a blanket from the bed. Still shocked and unsure, he backed away when Gabriel stepped back into the sitting room.

"I told you Aamon is gone!" Gabriel picked up the whiskey bottle and quickly swallowed half its remains.

"Fucking Hell!" Ted fell down in a chair. "I never thought I would see that monster again. But how? How did you... change like that? You are...were you Aamon? I do not understand."

"If anyone should understand, wouldn't it be you? Wasn't it you and your ilk that started all this madness and mayhem?" He took another drink from the bottle.

"Desjardin was my father. Who the Hell was his father! If I do not control my rage that is what happens. I am very aware of all that he does."

"You allowed him in?"

"I wanted Cornelia to suffer more than I was capable of doing. I wanted her to know horror and pain. She did. Now Ted...do you have any clothes for me?"

Ted rummaged through the wardrobe, pulling out a suit, shirt and over coat.

"They are from my thinner days. They should fit you."

Gabriel dropped his bloodied clothes to the floor and redressed in Ted's clothes. That done he picked up the Chronicle and tossed the forged letter into the fire. "You keep this thing, Ted." He handed him the book. "I got what I need from it. You heard what she said about Jane?"

Ted nodded. "I should have seen it. No bigger fool than me has ever walked this world. All I ever wanted right from when I was a young man... not the money, not the power...all I ever wanted was a daughter. I used to day dream that one day I would teach her to ride a beautiful horse, walk her down the aisle, play with her babies! In all the insanity, I lost that dream. If you have a dream, Gabriel, do hold onto it for dear life."

"Then you understand that things will not work out well for her tonight? And the same will stand for Steward!"

"Oh, I understand."

"Stay in here. Do not get involved. You did what you needed to do."

"Not completely, Gabriel!" Ted looked at his watch. "It is still half an hour until midnight. Then, thank God my misery will be over."

Ted watched as Gabriel checked his pistol and placed it securely in the holster. He put Cornelia's gun in his coat pocket. "Are you going after Sebastian?"

"My first responsibility is to Isabelle. I feel in my gut that she is still alive. When I find her, no doubt Ridley will be near by." Gabriel paused, when he continued Ted once again saw the face of Aamon. "And I will kill him!"

Ted shook his head, sat and picked up the whiskey bottle. "I have written four letters. They are there on my desk in the study. One letter is a confession to killing my wife and so many other innocents. One is for Owen, Randall and the other for Jane. You can burn the one for her. Will you make sure Owen and Randall get their letters?"

"I will." Gabriel closed his eyes and vanished.

Chapter Sixteen

"Excuse me, Mr. Steward."

"What is it, Nora?" Steward snapped at the nervous maid standing in his doorway.

"Janet and I were just leaving when a telephone call came in. Mr. Ridley wants to speak with you."

Steward narrowed his eyes and smiled. Nora backed into the hallway. "I will take it in the study. You go and hang up the kitchen telephone."

He closed the study door, picked up the receiver and waited to hear the other open line close before he spoke. "What do you want, Ridley?"

"Still waiting around begging for pennies from your father? It must be tiresome dealing with Ted along with all your other worries. How much do you owe your bookie now?"

"How is it your concern?"

"I paid your debt for you before and I will pay it again...if it is reasonable and if you earn it, Steward."

"Seventy pounds and the bastard is really pushing on me."

"Don't worry. They never kill the goose with the golden eggs. However, they may break a leg or crack your head. I need some simple information. It will be the easiest money you ever earned."

"What do you want to know?"

"Is Elizabeth Leighton still at the Manor?"

"Yes and shows no signs of leaving...her and fucking Jackman."

"What room is she staying in?"

"What do you want to know that for?"

"Do you want me to pay that debt or not, Steward?"

"I don't give a fuck about that any more. I have a few things to clear up around here, and then I am long gone. You had better do the same, MP Ridley!"

"Why?"

"Look, have you got Ruth and Isabelle Lucci? If you have, you better put the bitches down. My idiot sister has told Ruth everything."

"What are you talking about? Ruth must be there."

"Believe me, she is not!" Steward thought for a moment and smiled. "That bloody Jackman! I thought he was up to something. Did you keep letters that Ruth wrote to you?"

"Tell me what you are bloody talking about!"

"Ruth's gone. Jackman has her hidden somewhere, no doubt. He gave Jane the letters you were stupid enough to keep. The bitch went mad and told him everything."

"What do you mean by 'everything'?"

Steward laughed, "Shitting yourself, are you? I said everything and I meant everything. All the whores here on the mountain...and what you did to his wife and

Margaret. If I were you, Sebastian, I'd keep a wide eye out for Lucci and Jackman from now on. You are in the deep and murky right along with me!"

After a heavy silence, in a voice thick with anger, Sebastian said, "Kill Jane."

"She is as good as done. And the same can be said for our dear Mother. I have just been listening to my Father and Jackman having a go at her. Jackman convinced her you had run off with Ruth. He has some kind of book that Desjardin wrote. He told her that you gave it to him so she and Father would hang. She is not holding too much back and it is clear as hell that father has finally found his balls. That is it for your money ticket!"

Steward waited for Sebastian to speak. For a long while, there was only the sound of his breathing. "What room is Elizabeth Leighton sleeping in?"

"Fucking hell, Ridley. You cannot get at her. She is never alone. Jackman's got Randall, Owen and Lucci sitting watch over her night and day."

"Tell me where she is ...or you'll wish you met the hang man when I catch up with you!"

"Second floor, east wing...third door from the end on the left." Steward paused and smiled. "If you are going to 'play' with that little tease, I would love to help."

"I 'play' alone."

"Suit yourself. However, when you are done with her I suggest you take a fast and long trip. Your trick is up, MP Ridley!"

Sebastian hung up.

After a moment, Steward clicked the telephone buttons a few times. He heard the telephone at the operator's station ringing.

"Operator Finch speaking." A familiar voice picked up the call.

Steward dropped his voice and spoke slowly, sounding exactly like Randall.

"Good evening, Rosalind. How are you tonight?"

"Dr. De Wolfe?"

"Yes. I thought I would take a chance that you might be on the board tonight."

"No rest for the wicked or so they say."

Steward laughed. "No truer words. I was wondering how little Bob was doing. Did the salve I suggested for his infection help?"

"Almost before my eyes, it was that good! Randall, you should see it. Two months going back and forth to old Dr. Redmond and nothing he offered did a thing. We will all be better around here when he is gone and you hang your shingle. John and I can't thank you enough."

"Just glad to help, Rosalind. I wonder if you could do me a rather large favor."

"I'll do my best."

"I just had a call from MP Ridley. Did you put it through?"

"I am the only one working tonight. Yes, it came through about ten minutes or so ago."

"Good. I have some important papers I am to mail off to him first thing in the morning. Now, I have his London address but I believe he might have bought a new house. I never thought to get the address from him. I would rather not call him back and look like an idiot. Do you have a record there of that address?"

"If he is in this county I should have it, especially if it is a new line."

"Could you be a dear and give it to me?"

"I could lose my job for that but seeing as I know you won't tell. Hold on!"

Steward took a pencil and paper. He could hear the operator rustling papers in the background.

"Here you go, Randall! Line connected a fortnight ago. The address we have is 4 Oldham Fields, place called 'Paddocks Hollow'."

"Oldham Feilds? Sounds familiar."

"Yes, you know. It is about two miles west from where you are, along the Village Road, where the burnt out Weaver Textile plant sits. Not many houses out on Oldham Feilds. Just a few cottages and the like, bit lonely but that is what some folks like."

"Oh yes. I remember now. Thank you so much, Rosalind. Should I drop by and see how Bob is doing?"

"Yes, that would be nice. Anytime, Dr. De Wolfe."

"Good night Rosalind and again, thank you!"

Sebastian touched Isabelle's arm. She woke with a start, sat up and looking around the room. The fireplace was alight with a large fire, a single gas lamp burned over the mantle. The French doors were closed and the curtains drawn.

He placed a folding tray on the bed. On it was a bowl of steaming stew, thick slices of bread and butter and a large glass of milk. "Is something wrong?" He asked as he followed her eyes round the room. "Other than the obvious, that is?"

"I guess...I must have been dreaming. A terrible night mare!"

"Really? What was it about?"

"You raped me....again! There was some kind of dark spirit watching."

Sebastian smiled. "It is most likely the effects of the sedative and your empty belly." He unlocked the wrist cuff and put the tray on her lap. "You will eat all of that. I do not need you to get ill."

Isabelle took a mouthful, realizing then just how hungry and thirsty she was.

Sebastian sat back, leaned against the footboard and watched her for a while before he spoke. "In a few hours you and I will leave here. We are going to France. I keep a small flat there. It is not much but it will do for a day or so. Then we will take the train south. I think to Madrid. It is beautiful there. We will stay there until your child is born, then we will go to the States."

She opened her mouth to argue but decided not to. Some how, some way she would get those stockings from him, destroy them and run away. Maybe, she thought, I will kill him before I go.

"You may destroy the stockings...." He narrowed his eyes and glared at her. "But you will never kill me."

Isabelle stopped with the spoon half way to her mouth.

"Making more very poor decision's? You should know that any garment you have worn or even touched will work as well as the stockings." He paused and leaned forward. "So if you want to see that baby born alive you had best do just what I tell you."

They stayed silent while she finished her meal.

"I need to wash and use the toilet." She said as he took the tray and put in on the floor.

He motioned to a nearby door, helped her get to her feet and led her to a door across the room. "The washroom is in there."

"I prefer to be on my own." She pulled her arm away.

"No doubt, but I prefer to keep my eye on you for a while longer."

Isabelle shrugged and muttered something in Italian. She ignored him, used the toilet, washed thoroughly. She was drying herself when he left the room and was quickly back again.

"I thought you might be tired of being naked." He smiled. "Although I have to say it is doing wonders for me. I bought this nightgown for you."

She held it before her. It was made of the finest black satin. Tiny white pearls and black sequins decorated the deep V front. An insert of sheer lace ran down each side.

"It is beautiful." She said quietly.

"Then put it on."

She pulled it over her head. It was a perfect fit. "If you are taking me to France I will need more than this."

"Not the way I travel. I will buy you more when we are there." He took her hand, brought her back to the bed and refastened the chain cuff around her wrist.

"You do not need to do that, Sebastian. Where am I going to go without proper clothes on a cold night? I do not even know where I am."

"It will give me peace of mind. I have to leave for a while and I want to be sure you are not making more mistakes."

"You are leaving?" She looked nervously at the French Doors.

"Yes. I have to deal with Elizabeth...."

"No, Sebastian. Please do not hurt her. There is no reason."

"It was your idea, Isabelle. Now I need to see if it is something I want to do or not."

"That is ridiculous. Do you not know your own mind?" She watched as Sebastian fastened his shoulder holster in place. Through the sleeve of his white silk shirt, she saw the black stocking tied around his arm. She gasped. "It was not a dream! It was real?"

"No it was not a dream, my dear. In-laws! They can be such a pain. However, you will eventually get used to my father. In his current state he does not require the detailed attention that I do. "

She watched silently as he finished dressing, closed his eyes, lowered his head and disappeared.

It was just before midnight when Steward walked into his sisters' room. She was on the floor by the fire. Ruth's letters, torn in many small pieces lay scattered around her. She was dropping each piece, one at a time, into the fire. She looked up at Steward with eyes red and swollen from crying.

"What's wrong now?"

"Go away!" She snapped at him.

He folded his arms and leant against the wall. "What are you wearing...never mind, I don't want to know!"

"I...said...go...away!"

"Are you burning Ruth's love letters to darling Sebastian?"

"How do you know about that?"

"A good guess. How did you get the letters?"

Jane's eyes darting around. She was looking for the needed lie. "Someone mailed them to me. I don't know who."

"Oh, I see, just a well-wisher. Did this helpful person have any message or advice for me?"

"No! Anyway all this is your fault."

"My fault? Jane, my sick little sister, you brought Sebastian to Ruth's bed. Mother and I warned you not to. Ruth is a lovely thing and well worth the effort even without her legs."

"I let him fuck her because she wanted a man. I could tell that."

"I gave her all she wanted whenever I was here."

"You made her hate you because you are so mean! If you had been nicer to her she would still be here with me." Jane was crying again.

Steward picked up the last of the torn pages and tossed them in the fire. "Well," he spoke with a much softer tone, "it is all water under the bridge now. They are gone and it is safe to say that your marriage to Sebastian is off. Mother is going to be furious with you!"

"I know." She jumped to her knees and clung to his arm. "She is going to kill me...."

"No, she is not. Don't be a ninny!"

"Yes! She told me so many times if I messed everything up, I would pay. You know what that means. Please Steward! Let me come and live with you in London. You have more than enough room for me."

"No! We have had this conversation before. I don't want you bothering me day and night."

"I would not be in your way. And it will only be for a while. I will soon find someone to look after me. Just think...when you do not have a female around you can always use me. I will do anything you want."

He smiled and shrugged. "I have heard that before. But still you like to fight with me!"

"I will be good, I promise. Look, I will start tonight. Just tell me and I will do it."

"You promise you will do anything I want, whenever I want?"

"Yes!"

"You can prove that to me right now, Jane. Do what I want now and I will bring you to London with me before the sun rises."

She stood and began to open the buttons on her dress.

"Why not do something different, Jane...?"

"What?" She asked eagerly.

"We could go outside as we did with you were a child." He stood and held her arms. "I know. Why don't we go down to the old mill?"

She thought for a few seconds. "Where we did Mrs. Beaver?"

"Yes!" He slid his hands over her breasts. "It is cold outside but we will warm each other up fast enough. I remember how much you enjoyed it when we went back to the woods where the O'Neal bitch died!"

"And you will take me away from here tonight, no matter what? You will make sure Mommy doesn't hurt me?"

"I promise, Jane, our mother will never touch you again. Now, get your coat. I was going to go into the village and visit a friend so I have a clip all set."

Tony nudged Elizabeth. "Wake up, Lady Bug; it is time to go to bed."

She smiled at him. "That sounds kind of silly!" She sat up suddenly. "Gabriel?"

"He left about an hour ago."

"He went to confront Cornelia. Shouldn't you go and see if he is alright?"

"Under other circumstances I would agree but not this time. He does not need nor does he want help with Cornelia and Ted." Tony took her arm and helped her off the bed.

"Randall and I have decided it is best that he and I sleep in your room, with you...so to speak!" They had pulled the settee into the bedroom; another bed of pillows lay along the bottom of the bed. "We flipped a coin. Randall gets the floor."

Randall grinned. "I would like another look at that coin of yours, Tony!"

"Well, I want to bathe. You two can wait here."

"No." Tony said firmly. "You are not...."

"Oh, Hell, I know. 'You are not going anywhere on your own!' Well, come on, then." She took the men by their hands and pulled them into the bathroom. With a little fuss and bother, she was able to position them behind the dressing screen and facing the wall.

"Do you also have the distinct feeling she has done this before?" Randall asked Tony.

"Without a doubt, my friend, and staring at this wall is far better than a black eye!"

It was not until Elizabeth was in her bed, Tony and Randall sleeping on their make shift beds that her troubled thoughts reached the forefront of her mind. Was it possible that not even a week had passed since she became a part of Gabriel's world? Why did she feel as though she had loved him for a lifetime? Would he keep his promise and always return to her? She said a prayer that he be surrounded and guided by angels and fell into a light sleep.

An hour later, she was wide-awake and needed to use the toilet. "Damn!" She cursed under her breath and sat up. Tony had told her if she needed to go, she was to use the porcelain pot under the bed or wake them. She decided she was not going to squat over the pot with two men in the room, asleep or not. Why wake them when she would be back in bed in less than a minute.

Elizabeth slipped her legs over the side of the bed, stretched, stood and pulled on her slippers. A long shadow moved quickly and unseen down the hallway and into the bathroom. Not wanting to disturb the men, she did not turn up any lamps. There was just enough light in the washroom for her to see what she needed.

She was reaching to pull the chain when Sebastian came up behind her, held her around the waist, lifted her off the floor and covered her mouth firmly with his hand.

"Hello, Elizabeth!" He whispered in her ear.

She tried to cry and to break his hold but he was far too strong for her.

"We are going for a little trip and then get to know each other."

Sebastian raised his hand to the base of her neck, pinched hard. Elizabeth passed out. Sebastian put her over his shoulder and traveled back to 'Paddocks Hollow'.

At ten minutes before midnight Ted left Cornelia's bedroom, went up to the fourth floor and into the abandoned chapel. In the dim light of his lantern, he saw that the room was a clutter of broken furniture. The small antique organ, placed there with love by his Grandmother seemed as though someone or something had taken an axe to it. The large ornate wood cross that hung over the alter now swung upside down. The room stank with the smell of sulfur. Ted knew that all this was the result of the temper of the shade that once was Pierre Desjardin.

He moved further into the room and made the sign of the cross. He placed his lamp on the floor, found an unbroken chair, placed it upright and sat down.

"I know you are here, Pierre. I smell your stench." He grinned up towards a thick patch of blackness in the overhead darkness. "Stop skulking and face me if you have the courage!"

The shadow became the solid, shroud covered figure of a man and lowered slowly to just a few feet above the rubble.

"Cornelia is dead." Ted spoke with tired resolve.

The shade opened red eyes and turned them down on Ted.

"You did not know?" Ted laughed. "She has been dead over half an hour and now well held in Hell and you had no idea! How the mighty have fallen! Go back to Hell and take your place beside her. That is where you belong."

"You as well!" The voice of the shade rumbled around the room.

"True. However, unlike all the others at least my death will not be in vain. How many souls did you give to Satan over the years...hundreds or more? No doubt your pride and joy. What a shame with my death all that work will be for not."

"Liar." Desjardin bellowed.

"Oh, it is a fact. I read it, written in your own hand, in your Chronicle. I am the last living original member of your foul group. If I spill my blood this night between midnight and dawn your coven is 'enfolded'. The souls of Owen, Sarah, Elizabeth Leighton, Tony Lucci and Gabriel Jackman will be free. Steward and Jane will stay in Hell with their mother. All the good souls you damned will rise to Heaven where they belong and the work of your life time becomes nothing."

A low, steady moan and cold breeze began to swirl around the room. Smiling, Ted continued to speak, "In life you were a pathetic failure...just as you are in death." Ted stood, pulling his pistol from his pocket. "You could not even stop Cornelia from bringing Sebastian into her madness." The moan turned to a scream, the breeze to a fierce wind. "You are done and done far worse than me! I will see you in Hell, my old friend." Ted put the barrel of his gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

The ride down Wolfe Mountain, along the Village Road and through the overgrown back road to the long abandoned mill usually took forty minutes. On that moonless night, Steward had to take the steep roads much slower than suited the rage growing inside of him. All the way Jane prattled on about how much fun life in London was going to be for her. She had no sense of the danger sitting next to her.

Steward pulled the horses to a halt in a small service yard behind the mill. Jane leaned over and placed her hand on her brothers' leg. "We haven't done this in such a long time, Steward." She purred at him. "Do you remember how mad Mommy would get mad at us if we went into the bushes without her? If she only knew how often we did."

He moved her hand away. "Is there anything that frightens you, Jane?" Jane should have recognized the dark menace in his voice but she did not.

"Well, Mommy and that...!" She pointed at the crumbling mill building. "Doesn't it look different in the dark?"

"Do you ever think of what will happen if they ever clue on to us?"

She shrugged. "I don't think about it. I know. They will hang us."

"That does not frighten you?"

"No. We all have to die sometime. Anyway, they will not catch us, will they? Who cares about the stupid, useless women we use? People like that are easily replaced, like old shoes."

He jumped down from the clip, took the lamp from its hanging place on the harness. Jane followed him. "Well, Jane. I do care about when and how I die. I will not die for a very long time and I most certainly will not hang."

She frowned at him. "Why do we have to talk about that?" She stopped and took a step backwards. "You are not in a bad mood, are you? I don't want you to hurt me."

Stewards' expression changed. The angry bright blue eyes softened. A quick, wide smile spread across his face. "I only hurt you when you deserve it, when you make me cross at you, Jane. Have you done anything that would make me angry?"

"No."

"Good." He took her arm pulled her to the hanging doorway. "Let's see if you meant what you said about doing anything I want. We will go to exact spot where we killed the old woman. Would you like that?"

Jane smiled and skipped ahead of him, up the narrow staircase to the attic. "At least we don't have to drag anything heavy up these stairs, this time." She stopped by a supporting beam at the center of the circular room. The wooden boards under her feet were stained with a large puddle of blood. "So go ahead Steward...tell me what you want me to do!"

Steward put the lantern on the floor and sat beside it. "Take off that ridiculous dress, for a start."

"It is not ridiculous! It is ...was my wedding dress. I think I look pretty."

"Yes, Jane...pretty, that is the word I was looking for. Take the damn thing off."

She took her time opening the many buttons on each sleeve and down the front. She dropped it to the floor and kicked it aside. She was wearing nothing but a corset, garter belt and stockings.

"Always ready for what might come your way, aren't you Jane?" He pulled a set of handcuffs from his pocket and slid them across the floor to her. "Put them on and fasten the other end to the trap door ring."

She sat on the floor, smiled did as he said. "That is just what we did to Mrs. Beaver. I hope I am not going to get splinters in my backside."

Steward laughed. "Splinters? Wouldn't that be terrible?"

"Yes. I have had them before and it is not fun!"

"Pull on the cuff and let me see if you are secured."

She yanked the cuff a few times.

"Right! Before we get down to business I want to ask you a few questions?"

"Dirty questions?"

"What did Gabriel tell you when he was in your room this afternoon?"

She blinked a few times. The beginning of fear wiped away her smile. "He wanted to tell me about Ruth leaving and give me her letters to Sebastian."

"You told me they came in the post."

"I made a mistake. I just remembered now when you asked me."

"Do you want to know what Gabriel did when you rushed off to check on Ruth?"

Jane stayed frozen and silent.

"He came to my room and told me you were in a bad way and might need me as he had more serious matters to share with you."

"Steward...?" she whispered, hoarsely.

"He's a smart bastard, that Gabriel. I have to take my hat off to him. He knew I would come and listen at your door."

Jane jumped back, pulling hard on the ring that held her in place.

"So Jane." Steward continued. "You are going to throw me into the fire and play innocent?"

"No. Steward it was not like that." Her eyes were wide with fear. "Gabriel tricked me."

"You told him I am insane. Maybe so, Jane but you are far madder than me."

"Steward, please don't hurt me! I will go to Gabriel and tell him it was all a lie. Everyone says what a liar I am." She squealed as he pulled his pistol from his pocket. "They do not have any evidence...you are always telling me that!"

"You are stupid Jane and you have a big mouth. Along with that, you are the worst lunatic I have ever heard of. Those three things make you useless to me. Like our victims you are useless and stupid!"

"You cannot kill everyone. I told many people what you made me do. I told Ruth everything single thing. She knows everything right from Mary O'Neal! You cannot get at her because you don't know where she is."

"You fucking, stupid fat cow!" He snarled at her, his face red with rage.

"It must have been Ruth who told Gabriel in the first place. If I go missing they will know it was you...."

Steward stood, pointing the pistol at her head.

Jane's mind raced. "I was upset and Ruth asked me what was wrong."

"And the only thing you could think to tell her was that I was the bloody 'mountain murderer'?"

"That is what I did. She told me she would tell Gabriel and they would get the proper authorities on you...not Brock."

Slowly he walked few steps closer to her. Jane dropped to the floor and curled into a ball.

"Please don't kill me Steward! Please! I will tell them all that I did all the killing and that you were not even there."

"You know Jane; I was thinking I might kill you quickly. A bullet to the head and that is it for my idiot sister." He reached into pocket and brought out a full syringe. "But on second thoughts, why shouldn't I have some fun while I am at it."

She moaned with fear, pulling so hard on the cuff her wrist bled.

"Do you know what is in here? Not lovely cocaine as I gave your very unfaithful lover...its rat poison. Nasty fucking stuff for a very nasty female!"

He bend over her, she kicked at him. He grabbed her leg, shoved the needle into her thigh and pushed the plunger all the way down, then backed away and leaned against the wall.

Jane sat up, looked down at the needle still hanging on her leg and then up at Steward. Her face, wild with shock and fear, twisted suddenly as the first pain ripped through her. She lurched forward, screamed with agony; the poison eating through her body. "You..." she gasped and choked as blood flowed from her mouth and nose. "will be sorry...!"

Steward watched silently until the screams and the convulsions stopped. He walked up to Jane's body and kicked her in the face. He unlocked the handcuff, he opened the trap door, pushed Jane's body and the wedding dress through the opening.

From the storage unit at the back of the clip he brought out several lengths of sturdy rope, cut into 6-foot lengths. He threw them beside the body. Back at the clip, he pulled out two rusted boat anchors. He positioned the body near to the edge of the boat ramp then wrapped it in the wedding dress, tied one length of rope under the arms and securely to one of the anchors. He did the same with her legs. He lifted the anchors and threw them into the water. The anchors and body disappeared into the deep water.

He went back up the stairs, put the empty syringe and pistol in his pocket, then came back down to the boat ramp. The water was still and black. "Fuck you, Jane!" He spat into the water.

It was just over two miles from the mill to Oldham Fields and Sebastian's Ridley's house. Back in the clip, Steward headed in that direction.

As he did before, Gabriel materialized in Sebastian's powder room. Quietly and carefully, he thoroughly searched the house. That done he lit a lantern and went quickly down the cellar steps.

Cornelia said the secret room was behind the shelves. Gabriel knocked the books from the shelves, found a bolt lock near the floor and pushed it over. Holding the lantern ahead of him, his heart racing, he stepped into the small, fetid room. He looked at the bed and the open shackles. He picked up the destroyed dress and recognized it. A familiar, awful heat spread through his blood and he knew that Aamon was with him.

"No!" He called out loud.

Cornelia's words that this was the place where Helena met her dreadful end, repeated and Aamon pressed harder.

"No, I do not need you for this!" This time he yelled. He closed his eyes and lowered his head.

"So, where will you go?"

Gabriel jumped back, pulled out his pistol. The demon stood in front of him. Sitting on his haunches the seven-foot tall demon filled the room. Appalled and stunned, Gabriel froze.

"I said, Gabriel, where will you go. Do you have any idea where Ridley is?"

"No, I bloody well do not. You served your purpose with Cornelia. Go back to hell and let me handle this."

Aamon smiled, showing several rows of permanently blood stained, razor sharp teeth. He swung his huge head from side to side, all the while keeping his yellow snake eyes on Gabriel's face. "So far you have not done very well. What do you know about

Ridley? How can you fight and win when you are blind?” Aamon rolled his head back, stretched out a long, thick black tongue, flicked it through the air with the snap of a whip and pulled it back in his mouth. He looked back down at Gabriel. “I taste female sweat and fear in the air. The blood of a young female is about to fall. My friend, Death, the enemy of all humans is waiting for her. She has an hour, maybe less to live. However, Gabriel, you want to deny your birthright and do the manly thing. Elizabeth Leighton will die at the hands of the creature who slaughtered your wife. Or maybe you would rather listen to me and learn.”

Gabriel pushed his hands through his hair. “Make it fast.”

“I am known as a demon of many words. You will hear them all.”

“Fuck! Get on with it!”

“Sebastian Ridley is for the most part human only in appearance. His father, your father, Pierre Desjardin was born from my intercourse with a junior, half-human demon. Because I created this mess, it is my unfortunate responsibility to see to it that you bring him down and he must be finished. If he lives, in five years, he will lead this country and he will bring it with him to Hell.”

“You cannot kill him as you think. Bullets, knives, poison...none of it would kill him. That is the reason why he has no fear of you, Gabriel. In fact, he has been waiting for the time that you finally face him.”

“Even in my world, there are rules and laws. In fact, we have less tolerance than exists here. Can you imagine the chaos we would have without them?” Aamon laughed. “Shortly after Desjardin took his place in Hell; he broke order and returned ‘earthside’ as we call this dimension. We have been able to trap him in the De Wolfe Manor but he does occasionally break free when he needs to be near Ridley. His energy fades fast and he is quickly back at the Manor. He fights a fool’s fight to keep Ridley from his true nature, that being a murdering, mindless and relentless monster. He wants Ridley to take the place as Prime Minister. Until Ridley killed Helena and Margaret and before Isabelle went to him, Desjardin has been successful.”

“Ridley was in a heat to fuck and weak because of it. He showed his true nature to Isabelle. After that, he could not let her go. She would most certainly talk. He should have killed her quickly and disposed of her body but the fool weakened at the effect of her beauty and has decided to keep her. Now, Ridley has taken Elizabeth.”

“What?” Gabriel stepped forward, only inches from the monster. “He can’t. I left her guarded.”

“So you say! He does have her, nonetheless.” Aamon’s voice thickened with anger. “Within the next hour Elizabeth will be dead and Sebastian will successfully run and take Isabelle with him. If you do not want that you had better listen to me.”

“Then tell me how to kill the bastard!” Gabriel demanded angrily.

“The only thing that will kill Ridley is fire and that fire directed into his brain through his eyes. Ridley’s death will suck Desjardin back into Hell with him and neither of them will ever return here. So, you see why you have no choice but to channel me and take my help, Gabriel.”

Gabriel narrowed his eyes. “Wait a minute. You are able to channel into me, then you can also channel into him. If you do that you can tell me where he is!”

“I can channel into you because you are a dedicated soul. Ridley was not dedicated.”

"If you do not know where they are, what use are you to me?"

"These people are your lovers and friends, not mine. Let me in so I can read the situation. Or would you rather lose Elizabeth as you lost Helena?"

Gabriel looked down at Isabelle's dress and thought of Elizabeth's beautiful face. Rage surged through his body and Aamon stepped into his mind.

"Well?" Gabriel said with his patience at the breaking point.

"Go to Suzanne Beryline. She is not aware of it but she knows where Ridley holds your females."

"How the hell could she know?"

"Go and find out!"

Gabriel materialized next to Elizabeth's empty bed. Tony and Randall were sleeping soundly in their makeshift beds. Gabriel lifted the side of the settee. Tony rolled out on top of Randall. He was scrambling to get to his feet and his gun when Gabriel yelled at them.

"Where the fucking Hell is Elizabeth?"

"Gabriel?" Stunned, Tony looked from Gabriel to the empty bed.

Randall stood.

"I hate to bother you two sleeping beauties but something does seem to be wrong here!" Gabriel's voice heavy with sarcasm and anger.

"What the hell?" Tony rushed to the bathroom and Randall to the sitting room and Gabriel's bedroom.

Tony quickly returned with Elizabeth's slippers in his hand. "These were by the toilet!"

Randall joined them. "She's not here!"

"Of course she is not fucking here, Randall. Ridley's got her!"

"Jesus Christ, Gabriel. I am sorry. She must have gone to use the toilet. I told her to wake us if she needed to go."

"Did it not occur to either of you mushrooms to sleep in shifts?"

"Obviously not." Randall answered quietly.

Gabriel threw up his hands in disgust. "Come on!" He moved to the hallway.

"Where are we going?" Tony asked.

"To talk with Suzanne."

Randall and Tony exchanged glances, stayed silent and followed Gabriel.

With the strength of Aamon, Gabriel broke the locked door leading to Owen's apartment and did the same with his bedroom door. With Tony and Randall close behind he ran into the room.

"Wake up!" Gabriel kicked the side of the bed. Owen was on his feet, naked with gun in hand before he was even awake. Suzanne sat quickly holding the blankets up to her neck.

"What?" Owen looked wide-eyed at the three men.

"Get dressed. Ridley's got Elizabeth."

Owen turned to Tony and Randall. "How?"

"That does not matter now, Owen. Just get dressed." Gabriel leaned over the bed to Suzanne. "Where is Ridley's new home?"

She looked from Gabriel to Owen and then back at Gabriel. "I have no idea, Gabriel!"

“Yes, you do!” Gabriel banged his hands on the bed. “Think!”

“But, I don’t. How could I? I hardly know the man....”

“There must be something....”

“Wait!” Suzanne smiled. “Yes, I do know! Just before Papa left for his last trip he and I left my cottage to go for a ride.”

“Yes.” Gabriel encouraged with impatience.

“We were at the end of Oldham Fields Road, where it turns down Parker Hill to attach to the Village Road. The last house...it is far back off the road. I saw a man walking up the pathway towards the house. I said to Papa, ‘Is that MP Ridley?’ Papa said ‘Yes, it is. I wonder what he doing out here!’”

“So it is the last house at the end of same road as your cottage?” Gabriel asked.

“Yes, on the right side! I do not know the number but there is a sign over the front gate. It says ‘Paddocks Hollow’ on it. If you are going there, you do not have to go all the way to my cottage. Turn up Parker Hill and it is very quickly at Oldham Fields. You will save a lot of time.”

Gabriel grabbed her head and kissed her. “Thank you, Suzanne! If you weren’t French I’d marry you!” He turned to the watching men. “Right. I cannot transport there because I have never seen the place but I do know that roadway and the turn onto Parker Hill very well. You three get up there as fast as you can. Owen, could you put some bloody clothes on?”

“What does transport mean?” Suzanne asked.

Gabriel ignored her question. “Suzanne, you will have to go along with them. We cannot leave you here alone. I have no idea where Steward is.”

“I have a question.” Tony looked at Gabriel. “Did Ridley transport with Elizabeth?”

Gabriel thought for a moment. “I have no idea. Maybe, why?”

“Well, when you transport, your clothes or whatever you are carrying goes with you, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then I am coming with you, Gabriel!”

“What are you talking about?” Suzanne asked. “What does transport mean?”

Gabriel smiled at her. “You are in for a surprise.” Gabriel stood behind Tony and wrapped his arms around his body. “Close your eyes and keep them closed. If you don’t you get one hell of a headache.”

“What are they doing?” She asked Owen, who was finally dressing.

“You’ll see.”

“Ready?” Gabriel asked Tony.

“As I will ever be.”

Both men closed their eyes and vanished.

Suzanne blinked a few times and fainted.

Isabelle was sitting just as she had been when Sebastian returned with Elizabeth. “There, that was not too long.” He pulled a sturdy, heavy chair to the center of the room and lowered the still unconscious woman onto it.

“What have you done to her? I thought you were not going to hurt her!”

Sebastian took several neckties from his dresser. "She is not hurt, not yet." Elizabeth moaned as he tied her arms behind the chair and her ankles to the chair legs. "You see, she is coming back to us already." He went into the washroom, came out with a glass of water and threw the water in her face.

Elizabeth sputtered, coughed and opened her eyes. She squinted, trying to focus her eyes and looked up at Sebastian. Fear and reality hit her suddenly. She tried to lurch from the chair but fell back as pain shot up her arms into her shoulders.

"Best not to do that." Sebastian said. "You will dislocate your shoulders."

Elizabeth saw Isabelle. "Isabelle? Are you alright?"

Isabelle shook her head and lay back on the pillows. "I am so sorry, Elizabeth. I really did not mean for this to happen."

Elizabeth looked back at Sebastian. "If you have any sense you will let us go! Gabriel is most likely already on his way here!" Her heart thundered. Her words had nowhere near the force she wanted.

Sebastian laughed, took another chair placed it directly in front of Elizabeth, so close his knees touched hers. "I doubt that. Other than you two, no one knows I have this place." He shrugged. "Let him come, if he does. I am sick of hearing about him. It is far past time to put an end to his interference."

She rested her head on the back of the chair. "What do you want from me?"

"As I said before...just to get to know you! Maybe ask you a few questions. If you satisfy me, I will leave you here unharmed. If not, well...I am sure you can guess."

"Fuck you, Sebastian!" She snarled at him.

For a moment, he sat stunned and then he laughed. "Such a foul mouth for a lady. I wonder what your mother would say if she could hear you."

"You only mention my mother because you want to rub it in my face what you did to her. Your intentions are obvious and do not phase me."

"No questions then?"

Elizabeth looked down her nose and shook her head.

"For God's sake Elizabeth just tell him what he wants to know!" Isabelle was close to tears.

"No, it is alright, Isabelle. Elizabeth is angry and very frightened. This reaction is normal. Lets' see what I can learn other ways. Words lie, aromas do not." He moved forward in his chair, ran his face along from her neck to her knees, inhaling deeply.

He sat back in his chair, smiling. "Well, you are most certainly not a virgin. I did not really think you were. But..." he turned and looked back at Isabelle, "it has been a very long time since lovely Elizabeth has had intercourse. For a need that strong, I guess it has been a year or more. That will please you, Isabelle. Poor Gabriel has not fucked her, yet! Is he losing his touch?"

He leaned forward again and took another deep breath. "But still you reek of him...! He has been all over you and you have his scent deep inside you." He laughed and slapped his knee. "A blow job? Is that what you did? Worked up the poor bastard and sucked him instead of fucking him? Yes, that is just what you did."

"What a sad and sick little mind you have, Sebastian Ridley!"

"Not me, Elizabeth! You are the one who loves the tease. You drive him mad and then say..." Sebastian paused, looked at her from the corner of his eyes, and glanced at Isabelle then back at Elizabeth, "... you say not now, Gabriel. I will not be your

mistress. I will be the one and only. You must get rid of Isabelle, end it forever, and then you can have me all you want. And Gabriel can't wait to do just that."

Isabelle moaned quietly and put her hand over her face.

"Do you hear that, Elizabeth? That is the sound of a heart breaking. Are you still so proud of yourself? Mind you, it is clever. You got the man you wanted, another woman's man without soiling your reputation. I often marvel at the underhanded genius of a female."

"None of that is your business." Elizabeth spoke quietly. She could not bring herself to look at Isabelle.

Sebastian nodded slightly. "And you really do feel bad about hurting Isabelle, don't you? I am surprised. Scruples and integrity in a beautiful young woman, that is rare. However, you could be right. None of that is my concern and does not solve my problem." He took his knife from his trouser pocket and flicked it open.

Elizabeth gasped and pulled as far back in the chair as possible.

"I am not going to cut you, Elizabeth, just your nightgown. I need to have a much more detailed look at you." He leaned down and ran the knife through the hem of her nightgown. She looked over him to Isabelle. Isabelle shook her head and mouthed the words. "Don't do anything!"

Elizabeth took a deep breath, turned her head to the side and closed her eyes.

Carefully Sebastian cut the straps and front of her nightgown, pulled it out from under her, sat back in his chair and studied her. "Not bad." He said after an unbearably long silence. "I prefer some meat like Isabelle but you are still very pleasing." He leaned forward, kissed one breast and then the other. He bared his teeth, ran them across her nipple and smiled up at her. "So far, so good for you, Elizabeth. I have the great urge to do many things but none of them has to do with killing you!"

He stood, walked behind Elizabeth and put his hot hands on her shoulders. She shuddered at his touch but did not say anything or move. His slid his hands over her breasts. With his lips against her ear and his hands running circles around her breasts, he whispered. "A year is such a long time! Your smell is very telling. You need some real sex, my pretty friend."

He moved back to his chair, put his hands on her hips and pulled her slightly forward. He put his hand between her legs, took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I can feel your heat from here." He pushed his fingers under her. "Let me see just how hot and wet you are."

"No!" Elizabeth jumped back.

"Yes!" He pulled her body forward again, held her place with one hand and pushed fingers of the other hand into her.

"NO!" She yelled this time, pushing hard down on his hand and pulling to the side. "You will not touch me like that. You are a filthy, disgusting creature! I would rather be dead than have your hands on me!"

His jaw dropped. His eyes narrowed. He stood; his face went white with rage. "You would rather die? Is that right?"

"Yes! You make me want to vomit. Go and rot in hell with your ridiculous father. Fuck him...or have you already done that?"

Sebastian made a sound like a growl, raised his hand and brought it across Elizabeth's head with all this strength. "Bitch!" He hissed at her. Once again, he hit her,

this time sending her and the chair falling to the side. Her temple hit the side of the fire fender with a resounding crack.

He was moving towards her again when Isabelle called to him. "Stop! Please stop, Sebastian!"

He turned on her with fierce anger. "Be quiet, Isabelle!"

"Just think about what you are doing. She is not a whore...how do you think she will react to the things you were doing and saying!"

"No one talks to me like that...."

"Why not? You are a murderer! You keep me chained to your bed and rape me." She held up her bruised and chained wrist. "Do you really believe you deserve respect?"

He pulled his knife from his pocket. "I may not deserve it but I will get it!" he cut Elizabeth's hands and feet free from the chair and lifted her into his arms. Blood flowed freely from a wide gash that ran from her forehead, down her temple to her ear.

"Sebastian! Where are you going?" Isabelle called after him. He slammed and locked the bedroom door without answering her.

He moved up stairs to a small attic bedroom, laid Elizabeth on the bed, pushed open a window and sat beside her. Sweat rolled down his face. "It was not my plan to hurt you!" He panted as he removed his jacket. The shirt underneath saturated with sweat. "It is still not my desire...!"

He placed his hand on her neck and felt a very faint pulse. With his face against her ear and in the blood, he whispered. "If you die, Elizabeth, it is your fault." He ran his face down her chest, sucked the flesh of her breast into his mouth, shuttered and whispered, "All I wanted to do was learn what sort of woman you are. Is that too much to ask?"

He rested his head on her belly, placed one hand on her forehead searched her memories. He saw the night she all but forced her virginity onto the man she loved. Sebastian smiled and ran his tongue through the blood that had spilled down her body. "An aggressive, courageous virgin. What a treat for any man!"

He felt the heartbreak of her grief for this man and her mother. He felt the loss and the fear as she fought to maintain dignity and understand her new life at The Three Bells. He saw the fight between Rose and Kitty. He laughed, "Even the old dykes fight for you."

He saw the carriage ride she took with Gabriel from London to the De Wolfe Manor. He felt her surprise and passion when she saw the effect she had on Gabriel. "The fool could have fucked you right then if he tried just a little!" Sebastian sneered at the thought of Gabriel wanting so badly and holding back.

He saw and felt the passion and burning need she had for Gabriel when he told the story of Anna. He heard her ask Gabriel to forget his promise and take her then. He shook his head as Gabriel refused her. He felt Gabriel's frustration and unbelievable release as she gave him at least one outlet. "Oh Gabriel, what a fool you are! You do not deserve either of your females."

After hiding his clip and horse off the roadway, Steward circled Paddocks Hollow. The only room with light was at the far end of the second floor. A balcony ran the length of that floor but the wall had no foothold for climbing.

In a shed at the back of the property, he found a ladder, brought the ladder to the balcony and quietly climbed it. Through a crack on the curtain, he watched the scene inside. He smiled when Sebastian took Elizabeth and left. He put his weight against the balcony doors. On the third attempt, the doors flew open. Isabelle swore as Steward, with his pistol drawn approached the bed.

“Good evening, Isabelle. It has been a long time since we met.” He crossed around to the side of the bed, looked at the handcuffs and smiled. “So I am not the only one having a rather a bad day.”

She opened her mouth to scream for Sebastian. Steward brought the butt of his gun across her head. She fell down onto the pillow.

“Idiot!” Steward cursed. “You always did have more mouth than brains!” He pulled the blankets from her, pushed the front of nightgown open and ran his hands down her breasts. “I can’t tell you how long I have wanted to do that! What a shame I do not have enough time to really enjoy you.” He opened his belt, slipped it off and tied it around her arm. “You are not the bitch I want to spend time with right now but since Elizabeth now belongs to Sebastian. I will settle with you.”

He slapped her arm and watched for the veins to rise. He took the last syringe from his pocket. “It is too bad that you never gave me the same joy you liked to spread around to everyone else. I am a very generous person, Isabelle. I brought a treat...enough cocaine to take you on a mighty trip.” He inserted the needle, released his belt and emptied the syringe. “Unfortunately for you it will most likely kill you.”

Isabelle moaned as her eyes opened wide and closed again. He climbed onto the bed, crouched between her legs and opened his trouser buttons. He smiled. “And fuck you, Gabriel Jackman!”

Gabriel and Tony landed ungracefully in a thick, wooded area at the intersection of Oldham Field Road and Parker Hills.

“Bloody hell!” Tony exclaimed. “And you have been doing that all...” He stopped, speaking, turned and pulled out his pistol as Aamon crashed through the bushes, blocking the pathway. “Oh shitting Hell! What in God’s name is that?”

“Put your gun away.” Gabriel said his voice heavy. “It is just an irritant that follows me around.”

“An irritant?” Aamon hissed. “Is that any way to speak of your Grandfather?”

“Gabriel?” Tony looked at his friend.

Aamon slid his split tongue out, curled and flicked it in Tony’s direction. “Ah, Tony Lucci! I have not seen you since you sucked on your mother’s tits. You resemble her. What a hot bitch Serena was! No human female held my attention as much as she did!”

Gabriel felt Tony’s anger. He stepped closer to his friend and pushed the hand holding the pistol down. “Do not bite his bait.”

Aamon laughed. “Gabriel, you do spoil my fun! However, we will have more fun to come this night. I have no doubt in that.” He sent the yellow beams from his eyes on Gabriel’s face. “Are you prepared to take me in? Your females are not fairing too well.”

“Get out of my way!”

“Will you allow me in?” The demons voice rasped and crackled with growing anger.

“Do I have a fucking choice?”

“No! Not unless you and Tony want to die tonight.” He opened his huge arms. “Come along, Grandsons...I will take you where you need to be.” When neither of them moved, Aamon added. “Dead human females suit my needs just as well as live ones do, Gabriel...is that the same for you? Steward De Wolfe is right now with Isabelle!”

Gabriel pushed Tony into one side of the creature and he stood at the other. Tony looked around the demons belly. “I am going back to Scotland.”

Aamon laughed, held the two men tightly and lifted off the ground. He moved across the woodlands, to the back of Paddocks Hollow and lowered Tony and Gabriel onto the balcony.

“And fuck you, Gabriel Jackman!”

“Now is that nice, Steward?” Gabriel asked, stepping through the broken doors with pistol pointed at Stewards head. “Move!”

Stunned Steward fell off the bed and backed against the wall. “I didn’t do anything to her. Sebastian did it!”

“Empty your pockets onto the floor.” Tony ordered. “All of it and hurry up!”

Gabriel moved around the bed. He turned Isabelle on her back and saw a trickle of blood run down from her ear. He looked at her wrist, chained to the bed, badly swollen and bruised. He picked up the empty syringe and held it up. “What was in this?” he hissed at Steward with a voice that was not Gabriel’s.

“Just cocaine! She will be alright in time.” Steward answered. With his foot, he pushed a gun and the handcuffs across the floor to Tony.

Gabriel pulled the blankets over Isabelle and went to the over turned chair. He recognized the split nightgown as one Sue Lyn had bought for Elizabeth. He stooped, ran his fingers through the large puddle of blood, closed his eyes and let Aamon step completely into him.

“I did not do anything! I just came here to help Elizabeth. I did not even know Isabelle was here. You have to let me go!” Steward pleaded, looking from Tony to the crouching figure of Gabriel.

Tony caught the disgusting smell of Aamon. Keeping his pistol firmly on Steward he picked up the handcuffs and gun. “Turn around and put your hands behind your back.”

Steward did as Tony instructed. Tony fastened the cuffs around his wrists and ran his hands down his body. He found another gun and knife and put them in his pocket.

“Fuck! You do not understand. Sebastian is somewhere in the house with Elizabeth. I was watching through the door. He stripped her and knocked her cold. He could be back any minute. You have got to let me go so I can help you fight him!”

Gabriel walked towards the bed, as he did Aamon filled his body, deforming his face and limbs and splitting his clothes and took full control of Gabriel’s mind. Gabriel watched through the monsters eyes. Aamon lifted Isabelle’s hand and broke away the cuff. He leant down and whispered in her ear. “Wake up, Isabelle. It is your time.” She opened her eyes and sat up.

Dividing his attention between the horrifying seen and the doorway, Tony made the sign of the cross.

Aamon turned to Steward. "It is not Sebastian you need to worry about now, Steward De Wolfe." He stopped inches from the now terrified murderer. "I am far worse than him."

"God!" Steward moaned and slid down the wall.

"Your God does not walk in your dark place. The worst of the lost belong to me!"

Aamon took Steward off the floor by his shirt, holding his face very close to his. "You like to rape, to bite and cut, like your mad mother and sister? You and they borrowed a page from a book that does not belong to you!"

"I never hurt anyone. It was all Jane! I killed her, she won't hurt anyone again."

Aamon shook Steward. "What a pathetic waste of your own father's sperm you are! Gabriel and I gave your mother a taste of her joy, now it is your turn."

"No!" Steward yelled, kicking and flaying widely.

"You wanted to rape and kill Elizabeth? Is that why you came here? She belongs to Gabriel and for now, I am under his orders. What in particular should I do with this piece of shit, Gabriel?"

When Aamon spoke again, it was with Gabriel's voice. "Do what you want...just kill him! Use the knife."

"Ah, music to my ears! Well, Steward. It is time for you to taste a little of your own medicine!" Aamon dropped Steward to floor. "Hold his legs." He said to Tony. "Now!" He added when Tony hesitated. "Do what he wants," Gabriel said. Tony lowered to the floor and held down Steward's legs. "Because you will scream like a stuck pig!" Aamon covered Steward's face with one hand. With his other powerful, clawed hand, he tore through the trousers and flesh with his claws. "You won't need these any more." Steward's scream muffled as Aamon crushed his testicles.

Aamon stood, holding Steward against his body by his head. He smiled at Tony. "Catholic, give me his knife. Or do you want the pleasure?"

Tony flicked open Steward's knife and handed it to Aamon. Aamon laughed, pushed it into Steward's belly, held it in place and pushed Steward's body downwards. Steward shuddered violently, kicked out once and fell dead.

In the attic, Sebastian lay down beside Elizabeth, pulled her body against his, pushed her legs open and slid his fingers inside of her. "Would you really rather die than let me touch you like this? Maybe you are correct in one way, though, little bitch! Maybe you should die. The smell of your blood is adding to my" Sebastian stopped as he heard a sound from the front yard. He stood, looked out the window and saw Owen, Randall and Suzanne moving across the lawn.

"Fuck. Not now!" In a frustrated rage, he turned back to Elizabeth and pulled out his pistol. "It seems your rescue party has finally arrived. It is too bad for you they are too late and even sadder I have reconsidered your value! Isabelle and I are going to France. So that means poor Gabriel has no one." He held the gun above her chest and fired once.

Aamon had just dropped Steward's dead body when they heard the sound of the shot. Tony turned and pointed his gun at the door to the hall. "That was a gun shot!"

As though she was in trance, Isabelle tried to focus her eyes on Aamon. She whispered, "Gabriel? Sebastian is coming." She slid her legs over the bedside, held on to the bedpost and squinted back at Tony, pointing over her head. "He shot Elizabeth. She is up there."

"Is she dead?"

"I don't think so ...but soon! You must hurry" She stopped as Sebastian kicked opened the door. Crouching low, he ran in the room, aimed his gun at Aamon.

"No!" Isabelle screamed and rushed towards Sebastian as he pulled the trigger. The bullet hit Isabelle in the neck. She fell into Aamon and to the floor.

"Isabelle!" Gabriel yelled as Aamon sent ribbons of fire towards Sebastian. They hit the curtains at the far corner of the room. Flames rolled up to and across the ceiling.

In the doorway, Owen fired at Sebastian and pushed Suzanne down the hallway. "Randall, get her out of here!"

Aamon crouched, sent more streams of fire at Sebastian's head. Sebastian lowered his face to the floor. The fire slid down his back, spreading across the carpet.

Sebastian rolled across the floor to Isabelle, shooting twice at Tony. Tony ducked behind the bed and fired back. He hit Sebastian in the shoulder. The bullet had no effect, except to slightly stun him. Keeping his back to Aamon, Sebastian put his arm around Isabelle, closed his eyes and lowered his head.

"You are not traveling anywhere, Ridley, except back to Hell!" Aamon yelled as he moved around the room sending a continual stream of fire at Sebastian's head. Flames spread over the bed and drapes at that end of the room.

Tony stood and fired again. This time he hit Sebastian's gun. It flew across the room. "You can't hurt him with bullets!" He called as he moved to Owen. Sebastian rolled into a ball, keeping one hand over his eyes; he reached into his trouser pocket with the other hand.

"What is that thing?" Owen pointed his gun at Aamon.

"That's Gabriel!" Tony answered.

"What?"

"We have to burn Ridley's brain."

"Oh, fucking Hell! Of course we do!"

"Move!" Tony yelled pushing Owen back. "Ridley's got another gun!"

Sebastian rolled back onto his belly, aimed at Owen and pulled the trigger of one the guns that Gabriel had emptied. Stunned, Sebastian stared at the gun. Aamon moved fast, grabbed Sebastian by the hair and laughed. "Back to hell with you, boy!" This time the fire flowed in a steady stream, from Aamon and into Sebastian's brain. Sebastian screamed. Aamon threw him into the fire that raged around them.

Tony fell down beside Isabelle. He shook his head, looked up from Aamon to Owen. He stood and pointed behind Aamon. Sebastian stood and walked out of the flames. Like a shroud, a black cloud surrounded him. "Christ almighty! He is still alive!"

"No, he is not." Aamon said and grinned as Sebastian approached. "That is just his shade. The black is Desjardin. Watch them and see their true end!" Aamon was enjoying himself.

Sebastian stopped at Isabelle. He bent down and touched her.

“She’s dead! Leave her...” Tony yelled at the shade. He stopped as Isabelle’s clear spirit sat, stood and separated from her body. With tears streaming down her face, she stood beside Sebastian.

Sebastian looked towards Aamon, smoke coming from his burnt eye sockets. She is mine now, Gabriel! I will see you in Hell! The black cloud that was Desjardin thickened swirled around Sebastian and Isabelle and pulled them down and out of sight. The fire spread quickly across the room.

“Fuck, Gabriel!” Aamon laughed. “Do you see what that woman gave up for you?”

“Back away now.” Gabriel cursed at Aamon. “I am done with you!” He turned to Tony. “Where is Elizabeth?”

“Isabelle said that Sebastian shot her and that she was up stairs.”

Gabriel pushed past Tony and Owen and ran up the stairs.

“That is not Gabriel!” Owen stared after Aamon.

“Gabriel is in there. Have no doubt about it.” The fire that then engulfed the room licked out into the hallway. “We have to get out of here!”

“What about...him?” Owen pointed up the stairs.

“Gabriel has gone after Elizabeth. If finds her he will bring her out and say a prayer for our friend that Elizabeth is still alive.”

They left the building and waited outside with Randall and Suzanne.

Aamon followed Elizabeth’s scent. “She’s in here.” He said to Gabriel and kicked the door open. They looked down at the still form on the floor. The large wound on her head and gunshot in her chest were no longer bleeding.

Racked with rage and sorrow Gabriel yelled a horrible sound that reached those waiting outside. Gabriel, still in the body of the demon, wrapped Elizabeth in a blanket from the bed, picked her up, left the burning house and crossed the front lawn to the others who waited for him. Aamon had only slightly faded.

Randall caught up with Gabriel. “Put Elizabeth on the grass, Gabriel, so I can have a look at her.”

Gabriel turned sharply glaring down at Randall. The yellow snake eyes of Aamon were then the soft amber eyes of Gabriel. “She is dead, Randall.”

“We don’t know that for certain! Christ, Gabriel, listen to me. She could still be alive.”

Tony stepped between Randall and Gabriel. Tony looked intently in Gabriel’s eyes. “Release the dark side, my friend...it is done.” He reached under Elizabeth, took her from Gabriel and placed her on the grass beside Randall. Gabriel made a sound half human, half growl and slid to his knees, his head hanging down. Aamon was gone. Suzanne broke free from Owen, ran to Gabriel and held him.

As Tony watched Gabriel, he remembered the nightmare of the months after Helena’s death. He remembered the depression, the drunken rages, and the rejection of his church. He remembered little Gabriella, lost without her mother and terrified of the man her father was becoming. That must not happen again. He turned to Randall.

“There’s a pulse!” Randall said. “It is very weak, though. I am sure her skull has a fracture. The bullet is very near her heart and she has lost a lot of blood.”

Tony nodded, removed his coat and his shirt.

“Are you sure?” Randall asked when he realized what Tony had in mind.

“No. We could both end up dead.” He looked back at Gabriel. “He is my friend. He would do this for me.”

Tony lay beside Elizabeth, pushed the bloodied blanket away and pulled her into his arms. He placed her horribly wounded head against his, held her tightly and whispered in her ear. “Come back to us, Lady Bug! We need you. If you love Gabriel, know he loves you and so badly wants you by his side.” He closed his eyes and began to pray. Behind them Paddocks Hallow was fully engulfed. The light and heat of the flames cast a warm golden glow over the small group.

“Gabriel! What is Tony doing?” Suzanne asked.

Owen lifted Suzanne and held her. “Just say a prayer for him and Elizabeth, Suzanne.”

Tony groaned as a blinding pain spread through his head. He felt his skull split and blood run down his face. He felt the burning agony of a bullet in his chest, his senses starting to fade and his grip on Elizabeth slipping. He rolled onto his back, using the last of his strength to pull Elizabeth on top of him. “Margaret...help me!” he gasped and blacked out.

For a brief, few seconds that passed like an eternity, Tony lay flat and still; blood flowed from his open wounds; Elizabeth, as though lifeless, lay on top of him.

“Will someone please tell me what is happening?” Suzanne cried, trying to break free of Owen. “Let me go!” She yelled at him.

At the sound of Suzanne voice, Elizabeth stirred. She lifted her head and rubbed her face. “Gabriel?” She whispered.

“Shit!” Randall exclaimed, reached over and took her face in his hands. “Good God! Look!” He lifted her off Tony, rolling her carefully on to the grass. All of her terrible wounds were gone. Her eyes were wide and clear, her face a normal color.

“What happened?” Elizabeth asked as Randall covered her with the blanket and moved so she could not see Tony.

Gabriel slid across the grass, pulled her head to face him. “Elizabeth?” He laughed and cried at the same time. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, I think so...but what...” She stopped as Gabriel pulled her into his arms.

Tony sat slowly, ran his hands over his head and down his chest. It was uninjured and there was not a single drop of blood. “Bloody hell!” He smiled at his astonished friends. “It worked!”

“Oh no!” Suzanne took a few steps backwards to the bushes. “Owen...I don’t feel well.” She turned and vomited. Owen followed her, held her hair and rubbed her back.

“I am sorry, Suzanne! This must be a nightmare for you! It is a nightmare for all of us.” She straightened up and wiped her face with her sleeve. He pulled her against him. “I will explain it all when we are home again.”

Gabriel held Elizabeth with one arm and helped Tony to his feet with the other. “Yes, it worked!” He slapped him on the back. “I owe you the fucking world, my friend!”

Tony winced and almost lost his balance. “I need a drink!”

Somewhere down the road, they heard the cry of someone alerted to the now raging fire.

“We all need a drink!” Owen laughed. “I suggest we get out of here fast.”

"I agree and the sooner the better." Randall took the still shaky Tony by the arm and they went quickly across the lawn, into the woods and to the hidden De Wolfe carriage.

"I'll drive. I need the air." Randall climbed up to the driver's seat.

They rode in silence for a while. Elizabeth, wrapped in the blanket and sitting on Gabriel's lap, was first to speak. "Sebastian tied me to a chair. Isabelle was near us. I think chained to a bed. I do not remember anything after that. Where is Isabelle?"

"She did not make it. Isabelle is dead." Gabriel answered quietly.

Elizabeth looked up at him. Gabriel took a deep breath and held Elizabeth tighter. She touched Tony's arm. "Was I badly hurt?"

"Yes, very much so." Tony took her hand. "But it is all finished and over with now."

"Does this mean our souls are free?"

"Time will tell, Lady Bug!"

They were climbing the mountain road when Gabriel spoke to Owen. "I will send for Wesson and his men in the morning. There will have to be an inquiry but Wesson will keep it fast and simple."

Owen sighed. "Mr. Theodore De Wolfe went mad, killed his wife and then himself?"

"Well, it is after all the truth. They will discover the bodies of Isabelle, Steward and Sebastian in the burned remains of Paddocks Hallow."

"And my demented sister?"

"Steward claimed he killed her. I am certain he did. Ted left letters for you and Randall on his desk in the study. I think perhaps that you should keep Randall with you for the rest of the night. Do not let him go alone into Cornelia's bed room."

"We will stay with Suzanne. There is a lot we have to explain to her."

"That is a fact." Suzanne agreed and leaned against Owen's arm.

Back in De Wolfe Manor Gabriel put Elizabeth in her bed and built a warming fire. She looked at the toppled settee and the messed remains of Randall's bed. "I am sorry for causing you more difficulties. I should have waked them when I needed the washroom."

He smiled and sat on the bed beside her. "That, my dear, is very obvious." He ran his hand over her forehead. She was trembling. "We will talk about that some other time."

"Is it over, Gabriel? Really over with?"

"Yes. Steward, Jane, Cornelia, Ted and Ridley...they are all dead."

"But Isabelle and your baby! I am so sorry!"

Gabriel nodded. He would never tell her of the last few moments in Sebastian's bedroom. "Isabelle is...was a good woman. I will always regret the way I treated her."

"Gabriel, what did Sebastian do to me? Did he...rape me?"

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He knew Sebastian had her alone in the attic for at least fifteen minutes and that was more than enough time for rape. "From what I saw, I don't think so. He did not have any blood on him. If he had raped you I think he would have been covered in it."

"Tony said my wounds were bad. What were they?" When he did not answer, she added. "I have the right and need to know."

"It seems he hit you when you were still tied to the chair. You hit your head on the fireplace fender. Randall said it was bad and that your skull was fractured."

"Was there more? Tony will tell me if you do not."

"Ridley shot you."

"Where?"

He touched the left side of her chest. "Very near your heart."

She closed her eyes briefly. "Then Tony saved my life?"

"There is not doubt in that. I owe that man a great deal."

"We owe him." She smiled. "Maybe one day, if you and I have a son we will name him Anthony and Tony will be his Godfather. Would you like that?"

For a long while Gabriel stayed silent and looked into her eyes. He fought to hold back tears. "Yes, I would like that very much. All that matters now is that you are all right."

"I think I am fine, just so very tired."

"It has been an exhausting few days. We need to sleep." He striped off his clothes and climbed into bed with her. He held her so tightly she could barely breathe and for Elizabeth it felt good. In a few minutes, they were sound asleep.

It was almost eight when Elizabeth woke. Gabriel, still sleeping, lay on his belly beside her. She lowered her hand to the base of his spine and moved it in small circles.

"I am going to wake up if you do that." He mumbled into his pillow.

"Silly man." She kissed his shoulder. "That is what I am trying to do."

He rolled onto his side. "Good morning, Lizzie."

She pushed his hair back from his face and whispered. "I love you Gabriel."

To her surprise, he frowned and rose up on one elbow. "I wonder if you understand the true weight of those words. Do not say them to me unless you do."

"You doubt me?"

"You are so very young. I need the kind of love that is far more than lust. I need a love that is as powerful as the one I will give you. It is not just for now but also for forever."

She sighed and pulled him back to the pillows. "You have saddest eyes I have ever seen. Were they always like that? I doubt it. I will bet they once sparkled with happiness. I love you now and very much forever. If you will let me, give me the time, it will be my passion to bring that sparkle back to you eyes."

Gabriel smiled and kissed her. "I love you too, Lady Bug! I thought you always woke in a bad mood?"

She slid her body against his and ran her tongue up his neck. "I am in a mood, Gabriel, but it is far from bad. Shall I tell you about my mood?"

"Please do. I am all ears."

"Not just ears, not from what I can feel."

"I warned you that you were going to wake me. Now tell me about this mood you are in?"

"I am in the mood to properly complete the love making we have enjoyed. Gabriel." She ran her lips gently over his, "I want you to make love to me. Do you want me?"

He kissed again and with growing passion. "More than I have ever wanted anything in my life, Elizabeth!"

"Good!" She sat up suddenly, pulling the covers off him. "But not here!"

"Yes, here...." he pulled her back down. "Here and right now!"

"No, Gabriel! I do not want our first time to be here. Not in this house of madness and murder."

He sighed. "Well, where then, the roof, on the road, in a bloody tree. It does not matter to me. Just make up your mind."

She held his face. "In your study at Random House."

"My study? Why?"

"Because it was in that room, during the brief time we were in there, when I first began to fall in love with you." She jumped from the bed and pulled a dress from her wardrobe. "Come on, we have to get dressed."

"Get dressed?" He frowned at her and then smiled. "So we can take each other's clothes off?"

She laughed and shook her head. "No! Just in case we run into Lee and Sue Lyn."

Five minutes later, they tumbled onto the bearskin rug in the Random House study.

"Sorry about that." Gabriel said as he helped her to her feet. "We are going to have to practice traveling. My Lord, it is bloody freezing in here."

Elizabeth helped him build a fire. When the fire crackled brightly she followed him to his desk. She sat on the corner and watched as he pulled out a sheet of paper and pencil. "What are you writing?"

"A note for Lee. I'd hate to have him come busting in here, pistol drawn at just the wrong moment." All he wrote was 'It's over!' and signed it Gabriel and Elizabeth. He tore a slit in the top of the sheet, hung it on the outside doorknob and locked the door. As he walked back to Elizabeth, he removed his shirt and dropped it on the floor.

"Why, Mr. Jackman, that is being rather familiar and informal, don't you think?" She smiled at him.

"Well, Miss Leighton, I suppose it is. You should know that I intend on becoming very informal and familiar with you." He put his hands on her shoulders. "You are shaking. Are you still cold?"

"No. I am nervous...scared."

"Good Lord, why?"

"What if I am not good enough? You have known so many women with much more experience than I have. I do not want to let you down."

"Let me down? No, my dear, there is not a chance in the world of that." He slid his hands cross her breasts and opened the buttons of her dress. "Just your presence thrills me. Let your instinct, my hands, lips and body be your guide. I know you will more than meet my many important needs." He lifted her off the desk, let the dress fall to floor and smiled, as he looked her up and down. "What an incredibly beautiful woman you are!"

She put her hands on his chest; felt his heart beating fast and hard. That thrilled her. She took his hand and pulled him towards the bearskin rug.

"Wait!" He pulled her back into his arms. "I have something to ask you."

“I thought you had important needs to meet.”

“I have many. You have no idea what a very busy person you will be. Elizabeth, I love you, my daughter needs a mother and I need to know that you will be by my side for the rest of my life. Will you do me the honor of marrying me?”

She threw her arms around her neck. “Oh Lord, yes! I thought you would never ask!”

“Good! Now all is how it should be....”

“Sh.” She put her fingers to his lips. “Enough talking!” She moved behind Gabriel, slid her hands around his hips and opened his trouser buttons. She pushed the trousers down, closed her fingers around his thickening penis and ran her tongue over the small of his back. She felt Gabriel’s sharp intake of breath and heard him whisper her name.

Still on her knees, she moved around Gabriel, running her tongue over his outer thigh. She helped him step out of his trousers and pulled the flesh of his inner thigh into her mouth. Suddenly she stopped. “Look...it is gone!” She looked up at him with amazement.

“What?” He asked breathlessly.

“The mark of the snake...it was right here.” She pointed to the place on his upper thigh. “It’s gone!”

Gabriel looked down. “Well, I’ll be jiggered!” He brought Elizabeth to her feet and lifted her arm. The black snake-like mark on her side had disappeared.

She laughed with joy. “That must mean our souls are free!”

“No doubt, Elizabeth. But,” he pulled her body against his, “as you said, ‘enough talking!’”

Not too long later Sue Lyn and Lee were coming down the stairs. She stopped and held his arm. “Lee! Listen I can hear voices...or laughing. I think it is coming from the study.”

“Stay there!” Lee said firmly. He listened at the study door and read the note. “It is all right.” He motioned for his wife to join him and showed her the note. “It’s Gabriel and Elizabeth.”

“Oh! Are they laughing?”

“Something like that, Sue!” He put his arm around her and led her to the breakfast room.

THE END