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The Dark Farewell

JOSH LANYON

Don't talk to strangers, young man—especially the dead ones.

It's the Roaring Twenties. Skirts are short, crime is rampant and booze is in short supply. Prohibition has hit Little Egypt, where newspaperman David Flynn has come to do a follow-up story on the Herren Massacre. The massacre isn't the only news in town though. Spiritualist medium Julian Devereux claims to speak to the dead—and he charges a pretty penny for it.

Flynn knows a phoney when he sees one, and he's convinced Devereux is as fake as a cigar store Indian. But the reluctant attraction he feels for the deceptively soft, not-his-type Julian is as real as it gets.

Suddenly Julian begins to have authentic, bloodstained visions of a serial killer, and the cynical Mr. Flynn finds himself willing to defend Julian with not only his life, but his body.

Warning: This novella contains phony spiritualists, cynical newspapermen, labor disputes, illicit love affairs, high-calorie southern cooking, and more than fifty-percent humidity!

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520
Macon GA 31201

The Dark Farewell
Copyright © 2010 by Josh Lanyon
ISBN: 978-1-60504-944-1
Edited by Sasha Knight
Cover by Natalie Winters

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: March 2010
www.samhainpublishing.com

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Josh Lanyon

Dedication

To my dad—whose own stories brought history alive for me.

Chapter One

The body of the third girl was found Tuesday morning in the woods a few miles outside Murphysboro. Flynn read about it the following day in the *Herrin News* as the train chugged slowly through the green cornfields and deep woods of Southern Illinois. The dead girl's name was Millie Hesse and like the other two girls she had been asphyxiated and then mutilated. There were other "peculiarities", according to the newspaper, but the office of the Jackson County Sheriff declined to comment further.

The peculiarities would be things about the murder only known to the police and the murderer himself. At least in theory. Flynn had covered a few homicides since his return from France three years earlier, and it wasn't hard to read between the lines. But there were already rumors flying through the wires about a homicidal maniac on the loose in Little Egypt.

Flynn gazed out the window as a giant cement smokestack came into sight. The perpetually smoldering black slag heap, half-buried in the tall weeds, reminded him in some abstruse way of the ravaged French countryside. His lip curled and he stared down again at the newspaper.

He didn't care much for homicide cases; he'd seen enough killing in the war. And reading about poor, harmless, inoffensive Millie Hesse and her gruesome end in the dark silent oaks and elms of these lonely woods dampened his enthusiasm for the story he was there to cover, a follow-up on the Herrin Massacre the previous summer. Not to write about the massacre itself. More than enough had been written about that.

It had been a big year for news, 1922, between the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote and the discovery of King Tutankhamen's tomb, but you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone in the States who hadn't heard about what had happened in these parts between local miners and the Southern Illinois Coal Company. Flynn wanted to write about Herrin one year later; the aftermath and the repercussions. Plus, it was a good reason to visit Amy Gulling, the widow of his old mentor Gus. Gus had died in the winter, and Flynn hadn't made it down for the funeral. He didn't care much for funerals, either.

The train had been warm, but when Flynn stepped down onto the platform of the old brick station in Herrin, humidity slapped him in the face like a hot towel in a barber shop. It reminded him of summer in the trenches, minus the rats and snipers, of course.

He nodded an absent farewell to his fellow passengers—he couldn't have described them if his life had depended on it—and caught one of the town's only cabs, directing the driver to Amy Gulling's boarding house. Heat shimmered off the brick streets as the cab drove him through the peaceful town past

the sheriff's office, closed during the violence of that long June day last year, and the hardware stores where the mob had broken in to steal guns and ammunition which they had then used to murder the mine guards and strikebreakers.

The cab let him out in front of the wooden two-story Civil War-style house on the corner. Flynn paid the driver, picked up his luggage and headed up the shady walk. He rang the bell and seconds later Amy herself was pushing open the screen door and welcoming him inside.

"David Flynn! I just lost a bet with myself."

"What bet?" He dropped his bags and hugged her hard.

"I bet you wouldn't come. I bet you'd find another excuse."

Amy was big and comfortable like a plushy chair. She wore a faded but well-starched flowered dress. Though her hair was now a graying flaxen, her blue green eyes were as bright as ever. They studied him with canny affection.

Flynn reddened. "I'm sorry, Amy. Sorry I didn't make it down when Gus..."

She waved that away. "The funeral didn't matter. And you're here now. You must be tuckered out from that train ride."

She led him through to the parlor. A fat woman in a blue dress sat fanning herself in front of the big window, and in another chair a small, slim girl of perhaps twenty was reading a book titled *The Girls' Book of Famous Queens*. She had dark hair and wore spectacles.

"This is Mrs. Hoyt and her daughter Joan. They're regular boarders. They've been with me for two months now, since Mr. Hoyt passed."

"How do," said Mrs. Hoyt. The fine, sharp features of her face were blurred by weight and age. When she'd been young she probably looked like Joan. Her hair was still more dark than silver.

The girl, Joan, gave him a shy smile and a clammy hand.

"David's an old friend of my husband. One of his former journalism students. He's going to be spending the next week or so with us."

"Are you a newspaperman, Mr. Flynn?" asked Mrs. Hoyt.

"I am, but I'm on vacation now." Flynn knew this old beldame's breed. She'd be gossiping with the neighbors—those she considered her social equal—in nothing flat. And he wanted the freedom of anonymity, the ability to talk to these people without them second-guessing and censoring their words.

There was plenty for people to keep their mouths shut about considering Herrin had a national reputation for being the worst of the bad towns in "Bloody Williamson County". The trials of the men who had murdered the Lester Mine Company strikebreakers and guards had ended in unanimous acquittals, shocking the rest of the nation.

"David was in France," Amy said with significance.

"My son was in France, Mr. Flynn. Where did you see action?"

"I went over with Pershing's American Expeditionary Forces, ma'am."

"As a soldier or a journalist?"

"As a soldier." He had been proud of that. Proud to fight and maybe die for his ideals. Now he wondered if he wouldn't have done more good as a reporter.

"My son fell in the Battle of the Argonne."

The girl bowed her head, stared unseeingly at the book on her lap.

Flynn said, "A lot of boys did."

"My son was the recipient of the Medal of Honor."

"I'm afraid I didn't win any medals."

"Well, let's get you situated," Amy said briskly, breaking the sudden melancholy mood that had settled on the sunny parlor. "I've got David in the room over the breezeway."

"That's a mighty pleasant room in the summer," agreed Mrs. Hoyt. The daughter murmured acknowledgement.

Flynn smiled at Amy. "I remember."

He nodded to the ladies and followed Amy. She was saying, "I've turned Gus's study into a library and smoking room for the gentlemen."

Flynn asked unwillingly, "Has it been tough since Gus died?"

"Oh, you know. I manage all right. I keep the boarding house for company as much as anything. I never was happy on my own." Amy paused in the doorway of another room. "Here are our gentlemen. Doctor Pearson, Mr. Flynn is an old family friend. He'll be staying with us for a few days. Mr. Devereux, Mr. Flynn."

The gentlemen appeared to have been interrupted in the midst of writing letters. Doctor Pearson was small and spry with snapping dark eyes and the bushy sideburns and whiskers that were popular before the war. Mr. Devereux was older than the doctor, but he dyed his hair and mustache a persevering jet black. He had the distinctive features—aquiline nose and heavy-lidded eyes—Flynn had grown familiar with in France.

"Pleasure to meet you," Dr. Pearson said, putting aside his pen and paper and offering his hand.

Devereux was equally polite. "A pleasure, sir." He had a hint of an accent, but it was not exactly French. French Canadian perhaps? Or, no, French Creole?

"Mr. Devereux is a regular contributor to a number of Spiritualist periodicals," Amy commented.

Mr. Devereux livened up instantly. "That's correct. I'm penning an article at this moment for *The Messenger* in Boston."

Flynn nodded courteously. Spiritualism? Good God.

Perhaps Amy sensed his weary distaste because she was soon ushering him out of the room and down the hall.

They started toward the long blue-carpeted staircase. A quick, light tread caught Flynn's attention. He glanced up and saw a young man coming down the stairs. He was tall and willowy, his black hair of a bohemian length. His skin was a creamy bisque, his eyes dark and wide. Flynn judged him about nineteen although he wore no tie or jacket. He was dressed in gray flannel trousers, and his white shirt was open at the throat, the sleeves rolled to his elbows like a schoolboy.

"This is Mr. Flynn, Julian," Amy said.

Julian raised his delicate eyebrows. "Oh yes?"

"He's an old friend of my husband and me. He's going to be staying with us for a time."

Julian observed Flynn for long, alert seconds before he came leisurely down the rest of the staircase. He offered a slender, tanned hand and Flynn grasped it with manly firmness.

"Charmed," Julian murmured. He gently squeezed Flynn's hand back and studied him from beneath lashes as long and silky as a girl's. It was a look both shy and oddly knowing. Flynn recovered his hand as quickly as he could. He nodded curtly.

Julian smiled as though he read Flynn's reluctance and was entertained by it. It was a sly sort of smile, and his mouth was soft and pink. A sissy if Flynn had ever seen one.

"Julian is Mr. Devereux's grandson." There was something in Amy's voice Flynn couldn't quite pin down. Either she didn't like the old man or she didn't care for the kid—or maybe both.

Julian said slowly, "You're a...writer, David?"

"How the hell—?" Flynn stopped. Julian was smiling a smug smile.

"I know things."

"That's a dangerous habit."

"The philosophers say that knowledge is power."

"Sometimes. Sometimes it's the fastest way to get punched in the nose."

Both Amy and Julian laughed at that, and Flynn realized that he probably seemed a little hot under the collar.

Julian nodded pleasantly and sauntered away to the smoking room cum library.

"What in the blue blazes was *that*?" Flynn inquired of Amy as she led him up the staircase.

She laughed but it sounded forced. "*That* is The Magnificent Belloc. He's a spirit medium."

"You're joking."

Amy shook her head. "He's giving a show over at the Opera House every night this week except Friday and Sunday. Friday the high school is putting on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*."

"Spiritualism," Flynn said in disgust. He came from a long line of staunch Irish Protestants.

"Oh sure, there are a lot of fakes and phonies around. But the war changed a lot of people's feelings about spiritualism and mediums," Amy said. "When you lose someone dear to you, well, I guess you'd do anything to be able to talk to them one more time."

Flynn glanced at her and then glanced away. "I guess so."

"I don't put stock in spirits and that sort of thing, but from what I hear young Julian has a knack for knowing things."

"I'll bet."

Amy said mildly, "He called it right with you. I didn't tell him your first name was David or that you were a newspaperman."

"No, you didn't. But you did mention it to Mrs. Hoyt and her daughter." Flynn added dryly, "I'm guessing that The Magnificent Belloc's bedroom is the one over the parlor. Is that right?"

Amy looked chagrined. "That's right."

"I thought so. That kid's as phony as a three dollar bill."

"Oh, he's not so bad. A bit of a pansy, I guess. It's the old man I don't like. Whatever that boy is or isn't, it's that old frog's fault."

Flynn didn't argue with her, but he didn't agree either. Devereux younger wasn't anyone's victim. He recognized that jaded look. Whatever the racket was, The Magnificent Belloc was in it up to his shell-like ears.

Amy continued up the narrow staircase to the second level. Flynn's room was in the former servant's quarters on the far side of the house's breezeway. The roofed, open-sided passageway between the house and the garage was on the east side of the corner property, the "cool" side shaded by a big walnut tree, but there was nothing cool about that sunny box of a room that afternoon.

After Amy left, Flynn unpacked and then washed up next door in the closet-sized bathroom that had once served as a storage room.

Back in his room, he changed his shirt and examined himself closely in the square mirror over the highboy. What had that punk seen? Dark, wavy hair, blue eyes, strong chin and straight nose. Regular features. He was a regular guy. He looked all right. He looked like everybody else. Girls liked him fine. That girl, Joan, she didn't see anything wrong with him.

He shook his head impatiently at the troubled-looking Flynn in the mirror.

It didn't matter what that pansy thought or didn't think. Flynn didn't have to have anything to do with him. He was going to get his story and then he'd be heading back to New York City where people had a little discretion, a little subtlety.

He could smell fresh coffee and frying ham, and he followed the aroma downstairs where his fellow boarders were having a big noontime dinner of fried eggs, ham, sausage and golden brown potatoes. "Luncheon" they called it in New York, although you wouldn't get anything like this for lunch.

Flynn took a seat at the table across from Joan. He noticed—to his relief—that the disturbing Julian was absent. There was a lively discussion going on about the recent murders in the neighboring county.

"Perhaps someone could ask the Comte about them," Joan said, with a self-conscious look in Flynn's direction.

Doctor Pearson snorted. The older Devereux was shaking his head.

"Who's the Comte?" Flynn asked.

"The Comte de Mirabeau. Julian's spirit guide," Joan replied primly. "He was a French statesman, orator and writer. He died during the French Revolution."

"You're not a believer, young man," Devereux said severely, watching Flynn.

"I believe in plenty of things," Flynn said. "What did you have in mind?"

"Julian is a medium," Joan said.

"A medium what?"

Mrs. Hoyt gave a breathy laugh and scooped up a mouthful of eggs.

The conversation briefly languished, and Flynn decided to ask about the trials of the miners accused of murder last year and the winter. That revived the discussion, but mostly what he heard about was how the KKK and the local ministers were trying to persuade the government and the law to do something about the bootleggers and their roadhouses springing up like toadstools. The massacre was old news. It appeared nobody wanted to think about it.

Astonishingly, these civilized, decent folk seemed to think the best bet for the lawlessness plaguing their county was the Ku Klux Klan. Flynn found it hard to credit. He kept his mouth shut for the most part and listened.

"Thank goodness for Prohibition!" exclaimed Mrs. Hoyt, shoveling in fried potatoes.

Dr. Pearson shot back, "The only thing Prohibition helps is the gangsters and the damned Ku Klux Klan."

"It's kept a lot of boys off the liquor," insisted Mrs. Hoyt thickly.

"Ah baloney," growled the old doctor. "More of those kids are trying booze out now than they were before Prohibition. Forbidding it makes drink seem exciting."

"That's because the sheriffs don't enforce the law!"

Amy said to Flynn, "Mrs. Hoyt is right about that. We've got a poor excuse for a sheriff. He's great pals with half the bootleggers in the county."

"I'm surprised that you, a doctor, would take that view," Mrs. Hoyt said to Pearson. She seemed indignant, but Flynn had the idea this was not a new argument in this household.

Pearson was unmoved. "When drink was legal these kids weren't allowed in a saloon, but these damned bootleggers don't care who they sell their hooch to or who they sucker into gambling away their paychecks. Why, I was tending a poor kid over in Murphysboro just last week who died of that damned bathtub gin."

Joan's gaze met Flynn's and slid away.

"But that's exactly what the Klan and the ministers are saying," Mrs. Hoyt insisted. "If the law won't clean this mess up, then the people have to."

Devereux chimed in, "People? Which people? A bunch of anti-union kleagles and clowns dressed up in spooky robes doing their mumbo-jumbo and burning crosses out in somebody's pasture."

The old guy sounded pretty heated. Flynn was willing to bet that with their complexion and coloring, he and the kid had been mistaken for Italians or worse on more than one occasion.

"You're a fine one to talk about mumbo-jumbo," Mrs. Hoyt said tartly.

Devereux bridled. "I assure you, Madame, Spiritualism is as valid and respectable a religion as any other. We simply believe that the door between this world and the next is accessible to those who hold the key, and that through the talents of one gifted with the power to communicate with spirits, we may learn and be advised by our loved ones who have gone before us."

"Speaking of those gone before us," Flynn remarked, "I see your grandson isn't at lunch."

"Julian rests in the afternoon," the old man said stiffly. "He is not strong, and his efforts to act as conduit to the other side tax him greatly."

Flynn managed to control his expression. Just.

There was not a lot of chat after that. When the meal was finished, Flynn excused himself and went back to his room. He wanted to start looking around the town as soon as possible.

He found he had a visitor. Julian Devereux was seated on the bed, idly flipping through his copy of *Bertram Cope's Year*. Flynn had left the book in his Gladstone.

He paused in the doorway, the hair on the back of his neck rising on end. "What are you doing in here?" he asked sharply.

Julian jumped—so much for psychic powers—though his smile was confident. He tossed the book on the green and white Irish chain quilt, leaned back on his hands.

"I thought we should get to know each other, David."

Flynn studied Julian's finely chiseled features coldly, taking in the angular, wide mouth and heavy-lidded, half-amused dark eyes.

"Why's that?"

Julian arched one eyebrow. "You know."

"No, I don't. And I'm pretty sure I don't want to."

Julian tilted his head, as though listening to an echo he couldn't quite place. "I didn't figure you for the shy type," he said eventually.

"I'm not. I'm not your type either." Flynn was careful not to look at the book on the bed. "Now if you don't mind—?" He held the door open pointedly.

A look of disbelief crossed Julian's face. He rose from the bed and slowly moved to the door. For an instant he stood before Flynn. He was so slight, so lithesome that Flynn kept picturing him shorter than he was. In fact, he was as tall as Flynn, his doe-like dark eyes gazing directly into the other man's.

"Have it your way," he said.

"I intend to."

"But if you should change your mind—"

Flynn inquired dryly, "Wouldn't The Magnificent Belloc be the first to know?"

Chapter Two

“Those scabs and strikebreakers got what they asked for.” That was the view of big Tom McCarty.

“Bullets and pick handles?”

Flynn was genuinely curious about that kind of reasoning, and McCarty’s weathered face tightened. He was a young mine hoisting engineer with powerful arms and shoulders, a long-time member of the United Mine Workers. He didn’t say he had been at Crenshaw Crossing or Harrison Woods. He didn’t say he hadn’t been. “The miners were striking for safe working conditions and decent wages. They deserve that. Anybody deserves that. But Lester and the other mine owners shipped in them strikebreakers and scabs and gave away the striking miners’ jobs. I stand by what I say. They deserve what they got.”

There were mutters of agreement from the other men at Skeltcher’s Tavern. Except that Skeltcher’s wasn’t a tavern anymore. Theoretically it was a soft drink parlor. Every town, every wide-spot-in-the-road now had a small, weather-beaten saloon currently known as a soft drink parlor though the clientele hanging around those joints didn’t much look like sody pop drinkers to Flynn.

“What about these stories about cutting the throats of the wounded men?”

“Don’t believe everything you read in the papers, pal.”

“I won’t,” Flynn said gravely.

An older man with the cough that came from too many years of cigarettes—or coal dust—chimed in, “If rich, blood-sucking mine owners like Lester get away with using thugs and scabs to break a strike down here in a union stronghold, then the UMWA and the other unions are finished in this country.”

McCarty agreed. “Those miners were acquitted by a jury—two juries—of their peers. That’s justice.”

Flynn nodded politely and stood McCarty to another “root beer”. Maybe it wasn’t justice, but it seemed to be raw democracy in action. Flynn had read the trial reports and one thing was clear—local sympathy had been clearly and unwaveringly with the miners. An initial inquest concluded that all the strikebreakers were killed by unknown individuals, and recommended that Southern Illinois Coal Company and its officers be investigated in order to affix appropriate responsibility on them. Eventually two trials were held, the first on November 7, 1922, the second that very same winter. Only six men had been indicted for the massacre, and both trials ended in acquittals for all the defendants. At that point the prosecution had given it up as a lost cause. The remaining indictments were dismissed. The prosecutor had summed up the defense’s case as “These men were justified in what they did; and besides, they didn’t do it!”

You could still hear the echo of that sentiment in Skeltcher's soft drink parlor. It was like the entire town of Herrin, maybe Williamson County, were suffering from a kind of hysterical blindness and couldn't see what the rest of the world saw. Old General Black Jack Pershing himself had shown up in Marion and pronounced the massacre as "wholesale murder as yet unpunished."

And that was very much the mind Flynn had been in when he had boarded the train in New York. How could it be anything else? But listening to these men talk he was startled at their certainty, their lack of remorse, their continuing and abiding anger at the rich men who they believed had forced them to take violent action. Little as he liked it, Flynn couldn't help but suspect there was a grain of truth in the miner's comments about whether Lester and the other mine owners would ever be held to account for the unsafe working conditions in their properties or the men killed in the explosions in their mines.

It was still early when Flynn left Skeltcher's. His thoughts were restless, and he wasn't ready to return to the stuffy quiet of the boarding house, wasn't ready to hear more about how the KKK was going to save western civilization, wasn't ready to talk to Amy about Gus. Instead he walked along the mostly empty streets trying to reorganize his thoughts, trying to quell his own turbulent needs.

It was all the fault of that young fakir, the sham mentalist with the lithe body and ancient eyes. That kind of thing was dangerous even in New York where people were cosmopolitan and sophisticated and where there were clubs where a man could go for drinks and the company of men like himself. In Harlem, Greenwich and Times Square there were restaurants, cafeterias, cafés and speakeasies where the city's intellectuals and artists and bon vivants gathered.

Little Egypt was a cultural wasteland in comparison. And Julian Devereux stood out like a tropical flower.

So Flynn strode along the brick streets, waving the gnats away, watching the fireflies winking on and off. It was still uncomfortably warm, though the yellow stars were high in the pink and violet sky now.

A poster in a shop window caught his eye, and he stopped to examine it. Fancy swirling script announced The Magnificent Belloc's public exhibition on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday night at the Opera House on West Franklin Street.

Flynn snorted at the flowery sketch of Julian in the garb of an Indian prince. He was surrounded by highly stylized zephyrs—or maybe ordinary working draughts—with faces both mournful and gay. The spirits he communicated with? Yet even in that strange drawing Julian's mysterious dark eyes seemed to gaze out at Flynn, seemed to hypnotize him.

Amused at himself, but curious nonetheless, he caught the little streetcar and made the journey across town to the Opera House. It was a grand-looking building with a wide arch entrance, terra-cotta trim and sour-looking gargoyles.

"You're just in time," the freckle-faced girl in the ticket booth told him. "We got strict orders to lock the door after the show starts."

"Is it much of a crowd?"

To his surprise, the girl said, "Oh, yes. The Magnificent Belloc impressed a lot of folks last night, and they told their friends and families."

Flynn raised skeptical brows, but he went inside the lobby which was startlingly ornate with dark wood and gilt fixtures and red carpets. An usher held the door for him and Flynn slipped inside the darkened theater. The door closed firmly after him.

Through the darkness, he found his way down a row of plush seats, located an empty seat near the back and sat down. It was only then that he actually looked at the stage. There was a small table with a crystal ball in the center. Behind the table, The Magnificent Belloc was sitting in a large gold throne. Presumably it belonged to the Opera House since it was hard to picture gramps and Julian lugging that piece of furniture all over the Midwest. It was a nice prop, though, and it suited the occasion and the man sitting in it.

Julian looked like one of those French aristocrats from the time right before the people got tired of eating cake and started lopping heads. He wore dark blue leggings and a silver and powder blue brocade frock coat over a soft shirt with bunches of lace at the throat and cuffs. He had caved to the fashion of phony mediums and donned a turban, but it was relatively simple, creamy pale silk fastened with a giant sapphire. There were jewels on his slender hands and pinned at the lace at his throat; they flashed in the footlights every time he moved. The crowd seemed spellbound, and Flynn was not surprised. Julian looked beautiful and exotic and mysterious. He looked unearthly.

Flynn had already missed the introductions and preliminaries, whatever they were. Julian's eyes were shut and he was mumbling to himself, but the acoustics of the old building were excellent and Flynn recognized the occasional French word. Not French as he knew it. It was probably supposed to be the French of Paris at the time of the Revolution, but it was more likely French Creole. Then again, French Creole was supposed to be an older variety of French, wasn't it?

Someone shouted out from the crowd, "What about these here murders we're hearing about? What do the spirits say about them?"

The Magnificent Belloc shook his head, gave an impatient flick of his jeweled fingers and kept concentrating.

There were hisses and shushing from the crowd for the man who had interrupted the mystic's train of thought. He subsided, abashed.

Belloc—it was hard to think of him as Julian in this context—sat up straight and opened his eyes. He had a distinctly French inflection as he said, "Her name is Marie. No. *Mary*. A pretty child. *La pauvre petite*. She was very young when she crossed, yes?"

Reaction rippled through the crowd but no one spoke up.

"She was...confused at first," Belloc said gravely. "The young ones often are, but they...what is the word? Habituate the most quickly." He looked out over the sea of faces, although he probably couldn't see anything beyond the front of the stage. "Mary. She is all right now. Everything is all right now. Who is here for Mary?"

There was a smothered sob as though torn unwilling out of some grieving breast, and an elderly woman stood up, handkerchief pressed to her mouth.

"Ah. *Grand-mère*," Belloc said kindly. "Mary wishes to tell you something. She wishes to tell you that she is all right. She is happy. She is playing with the little lambs and baby angels. She is strong and she is well again."

The woman sobbed into her handkerchief.

"*Non, non, Grand-mère*," Belloc said quickly. "Mary wishes you to be happy for her. She has joined us with one purpose tonight and that is to tell you that she thanks you for all your love and your care, and that she is in a better place now, *oui*?"

The woman buried her face in her handkerchief and sank back into her seat.

Belloc nodded, well-satisfied with his chicanery, and relaxed in his throne. He closed his eyes.

Already the murmurs were running through the crowd impressed with the evening's entertainment so far.

Belloc mumbled some more French words. He dipped his head as though agreeing to something the spirits were saying. Listening a few seconds more, he held up a graceful hand, bidding the spirits to shut it for a sec.

"Joe...Joseph...he is very excited to speak tonight. Who is here for Joseph?"

Four different people rose throughout the audience, and a nervous titter went through the crowd.

Belloc laughed too. "*Eh bien*! We must narrow this down." He turned to consult with Joe for another few seconds, but again it appeared Joe was overeager and a little incoherent.

"Joe was a miner? Is that correct?"

All four members of the audience remained stubbornly standing.

Flynn began to enjoy himself.

Belloc returned to listening to Joe. He cast the audience an apologetic look. "It is a little hard to understand. Joe, he is not...was not...much for conversation on this side. Except perhaps when he had a bit of the...how you say...*moonshine*?"

Laughter rippled through the audience and three of the four standing sat down. Pointedly.

Belloc smiled encouragingly at the fourth. "What is your name, Madame?"

"Mable Gabbay. I was Joe's second wife."

"Oh yes?" Belloc hesitated a fraction. "And the first Madame Gabbay, she is...?"

Mable said grimly, "Joe was nine years a widower when I met him."

Belloc turned back to Joe, who appeared to be requesting a quick word. He listened attentively to Joe, then turned back to the widow. He said with charming simplicity, "He misses you, Madame. There is no doubt of this. He misses you greatly."

"What I want to know," Mable said, "is whether *she's* over there with him?"

The audience burst into nervous laughter. Surprisingly, Belloc laughed too, although he quickly sobered.

"Madame Gabbay," he said seriously, "it is most important that you understand that it is different on the other side. Joe has returned to us tonight for two purposes. The first is that he wishes you to understand that on the other side the feelings and thoughts that trouble us on the earthly plane are gone. They are no more."

Mable bridled at this but didn't argue.

"The second purpose for Joe's presence here tonight is that he wishes you to understand that he loves you. He wishes he had told you this more often. But though he did not say the words, he was not a man for words, he felt for you *la passion grande*."

Mable did not seem to have an answer for that. She stared with a sort of hard, anxious longing at the empty space on the stage next to Belloc's throne before taking her seat again.

Flynn felt faintly nauseated. This was nothing more than base manipulation of people's deepest, most cherished feelings. Belloc was skilled enough, though the act was much simpler than others Flynn had seen. No floating lights or musical instruments, no weird noises or showy stagecraft, no assistant moving through the crowd and feeding him code words and signals. Belloc was doing it all through, no doubt, painstaking research of the community: reading the obituaries and social pages of the local paper, checking the local cemetery, exploring the town and picking up useful bits of info—all that plus using what was no doubt a wily intuition. Given how very at ease he was, Flynn guessed he'd been involved in this mystical fraud one way or another since childhood. It was sickening and it was fascinating.

After the success of Joe and Mary, Belloc moved into high gear. He kept the names flying, kept the audience eagerly supplying him with the cues and information he needed.

He kept up his reassuring prattle about the idyllic happiness on the other side and the beauty and joy of being dead. And the suckers ate it up, every word.

Had it been a different time and place, Flynn would have taken time and pleasure in writing a searing expose of His Magnificence. But he didn't have time and this was not a town to be trusted when angered. Flynn didn't need more blood on his hands.

"Henrietta, Orrin says that you must look in the cellar. There is something valuable there. You will know it when you see it. Peter, Dolly says you must remarry. *Vraiment*. You do not honor her memory with loneliness and grief, but with joy and love. Maggie, your brother Glenn sends his greetings and wishes you

to know that he is happy and well. David, Gus says you must not waste time on regret. He is happy that you are here. Your presence will make a difference in the days to come.”

Flynn caught this last in frozen disbelief. “You phony little sonofabitch,” he muttered. His words carried with unexpected clarity in the pause that had followed Belloc’s last remark.

People glanced around looking for the heretic, and there were murmurs of displeasure. On stage, Belloc had fallen silent, fist to his forehead, ostensibly concentrating hard.

“Angela,” he said slowly, “I have a message from Bill.” He raised his head and stared out beyond the glare of the footlights. “Is Angela in the house tonight?”

A tall woman stood midway up the sea of red velvet chairs. “I’m Angela. Bill was my father. William Robert Tucker. He passed nine years ago.” She looked around smiling, and others were nodding affirmation.

In that same tired voice, Belloc said, “Angela, Bill says that you must not feel guilty for going out tonight. He was teasing you, that is all.”

Angela seemed to recoil. She said falteringly, “What does he mean? What is he saying? Who was teasing me?”

“Bill...was teasing you.” The fakir must have been tiring because he wasn’t bothering with the accent anymore.

“*Bill?* My husband Bill? Is that what he means? What does he mean? What is he saying?” She looked around as though expecting answers from the audience, but the people around her were deathly still.

“Bill says he loves you...you must not grieve for the...you must not.”

“What are you *saying?*”

The voice dragged on. “When you see the music box he made you—”

“My father never did!”

“When you listen to the tune ‘By the Light of the Silvery Moon’...”

Angela screamed, her voice ringing shrilly off the rafters and walls. “It’s not true. It’s not Bill. It’s my father. It’s *not* Bill!”

There was stricken silence in the auditorium. Flynn could almost pick up the soft, tired breaths of Belloc. The spiritualist was gripping the arms of the throne with white-knuckled hands, his eyes were closed, his face tense and pained. Alarmed whispers rustled through the spectators like a fox running through tall grass. The whispers picked up volume and velocity as they flowed through the aisles.

Angela made her way through the row of seats, still crying and protesting, “You’re lying. You’re trying to frighten me. It’s not true. It’s not Bill. It’s not true...” She ran up the aisle followed by her companions, and they hurried out through the double doors, leaving them swinging.

In the wake of her panicked flight a hushed alarm hung over the spellbound audience, all gazes fixed on the man in the golden throne.

After very long seconds, Belloc's eyes flew open and he seemed to recover himself. He offered a tired smile.

"You have questions, no? Let us see if the spirits have answers. Arthur, Madeline says that you must take the time to eat a proper supper..."

Relieved laughter from the crowd. Flynn rose and made his way down the narrow row of chairs and out of the Opera House.

A fake and a phony. That summed up The Magnificent Belloc. But a smart one, a shrewd one. The Bill incident had been eerie, no doubt about it. It had spooked Bill's wife. That was probably no accident. Whether the story was true or not, it would set tongues wagging, and tomorrow night more people would show up at the Opera House and pay their hard-earned pennies to hear that charlatan babble his clever concoction of spooky stories and platitudes.

Flynn walked briskly, lost in thought, and eventually he reached the boarding house. He let himself inside the airless house with the key Amy had given him and went quietly upstairs.

It was still uncomfortably warm in the room above the breezeway, a hot, still night. The crickets chirped merrily and in the distance a dog was howling. Flynn undressed and stretched out on the cotton bedcover. He closed his eyes.

He heard the clickity-clack of the train wheels again, miles and miles of it, and soon he drifted into dreamless sleep, leaving images behind like smoke from a train: bloodied miners, white-sheeted klansmen, and a slim dark man in the rich costume of a doomed aristocrat.

Chapter Three

Thursday Flynn woke to the sound of voices.

He opened his eyes and blinked at the glare of bright sunlight on wallpaper. It took him a few seconds to place himself, to remember that he was in Herrin, in his old room at Gus and Amy's.

He winced, remembering the things Julian Devereux had said during his show at the Opera House the evening before.

David, Gus says you must not waste time on regret. He is happy that you are here. Your presence will make a difference in the days to come.

Nothing would give him greater pleasure than to punch that wiseacre in his wide, smirking mouth. But he had to give Devereux credit. He was good at reading people, good at ferreting out the truths people tried to hide even from themselves. In that sense he was like a smart investigative reporter, but he used his skill for making fools of others rather than educating them with the truth.

Flynn rose and went to the window, gazing down. He could see the breezeway below and the striped awning of the old swing as it rocked gently. Someone was sitting in the swing: he could see a flannel-clad bent knee and the flash of smooth brown arm as the swing moved in and out of sunlight. A radio played noisily through the kitchen window.

Flynn went next door and had a quick bath using three pots of water, two hot and one cold. The day was already hot and by the time he'd shaved and dressed he was nearly as sweaty as when he began, but he smelled more civilized.

At breakfast it was Flynn, Mrs. Hoyt and Joan.

Joan was talking about the murders in Jackson County, although she broke off when Flynn entered the dining room.

"Publishers make things up to sell more papers, isn't that true, Mr. Flynn?" Mrs. Hoyt inquired.

Flynn shook his napkin out and said, "Respectable publishers don't."

Mrs. Hoyt's expression indicated she believed the respectable publisher to be right up there with the dodo bird.

Joan, keeping her voice down as though afraid of being overheard, said, "The papers say that the bodies of the women were prepared as though for Egyptian burial. Do you suppose that means they were wrapped like mummies?"

According to Flynn's pal in the AP the women had been left naked, their bodies crudely carved up, their internal organs wrapped in linen bandages and left in mason jars like the hearts, lungs and kidneys of ancient pharaohs had been placed in canopic vases for burial. Of course that could be a rumor, and even if it wasn't, Flynn wasn't about to share it with the ladies over breakfast.

Mrs. Hoyt said in shocked tones, "*Joan.*"

Joan turned scarlet and explained, "I enjoy murder mysteries."

Mrs. Hoyt was shaking her head at her unnatural offspring. Flynn smiled at Joan. She blushed more.

"I suppose you've covered a few murder cases in your time, Mr. Flynn?" That was Mrs. Hoyt again.

"A few." To Joan, he said apologetically, "They're mostly sad, sordid affairs. Not like the things you read in books. Most murderers aren't that smart. If they get away with it, it's more luck than anything."

"That's what Julian says."

"Julian?"

"Mr. Devereux. I suggested that perhaps he could use his talents to help the police like they say Mr. Edgar Cayce has done."

"And what did he say?"

"He said that the spirits didn't like to get involved in such sad, sordid affairs. Those were his exact words. That the spirits came to us to teach us about how to live better lives so that we can safely reach the blessed hereafter."

"Did he?" Flynn said dryly.

Amy came out of the kitchen with a great platter of pancakes. She had always been a wonderful cook, although she employed a woman to help her now. It had interested and surprised Flynn, the relationship between Amy and Gus. Gus had been a New York intellectual and radical. Amy was...the salt of the earth. Not the kind of woman anyone would have pegged for Gus. Maybe it was true about opposites attracting. Amy and Gus had seemed as happy as two people could be with each other. Not that Flynn was an expert on such things.

"Did you have a nice time last night?" Amy asked Flynn, forking a stack onto his plate.

Flynn nodded. "It was educational. I caught part of young Julian's show at the Opera House."

"Oh my."

Joan caught her breath and said, "I want to see Julian's show. Mama doesn't approve of spiritualists."

"You're not missing anything." Catching their expressions, Flynn qualified, "I guess I'm not much for spiritualism myself."

Amy said quietly, "There's talk that he foretold the death of a member of the audience."

"No." Reluctantly Flynn added, "It seemed like he might have foretold the death of a woman's husband." He shrugged as the ladies gasped.

"It's the devil's work," Mrs. Hoyt exclaimed.

“But what if it’s true?” Joan asked.

“There are things we’re not meant to know.”

Flynn devoted his attention to his pancakes. He wondered why Joan wasn’t married and starting a family of her own. But the war had probably put paid to a lot of women’s hopes for that. Over a hundred thousand dead American soldiers meant a hundred thousand fewer husbands and sweethearts.

“Where *is* The Magnificent Belloc?” he asked abruptly.

“Julian doesn’t eat breakfast. He can’t the morning after a performance.”

Joan seemed to know an awful lot about Julian, given he and gramps couldn’t have been staying at the boarding house long. If she was sweet on Julian, that really was a shame.

Flynn raised polite eyebrows, and she continued, “Mr. Devereux rarely rises before noon. And Dr. Pearson is always away by this time of the morning.”

“That’s because he’s the only doctor in this county who knows his business,” Mrs. Hoyt said briskly. “I don’t hold with those boys fresh out of the university. I don’t like a doctor younger than me.”

“Now, Mrs. Hoyt,” Amy said briskly, “that young Dr. Anson in Carbondale is very pleasant and very knowledgeable.”

Mrs. Hoyt was unswayed, and Flynn went back to eating his pancakes and trying not to listen to them. He had a lot planned for the day. He wanted to hurry and finish this story; he could no longer remember why he thought traveling to Illinois was a good idea. Murders and mystics...

When breakfast was over, Flynn nodded goodbye to the ladies and walked out to the breezeway to have a smoke.

Most of the houses in town were single story, designed with a front porch where people could sit on their swings in warm weather, fan themselves and say unkind things about their neighbors in relative comfort. The boarding house swing was at the west end of the breezeway making it a shady and fairly pleasant place to sit in the hot afternoon. Cream-pink roses wound up the walls of the arbor.

Julian Devereux sat idle in the swing. He looked up at Flynn’s approach and offered that sly smile. “Good morning.”

Flynn nodded curtly. He leaned against the wall and lit his cigarette, studying the younger man with a level eye.

“Did you enjoy the show last night?”

“Not particularly.”

Julian chuckled. “Why not? I heard I was very good.”

Flynn said evenly, “You want to know what I thought? I thought—think—you’re a two-bit four-flusher in fancy dress. You winkle out people’s deepest, most treasured feelings and you use that knowledge to take advantage of them.”

"No, I don't," Julian said calmly. "I give them hope. And reassurance."

"Hope and reassurance? Is that what you were feeding that woman last night when you hinted her husband was dead?"

Julian's smile faded. He stared out at the street where two women were strolling along with shopping bags. "I don't remember that."

"I bet everyone else does."

Julian raised a negligent shoulder. Flynn puffed on his cigarette and eyed the younger man's sharp profile.

"I notice you don't deny it's all a bunch of hocus-pocus."

Julian's dark, wide gaze turned his way again. He said mockingly, "Deny it to a smart big-city reporter like *you*, David?"

"Why did you tell that woman her husband was dead?"

"I told you I don't remember that." He sounded mildly irritated.

"That's convenient. How long have you been in this racket?"

Julian smiled with sudden disarming sweetness. "Oh, I come by my trade honestly. I was, as they say, born in a trunk. The only offspring of Count Amadeus and Zaliki the Seer. In fact..." his voice dropped for apparent dramatic effect, "...my mother foresaw my father's death during her final performance."

Flynn's smile was sardonic. "The Astral Plane by Louisiana way?"

Julian cocked his head inquiringly. "I'd think with the things you must have seen in the war you'd want to believe there was something more, something better waiting for us."

"You don't know anything about it."

Julian continued to stare at him with an intensity that made Flynn uncomfortable.

"What was that book in your luggage?" he asked unexpectedly.

"You saw it," Flynn said shortly.

"I saw you turn white."

"I don't like people going through my things."

"You don't like people." Julian was smiling again. "You'd rather write about them, turn them into characters like in a book, than have to deal with flesh and blood."

Flynn dropped his cigarette on the walkway and ground it with his heel. "You better stick to fortunetelling and leave the psychoanalyzing to the experts."

Julian's laugh was suggestive. "I'll tell *your* fortune if you like, David."

It irked Flynn the way the pansy kept saying his name, *David*, with that certain knowing intimacy. He had no right to take that tone. He didn't let his irritation show as he replied, "I thought spiritualists didn't predict the future."

"I'll make an exception in your case."

“Thanks. I’ll work it out for myself.”

Julian said quite seriously, “All right. But don’t take too long, will you?”

Flynn gave a dismissing laugh and walked away. He was annoyed with himself for going out to the breezeway in the first place. He’d had a pretty good idea Julian was sitting out there, but as much as he disliked the other man, he’d headed straight out there after breakfast. It was peculiar. He understood part of the uneasy draw. He and Julian did have one thing in common, but that only made it worse. Julian was the kind of twilight lover that embarrassed men like Flynn. It was only when he saw sissies and pansies like Julian that he felt ashamed of what he was.

The Hoyt mother and daughter were back in the parlor when Flynn grabbed his coat and hat and left for the soft drink parlor and pool hall. With Amy’s permission he borrowed Gus’s Model T and drove into the center of town rather than walking in the bright shimmering heat.

Milo’s place looked exactly like it was: a rundown old pool hall. Flynn walked down a narrow hallway dividing a small office from a storeroom. A scrawny, squint-eyed man sat in the office, watching the back entrance. A well-chewed cigar was clamped between his teeth and a double-barreled shotgun lay on the big desk in front of him.

Beyond the office was another room with two card tables and a door on each end leading to the front. The right door led to a couple of beat-out pool tables set off from the bar by a five-foot curtain divider. Two men lackadaisically knocked colored balls around with pool cues and cursed each other amiably. The left door opened on the front of the soft drink parlor. The tall wooden bar was scuffed and battered but someone had made it their business to keep it and the tall stools before it well-polished and gleaming.

The bartender was a Hungarian named Earl. He asked what soft drink Flynn wanted, and Flynn ordered a Dr. Pepper. The Dr. Pepper turned out to be half a soft drink bottle full of fine Canadian whisky. He drank it and ate salty Georgia peanuts while he talked to the natives. For a bloodthirsty lot they were surprisingly good-natured and frank.

“People around here are sick and tired of Williamson County being called Bloody Williamson,” said a man the others referred to as Monty. “We’re sick of being called murdering hillbillies by newspapers all over the country.”

“Twenty-one men dead, two trials, and not one conviction,” Flynn pointed out.

“That should tell you something right there.”

It did, but apparently not the same thing it told the gentlemen of Herrin.

“I tell you what I feel bad about,” said a man with a long scar down the side of his face. “I feel bad that W.J. Lester didn’t get what his boys got.”

The other men gave him warning looks, but he ignored them. “Hell, this is the strongest union area in the entire country, but Ole King Coal thinks to hell with that and he brings in a bunch of scabs, mine-

guards and hoodlum strikebreakers from Chicago. Pride goeth before a fall. That's what the Good Book says. If anyone should have reaped what he sowed, it was that bastard. But he walked away scot-free like the rich always do."

"The coroner had it right when he said the real criminals were the officials of the Southern Illinois Coal Company."

There was a muttered chorus of agreement.

Monty said, "The miners stood their trial and they were acquitted fair and square, but you'd never know it to hear these bastards talk. Look at that union-hating jackass Harding and his baloney about 'free Americans have the right to work without anyone's leave.' He and the big-shot mine owners figure if they can bust the UMWA in Illinois then they can bust any union in the country. Or that other bastard Pershing and his bullshit about 'inoffensive people having the right to earn a livelihood.' Inoffensive, my ass! It's easy to stand in judgment when you've never been hungry or had to see your kids go hungry."

Flynn was silent. He had a lot of respect for Black Jack Pershing, but he'd covered a mine disaster in his time. And he remembered hearing Gulling talk about the mine conditions before the unions: working in water up to your hips, gas-filled rooms, cave-ins, and all that for a buck fifty a day—a buck fifty if you were lucky.

Rough justice. That was the consensus of Milo's pool hall and soft drink parlor and a couple of hours of talk and drink didn't sway them an iota. They were resentful but not remorseful. And there was still a lot of bitterness and hatred boiling not far below the polite surface.

When he figured he'd learned all that there was to learn at Milo's, Flynn got in the Model T and drove out to Moake Crossing, about half a mile from where on June 21st the previous summer, the miners and a mob of about five hundred—and growing—had finally forced W.J. Lester's mine to shut and the workers to surrender.

This was the road the miners had marched their prisoners down after their surrender. This was the place where McDowell, the mine boss, had been taken off the road and shot to death.

It was a harmless-looking place on a sunny July afternoon. Nothing but farm fields and forest. It seemed a long way from town. The sky was cloudless and the air so still you could hear the hum of every insect.

Flynn put the flivver in gear and continued on. He had read the accounts many times. The prisoners were walked along the railroad tracks, their arms in the air until they came to the powerhouse. Then, the story went, the Union President Hugh Willis supposedly drove up and warned the miners not to kill their prisoners on an open road where women and children might see.

Maybe that part of the story was the fantasy Willis and others claimed. Certainly nothing had been proven against Willis. But it was no fantasy that the strikebreakers and guards had been herded north of the powerhouse, across the tracks to a narrow strip of wood and brush. The mob pushed their captives into the

trees, and about a hundred yards from the treeline they came to a fence with four strands of barbed wire. A big bearded man in overalls yelled out, “Here’s where you scab bastards run the gauntlet. Let’s see how fast you gutter-bums can run all the way back to Chicago.”

And then the mob had opened fire.

When Flynn came to the spot, he pulled to the side of the road and got out, walking across to the dense woods and green brush. The pound of his shoe soles on the dry ground sounded unnaturally loud in the unfriendly silence. He was not a superstitious man, but the place had a queer, haunted feel. The barbed wire glinted barbarous and cruel in the unforgiving sunlight. It reminded him of other barbed wire and other blood-drenched ground.

The undergrowth crackled, but when he glanced around, nothing was there.

High overhead on a tree branch, a black crow called out in its harsh, raucous voice.

Chapter Four

On the way back to the boarding house, Flynn stopped and bought an electric fan at the hardware store. He parked the Model T in the garage and carried the fan inside the house. In the parlor he could hear Mrs. Hoyt complaining; he didn't catch the words, but he knew the tone. Her daughter's voice murmured in acquiescence.

Farther down the hall, in the study where Gus had typed his Pulitzer prize-winning series of articles on the national coal strike in 1919, he could hear Dr. Pearson and Mr. Devereux bickering, but it sounded mostly amiable.

"David," Amy called.

Flynn glanced around. Amy was coming his way, a fair-haired, broad-shouldered man in tow. The man carried a suitcase in each hand. For one shocked instant, Flynn thought the man was Paul. Then reality reasserted itself. Aside from the light hair and the broad shoulders, the man didn't resemble Paul at all.

"David, this is Mr. Lee. He works for the Queen of Egypt Medical Supply Company and stays with us regularly." To Mr. Lee, she said, "Mr. Flynn is an old family friend."

Mr. Lee's tilted green eyes met Flynn's briefly. He looked away then his gaze returned and locked. He shifted his samples bag and offered his hand and a smile. David shifted the fan he was carrying and shook hands. He smiled back. Mr. Lee was blond and boyishly handsome.

"Casey."

"David."

"Well now, I'll leave you two to get acquainted. Mrs. Greer helps me out in the kitchen, but her daughter is ill and she had to leave this morning." Amy was already turning. "I need to get back to work." She hurried away, and Flynn and Casey Lee were left to climb the stairs to the second level on their own.

"Medical supplies?" Flynn asked. He thought he recognized a fellow veteran. It was the way Casey held himself and the quick, no-nonsense way he'd sized Flynn up. During the war there hadn't been time to waste.

Casey laughed. "Yep. I'm the original snake oil salesman. We sell everything from elixirs to remedies for warts and asthma." He gave Flynn a sideways smile.

"You must travel around quite a bit."

"I'm on the road pretty much all the time these days. I was in Marion yesterday." He grimaced. "Day before that I was in Murphysboro."

“Yes?”

“The whole of Jackson County is talking about those murders. People are pretty worked up.”

“I bet.”

They reached the second level. Casey said, “Amy lays a mighty fine table. I always eat too much. I was thinking of going out for a walk after supper.”

“I have the same problem,” Flynn said. “Maybe I’ll join you.”

Casey smiled. He turned left to go down the hall to his room and Flynn turned right.

He was still smiling as he opened the door to his room. The smile vanished at the sight of Julian Devereux lying on his bed.

Julian wore a sumptuous plum-colored dressing gown. At the squeak of the door hinges, he turned his head and looked up under his lashes, smiling with deliberate seduction. “I knew you were back.”

Flynn closed the door and leaned back against it. “What the hell are you doing in here?” he asked, keeping his voice down.

“Waiting for you.”

“You’re wasting your time.”

“It’s my time to waste.” Julian sat up, the purple robe falling open to reveal a sleek, honey-colored body. “Although I shouldn’t want to waste much more of it.”

Flynn shook his head in disbelief. “You must be insane.” He truly didn’t know what to make of this young maniac. He had neither scruples nor morals. Worse, he didn’t appear to have any commonsense. He added deliberately, “Or stupid.”

As it slowly sunk in on him that Flynn was serious, Julian’s smile faded, lost its confident curve. His bold gaze darkened with something like hurt. “Why would you say that? The moment I saw you I saw that you were just like me. That you wanted this too.”

“I’m *nothing* like you,” Flynn said with quiet intensity. “Now get out of my room.”

Julian continued to stare at him with those wide, dark eyes. “I’m not wrong.” He spoke with a stubborn sort of dignity. It was almost disarming.

Flynn, however, had no intention of being disarmed. “You damned fool. You’re going to get us both arrested. Or killed.”

Julian shook his head. “People don’t notice unless you bring attention to yourself. They see what they expect to see.”

He said it quite seriously, and Flynn had to laugh. “*The Magnificent Belloc*? I hate to break it to you, Devereux, but you have a way of bringing attention to yourself.” He tipped his head toward the doorway. “Get the hell out. I won’t ask you nicely again.”

“Fisticuffs would draw the attention you’re trying to avoid,” Julian pointed out, but he rose from the bed, straightening his dressing gown without haste. Flynn had to hand it to him; he wore his own skin with a panache most men only managed when fully and expensively clothed.

Flynn stepped away from the door, intending to open it. Instead, he found his arms full of Julian. He pressed his slender, taut body to Flynn’s and wound his arms around Flynn’s neck. Flynn could feel the other man’s sizable erection poking through the silk of his dressing gown, and his own body automatically responded.

That was biology. It was pointless to argue with it. He tried, though, opening his mouth to blast Julian. The sound that escaped him was surprisingly without force, and then Julian’s lips, soft and honey-sweet, touched Flynn’s. It was a delicate kiss, skilful but subtle. The body in Flynn’s arms felt slight and almost feminine, but the aggression, the hunger, was all male.

Flynn’s own body tingled with uncomfortable awareness. It was all he could do not to respond to that kiss with a blaze of hunger. Instead, he grabbed Julian’s wrists, forced his arms from about his neck, and thrust him away none too gently.

Julian staggered, but caught himself. He glared at Flynn. His chiseled nostrils actually flared.

“I don’t understand you, David.”

“I’m making it as clear as I can. I’m not interested.”

“No one will know—”

“I’m not interested in *you*,” Flynn cut in. “I don’t even like you.”

Julian considered this, blinking, puzzled. Flynn opened the door, glanced down the empty hallway. “The coast is clear. Go.”

Face averted, Julian went without another word.

Flynn closed the door. He was tempted to lock it, but that would be ridiculous. He made room for the new fan on the dresser top, plugged it in and waited for the sparks to fly. But the fan came on smooth and quiet, the metal propellers flying fast enough to chop an unwary finger off, and a wonderful breeze washed through the warm room, erasing the faint spicy scent of Julian’s cologne.

~ * ~

The entire household gathered for the simple, hearty supper of navy beans cooked with chunks of tender ham. There was fresh corn bread and cold, tangy coleslaw. Plenty of everything. David still vividly remembered the deprivations of the war years, and he gave thanks with everyone else at the table. He noticed that even Julian and Mr. Devereux politely murmured along with the mealtime prayer.

As though feeling his gaze, Julian’s lashes lifted and he gave Flynn a long, silent look. Flynn looked away.

“Were you in the war, Mr. Lee?” Mrs. Hoyt inquired.

“Yes, ma’am. I was in France with the 5th Marine Regiment.”

“Belleau Wood?” Flynn asked.

Casey met his eyes and nodded.

“My son fell at the Battle of the Argonne.”

“Sorry to hear it, ma’am.”

“My son won the Medal of Honor.”

“I’m sure he was a very brave man.”

Mr. Devereux cleared his throat noisily. “Even if Julian’s health had permitted, we are firm believers in nonviolence.”

Casey raised his brows. “Well, Julian’s only a kid,” he said politely.

Flynn glanced at Julian. He was very quiet, his face expressionless as he replied, “I’m twenty-six.”

“That so?” Casey said, showing the surprise Flynn felt. “No offense intended.”

Julian did not respond, his attention focused on his plate. Flynn felt an unexpected stab of sympathy for him.

“Lordy, I know what it is to suffer from ill health,” Mrs. Hoyt said, and she proceeded to describe in detail her many physical woes.

Joan sank lower in her chair, and Julian had apparently removed himself to the astral plane, but Amy listened politely and made sympathetic comments although she had surely heard all this a hundred times. Dr. Pearson contributed with his own occasional acerbic advice, and Casey cheerfully recommended several Queen of Egypt products with miraculous healing properties.

He was personable and quite a talker; Flynn bet he was a great success in his line of work.

When Mrs. Hoyt had worn out the topic of her own ill health, she asked about the news around the county, and Casey admitted he had been in Murphysboro two days earlier.

“Why that was right around the time of those brutal murders,” Mrs. Hoyt exclaimed. Joan brightened and the rest of the table eyed Casey expectantly—except for Julian who continued to stare at his plate as though he could foretell the future in the navy beans.

“Well, I was only there when they found the last girl, Millie Hesse,” Casey hastened to say. “Although the whole county’s been talking about it ever since the first murder.”

“Anna Spiegel,” Joan said eagerly. “She was the first. Then Maria Campanella, then Millie Hesse.”

“I knew Anna,” Casey said. “That is to say, she was a regular customer of mine.”

“Was she in ill health?” Mrs. Hoyt asked with interest.

“No. Not that I know of. Anna used our beauty products. Our lip salves and rouge papers and kohl eyeliners. She was a very pretty girl.” He smiled at Joan. “We carry the finest all natural and all quality beauty products.”

Joan blushed and reached for her coffee.

Casey grinned at Flynn who tried not to grin back. Casey had an irrepressible good humor that was hard not to respond to. Looking away from him, Flynn happened to catch Julian's eye and his smile faded. Gramps might be a pacifist, but the expression in the back of Julian's eyes was definitely violent. He looked from Flynn to Casey and his mouth tightened.

It seemed he wasn't kidding about his instincts.

"Was she a nice girl?" Mr. Devereux asked with what appeared to be unwilling fascination.

"Not if she used cosmetics," Mrs. Hoyt retorted.

Casey objected to this. "Sure, she was a nice girl. At least as far as I could tell. They were all nice girls from what I heard. Not the kind of girls to get themselves into trouble. That's what no one can understand. How this fiend could get close to them. He must be very clever."

"Or very evil," Devereux added.

"Excuse me," Julian said, rising. "I have to prepare for this evening."

"There's peach cobbler for dessert," Amy told him.

He shook his head.

"I'll save you a piece for later," she promised, and he smiled at her. It was a genuine smile, warm and friendly and uncomplicated. It surprised Flynn.

Nearly as much as the realization that he was aware of every move Julian made.

When Julian left the room there was a pause and then Mr. Devereux said, "My grandson is very sensitive to the vibrations of evil."

Dr. Pearson snorted. "What that young man needs is fresh air and sunshine and exercise. A few early nights wouldn't come amiss either."

"He has always been most delicate."

"What's wrong with him?" Casey inquired with interest, no doubt mentally running through the catalog of Queen of Egypt remedies and elixirs.

Mr. Devereux shook his head. Casey said, "Sorry if I offended him. I guess he's got one of those baby faces. Must have been hard on him not being able to serve his country."

Mr. Devereux opened his mouth, seemed to consider the company, and said, "My grandson has been called to a higher purpose."

Mrs. Hoyt sniffed disapprovingly.

After the peach cobbler, Casey mentioned that he was going for a stroll and Flynn said he'd join him.

They grabbed their jackets and hats and stepped out into the warm twilight.

"I know a place we can get a real drink," Casey said, lighting a pipe.

Flynn nodded.

They talked about the war and France. “Do you miss it sometimes?” Casey asked as they watched the street lamps blinking on all down the long silent blocks.

“Miss it? No,” Flynn said.

“I do. I never felt as alive as I did in the war.” Casey gave him that wide, friendly grin. “I guess that sounds peculiar.”

“No, I think I know what you mean.” Flynn added, “You never feel as alive as in those first seconds after you just miss getting your head blown off. I just wonder what the hell it was for. I lost a brother, an uncle, and two of my best friends in that war. I miss ‘em every day.” And Paul. He’d lost Paul too, but he couldn’t talk about that. Not to anyone. Rarely did he even let himself remember.

A sniper’s bullet on a sunny day. One moment Paul had been warm and alive, the next he was dead. *Dead*. No warning, no reprieve, no deferment. Dead and done.

“Yeah. I know. I lost a lot of pals too. Every one of the guys I joined up with went during that damned war.”

“It changes you,” Flynn said quietly. “It changed the men here. Were you around last year?”

“You mean the so-called massacre?”

Flynn nodded.

“I saw a damn sight more than I wanted to,” Casey said grimly. “But you know, my granddad worked in the mines back before the union. Things were different back then—harder, meaner. My granddad worked for fourteen hours a day in a shaft that was only three feet high, sometimes up to his ankles in water. He spent all day bent over, loading coal onto mule carts. The mules used to go blind from so much time in the dark. Granddad died in the mines from bad air.”

“Everyone died back then,” Flynn agreed. “From the bad air, or collapses, or shaft fires.”

“That’s right. The lucky ones who survived the mines ended up dying of black lung. It’s not that long ago. People still remember those days.”

Flynn thought of the stories he’d heard: a man using his pocketknife to cut the throat of the wounded, a woman holding the hand of her child as she led him to see the dying, a man urinating on the corpses. As bad as anything he’d seen in the war. But then this *had* been war—or at least a battle in an ongoing war.

“You know,” Casey said, “a lot of those people on the road and at the cemetery where it all ended, they weren’t miners. They weren’t even from Herrin. They were the no-account trash that gathers any time there’s trouble.”

Flynn nodded. It was something to take into account, true enough.

“Why do you care?” Casey asked. “You’re not from around here. You’re from...where? New York?”

Why *did* he care? Why was it so important to understand what had happened? Understanding it wouldn’t change it. Probably wouldn’t even prevent it happening again someplace else.

Flynn said, “They took dynamite and blew the draglines and the shovels and bulldozers of the Lester strip mine. They blew that mine apart. It’ll never operate again.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing.”

They had reached the Lafayette Hotel. It was one of Herrin’s nicest lodgings, designed to recall European splendor before the war. It had done a brisk and lively business before Prohibition, but now, like a lot of businesses, it was struggling to stay afloat. Small iron balconies and window boxes decorated the outside. Inside, the walls were paneled in a red wood, ornate amber chandeliers hung from the ceiling, the carpet was an elegant pattern of fruit baskets and flowers on a field of black.

They went inside and ordered “soft drinks” which they sipped while they continued to talk, although they steered clear of such serious subjects as the war or the massacre. Casey was easy to talk to and Flynn found himself opening up in a way he rarely did anymore. He bought the second round. Their conversation grew less focused.

By the third round, Flynn was impatient for what would surely follow—the reason they had both walked out that evening. He was already trying to calculate the logistics of it. This was not New York where they would find a sympathetic club or speakeasy.

They would need to find a quiet alley or a deserted building or a corner of the park.

It had been awhile since he had to sneak around like that. He lived in a Greenwich Village brownstone, and while he was cautious, he didn’t have to exercise the kind of care necessary in a small town like Herrin.

He wondered what it was like for a man like Casey. The war had probably simplified a lot of things for him. No wonder he missed it.

“Another?” Casey asked, half-rising.

Flynn didn’t want another drink. He wanted Casey’s body which was enough like Paul’s body to fill him with a fierce hunger. A hunger that had sparked, oddly enough, when Julian had pressed his slim, hard form to Flynn’s.

He hesitated, but Casey was giving him a meaningful look, so Flynn nodded. Maybe Casey had to get drunk to do it. That was sad, but it wasn’t uncommon.

They had a fourth round of “soft drinks” and then, finally, Casey said, slurring a bit, “We oughta start back, ya think?”

They rose and went out, down the front steps and started walking back. At first Casey was whistling softly, “Ain’t We Got Fun”, but then he fell silent, seeming increasingly morose.

Their footsteps echoed loudly down the quiet street. Flynn was all but positive he hadn’t misread him, but wondered if Casey had changed his mind.

But as they came to the set of stairs leading to the small corner park, Casey grabbed his arm and they ran up to the iron gate. It wasn't locked and they slipped inside, easing the gate shut behind them. It closed with a ghostly clang.

The park was dark and shadowy. The street lamps didn't reach beyond the tall maple trees lining the spiked fence, and they made their way down the dirt path to the small, open-air gazebo. Flynn started to climb onto the gazebo, but Casey pulled him back.

"No. Not there. Over here." Casey led him behind a great flowering barberry bush and unzipped his trousers, freeing himself. Flynn unfastened his own trousers.

The fact that they'd had a good deal to drink, and that Flynn had been craving this release since...anyway, it made it easier. Made it simple to push aside the faint dismay that their joining was so blunt, so businesslike. What was he looking for? This was not Paul, this was not romance, let alone love. He didn't look for that at home, why should he look for it here?

They stumbled together, and Flynn could feel the heat coming off Casey through his clothing. They were both perspiring with excitement—and humidity. He could feel Casey's heart thumping against his own as though he were scared to death. They clutched each other like drowning men. Casey's hardness jutted against his hip. His hands were going to leave bruises; his mouth was like a cave, dark and empty. It opened to Flynn's and their tongues slid together, wet and hot and slick.

Strangely, in that moment, Flynn remembered that delicate, expert kiss Julian had pressed upon him in his room. He remembered how Julian had felt in his arms: light and ardent as a raw flame.

The impression was gone in the next instant. The tang of Casey's sweat and the sweet scent of his hair oil mingled with the sharp, acidic scent of the barberry bush. Casey's fingers dug into Flynn's buttocks, urging him closer. Flynn pushed against him, rubbed against him, hunting eagerly for the release he knew was coming.

Casey's mouth opened wider, his tongue pushed deeper. Flynn drew back from that fever heat, from the bite of the whisky and the unfamiliar taste. He didn't want kisses, he just wanted the relief. He slicked his palm with spit, reached down, got both their stiff cocks in one hand and began to work them, rubbing them together.

Casey groaned into his mouth and then tore away, tipping his head back and gulping great lungfuls of night as Flynn rolled them forward, shoving them along. They humped and fumbled against each other, nearly overbalancing in their thrusting, grinding, frantic...like two stags rutting.

A roiling blaze of heat soared between them, and Casey made a sound like he was choking to death. Hot wet come spattered between their bodies. Breathing hard, they hung onto each other—mostly to keep from falling over.

Then the hasty, limbs trembling, business of wiping off, doing up the zippers and buttons, moving quickly, putting it behind them.

They looked each other over, not that there was much to see in the uncertain light, and they moved in accord down the dirt path back to the iron gate. They stepped through it, the gate shutting with a faint chime behind them. They walked down the steps to the pavement.

To his horror, Flynn realized there was a man a few feet in front of them. He must have just passed by the park as they were reaching the gate. Flynn felt a sudden, guilty alarm that they would be discovered—what the hell explanation could they give for being in the park at that hour?

Casey realized their danger at the same instant. He stopped in his tracks. The man must have sensed their presence, for he glanced over his shoulder and jumped visibly.

“Didn’t see you behind me,” he said. His hat brim hid his features, but he sounded nervous. “Were you in the theater too?”

Casey appeared struck dumb. Flynn said, “Yes.”

“Wasn’t that the damndest thing?”

“I—”

“Not that I believe in that superstitious mumbo-jumbo.” The man gave an edgy laugh. “But it was strange, certainly.”

“Yes.”

They were now all three of them walking in a small herd, Casey bringing up the rear. Moonlight shadowed the beautiful old houses and the churches as they stepped briskly along their way. Warmth still radiated from the bricks of the building and road.

“The rest of it, well, any good huckster could come up with that pabulum. Your Auntie May wants you to wear a scarf in cold weather, your grandpapa still loves you.” The man snorted in amused disgust. “But predicting Bill Doyle’s death? And that thing about the murders.”

Flynn felt a chill slither down his spine. Abruptly he knew that the man had been to the Opera House and that he was talking about Julian.

He said carefully, “But maybe we misunderstood him? Maybe that’s not what he was saying at all?”

“What else could he have meant?” the man said. “He said—she said—whoever that was supposed to be said that she was lost on the far side of Crab Orchard Creek. That the other girls were with her. Four girls. And one of them doesn’t know she’s dead yet.”

Chapter Five

When Flynn and Casey reached the boarding house they found everyone out on the breezeway drinking lemonade and talking. It was clear that the news of Julian's announcement had already, in the mysterious way of small towns, reached home.

The three ladies sat on the wide swing, their shadowy faces lit by the street lamps a few yards away. Their paper fans fluttered like the wings of dying moths, languidly waving back and forth. Dr. Pearson sat smoking at the edge of the brick walk, the red tip of his cigar glowing in the darkness.

Amy instructed them to bring chairs outside and pour themselves a glass of lemonade. Casey and Flynn obeyed. They sat a few feet away from each other on the breezeway, sipping their cold drinks. Casey sniffed discreetly a couple of times, and Flynn was tempted to elbow him in the ribs.

Mrs. Hoyt made a disapproving noise and said, "I don't need to ask where you gentlemen have been this evening."

For a paralyzed second Flynn thought she meant...but then he realized she was talking about the alcohol they had consumed earlier.

"Are the Devereuxs back yet?" he asked, ignoring her.

"No," Amy replied. "Any minute now, I expect. We heard the show ended early."

"Did it?"

"They're saying it was true about the man whose death he predicted, that his wife came home and found him dead."

Joan's shadow shivered in delighted horror. Mrs. Hoyt exclaimed, "Table tilting and spirit writing. Bell ringing and levitation and invisible hands playing musical instruments. At worst it's blasphemy and at best it's nonsense!"

"It's harmless nonsense, I guess. And it's fun," Casey put in, and Flynn saw the white flash of Joan's grateful smile turned his way.

Mrs. Hoyt said, "From what we've heard from the neighbors, I don't think people found it much fun tonight."

"How can that be Julian's fault?" protested Joan. "Anyway, he doesn't deal in spiritualistic phenomena."

"How would you know, missy?"

"I asked him. He said that's for people in traveling shows and carnivals."

"And what is he? The child of a fortuneteller and a vaudevillian."

"Now, Mrs. Hoyt," Amy remonstrated amiably, "the Devereuxs are my guests. I don't want you speaking ill of them. I don't have any complaints about either of them. Julian's a sweet enough boy."

Casey gave a derisive laugh as he lit his pipe.

Flynn stared at him, at the handsome features looking mask-like and foreign in the brief illumination of the pipe bowl. He asked, "Is it true he prophesied another murder?"

"He didn't prophecy," growled Dr. Pearson from the gloomy corner of the breezeway. "He announced she was dead. According to Mrs. Muenster next door."

"He must have heard it on the radio," Mrs. Hoyt said. "Or he simply made it up to frighten people. To get more people to come to his show."

"The radio wasn't on when he came back," Amy said.

"When he came back from where?" Flynn asked.

"I don't know where. He was gone most of the day. He goes out every day. Of course they only arrived on Monday. He said he went to the dime museum today."

"Where were he and the old man before they came here?"

"Cairo."

Joan said, "Cairo, Illinois that is."

"Where else would it be?" Mrs. Hoyt retorted. "Those two are homegrown hucksters."

Amy said, "According to Mr. Devereux they traveled the Continent before the war."

"There is only one continent worth traveling and that is the United States of America," Mrs. Hoyt pronounced.

Flynn asked, "How long were they in Cairo?"

Mrs. Hoyt laughed jarringly. "It's easy to see you're a reporter, Mr. Flynn. You ask so many questions."

"A reporter," Casey repeated in a funny voice.

"Well, well." Dr. Pearson sounded amused.

David flicked his cigarette butt in the damp grass and slapped at a mosquito. "Reporters take vacations too."

"But you're not on vacation," Dr. Pearson said shrewdly.

"No," Flynn admitted. "I'm writing a story on Herrin one year later."

"Not much of a story there." Pearson didn't sound troubled about it, but then who in this godforsaken town did?

"Most people I've talked to seem to see it your way. The rest of the country still wonders whether what happened here could happen someplace else."

"Of course it could. People forget about Ludlow now because that was before the war mostly. But women and children died in that one. And that time it was the mining companies doing the shooting."

"Gus covered the Ludlow story," Amy said quietly.

"I remember." Flynn looked her way although he couldn't read her face in the dim light. Gus had helped dig out the dead women and children killed in the fire set by the Colorado National Guard.

"These are evil, godless times," Mrs. Hoyt pronounced.

"It's not the gods who've forgotten—" Dr. Pearson broke off at the sound of voices inside the house.

"I don't want to talk about it anymore." Julian's irritated voice carried clearly through the open windows. Through the lace curtains they could see his silhouette and the silhouette of the old man as though they were watching a Punch and Judy show. Devereux senior had a fierce, unforgiving profile. Julian had taken off his turban and his longish hair and ruffled collar gave him the aspect of a prince in a fairytale.

"You're going to ruin us with that kind of prophesying," the old man snapped.

"It wasn't a prophecy."

"Whatever it was, it has to stop. You're frightening people. You're frightening *me*. Prophesying is for...for lowlives and scallywags."

"It wasn't a prophecy."

"People walked out. People left the theater tonight."

"I know. *I* left the goddamned theater."

"Cursing and blaspheming. What devil possesses you?"

Julian said with sudden anguish, "Leave me alone, can't you?"

Their voices faded as they went up the stairs.

"Well!" Mrs. Hoyt said at last.

"That guy's nuttier than a fruitcake," Casey observed.

"Maybe he's telling the truth," Joan said defiantly. "Did you ever think of that?"

Silence followed her words, so perhaps no one had.

Casey went upstairs when Flynn did.

"You didn't say you were a reporter," he said softly, as they reached the top of the stairs at the second level.

"Does it matter?"

"I guess not." But Casey was giving him a funny look.

"What?"

"I don't know." Casey shrugged his wide shoulders.

Abruptly, Flynn was fed up with Casey, fed up with the evening, fed up with himself for ever traveling to this hick town. "Good night," he said curtly, and went down the hall to his room.

He opened the door, stepped inside, closed the door. It was difficult to see in the silver-edged darkness. Was he alone? He stood still, waiting, but no one spoke. No one moved. He turned on the lamp, and the room was empty, the bed neatly made, the window open to the hot, still night.

He was conscious of disappointment.

What had he expected?

Perhaps it was better not to examine that.

He went next door, splashed his face, brushed his teeth. Casey was waiting in the hall when he stepped out again. Flynn nodded curtly. Casey nodded curtly back.

Flynn went back to his room, turned on the fan, turned out the lamp, lay down on the bed. He stared up at the shadowy recesses of the ceiling.

He remembered Julian's face when he'd told him, "I'm not interested in *you*. I don't even like you."

Flynn closed his eyes. He didn't want to think about that. When had he grown so cruel? After Paul had died, he supposed. But a lot of people had lost someone they loved during the war. *Most* people had lost someone they loved. What gave him the right to...to close off the way he had? Yes, that was the truth of it. After Paul's death he'd turned off something inside himself.

Anyway, what was so different between Julian and him? Or Julian and Casey? Julian might be a nut but he was honest about what he wanted. And, face it, his instincts were pretty sharp.

Flynn listened to the muted voices down below on the breezeway. Mrs. Hoyt had gone up before Casey and him. It wasn't long before the rest of them went inside. He listened to the rattle and gulps of the old plumbing, and then the sounds of the house settling down for the night. The squeak of floorboards, pops and cracks of timber and rafters.

And then a complete silence.

And yet...there was something alert in the silence. He could feel it. Feel an...intelligence awake and listening. Flynn listened too.

He waited.

And waited.

The ripe lemon moon shone brightly through the window, making it difficult to sleep. He sat up, considered pulling down the window shade, but that was liable to cut off what breeze there was. Even with the fan circulating, the room felt stifling.

Flynn swung his legs over the side of the bed. Maybe he should get dressed and go for a walk. Lying here staring at the ceiling was accomplishing nothing.

The door swung open soundlessly; Flynn felt the disturbance in the air. He stared at the doorway and the tall, pale form standing motionless. Flynn straightened. The hair rose on the back of his neck, and for one hazy moment he wondered if he was staring at a ghost.

“David?” The whisper was so soft it could have belonged to anyone, but Flynn knew.

He whispered back, “It’s all right. Come in and shut the door.”

The white shadow slipped inside the room and closed the door. Julian came over to the bed and sat next to Flynn. The mattress springs squeaked. “I’m sorry,” he said breathlessly. “I know what you told me, but I can’t be alone tonight. Do you...” He swallowed the rest of his sentence. He sounded unsure, frightened to death, in fact, and Flynn reached to cover his hand. He found it ice cold.

“What’s the matter?” Instinctively he took the chill hand—both hands—in his, chafing them.

“I can’t.” Julian stopped and tried again. “Do you ever—?”

“Sure. Everyone does,” Flynn said easily. He had the strangest sense that he understood everything Julian was not saying. Julian’s trembling fingers clutched his as though Flynn were leading him back through the Underworld.

“What happened tonight?”

“Did you hear about that?”

Flynn nodded, realized Julian might not be able to see him, and said, “Yes. They’re saying you predicted another murder.”

“I didn’t predict it. She’s already...” He stopped and then gulped out, “And then this house tonight.”

“What’s wrong with the house?”

He saw the glimmering outline of Julian’s face turning to him, but he didn’t say anything. Flynn’s scalp prickled. “What’s wrong with the house tonight?”

Julian’s whisper was so faint he had to bend closer to make out the words. “Can I stay with you till morning? I won’t be a nuisance. I want to sleep here, that’s all. I’ll sleep in the window seat if you like.”

Flynn absorbed this quietly. “Sure,” he said. “But the bed’s big enough for both of us if you don’t kick too much.”

There was a pause. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” Flynn stood. “Go on. Lie down.”

Julian slipped out of his dressing gown. It pooled to the floorboards in a silken sigh, and he crawled onto the bed. Back to Flynn, he lay on his side in a neat, self-contained line, illuminated by the moonlight. Flynn stretched out beside him. There was only about a hands-length between them. Julian’s scent was light and clean, like summer wind and spiced oranges. Fine tremors ran through his body. Flynn touched his arm.

“How can you be cold on a hot night like this?”

Julian moved his head in denial. “I’m all right.”

Flynn reached for him, and Julian turned, biddable as a babe, wrapping his arms tightly around Flynn. Flynn was thinking...but no. Julian was completely unaroused. He was seeking comfort, that was all, and Flynn responded instinctively, wondering at himself. When was the last time he had lain with another man for any purpose but sex?

Paul.

Paul was the last time. Strangely, tonight the thought of Paul brought no pain.

Flynn stroked Julian's back. His skin was smooth and unblemished as a child's. His hair was fine as silk. As he grew warm, his body relaxed, went boneless, and soon he was breathing in the soft, deep pattern of sleep. Flynn's arms grew tired, but he continued to cradle the other man until he too dropped into sleep.

A mouth brushed his own, light as a spring breeze, the kiss working itself into his dreams.

Flynn smiled and woke. The room was growing light. He had the impression that the bedroom door had just closed. He was alone, but the pillow next to his was indented with the shape of a head, the sheets still warm.

Not a dream. At least, not entirely a dream. His lips still tingled with that kiss, real or imagined.

He was surprised at how well he had slept, how relaxed he felt. He rolled onto his side, stretching comfortably, closed his eyes and fell back asleep.

The next time he woke it was to the muffled sounds of disturbance. The sound of crying filtered through the floorboards. Footsteps were moving rapidly up and down the stairs. He could hear voices; muted, but the tone was clear enough: trouble. Serious trouble.

He rolled out of bed and dressed hastily, hurrying downstairs.

Amy met him in the main hall. Her plain face was worried and weary. "I'm sorry. There's no breakfast ready. The house is in a bit of a commotion. Mrs. Hoyt passed during the night."

"She's *dead*?"

Amy nodded.

"How?"

"Doc Pearson says stroke. He thinks it must have happened soon after she left us last evening. Joan's mighty upset."

"I bet."

"Doc Pearson has her sedated, poor kid. Anyway, can you manage for yourself this morning?"

"Of course."

Amy patted his arm and turned away. Flynn said suddenly, "Amy, is there more I can do?"

She looked at him with surprise. "Why, no. Not just now, David. Thank you for asking."

Dr. Pearson poked his head out of one of the rooms down the hall and called to Amy. She excused herself and hurried away.

Flynn went back upstairs and waited for the bathroom to be free. Casey stepped out and Flynn explained to him what had happened.

“Can’t say I’m surprised,” Casey said. “She was a prime candidate. Had all the symptoms.”

Flynn raised his brows. “Are you a doctor?”

“Er, no. But we’re taught the basics.” Casey gave Flynn a sideways look and asked, “Feel like going to grab some breakfast? I have time before I have to start on my rounds.”

“Sure.” It was not so much that Flynn wanted to have breakfast with Casey as he wanted out of that house. What he really hoped was to see Julian that morning, but there was no sign of him so far, and he had no idea which of the rooms down the hall belonged to whom. Walking in on *Grand-père* Devereux would not be good. “I’ll get my hat.”

They walked down to a small diner and ordered eggs, hotcakes, ham and coffee for thirty-five cents.

They didn’t talk much. Flynn was preoccupied with thoughts of Julian and the night before. Had Julian sensed Mrs. Hoyt’s death? Flynn didn’t, in theory, believe in that kind of thing, although he couldn’t deny odd occurrences during the war; men who had sensed that they or other men would die the following day. “The sight” his dear old superstitious Irish granny had called it. Some folks had it; you could only chalk so much up to coincidence.

“How long are you staying at Mrs. Gulling’s?” Casey asked. “I’m here for the week.”

“I’m staying a few more days.”

“Maybe we could get a drink tonight?” Casey’s green eyes were bright and alert. His smile was wide and warm.

Flynn smiled back, but he felt disinclined to take him up on his offer. Casey was nothing like Paul after all. He said noncommittally, “We’ll have to see how things are at the house this evening.”

“Nothing to do with us, is it?”

Us.

No it was nothing to do with them. Since the war Flynn had made a point of not getting involved in things that weren’t his business. At least...to avoid personal involvement. He wrote about the injustices he saw, but he didn’t take them personally. He didn’t look for trouble and he didn’t make trouble his own business. As much as he had admired Gus, the way Gus had thrown himself heart and soul into the causes he’d covered in his stories, the war had convinced Flynn that a man, especially a writer, could do more good by keeping a certain distance, a certain detachment. Like a surgeon.

Perhaps that detachment had spilled over into his personal life. But without Paul...

But he didn’t want to keep dragging up Paul’s memory. It was beginning to feel uncomfortably like he’d been hiding behind Paul’s ghost. Using the memory of Paul as an excuse for, well, participating in his own life.

He opened his mouth to say...something, but the waitress came to their table, cheeks flushed, eyes bright. "Did you hear? There's been another murder over Carbondale way. A girl named Theresa Martin. They found her by Crab Orchard Creek and they say it's exactly like the others."

"What's like the others?" Flynn asked.

The waitress lowered her voice to a stage whisper. "What it was he did to her."

She bustled away and Casey reached for his coffee cup, saying grimly, "Damned ghouls."

Flynn was inclined to agree, but maybe it was reassuring that even in a place like this people were still shocked by such violence. Wouldn't it be a bad sign if they took it for granted?

After breakfast he and Casey walked back to the boarding house. A black hearse was pulling away as they arrived. A police car was parked in the front.

"Swell," Casey said. "The cops are going to be crawling all over this place thanks to that escapee from a freak show."

Flynn stared at him, at the unexpected venom in Casey's voice.

A sheriff deputy stood outside the front door, and they had to identify themselves to get inside.

Amy met them in the front hall. "What's going on?" Flynn asked, removing his hat.

"The sheriff is questioning Julian."

"Why?"

But he knew why even before Amy said, "Because of the things he said during his show last night. I think they must believe he knows about the murders."

Flynn could hear the murmur of voices from the front parlor. "I thought they were in Cairo last week. Didn't the old man show them his train tickets?"

"He went down to the train depot this morning and I haven't seen him since," Amy said. "I've had my hands full this morning." She hesitated. "That boy isn't... He's not equipped to... Do you think you could...?"

From the parlor he heard a voice say, "You're some kind of colored, aren't you?" This, followed by Julian's murmured answer.

Flynn nodded grimly to Amy and went into the parlor. There was a deputy standing inside the doorway, but Flynn said, "I'm representing Mr. Devereux."

"Are you a lawyer?"

Julian was seated on the sofa. He had not even had time to shave before being roused out of bed. His hair was uncombed. He wore gray flannels and a white T-shirt. He looked thoroughly disreputable as he glanced up hopelessly at Flynn's entrance. His somber eyes lightened, but he bit his lip and said nothing.

"Who are you?" the sheriff asked, taking a cigar from his mouth. He was a short man with a big belly, a bushy mustache and mud brown eyes.

"David Flynn. I'm a reporter for *The Atlantic Monthly*."

“A reporter! That’s what we don’t need around here.”

“But that’s what you’ve got,” Flynn said. “I’m here to make sure this kid’s not being railroaded.”

“Railroaded! What the hell do you mean railroaded? We’re just asking this young man a few simple questions about how he knows things he’s got no business knowing.”

Julian leaned forward, elbows on his thighs, head in hands. “I don’t know anything,” he groaned. “I keep telling you.”

“You got up in front of three hundred people and told them where Theresa Martin’s body was lying.”

Julian shook his head without looking up.

“I take it you’re not a believer, Sheriff...? Sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“McFadden. No, I’m not a-a *believer*. I’m a Baptist, for chrissake.”

“Is that McFadden with an ‘Mc’ or ‘Mac’? We like to spell names right in *The Atlantic Monthly*.”

McFadden’s gaze—reminiscent of a bear’s small, suspicious eyes—flickered. “I don’t see much of a story here, Flynn. We’re only asking—”

“Mr. Devereux’s cooperation? As Mr. Edgar Cayce has helped the police on occasion with their most difficult cases?”

“He has?” McFadden looked plainly taken aback. “He did?”

Flynn nodded. He had no idea if it was true or not.

Julian raised his head. “You don’t understand. I can’t...control it. It just happens.”

Flynn gave him a warning look and he fell silent, his mouth not steady, eyes sullen.

“Sure, and I can see why you would think that way because it’s a great story and it would get you great coverage in the papers. And nothing else makes sense because the Devereuxs were in Cairo when these first murders happened.”

“So we’ve all heard a couple a times, but can he prove that?”

Flynn and McFadden turned to Julian. Julian sounded frightened as he said, “I gave shows Tuesday through Saturday at the Gem Theater on Eighth Street. And there will be the train ticket stubs. *Grand-père* will have those.”

“*Grand-père*,” the sheriff said disgustedly.

“The Devereuxs are from New Orleans,” Flynn said. This area had been settled by French and German and English and Irish settlers, so he wouldn’t expect to see the same prejudice that Italians or colored found.

“I know French!” The sheriff had his dander up. “I do find it convenient his grandfather is absent this morning.”

“The Devereuxs could hardly be performing in Cairo and committing murder two counties away. Unless you think young Mr. Devereux really is a sorcerer?”

“I don’t believe in that hocus-pocus hooey,” the sheriff snarled.

“Then there’s your answer.”

McFadden stared at him. “And you don’t believe in that mumbo-jumbo either.”

“That’s not the point,” Flynn said. “The point is, without magical powers, Devereux couldn’t be in two places at one time.”

The sheriff continued to eye him grimly, only partly convinced.

“Think what a fine story it would make,” Flynn suggested. “This young man using his talents to help the police in their investigation. Why, the public loves this kind of thing. It would be nice to appear in a national paper for something other than the massacre, don’t you think?”

The sheriff stuck his cigar back in his mouth and chewed on it thoughtfully. “Meybee so,” he said reluctantly. “Meybee so.”

Chapter Six

“I never know when it’s going to happen,” Julian said, staring at his hands.

“Speak up,” McFadden ordered.

Julian’s throat moved and he said more loudly, “Before I turned sixteen, the voices—the spirits—came to me all the time. But then when I turned sixteen, I-I became ill. The spirits only come once in a while now.”

“Come every night you’ve got a show, don’t they?” McFadden asked. He added sarcastically, “Or are you charging folks a pretty penny on the outside chance the Count of Monte Crisco is going to show up?”

Monte Crisco. Well, that was appropriate from this pigheaded fool. Flynn was careful not to let what he thought show on his face. He said calmly, “You’re doing fine. Just tell the truth.”

Julian swallowed hard. He didn’t look up. “Last night, during the performance, I heard a woman talking to me. A spirit. At first I was confused. Unsure of why she had come to me. She didn’t understand.” He looked up, but he was talking to Flynn not McFadden.

“What didn’t she understand?” Flynn asked.

Julian closed his eyes. “She didn’t understand she was dead.”

McFadden turned to Flynn and Flynn shrugged.

“What happened?” McFadden questioned.

Julian drew a deep breath and opened his eyes. “It’s difficult when they don’t know yet. She didn’t come to me willingly. She came because she was lost and heard my voice. She’s trapped on this side. They all are.”

McFadden asked, “Who?”

“The murdered girls.” Julian said carefully, “It happens sometimes with a-a violent death. They don’t have time to...to transition. And he’s done something to them.”

McFadden’s voice was dangerous as he demanded, “Who has? What’s he done?”

“He...cut them up.” Julian put his long, slim hands over his face. His voice was muffled and shaking. “He’s cast some spell on them. An ancient spell. They’re held here, prisoner—”

“Horseshit!” McFadden jumped up, looking as though he wanted to strike Julian. Flynn rose too, watching him, ready to intervene. Whatever McFadden read on Flynn’s face stayed his hand, but he said in a trembling, deep voice, “You’re a goddamned liar.”

Julian lowered his hands. He looked terrified. "I'm not lying. Why would I lie? I don't want it to be true—"

"What's the name of this murderer then? She must know it, this spirit gal. What's the name of the man who killed those girls?"

"I don't know."

"Because you're a liar. A goddamned liar and a-a mountebank."

Flynn cut across the sheriff, his voice calm, although listening to himself he thought he must sound as loony as Julian. "Did you ask Theresa who killed her?"

Julian shook his head, his shoulders hunched defensively. "I had to tell her she had...crossed over. It was a shock to her and she fled. They do sometimes." His wide dark eyes were absolutely sincere as they met Flynn's. He might be a mountebank or he might be mad—or both. He believed what he was saying.

"All right then," Flynn said. "You could summon her and ask, couldn't you? You could hold a...whatchamacallit? A séance."

"You're as crazy as he is," McFadden exclaimed.

At the same time Julian said with great definitiveness, "No."

Flynn ignored McFadden. "Why not?" he asked Julian.

"I told you I can't control it."

It was the first thing he'd said that Flynn suspected was a lie. "You could still try. You said she's trapped on this side. She came to you once. She might come to you again." He heard himself but dismissed the thought of what he must sound like. Maybe it *was* crazy, but it was logical too, wasn't it? "You could summon her and you could ask her about the last thing she remembers."

Julian was shaking his head with that exasperating scared stubbornness.

McFadden looked from Flynn to the younger man and said, "You know what I think? I think it was a lucky guess. I think he knew eventually there was going to be another murder. That's what everyone's been saying. His kind like to shock and frighten folks. He said it to get a bigger audience. It just happened to be true."

"He knew the dead girl's name," Flynn pointed out.

"Who says? Today everyone knows her name, so they're saying he knew it last night. There's no proof that he did."

Flynn opened his mouth to argue the obvious, but McFadden said, "Either he's a fake or he's a killer, but I don't believe in magic and I don't believe in ghosts or spirits talking to the living. You want to turn this huckster into a big story for your newspaper like that sacrilegious conman Edgar Cayce, you go right ahead, but you're not making a laughingstock out of me and my boys."

"What's going on here?" Julian's grandfather stood in the doorway, glowering at them all. "What is this? What has he done now?"

The sheriff turned to him with something like relief. “I understand you have in your possession ticket stubs that will prove you and your grandson were in the town of Cairo last week.”

“Yes?” Mr. Devereux’s eyes moved uneasily from Julian to Flynn. “What of it? Why are you interrogating him?”

“I need to see those tickets.”

“Very well.” Devereux’s suspicious gaze rested on Julian’s pale face. He turned away reluctantly.

The sheriff followed him. He stopped in the doorway and threw back to Flynn, “If you do learn something in this séance of yours, you let me know.”

When their footsteps had died away, Flynn seated himself facing the sofa and Julian. He wanted to sit next to Julian, put his arm around him—Julian looked sorely in need of comfort—but that was, of course, out of the question.

He said, “What happened last night?”

Julian’s face worked. “David, I’ve told you everything.”

“What about Mrs. Hoyt?”

Julian’s mouth opened. No sound came out.

“You knew she was dead, didn’t you?”

He closed his mouth and shuddered. He nodded.

Flynn stared at him for a long time. “So it’s true,” he said at last. “The dead speak to you.”

“Through me. I’m only the messenger.” He tried to smile, but it was a sad, unsteady effort. “And not a very good messenger. It’s true what I said. When I turned sixteen it stopped. And I was glad. But *Grand-père*...”

“What?”

Julian shook his head.

Flynn said shrewdly, “The show must go on—and you’re the meal ticket. This is the family stock and trade.” He considered this. “But now the phone line to the spirit world is working again and you’re starting to get calls.”

Julian said nothing. He looked all at once much older, older than his age. He met Flynn’s gaze and said quietly, “Please. I can’t bear it from you.”

“Can’t bear what?”

“Don’t...ask.”

“What?” But Flynn already knew what he was going to hear. Yet the idea had not occurred to him until the second Julian spoke, so how could Julian—

“You want me to contact Paul for you.”

It took him a moment to command his voice. “You could do it?”

“I don’t know.” He sounded anguished. “Perhaps.”

“Well?”

Julian shook his head.

“Why not?” And even Flynn was surprised by the anger in his voice.

Julian studied him and the wounded expression in those doe-like eyes troubled Flynn, disturbed him.

“Do you never think of anyone but yourself, David?”

“Me?” Flynn was astonished. “What do you think I came in here for a few minutes ago if it wasn’t to help you?”

Julian’s eyes glittered with quick, angry tears. “I think you thought it would make a good story to write about a medium working with the police to capture a killer.”

“You’re wrong.”

“I wish that was true.” Julian wiped hastily at the tears. His smile was bitter. He rose and left the room before Flynn could decide on an answer.

Listening to the fading footsteps, Flynn realized that Julian *was* wrong—although not entirely.

Amy was in the kitchen when he wandered in a short while later. Water boiled on the stovetop. She was greasing a heavy skillet. Death or disaster, people still had to eat.

“There’s cold buttermilk in the icebox,” she told Flynn, looking up at his entrance. Her smile was tired.

Flynn got a glass and the bottle of milk out. “How’s Joan doing?”

“That little girl is heartbroken.”

Flynn couldn’t think of anything to say. Mrs. Hoyt had seemed a foolish and tiresome woman who would probably become more so the longer you knew her, but even newspapermen tried not to speak ill of the dead.

“How’s the story coming?” Amy asked and he realized he’d barely had a chance to talk to her since he’d arrived. Or had he arranged it that way?

The buttermilk was refreshing. As he drank, he considered her question. She would be viewing this situation from whatever angle Gus had, and Gus had always been pro-Labor and pro-Union and pro-Miners. But how would a man as conscientious and civilized as Gus have viewed a massacre?

“I don’t know,” he answered. “For all the complaining folks are doing about lawlessness and godlessness, I can’t find anyone who thinks Lester didn’t deserve what he got or who wants to see those miners prosecuted.”

Amy didn’t answer for so long he thought she wasn’t going to. “It’s a mighty shocking thing. I think most people still...”

She didn’t complete the thought. Flynn gave a short laugh. “I guess so.”

She looked up then and there was an odd glint in her green-blue eyes. “I’ll tell you this, no charge. W.J. Lester was and is a fool. An arrogant, greedy, college-educated fool.”

As fond as he was of her, Flynn couldn’t let that pass. “Amy, my God. They murdered those men. They tortured them and then they murdered them—after promising them safe passage.”

Her face tightened. “I don’t have to tell you I don’t approve of murder. I know that’s what it was. Everyone knows that’s what it was, plain and simple. People are angry and ashamed and frightened. Frightened about what they learned was inside them.” She folded her lips and stared down at the pan on the stove. After a brief struggle, she said, “But you want to hear the truth? The truth is that bunch of thugs Lester imported from Chicago had already stirred up enough hate to get someone killed before the massacre. They’d been harassing farm people and berry pickers for using roads they’d been using for fifty years. Pushing them around, cursing them, shoving guns in their ribs, even robbing a few of them—and threatening to kill them if they went to the sheriff.”

She added shortly, “Not that the sheriff cared to get mixed up in it.”

“I’ve heard a few of them were thugs and gangsters. But that mob killed twenty men that day. And even if every single one of them was—”

“You killed men in the war, didn’t you? It was them or you, wasn’t it?”

Flynn stared at her. “Is that what Gus thought?”

Her face quivered. She turned back to the stove. “No.” He could hear that she was close to tears. It seemed to be his day for making people cry. “Gus said ‘Each man’s death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind. Therefore, send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.’”

Hearing Amy quote John Donne in that flat, plain, unvarnished way struck Flynn absolutely silent.

Maybe it was as he’d said to Casey Lee the night before. Maybe the war *did* have to do with it. A few of those miners had been in France the same time he had, and had seen and done the things he had. If they were like Flynn, they’d come back changed men. Harder and rougher than when they waved farewell to peacetime.

He’d been so sure of the answers when he had arrived on Wednesday morning. He’d planned to write a simple article about the aftermath of violence. He’d wanted to set it straight in his own mind, see it in black and white, saints and sinners, but the reality was many shades of gray. It wasn’t anything that was going to be fixed anytime soon and writing more about it wouldn’t change that. Plenty of people were already writing and speech-making about it.

Flynn found himself wanting to do something. Something...

“Where’s Julian?” he asked.

“Out. He don’t like funerals,” Amy said cryptically.

Flynn walked down to the courthouse to poke around, but he'd already lost whatever enthusiasm for the story on the massacre that he had started out with. The truth was, he was looking for Julian. He told himself that he wanted to take another shot at convincing him to try a séance; that this would make a better story than his original idea of writing about the massacre. Instead, he would write about these murders—and Julian.

But if he was honest, he wanted to find Julian.

He wasn't sure how or why his feelings had changed, but he felt a singular mix of pity and fascination for that strange young man. And, well, a certain amount of lust.

So he walked along the streets, nodding politely to folks, lost in his own thoughts.

It was hot, but there were lots of cloth awnings and shady roofs along the storefronts so it wasn't bad that time of day. He passed the corner park where he and Casey had stopped the evening before. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

In front of the courthouse the old timers were enjoying the latest gossip over their cigars and chewing tobacco, probably exactly what they'd been doing since the Civil War.

He paused for a shine at the old shoe-shine stand. The grizzled old colored man made pleasant conversation while he swiftly polished Flynn's shoes till they shone like glass.

He went into Skeltcher's and had a "root beer" and then walked back to the boarding house. He was walking up the sunny street when he spotted Julian coming from the opposite direction. He raised his hand in greeting, and Julian paused at the house walkway, waiting for him.

"What time is your show tonight?" Flynn asked.

"There's no show tonight." Julian looked weary. "And before you ask again, no, I won't hold a séance for the police."

"It's clear you're not a mind reader," Flynn remarked. "I wasn't going to ask you to give a séance. I was thinking you might like to drive out and have supper at a roadhouse this evening."

Julian's astonishment was almost comical. "Why?"

"Wouldn't you like to?"

"Yes."

The naked—though fleeting—vulnerability of the other man's face made Flynn's chest hurt. What the hell was Julian's life like that the idea of dinner with a friendly stranger should mean so much? But then he probably didn't have friends. He had that crazy old coot of a grandfather driving him from town to town like a gypsy with his dancing bear.

"All right then," he said gruffly. "We'll tell them we're going out to the roadhouse dance."

Julian said hesitantly, "There'll be a viewing for Mrs. Hoyt, won't there?"

"You don't want to have anything to do with that, do you?"

He shook his head, but his eyes were unhappy. "It might seem disrespectful, though."

“I didn’t realize you were so worried about appearances.”

The slender brown column of Julian’s throat moved as he swallowed. “My grandfather isn’t...very happy with me.”

He hadn’t sounded particularly concerned about what the old man had thought the night before. Flynn wondered what had changed. “It’s moot in any case. The viewing is tomorrow night at the funeral parlor. You’ll have a show to perform.”

He knew he didn’t misread the relief on Julian’s face. Yes, getting Julian out of that house tonight was a good idea for everyone. And there was no denying how much Flynn liked the idea.

Much more, as it turned out, than old man Devereux did. He could hear them down the hall when he went to use the washroom after he and Julian went upstairs. He couldn’t make out the words—the Devereuxs were used to conducting their quarrels under other people’s roofs—but the tone was most definitely unhappy on the part of both parties.

He was heading back to his own bedroom when he heard Julian say clearly, “I’m neither a child nor a half-wit however much you wish it might be true.”

The old man’s response was muffled, but the tone was venomous, and Flynn felt a stab of alarm for Julian. That was not a tone to use on someone you loved, and he had an idea that Julian had fewer defenses than some.

When they met downstairs twenty minutes later, Julian was neatly, even dapperly dressed, hat, coat and tie all present and correct. His eyes were shining and he was so obviously happy that Flynn couldn’t help an inward flinch at the responsibility.

Mr. Devereux was downstairs as well.

“Going to a dance, eh?” he inquired acidly, his midnight eyes raking Flynn up and down. “Planning to meet a couple of gals and Charleston the night away?”

It was instantly clear to Flynn that the old man knew about his grandson’s proclivities—which meant he now knew about Flynn. He said evenly, “That’s right.”

Devereux opened his mouth, but closed it as Amy came into sight.

“Now don’t go picking up any flappers,” she warned them as she went around picking up stray items in the hall and parlor. She was holding one of Joan’s books on Cleopatra and crocheting that had belonged to Mrs. Hoyt.

“You’re the only gal for me, Mrs. Gulling,” Julian said charmingly, and Amy laughed.

They met Casey on their way out the door, and he looked plainly taken aback to see Flynn and Julian together. The surprise on his face gave way to an unfriendly expression, but Flynn tipped his hat and kept Julian moving with an unobtrusive hand on his back.

The sun was setting as they backed the old Model T out of the garage and were on their way at last. Flynn glanced over at Julian and said, “I don’t think Grandpapa likes me.”

"No." Julian was smiling a lazy smile, and Flynn wondered if part of his attraction for the other man was tied up in that fact. He was surprised to find he didn't like that idea.

"Where's the rest of your folks?"

"Dead."

"All of them?"

"The ones I know about. My father was killed in a train wreck. My mother predicted it."

"So you mentioned once before. Count Amadeus, that would be?"

"Yes. He was a magician." Julian smiled faintly. "My mother was Zaliki the Seer. She was a fortune teller by trade, though she was also clairvoyant."

"Like you?"

"Yes. But she preferred telling fortunes." Julian's smile faded and he stared ahead through the windshield.

Prophecy is for...for lowlifes and scallywags.

"What happened to your mother?"

"She killed herself."

Flynn's hands tightened on the steering wheel. He consciously relaxed them. "Why?"

"She missed my father, I expect. *Grand-père* says she went mad. Perhaps she did." He sounded peculiarly disinterested.

"Can you tell the future?"

Julian was studying him again, mouth curved in a sly smile. "Sometimes. Sometimes it's not hard to know what's going to happen."

Flynn's face warmed.

They passed scattered houses, gardens, fields and big green lawns that were actually nicely mown weeds. The woods were deep on the edge of town. They passed through them and then the woods thinned to a couple of miles of cornfields, and Julian leaned forward, pointing and saying eagerly, "There it is."

The Dance and Dine Inn was a big white two-story house set back away from the road, welcoming lights gleaming from every window. There were lots of cars and a couple of buggies in the front yard, and several shining roadsters parked on white gravel in the mown field next door, expensive ones, lined up all in a row and watched over by two tough characters in straw hats sitting in chairs by the gate.

Flynn pulled up not far from the side-door entrance. They got out and walked across more white gravel and up the big wooden steps of the long front porch. A tall, very black Negro in a white mess jacket greeted them with a big smile and a suave, "Welcome to the Dance and Dine Inn, folks."

As they stepped inside, Flynn took note of two large gentlemen sitting watchfully in a small alcove to one side.

A pretty colored girl in a French maid's outfit led them to a table near a window.

The best tables, the tables on the screened-in porch, were already filled, but it was nice in the main dining room too, and they got one of the last tables by the windows on the far side of the room. The walls were papered in flocked dull red. Alphonse Mucha posters of women in nimbuses and flowered headdresses decorated the walls. Ceiling fans turned slowly overhead stirring the warm air, and small polished brass lamps shone gaily on every linen-covered table.

Flynn studied the menu. There was no booze listed of course, only “soft drinks”, ciders, and a beverage called “Grape Drink Français”.

He mentioned it to Julian whose mouth curved in that habitual sarcastic smile. He nodded approval to the grape drink and went back to gazing out the window at the moon-shadowed yard.

“Do you know what you’re having?” Flynn inquired. Julian hadn’t looked at the menu.

“I’ll have what you’re having.”

“You don’t know what I’m having,” Flynn pointed out.

“It doesn’t matter.” At Flynn’s expression, Julian made a face and said, “Oh well. Have it your way. I can’t read.”

“You mean there’s something wrong with your eyes?” Was this the mysterious illness both Julian and the old man had referred to?

“No.” Julian seemed amused. “I never learned how. My grandfather didn’t think it was important. For me.”

This offended Flynn on so many levels that he spluttered before he finally got out an outraged, “Didn’t think it was important? *He* reads. He writes articles and essays for those damned spiritualist magazines.”

“That’s true.” Julian said it placatingly. “I believe he thought it was for the best. That there would be less chance of people claiming I was a fraud if it could be proved that I couldn’t read or write.”

“Jesus. You can’t read *or* write?”

Julian reddened. “You don’t have to shout it to the world.”

“Sorry.” Flynn was still fuming though. He stared down at the menu. When he had himself under control again, he asked, “What do you like to eat?”

“Ice cream.”

“Ice cream?”

“Lots of things,” Julian amended in an apparent desire to please.

“I’m going to have T-bone steak.”

“All right.”

Flynn scanned the menu. “They have breast of chicken a la rose and crown roast of lamb and roast duck.”

Julian gave this due consideration. “T-bone steak, I think.”

Flynn was still trying to come to terms with the notion that Julian couldn't read. Not that plenty of people couldn't read, but Julian's grandfather was a literate man, so to deliberately leave Julian ignorant and uneducated horrified him. Not that Julian *appeared* ignorant or uneducated, but clearly there were considerable gaps.

Untroubled, the object of all this worry studied the crowded room with the same innocent pleasure of someone watching a play. "There's Sheriff McFadden," he murmured, and Flynn, following his gaze, saw that he was correct. The portly sheriff was dining at the roadhouse with an equally portly woman in a puce-colored silk dress. Julian pointed out two policemen, a judge, and a couple of well-to-do Herrin merchants. He was sharp-eyed as any reporter, but that was a necessity in his line of work.

"The law-and-order crowd," Flynn commented.

Julian said sardonically, "Prohibition means bootleggers are running this place instead of honest businessmen."

Their waiter, younger than Julian, arrived, uncorking the bottle of grape drink as he would have decanted a bottle of wine in the good old days. He poured it into Flynn's glass. Flynn sampled it. It was wine all right. Good wine. It might even have been imported.

Flynn nodded, and the waiter filled Julian's glass and departed.

Julian sipped his wine. Meeting Flynn's gaze, he smiled, seemingly relaxed and happy.

"Your grandfather seems to know...certain things," Flynn said neutrally.

"Well, he could hardly miss them," Julian pointed out.

Flynn was still trying to work through that when Julian added, "Why don't we talk about you for a change? I feel like you're interviewing me for a newspaper article."

"What would you like to know?"

"Everything."

Julian gazed at him with such unabashed and unfeigned interest that Flynn felt himself coloring.

"I guess my life is about as different from yours as it could be."

"Not in all ways," Julian said serenely.

"Oh. No. Not in all ways. I was born in Portland, Maine. I graduated from the Fryeburg Academy like my brothers before me. I went to Brown University—that's where I met Gus, Amy's husband. I got a job at *The Daily News*, but the war was on and I enlisted."

"And that's where you met Paul?"

"That's where I found him again. We'd known each other at Brown." He fell silent, gauging the extent of pain within himself. It was...tolerable, surprisingly so. He said calmly, "After the war I got a job as a contributor to *The Atlantic Monthly*."

"But you live in New York?"

Flynn nodded. New York and his tidy, quiet brownstone seemed a lifetime away.

“What’s that like?”

“Very different.” Flynn thought for a few moments. “I guess...things were too easy for me growing up. It leaves you unprepared for the bad times that come.”

“I don’t know. Maybe it gives a kind of foundation. Having an education. Knowing that you’re loved.” Julian said it simply, seriously, and for some reason Flynn’s throat closed tight. Too tight to say a word. What Julian said was true. Those things should have supplied Flynn the bedrock of philosophical and spiritual certainty. Why hadn’t they? A lot of people had suffered through the war and the terrible influenza epidemic that followed, and they hadn’t closed themselves off from life and love.

Here was Julian who hadn’t had half the advantages of Flynn, was about as isolated and lonely a man as Flynn had ever known, and yet he possessed a calm confidence and an almost childish optimism.

“If you could do anything you wanted in the world, what would it be?” he asked Julian.

Julian’s eyes widened as though Flynn were really offering this, as though he had the power to give him whatever he would like. “I’d like to own a café.”

“A *café*?”

“Like in France before the war.”

“Were you in France before the war?”

“A couple of times. When I was a child. I loved it.” He smiled, remembering. “They have these little cafés. Bistros, the Russians call them. I’d like to open one. Omelets stuffed with mushrooms and cheese, *coq au vin*, mussels in cream sauce. And I’d like to sing there in the evenings.”

“Sing?”

Julian nodded. His eyes were bright and mischievous. “Yes.”

“*Can* you sing?”

“Er, a bit.” He was still smiling, and studying him, it occurred to Flynn that it wouldn’t matter if he could sing or not. People would love him. In Greenwich? They would adore him.

He put that thought away, and said, “Well, why don’t you? You can’t do this forever, surely?”

“It seems you can.” Julian’s smile had faded. He sounded bitter.

“You could surely stop if you didn’t want to do it any longer? You’re free, white and over twenty-one.”

“And what would I live on?”

“What happens with all this money you earn?”

“*Grand-père* controls the purse strings.” He was staring out the large window again, his profile hard.

“Don’t you get a say in how the money you earn is spent?”

A second or two passed and he thought he wouldn’t get an answer, but then Julian turned back to him and he was smiling again. “Anyway, it’s a nice dream. Did you get to try much French food when you were over there?”

“We were a trifle busy,” Flynn pointed out.

“But you went on leave, right? Once in a while?”

Yes, once in a while they’d had leave. And he and Paul had enjoyed themselves very much. It gave happiness a special shine knowing it could end any moment.

Their meals came then, and that line of conversation died a natural death. Along with the T-bone steak were Potatoes a la Hollandaise and Asparagus Tips au Gratin. The kind of food you’d expect to find at the Waldorf Astoria, not in a hick roadhouse in the middle of nowhere.

They ate their food and talked and drank more of the Grape Drink Français. It was far different than the evening he’d spent with Casey. The funny thing was that while Flynn had pegged Casey as more his type, he’d never have considered spending an evening like this with him—well, not after the first couple of drinks at Hotel Lafayette. In fact, he was enjoying himself more than he could remember in years. Julian might be illiterate and more than a bit odd, but he was handsome and witty and very charming when he put his mind to it. Flynn found himself laughing at Julian’s sly observations and comments more than he had laughed in a very long time.

“Would you like dessert?” he asked, not wanting the meal to end.

Julian’s wide mouth curved. “Yes.”

They had a dish of Venetian Ice Cream each.

Finally Flynn paid for the meal and they exited the rear side door, watched over by another dark, smiling gentleman in a white dinner jacket.

In a companionable silence they followed slightly tipsy couples through the warm moonlit night and down a hedge-boarded walkway to the big barn where buttery light streamed into the summer evening, and a jazz band could be heard tentatively warming up.

A couple of St. Louis-style bruisers sized them up inside the entrance, looking them over for flasks or pistol bulges.

Inside the barn, the floor had been polished like black glass. The walls were dark paneled and the lights mellow. A few ceiling fans moved the air languidly overhead.

They got a table away from the dance floor but with a good view of the band. A big-bosomed hostess left them a small paper list of soft drinks.

Flynn studied the list. “What do you want?”

“I prefer gin. Did you ever have a New Orleans Fizz?”

Flynn shook his head. “I don’t think they have anything like that here.”

“No. Prohibition’s spoiled everything.”

When the waitress came back, Flynn ordered two Juniper Jennies, which were gin and tonics by any other name.

Flynn watched the small back door of the bar and noticed a tall, short-skirted lady open a door in the partitioned area and smile over her shoulder at the young man who followed her in and closed the door behind. He didn't doubt stairs in there led up to the former hayloft. They were making hay all right, though it was doubtful any bales remained.

The thought of sex with Julian caused heat to pool in his belly, made his groin ache.

He looked across the table and Julian was watching him steadily with those dark and knowing eyes.

Julian smiled and turned his gaze back to the dance band.

Their drinks arrived and they sipped them, Flynn with sudden and uncharacteristic self-consciousness.

It was increasingly warm inside the barn as people got up to dance. Half the men were in their shirtsleeves by now, and Flynn loosened his tie and slipped out of his jacket, hanging it on the back of his chair.

Julian raised eyebrows at this lack of decorum.

"Half the fellas in this place have their jackets off," Flynn observed.

The people around them seemed like a cross-section—although there were no old people—an even mix of middle-aged couples and bright-eyed kids. Some of them, especially the girls, looked way too young to have been served hooch in a saloon, but nobody was asking questions at the Dance and Dine Inn.

Scattered here and there were a few single guys hoping to meet the girl of their dreams or getting up the nerve to shell out cash to the ladies of the evening casually strolling about or demurely seated by twos and threes near the edge of the room.

Flynn could easily pass for such young men. Julian...Flynn glanced across the table. Julian was staring alertly at the crowded dance floor as though these were the fascinating customs of South Sea Islanders.

Flynn felt an odd surge of emotion. Amusement? Affection? He wasn't sure.

A muted cornet sang out over the chattering crowd, and a good imitation of Paul Whiteman's version of "If I Could Be With You" rang off the rafters of the old barn.

The drinks were strong and the music was good but suddenly Flynn was wondering what the hell they were doing there.

Julian sipped his drink. His lashes lifted and he gave Flynn such a direct, naked look that Flynn's heart seemed to leap and then seize.

A scream—more of a squeal—broke the spell. Flynn spotted two young men at the edge of the dance floor flailing away at each other. Close by was a would-be vamp in a red dress wringing her hands and yelling at them.

Before the knights errant could do much damage, two rough-looking country boys in their first ties and jackets came sailing across the empty dance floor and yanked the combatants apart.

One of the portly Saint Louis-type gangsters, cigar clamped tightly between his teeth, joined them, and it was clear even from across the tables what was happening.

Flynn opened his mouth and Julian said, "Yes. Let's go."

Flynn shrugged back into his jacket, and they made their way through the crowded tables.

The tenor on the bandstand started a song made familiar to Flynn from the war. A few of the boys at the tables began to sing. That impromptu male chorus sent a funny chill down his spine as he and Julian strolled out through the wide doorway into the warm moonlight. The voices faded behind them.

*There's a long, long trail a-winding
Into the land of my dreams,
Where the nightingale is singing
And the pale moon beams.
There's a long, long night of waiting
Until my dreams all come true,
Till the day when I'll be going down
That long, long trail with you.*

Chapter Seven

The Model T jogged and bounced across the mowed field, past the hoods in the straw hats, down the gravel drive, and then they were on the main highway headed back for Herrin. Julian scooted over in the seat next to Flynn. The wind whipped his hair back from his forehead. He was smiling that private smile.

Despite the ripe golden moon hanging low in the sky, it was dark and the road was mostly deserted. Flynn took a chance, pulled Julian closer and put his arm around him. Julian snuggled nearer, the heat of his body warming Flynn all down one side of his body.

"I like this." Julian's warm breath against his ear sent shivers across Flynn's scalp. "I like flying through the darkness like an arrow in the night."

"Do you know how to drive?"

Julian shook his head.

"I'll teach you," Flynn said recklessly. "It's not hard."

There was a funny pause and Julian faced forward in his seat again. After a moment, he said, "I don't expect we'll be here long enough for that."

It caught Flynn off guard. He should have expected it; of course The Magnificent Belloc would not be staying long in any one place. That wouldn't be lucrative. Or wise. He was only here for a short while himself.

"When are you leaving?"

"Monday morning."

Flynn nodded. He didn't know what to say.

The bobbing headlights stabbed into the pitch-black night, and the breeze felt good against his face as they sped along. The wall of woods flashed by, tree trunks white in the headlights.

By the time they crossed the bridge over Crab Orchard Creek, Julian was back to business, his nimble fingers caressing Flynn's crotch, making it difficult to keep an eye out for deer or other wildlife.

He risked a glance at Julian's bent profile. Even in that poor light he could see Julian was smiling.

Julian's lashes lifted. He murmured, "Flynn, stop the car."

As though he'd been waiting for that signal, Flynn yanked the wheel and the Model T bounded to a rough idling halt on the dirt turn-off. He turned off the engine, the lights winking out. It was only the two of them sitting in the dark, listening to the breeze whispering in the leaves of the wall of trees a yard or so away. In the distance a fox was barking.

"Come on." Julian vaulted out of the automobile, waiting till Flynn followed. Frogs croaked accompaniment to the crunch of their footsteps as they crossed the clearing to the shelter of the trees.

Flynn glanced uneasily over his shoulder at the car sitting in the moonlight. The road was dark and empty both ways for as far as he could see. He ducked under the low branches.

Julian had found a soft place beneath the trees and ferns. They undressed and lay down in the cool grass and wild mint. The pleasure of coming together, naked and unfettered, was almost unbearably sweet. They held each close and kissed without haste or fear.

"Let's try it this way," Julian said abruptly, sitting up.

"What?" But Flynn followed Julian's silent command. They stretched out alongside each other, cock to mouth, mouth to cock. It was far too dark to see anything beyond the pale outline of the other, so they were reduced to a kind of night writing, a sensual brailing as they touched and tasted, fingertips tracing, lips exploring the textures of silky hair and smooth skin, of bones and muscles, teeth and fingernails, nipples, eyelashes, balls...everything seemed fantastic and unknown in the Delphian shadows scented of sex and damp earth and decaying leaves.

At last they settled down to it, hot, wet mouths closing over each other's rigid hardness. It was unreasonably difficult to concentrate on anything but the intense pleasure building in his groin and swelling cock, but Flynn tried. He tried to give as good as he was getting—what he was getting was very good indeed. Julian used everything from his warm breath to the slick tip of his tongue. He sucked hard and fiercely and then so soft and sweetly...

It was torture and delight to have this done to him at the same time he was trying to return the favor, growing hot inside and out, skin glazing with honey dew. Flynn buried his face in Julian's crotch and breathed in the damp, musky male scent. He traced his tongue around Julian's balls, and they were tender as sweetmeats, sweet as cherry cordials, those sweet intoxicating sacs...

Julian made a strangled sound but kept pulling and sucking like a trooper, and the great, rolling wave far out in the distance built speed, growing in height, a wall of pleased release sweeping inland, knocking down all restraint, all thought, all considerations. That tidal wave of wild delight crashed into Flynn, washed him along in its powerful current. There was nothing like it, flooding him from the ends of his hair to the soles of his feet.

And at the same time he became aware that he had burst the cherry, a wet, salty-sweet rush filled his mouth, like tears of laughter or life-bringing primordial tide. He sucked and gasped for breath and sucked some more.

Later they lay entwined, hearts calming, breath evening, and watched the fireflies flickering overhead and heat lightning flashing along the distant ivory clouds to the south. The only sounds were the crickets and the katydids and the faint splash of the river far behind the trees.

The river's keening song reminded Flynn that a madman was prowling only a few miles away, and that it might not be wise to linger. He kissed Julian's warm, salty mouth. "We ought to think about getting along home."

"I wish we could stay here all night," Julian murmured.

"Be more comfortable in my bedroom."

Julian shook his head. "Not tonight. *Grand-père* will be watching."

"How can you live like that?"

Julian said calmly, "People live however they must."

"Why don't you tell him you don't want to perform anymore? Take your money and go open your café."

He was shaking his head.

"Why not?"

"It's not that simple."

"Why shouldn't it be?"

Julian said irritably, "In case you haven't noticed, I don't actually *know* how to run a café. I can't read or write or cook. I know how to do one thing."

"Con people?" Flynn hadn't meant to say that, it slipped out.

Julian pulled out of his arms and sat up. He said in a silky tone that raised the hair on the back of Flynn's neck, "Oh, it's not all a con. I could tell you things if I wanted to."

"What things?" Flynn was sitting too, reaching automatically for his trousers.

Julian didn't answer, and he repeated harshly, "What things?"

Julian was on his feet now, dressing quickly, ignoring Flynn. He said finally, "I know you don't think so, but it helps people to say farewell to their loved ones."

"But they're not saying farewell to their loved ones. You're making it all up. You're pretending you're hearing voices."

"Sometimes I am hearing the voices."

"But most of the time you're not, you admitted it today to the sheriff. Most of the time you're lying to them."

Julian made a small sound of contempt. "Oh, you're so smart, Mr. Big City Newspaper Man, and yet you don't understand the simplest thing. Didn't you ever notice funerals aren't for the dead? They're for the *living*."

He slipped his shoes on and started back for the flivver.

Flynn caught him up in a few steps, fingers sinking into Julian's arm. "What do you mean, you could tell me things if you wanted to?"

Julian stared at him. In the weird moonlight his eyes looked like the black holes in a skull. Flynn dropped his arm.

Julian said in a low, spiteful tone, "Do you really want me to contact Paul for you? Are you *sure* you want to know what he would say?"

"You *sonofabitch*." Flynn leaped forward, fist raised, and Julian stepped warily back. Flynn grabbed him by his shirt collar, but at the last minute he shoved him down rather than punching him in the face.

Julian sprawled on the ground. Half propped on an elbow, he stared up at Flynn. He said mockingly, "That's what I thought."

"I should let you walk back to town." Flynn turned away. He crossed the clearing in long, angry strides to where the Model T sat outlined in silver moonlight. Behind the trees the night sky flashed with lightning, like an electrical short behind a purple black curtain.

Climbing inside, he slammed the door and waited. Julian joined him a few moments later, brushing his clothes down.

Flynn cupped the crank handle, started the engine. Neither spoke on the rest of the drive back to Herrin.

~ * ~

It was late when Flynn woke on Saturday morning. He had a bad headache and his body ached as though he'd been rolling around on pebbles all night. For a time he lay there wincing as he thought over the events at the shank of the evening.

The fan on the dresser was still droning. A light rain had left the morning cool and fresh. His anger seemed a distant, vague thing now. He was ashamed of having shoved Julian.

He washed his hands and face and followed the smell of coffee down the hallway to the kitchen where Amy was sitting on her own. She looked up and smiled at him.

"How about some flapjacks? I still have batter left."

"Sounds good." Flynn dropped down at the big maple table, avoiding looking directly at the bright sunlight flooding through the open window. How could birds be *so* loud?

"You all didn't drop in on one of those illegal roadhouses last night, by any chance?" Amy inquired, readying the heavy iron skillet.

"Perish the thought."

Amy chuckled sentimentally. "Now if Mrs. Hoyt were still with us, she'd be dishing up the Demon Rum sermon right about now."

"It was more like Demon Gin." Flynn asked belatedly, "How's Joan today?"

“Poor kid.” Amy flicked water on the skillet and the beads sizzled. She poured the batter into the pan. “She’s taking it hard. She hasn’t got anyone here. There’s an aunt in Missouri. She’ll be coming out for the funeral I guess. She could stay on at the house, of course. Joan, I mean.”

Amy went on chattering about Joan and Joan’s future. Flynn listened with half an ear. What he really wanted—and dreaded—was to ask about Julian. The words wouldn’t come.

He realized that Amy had fallen silent. Her back was to him as she flipped the flapjacks in the hot skillet with brisk efficiency.

Flynn stared at the wide, comfortable outline of her. He said, surprising himself, “I’m sorry I didn’t come down after Gus died. I should have been here. To pay my respects.”

Amy turned. It was almost as though she had been waiting for this. “That didn’t matter. After Gus was gone, it didn’t matter. He knew you respected him. He’d have liked to see you, though. I wish you’d come then: when he was still well—after you got out of the army. He used to talk about you a lot.” She said it without reproach. She was being honest, and Flynn heard her out without defensiveness.

“I should have. I meant to. I kept thinking there was time for all that. You’d think the war would have taught me that lesson.” He’d wasted a lot of time grieving. Not only grieving though, because that was maybe forgivable. He’d also wasted time feeling angry and sorry for himself. He’d hurt other people and it couldn’t all be repaired. He could tell Amy that he regretted his action—or lack of action—but it didn’t change anything. And he couldn’t tell Gus...

Perhaps he understood why Julian thought he was helping people when he let them take those dark farewells of their loved ones.

Amy sighed and said, “I guess it’s a lesson we all need to learn a few times before it sticks.”

He understood why Gus had loved her despite their many and obvious differences.

Despite the turbulence of his emotions—and his hangover—Flynn’s appetite was not affected much, and he kept eating pancakes as fast as Amy kept them coming, buttering them and spilling syrup on their pale faces reminding him of that big golden moon over the trees the night before.

The screen door behind him creaked. He turned, uncomfortably aware that he hoped the newcomer was Julian.

It wasn’t. It was Casey.

“Well, you’re home early,” Amy greeted him.

He nodded and set his sample case on the table, pulling out the chair and sitting down heavily. “I thought maybe I’d take Joan out for a drive today. Get her out of the house.”

He met Flynn’s surprised gaze pointblank.

“Well, that’s a very nice thought,” Amy said. “She’s down at the funeral parlor right now, but she ought to be back anytime soon.”

Casey smiled rather unpleasantly. "The old frog was stocking up on remedies for the kid last night," he informed Flynn.

"What remedies?"

"Bromide salts mostly." He was enjoying himself, clearly. "Tincture of belladonna. He's a very sick boy, your pal."

"What the hell is supposed to be the matter with him?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No." Flynn added shortly, "Should you be discussing this with all of us?"

"Now that you mention it, I guess not." Casey smiled again. Funny how Flynn had first found Casey attractive and his grin engaging. He thought now that though he was handsome enough, his smile had a hint of cruelty.

Casey pushed the chair back, picked up his sample case and left the room.

"Where is Julian?" Flynn asked Amy.

"He went out this morning early."

Gathering information for the evening's show, no doubt.

She said uneasily, "What do you suppose he meant about the boy?"

"I don't know. He seems okay to me." All things being relative.

She had a look on her face as though she were remembering something.

"What?" Flynn questioned.

"Oh, I don't know." She seemed flustered to be caught gossiping. "But the old man was closeted with Dr. Pearson for a time yesterday. I did wonder..."

Flynn wondered too, but he realized he had already said too much about it.

Finishing his breakfast, he asked Amy if he could make a long distance phone call. She assured him anything in the house was his to use. He waited until the coast was clear, then went into the hall and called his editor, Ellery Sedgwick, at *The Atlantic Monthly*. He told Sedgwick the massacre story seemed to be hitting a dead end, but he had a new angle on spiritualism and sleuthing.

"I thought you couldn't wait to get back to New York?"

"I can't. But since I'm here I need to make the trip worth my while. I simply don't think there's much story in the massacre. Nothing that hasn't been covered."

"I tried to tell you that."

"You were right. But this spiritualism angle, well that's new." He told Sedgwick about the murders, and Sedgwick heard him out in thoughtful silence.

"Well, one thing's for sure, you haven't been this excited about a story for a long time. I'll be looking forward to seeing what you come up with. The spiritualism racket is still news."

Flynn was thoughtful when he rang off.

The house was empty and hushed with a funereal silence when Flynn left for the Opera House that evening. The Devereuxs had departed for the theater earlier to prepare for their final performance while the rest of the household was at the funeral parlor viewing for Mrs. Hoyt.

Flynn took the street trolley and arrived at the Opera House in plenty of time—which turned out to have been a wise decision. It was a full house, every one of the nearly five hundred seats filled. News of The Magnificent Belloc’s conversation with the latest victim of the “Little Egypt Slayer”, as the local papers were now terming the maniac, had spread far and wide.

Flynn listened absently to the discussion floating around him.

The stage had not been broken down from the high school theatrics on Friday evening, and before the stage crew drew the long red curtains the whispering audience was treated to an inside peek at *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* forest fairy kingdom. A golden lantern moon hung in the fanciful swirls and star-swept blue black night. Shy woodland creatures peeked out behind painted trees and rocks. Glowing fireflies and fairies were strategically placed about the *mise en scène*. Flynn was reminded of the evening before. There had been a kind of magic in that woodland bedchamber.

Eventually the houselights dimmed. From behind the curtains a Victrola offered a scratchy rendition of “Angel Friends”. The audience sang along.

*Floating on the breath of evening, breathing in the morning prayer,
Hear I oft the tender voices that once made my world so fair.
I forget while listening to them, all the sorrows I have known,
And upon the troubles present, faith’s pure shining light is thrown...*

The spotlights went on, the curtains slid slowly open on the fairy kingdom, far more realistic and beautiful now that the main houselights were dimmed. Julian—The Magnificent Belloc—dressed once more in the finery of a doomed aristocrat, sat in the golden throne. He was smiling remotely as the audience finished.

*Bless you Angel friends, oh never leave me lonely on the way,
For your gentle teachings ever meekly may I watch and pray,
For your gentle teachings ever meekly may I watch and pray.*

Pretty ghastly stuff in Flynn’s opinion. The audience trailed off, and someone killed the magnified rolling gallop of the Victrola.

Belloc rose and strolled to the edge of the stage.

“Good evening.”

“Good evening,” the crowd answered back like thunder.

Julian smiled one of those practiced, charming smiles. “You will not be surprised to learn a great number of people are still under the impression that clairvoyance is a mysterious art, practiced by peculiar

individuals who seem to be invested with singular—even sinister—powers, which they exercise within the confines of a dark and mysterious room. The séance room.”

The audience tittered at his friendly mockery.

“These ignorant ones are unaware that many persons of considerable and various abilities have had psychical experiences of a veridical nature, and are familiar with the power of seeing either past or future, or both, as well as events that are happening at a distance.”

He strolled casually to the other side of the stage. “Seeing the past and becoming aware of the possibility of witnessing people or happenings at a distance that cannot be perceived by the physical sight alone should bring us nearer to a comforting realization of the unity of all life and the existence of other spheres, of hitherto unexplored conditions in which dwell those whom we have known and loved in their earth lives, and later have mourned, because the physical process called death has removed them from the limitations of our physical sight and hearing.”

The hall was silent, only the occasional cough or throat clearing interrupting the solemn hush.

“This is reassuring, is it not?”

“Yes,” thundered back the audience.

“You have all heard of the well authenticated and numerous cases which have been recorded. It becomes evident that this faculty of clairvoyance is a natural one, and can be used under natural conditions by perfectly natural people. The séance room is merely a laboratory, a quiet place where suitable and harmonious conditions can be assured, unhampered by the noise and distractions of the outer world.”

He paused as though giving the opportunity to object. A pin would have sounded like an anvil hitting the floor in that silence.

“Tonight, this hall will serve as our séance room as we attempt to contact those who have gone before us.”

Belloc returned to the golden throne and threw himself into it with careless grace.

“We will now summon my guide in the spiritual realm, le Comte de Mirabeau. He is your true host this evening.”

Closing his eyes, Belloc bent his head, fist against his lips as though he were deep in thought. For a long time no one spoke, no one said anything. Then he lifted his head and murmured in French. There were rustles and whispers in the theater. Flynn smiled cynically, and yet he couldn’t deny that he was engrossed along with the rest of the audience.

Belloc’s eyelids fluttered, he straightened and opened his eyes. He had a distinctly French inflection as he said, “This one has been waiting, hanging back. He does not wish to grieve you, *monsieur*, but you must relinquish hope.” His bright gaze stared past the footlights. “He was a soldier. His name was Christopher, *oui*? Lt. Christopher Thompson. Reported missing in battle.” Julian shook his head regretfully, and a collective sigh seemed to escape the audience. “Who is here for Christopher?”

An elderly gentleman rose and stood erect as possible as he gripped his cane.

“He died bravely, *monsieur*. He wishes you to know that. And he wishes you to know that he is...how you say? Adjusting well to the...er...rules. In fact, he says there are far fewer rules on the other side. Love abounds. Heaven is and will be perfect love and harmony.”

The elderly man nodded curtly. He seemed to struggle to speak, but in the end he lowered himself slowly and painfully once more. Belloc withdrew and closed his eyes again. More mumbling in French.

“*Ah, Grand-mère. Helen. Qui est ici pour Helen?*”

Sighs and rustlings.

“She died during the beginning of the influenza epidemic.”

More whisperings.

No one laid claim to Helen, and Belloc shrugged and went on. “She wishes you all to know that the dead do not sleep. They are alive, as you are alive. Do not forget. Do not forget them for one moment.”

Belloc subsided once more. On this evening the spirits seemed to be mostly those of soldiers and people who died in the Spanish Flu epidemic. Belloc was sincere and fluent, but something seemed off to Flynn. Slowly it dawned on him that whatever Belloc’s attitude, Julian was nervous.

He wasn’t sure how he knew, but he knew it.

“Maggie, Cyrus says that you must take the old tonic. The pink-colored one you were accustomed to take. It is better for you. Thomas, your dog is at Harrison Farm. Patrick says that he is happy and well again and free from pain. Martin is watching over you and the children, Louise.”

Julian caught his breath. He clutched the arms of the throne and his knuckles turned white. “David, Paul says you...Paul says there is nothing to forgive.”

Flynn heard this with a shock of disbelief. He sat very still, barely breathing.

Belloc opened his eyes and stared blindly at the wall of audience. “The quarrel meant nothing, would have been forgotten but for a German bullet. You know it is true.”

People looked around, but Flynn didn’t move, didn’t breathe.

Belloc exhaled a long ragged breath and went on, sending messages to the mothers and wives of dead soldiers and sailors. Flynn continued to sit deaf and unseeing. A sob tore out of the woman next to him. A middle-aged man took out a handkerchief and blew his nose.

What was Belloc saying now?

Flynn forced himself to listen again. Shook off his numb preoccupation. But there was nothing to hear or see. Belloc was leaning back in his gold throne, exhausted. His face was white and strained, harsh breaths seemed to reverberate in the elegant Opera House. He rolled his head from side to side as though in a fever.

“No.”

He sat up and glared stage left. “*No.*”

Mesmerized, the audience watched as he jumped up, putting the throne between himself and another invisible presence.

“What do you want?” Monsieur le Comte seemed to have departed in a rush, taking Belloc with him. There remained a tense, angry young man speaking to what appeared to be...a ghost.

There was a long silence. People looked at each other, moved restively in their seats.

Julian said, “You must go. I can’t do anything more for you.”

A nervous ripple of laughter flowed up and down the aisles of the darkened theater. The audience began to whisper and talk amongst themselves. Julian glanced at them, glanced back at whatever was on the stage with him—or whatever he was pretending was on the stage. But, no, Flynn didn’t believe that. As difficult, as bizarre as it was to conceive of, there did seem to be some...presence on the stage, hiding in the painted woodland.

Julian made an anguished sound. To the audience, he said, “Theresa is here again tonight. She says she can’t rest—none of them can rest—until this murderer, this madman, is caught.”

He stopped, biting his lip. The words seemed torn from him. “He is among you even now. You must *trust no one*.”

There were gasps and cries of horror and then, terrifyingly, every light in the theater went out.

An absolute pitch black descended on the Opera Hall.

There was an instant of frozen horror and then pandemonium. The audience rose in a surge, shoved their way down the rows of seats, crowding into the aisles in panic, pushing their way toward the doors. Voices cried out for calm, for order.

Flynn rose, also calling for reason, for quiet. People continued to try and push past to get to the jammed aisles.

The overhead lights went on.

People stopped their hysterical shoving and pushing and looked around, blinking, as though woken from a nightmare. Flynn looked back at the stage. It was empty.

Chapter Eight

The house was dark when Flynn let himself inside.

He made his way to the front parlor, turned on a lamp and sat down, resting his head in his hands. If what he had witnessed that night at the Opera House was legitimate, it was the most amazing proof of psychic ability or perhaps supernatural power that he had heard of. And if it was faked, both Julian and Old Man Devereux deserved to be locked up and have the key thrown away. People could have died in that theater tonight. If the lights had not come back on when they had, people probably would have. As it was, three ladies had fainted and had to be carried from the theater.

Flynn did not believe in spiritualists or ghosts or any of that mumbo-jumbo, but he couldn't argue that Julian Devereux had seemed on several occasions to tap into the uncanny. It was possible he had guessed from comments Amy had made and his own psychological insights that Flynn had not been back to Herrin to see Gus for years. It was possible he had guessed from Flynn's behavior that Paul and Flynn had argued the night before Paul died.

He was shrewd and he was clever. It was even possible he had heard rumors of a missing girl named Theresa Martin and taken a gamble that she was the murderer's latest victim.

But it was not probable.

Which meant what? That Julian did indeed have contact with the spirit of this murdered girl? That here was an as-yet-unused tool for finding the killer who had so far eluded the sheriffs? What use were either of those things if Julian refused to utilize this mysterious power he possessed?

Flynn scrubbed his face and sat up. He needed to talk to Julian alone, but there was no telling how long it might be before he and the old man showed up. He switched off the lamp and went upstairs.

In his own room, he turned on the lamp and the fan and sat on the side of the bed to take his shoes off. He noticed that a book lay on the bedside table. *The Encyclopedia Americana*. There was an envelope inserted between the pages as though to mark the reader's place. Curiously, he opened the encyclopedia and began to read.

It has to be born in mind that the disease is a progressive, degenerative malady, and that the object of treatment does not lie only in an attempt to combat convulsions by sedative medicinal remedies, but to prevent by every possible means the tendency to mental deterioration which is so important a clinical feature of the disease as shown in the impairment of intellect and memory, by impulsiveness, mental irritability, loss of moral sense and partial or complete loss of productiveness. Male patients are often

given over to perverted sexual behavior, a condition that is probably part of the co-existent mental infirmity. It is also accompanied by periodic disturbances, transitory attacks of anger, dream-states or automatic phenomena.

Flynn's heart pounded very hard with a mix of anger and horror. He wanted to throw the book away, but he couldn't help continuing to read.

Hallucinations are infrequent, illusions are common during an attack or following a grand mal seizure, and delusions are transitory, being found usually only in the dream-states. Morbid and sudden impulses are quite frequent, sometimes approaching distinct nerve-storms, during which suicidal and homicidal attacks may occur. Not infrequently the afflicted may set fire to their beds or furniture, commit theft, assaults, homicides, expose their persons and otherwise conduct themselves in an irrelevant and insane manner. Treatment should be commenced at the earliest possible time, after the onset of convulsive seizures, and should be continued for long periods, extending for at least two years even in the most satisfactory cases. For this reason treatment is best conducted in institutions, asylums or under skilled supervision, by which means the mental and bodily functions can be regulated and submitted to suitable forms of work, exercise and dietary restriction.

He slapped the book shut, then opened it and read the bookplate on the inside cover: *Casey Lee*.

At first he was too angry, too appalled, to think clearly. The message here was stark in its ugliness as a famine victim, and the target only too vulnerable. A wave of grief for Julian overtook him.

The grief was followed by another wave of angry outrage. The book had been left here in warning, and he did not believe it was kindly meant. Flynn didn't know much about medicine or this particular illness, but he knew none of this described Julian.

It could not be true.

But he remembered Casey saying the old man had bought bromides and belladonna. He remembered Amy saying the doctor had been closeted with the elder Devereux. He remembered Julian's veiled references to his "illness".

Was the book meant to frighten him off?

He considered it objectively. It was possible that Casey's ego had been pricked by the realization that Flynn had chosen Julian's company over his own the night before. But what if it was more sinister? This passage was meant to discredit Julian, even perhaps throw suspicion on him.

Why?

Was Julian somehow a threat to Casey? Why should he be?

Flynn did not yet dare to truly consider the personal implications of what he'd read. The main thing that Casey would know about Julian was that Julian had supposedly made contact with the spirit of one of the girls murdered in Jackson County—the neighboring county where Casey had been selling his wares during the period of the murders.

A light seemed to go on inside Flynn's mind. Casey was a traveling salesman. He moved all around the countryside, all around the state, and the nature of his business—cosmetics and medical supplies—made women his first and best customers. That sample case of his was as good as a pass key to most of the homes he visited. And that sample case itself was a clue. *Queen of Egypt Medical Supply Company*. Hadn't the women been mutilated in a grisly imitation of Egyptian burial practices? That was certainly the rumor. And Casey said he'd received medical training, which probably meant he knew enough rudimentary biology to carve the organs out of his victims.

Yes, it all made terrible sense.

Casey had sat out on the breezeway and listened to the others talk about Julian's performance and the contact with the spirit of Theresa Martin. If he was guilty, wouldn't he hear that news with alarm? Wouldn't he wonder whether it was true? What if the spirit of the dead girl *could* tell The Magnificent Belloc who her killer was? Didn't it give Casey the strongest incentive to discredit Julian as quickly and thoroughly as possible?

Of course it did.

And if it was true about Julian's illness? Flynn swallowed hard. There was no pretending that he wasn't stricken at this news. "The Falling Sickness" the ancients had called it. Flynn had witnessed a couple of convulsions. Not a pretty sight. Not something he wanted to think of afflicting someone he...cared about.

And if it was true, if Julian had the disease, was his supposed clairvoyance simply a manifestation of his illness? He opened the book and read again. *Hallucinations are infrequent, illusions are common during an attack or following a grand mal seizure, and delusions are transitory, being found usually only in the dream-states.*

He forced himself to consider the statement objectively.

Could Julian's psychic abilities be the sad proof of his deteriorating mental condition?

But he had been right about Gus, Paul and Theresa. If he was simply mad—granted there was always the possibility that he was mad *and* clairvoyant.

Flynn raised his head as he heard footsteps down the hallway. Muffled voices. Doors opening and closing. The Devereuxs had returned to the boarding house, and judging by the brevity of the muted exchange, not in great sympathy with each other.

He listened to the washroom plumbing rattle into life. He looked down again at the book he held. Whether Julian was ill or not, it didn't change the fact that Casey had deliberately sought to discredit him, and there had to be a purpose behind that. In Flynn's opinion it gave credence to Julian's clairvoyant declarations if only because Casey was so determined that they not be taken seriously.

And that, in Flynn's opinion, was because there was a very good chance that Casey himself was the murderer.

But how to prove it?

He was now determined to prove it. He couldn't help Julian, but he could pay Casey back for this, for trying to discredit the younger man, for destroying the delicate connection blossoming between them. He forgot completely his own earlier anger with Julian—he had mostly been over it by the morning, if he was honest. Now Casey had effectively wrenched that tentative emotion out by the roots.

Flynn looked down at the tiny print on the page and his anger rose again. *Male patients are often given over to perverted sexual behavior, a condition that is probably part of the co-existent mental infirmity.*

No question what that referred to, and Flynn didn't happen to believe it was true. Didn't believe the love of man for man was perverted or mental infirmity. Society and doctors were wrong about a lot of things. Why not this?

The washroom door opened, closed, opened again, and the erratic plumbing rumbled into action.

After a suitable interval, the washroom door opened and closed once more. The house fell at long last into silence.

Flynn closed the book, set it aside and turned out the lamp. He undressed in the darkness and lay down on the bed. The curtains gusted in and out and there was a not-too-distant grumble of thunder.

He rose, went to the window, lowering it halfway. He turned off the fan.

The bedroom door opened a silent foot, and Julian's tall, pale form slipped inside the room. A flash of lightning illuminated him briefly, highlighting his wide eyes, the elegant, exotic planes of his face, his mouth which whispered, "I'm sorry. I had to see you."

"It's all right," David said automatically.

Without turning, Julian locked the door. Flynn met him in two steps, pulled him into his arms, his lips finding that sweet, eager mouth in a long, hungry kiss.

Julian clung to him and whispered, "I missed you so."

I missed you too.

Flynn didn't say it, but it was true. Already, in these few days—four days—Julian had become important to him. More important now that he knew that anything between them, any real relationship, was impossible.

Because it was, wasn't it? If it was true that Julian had that dreadful malady?

Flynn buried his face in the silk of Julian's hair and skin. His own heart was pounding as hard as Julian's.

"I'm sorry for what I said last night," Julian breathed. "I regretted it all day, but—"

"It's all right."

“And then tonight at the Opera House. The message from Paul. It should have been in private. I swear I didn’t know it was going to happen.” Julian’s arms tightened around Flynn’s neck, he leaned his head back and gazed searchingly at Flynn’s face. Flynn kissed his yielding mouth softly.

“I believe you.”

“I wouldn’t hurt you for the world, David.” He seemed almost desperate that Flynn should believe him.

Flynn nodded. “I know. I feel the same. I tried to find you today to tell you.”

Something about Julian made it easy to let go of his anger, to say he was sorry. Paul had been too much like himself, apologies difficult for both of them. Julian...there was a gentleness there, the kind of sweetness that was unique to the genuinely strong.

Flynn guided them both to the bed. They lay down, freezing at the ping and squeak of old springs and bedframe. Flynn said, “We’ve got to be careful. The washroom is between my room and your grandfather’s, but even so.”

Julian nodded.

They fell asleep to the music of thunderclaps shaking the old house to its foundations and the lightning flashes turning the room electric white.

“David.”

He could hear the sound of dripping. Flynn opened his eyes. It was daylight; a silvery, cool daylight. Glistening rain was still falling from the eaves. He turned his head. Julian was lying next to him, his gaze fastened on Flynn’s.

Flynn blinked a couple of times, cleared his throat. “Hm?”

Julian’s mouth covered his. When he broke the kiss, he whispered, “I’ve got to go.”

“Go where?”

“I don’t want to be in this house today. After the funeral they’ll come back here and it’ll be better if I’m not here. Better for me. Better for them.”

He was probably right about that, but Flynn didn’t want him to slip away. Their remaining time was brief as it was. “Where will you go?”

“I’ll find a place to spend the afternoon. I’ll be back this evening.” He added regretfully, “I’ll have to come back.”

“I’ll go with you,” Flynn said on impulse.

Julian shook his head. “It’ll cause comment. Better to avoid that now.”

“I’ll go with you,” Flynn repeated. All at once it was very clear in his mind all the disastrous misadventures that might befall someone with Julian’s affliction. But even more strongly it came to him that he wanted to spend this final day with Julian. Tomorrow the Devereuxs would be off to Murphysboro

and the Liberty Theater. And after that? Another stop in an endless string of Midwestern towns. It was more than likely Flynn would never see Julian again after tonight.

He said stubbornly, "I want to spend today with you."

Julian's winged brows arched.

"I do," Flynn reiterated, and realized how much he meant it. Wanted it. Needed it. He covered Julian's mouth in warm insistence, and he felt the other man's opposition fade.

At last they broke the kiss. Julian sat up, raking his hair out of his eyes. "If you're coming, hurry up then."

He scooped his dressing gown off the floor, pried open the door and peered into the hallway. He was gone a second later, closing the door soundlessly behind him.

Flynn rolled out of bed and headed for the washroom where he washed hastily and shaved. He dressed and was downstairs waiting when Julian arrived a few seconds later.

Julian was smiling and that smile seemed to strike Flynn right in the solar plexus. How the hell was he going to let Julian go?

They let themselves out of the house and walked down to the diner where Flynn had breakfasted with Casey a day earlier. He'd forgotten that nothing would be open on a Sunday morning, and they were greeted by a large unfriendly CLOSED sign in the window. Instead they caught the streetcar and traveled out to Ozark's Park. They managed to get cinnamon walnut rolls and hot coffee from a street stand, and they ate contentedly on a bench in the deserted six acres of well-tended lawns and flowerbeds surrounding a luxury hotel and dance pavilion.

Though they talked, it was about nothing in particular. Just easy and comfortable conversation, and they smiled often at each other.

The storm had left the morning damp and muggy as it warmed up. There was an electrical hum in the air, and Flynn could feel an echo of that buzz every time Julian's gaze lingered on his.

When they grew bored with sitting, they walked down to the lake and skipped stones across the blue surface. Julian turned out to be unexpectedly adept at this crucial skill, and they made a friendly wager as to who would buy lunch. Flynn won by a skip, eleven to ten.

At lunchtime they bought a big striped watermelon and split it in half, sitting in the deep, cool shade. Flynn found himself struggling to stop staring at Julian as he ate the ripe, red melon, wiping occasionally at the juice running down his chin, spitting the seeds into the grass with the insouciance of a Huck Finn.

"These murders..." Flynn said tentatively.

Julian sighed and spit a couple of seeds at a rose, knocking the petals from its yellow head.

"I'm not asking you to check with your contacts in the spirit world," Flynn said. "But...what do you think? As a...a citizen?"

Julian lowered his lashes, considering. He lifted a dismissing shoulder. "It could be someone like you."

"Me?"

He grinned at Flynn's consternation. "Someone these women wish to talk to, despite the fact that he's a stranger to them. People talk to reporters. They like to see their name in print."

"What if he's not a stranger to the victims?"

"You mean the slayer could be known to the women?"

Flynn nodded. "Someone they've known for years maybe. Someone they trust *because* they've known him for years. Someone who's been a regular part of the community."

"Like a sheriff or a priest."

"Er...yes. Or a peddler or a trader."

Julian gazed at him with sudden alertness. "Like a traveling salesman?"

"Yeah."

He considered it with evident surprise. "You think Casey Lee is a murderer?"

"Do you?"

"Do I?" Julian's eyes widened. "What does it have to do with me?"

"I don't know. I thought perhaps your ability might give you insight into people. A feel for them?" He felt silly even saying it, but there was no denying Julian had a preternatural talent for knowing things no one could reasonably know.

Julian shook his head. "I don't think so," he said with shattering honesty. "I'm no good judging him. I'm jealous because you like him so much."

Into that naked revelation, Flynn said awkwardly, "I don't like him so much."

"You did." Julian grimaced. "Much more than you liked me. You wanted me, but you didn't like me." His smile was self-mocking. "I make you nervous."

Flynn said quietly, "You don't make me nervous any more except, I guess, in a good way." He smiled at Julian's uncertainty. "And I do like you. I wouldn't be here with you now, ants crawling in my pants, if I didn't."

Julian's laugh was lazy. "I guess that's true. And I did try to keep you from coming with me. Do you think Casey Lee is the Little Egypt Slayer?"

It felt so strange to discuss it calmly in broad daylight. Flynn said, "Well, there's a lot of circumstantial evidence. He was in Murphysboro or at least nearby in Jackson County at the time of at least some of the murders. And he's a person the women might let into their homes without question. He sells medical supplies."

Julian seemed very involved in finding the right blade of glass to make a whistle. "Queen of Egypt Medical Company, yes."

“And he’s got medical training. Those women were pretty cut up from what I read.”

“He cast a spell on them, I believe. I couldn’t quite understand what I was hearing during the performance last night. I don’t think the women knew who killed them. He must have drugged them first.” Julian added, still not looking at Flynn, “I don’t think it was cruelty, you know. I think the man who killed those women is mad. Mad as a hatter. Lee has a cruel streak, but I don’t think he’s mad.”

“Has he done something cruel to you?” Flynn asked, and he was startled at how instantly angry he was at the notion.

Julian looked startled too. “No. I can see the way he looks at Joan, though, the way he talks to her. He’s going to marry her if he can. It’s not right.”

Flynn stared. Was that true? He thought of the small attentions Casey offered Joan. And he thought of Joan’s eagerness, her obvious loneliness. Yes, he could see all that now that Julian pointed it out.

Julian said slowly, thoughtfully, “Maybe you’re right at that. Maybe the slayer is someone the women have known for years and trusted. They can’t see that he’s going slowly insane—and neither can he.” He swallowed. “Madness can creep up on you.”

Flynn thought of the book that had been left in his room. There had been several pages about the likelihood of patients afflicted with that particular disease going mad. Not everyone, true, but the author had been far more interested in discussing the gruesome probabilities.

He opened his mouth to tell Julian about the book, to ask him about this mysterious illness, but Julian jumped up and said, “I need to stretch my legs. Let’s walk back down to the lake.”

As he spent the day with Julian talking and walking, Flynn felt more and more convinced that Casey Lee was simply trying to discredit the younger man. There was nothing wrong with Julian. He was smart and funny and jolly company as he described the astonishing and silly things that had happened during performances through the years. He laughed at his own mistakes with the same good humor that he laughed at the follies of his fellow performers.

Flynn stared at Julian stretched comfortably on the green velvet lawn. He was smiling faintly, face tilted to the sky, and Flynn’s throat tightened painfully. If only this day would never end. He wanted to lean over and kiss Julian’s beautiful, mocking mouth. Impossible of course. Even to take his hand and hold it was forbidden for two men. They had been born several centuries too late.

The day flew and soon it was evening and the acetylene gas lamps were coming on all around them, families and couples leaving the park. Flynn and Julian rose and followed them out through the gates.

They caught the streetcar back to the Gulling Boarding House, reaching the house to find it unexpectedly quiet.

They exchanged puzzled glances. But when they looked in the front parlor they found nearly the entire household there, speaking quietly. Not surprisingly, the mood was subdued after the day’s funeral.

“There’s plenty of food in the kitchen,” Amy told them by way of greeting. There was a curious expression in her eyes.

In fact, the entire household seemed to watch them very carefully. *Grand-père* had been glowering from the moment they appeared together in the doorway. Casey Lee sat in a chair near the cold fireplace. A strange middle-aged lady sat on the sofa next to Joan who was dressed in sobering black. The middle-aged lady, also dressed in black, bore a remarkable resemblance to Mrs. Hoyt minus a few years and pounds.

Joan introduced her aunt, Mrs. Packard, and Flynn nodded a polite hello. Julian stumbled through an awkward apology for missing Mrs. Hoyt’s funeral. Joan was quick to make his excuses for him on the grounds of his extreme sensitivity to spirits. This brought a politely skeptical nod from Mrs. Packard and a faint, derisive smile from Casey Lee as he met Flynn’s gaze.

Flynn, remembering again the book that had been left in his room, met that green gaze with his own stony one and saw Casey’s eyes narrow.

Joan, finished describing the hymns and flowers of Mrs. Hoyt’s ever-so-lovely funeral, was saying in her pleasant way, “Julian, I know it’s a terrible imposition, but it would mean so much if you would only consider...”

“Consider?” Julian asked warily.

“Holding a séance so that I might talk to Mama.”

Julian’s recoil was unmistakable. “I’m... I don’t think...”

Tears filled Joan’s eyes, she clasped her hands together as though in prayer—much to the obvious discomfort of her aunt and Casey—and pleaded, “You’re not giving a performance tonight. You could do it right here in the house. I’ve already spoken to Mrs. Gulling and she’s given permission if you would agree.”

Flynn glanced around but Amy had slipped out of the room. Not that he blamed her.

“It would just be us.” Joan looked around the room with a suppliant’s gaze. “Our family here. You do it for strangers. It’s not fair that you won’t do it for people you know.”

“Assuming you do it for real,” Casey drawled.

Julian threw him a look of dislike. He stared at Joan. “It’s not...that simple.”

He looked to his grandfather, who said tersely, “Julian must have time to rally his energies. He’s given four performances this week. The toll on his psychic stamina is considerable. He must have time to rest and recover.”

“Plus he wouldn’t be paid for this,” Casey said.

Julian’s mouth opened, but he swallowed his angry words as Joan said, “Please, Julian.” Tears spilled from her eyes. “I never got the chance to tell Mama goodbye.”

There was a strange silence. Flynn became aware of a sense of foreboding. *Refuse*, he thought. *Tell them no.*

Julian sighed. "All right."

Hearing this, Flynn felt oddly weary, almost let down. Yet the day before hadn't he been hoping for this very thing? He himself had suggested a séance to the police. Now he wondered what he'd been thinking.

Joan was still thanking Julian as Flynn turned and went down the hall toward the stairs. Passing the study, he saw Dr. Pearson reading at the long table. He was so engrossed in his book that he was unaware when Flynn stepped inside the room.

"Dr. Pearson?"

Dr. Pearson looked up and stared at him with an unfocused look. He looked like a man who had received unexpected bad news.

"May I talk to you?"

Pearson seemed to shake off his preoccupation. He closed the book and folded his hands on its blue and gold cover.

"Sorry, young man. I was miles away. You wished to speak to me?"

"Professionally. Consult you, I suppose I mean."

The doctor's silver brows rose. "I see."

"Yes. Except it's not for myself. I wanted to ask you about...a friend."

"Ah." Clearly Dr. Pearson had heard that one many a time. His expression became one of resigned patience.

Flynn came the rest of the way into the room and sat down at the polished table. He lowered his voice as he said, "This friend is subject to convulsions. Seizures. He's—" Flynn took a deep breath. "I believe he's an epileptic."

"Ah." The doctor's tone was quite different. Could a greater tragedy befall anyone? Beside the grim physical and mental prognosis, there was the social stigma. No wonder the idea of marriage for epileptics was so frowned on; the notion of delivering children to a similar catastrophic fate would make any sane person quail.

When Flynn didn't continue, the doctor said with brisk kindness, "Poor fellow. I'm sorry to hear that. What is it you think I can do for you —er, your friend?"

Flynn said carefully, "My question is...does the disease always follow the same course? What I mean is, is there any chance of...of recovery?"

Flynn was so sure of the answer he was taken aback when the old man said calmly, "Occasionally. It depends on a variety of factors. Some patients do achieve remission even after many years of seizures. Occasionally the illness can be controlled through treatment. When did your friend first begin to exhibit signs of the malady?"

"I believe he was sixteen."

“That is more favorable than someone who develops the illness earlier in life.”

“Is he likely to die from the seizures?”

“Probably not from the seizures themselves. Are the convulsions frequent?”

“I-I’m not sure. I don’t believe so. I don’t really know.”

Pearson considered this, and then light seemed to dawn. He eyed Flynn with mounting hostility.

“Does the patient or the patient’s guardian know that you’re asking for this medical advice?”

Flynn felt his face heat. “No.”

“I see.”

Flynn gathered his courage. “It’s not what you think, sir. I’m asking out of friendship only.”

Dr. Pearson continued to inspect him dubiously.

“May I ask you one more thing? Must the illness always end in...mental deterioration and madness?”

“Of course not.” Testily, Dr. Pearson rose from the table and went to the tall bookshelves lining the far end of the room. He put away the book he had been reading, scanned the shelf and pulled another. He flipped through it, muttered to himself, and then silently read for a few seconds. His mouth tightened. He replaced the book on the shelf.

“On second thought, never mind. There is a modern tendency to believe the best course of treatment is to lock these unfortunates away as soon as possible in one of the asylums popping up all across the country such as the Craig Colony in Sonyea, New York.”

“I’ve heard of it.”

“I’m sure you have.” Pearson came back to the table. “If you want the opinion of an old country horse doctor, those well-meaning monsters are responsible for the destruction of far more lives than the wretched disease itself. In fifty years of medical practice it has been my observation that what the epileptic patient most requires is a reasonable routine of rest and activity, interesting occupation for their minds, affection of friends and family, and a diet rich in protein and low in carbohydrate. Mild bromide is useful if the attacks are frequent and severe.”

“Is that true?”

“I’ve no reason to lie to you, young man,” Pearson said irascibly.

Flynn thanked him and went upstairs.

Supper was deep-fried catfish, tangy coleslaw, chilled beets, fresh, crusty Italian bread with plenty of butter. Good simple food, and all of it, with the exception of the catfish, left over from the funeral reception.

There was no sign of Julian at the evening meal. The other guests were subdued although Casey Lee did his best to cheer Joan up.

Joan's aunt, Mrs. Packard, eyed Casey tolerantly and asked what she clearly imagined to be shrewd questions about his marital status and income.

After the meal, the household, with the exception of Dr. Pearson who said he didn't hold with such out-and-out superstitious nonsense, retired to the formal dining room. The large, polished oval table sat with a brass candelabra burning brightly in its center. Julian stood behind the chair at the head of the table. He was dressed in ordinary trousers and a white shirt rather than the rich costume he wore for his stage performances.

His gaze met Flynn's. There seemed to be a message in his eyes, but Flynn was uncertain of the meaning. He moved to take the seat to Julian's left.

"I was expecting something quite different," Mrs. Packard announced, settling herself on a spindly chair which creaked ominously beneath her weight. Whether she was pleased or disappointed was unclear.

"Isn't the Comte de Mirabeau going to join us?" Joan asked uncertainly.

Julian gave her an odd look. "No. Not tonight."

The Comte's night off apparently.

"I still don't feel this is a wise idea," the elder Devereux complained, taking the chair at the end of the table. "Julian is not strong."

"Or perhaps you don't feel he should be doing this for free?" Casey Lee said, making sure he was seated next to Joan who was on the right side of Julian.

The old man said querulously, "I didn't say that."

Julian glanced at Flynn, who offered him what he hoped was a reassuring smile. Julian's smile flickered in return.

Flynn pulled his chair out and sat down with the others. They quickly settled, obeying Julian's instructions to rest their fingertips lightly on the glassy surface. Julian looked grimly around the assembly and requested Joan to say *The Lord's Prayer*, which she did in her soft, grave voice.

Casey Lee squeezed her hand reassuringly, and she gave him a shy smile.

Julian eyed them unsmilingly before offering up a brief petition that the spiritual assembly might enable those humble seekers gathered to receive a fuller measure of celestial knowledge to ease their grieving hearts and seeking minds.

There was silence. The candle flame on the tabletop seemed to brighten.

Julian said abruptly, "Make your presence known."

Silence.

Joan gasped, looking around. Flynn heard it too. They all heard it: a sound like the rustling of large wings. Not the flapping of flight, but a gentle quivering, a trembling beat.

"It's a trick," Casey Lee said shortly, and he reached across the table. Joan murmured protest at the same time Flynn's hand shot out to intercept him. The two men locked gazes. Flynn dug his fingers in hard, and Casey Lee opened his mouth in protest.

Julian said in a flat, cold voice, "You must neither speak nor touch me."

Flynn released Casey, and the other man sat back in his seat, rubbing his wrist.

They rested their fingertips on the table edge once more.

All was still.

The table suddenly rocked beneath their hands. The shadow of candle flame danced crazily against the wall as the candelabra slid forward a few inches. The elder Devereux snatched it up and placed it safely on the sideboard.

There were gasps and murmurs. Julian said, "Please join your hands together so that all may know that no one is moving the table."

They clasped hands hastily. Flynn's hand closed warmly about Julian's long, cold fingers. He tightened his hold reassuringly and Julian squeezed back.

Amy was seated on Flynn's other side. Her work-roughened hand was comfortingly vigorous. Her profile looked stern.

The table continued to rock and then it slowed and stopped.

Julian asked in a low, almost sleepy voice, "Who are you?"

Silence.

"What was your name on the mortal plane?"

Silence.

"Did you go by the name of Alicia Hoyt?"

Silence.

"Is the woman known as Alicia Hoyt among you?"

Silence.

Mrs. Hoyt's sister sighed restively. Mr. Devereux threw her a warning look.

Joan cried out, "Mama!" She was looking past Julian's shoulder.

Flynn glanced over his shoulder as the others looked up. There did seem to be a pale, glimmering outline of a form, but it did not look precisely human, let alone female. Everyone stared, spellbound.

"Are you Alicia Hoyt?" Julian persisted. He did not look behind. His eyes were closed, his lashes black crescents on his cheeks.

Silence.

"Do you have a message for your daughter, Joan?"

There was a gasp from around the table. A single word appeared in letters of light on the wall behind Julian.

“What does it say?” Joan asked, looking from one to the other of them.

Flynn had to narrow his eyes to make out the small word. “Beware,” he read slowly.

There were several intakes of breath. Amy’s hand clenched his tightly. Julian’s remained cool and lax in Flynn’s grasp.

A sound like the rustlings of tree branches—marked from the earlier fluttering of bird wings—filled the room, followed by the sensation of wet leaves or wet...something falling upon their hair and skin. Beads of water seemed to rain from the ceiling and splash on the table. They glittered in the candlelight like raindrops or drops of blood.

There was a distinct sound of someone inhaling and then a fiercely exhaled breath. The candles on the sideboard went dark.

Chapter Nine

“Death shall shine in your starless night.” The voice came from Julian, but it was several octaves higher than his normal tone and it had an eerie, dreamy quality.

“Who said that?” Mrs. Packard’s voice sounded frightened. “What does that mean?”

“Julian?” Flynn asked quietly.

“Don’t wake him,” Mr. Devereux whispered urgently from down the table. “He’s entered into a trance state. It’s most dangerous to wake a medium.”

“What do we do?” Amy asked. She sounded calm but ready for action.

Mr. Devereux hissed, “We mustn’t break the circle of our hands or do anything to shatter the trance.”

“But what’s the point of it?” Casey asked impatiently.

“Can’t you all stop talking?” Joan cried.

A sharp surprised silence followed her words.

“Julian,” she said softly through the pitch darkness that blanketed the room.

“There is no Julian,” the queer flat voice coming from Julian said. “There is only Millicent.”

“*W-who?*” Joan quavered.

“Millie Hesse?” Flynn cut across quickly, softly.

“Millie Hesse,” agreed the voice.

“Who’s Millie Hesse?” Mrs. Packard demanded. “Where’s Alicia?”

“Millie Hesse was the first,” Casey said in a thick voice.

“No,” Amy said. “The third.”

The voice that came from Julian said dreamily, “Millie Hesse is the last. The others have gone now, crossed the great river.”

“What river?”

“The Mississippi?”

“What the hell is he talking about?”

“*Iteru,*” Julian said in that same vague voice. “First Theresa went, then Anna, then Maria. There’s only me now...”

Flynn ignored the nervous babble of voices. He stroked Julian’s icy knuckles with his thumb. “What do you want, Millie?”

“Justice for the dead.”

“When did you die?”

“The nineteenth of July, 1923. It was a hot, sunny morning when he came to the house.”

“Who came to the house?”

Silence.

“Who came to the house?” Flynn repeated.

The voice said serenely, “The sun was shining on the water like silver dust and the leaves in the trees whispered like a hundred tongues. I can’t say his name.”

“Why can’t you say his name?”

“He cut our tongues out in the way of the ancient sorcerers so we couldn’t speak his name. I can’t go forward. I can’t go back. The others have gone. Only I remain. Only I wait for justice.”

“This is lunacy,” Casey cried. “Ancient *sorcerers*? Devereux is insane. He’s a charlatan—or he’s insane.”

“Shut up,” Flynn told him fiercely. “Shut up or I’ll shut you up.”

“Try it!”

“Don’t break the circle,” Mr. Devereux entreated from the far end of the table.

Flynn felt the tension go through the circle as though someone had tried to pull free but the others held fast. He urged, “Millie, can you write the word on the wall like you...like Julian did before?”

Silence.

“Millie, someone—you or another spirit—wrote a word with letters of light on the wall. Can you do that? Can you write the name of your murderer—?”

“You’re *crazy*!” Casey roared. “You’re a goddamned bunch of lunatics!”

A flash of light was followed by great upheaval in the darkness.

“Casey!” Joan cried out in distress.

Mr. Devereux exclaimed, “He’s broken the chain of hands.”

Amy let go of Flynn’s hand. On the other side of Flynn, Julian’s hand tightened on his own with near crushing force. A strange drumming sound issued from beneath the table and the chair at the head crashed over, Julian nearly pulling Flynn and his chair over too.

“Turn the lights on!” Flynn yelled.

“What has happened to Julian?” shouted Mr. Devereux.

Pandemonium reigned. The floor was vibrating beneath that queer rapid pounding sound. What was it? Flynn felt his way in the dark and found the rigid mound of Julian’s tumbled form. He could hear an alarming choked whistling as though air were being pressed from a bellows, feel the severe muscle contractions of the body convulsing beneath his hands. A flailing arm grazed his jaw.

It was all the worse for being in the dark.

“Get Dr. Pearson,” Flynn ordered. He reached out, trying to protect Julian’s thrashing head from the forest of table and chair legs.

On the other side of the table Joan was screaming over and over in a complete hysterical fit. There was much stumbling around and cursing in the dark.

“What in tarnation is going on in here?” Dr. Pearson’s voice demanded above the mayhem.

Julian’s fit seemed to be lessening as the lamp at the sideboard against the wall was lit at last.

Mrs. Packard made her way to Joan and slapped her. Joan collapsed in Casey Lee’s arms, sobbing. The others stood bewilderedly gazing down at Flynn and Julian.

Julian lay trembling and pale in the aftermath of his convulsion. His dazed eyes moved unseeing from Flynn’s face to the ceiling to the table.

Mrs. Packard and Amy attempted to soothe Joan, who continued to weep on Casey’s shoulder. He swept her up in his arms and bore her from the room, the worried women on his heels.

“Well, well. What have we here?” Dr. Pearson lowered himself painfully on one knee and examined Julian curiously but not unkindly. He took his pulse, checked his pupils. “You’re all right now, aren’t you?”

Julian didn’t answer. Did not seem aware of his surroundings yet. He kept licking his lips and blinking.

“Let’s get him to bed. The worst of the attack is over. He’ll sleep now.”

“He should have been dosed properly. You shouldn’t have discouraged me,” Devereux said to the doctor. He stroked his grandson’s damp hair with a shaking hand and whispered in French.

“If he’s having these fits more frequently, then yes, we’ll have to dose him with the bromides. You said the fits were rare.”

“This is your fault!” Mr. Devereux charged, and Flynn gazed up at him stupidly.

“How is it my fault?”

“You know what you’ve done. Overexciting him, overtaxing his strength, encouraging him to-to unspeakable—”

Flynn waited in horror for the old man to say it. Rescue came from an unexpected source.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” Dr. Pearson broke in impatiently. “This isn’t doing the young man any good. What he needs now is absolute rest and quiet. Save your dispute for later and help me. Between the three of us we should be able to get him upstairs to his room.”

“I’ll take him,” Flynn said roughly. He bent, gathering Julian carefully in his arms. In fact, Julian, for all his willowy height, was no featherweight, and Flynn did require the assistance of the older men to gain his feet.

He needed their help up the staircase as well, but at last they got the sufferer to his own room, undressed and tucked comfortably inside his bed. By then Julian seemed to be coming back to himself. He clutched Flynn’s hand.

“David...”

“Shhh.”

Devereux senior moved between them, breaking Julian’s hold, and there was nothing Flynn could do or say to stop it. He had no rights here despite the way Julian’s tired, dazed eyes sought him out.

He turned around as Amy appeared at the bedroom door. “Dr. Pearson, you’ve got another patient downstairs. Joan took a fit right after the séance.”

Dr. Pearson, taking Julian’s pulse once more, looked confounded. “Very well.” To Flynn he said, “He’s all right now. I expect he’ll sleep all night and most of tomorrow. Someone should sit with him, though.”

“I’ll sit with him,” Mr. Devereux said with a fierce look at Flynn.

“David,” Julian murmured.

“What are you thinking? Mr. Flynn can’t stay,” Devereux said sternly. The ready tears of the invalid filled Julian’s eyes.

Flynn opened his mouth in protest, but what could he say?

He threw one final look at Julian who was wiping shakily at his tears.

Dr. Pearson had already followed Amy out of the room and down the hallway. Their footsteps rapidly disappeared as the elder Devereux said grimly, “A word, Mr. Flynn.”

Flynn nodded reluctantly and Devereux followed him over to his own room.

“If you come near my grandson again, I’ll go to the sheriff. Julian is not responsible for the things he does. He’s ill. You see that. And you know only a man as ill as Julian would let you do those foul, perverse things to him.”

“Julian might be epileptic, but he’s not a child and he’s not insane.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Devereux said with bitter triumph. “This filthy disease has eaten away his mind and his will. He’s like a child, and for your information, the law recognizes that fact and has placed him in my guardianship.”

“He’s twenty-six years old.”

“He is epileptic. Already he shows the signs of moral insanity.” He glared at Flynn. “I’ve told him and now I’ll tell you, if he doesn’t obey me in every respect, I’ll have him committed for his own damned good.”

“You won’t have him committed,” Flynn said quietly. “That would be the end of the golden goose.”

Devereux said equally low voiced, “But if the golden goose is going to run away with you, Mr. Flynn, then I will have no choice but to have him committed in the hopes the doctors can help him. Or at least keep him from harming himself.”

“*Run away with me?*” Flynn repeated, stunned.

The old man stared at him suspiciously, then said slowly, “You don’t know? You didn’t offer to take him away...?” He laughed an acrid laugh. “There. You see now? You see what that poor, sick, young madman made of your using him? You should be ashamed, sir. And if you approach my grandson again, I’ll see that you’re shamed before all the decent world.”

He left Flynn’s room, closing the door silently behind him.

For a long time Flynn stood motionless, unable to think past Devereux’s words. Distantly he could hear the house still in commotion. He thought that across the hall Julian was crying. His heart squeezed, but he continued to think hard.

There was no way around it, was there?

He couldn’t risk exposure. New York might be more sophisticated in its tastes than Herrin, but it wasn’t *that* sophisticated. Nowhere on the planet was *that* sophisticated. Oh, they could easily manage it if *Grand-père* wasn’t bound and determined to keep his meal ticket. Julian would be safe enough in Greenwich. Flynn could say that he was his distant cousin or some such thing. He would be safe and he would thrive there, and Flynn could make sure he got the care and attention Dr. Pearson had spoken of, particularly the affection and love.

But not if M. Devereux was going to come after them.

He needed to put the thought out of his mind and go to sleep. But sleep wouldn’t come—even after the house settled into a heavy, portentous silence. Flynn lay fully dressed, hands behind his head on his bed, staring out the window at the old, tarnished moon.

It wasn’t possible, was it?

The old man had already had Julian placed in his wardship. He was two steps ahead of them all the way. They couldn’t run away like children or hobos. Start a new life without money or friends?

Perhaps he was the insane one to lie here contemplating such a thing.

And yet...and yet Julian had told the old man they were going away together. Julian *wanted* to go with him.

Sleep was impossible. He felt uneasy, restless. He needed to speak to Julian.

After a time he rose and went down the hall to Julian’s room. He eased open the door. The lamp on the dresser was down low. An ominous-looking bottle and a glass with a spoon in it stood next to the bed. Mr. Devereux sat in a chair near the window, dozing. Julian was lying in bed gazing up at the ceiling.

As the door swung open, he stared at it, stared at Flynn without expression. Flynn came to stand at the end of the bed. “Hello.”

Julian nodded politely.

“How do you feel?”

He curled his lip contemptuously, but said nothing. Flynn shot a quick glance at the old man, gently snoring, and came to sit on the edge of the bed. He took Julian's hand. Julian did not resist, but he didn't respond either. Not even when Flynn leaned forward and kissed him.

His lips were feverish and dry and there was the taste of bitter—medicine or bromide, no doubt—on them.

When Flynn withdrew, Julian gave a long, weary sigh. "Now you know."

"I already knew. I knew the day before yesterday."

Julian's brows drew together. "You did? How?"

"It doesn't matter how," Flynn said, "You could have told me. It doesn't make a difference." And he realized as he said it that it didn't. As frightening as the convulsions were, the fear that the disease might—probably would—grow worse, something about Julian made him feel alive and happy in a way he hadn't in too many years. And if the war had taught him one thing it was that happiness was fleeting and fragile. You had to grab on to it and hold tight for as long as it lasted.

"Oh, it matters," Julian said bitterly. He glanced at the old man in the chair. "You asked about why I can't take the money I earn and go do as I like? Because he's my legal guardian. And if I don't do exactly as he likes, he can have me shut up in an insane asylum or an epileptic colony like the one in New York."

"He can't do it simply on his say so."

"Oh, David." Julian sounded both miserable and impatient. "You still don't understand. This affliction is...it's a curse. And people blame you as though you had control of it. There are plenty of folks who think I'm crazy for seeing spirits. Let alone if they saw me having fits. Any doctor would have me committed if he told them even half of it and let them examine me. Let alone if they knew..." He gave Flynn a despairing look.

"There's a way around it."

Julian's eyes widened. "What are you saying?"

Flynn threw a quick look at the sleeping man. "Did you tell him you would go away with me if I asked you?"

Julian's mouth trembled. "I shouldn't have, I know it. I know you didn't ask, didn't plan on asking. But I-I wanted it to be true."

"And if it was true?"

Julian swallowed hard. "You know the answer. You know how I felt from the first minute I saw you. But it's no use."

"How brave are you?"

"I don't know." Julian's eyes were puzzled.

"I've got friends and I've got family and they're a hell of a lot more powerful than anybody on the side of your loony *grand-père*. But it would be a fight and it wouldn't be a pretty one. Do you have the nerve for it?"

Julian's riveted gaze held his, so Flynn saw each emotion flash past: joy, doubt, fear, stubbornness, despair. "For myself, yes," he whispered. "But I couldn't do that to you. You'd be ruined. You don't know what it would be like."

"Neither do you."

"It would be bad."

"Yes. Probably. He's a stubborn old coot. But then it would be good. That's what I believe."

"I...wish I could believe too..." Julian closed his eyes. Wet glittered beneath his lashes. "Sorry, David. I...can't talk anymore. I want to sleep now."

"All right." David squeezed his hand and rose. "I'll come and see you in the morning."

Tears trickled down Julian's cheeks. He ignored them stoically and said, his voice nearly steady, "We're leaving on the morning train."

"Not now, surely? Not while you're ill?"

"Oh yes. I'll be well enough tomorrow. He'll want me away from here—and you—as soon as possible."

Flynn stared down at his lover—yes, he acknowledged, his lover—and squatted down beside the bed so that his face was level with Julian's.

"Julian?"

Julian's eyes opened, red-rimmed and over-bright.

"We'll see it through together, I promise you. I won't abandon you. I have resources and contacts your grandfather doesn't. Maybe he can paint you—and me—in an unflattering light, but when I'm done I'll have him tarred and feathered and run out of town."

"Don't, David." Julian reached out a quick hand. "He's not evil. He thinks he's protecting me."

"Maybe. But he's using you too." Flynn covered his hand, brought it to his mouth and kissed it. "Rest. I promise it'll be okay."

Julian's eyelids were already fluttering shut.

Flynn watched him and in a few seconds he could see that Julian was sleeping again. He looked with far less affection at the old man, starting to snort as he woke himself with his snoring.

Flynn hesitated. He was ready to do battle now, but clearly Julian was not. It would have to wait, but in one thing he was determined. Julian was not going to be dragged off to another performance in Murphysboro tomorrow morning.

He left the sickroom and stood undecided in the hall.

If he was going to do battle, it would be wise to be as well-prepared as possible. He thought of the medical book that Dr. Pearson had started to hand him and then thought better of. He might as well know now what he was committing to, but either way he was committed. Hope for the best and prepare for the worst, that would be his motto from now on.

Flynn went downstairs. The house was in darkness. The silence seemed complete and absolute. There was a single band of light down the hallway beneath a door. Joan's room he guessed. The other sickroom.

He went into the study and turned on the light. Going to the tall bookshelf, he scanned the green, red, blue bindings for the medical book Dr. Pearson had pulled from the shelf. A gold embossed title caught his eye. *The Burial Customs of Ancient Egypt as Illustrated by the Tombs of the Middle Kingdom.*

For an instant Flynn could not seem to process the information. He recalled his conversation with Julian about the Little Egypt Slayer. That the slayer would be someone his victims knew and trusted, someone with medical knowledge and tools, someone who frequently traveled the countryside, someone so well-known and liked that his eccentricities might be taken for granted.

He took the book down from the shelf and it fell open with the loose-leafed familiarity of an oft-read section.

A priest then cut an opening in the abdominal cavity. The internal organs were removed in ritual fashion leaving only the heart. The ancient sons of the Nile believed that the heart contained the individual's essence and was the centre of intelligence...

Flynn closed the book and shoved it back on the shelf, his mind racing to the events of the séance. To those final moments after Julian had seemed to make contact with Millie Hesse and Flynn had asked the spirit whether she could write the name of her killer on the wall in the letters of light.

He left the study and strode down the silent hall to the dining room. He found the lamp on the sideboard and turned it on. The chairs still lay fallen on the floor, the table had moved two feet to the left. The candelabrum was on the floor. Flynn stared at the wall behind where Julian had sat.

It was simply a blank white wall with two prints of optimistically European landscape. No place on Earth that Flynn recognized. He walked up to the wall and peered closely. There was a small black smudge in the center. He remembered leaning out of his chair to see, but the letters were so small he was unsure how he could have made them out. He bent close and saw the letters, perfectly formed, as though branded in the plaster: *Beware.*

That was the word offered at the first part of the séance. Had Millie Hesse left a second part of the message? Flynn examined the wall with meticulous care. He found another smudge half hidden beneath the bottom frame of the unrecognizable European castle.

He squinted, leaned in closer still. He could barely make out the small scripted letters burnt into the plaster: *Pearson.*

From beyond the grave: *Beware Pearson.*

Flynn turned and ran down the hall to Joan's room. He was distantly aware that Mr. Devereux was coming down the stairs. The old man hissed, "I told you what would happen if you came near my grandson again, Flynn!"

Flynn ignored him. He ran to Joan's door and yanked it open.

The gentle lamplight revealed Joan, naked and still on the sheets. On every flat table and dresser surface of the room stood mason jars of various sizes glinting in the glow of the lamps. An array of surgeon's instruments were arranged on a white towel at the foot of the mattress. Dr. Pearson stood beside the bed calmly, placidly unrolling bandages. Behind him, the full moon seemed to loom outside the window like a great golden eye staring into the room.

As the door swung open, however, Pearson's head jerked up and he gazed in instant affront at Flynn. Though it was the same man who Flynn had spoken to a few hours earlier, it was the face of a stranger. He rattled out a string of nonsensical syllables—was it supposed to be Egyptian? Perhaps it really was.

"Stop," Flynn ordered.

The maniacal stranger who wore Pearson's body snatched up a scalpel and flew across the room at Flynn.

Flynn caught the doctor by his wrists, and as fragile as they felt, the man had an unexpected and terrifying strength. *The strength of a madman*, Flynn thought dimly, wrestling for possession of the scalpel.

He pulled the scalpel away and hurled it outside the room.

"What the devil do you think you're doing?" Mr. Devereux cried, reaching the doorway.

Flynn threw Dr. Pearson back. He bounced off the bed and fell to his knees, suddenly an old man again, broken and bowed. Flynn went to Joan, turning her face to see if she was breathing. To his relief he could see the faint rise and fall of her bony chest, feel her exhalations against his hand.

"Go get Amy and Casey Lee," he told Mr. Devereux, throwing the quilt on the chest at the foot of the bed over Joan. "At least, try to wake them. I'm guessing they're all drugged."

"Drugged?"

"He wouldn't want them interrupting."

Devereux stared at him as though it were Flynn speaking in Egyptian. His mouth moved as he stared back at Joan, at the monstrous array of shining jars and gleaming tools in shocked disbelief.

"Interrupting?" he parroted.

"What do you think he's doing in here? Surgery?" Flynn snapped. "This is the Little Egypt Slayer."

"Y-you're mad."

"No, *he's* mad. Stark, staring mad. It was right there in front of us all the time. Who has a better excuse for traveling the countryside with bloody clothes and bloody instruments? Look, we can talk it out later. Go get Amy or Casey Lee. Or phone the damned sheriff." Flynn lightly slapped Joan's face, calling her name.

Still looking dazed, moving like a sleepwalker, Devereux turned to leave the room.

Dr. Pearson uttered a blood-curdling shriek, launched himself from the floor and grasped another of his razor-sharp instruments from the white cloth on the foot of the bed. He darted across the room, plunging it into the throat of the horror-stricken Mr. Devereux.

Mr. Devereux began to make ghastly choking noises, clawing feebly at the silver blade wedged in his gullet. He slumped to his knees as Flynn grabbed Dr. Pearson and slammed him against the wall. Hard. Pearson's head hit the wall with a crack. He went limp and collapsed on the floor.

Flynn dropped on his knees beside Mr. Devereux. Already the old man's eyes were glazing as he struggled for his final wet gasps. Seeing Flynn, a spark of alertness came into his face. His bloody lips moved, he tried to raise his hand.

Flynn took his hand. "Can you hear me? I promise you I'll take care of him. I love him."

He couldn't tell if the old man heard him or not. Perhaps it was the last thing he wanted to hear. It was certainly the last thing he heard.

For a few stunned seconds Flynn knelt, his mind reeling. Behind him he could hear Dr. Pearson's stentorian breaths. He turned and was struck motionless by the unearthly aspect of the moon, so beautiful, so ancient, so indifferent to all that happened beneath her golden eye.

Unbidden the words of a poem he'd learned back in his school days returned to haunt him.

Ere for eternity thy wings were spread

Alone I listen'd to thy dark farewell.

In two steps he was back at Dr. Pearson's side. He slammed his head into the wooden floor once more for good measure, and ran shouting to wake the household.

About the Author

A distinct voice in GLBT fiction, multi-award winning author Josh Lanyon has written numerous novels, novellas and short stories. He is the author of the critically praised Adrien English mystery series as well as the new Holmes and Moriarity series. Josh is a two-time Lambda Literary Award finalist. To learn more about Josh, please visit www.joshlanyon.com or join his mailing list at groups.yahoo.com/group/JoshLanyon.

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Holmes & Moriarity

Somebody Killed His Editor

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Mexican Heat

(Writing with Laura Baumbach)

He followed all the rules...until one man showed him a dozen ways to break them.

An Improper Holiday

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As second son to an earl, Ian Stanton has always done the proper thing. Obeyed his elders, studied diligently, and dutifully accepted the commission his father purchased for him in the Fifty-Second Infantry Division. The one glaring, shameful, marvelous exception: Nicholas Chatham, heir to the Marquess of Carleigh.

Before Ian took his position in His Majesty's army, he and Nicky consummated two years of physical and emotional discovery. Their inexperience created painful consequences that led Ian to the conviction that their unnatural desires were never meant to be indulged.

Five years later, wounded in body and plagued by memories of what happened between them, Ian is sent to carry out his older brother's plans for a political alliance with Nicky's father. Their sister Charlotte is the bargaining piece.

Nicky never believed that what he and Ian felt for each other was wrong and he has a plan to make things right. Getting Ian to Carleigh is but the first step. Now Nicky has only twelve nights to convince Ian that happiness is not the price of honor and duty, but its reward.

Warning: Just thinking about reading this book in 1814 could get you hanged, so the men in this book who enjoy m/m interaction of an intimately penetrative nature are in a hell of a lot of trouble.

Enjoy the following excerpt for An Improper Holiday:

When at last the door opened, Ian spun 'round to be relieved of his coat, sufficiently irritated by Simmons' delayed arrival to forgo his usual greeting.

Perhaps the fellow had been overindulging in whatever libations were being offered to celebrate the day in the servants' hall because the valet was clumsy rather than deft, struggling just to ease the coat from Ian's shoulders.

"And I shall be retiring, Simmons."

Instead of the expected "Very good, sir," the man left his arms pinned behind his back and brushed his fingers beneath Ian's cravat. The unanticipated contact awakened Ian's skin, his flesh alight with delightful ripples of sensation.

"What the devil?"

He would have turned to face the man, but Simmons stepped closer, hands moving to remove the starched tie while pressing his hips intimately against Ian's arse.

The shock and terror in his gut, even the pain of his confined shoulders, could not dampen the rush of arousal evoked by the touch, by the strength of another man's embrace.

“Simmons. I must ask that you remember yourself.” Ian twisted free, retreating to place a wall at his vulnerable back, but his all-too-vulnerable front was exposed to—Nicky.

The identity of his assailant did little to mitigate Ian’s dismay.

“Are you mad?” Ian struggled with his coat, anger lending him sufficient strength to tear one of the sleeves from the body.

Nicky locked the door and removed his own coat. “It is Boxing Day, after all. Simmons has the evening off, as do almost all of the servants. Surely you would not deprive the man of his well-earned holiday.”

“It is not Boxing Day for another hour,” Ian asserted as the solemn toll of the chapel bell made him a liar. He flung his torn coat to the floor.

Nicky’s cravat parted company with his shirt, revealing a neck still defined with the strong tendons Ian had once traced with his tongue. Quelling thoughts of other flesh his mouth longed to revisit grew more impossible with each piece of clothing Nicky dropped onto the Aubusson rug.

“What are you doing?”

“I am preparing for bed. That bed.” Nicky indicated the four-poster in the center of the room.

“Is the castle so crowded the son of the house has been turned out of his rooms?”

“If it pleases you to think so.” Nicky straightened, torso bared to Ian’s gaze.

Firelight gilded Nicky’s skin, gleaming on the fine hairs of his breast, drawing Ian’s eye to the waist of Nicky’s breeches where the hair thickened and darkened. The garnet on his signet ring flashed as Nicky’s hands moved to those buttons.

Ian shut his eyes. “No.”

“No?” The amusement in Nicky’s voice had Ian looking again, forgetting what imminent danger had prompted his action. But Nicky only bent to remove his shoes and stockings, gifting Ian with the sight of the firm curve of his backside under the tight kerseymere breeches.

Nicky brought his hands to rest above his hips, fingers disappearing under the waistband. “Is it truly no or is that what the good soldier, the dutiful second son, feels compelled to say?”

Ian’s throat burned as it tightened, but he could not look away.

“Whom do you seek to save with your denial, me or you?” Nicky persisted. He stepped closer, but made no move to touch Ian. “Why are we to be denied pleasure when you must know how precious and brief life is?”

“The risk of—”

“You threw yourself against a wall of French rifles in service to your father’s idea of honor. Can you not permit yourself something your own honor knows is right? How can it be wrong when we both desire it?” Nicky shoved his breeches down and stepped free, the proof of his desire standing proud and hard.

As swiftly as snow falling off a steep roof, Ian's body dropped into a pit of raw need. He made a last effort to find any handhold which might keep him from the abyss.

"I do want..." *you* "...this, but only what we did before. We cannot, I will not..." He tried making a gesture to communicate the specific deed.

"Bugger me?" Nicky grinned. "Fuck me?"

Despite Ian's shock, the coarseness of Nicky's words brought a faster beat of blood to Ian's prick. That unabated grin suggested Nicky knew damned well what effect he had wrought. His next step brought Nicky close enough to try the truth with his hand. Fingers traced the outline of Ian's prick beneath a layer of wool and linen, a light pressure that offered nothing beyond exquisite torment. A quick hard rub against the crown, dragging the linen across the damp skin until heat pulsed from the tip, the touch as unerringly accurate as Ian's own.

Pleasure stole his breath as surely as a fist to the stomach. Sucking the air through his teeth, he reached a hand to Nicky's shoulder, hips tipping into the caress.

Nicky leaned forward until his breath moved against Ian's ear. "While I find your concern utterly charming, what makes you believe you could take my arse if I didn't allow it?"

Ignoring the wail of protest from his prick and balls, Ian transferred his grasp to Nicky's wrist to still the motion of his palm. "I am well aware that many now consider me less a man, but with all your protestations, I would have thought—"

Nicky laughed. "Christ, Ian, try not to be more of an ass than the good Lord intended you to be. You couldn't best me even when you had four inches and two-stone advantage."

"I've never had two stones on you, you country-fed beast." The retort came unbidden to his lips, their long habit of verbal sparring impossible to amend.

"By God, how I've missed you." Nicky chuckled and yanked Ian's cravat free.

Ian felt his own lips curve in answer. There had always been so much laughter between them. For years, that absence cut as keenly as the loss of Nicky's touch.

Shoving away bolster and counterpane, Nicky flung himself onto the bed. "Now. Kindly divest yourself of those clothes and get up here before I am forced to seek other amusements."

Nicky arranged himself in a gloriously naked display, familiar laugh and cornflower-blue eyes at odds with the strangeness of a body more heavily muscled, more thickly pelted, but no less enthralling than the one that had filled Ian's dreams as he slept in tents on the edges of battlefields. Longing clawed deeper hollows than all those years of denial, until again Ian was deprived of sufficient breath.

Such was the assault wrought on his senses by Nicky's sprawl across the mattress that Ian had stripped away waistcoat and shirt and unfastened his breeches before Nicky's last words attached themselves to a meaning. The haze of lust clouding Ian's mind took on a red veil of anger.

"Other amusements?"

Nicky sighed and leaned forward, taking Ian by the arm. "I swear to provide you with a detailed history of the past five years in writing and affix the bloody Carleigh seal to my testimony. But if I don't have you right now, one of us will end up dead."

Nicky pulled him with a force too gentle to be compelling, but it was easier by far to let Nicky drag Ian onto the bed than to make the decision himself.

Nicky rolled, trapping Ian beneath, the press of hard warm skin such a shock Ian had to close his eyes against the sensation. When he opened them, there was Nicky, the achingly familiar blue eyes and full lips all Ian could hope of heaven "Which of us?"

"Does it matter?" Nicky rocked against him.

Ian thought again of Aristophanes and Phaedrus and their tales of separated lovers. Of Achilles' terrible grief for Patroclus. "No."

Nicky kissed the word from his mouth in a gentle press of lips, but Ian brought his hand up to tangle at last in those curls and pinned Nicky tight, an upward thrust of hips to feel the harder, wetter kiss of Nicky's cock on Ian's belly.

Nicky wrenched free and reared up, hands working to finish his duty as substitute valet, shoving away Ian's breeches and small clothes until at last their pricks slapped together. Ian thought he had exorcised it from his memory, but there was no forgetting that sensation, the silky heat of Nicky's cock against his.

Adding his spit to slick the way, Nicky held them together, rubbing the thick ridges against each other, washing the whole shaft with heat and pressure. Sweet enough to die from but not enough. God, not enough.

The ghosts of the past will shape your future. Unless you fight them.

Lessons in Power

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A Cambridge Fellows Mystery

Cambridge, 1907.

After settling in their new home, Cambridge dons Orlando Coppersmith and Jonty Stewart are looking forward to nothing more exciting than teaching their students and playing rugby. Their plans change when a friend asks their help to clear an old flame who stands accused of murder.

Doing the right thing means Jonty and Orlando must leave the sheltering walls of St. Bride's to enter a labyrinth of suspects and suspicions, lies and anguish.

Their investigation raises ghosts from Jonty's past when the murder victim turns out to be one of the men who sexually abused him at school. The trauma forces Jonty to withdraw behind a wall of painful memories. And Orlando fears he may forever lose the intimacy of his best friend and lover.

When another one of Jonty's abusers is found dead, police suspicion falls on the Cambridge fellows themselves. Finding this murderer becomes a race to solve the crime...before it destroys Jonty's fragile state of mind.

Warning: Contains sensual m/m lovemaking and hot men playing rugby.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Lessons in Power:

"Jonty?" Orlando didn't usually knock, making do with barging into his friend's room unannounced, hoping to catch him unawares. On this occasion he not only tapped at the door, but tentatively poked his head around it.

"Hello, sweetheart. Come in and stop making a draught."

Orlando shut the door carefully behind him then wandered across to the huge brass bed, where Jonty lay looking like a schoolboy in his striped pyjamas and with his hair all fluffed up from being washed. It was a sight which filled him with thoughts even more tender than those he'd entered the room with. Orlando ruffled his locks. "Feeling better?"

"Much, thank you. Have you been chin-wagging with Mama?"

Orlando nodded. "A pleasant way to pass the time." He sought refuge in bland words, hoping his friend wouldn't come up with any probing questions just yet.

"And would it be pleasant to pass some time in my bed?" Jonty reached out his hand to finger Orlando's tie. "I have a hankering to lie with my lover which won't be easily gainsaid."

"I think I would like that above all things." Orlando started undressing, as brazen as he'd been the afternoon when he'd got drunk and insisted on using Jonty's bath. That now seemed long ago, an age of

great innocence when they knew very little about each other. They knew much more now—hardly anything was kept secret and that only because it didn't really matter in the greater scheme of their lives.

The innocence had now long gone—Orlando couldn't believe what he'd been just a year or so ago. Twenty-seven and a virgin. Twenty-seven and never been kissed. Twenty-seven and likely to remain untouched until he died a dried-up death in a chair in St. Bride's Senior Common Room. Then Jonty Stewart came on the scene and all that had changed. Thank heaven he had.

Orlando wandered through the bathroom which connected their two bedrooms, found his pyjamas, slipped them on, then returned to find Jonty snuggled down, book and reading glasses discarded. Orlando slid between the soft linen sheets, drawing Jonty to him. "I'd hoped it was all over, you know."

"Hmm?"

"This business with the thunder. I always hoped that somehow I could overcome it with my affection for you. 'Perfect love casteth out fear' and all that."

"Well it should do, Orlando, but somehow it's not as easy as it seems. We do have perfect love for each other and I'd regard myself as blessed above all men 'were it not that I have bad dreams'." Jonty shuddered, as if he were shaking off memories as easily as he could shake off his jacket.

"Do you? Nightmares?"

"No, clown." Jonty pinched his lover's backside. "I was quoting your pal Hamlet. It isn't the land of nod, wherever I go when the storms come. I don't feel distressed or see visions, I just visit somewhere else. Very odd."

"I think you go there to protect yourself, in case you remember anything." Orlando smoothed his lover's hair, admiring the golden tones, the hints of auburn the firelight threw up.

"You could well be right. I don't want to remember the gruesome details, thank you." Jonty snuggled onto his lover's chest. "Want to make new memories with you. I think we should somehow wangle it one night, you know, make love while a storm is at its height. That might just get rid of all the trouble. If I could keep *here* for long enough to take an active part."

Orlando held him tighter, kissed his brow. "I suppose I could pinch you or something. Shame there's not been a storm since we got the house—being there would make it easier."

"There'll be plenty in the spring. We just need to plan things. You'll like that, working out your military strategy." Jonty giggled and launched an assault on his lover's collarbone.

"Seems you've got a strategy worked out." Orlando responded by caressing Stewart's back, little, tender movements which always brought contentment to them both.

"Sort of. It's been a long time since we shared the last favours, my love. I've been skittish for too long."

The business with Jardine had become an ever-present menace, as if those who'd committed such outrages on Jonty had somehow found access to his bedroom and were standing gloating, spoiling even the most innocent of pleasures.

Orlando had been frustrated yet endeavoured to understand—he had to be patient, the worst thing to do would be rushing or forcing things. None of this logical reasoning had helped. Now the lowering clouds of unease seemed to have lifted and the sunshine of affection warmed him beyond measure. “If you’re sure, I’m ready.”

“You always are, Dr. Coppersmith. Since you discovered the delights of the flesh you’ve become quite a hedonist. Just imagine if I’d taken up that post in Ireland, you’d never have known any of this.”

Orlando swallowed hard, hating to be reminded of how close he’d been to not having Jonty by him. “Don’t remind me of that. Small turning points, that’s what life consists of. One little decision and the whole world changes.”

“It does. As it did for us.” Jonty reached up to kiss him. “Come on, I want you to lie with me. Been far too long.”

Orlando didn’t reply. Lips and hands could talk for him, kisses saying *yes* as loudly as tender touches did. Jonty’s skin was warmer than expected beneath his boyish pyjamas, and wafts of something lovely, which might have been lavender soap, assailed Orlando’s senses as he undid any buttons which had survived his first assault. To feel Jonty’s chest against his own, downy skin on smooth, was a necessary part of their lovemaking for him, a sign that they were indeed one, and not meant to be split asunder.

He still wasn’t sure how far Jonty wanted to pursue this. There was hesitancy in his touch, some slight tentativeness which didn’t usually grace their bed. He gently caressed the small of his lover’s back and was pleased to find that, at least for the moment, his hands were allowed to carry on.

Jonty twisted in his lover’s arms, using his powerful muscles to turn Orlando, give himself the dominance. He stretched over his lover, a protective canopy against the cold, the world, anything which might disturb them this night. Orlando burrowed into the security, enjoying the unusual sensation of being looked after. He preferred to be the protective one, guarding his most treasured possession, but Ariadne Peters’s words had stuck with him. He knew he shouldn’t always be the protector.

Tender kisses on the side of his neck made him tingle, firm strokes on his lower back made the sensation spread. However far Jonty wanted to go, he was ready, more than ready. He inched his fingers from the smooth skin of Jonty’s lower back down towards their target, a movement which normally brought delighted acquiescence, manoeuvring of body and legs to allow access. Not this time.

“What’s wrong?” Orlando spoke into his lover’s hair. Jonty had tensed—he was trying to hide it, but Orlando knew.

“I can’t. I’m sorry.” Jonty pulled away, rolling onto his back and staring at the ceiling.

“Is it this wretched thunder?” Orlando laid a tentative hand on his lover’s arm. A protective, comforting gesture, with no hint of desire.

“No. Yes. It’s everything.” Jonty crossed his arms over his face, shaking off Orlando’s hand in the process. “I’m back there, in my mind. A boy of thirteen in a cold room praying for a fire alarm to sound, or anything that would make *it* stop.”

“Dear God.” Orlando knew this had happened before, but never with him—all he could do was wait for Jonty to come out of the slough of despond.

“Put off the light and go to sleep, sweetheart. I don’t think I’ll be able to get off for a while.”

“Should I stay here? I’ll do whatever you think best.”

“Please, if you could bear it. I’ll be fine, soon. Just tonight...I couldn’t do it tonight.” Jonty turned, pulling the covers over his head.

“Of course.” Orlando didn’t attempt to touch his friend. For the moment they were beyond words or contact. There was a chance, more than a chance, that it would be a long time before *doing it* became a viable option again.

A quirky holiday romance about Faith, Hope, and...er...glow-in-the-dark condoms!

The Dickens with Love

© 2009 Josh Lanyon

Three years ago, a scandal cost antiquarian “book hunter” James Winter everything that mattered to him: his job, his lover and his self-respect. But now the rich and unscrupulous Mr. Stephanopoulos has a proposition. A previously unpublished Christmas book by Charles Dickens has turned up in the hands of an English chemistry professor by the name of Sedgwick Crisparkle. Mr. S. wants that book at any price, and he needs James to get it for him. There’s just one catch. James can’t tell the nutty professor who the buyer is.

Actually, two catches. The nutty Professor Crisparkle turns out to be totally gorgeous—and on the prowl. Faster than you can say, “Old Saint Nick,” James is mixing business with pleasure...and in real danger of forgetting that this is just a holiday romance.

Just as they’re well on the way to having their peppermint sticks and eating them too, Sedgwick discovers the truth. James has been a very bad boy. And any chance Santa will bring him what he wants most is disappearing quicker than the Jolly Old Elf’s sleigh.

Warning: This book contains an ocelot, songs by America, Stardust martinis, tinsel, long-lost manuscripts, Faith, Hope and...Love.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Dickens with Love:

I dreamed that an ocelot was chewing on a first edition of *A Christmas Carol*. When I tried to snatch the book away, it sank its fangs into my hand.

Head throbbing, I opened my eyes to watery green daylight. I was in a hotel room. A very comfortable hotel room that smelled of orange furniture polish and sex. The fluffy duvet and long draperies were in matching old-fashioned pink and gray cabbage rose print. Rain trickled down the windowpanes of a pair of French doors and sent sperm-shaped shadows twitching and jerking across the sage green walls.

My head hurt. That was because I’d had too much to drink. My hand hurt. That was because a strange man was lying on it.

I wriggled my hand out from under my naked companion and studied him. Sedgwick Crisparkle looked less angelic and more rakishly debauched that morning. He had quite a heavy beard and the longest eyelashes I’d ever seen on a guy. He did not snore, but he made a gentle puffing sound. He looked deeply asleep and unreasonably content.

I flexed my fingers a couple of times, then sat up carefully, wincing, and looked around for my clothes. They were on the floor near the door where I’d apparently dropped them. I inched over, trying not to wake my host, and got slowly, cautiously out of bed.

I had to stop halfway to the door to give my spinning head a rest. How the hell much had I had to drink the night before? Not that much really, but I hadn't eaten. Those shooting stars, or whatever they were called, packed an unexpected wallop. I tried to make out the numbers on my watch. They seemed very tiny. I peered harder.

Six thirty. Plenty of time. I didn't need to be at work until four. I could go home, sleep more, shower, and...call Mr. S.

"Not feeling well?"

I jumped, whimpered and clutched my head. "Must you shout?"

"Sorry." Part of what he said was lost in a gigantic yawn. "Didn't mean to startle you."

I heard the rustle of bedclothes being thrown back and the pad of bare feet on carpet. The drapes were jerked shut and the room returned to a soothing darkness. I heard him pad past me on his way back to bed, so when a warm hand was laid on my naked shoulder I did another of those starts and yelps.

"You have a very nervous disposition," Sedgwick said disapprovingly. "You ought to consider supplementing your diet with bee pollen."

I gazed up at him, opened my mouth. Closed it. Closed my eyes. Why not? I was clearly still dreaming. *Bee pollen?*

"I think you should come back to bed." I opened my eyes at that particular note in his voice. Sedgwick was smiling a funny sort of shy half-smile. "I think you'd feel much better in bed."

He put his arm around me and I permitted myself to be led back to bed.

When I woke the next time the sun was shining and a busboy was carefully lowering a large tray with covered dishes to the table in front of the fireplace.

"Lovely," Sedgwick was saying as he signed the busboy's chit.

I raised my head, peering owlishly over the edge of the duvet, and the busboy grinned at me before taking his bill book and departing.

When the door had safely closed, I climbed out of bed, pulled on my jeans—to Sedgwick's evident disappointment—and investigated the breakfast tray. A white teapot, two gold-rimmed china cups, a jar of honey, a small basket of muffins and nut breads, a bowl of fresh berries. One plate offered eggs Benedict with shaved honey ham and what appeared to be an herbed Hollandaise sauce. Another plate had thick round Belgian waffles, richly, sweetly scented of vanilla, cinnamon and topped with whipped cream, fresh strawberries and pecans.

"I wasn't sure what you liked," Sedgwick said at whatever he read in my expression. "We can share or I can order you something completely different." He was wearing the kind of gorgeous silk dressing gown people only wear in old movies and the horn-rimmed glasses, but even behind those severe glasses his face looked much younger and softer that morning.

I dropped down on the fat comfortable chair cattycorner to the table. “No. This is...amazing. Any of this is fine.” I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had a breakfast like this.

He looked smug. “We’ll split everything down the middle.”

“We will if we eat all this.”

He laughed. “I admit I don’t usually eat like this, although I do like my breakfasts. I’m on holiday, though, so...when in Rome.”

“I’m very glad you’re not in Rome this morning.” I heard myself say that and cringed. Talk about sappy. I added quickly, “I’d be eating a bowl of Cheerios right now.”

“I’m glad I’m not in Rome too.” He smiled right into my eyes.

After that I couldn’t think of anything to say, and I devoted myself to eating that fantastic breakfast.

As vocal as Sedgwick had been in bed, he was not terribly chatty over breakfast. It seemed to be a replete and satisfied silence, though. He appeared content, and each time our eyes met, he offered that disarming smile.

In fact, it felt so natural and comfortable between us, I was encouraged to ask, “Will you let me have another look at *The Christmas Cake*?”

Sedgwick’s gaze dropped to the egg-topped muffin he was neatly cutting through. “No.”

“No?” I felt bewildered, not least by the brusqueness of this. “Why?”

He sighed. “After last night I’d hoped you’d let this go.”

What the hell did last night have to do with it? “I was hired to appraise the book. I’m being paid to do that. If I ‘let this go’ I also have to let go of that commission. Which I need.”

He said quietly, “James, I think we’re both realists.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“If you don’t stop now, you’re liable to spoil this, you know.”

“No, I don’t know. Spoil this? How is asking to see the book spoiling anything?” And now I was starting to get annoyed.

Behind the severe glasses, Sedgwick raised his green-gold eyes, gave me a long, direct stare.

“I don’t know what that look is supposed to mean.”

“It means we’re having a very nice time together. Let’s not ruin it by bringing up...unpleasant memories.”

It took me a beat or two to work out what he was referring to. The rush of anger and hurt left me feeling winded. Lack of oxygen made my voice come out flat and compressed. “I thought you didn’t believe the rumors about me.”

He said with all the dispassionate exactitude one could ask of a science teacher, “What I said was, no one accused you of being directly involved in murder or forgery. That is *all* I said.”

I'm sure my disbelief showed on my face. Hopefully nothing else showed. The laugh that escaped me took us both by surprise. "You're right. My mistake."

I got up, my knee knocking the edge of my plate and tipping it over. The waffle landed in a sticky plop face down on the plush carpet. I didn't give a fuck about that. I didn't give a fuck about anything at that point. It was all very clear, diamond-edged and razor-bright. He didn't trust me. He thought I had possibly been involved in murder and forgery, but he liked having sex with me—or possibly with anyone and I happened to be willing—and he didn't want me to spoil that by bringing up something as awkward as business.

Sedgwick rose too. "James."

I ignored him, finding my shirt and buttoning it up quickly. I got one of the buttonholes misaligned, so it hung crookedly—appropriately, it seemed—but I didn't care. Was not going to stay in that room one instant longer than I had to.

"James—?"

I was hunting with fierce attention for my other shoe. I found it under his side of the bed.

"Apparently I've offended you. I...didn't intend to."

Now that was almost funny. I slipped the shoe on. I was missing my socks, but that really seemed a small price to pay for getting out of there without committing murder for real.

"I'm not sure what I—oft times I put things more bluntly than I intend," Sedgwick was saying. He sounded a fraction impatient. "Don't you think you're overreacting?"

I found my jacket and headed for the door. He was right behind me.

"James, I really don't *see*—" He put a hand on my shoulder, and I spun around and shoved him back. The arm of the sofa caught him behind his thighs, and he half fell back over it, glasses crooked, blinking up in astonishment at me.

I said, "Enjoy the rest of your stay in L.A., asshole."

I managed not to slam the door on my way out.



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