

*The Friend of
White Buck Hall*

PENELOPE MARZEC



The Fiend of White Buck Hall
by Penelope Marzec

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by Penelope Marzec

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For Jan

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Chapter One

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March 1897, Stony Mill, New Jersey

Molly Coan turned away from the window. One other table was occupied in the dining room of the Stony Mill Inn, but the man had his back to her and that was fine. She could not take any chances. What if the man had seen a drawing of her on a poster? Twisting a handkerchief in her hands, she wiped away the dampness on her palms.

The innkeeper, a wiry man with several missing teeth, brought her the tea she had ordered. She had been starving herself for more than three weeks, but once she reached her destination, there should be something more substantial for her to eat.

"Can you point out the way to White Buck Hall?" she asked the innkeeper.

The man stared at her with shock on his face. "Nobody goes there."

"But ... I'm to be Mr. Hillyer's secretary."

His eyes narrowed as he stared at her. "If I were you, I'd go back where you came from." Drawing closer, he whispered. "Thomas Hillyer is an albino—and you know what they say about them. They're witches and mind readers."

She felt the blood drain from her face, but she stiffened her spine and retorted. "Mr. Hillyer is a scientist."

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The innkeeper gave a dry laugh. "Ha! He is a madman or worse. He calls himself a wizard and them that works for him—why they're all peculiar. There's a dwarf, a deaf mute, and a bearded lady. Freaks, the lot of them."

Apprehension slid along her shoulders, but she primly informed the innkeeper he was merely spouting off gossip. "You should have more compassion toward those afflicted with unfortunate physical defects."

The innkeeper shrugged. "Be that as it may, mark my words about the man. There are strange happenings at White Buck Hall. There are them that say Thomas Hillyer bargains with the Devil."

She chilled at his words. A cold knot formed in her stomach and her hunger vanished as fearful images swirled through her mind, but she forced away her doubts.

"That is preposterous."

"You won't be able to reach White Buck Hall before nightfall, even if you take the shortcut through the woods," the innkeeper explained. "And it is madness to go into the woods at night for the white buck is sure to come upon you. He can hypnotize them what stares into his eyes—and then he steals their soul."

She pressed her lips together as her temper rose. "That sounds like nothing more than a horrid fairy tale."

He reassured her he had a vacancy for the night. "I've seen the creature myself. It is a fearsome beast—the very spawn of Satan."

She clutched her bag tightly so he would not see her hands shake. "You are trying to frighten me."

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"There'll be no help for you once you cross into the white buck's territory."

Molly's stomach growled. She refused to listen to his warning. After wrangling directions from him, she set off for the dense woods at the edge of town.

She found the path. Quite worn and easy to follow, it paralleled a wide river. The chill of late March seeped through her thin jacket and her teeth chattered. Spring remained thoroughly hidden in the woods. The only green she saw was the thick, velvet moss carpeting the gnarled tree roots.

When the sun sank below the hill, her heart quailed within her. Though a rosy tint touched the distant horizon, above her the sky clouded to a somber violet. She pushed herself to hurry along but with starvation clawing at her stomach her limbs felt like leaden weights.

The toe of her scruffy Oxford hit a root hidden by the lengthening gloom and she stumbled onto a log beside the path. Fortunately, her eyeglasses did not fall off. She pushed herself up and sat on the log. After dusting the dirt from her wool skirt, she lifted it to examine her knee. Swelling rapidly, the joint hurt if she bent it the slightest bit.

"I should have stolen a lantern from the inn," she grumbled to herself. After all, she was already considered a criminal. The familiar ache rose in her throat at the injustice she had suffered, but she swallowed past the pain.

When she heard a rustling in the leaves, her heart beat furiously in her chest.

"Whoo who who?"

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The question echoed through the woods and she realized it came from above her. Glancing upward, she saw a silhouette in a tree. It must be an owl. At least, she hoped that's what it was and not some awful demon. If the innkeeper had been trying to terrify her, he had done a very good job of it!

She got up and gingerly put her knee to the test. She could still walk, though with a slight limp. It would take her even longer now to reach her destination. But while the sky grew darker, a half moon's light filtered down through the branches and provided enough illumination for her to see the path.

Hobbling along, she soon came upon a small bridge and stopped to lean on the railing in order to rest her injured knee. The bridge crossed a stream that tumbled down the hill into the larger river. The water gurgled as it rushed over stones and fallen limbs. It might be a pretty sight in the daytime, but in the pale moonlight everything about the shadowed woods became sinister and evil.

She did not doubt that the cold shivers causing her to tremble came more from the disturbing ideas the old innkeeper had planted in her mind than from the temperature. Surely, without the innkeeper's alarming stories, she would not be so tense. She was ready to jump at her own shadow.

She barely finished that thought when she heard something crashing through the underbrush behind her. In a panic, she sought to run but she stumbled and caught herself on the railing. With her twisted knee preventing a quick

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escape, she fought to calm herself. She was overreacting. Surely only a large squirrel was bounding through the woods.

Slowly, she forced herself to turn toward the sound. She turned numb with terror as she stared at the creature standing on the path behind her. The snow-white buck's sleek coat seemed to shimmer in the moonlight and the red of his eyes shone like perfect rubies. The buck's height and weight far surpassed her own—in fact, she had never imagined a deer would be so huge. Each tip of his antlers looked lethal. She barely breathed as she gripped the narrow railing with hands that felt like ice inside her kid gloves.

The buck stood proud and haughty, glaring at her as if she was the unwanted interloper. He snorted and a stream of vapor flowed from his rosy nostrils like a dragon in a hideous fairytale.

The buck can hypnotize them what stares into his eyes—and then he steals their soul. In the daylight, the innkeeper's warning seemed ludicrous, but in the woods, in the dark, and alone with the beast it became entirely possible.

His gaze swept up from her Oxfords to her worn hat. His head tilted as he made his assessment, eyeing her as if she might be his next meal.

His muscles rippled in the moonlight while the breeze stirred. The primitive and musky odor of the animal wafted into her nostrils. She did not find it offensive; unaccountably it stirred her senses. An odd quiver surged through her veins.

The stamp of his hooves on the hard-packed earth of the path broke the spell. Her mind raced with alarm as he moved toward her. Would he leave her alone if she stepped aside?

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"I ... I'll get out of your way" With her heart hammering, she inched backward but her awkward limp hampered her progress. The buck stepped forward, shaking his proud head. Then he lowered it so that his antlers pointed toward her.

"Please ... there's no reason to attack me." She let go of the railing and turned, fully aware that she could never run faster than the buck. *Perhaps I can climb a tree!* However, in the pallid moonlight she saw nothing but enormously tall, straight trees with branches too far from the ground for her to reach.

As she stepped off the bridge, the heavy hooves of the buck tramped across it. Then his footsteps stopped—right in the middle of the span. Cautiously, she looked back while she leaned against a tree trunk to give her knee a rest.

Rigid and still like a statue, the buck stared off toward the river. The entire woods went silent, not even a dry leaf rustled.

The crack of a rifle shattered the hush and Molly screamed when the buck staggered backwards. A dark stain grew on his flank. If she went to help him, would he hurt her? He was a wild animal and as such should not be trusted.

But he was in pain and in need of help.

She rummaged through her bag and pulled out her mangled handkerchief thinking to staunch the bleeding with it. With care, she moved toward the buck. He did not appear to notice her as he licked his wound.

Another shot exploded in the woods directly above her head and pieces of bark flew away from a tree trunk.

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"Stop shooting!" She dove behind the tree and cowered on the ground. Closing her eyes and covering her ears, she shook as she lay at the foot of the tree with ice in her veins. What madman prowled these woods?

With her pounding heart echoing in her ears, she could not hear other noises. Then something gently nudged her shoulder and she nearly fainted with fright. She dared to open her eyes, hoping the hunter had come to check on her and apologize for his poor aim.

However, she found herself staring into the unholy crimson glare of the great white buck. He gave a soft snort and the warmth of his breath fanned her face. Dark drips of blood splattered from his wound onto the dried brown leaves of the forest floor.

"I ... I have a handkerchief ... maybe I can"

He shook his head and nudged her again. Confused and still trembling, she reached out to touch his soft pink nose. He breathed into her hand and her gaze clouded in sympathy with tears.

"Does it hurt badly?" She had taken care of her father in his last days, but she had no idea how she could ease the pain of such a large creature.

With clumsy movements, she got off the ground. The buck sniffed at her hair and her neck before nestling his nose at her bosom.

She saw a large, clear crystal on a knotted leather string dangling from his neck.

Tentatively, she reached out to finger the crystal. Warmth pulsed up her arm at the contact. The buck lifted his head

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slightly to slide the heat of his tongue along her neck, gently kissing her. She did not pull away. A strange longing vibrated inside her.

"I can try to help you," she murmured. She moved to his side and pressed her handkerchief against the wound. The blood from the deep gash soaked rapidly through the cloth. Her fingers shook. What should she do next? She could pull a ruffle from her petticoat, but before she could do so, another rifle round splintered a fallen log not a yard from the buck's back feet.

She screamed again and dropped to the ground. At once, the buck bolted away. She watched as his white tail flew behind him like a flag while he bounded up the hillside. The grace and strength of the fine creature took her breath away.

But what was to become of her? Could she escape the hunter in the night that seemed to be preying on anything that moved? Drawing her arms about her, she listened. The woods lay silent again; the hush sent a shiver through her for it seemed as if every creature held their breath. Waiting

In the eerie quiet, she sat mulling over her choices. She had two. Stay hidden all night in the woods or get back on the path and continue to White Buck Hall. Hunger influenced her decision.

Groping about, she found a sturdy fallen branch to help take the weight off her aching knee. With it, she limped along the path in the moonlight.

Another owl hooted high up in a tree and a small creature scurried across her path, but she did not fear the animals. The danger came from a man. The bitter taste of truth soured

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in her throat. The deep woods were no different than the bustling city.

She struggled along until she reached the top of a crest where the woods ended abruptly. Below her, a broad lawn swept down to a large mansion sheltered on all sides by towering evergreens. The chimneys belched smoke into the somber night. She had never seen such a grand home.

From the corner of her eye, she caught sight of a dark figure walking toward her along the tree line. The rifle in his hands glinted in the moonlight. Her breath caught in her throat. As she turned to flee, she saw a flash of white on her right. The buck jumped out of the woods and tore off across the lawn headed toward the house with his bright coat an easy mark. The rifleman raised the gun to his shoulder.

"No!" She shouted in fury. The wicked man had already injured the noble beast.

In horror, she watched him swing around to lock his sight on her. She lunged for safety. The man fired and the whistle of the bullet whizzed past her ear. Ducking behind a wide tree, she tried to catch her breath. How long did it take to reload a gun? Should she try running now?

Cautiously, she peered out from behind the tree. As she suspected, the gunman's head was bent over the task of putting another bullet in his rifle. She could never make it to White Buck Hall before he finished.

Her short, hard scrabble life had come to a certain end. She closed her eyes and prayed as she heard a metallic click, but that sound was quickly followed by a hideous scream. Startled, she opened her eyes to see that the white buck had

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used his antlers to spear the man. After lifting him into the air, he tossed him to the ground and then with vicious intent, he trampled upon the hunter with his hooves.

She held back a scream. He remained silent on the ground. Was he dead? She did not want to get close enough to find out. The buck stood over him.

She could not blame the buck for his action—it was self-defense, and he had undoubtedly saved her life as well.

She poked around until she found the branch she needed to help her walk. Trembling badly and feeling lightheaded, she got to her feet once more. She would hurry and tell Mr. Hillyer about the incident. He could arrange to have someone take care of the hunter.

However, as she limped toward the great house, the buck turned and ran toward her. Sudden fear iced up her spine. She stood rigid and held her breath. Could she still trust the animal after the way he had brutally attacked that man?

The creature slowed as he came closer. When he was but a foot away, he lowered his head so that his eyes were level with hers. Terror wound through her. His gaze locked with hers and she could not glance away. His eyes were hard, cold, commanding, and evil.

Panic rose in her chest and the breath went out of her. He drained away the very essence of her—her soul. She wanted to scream but she could not open her mouth. Strange images whirled through her mind. It was as if she was no longer standing on the ground but running through the woods, leaping like a deer over fallen logs—free and wild.

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Her heart fluttered as her pulse faded. The last of her strength failed her and she fell to the ground as all went black.

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Chapter Two

Thomas Hillyer clenched his wand in one hand while he gritted his teeth against the pain and struggled not to hobble as he paced back and forth in the small room. His powers of concentration had completely scattered. Moreover, he had aggravated the wound riding hard to bring back the doctor who had only agreed to come along because he held a gun to his head. Nothing could be done about the broken body of the hunter, but as for Molly Coan, the doctor made no promises other than to return later in the day to see if she had come round.

"That doctor is useless." Thomas's frustration grew as the minutes ticked by and the woman remained pale and unconscious.

"There isn't much that can be done." Rafe leaned over to wring out a cold cloth before he pressed it to the woman's head.

"I'm firing you, Rafe!" Thomas swore. A small bolt of lightning sprang from the crystal at the top of the wand to land on the floor under the dwarf's feet.

"You'd be hard pressed put to find another assistant willing to deal with your fits of temper."

"Why did you post that advertisement in that newspaper?"

"You complained about my spelling."

"You should use a dictionary."

Wringing out another cloth, Rafe calmly stated, "Molly is a secretary. I'm sure she's an excellent speller."

"She's a woman, by God! Women belong at home."

"What about Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell and Dr. Marie E. Zakrzewska? Women have made great strides."

Thomas stopped pacing long enough to study the woman on the bed. Her complexion reminded him of the soft petals of trailing arbutus that grew wild in the woods—the palest pink and so very delicate. "Dammit! One look at me, and she will be will frightened."

"If she is, it will be your own fault."

"I am an anomaly!"

"So am I. However, I've found the use of the social graces an invaluable aid in putting people at ease. If you persist in your obstinacy to retain all your rough edges it will be to your detriment."

"I will not change my personality to please anyone!" He thundered as he twisted the wand in his hand. "Least of all some silly female who should be at home."

There came a sudden cry from the woman. He frowned and clenched his jaw tightly.

"No, Mr. Filmont." The woman shook her head slightly as she spoke, though her eyes remained closed. "You cannot be so cruel" Her words faded away to a whisper but lines appeared in her face along with a look of pain.

"Filmont?" Thomas pressed his lips firmly together. The dead hunter's name was Silas. Did Miss Coan have something to do with Filmont? The old anger shot bile into his stomach.

"Isn't he one of your Philadelphia society neighbors?" Rafe removed one cloth and applied another.

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"Yes, but he is also the man who cheated my father." He spat out the words. "I have always placed the blame on him for the stroke that led to my father's death."

"Well, we don't know if that's who she's dreaming about, but doesn't she have a sweet voice? I am glad to hear it and I'm sure she will wake up soon."

Thomas cast a brief glance at the sunshine of the new day, but it hurt his pale eyes and he turned his gaze back to the shadows. His shoulders sagged as the searing pain from the wound sapped his energy. He fingered the quartz crystal around his neck. "Even if she lives, it will not help me. They'll consider me responsible for the murder."

"It happened on your land." Rafe noted with a sigh.

Thomas muttered several more curses under his breath. He struggled to rein in his frustration and temper. Rafe would take him to task if he alarmed the delicate female again.

He could not help admiring her unblemished skin, finely veined and as fragile as a moth's wings. A sudden urge came upon him to know if her flesh felt as smooth as it looked. Instead, he squeezed the wand until he thought he would crush it. He did not need this distraction! He had intended to finish his research. He was positive he had an answer for improving prescience—at least in albino mice. He let out a heavy sigh.

"The lynching mob is probably on their way right now," he grumbled.

"I think they'd prefer to burn you." Rafe shrugged. "Spawn of the devil and all that."

"Would you hand them the match?"

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Rafe chuckled. "I daresay the townspeople of Stony Mill wouldn't mind seeing the last of me as well."

Thomas cursed the day he was born. "What would Averill do?"

"Why—Averill would give this lovely young lady a job—if that's what she wants."

"I'm not talking about her," Thomas grumbled. "I'm talking about the mob that is surely due to arrive."

"Averill would be certain to entertain them." Rafe sighed. "He always said, 'Anyone can perform tricks, but a wizard creates magic.'"

Thomas nodded. A wave of weariness hit him and he realized he had gotten no sleep at all. He pulled up a chair and eased into it. The throbbing hurt did not subside. That was not supposed to happen. The spell had gone wrong, and it was one he had gotten from Averill's grimoire. The old man had been a master and Thomas was well-aware of his own shortcomings.

"I'm a second rate wizard."

"Don't start that again."

Thomas frowned at Rafe and noticed the dark circles beneath the dwarf's eyes. He had gotten no rest either. Usually Rafe more than made up for his size with an abundance of energy, but as he hovered over the woman Thomas could see the strain taking its toll on his assistant.

"I'll take over," he ordered.

Rafe shot him a severe look. "If she opens her eyes, you'd better be smiling at her."

He stretched his mouth into a wide grin. "Like this?"

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"Try something less forced."

"Go. I promise not to be an ogre, but when she recovers she's going back home."

"Give her a chance."

"No. She does not belong here." He set his jaw. *Especially if she is associated with Joseph Filmont*

Rafe slid off the chair until his feet landed heavily on the floor. "I'll have Cook bring some breakfast to you on a tray."

Thomas knew he would be wasting his breath if he told Rafe he wanted nothing to eat. He moved to the chair Rafe had been occupying and turned to the basin of water. It was ordinary water. He studied the swollen bump on Molly's head, recalling that blue was the color for headaches. Lifting his wand, he held it over the water. Closing his eyes he focused his mind on images of the ocean. Then he opened his eyes, swirled the wand around and touched the tip of the crystal to the water. The water turned into a bluish-green liquid.

He was off the mark again. All this hubbub had fractured his skills of concentration.

Dunking another cloth up and down in the basin, he watched Molly Coan breathe. Her chest rose and fell in a regular rhythm—a good sign the doctor had said.

"Any woman having an ounce of common sense would never dare to walk in the woods in the dark alone." Twisting the cloth to wring it out, he lifted the warm cloth from her forehead and gently replaced it with a cooler one. What madness had driven her to Stony Mill?

He clenched his jaw. It was Rafe's fault for putting that damned advertisement in the newspaper.

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Lightly, his fingers slid down to touch the woman's skin. Not a single pockmark marred the surface. Something tightened in his chest.

He leaned closer and felt the throbbing pain from the gash in his skin.

Dammit.

He pulled his hand away.

He needed to be in control. He needed to concentrate. He could not allow some involuntary compulsion to force him into reckless behavior.

He glared at her. Her skin had reminded him of the softness of newly hatched chicks.

He wanted to feel it again. Holding his breath, he glided his callused palm down her cheek and then further ... to her neck where he paused to linger over her warm, sweet pulse. She reminded him of wildflowers and sunshine.

Despite the pain of his injury, she held him spellbound. He gazed at the swell of her bosom covered by the blanket. Dare he touch her there? His hand hovered above the blanket as he struggled with his conscience.

He moved instead to touch her hair, which had escaped the pins holding it captive. He lifted up a heavy length of it. It flowed over his palm like dark water down a hillside in the night. He laid it down on the coverlet. It reached to her waist. He lifted it again and breathed in the scent of honeysuckle. Visions of the sweet yellow flowers filled his mind.

Suddenly more shaken than he would care to admit, he released her hair and drew his hand away. Surely, madness was taking over his soul.

"You are married." Soft but clear, the words from her sweet, rosy lips startled him.

"I am not," he retorted.

"I know ... the truth."

To his amazement, though her eyes remained closed a tear rolled down her cheek. He wiped it away with a corner of the blanket, but another tear soon followed in its tracks. His own heart chilled. Was she still thinking of Filmont? What had he done to her? A flare of fury rose up in his chest and he balled up his fists.

Cook's heavy tread sounded in the hallway and he straightened in his chair. The tall cook entered the room and set a tray on the table. Though deaf and mute, he never missed much of what was happening. He cast a brief glimpse toward Thomas and then moved to stand beside the bed. Pulling out his handkerchief, he swiped at one of the tears coursing down Molly's cheek. Then he handed the handkerchief to Thomas.

He thanked Cook by signing. Cook made the sign for beautiful woman and then changed it to beautiful angel. Smiling he left the room.

Turning his attention to Molly once more, Thomas found her cheeks dry. She appeared to be quiet and peaceful once more, untroubled by her dreams of Mr. Filmont. Her long, brown lashes fanned out on her cheeks as she breathed softly in and out.

"Angels have curly blond hair," he commented softly. "In fact, they are quite similar to albinos, but your brown hair is

straight, Miss Molly Coan. There are no brunette angels in heaven."

But what if there were? Would they look like Molly Coan? He could not deny that she intrigued him. It had been a long time since any woman had held his interest for more than a few minutes.

Cook lumbered into the room once more with a fresh basin of icy water and some clean cloths. He frowned at the untouched tray of food and signed to Thomas telling him to eat.

Obediently, Thomas went to the table, picked up a fork and dug into the eggs. Cook smiled, picked up the basin of blue-green water and left the room.

The aroma of the bacon resting next to the eggs teased Thomas's appetite briefly. Still, the smarting wound plagued him and he dropped the fork. He could do without food and sleep. He wanted to get back to his laboratory and his research. He did not have the statistical data to prove his hypothesis—yet. But he was close.

He should never have faulted Rafe's poor spelling.

Dammit.

He went back to the bedside and picked up a clean cloth. He decided not to waste his energy coloring the water, but when he dunked the cloth into the basin, his hands nearly went numb. The water must have come from the springhouse. Removing the old cloth from Molly's head, he replaced it with the icy one. Instantly, the bracing shock evoked a gasp from the woman. Her eyes slowly opened.

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A thrill went through him and he stared in fascination. Her huge dark pupils held the deep black of midnight, but the soft brown surrounding them had the rich color of the damp leaves on the earthen floor of the woods.

At first, she could not seem to focus and her lashes swept down upon her silky cheeks. Her lips parted and she sighed. The light breathy sound reminded him of a gentle spring breeze.

He had never spent so much time studying any woman in such detail. Excitement rippled through him as he drank in every aspect of her countenance.

A frown furrowed her brow and her lashes rose again. The hazy look in her eyes hardened. She narrowed her gaze and stared at him. Fear locked into her features before she shut her eyes again. To him, it felt as if the moon went dark.

She asked in a soft voice, "A-are you Mr. Hillyer?"

"Call me Thomas."

A crease marred the bridge of her nose. "That would be improper."

"In this house, we are all equals."

Her eyes slowly opened. Her gaze fluttered about the room. "Am I ... dreaming?"

"Not at the moment. Perhaps you were when you mentioned Mr. Filmont."

Shock froze her features. "What did I say?"

"That he was married."

"Is that all?"

"No."

Her lips quivered. "W-what else did I say?"

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Puzzled and fascinated by her, he crossed his arms over his chest. "Aren't you going to scream? Don't I frighten you? Would you like a photograph of me to take home so you can show it to your friends and tell them you talked with an albino wizard? You'll be the envy of all."

"Please," she begged. "Tell me what I said. I can't recall saying anything to you."

He scanned her critically. Obviously, she differed from most women in that she did not find him a fearful or odious curiosity. However, he still did not need a secretary—especially a female—and certainly not one who dreamed of Mr. Filmont.

"You mentioned that he was cruel as well and that you knew the truth."

She took a deep, ragged breath. "Was that all?"

"I believe so—unless you mentioned something else to Rafe."

"R ... rafe?"

"My assistant. He watched over you most of the night but I told him to get some rest."

She sucked in her full lower lip as she glanced down at the flannel nightgown covering her. A delightful blush bloomed on her cheeks.

He decided her mouth had an enchanting shape to it and the rosy color on her soft cheeks highlighted her dark eyes. Indeed, she had a pleasing appearance. Heat rushed through his veins.

He was out of control again! He fought to tamp down his baser nature.

"Whose nightgown is this?" Her voice seemed edged with hysteria.

"It belongs to Gertrude, our housekeeper."

"Did she undress me?"

"I rode to get the doctor."

His statement apparently mollified her. He could see the tension ease as the tight lines around her captivating mouth faded. Her lips softened.

Her sweet face had him leaning closer, caught in a swirl of dangerous hunger.

The cloth on her head slid to one side. He moved to lift it away but as he did so, his hand brushed against her cheek once more. Against his heated palm, her skin lay cool but the contact sent a spark shooting up his arm like the fuse to a firecracker.

What sort of magic was that

He dropped the rag back into the basin with a shaking hand. "Does your head hurt?"

"Some."

Why were her eyes so huge? So wide? Dark, but glistening and shiny like the smooth wet stones in the creek under a moonlit sky. He barely breathed as his gaze slid once more to her luscious mouth. Her lips were slightly parted and he longed to taste the wet darkness inside—to drink in her warmth. Pressure built in his loins.

He had to restrain his impulses!

Clearing his throat, he tried to remember some of the doctor's instructions. "Can you see clearly?"

"No. Where are my eyeglasses?"

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"Spectacles? I—we did not see any—it was dark." He swallowed hard. He had carried her across the lawn—held her small, fragile body close—

"How did you find me?"

"Everyone heard the gunshots."

She gave a ragged sigh. "Did you find the hunter?"

He twisted the corner of his mouth down. "He's dead."

Curse Silas! The crazy hermit with his single-minded obsession had succeeded in causing chaos. The townspeople would be on their way. He needed to get the guns ready.

"So ... the white buck did kill him."

His mouth went dry as the pain throbbed more violently. He nodded.

"I told him not to hurt the buck." There was a catch in her voice. "He had already injured the poor creature, but then the hunter aimed at me. The buck saved my life."

"I doubt that was his intention." A suffocating sensation tightened in his throat.

"No, I am sure of it, but then ... he changed somehow. He came up to me and I could not look away" She remained silent while the torment twisted inside him.

She cleared her throat. "It was as if ... as if he tried to hypnotize me." She seemed to consider her words at that point for an awkward silence ensued for a moment.

"Did you know the hunter?" she asked hesitantly.

"We had previously met."

"Oh." Her voice became a mere whisper. "Then I am sorry."

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"Don't be. You are correct in believing him to be a malicious man. He wanted only one thing—to have the white buck for his prize."

"But he shot at me, too."

"You should not have been in the woods alone at night, Molly."

Alarm siphoned the rosy tint from her face. "How do you know my name?" Her small dainty hands twisted the blanket into a knot.

"We found your trunk at the depot. Inside, we discovered a stack of letters addressed to a Miss Molly Coan."

"How dare you rifle through my things!" Terror held sway in her huge eyes.

The conscience he usually ignored stabbed him. He balled up the handkerchief in his hand and jammed it into his pocket. "In your bag we found an advertisement from the newspaper."

"Y-yes." In an instant, a mask of calm shuttered her features. "I came to apply for the job as your secretary. I am quite well-trained and have had four years experience."

"You had very little money on you."

"That is none of your concern!" The blush bloomed once more on her cheeks and he felt compelled to see if her cheeks held a touch of fire, but he forced his hands to remain at his side.

"You had enough money to hire a coach at the train station. You did not need to walk."

"I hate coaches for they are so cramped ... and you never know who your companions will be ... I did not think it would

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be a long walk ... and ... and the Stony Mill Inn is such a horrid little place ... I could not bear to stay the night there."

"My assistant posted that advertisement without my assent. As soon as you are well enough, you will be leaving here. I do not want a secretary."

"No!" Her eyes darkened to the same empty black as a deep hole bored into the earth. With a fierce and desperate effort she struggled to sit up. Her despair called to mind the bleak anguish of wild creatures caught in a trap.

He pressed against her shoulder. "Please calm yourself."

"I am not the type to faint if that's what you're worried about." Annoyance sounded in her voice, but as she glanced around the room a look of discomfiture clouded her features. "Not usually ... but the white buck ... he stared into my eyes ... that was ... different."

"You have a bump on your head. The doctor will be returning to check on you tonight."

Her fingers touched the swollen bulge on her forehead and then moved down to the buttons on the nightgown as if to assure herself that each one was properly fastened. "I must have fallen on the stick I had in my hand."

He shrugged and then regretted the movement for it aggravated his suffering. He fought not to wince with the pain but his words took on a harsh tone. "Perhaps the white buck knocked you over."

"No, I ... it was as if ... all the strength was drained from me." She turned her head away from him, but her lips formed a pout and once again he had an unwelcome urge to taste

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them, to see if they tasted of honeysuckle and summer vines. He battled the temptation.

"Please, sir, I beg you to give me a fair chance so I can show you what I can do. I am quite skilled as a secretary. I rarely make a mistake when I type. I am thorough, fastidious, as well as highly organized."

He did not expect such pride—especially from a female. His anger ignited. "You have already shown me that you can cause a great deal of trouble."

She did not cringe despite her diminutive size and weakened condition. "I was attacked in the woods—on property which belongs to you. I should ... I should"

"Have me arrested?" He expected more than enough trouble due to Silas' death. "You were trespassing," he stated with exasperation. "I should have you locked up!"

All her bravado appeared to crumble and she sank into the soft pillows. As she closed her eyes, her lips quivered, those lips he hungered to taste. "If I had not seen the advertisement"

Tears welled in her eyes. He felt the cold blade of a dagger at his heart. What possessed his wretched soul? He found himself seeking awkwardly for a way to soften the words he had blurted out so harshly.

Uncomfortable silence grew between them. The hush weighed upon him, leaving a loneliness inside him that he could not comprehend. "You may stay here until you are well. Aside from the bump on your head, the doctor said you are malnourished and you've injured your knee, too."

Her eyes flew open. "H ... he looked at my legs?"

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He welcomed the rush of pink staining her cheeks. "I'm sure he's seen other women's legs." He had not been in the room when the doctor examined her. He wished he had. Visions of smooth, creamy calves and dimpled knees swam through his mind. He wondered if the skin of her legs would feel as soft as the flesh on her cheeks. In his chest, his heart galloped.

"I tripped on a root ... simply a clumsy accident."

He focused on her mouth. It reminded him of the color of red clover. Would it taste as sweet?

Last night, under the light of the moon, her skin had an ashen cast, and her lips had been dark but colorless, lending her an eerie resemblance to a long lost phantom. But then he had touched her. And he wanted to touch her again—to cover her trembling mouth with his own. Blood surged through his veins. Dammit. He was quickly becoming a lunatic.

She turned her head to look at the table where his breakfast cooled. "Is that for me?"

"If you feel up to it." He did not care about the food. He wanted to feast on her.

She tussled with the bed covers in an attempt to free herself.

Lust obliterated his rational thoughts. Now he would get to see her legs! His heart hammered in his ears. Her dark eyes lifted, mesmerizing him and sending a shudder of passion through him. He paused for a brief moment and nearly reconsidered what he intended to do, but she managed to throw back the covers.

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The sight of her beautiful feet and sweet ankles had him throwing caution to the wind. He slid his arm under hers and the warmth of her body radiated through him. He dropped the wand on the bed. Heady from breathing in her scent, he slid his other arm beneath her knees to lift her off the mattress. She wound her arms around his neck and her soft curves pressed against him. Desire scorched every nerve.

"The doctor said you should stay off that knee." His lips touched her ear and then slid along her soft cheek to fix upon what he had been seeking all along. His mouth came down on hers.

He felt her stiffen in his arms but he took little notice of that. He traced the fullness of her lips with his tongue and then gently, patiently he probed until she opened to him. Inside, he found her heated darkness as silky as the velvet moss in the woods.

"Thomas! They're here!" Rafe's shout echoed from the hall.

His gut twisted and the ache in his side burned. My God, he *was* mad. Quickly, he set her down in the chair beside the table. She appeared frozen, or stunned. He could not tell which and he did not have time to find out. He picked up the wand.

Rafe ran into the room. "There's a mob of twenty or so. Cook and I loaded the rifles."

"Enjoy your breakfast, Molly," he nodded. "But stay away from the windows."

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Chapter Three

Molly lifted her fingers to her lips. Hot and swollen, her mouth felt branded by the fire of that kiss. Thomas Hillyer's scandalous ardor had singed her to the core. Blood surged through her limbs, turning her bones to slow molasses. Despite the thin flannel nightgown covering her, she was not chilled.

Were all men animals seeking only to satisfy their desires? Had she known her new employer would be such a reprobate, she never would have responded to the advertisement. That thought brought her up sharply—for she had no choice. Forced to run, she had nowhere to turn until she saw that post in the newspaper.

Yet, despite that burning kiss, he did not want a secretary and he had threatened to accuse her of trespassing. She closed her eyes. And he knew her name. She should have burned those letters. She was a fool.

A chill slid down her spine. What about the only real evidence she had to prove her case? Had that been removed from her trunk, too?

She pressed her lips together. She had hidden it well. She had to hope that no one would suspect her ruse.

Opening her eyes, she took in a ragged breath and tried to clear her head but instead the aroma of eggs, bacon, and buttered toast drew her. The best feast she had seen in over three weeks lay right in front of her. Forgetting everything else, she snatched up the fork and lifted a mound of eggs into

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her mouth. Never had eggs tasted so heavenly. She quickly gulped them down and then went on to the bacon. She soon found her strength returning and by the time she had finished the toast and licked the last of the butter from the tips of her fingers, she had a plan all set.

She would prove herself invaluable to Thomas as a secretary, while keeping him at arm's length though she confessed to herself that she found him rather fascinating with his incredibly pale skin, white gold hair and lashes. He had handsome features, with lavender eyes of the intensity of finely cut amethyst—and just as cold. In fact, there was nothing soft about him. His rugged profile could have been carved from marble, but thinking about the strength of his arms and the hardness of his chest had heat flaming on her cheeks.

He did not dress like a wizard in a theatrical pointed hat and robe covered with golden stars. He did not dress like the fashionably rich, urbane men she knew in the city—the kind of men she used to find so handsome. Men like Mr. Filmont. She shuddered at the thought of that base and vindictive man.

Odds were he was hunting for her right now, as if she were a wild animal.

She and the white buck had something in common. She shivered so hard she had to wrap her arms tightly about herself to end the terrible quaking in her limbs.

Thomas knew her given name and that was a grave danger, but she comforted herself with the idea that he undoubtedly moved in far different circles than Mr. Filmont.

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Thomas's clothing had a rough quality to it, much like the kind a laborer would wear or perhaps a farmer. Or a hunter.

Her breath caught as she remembered her fright in the woods. She rubbed the bump on her forehead. It didn't hurt too badly, but something wasn't quite right in her vision, and it had nothing to do with the lack of her eyeglasses. When she first opened her eyes, she saw the face of the white buck before it blended into Mr. Hillyer's face. The strange phenomenon had frightened her, but surely she must have been coming out of a nightmare. After all, the last thing she had seen before she passed out was the white buck's strange ruby eyes.

She blinked one eye and then the other. Her vision seemed to be normal, though blurry for everything was out of focus. She turned over the plate to find the Haviland brand on the bottom. At least, she could see the words clearly as long as she held them close to her eyes. She picked up the fork and peered at the manufacturer's name. The fork was solid silver as was the silver tray. While Thomas was not attired in costly clothing, he dined in fine style.

Glancing around, she fancied the room she currently occupied would be suitable for a visiting princess. She sat in an elegant rose-colored wingchair close to the wall and traced the design of the flowered wallpaper. The palest light blue satin bore the image of pink roses climbing on a white trellis. A large wardrobe stood against one wall, a vanity table against another. A magnificent desk and a chair sat to the right of the window. Carefully, she stood up. The bump on her head ached and she felt lightheaded. However, if she kept her

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leg perfectly straight and rigid, she could walk. She opened a door in the room and found it led to a bathroom with a huge tub. Limping to the wardrobe in the room, she opened it but found nothing inside.

She had nothing to cover herself, not even a robe! Where was her trunk?

The window in the room faced the back of the mansion. Looking out into the yard, she saw some indistinct white things waving back and forth. She narrowed her eyes and thought those could be clothes hanging on a line. With any luck, the clothes belonged to her and if they didn't, she would borrow them. Lying about like an invalid would not help her cause. She turned back to the bed, pulled off the coverlet and draped it around her body.

Stepping out into the hallway, she discovered her room was the last one on the floor. A large painting hung at the end of the hall. She walked up to it and stared at the finely detailed image of a white buck. This one did not have a pink nose and red eyes, but its majestic bearing reminded her of the proud beast in the woods.

Reaching up to touch the painting, she remembered the strange moment when the buck had burrowed against her chest and then licked her neck. She closed her eyes. It had felt like a kiss. A quiver tingled along her shoulders.

Yet, after he had killed the man, the buck had changed. Had he hypnotized her? Or had she imagined it? Surely, he had not stolen her soul. Wouldn't she be dead if he had? But maybe he had mesmerized her in order to control her. The

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power from the buck's ruby red eyes had probed deep inside her. He knew all her secrets.

She shivered and told herself that sort of thinking was superstitious nonsense. She had never believed in such gibber jabber. She should have put her hands over her ears instead of listening to the innkeeper.

Forcing herself to dispel the image, she opened her eyes and moved away from the painting. To her right, a large arched window with tinted panes of glass let in the bright morning sunshine. The colored glass blessed the wall with rainbows of light. She paused to look outside and narrowed her eyes in an attempt to see more clearly. A large group of people stood on the front lawn. She could not see what they were doing but she could hear the furious rumble of angry voices.

Apprehension prickled along her shoulders. She had seen mobs in the city—and the destruction they left in their wake. She hoped the crowd remained where they were until she found a back door and checked out the necessities on the clothesline. While Thomas appeared to be rather free with his kisses, she doubted that making an exhibition of herself would help her cause in any way. Turning from the window, she headed slowly down the hall.

The crack of a rifle and the sudden explosion of the window behind her had her screaming and ducking for cover while colored glass rained all about her. That's when she recalled the words of the short little man who had run into the room.

There's a mob of twenty or so. Cook and I loaded the rifles

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What kind of crazy place was this? She had been so stunned by Thomas's passionate behavior that those words had not registered in her mind.

At the sound of heavy footsteps ascending a staircase at rapid speed, her heart froze. Was the mob coming after her?

Relief swept through her when she saw only Thomas.

"Are you all right?" He knelt down at her side.

She nodded, but he did not seem content with her answer for he pushed her hair back and examined her skin as he ran his hand along her cheek and neck. Her skin tingled at his touch. As he turned his attention to her hands, her pulse jumped. His hot hands, slick with sweat, turned her palms over.

"Glass can cut you so quickly you do not feel it," he explained as his rough calluses skimmed along her feet and up her calves. A river of heat followed his touch. Her breath grew uneven.

"Not a scratch," he whispered. His lavender eyes bored into her and the intensity of his gaze sent a swirl of heat to the pit of her stomach. "You are damned lucky."

Her mouth felt as dry as new flannel.

"Why did you leave your room?" he barked hoarsely.

"I ... I wanted" She could feel the flush burning on her cheeks, but she refused to be humiliated by him. "I need my clothes!"

"Dammit, woman!" He scooped her up and carried her back to the fashionable bedroom. As he placed her gently on the bed, he admonished her in a fierce tone. "Stay put!"

Suddenly, he grimaced in apparent pain.

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"You are hurt!" She reached toward him.

He shoved her hand away. "It is nothing!"

"You strained yourself lifting me."

He let out a short laugh tinged with a bitter edge. "I could carry three of you."

He turned to leave, but suddenly stopped and pulled something out of his pocket. He went back to the bed and handed it to her. It was a small potato. "Hold onto this."

"Why? It needs to be boiled."

"Not that one. It's for protection." With that, he stalked out of the room.

She clutched the small potato and listened to his footsteps echoing along the hall and down the stairway. Her mind whirled with confusion. Had she escaped Mr. Filmont only to run into a brand new nightmare? One just as dangerous and tinged with a bit of madness?

Several minutes later, as softer, lighter footsteps approached, she tensed.

A light rap came on the open door. "I have your clothes." The voice was sweet and high. "Mind if I come in?"

"Please do." She narrowed her weak eyes to focus upon her visitor and then choked back a gasp. While the person who entered her room was clothed in a dress, a full beard grew on her face.

Molly blinked. *This must be the bearded lady mentioned by the innkeeper*

"It is a miracle you were not hurt by the glass." The woman came up to the bed carrying a bundle in her arms. Her brown hair had been pinned in a becoming style on top of

her head and the beard was neatly trimmed. "How are you feeling?"

"Quite well, thank you."

"You gave us all quite a scare. Until we found Rafe's newspaper posting in your bag we had no idea why you were here."

She sat up and did her best to put on an air of competency despite the fact that she wore only a borrowed nightgown. "I am an excellent secretary."

"Far better than Rafe, I'll wager." The bearded lady set the bundle on the chair by the bedside. "Thomas went out and pulled your things off the line. I told him he was a fool, but he never listens to my advice or anyone else's for that matter. All I could do was stand there with the shotgun in my hands and cover him. Fortunately, the townsfolk did not have a plan to launch a full-scale attack. Nobody was in the backyard."

"Why is everyone shooting?"

"Because none of them have a lick of sense." The woman placed Molly's shoes on the floor. "There was some blood on the blouse and indeed everything had a bit of mud on it, but I brushed the woolens and shined your Oxfords. Cook patched up the hole in the sole with some old leather he had. That man is so clever." The warmth in her broad smile erased some of Molly's apprehension.

"Thank you."

"Do you need help dressing?"

"I am quite capable of doing that myself."

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"Good, for I must sweep up all the glass. I loved that window. Of all the windows in the house, why did they have to choose that one?"

"I ... I ... happened to look out that window. I guess someone saw my face."

The bearded lady set her hands on her hips. "Keep in mind it is never a good idea to look out a window when we have a mob outside. I am sure they'd much prefer to shoot Thomas but you cannot trust itchy trigger fingers."

"Can you never leave this place for fear of getting shot?"

"Fortunately, this sort of thing does not happen all the time—only when the white buck causes mischief."

"Because he killed the hunter."

"Yes, even though the poor critter was only defending himself."

"That's what I thought."

"The townspeople would prefer to see him dead. They're a superstitious lot."

Molly shuddered as she thought of the copious amount of blood she had soaked up in her handkerchief from the injured buck. He must have been in terrible pain. "I suppose White Buck Hall is named after the creature."

"It seems there has always been a white buck in these parts—as long as anyone can remember."

"Have you been here long?"

"No, I traveled with the circus for most of my life. Had I known what obnoxious neighbors Thomas had, I might have thought twice about leaving."

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"I have never seen a circus and I haven't done much traveling." In fact, she had never left the city until three weeks ago.

"Pity. You do have a rather piercing scream, you know. Carries very well. You could have a future on the stage."

"Respectable women do not become actresses."

"Bosh! Respectable women lead very dull lives."

A flush heated Molly's cheeks. She realized she had insulted the woman. After all, the circus probably was not that much different from the stage. "A-at any rate, actresses are supposed to be pretty." *Oh dear! That could be taken as an affront as well!*

"Put on a few more pounds. Add a bit of powder, some rouge, and lipstick and you would outshine most women." The woman laughed. "After a shave, I am considered attractive, too."

"I usually wear eyeglasses. I cannot see very far without them and apparently they are lost." A swirl of despair hit her. Without her lenses, she would be far less efficient as a secretary.

"I'll send Jeff—he's our stable hand—out to look for them on the lawn where you were found."

"Thank you. I'll be forever bumping into things without them."

"We wouldn't want that to happen."

"Are you Gertrude?"

"That's my given name but I was quite a popular attraction as Brunhilda, the Singing Bear Woman." Her lips edged into a wistful smile. "However, when Thomas asked me to help him

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out here, I decided retiring might suit me at this stage in my life. But the neighbors are more than I can stand at times. I do wish I could knock some sense into their heads."

"Were they friends of the hunter?"

"I doubt it, but his death has afforded them the opportunity to disrupt our lives."

"No one can control the actions of an animal."

"It isn't just that. There's Thomas's research as well. They do believe he is quite mad."

"Is he?"

"He is ... driven." Gertrude let out a long sigh. "I think the shipments of mice initiated the trouble. After that they started calling him a fiend. They think he eats them."

Molly's stomach made an uncomfortable lurch. "Mice?"

"He uses them for his research. He has bred an astounding number of albino mice." Gertrude turned to leave. "I'll be sweeping up the glass, but if you need me just use that excellent voice of yours." She walked out and closed the door softly behind her.

Molly wondered briefly why Thomas bred albino mice, but she had other things on her mind. She picked up her clothes and began to dress. Where was her trunk? Had anyone read those letters? She should have burned them and if she got her hands on them again she would. However, the wax cylinder was more important than the letters. The loss of it would mean she had no hope at all to redeem her reputation—and perhaps her life for she knew Mr. Filmont's vindictiveness had no bounds.

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An hour later, Molly stood in the large, shadowed entrance hall. Dark velvet drapes puddled on the floor beneath a window flanking the large oak door. Would a bullet blast out that window, too? She wound her arms about her to quell the goose bumps on her skin.

She had seen no one on her slow journey down the wide staircase. Her headache had grown with her exertion. Her knee did not trouble her as long as she did not bend it, but her uneven gait magnified every squeak in the floorboards or on the stairway, winding her nerves tighter. Where had Thomas gone? Where was Gertrude?

When her eyes slowly adjusted to the dim light, she saw an impressive array of rifles waiting in a cabinet by the door. She shivered. It was unsettling to be in such an untamed place, waiting for the next battle. Undoubtedly, it was better than spending the rest of her life in jail, but not if somebody succeeded in putting a few bullet holes in her. Toward the back of the hall beneath the staircase, she discovered her trunk. She clenched her fists and fought back her anger when she saw the broken lock. Lifting the lid, she slid her hand down on the right side. The round Epsom salt tin was still there. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Upon further inspection, she found everything else to be in exactly the same order as it had been when she packed it, except for the stack of letters. She had kept those at the bottom of the trunk, but though she searched through the trunk three times she could not find them. Anxiety had her pulse racing.

Those letters were private. She must demand their return.

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On her right, she saw the entrances to two parlors. She peeked into each one but both rested as quiet as tombs. At the back of the house was the grandest dining room she had ever seen, but it, too, lay empty. However, she could not resist taking a better look at it. Walking in, she ran her hand along the polished mahogany table, which could easily seat twenty people.

The clatter of dishes drew her attention. She moved toward the sound with grim determination until she found herself standing in a large kitchen occupied by one extremely tall man. She did not know humans could grow to such a lofty height. He had his back to her as he stood at a table.

"Excuse me, I wish to speak with Mr. Hillyer. Can you tell me where he is?"

The tall man did not turn around or speak to her. In fact, he completely ignored her. The pungent sting of onions filled the room. The sound of the rhythmic chopping of a knife led her to assume this had to be the cook. She had certainly enjoyed his eggs, bacon, and toast. Her stomach rumbled in anticipation of another meal. She had starved herself for so long that now all she wanted to do was eat everything in sight. Even raw onions appealed to her.

She moved to stand opposite the man at the table. He looked at her and stopped cutting the onions. Putting the large knife down on the table, he made a few odd gestures in the air with both of his hands.

Puzzled and more than a little nervous, she insisted, "I must speak with Mr. Hillyer. Where is he?"

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The cook shook his head, and resumed chopping up the onions with his very large knife. Her lip quivered. She did not dare walk outside to search for Thomas on her own. Besides, she was strangely exhausted after having simply dressed herself and walking downstairs. She put a hand to the bump on her head as a strong wave of dizziness hit her.

"Please, can you tell me where Mr. Hillyer has gone?" she pleaded as she clung to the table with her other hand to steady herself.

The cook put down the knife, walked around the table, and took her hand. However, he did not lead her to Thomas. Instead, he crossed the room and patted the cushion of a chair beside the huge stove. Then he let go of her hand.

Now weak as well as lightheaded, she sat down as he had indicated she should. He went out the kitchen door.

She lifted her hand to her nose. Her hand smelled like onions, which was strangely comforting. She sat ramrod straight for several moments rehearsing what she would say. She would ask Thomas to return her letters, but while she needed to be firm she could not be offensive because she needed this job. She decided to propose that she would work for him on a trial basis—without a salary. Room and board would be sufficient. That way she could impress him with her efficiency and then he would officially hire her.

Long minutes ticked by and her eyelids grew heavy. The black behemoth of a stove beside her heated the air. An old memory came to her of evenings spent around the stove at home long ago. The warmth soothed her nerves. Rubbing her

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eyes, she tried to stay awake, but it seemed an impossible task.

Curiously, she found herself in the woods again wandering along in the dark on a path. However, it did not look like the path to White Buck Hall. Anxiety twisted inside her as she realized she was lost.

Suddenly, she saw the white buck. He pawed the ground and lowered his head. Then he reared up and sprang forward in a great leap just as the hunter appeared from behind a tree and aimed his rifle at the great beast.

She screamed. The buck was going to die!

Someone shook her roughly and she woke up. She stared into Thomas's lavender eyes and the breath caught in her lungs.

"Did you have a bad dream?" he asked.

She moved her lips, but her throat was dry and raw. No sound came out at first. She had a strange urge to reach out for him, to feel the rough stubble along his chin and touch the hard planes of his chest. But that would be a most inappropriate action.

"I advised you to stay put." He held out a dainty cup and saucer. "Drink this."

Her fingers shook but she took the cup and saucer from his hands. The honey sweet tea did soothe her throat but it was Thomas's presence that had the terrible dream fading quickly from her mind. "I did not know where you had gone."

"I was in the lab with Rafe."

She straightened her spine. Here was her chance to show him what she could do! "I wish to see the lab."

"No. You will stay in bed until the doctor says you are well. Then you will go home."

Fear pierced her. "I am quite recovered."

"You are a poor liar."

"The warmth of the stove lulled me to sleep."

"You have suffered a concussion and are malnourished."

His gaze roamed over her igniting a curious path of heat. She fought to ignore the sensation.

"I would have sought you out myself, but the cook would not tell me where you had gone."

"Cook is deaf and dumb. We use sign language to communicate with him."

"Oh." Her cheeks flamed. *So that's what he had been doing with his hand gestures.* "I did not realize ... I shall learn sign language then." She swallowed more of the tea. It had an odd aftertaste, but perhaps there was simply too much honey in it. "H-have you ... where are the letters that were in my trunk?"

He frowned. "Those? I believe Rafe left them on my desk."

"Those are very personal letters and I must request that you return them to me immediately."

His brow furrowed with annoyance. "You have wasted too much of my time. I am not going to go looking for your things. You are to stay in your room, grow strong and go home."

Inside, she trembled, but she could not allow him to see her fear. *The letters are not as important as the job.* She jutted out her chin. "I came here in response to the ad you claim your assistant posted in the newspaper. I would like

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you to know that in addition to being able to take dictation and type accurately, I am not afraid of mice. If you have them in your lab it will not bother me one bit." She had an overwhelming aversion to rats, but mice were smaller. She was sure she could get used to them. She did not want to be hungry ever again. But most of all, she had to save enough money to hire a lawyer to prove her innocence.

To her consternation, he laughed. He threw back his head and let go a rich, full-hearted sound that rattled her far more than his tight-lipped commands. "You have no idea what goes on in the lab with all those mice. It will offend your sense of propriety." His eyes held the glow of a lavender sunset and she wrestled with herself to tear her gaze away from his.

"I am quite sure your research will not harm my sensibilities."

He placed his forefinger under her chin and tilted it upward while caressing her cheek with his thumb. "The mice in my lab are constantly copulating."

She inhaled sharply as a shiver of awareness shimmered through her.

"Ah. As I suspected, the thought of mice involved in such a flagrant activity causes you to blush. I daresay you would faint away if you caught them in the act."

"I have not led a sheltered life. I know about—about—"

"Reproduction," he interrupted. "The act of sexual intercourse. Sadly, the mice do not take much time in performing their mating ritual. For them, it is merely instinct, but they do it frequently as if they can never get enough of it." Deep and dusty, his voice had become a near whisper, but

his bold gaze slowly and seductively slid downward. "It is what I want them to do, of course."

Blood pounded in her brain. His thumb lightly massaging her cheeks wreaked havoc in her limbs. She felt as if her entire body had become nothing more than a mound of hot mashed potatoes that he fully intended to devour.

Before her will power failed her completely, she shoved his hand away. "The insatiable predilection your mice have for mating will not affect my work."

He flashed her a suggestive smile. She swallowed hard. Every move the man made struck her as erotic. Had he cast a spell on her? Could that explain the potent feelings she had whenever he came near? She never had such feelings for any man until now.

"Perhaps I should give you a test first. Simply to satisfy my curiosity, of course."

The blood pooled in her feet and what fragile control she had nearly snapped. "The only relevant tests are those which pertain to my secretarial skills."

He raised one eyebrow in reply. "Indeed, and what other tests did you think I had in mind?"

A shudder of humiliation went through her. He had baited her on purpose. She lifted the cup to her lips and swallowed the rest of the tea to hide her embarrassment, but before she put the cup down a strange languor overcame her, a weakness so debilitating that the cup slipped from her nerveless fingers.

She saw the slight smile of satisfaction on his lips. It chilled her. Now she realized why the tea had such a strange

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taste despite the overwhelming sweetness of it. She wanted to scream at him, but her tongue would not move. She looked down at the cup and watched as it crashed on the floor and shattered into pieces. All went black as she slipped into a silent oblivion.

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Chapter Four

Thomas sat at the desk in his office and tapped his fingers with his wand. He glared at the back of Dr. Elliot Westerly while the physician studied the titles of the books on the shelf. The portly man wore a stylish worsted suit. Without a doubt, he was the best-dressed man in Stony Mill. Thomas aimed the wand at the seat of the doctor's pants. A blotch of yellow spread from one end of his massive rear to the other. Oh, he knew it wasn't truly ethical but Thomas did not like or trust Elliot. He wondered why the doctor had bothered to return and examine Molly. True, he had vowed that he would, but in the past he had no problem forgetting his promises as he had last year, when Theresa's baby died.

Keeping his lips pressed firmly together, Thomas acknowledged that only God knew if the doctor could have saved the child, but the fact was that if he had checked as he said he would, he might have seen the beginnings of the illness that killed the baby so quickly.

Thomas took a deep breath and tried to release his anger. Magic and medicine had their limits. Theresa was young and so was Jeff. They could hope to have more children, but it had been a terrible blow to the young couple and he couldn't help feeling responsible. He had brought them to White Buck Hall believing they would have a better life here than they would in the circus.

He leaned over and fumbled with the key to open the drawer in his desk where he kept the bourbon. After this

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particularly chaotic day, he knew he could not count on getting any real rest. In addition, the wound continued to plague him. He lifted out the bottle, poured bourbon into one glass. Then he poured a much more generous helping into a second glass.

He handed the first glass to the doctor.

"You gave me far less." Elliot scowled.

"I bought it." He knocked back a long swallow. The fiery liquid burned his throat. It would take some time before it had any effect on his nerves.

"Tis better to give than to receive."

"Do not waste your platitudes on me. Your services are not free."

"You threatened me."

"I merely reminded you of the Hippocratic Oath."

"With a gun to my head."

"Would you have preferred the wand?"

The doctor's eyes widened.

Pleased, Thomas took another swig of his drink. "When can she go home?"

"What is more important than the bump on her head, and the twisted knee is the fact that Miss Coan is severely malnourished. Feed her and keep her quiet."

"I gave her the sedative you suggested." He would not have given her the drug if she had stayed safely in her room, but she seemed to have a penchant for wandering—and the day had proved to be a predominantly bad one for idle roaming.

"An excellent drug. She is resting comfortably."

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"I want her out of here."

"Where does she come from?"

"What difference does it make?"

"A long trip would not be recommended until she regains her strength and we are assured that she has suffered no permanent damage."

Thomas pinched the bridge of his nose and remembered the stack of letters on his desk. He glanced at the top letter, which was clearly addressed to Miss Molly Coan. However, he could not read the lines beneath her name. He lifted up the bundle and peered at the writing. It looked as if many small drops of water had splashed onto the paper. He rubbed one finger over the obliterated words. Had she shed tears on the envelope?

Dammit. What was he thinking? Why should he care?

He shoved the stack of letters to the side and lifted the decanter to refill his glass with unsteady hands. He poured the liquor down his throat and sat back as the warmth rushed through him, right down to his toes. He pushed the glass away.

"Those idiots from town could have killed her. She was at that window when they blasted it apart." He slammed his fist on the desk. The glass tumbled to the floor and broke.

The doctor grabbed the decanter as it tilted and saved it from destruction. "Silas was murdered by that monster you allow to run free on your property."

"Silas deserved what he got."

"There will be an investigation." The doctor poured more bourbon into his glass.

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"Will I be questioned by dunking until I drown?"

The doctor chuckled. "They are not that backward."

He doubted it. The mice in his laboratory exhibited more intelligence than the people of Stony Mill.

Hesitantly, he reached for the letters once more. The reservations he harbored about Molly increased as the hours passed—mostly because she had called out Filmont's name in her delirium. Why? How did she know him?

If he was as great a wizard as Averill he would already know the answers to his questions.

He loathed his inadequacy as he untied the ribbon that held the letters together. He wondered if that ribbon had once been bound up in Molly's deep brown tresses. He fingered the ribbon briefly and the scent of honeysuckle taunted him.

He forced himself to drop the ribbon on the desk. With the tip of his finger, he eased the top letter off the stack. That's when he noticed the address on the second letter in the pile could be read clearly.

"She comes from New York City."

"Indeed." Elliot Westerly mused. "In that case, I think she may be able to make the trip in a month or so."

"She would need only to get on a train!"

"She could pass out due to her weakness and often a head injury causes confusion. She could lose her way—forget where she lives, or forget who she is."

"I will send Rafe with her! He is responsible for her traveling here in the first place."

"It would hardly be proper for her to travel in his company."

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"Why? Because he's a dwarf!" Anger raced through his veins like a wild fire. He had no tolerance for prejudice, though he encountered it everywhere.

"She is a single woman."

"An old maid who traveled here all by herself!"

The doctor set his glass down. "It could be that she's had some difficulties. She may have been desperate."

He had considered that possibility himself. After all, there would be thousands of jobs for women in the city. Why had she left? He rose from his chair and paced the room. "I will send Gertrude with her."

"Not until she is recovered."

"I will not wait!" he thundered.

"You must take her condition into consideration." There could be no mistake about the change in the doctor's tone. "She could worsen and after all, she was injured on your property."

"Not by me!" He ended his pacing.

"You have claimed she was injured by Silas, but her injuries could have been caused by the demonic beast you so zealously protect." The physician's expression gave him pause. He did not want hunters tramping through his woods searching for the white buck.

"All right. She stays—for now. But I cannot play nursemaid." He could not be in the same room with her. He could not trust his own actions.

"Then I will instruct your housekeeper in the care that Miss Coan should receive if she is to heal quickly."

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"Fine. I will send Gertrude in to speak with you. However, I must warn you that she bites."

The doctor's jowls shook with fury, but he did not get a chance to spit out a retort. Thomas left the room, slamming the door after him.

Molly's legs seemed made of lead and would not budge. She glanced downward and a shaft of terror shot through her. In place of her hands, she had another pair of legs with hard hooves at the ends. Short, brown fur covered her body. Horrified, she realized what he had done. He had poisoned her! Paralyzed, she lay on her side in the shelter of a pine tree, concealed by the thick boughs above her. Dried needles formed her bed, perfuming the air with the heavy scent of resin.

Why had he done this to her? It was not her fault that the townspeople had threatened him and blasted out a window. They thought he was a fiend and they were right. He had wanted to get rid of her. Sobbing softly, she mourned the loss of her human form.

The wind stirred and a whiff of musk drifted through the air. She tensed. A thick fog swirled in the atmosphere, deadening all sounds save for the steady drips of water that fell from the branches above her as the moisture in the air gathered into drops on the evergreen.

Though immobile, she remained alert, peering from between the branches. No owl hooted, no small creatures scurried along the ground but she sensed another presence. Nearby in the dense mist, it drew closer while the vapor danced in the night.

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Her tears mingled with the mist. She should have listened to the innkeeper. She could not fight back or save herself from danger.

Suddenly, a twig snapped and the boughs parted. Moonlight shimmered on the soft pink muzzle of the white buck. He stepped closer and licked her tears away, telling her not to cry—but there were no words. She could read his thoughts and he could read hers. She realized that now she would be safe. No one would know who she was or what she had done. No one would suspect Molly Coan had been transformed into a doe.

She would never have to worry again. He promised that she would always have plenty of food. He would show her the tastiest plants and the purest water. They would leap through the woods together—wild and free.

I cannot move

The transformation drug will wear off soon

He knelt beside her. His white coat glowed like an opal in the mist and his heat ignited passionate stirrings within her, she wanted to touch him but she remained unable to move a single muscle.

I will find delight in pleasuring you for you are so beautiful. Your coat shines like sable and your hooves are small and dainty. Your eyes are as large and shiny as the smooth stones in the river

Her heart fluttered in her chest while he nipped playfully and teased her with his tongue, but then his explorations became more insistent. His hot mouth suckled every secret

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corner. She had never been touched like that and a strange aching formed in her limbs, which frightened her.

I am a virgin

He lifted his head and smiled. *I am honored to be the first for you*

She heard his words clearly in her mind.

Trust me and all will be well

And she did trust him. He had saved her life, after all.

His tongue seared a path straight to the heat of her desire. Time dissolved into nothing as he stroked her yearnings into blazing need. She gasped in sweet agony as his tongue darted in and out until the intensity built up and she was mindless with fevered want.

Powerless to do anything but moan, she closed her eyes as the ripples of bliss shuddered through her. She had not known it would be like this! She had found ecstasy. But when she opened her eyes, he was not there.

However, Mr. Filmont was. He stood there before her with a shotgun in his hands aimed at her heart.

"You cannot fool me." He laughed and pulled back on the trigger. "You will never escape."

"No!" She screamed and woke up. Panting heavily and dripping with a cold sweat, she gulped and looked up at a ceiling. Glancing about her, she realized she lay in the bed in the beautiful bedroom in White Buck Hall. Though a bright blue sky beckoned beyond the window, she felt like death itself. She looked at her body. She had arms. She was not covered in fur.

She was human. She choked back a wretched sob.

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She had been in the grip of a nightmare. Swallowing hard, she tested her limbs. Though they felt heavy, she could move them. Her skull felt as if a vise had been clamped on it and her mind had fog swirling around inside it. Her mouth was fuzzy and her stomach churned.

If she held very, very still she might not vomit. She frowned as she remembered what had happened before she had fallen unconscious. She had been drinking the tea that Thomas had handed to her. Even as the cup slipped from her fingers, she had seen the slight smile of satisfaction on his face.

He had drugged her. Perhaps it would be better to empty her stomach and rid herself of his noxious preparation. Had he invented it in his laboratory? Did he give it to the mice?

Is that why they spent all their time copulating?

The dampness at the apex of her thighs reminded her of the erotic part of her nightmare. Had the drug influenced her dream?

"Another nightmare? And who was chasing you this time?" Thomas's voice came to her from the doorway.

Slowly, she turned her head and narrowed her eyes. A small gasp escaped her. He wore only his trousers.

"You have a scream that could wake the dead." He padded into the room with bare feet. As he drew close, she could not help staring at his finely sculpted chest. It could have been carved from marble, but around his neck was a clear quartz crystal attached to a thin leather strip. Hadn't she seen one like it on the white buck? Or was her mind playing tricks on her? Fear curled along her spine.

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"I thought someone had broken in and was in the process of killing you." A touch of humor lightened his words.

Covering her eyes with a shaky hand, she considered running farther away—to California, or another country. However, right now, she could not even walk.

"You drugged me." Her words came out a raspy whisper. Though she had closed her eyes, she could smell the scent of soap as he stood beside the bed.

"Doctor's orders. Personally, I prefer magic over medicine, but everyone advised me to handle your illness in a conventional manner."

"I do not believe you. I have not seen this doctor."

"He has seen you. Twice."

"When I am completely senseless. Was Gertrude here to watch over me while he touched me?"

"No, I was."

Heat burned on her cheeks and spread along her limbs. "You are wicked."

"Indeed, I am—and I thoroughly enjoyed watching the doctor slide his hands along your leg to check the condition of your knee. Shall I show you how he did it?"

She suspected most women in righteous indignation would have slapped him soundly. She did not have the strength to do so—and worse than that, she felt her heartbeat quicken. Yes, she would not mind at all if he touched her leg, or her thigh. She thought of the white buck's rough tongue and the way he had pleased her in the dream. What sinful thoughts had taken over her mind?

Her stomach gave a sudden lurch.

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"Leave me." She muttered and turned her head away from him. "The potion has made me ill."

He did not leave. He sat down on the edge of the bed. His heat radiated through the blanket, blistering her thigh. Yet, his hand felt cool as he brushed her forehead. "Sick to your stomach?"

Miserably, she nodded.

He slid a hand under her arm and raised her head, putting a basin beneath it. "Empty your stomach. Perhaps the dosage was far too much for you."

Simply raising her head was all that was needed. The room whirled and she retched until there was nothing left in her stomach. He held her firmly, his hard sinews as rigid as steel. When she was through, he produced a warm cloth to wipe her face. Then he gently put her head back on the pillow to rest.

"Do you think you can swallow a little water?"

"Why are you being so kind?" she whispered.

"As soon as you are well you can leave."

His voice held no rancor, but dread washed through her and she felt the blood leach from her face.

"Please give me a chance. I came all this way—"

"Why did you travel so far?" His glare was brutal. "Surely there are plenty of jobs in New York for secretaries."

Her heart sank. Of course, he had seen the address on the letters. But he could not have read them—yet. "I—there was—a man—"

His eyes narrowed. "You did not know Filmont was married and he broke your heart."

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Jagged and painful thoughts pressed down upon her. She knew she should be relieved that he had made such a common assumption. She twisted the blanket with her hands. A broken heart would be so simple. Her problem was far worse than that.

"Please go. I want to rest."

"Of course. I will send Gertrude in later with some of Cook's ginger beer. It's the best tonic for an upset stomach."

The thought of drinking anything had her holding back a dry heave. As he turned to go, she noticed the edge of a large, white bandage peeking out from the top of his trousers. She reached out to touch the cloth. "What happened to you?"

He shoved her hand away. "Nothing to concern you. I'll be right as rain in a day or two." He appeared to give her a critical scan. "And if you rest, you should be well enough to go back home soon and get on with your life. I daresay you'll have no trouble finding another suitor if you can manage to plump up."

"I-I am not a chicken to be stuffed and served!" She sputtered with anger.

His mouth quirked upward. "No, but most men like a woman with some meat on their bones. It gives a man something to hold onto. Men enjoy the touch of warm, silky, scented flesh."

He exited the room, but the implication in his comment left her breathless. She thought back to the day before and recalled how he had touched her, sliding his hands along her skin to see if she had any cuts when the window broke. She had quivered inside as his callused hands searched her skin.

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She covered her face with her hands. What was happening to her? She must be losing her mind. She needed to focus on the reason she had come to this horrid place. She had to convince him that she was an efficient secretary—worthy of a decent salary.

Wiping away the dampness on her cheeks, she remembered exactly what she had asked for when he gave her that drugged tea and the pit of her stomach churned dangerously. She had to get her letters back before he read them.

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Chapter Five

Debilitated by the after effects of the drugged tea, Molly could not move for hours. She finally decided to be brave and sipped some of Cook's ginger beer though she feared that, too, would be poisoned. However, the spicy drink settled her stomach. Afterwards, she had some broth and a biscuit, which strengthened her.

Cook and Jeff, the young stablehand, brought her trunk to the room. Jeff had found her spectacles lying in the grass. The frame was bent, one of the lenses had cracked and the other one had fallen out. He had searched but he could not find the other lens. When he handed the broken eyeglasses to her she fought to hold back a sob, too choked up to thank him for his effort.

Jeff, with his red hair and brown eyes, reminded her of her baby brother, Emil. Jeff was probably around the same age Emil would have been—had he lived.

The men slipped quietly out of the room. She reined in her emotions and held what was left of her spectacles in her hand for a few minutes. She put the cracked lens up to her eye but that was like peering through a cobweb. It did not help her vision and strained her eye. Without any money, she would not be able to buy another pair of glasses.

Carefully, she wrapped up the broken eyeglasses in a handkerchief. She would have to get used to seeing everything in the distance out of focus. When it came to

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typing, she would have to sit closer to her work and while that would be taxing, she knew she could do it.

With grim determination, she slid out of bed. When her feet touched the floor, she felt woozy for a minute but the spell passed. Carefully, she made her way across the room to her trunk and opened it. Everything was still there, just as it had been the day before—except for the letters.

What if even now, Thomas was reading those letters?

She clenched her jaw. She took out her best shirtwaist from the trunk. Made of taffeta silk in a deep wine shade, it was trimmed with fine tucking. A wealthier friend had become bored with it and given it to her. It was the grandest thing she owned. She had a black sateen skirt to pair with it.

She draped the outfit on the bed and sat down beside it, smoothing out the wrinkles lovingly with her hand. Only four weeks ago she had worn it to the party. Mr. Filmont had noticed her and afterwards offered her the job as his own private secretary.

What if she had refused his offer right then and there? Would he have fired her?

Perhaps it would have been better if he had. She closed her eyes and struggled against her bitter regrets.

A knock at the door startled her. Would it be Thomas ready to haul her back to New York City?

The knock came again. "Are you all right, Miss Coan?"

It was not Thomas's voice and a sense of relief flowed through her.

"I am fine. You may come in."

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"I am sorry to disturb you." The dwarf came into her room. She guessed that he was not much more than three and a half feet high. With wavy black hair and eyes a deep shade of chocolate, he would have been a fine handsome man but for his short arms and legs. He walked into the room pulling a child's wagon. Inside the wagon was a typewriter.

This seemed slightly bizarre, but she already knew the household had more quirks than most. Nevertheless, she smiled at her visitor. "I am feeling more like myself."

He took her hand and brushed a kiss across it. "I know we have not been formally introduced. Circumstances have been most unusual as of late. My name is Raphael Lucchini, but everyone calls me Rafe. I spent much of my life as a clown in the circus but Thomas recognized my formidable mathematical skills and I became his assistant. Sad to say, he is appalled with my atrocious spelling."

"Are you the one who placed the advertisement in the newspaper?"

He struggled to climb up into the chair beside the bed. "Unfortunately, yes. So you can rightly blame all your troubles on me. I had not thought at the time that advertising for a secretary would cause anyone harm. I am grieved because you have suffered due to my impulsive action."

She clutched her hands together tightly in her lap so they would not shake. Could she trust him? She needed someone to help her. "I truly looked forward to being Mr. Hillyer's secretary."

"Make no mistake about it, he does need you. However, he is incredibly stubborn and will not admit it."

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She bit her lip and cast her glance at the lovely outfit on the bed beside her. "How am I to convince him?"

Rafe clapped his hands merrily and she turned once more to look at him.

"It will be as easy as falling off a log. I will bring all his notes and the statistical data to you. You will type it and when it is all through I will present it to him. He cannot fail to be impressed."

She frowned. "What happens when he sees me typing?"

His eyes took on a devilish gleam. "I have thought of that. You must type when he is not around."

"How will I know when that will be?"

"That is the easy part." He chuckled. "Gertrude will be in on the plan—in fact, I've had everyone join forces for this effort—Cook, Jeff, and Theresa, too."

"Theresa?"

"Jeff's wife, a charming young woman. You haven't seen her, yet. She and Jeff live in the gatehouse. She lost a child last year and was quite despondent for a while."

Molly instantly thought of little Emil and her throat tightened.

Rafe continued. "But she is markedly improved these past few months."

"I hope I can meet her soon."

"You will, I'm sure. She is interested in meeting you, too. In fact, she would like to learn to type."

"I would be happy to teach her." She believed all women should have a skill so they could earn their own wages.

"She'll be delighted to hear that."

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She found herself relaxing. Rafe's pleasant manners were such a contrast from Thomas's intensity.

"Now, back to our plan. During the day, I must assist Thomas in the laboratory, but I will send word to Gertrude when Thomas is finished and she will warn you when you must stop working."

A small spark of hope ignited in her heart. Could it be that effortless? "I could also type at night."

"No, that won't do. His room is next to yours so he might hear you or notice the light coming from your room."

Until now, she really had no idea of her host's close proximity but it explained why he had come so quickly when she had her nightmare that morning. A tingle slid up her spine. She could not be sure if it was fear or something far more dangerous.

Lust.

She closed her eyes and swallowed hard as she felt heat rising to her cheeks. He had been in her room that morning with only his trousers to cover him and she had memorized the sight of him. It was scandalous.

She cleared her throat and opened her eyes. "I will feel better if I can work."

"I suspected as much." Rafe's smile widened in approval. "But you need not start right away. Take your time recovering and when you think you are ready, let me know."

"I am sure I can begin right away."

His face clouded. "My dear Miss Coan—there is no need to rush. I don't mean to be unkind, but you do look somewhat

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peaked as yet. Besides, there is the problem of where we shall hide the typewriter."

She smiled. She had not thought about that at all, but, of course, subterfuge would be a very important part of such an undertaking. "Under the bed might be a good place."

Rafe pushed himself off the chair and landed with a thud. He peered under the bed. "No, this bed does not have a coverlet that touches the floor. Light from the window might cast a suspicious shadow."

She crossed her arms on her chest and stated the obvious. "The wardrobe?"

"That is a very small wardrobe. I daresay you'll have to struggle to get all of your clothes into it."

She laughed. "That wardrobe is three times the size of any others I've used in the past."

She saw the brief spark of surprise in his eyes, but he joined in her laughter.

"If my trunk is emptied, we could put the typewriter in there," she suggested.

"Excellent! That's what we shall do." He hurried to the trunk and opened it. Then he quickly closed it. "You have lacy women's things in there." He blushed to the roots of his hair.

She could not stop herself from laughing again. It was the first time she had laughed in a month and it felt good.

"Nothing in there will bite you."

He took a deep breath. "Perhaps not, but I do not feel—comfortable handling women's—women's—"

"Undergarments?"

"They are small and delicate, and I am ... clumsy."

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"I should think a clown would have to pretend to be clumsy so he can fall down." She had never seen a circus, but she had heard others talk about what went on inside the big tents.

"I can fall down easily enough, but it seems my true talent leans toward making a muddle of things. You can see what trouble I caused with the advertisement."

Her heart went out to Rafe. "But I am grateful to you. The advertisement gave me such hope."

He brightened. "I never thought of that."

"It is true. When I saw that advertisement in the newspaper I thought my prayers had been answered."

He rubbed his hands together with glee. "Why—that makes everything quite fortuitous."

"Yes, it does. I—I have nobody—only one male cousin who no longer writes to me." Which was just as well, she thought to herself. If there was an award for her arrest, her cousin would be delighted to collect it.

"Well! Then we will be doubly sure this works out. First, I will send Gertrude up to help you put your things into the wardrobe so we can hide the typewriter—"

"There is something I would ask you to do for me." She had to trust somebody and Rafe appeared to be the best candidate so far.

"I would be delighted to help you in any way I can. Except—except for touching your delicate things."

"I had a packet of letters in the trunk—"

"Yes—Thomas went through the trunk to find out who you were."

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"Why didn't he use his magic wand?" She wondered what sort of magic he could do. Perhaps, he was nothing more than a charlatan.

"He's a practical man and when there's a problem he usually uses a straight-forward approach. Searching the trunk was most logical."

"I would like the letters back. They are very personal."

"I understand. I saw them on the desk in the study. I'll go there right now and bring them back to you."

She was so relieved! Her eyes misted but she fought back the tears. "You are more than kind."

Again Rafe blushed and shrugged, but he did not get a chance to say anything more because Gertrude bustled into the room.

"Rafe, you have a telegram!"

Thomas dressed for dinner, one of the few concessions he made to proper decorum at White Buck Hall. His mother had insisted on it and after her death, he continued the formality, in part due to his feelings of guilt.

He was late as he hurried toward the dining room with a sheaf of papers in one hand and his wand in the other. He had expected Rafe to go over the work with him, but his assistant had gone for a cup of tea and failed to return. Thomas was furious. Especially when he noticed the typewriter missing. With the study now completed, the documentation became the critical part. Everything had to be recorded, every detail, every statistic. All of it had to be presented in a convincing manner. After going over the data

he knew he had what he wanted. He had proven his hypothesis—at least with mice.

He would like to do a larger study, one that involved people.

He crossed the room while concentrating on the columns of figures and did not look up until he reached his usual chair at the head of the table. But instead of seeing Rafe sitting in his accustomed place, he saw Molly. Her unexpected presence hit him like a punch in the gut.

Dressed in a color reminiscent of good burgundy, she graced the table with an almost regal presence. Her hair, gathered on top of her head, was decorated with what he assumed were some of Gertrude's ostrich feathers. He pressed his lips together. He had a mind to pick Molly up and put her on the next train out of town.

He hesitated since touching her was a very dangerous proposition and one which he knew he should avoid. Looking at her was perilous as well. Each time the pull became stronger. He could not tear his gaze away from her.

"You are supposed to be in bed," he growled.

She did not flinch. "Gertrude and Rafe thought it would be best if I dined here. They mentioned something about the social aspects of dining having a salutary effect on the appetite."

Dammit. He knew those two were up to something and he did not doubt that Cook was in on it as well.

"Where is Rafe?" He placed the papers face down on the right side of the table and laid the wand on top of them.

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"He went to visit his sister and will be back in a week or so." She held out an envelope. "He told me to give this to you."

He tried to tamp down his rage but it was like holding back a storm. He snatched the envelope from her. Rafe knew the metaphysical conference in Philadelphia was less than two weeks away. How could he do this to him! Thomas went to stand by the fireplace with his back to her as he ripped open the envelope. His anger mounted as he scanned the words.

Be polite. Make small talk. Feign interest in our poor Miss Coan. If you want her to recover quickly, you must not trouble her mind.

R.

P. S. My sister delivered a healthy baby boy.

"He's an uncle! What kind of excuse is that?" Thomas tossed the letter into the fire.

"He is to be the child's godfather as well," she explained. "He received the telegram and was thoroughly delighted. He said his sister is quite a lovely woman. Not a dwarf as he is."

"Yes, yes—I've met her." He stared at the flames as they greedily gobbled up Rafe's note. "How could his sister have the audacity to have the baby now? Couldn't she have waited for a month or so?"

"No one can predict the hour a baby will arrive. I should think you would know that—especially since you're dealing with all those copulating mice."

That brought his head around sharply. Caught off guard, he could do nothing but stare at her in complete surprise, but

she kept her eyes averted and fingered the silverware beside her dish.

He pressed his lips together and ignored her tart reply. She was at his left when he sat down. He could reach out and touch her if he wanted to do so.

"Where is everyone else?"

"Gertrude and Cook went to eat dinner with Jeff and Theresa in the gatehouse."

So it *was* a conspiracy. What were they trying to prove? Did they expect he would be taken in by her womanly wiles so that he would be more than willing to keep her around as his secretary?

How could they possibly think that Molly would fit the bill? He glared at her, but she kept her focus on her plate.

He could feel the pulse drumming inside him. He knew very well that women were imbued with magic and used a far more dangerous sorcery than his own. He glanced at her hand and found himself suddenly transfixed by her delicate fingers as they traced the trailing vine pattern on the china. Her fingers were long and smooth.

How could she pound typewriter keys?

Suddenly, he did not care. He wanted to taste her fingers. He wanted to kiss the inside of her wrists and feel the heat on her skin. He wanted to see her blush. His heart began to thump in a most uncomfortable manner.

He took a deep breath as the crystal pressed against his chest began to vibrate.

"Are you still in pain?" She lifted her eyebrows in speculation.

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"I told you it was nothing." He lifted the wine bottle and filled her glass before topping his own. "Jeff told me he found your spectacles, but they were broken."

"I am nearsighted. I'll have no problem reading or typing."

He knew it! This was to be a battle. She would make his dinner a miserable affair by insisting on her capabilities as a secretary.

Rafe probably left to visit his sister in the hope that Thomas would be forced to rely upon Molly's secretarial skills.

That Rafe had the nerve to tell him what to do infuriated him. *Make small talk*. No! He would not talk at all. She would be bored and irritable. She would be delighted to go back to New York City. He drank his wine down in one long swallow and refilled his glass.

Moving gracefully, she helped herself to the food in the serving bowls on the table. She was as lissome as a flower bending in the wind—but she was a dark flower, not like the bright ones that dazzled with the colors of sunshine or sunset. His gaze traveled to the swell of her breasts and her narrow waist. He did not like her clothing. It covered far too much of her.

Her voice disturbed his appraisal.

"I have asked you to return the personal letters you took from my trunk. Since you refused, I asked Rafe if he could locate them for me. He said the letters seem to be missing. It is imperative that the letters are returned to me." She curled her delicate hand into a fist.

Staring at her, he remembered the way her silky skin felt against his callused hands. He wanted to sit her in his lap and

drink in the moist shadows of her mouth. He was sure she would taste better than the wine.

"The letters were in plain sight on the blotter, unless Gertrude was at her infernal dusting again."

Dammit.

He did not intend to carry on a conversation. He reached for the platters and heaped food on his plate.

"Rafe already questioned Gertrude, but she had not touched the letters when she dusted. In fact, she did not see them there."

He paused. Nobody was supposed to remove anything from his office. That had been Rule Number One. In a fit of pique, he got up, snatched up his wand, stalked out of the room, and headed to his office. When he opened the door to the office, he saw the roll top desk open as always. The only thing he ever locked was the drawer with the bourbon in it.

He walked up to the desk. The letters were not there. However, the blue ribbon he had untied sat on the blotter exactly where he had left it. Hesitantly, he reached out and lifted it up. It smelled of honeysuckle.

Dammit.

Heat coursed up his arm as he clenched the ribbon in his hand. He closed his eyes and pictured Molly removing that ribbon from her luscious hair while the sweet scent of honeysuckle wrapped him in a cloud of longing.

He was deranged!

Forcing himself to open his eyes, he jammed the ribbon into his pocket but he was sure he could feel warmth seeping from his pocket to his skin. It was as if *she* was there,

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touching him with her heated skin. Blood pounded in his brain, surging towards his loins.

He slammed his fist on the desk. Fighting to maintain his equilibrium, he swirled the wand in the air and pointed it at the desk. A whirlwind appeared and grew into a gray twister that swept through the drawers, the pigeonholes, and under the desk—and found nothing.

Frustrated, he stamped back into the dining room. The platters of food were now cold. Molly had eaten everything on her plate. She did not look up at him, but sat idly twirling the stem of her empty wineglass.

He set the wand down on the stack of papers, grabbed a platter and began heaping food on his plate.

"Did you ... burn them?" Her voice was high and breathy.

He saw the ostrich feathers in her hair trembling. He turned his gaze back to his dinner. He must ignore her! He had to hold himself together—he could not allow himself to feel her pain. He had more than enough of that already. She had completely destroyed his concentration. He put a forkful of cold chipped beef into his mouth.

"If you threw them into the fire, it was for the best. I should have burned them myself."

He closed his eyes and saw the image of that one tear-stained letter. Had she held that letter in her hands while her tears washed away the ink? He wondered what the salty flavor of her tears tasted like. He knew it had to be better than the chipped beef in his mouth.

He put his fork down and rubbed his eyes. He had to send her away. Soon.

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What had Rafe said? *If you want her to recover quickly, you must not trouble her mind*

He stuck his hand into his pocket and felt his fingers ignite with heat. He pulled out the blue ribbon and threw it on the table. It was the wrong thing to do. He saw the color fade from her face, making her eyes appear huge—like the eyes of a doe.

The pain of his wound returned full force, searing him as if he had been cut anew with a hot knife.

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Chapter Six

Molly waited until all was quiet. Then she touched the wick of the candle to the fire in the grate. She had pilfered the candle and the aluminum candlestick from the mantle in the dining room. Nobody noticed it missing so far, but her conscience troubled her. Circumstances could force her to become the thief she was purported to be. She swallowed past the ache in her throat, knowing she made a very poor criminal. A successful burglar would steal a candlestick worth a good deal more than the one she had in her hand.

Her determination faltered as she choked back a sob. Could she succeed in clearing her name? She struggled hard against the despair threatening to overwhelm her. She could not go on running forever.

As she slid silently out of her room, she found herself troubled by a bout of dizziness. She waited for a few moments and it subsided, but she bit her lip wondering why this trouble with her balance would not leave her. What if it got worse? The disturbing thought sent her pulse racing. Seeing everything in a fuzzy haze was bad enough, but the difficulty with her equilibrium could cause her to fall.

She inched along the hallway. At least, her knee seemed to be doing better. Cook had made a potent plaster for it. The concoction smelled horrible, but the warmth of it soothed the ache.

In a dark gray shirtwaist and matching wool skirt, she hoped to fade into the shadows if anyone happened to

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awaken. She tiptoed to the door of Thomas's room in her stocking feet, carrying her shoes in her hand. Putting her ear to the door, she listened for snoring but heard nothing.

Lightly, she turned the doorknob, but it was locked. She leaned her head against the doorjamb and tried to forget what his kiss had done to her. His lips had left her weak and confused and longing for more. Whenever she saw him—whenever he looked at her—whenever she thought of him, she found herself buffeted by overpowering emotions and a terrible aching in her most private area.

She did not understand this obsession and she certainly did not need it. Not now. She must think clearly and use sound reasoning.

Had he only wanted her to think he burned the letters? He had neither confirmed nor denied her question.

She moved on trying not to cause any floorboards to creak on her journey, but a few did and every time it happened she would stand rigidly still and hold her breath until she was quite sure nobody had heard her.

When she reached the office, she was relieved to find the door unlocked. Entering the room, she placed her shoes next to the desk and set the candlestick down on the blotter.

The roll top desk stood open and she carefully checked every nook and cranny looking for the letters. She did not find them. However, one drawer of the desk was locked. If Thomas had kept her letters, he would have put them there.

She knelt on the floor, took out one of her hairpins, and inserted it into the lock. No matter how she twisted and turned the hairpin, she could not spring the lock. Perspiration

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dripped into her eyes. She wiped her forehead with her sleeve. She needed a different tool.

She stood up and noticed a silver letter opener on the blotter. Like a miniature scimitar, it had a curved, pointed blade and an ornate handle. Hesitating, she knew she might break off the point or scratch the finish, but when she glanced around she did not see anything else that might be used to pick the lock.

Lifting the letter opener, she frowned at the way the shiny surface distorted her image. When she turned it, the silver finish caught the glow of the candle mirrored in the gleaming wood of the polished desk. On the stained mahogany, the reflected light appeared crimson and the bow of the blade made it appear as if two flames burned instead of one.

Transfixed, she stared at the reflection on the blade as the red flames suddenly changed into the ruby eyes of the white buck and a strange tingle went through her body. Terror gripped her as the power of those unholy eyes drew her into their depths and quite suddenly, though she knew she had not taken a single step, she was enveloped in the sounds and the smells of the outdoors. She could see—in clear detail—the woods all around her. A breeze stirred, rustling the brown, dried leaves directly in front of her. She had been instantly transported outside into the wild.

She stood in the dark behind a tree near a well-worn path in the woods. She sensed the presence of evil moving toward her and every nerve in her body wound itself into a tight knot. The smell of danger drifted on the breeze. Filled with dread, she shook in panic.

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Her quaking had the letter opener dropping out of her grasp. The frightening mirage ended. She was safely inside Thomas's office, next to the roll top desk.

Stumbling backward, she sank upon the chair. Her pulse raced as she stared at her surroundings. Everything appeared blurry—as it should without her eyeglasses, but she had seen the details of the woods with perfect clarity.

She told herself this strange fugue was due to the late hour, and perhaps she had slipped into a momentary dream—especially since this episode reminded her of the woods in that odd fantasy she had only two nights ago. Though she did wonder about hearing the rustling of the leaves. She could not have dreamed up sounds.

She stared at the letter opener. How could such an ordinary object initiate such a bizarre incident?

Suddenly, she heard a noise outside. She blew out the candle.

With her heart racing, she listened intently. The bushes beneath the window rustled. Could there be another towns person with a gun lingering out there? Should she sound a warning before the window was blasted to bits?

She moved toward the casement, taking care to stay in the shadows. The moon had grown fuller in the past few days and shed plenty of light through the white lace curtains beneath the heavy velvet drapes. She edged up to the side, but she feared pushing aside the curtain. Clutching at her chest, she prayed to ease its thundering while she remained rigidly frozen in place.

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After what seemed an interminable amount of time, she heard nothing more outside. Cautiously, she moved aside the fabric with the tip of her fingernail but she could see nothing except the darkness beyond the glass. She took in a ragged breath before turning away.

Still trembling, she walked back to the desk and picked up the candlestick. She hated the taste of fear in her mouth. If only she could be rid of it!

The fire in the hearth had burned down to embers, but she used the poker and found a coal hot enough to relight the candle. When the wick caught, she took in an unsteady breath and stared at the soft, white-yellow glow. The gentle and comforting flame reminded her of the color of Thomas's hair and eased away the memory of the buck's hypnotic red eyes.

She returned to the desk and gazed fearfully at the letter opener. Gritting her teeth, she reached for it but her fingers hovered above the small implement and she could not force herself to take another chance. Irritated by her own fear, she kicked the locked desk drawer with her foot.

She let out a squeal of anger and pain. Immediately, the door to the office opened. She went numb with terror when Thomas stood in the doorway glowering at her. With her blurry vision, it seemed his eyes had an evil glow in the shadows cast by the candle.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

She felt as if her breath had been cut off. She couldn't say anything and her mind was in such a jumble that any coherent thoughts had fled.

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He stepped further into the room and closed the door behind him. His powerful presence dominated the office. "If you're looking for money, you won't find any. I'm not a fool."

He wore a rough hunting coat and carried a rifle in one hand. The scents of the woods clung to him—the same mossy earth odors that had enveloped her during that odd spell when she had touched the letter opener. She glanced at it again. Was she losing her mind? Had the stress of the past month been too much for her?

She swallowed hard. "I—I was looking for my letters."

"You won't find them here."

"I—I didn't know if you burned them or not. You handed me the ribbon without saying anything."

He moved with the stealth of an animal to the side of the window and peered out from the edge of the drape. "I did not burn them."

She held her head as a wave of wooziness threatened her. "Then may I have them back, please?"

"They are missing." He put the drape back in place and took the corduroy cap off his head.

"Did ... someone take them?"

"I thought the doctor had taken them, but when I stopped at his house tonight, he was unable to answer any questions."

"Why not?"

"Because I found him with a knife in his back."

She stifled a gasp with her hand.

He came up close to her, so close she could see the hard lines chiseled into his face. "What was in those letters?"

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Though tormented by a tumble of confusion and fear, she struggled to retain her pride. "Nothing ... important." She hoped he did not catch the faint edge of hysteria in her tone. She must get away from him. She stood up, holding onto the edge of the desk.

"Was Filmont your lover?"

"No!" Heat burned on her cheeks.

"Then what happened between you and him?" His voice rumbled low and deep furrows appeared in his brow.

She rushed toward the door, grabbed the knob, and tried to turn it this way and that—but it was locked! Breathing hard, she whirled to face him. With her back to the door, she found him but a foot away from her. Much too close.

He had shed his rough hunting coat. "Tell me the truth."

She shook her head. She could feel the heat of his body and despite her fear, her senses leapt to life.

"What did you do?" He lifted her chin with his index finger and she inhaled sharply. Drugged by the primitive scent of him, she knew she should do all she could to escape, but her body refused to budge.

"I ... I ... haven't done anything."

He leaned closer and she felt his warm breath against her neck. "Did you intend to use that letter opener on me?"

The emotions raging inside her took away her power to speak.

He shifted closer. His thigh brushed against her hip. Her legs trembled and she feared she would not be able to stand.

As if he guessed her need, his hands moved to pull her firmly against him. She splayed her hands against his chest

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but she discovered she did not want to push away. Her fingers quivered as she slid them across the width of his shirt. She could feel the racing of his powerful heart beneath his corded muscles.

"You are tempting me and that is a dangerous thing to do."

The evidence of his hard arousal pressed against her. Her fear faded and a feeling of something much like intoxication gripped her. Burying her face against his neck, she made a weak protest, "You must stop—"

"I must taste you," he whispered into her hair. His mouth swooped down to claim hers. Hungrily, he parted her lips and plundered what little was left of her defenses. His forceful domination ignited a fire in her belly. Her hands slid down to his waist. She yearned to bring him closer.

Pounding sounded on the door behind her. "The barn is on fire!"

He pulled away.

"Dammit!" He swore.

She found herself lifted off her feet and placed on the chair so quickly the room spun before her eyes.

He unlocked the door and was gone but she heard him bellowing out orders and swearing. It took her a minute to recover her senses while she shivered with the loss of his heat. Putting on her shoes, she gingerly got to her feet and went out into the hallway where a thick smoky haze hung in the air. The acrid cloud stung her eyes and nose.

Stumbling toward the kitchen, she bumped into Gertrude, who wore only a nightgown covered by a robe.

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"Thank heavens I found you! We must soak the area around the barn so the fire doesn't spread."

Gertrude rushed out of the house with a lantern in her hand. Molly followed, but without her eyeglasses she could barely see anything in the dark. Gertrude's lantern appeared as a huge, soft fuzzy ball of light.

Molly did not know the location of any of the outbuildings, but the massive blaze in the distance made her heart quail as the flames roared up into the dark sky. As they drew closer, she wanted to put her hands over her ears to block out the terrible screams of frightened animals.

Trailing after Gertrude and still weak from Thomas's sensual assault, she found her legs could barely hold her up. They soon reached the water pump closest to the barn. From there, even without the help of her eyeglasses, she knew nothing anyone could do would save the burning structure. It was one enormous wall of flames. The frightful groan of timbers cracking and falling sent shivers up and down her spine. There was one horrible whoosh as the roof fell in. She feared the scorching heat would singe her hair.

But the fire did nothing to dry the dampness that lay between her thighs. Thomas had started a blaze more blistering than an inferno inside her. He could have taken her right there in his office and she would not have fought against him. What a fool she was! He had quickly seduced her into wanting him and she very nearly gave herself to him. He must have had hundreds of conquests. He had warned her that tempting him was dangerous, but she had not intended

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to tease him. She only wanted her letters returned! She fisted her hands and wished she could pummel him with them.

Gertrude attached a hose to the pump. "There! Now you just keep pumping. I'll direct the hose."

Molly pumped vigorously fueled by her anger toward Thomas and her own traitorous body. In a few minutes her arms ached so badly she did not know how she would ever be able to keep going. Her arms were numb when someone tapped her on the shoulder. She turned to see a young woman wearing a man's coat over her nightgown.

"I'll take over now."

Too exhausted to speak, Molly nodded and shuffled away, rubbing her arms to bring some life back into them. She bumped into a huge metal hayrake. Leaning on it, she watched the young woman pump with strong and steady motions.

She had to be Theresa who Rafe had told her had lost a baby last year. Molly bit her lip, again remembering little Emil. Her heart bled for Theresa.

Suddenly the night turned bitterly cold and needles of sleet stung her face while a torrent of ice and water poured down on her. Shivering, she ran toward the sounds of the braying animals, hoping to find some shelter.

The sleet stopped when she came upon the carriage house. There she found Jeff next to a very skittish horse. Covered in soot, hunks of Jeff's bright red hair had been singed away. When he saw her, he thrust the horse's reins into her hand.

"See if you can calm her down." Tears ran down Jeff's sooty cheeks. "Maybe you being a lady and all will help. Her name's Bell. She ain't badly burned but she heard the screams of the one we lost, Arthur. That was Thomas's horse. He tried to save him but he was too late. Arthur came from the circus, like the rest of us. He loved it here, being free. Best horse I've ever known." He sniffed and wiped his face with his sleeve.

She knew nothing about horses, and the one Jeff asked her to quiet was a fearfully large creature that appeared ready to bolt. The huge mouth and menacing teeth alone gave her enough reasons to hand off the job to someone else. The copious quantities of saliva dripping from the area where the metal bit rubbed against the animal's gums made her somewhat nauseous.

She swallowed her fear. The poor beast was suffering from the effects of a terribly harrowing event.

She thought of the white buck. He had been badly hurt when he was shot, but he knew *she* was not his enemy. He did not hurt her. He did what he could to help her.

But then he had hypnotized her. Or had he? Was that a hallucination? Was she going insane?

She straightened and focused on the task at hand. The unfortunate horse needed comforting. Taking a deep breath, she lightly stroked the horse's neck with her right hand, making sure that she had tightly wrapped the reins around her left hand.

"Poor, poor Bell," she cooed. "I know how frightened you must be ... and to lose one of your best friends in such a

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horrible tragedy ... so terrible and you couldn't help ... you couldn't do anything to save your friend...." She spoke in a soothing voice while she smoothed her hand along the horse's neck, but exhaustion began to weigh upon her. The horse was warm, and before long, Molly shut her eyes and leaned against the horse's neck as she rambled on—half in a dream. "I know what's it's like ... to lose someone you love. I used to watch my little brother while my mother worked in the factory. His name was Emil. He was cute as a button, but full of high spirits and he had no sense of danger."

"I taught him songs and games and soon I thought he was brighter than all the other children in the neighborhood. But then one day, as I walked with him to the park, he suddenly pulled away from me and ran out into the street. A wagon rolled over him ... there was ... nothing I could do ... it happened so fast"

She saw it all as if it were yesterday. "His scream ... it was horrible ... then the wagon stopped ... and I picked him up ... but he was gone...." The horror of that tragedy haunted her still. She had lost her mother and her father to illness, but losing her little brother had broken her heart—and convinced her to remain unwed and childless.

Weary from the night's events, she sobbed into the horse's mane. Bell nudged her gently as if she understood.

"I'll take her now."

Thomas startled her and the horse. Bell stamped and shook her mane. Molly, groggy and weary enough to collapse, quickly swiped at the tears on her cheek. Dawn tinted the

horizon. In the pale rays of the early morning, the barn was nothing but a blackened, smoldering ruin.

"Go back to the house." His words were a command that brooked no argument.

She knew it would be best to get away from him quickly before he wrapped her up in another passionate embrace and silenced all her resistance with one of his soul drenching kisses. She ran her tongue around her lips. The taste of him was still there despite the dense smell of smoke everywhere.

Her fingers fumbled with the reins as she struggled to unwind them. He coughed and then reached to still her clumsy hands. That's when she saw the burn on his arm. Red and swollen, the area had blistered. Some of the blisters had broken.

She glanced up at his face. Like Jeff, he was coated with soot and some of his hair had been singed. But while Jeff's cheeks were stained with the tracks of tears, Thomas's face was a rigid mask, not a muscle moved. Pain lay beneath the severe facade; she could sense it in the way his usually generous lips remained grimly pressed together. His eyes had a fevered glaze.

"You need to take care of your arm."

"Later."

"It needs attention immediately." She had no idea where she had summoned up the reserve strength to speak to him so forcefully.

"It can wait." For a fleeting second the tight expression on his face turned somber and his voice cracked, but he coughed again as if to cover up that slight hint of emotion.

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"I'm very sorry about your horse."

His face hardened once more and his voice turned cold. "If I had not been with you—"

She sucked in her breath and her temper rose at his accusation. "You locked me in that room with you and you took liberties that were most inappropriate—"

"You led me on."

Shaking with rage, she slapped him on the cheek as hard as she could. "You are a beast!"

He showed no reaction. "Get out of here." The tone was quiet, but deadly.

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Chapter Seven

Thomas wrapped his hands around the hot mug of coffee and fought to control his grief and anger. He glanced around the kitchen table and his throat tightened with emotion. Covered in soot, with singed hair and clothing, Jeff, Theresa, Cook and Gertrude had done everything they could. They were more of a family to him than any blood relatives had ever been.

"Gertrude and Theresa, you did a great job in keeping the fire from spreading." He was aware that his voice sounded huskier than usual, but that was due to the smoke in his lungs.

"Molly helped, too." Theresa put in. "Even though she's a mite puny, she sure knew how to handle that old water pump."

He gave a stiff nod. He did not want to think about Molly. She made him forget everything except how she tasted and how badly he wanted to open her sweet thighs and rid himself of the madness.

He rubbed his forehead. He told her to get out—and he meant it. She had distracted him when he should have been keeping watch last night. He had suspected someone was following him and he had checked the other outbuildings, but when he caught her in his office, he lost his head. It took longer than it should have for him to gather his wits and summon the rain. Even then his spell had gone awry and

instead of rain he had gotten sleet. Nobody had complained and the precipitation—while chilly—had doused the fire.

But the incident fueled his feelings of inadequacy. He would never be a great wizard. He would never equal Averill or even come close.

He had lost his precious horse, Arthur. He had not protected him.

He was a failure.

He took another swig of the hot coffee to clear his mind. "Jeff, I can't thank you enough for rounding up all the animals and calming them down."

"That was nothing. I been taking care of animals from the day I was born. But Bell—well, she sure is high-strung. Molly talked to her for the longest time. I knew they'd be understanding each other—they both being ladies. Theresa told me how ladies understand each other."

Thomas did not miss the loving smile Theresa shot back at Jeff. A sharp ache went through him.

He merely nodded again. He had heard the tail end of what Molly had told Bell. *It was horrible ... then the wagon stopped ... and I picked him up ... but he was gone....* She had tears running down her face to boot.

Had she lived through some terrible tragedy? How did Filmont fit in? What about those letters?

He told himself he did not care.

Arthur was gone. His strong, smart warrior. He had promised to protect Arthur, and all the rest of them. He had promised them a better life in this seemingly pastoral paradise.

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And instead there was a disaster.

"I am surprised that none of our neighbors came to watch—or rather cheer," Gertrude noted in her usual sarcastic manner.

Theresa's soft voice chimed in. "They probably figured they'd be shot on sight. Or turned into toads."

Cook came to the table stirring a foul-smelling paste in a bowl. He signed to Thomas. Obediently, Thomas went to the sink and ran water over his burned skin. When he came back to the table, Cook dabbed the thick paste on his burned arm.

"What the hell is in that stuff?" He winced as the warm ointment hit his raw nerves.

"Some hair of the dog, I'll wager." Gertrude got up from the table and picked up the empty mugs to carry them to the sink. Theresa joined her to help in washing and drying the mugs.

"The fire could have been an accident. It happened enough times in the circus." Jeff sat beside Thomas, mulling over the last of his coffee. "One of the horses could have kicked over a lantern."

Guilt, regret, and an unusual emptiness centered in his chest. Jeff could be right. Thomas had been the last one in the barn. He kept going over the scenario in his head. He had rubbed Arthur down and given him more hay. Then he thought he had blown out the lantern.

But maybe he had not. He had rushed through the chore of caring for his horse. His mind had been in turmoil. Molly's letters had been taken from his office, and the doctor was the last outsider in the office.

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And now Doctor Westerly was dead. Quite clearly murdered. Why hadn't he seen that coming? He never had an inkling of it.

He was the world's worst wizard. He had never been able to foresee anything.

Still, on the way home from town, he had an odd feeling right between his shoulders—as if someone had been watching him.

He turned off the path twice and waited but he saw no one. Arthur wanted only to get back to his cozy stall. Rarely a difficult horse to handle, he had been plain ornery and determined to get home quickly.

Thomas gritted his teeth as Cook tended to the burn on his arm. He thought about Molly, upstairs in her room. She had not come down to join them for coffee, though Gertrude had asked her.

"I'm going to go out and check for tracks on the trail besides mine." Thomas really wanted to go upstairs and see Molly. He could hear her footsteps above him, pacing like a caged animal. He lifted his free hand to his cheek. It was tender, but not bruised. She did not hit him very hard. After all, she was only a woman, he thought to himself. But he admitted to himself that he had been taken aback by her sudden ferocity.

Though, perhaps, he did deserve it. He pressed his lips together. She brought out the baser part of his nature—and no woman had ever affected him like that until now. He had always been in control when it came to women.

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He hoped she had started packing. Otherwise, he did not know if he could control his desires. He wanted to peel the clothing off her body, piece by piece. He envisioned seeing all of her, naked, on the bed

He flinched as Cook tightened gauze bandages around his arm.

"I'll look for tracks, too," Jeff offered. "There won't be any near what's left of the barn."

"Stay and keep watch here." Thomas kept his voice low. He did not want to frighten the women. "We could be in for more trouble."

Jeff nodded.

"You and Cook take turns." Thomas lowered his brows. "I won't be back until I find the bastard who burned the barn and killed my horse."

Molly looked at the room in horror. While everyone had been outside fighting the fire, someone had gone through her things and thrown everything about the room. With her heart hammering madly, she picked carefully through her possessions.

Who could have done it? Thomas?

After checking everything twice, she knew the wax cylinder hidden in the Epson salt tin was missing. She could barely breathe. That had been her only hope—the one way she knew she could prove what happened.

She sat on the edge of the bed and rocked back and forth struggling to hold back her tears and covering her mouth so she would not let out a cry of misery.

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She found her bag among the disarray and emptied it. The small amount of money had not been touched. Her stomach knotted as she counted it out. She had enough for a one-way train ticket to Philadelphia, but there would be nothing left for food or lodging.

The thief had left behind her mother's ring and necklace. She had her father's watch. Anguish tore at her. She would have to sell them.

Thomas would be glad to see her gone. She realized now she should not have slapped him—at least not after the fire. He had been burned, exhausted, and grieving for his horse. She should have slapped him when he locked her in the office with him, but she had been completely under his spell and did not have the presence of mind to do it then.

How did he seduce her so easily? Ice shimmered up her spine. He was a wizard. It was all sorcery and the dark arts. Black fear swept through her.

If she stayed, he would surely lead her into depravity.

She fought to calm herself but her heart lay empty and cold. All her hope had fled and the future looked bleak.

She thought of writing a letter to Rafe, but she decided it would do no good. It would be best to go and not look back. She took the typewriter out of her trunk and set it on the small desk in the room. Then she opened the wardrobe and began packing her trunk and her bag.

She made up her mind to steal some food before she left. Thomas had plenty in his pantry and nobody would starve due to her thievery. Her stomach rumbled at the thought of a

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meal. She wondered if anyone was in the kitchen at that moment.

Probably Cook. And maybe Gertrude, as well.

Odds are Thomas would not be there. He should be in his laboratory watching the mice multiply. Yes, he was evil!

She peered out the door of her room and saw no one in the hall. She slipped out of her room and tiptoed along the passage. She stopped at Thomas's door. She could not resist turning the knob to see if it was locked.

The knob turned easily in her hand. She held her breath and carefully opened the door. The room was empty. Now she had a chance to see if Thomas had lied to her and hidden her letters in his room.

Could he have stolen the wax cylinder as well?

He would if he knew the truth about who she was. A sharp pain stabbed at her heart. Would he turn her in?

Though his room was far larger than hers, the furnishings were austere. A simple iron bed dominated the room. Against one wall stood a plain chiffonier with five drawers and locks. She tugged at one drawer and it opened. She found quite a few pairs of men's hose and neatly folded handkerchiefs.

The next drawer contained undergarments in very precise order. A swirl of desire caught her up as she touched them, but she fought against it. She could not allow herself to think about him, but she could not help breathing in the scent of him that lingered even in the laundered clothing. She fanned her face with her hand. Surely, the sun shining in the window had warmed up the room.

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In the other drawers, she discovered collars, suspenders, ties, and nightshirts.

The nightshirts appeared brand new and never worn.

She swallowed hard as she remembered how he had run into her room wearing only his trousers and that crystal on the leather string around his neck.

Just like the one on the white buck.

She shook her head. It could not be. She must have imagined it.

She shut the drawers. She had not found her letters or the cylinder.

Her stomach growled more insistently. Though she had gotten no sleep at all, the bone-numbing exhaustion she had felt as she leaned on Bell had vanished. Instead, ravenous hunger clawed at her.

She glanced at the one large wardrobe in the room. Should she investigate the contents of it? Most likely, she would never have another chance. With her stomach protesting, she went to open the door—but it was locked.

She clenched her teeth. Perhaps the wardrobe was where he kept the magic potion that had caused her to dream she was a doe.

A chill iced up her spine. But what about the letter opener that she had touched? She could not have been under the influence of a drug when she suddenly found herself in the woods.

Until her arrival at White Buck Hall, she never believed in any sort of mystical illusions. Obviously, she was wrong—though it would be far better to learn that only some cunning

trickery was involved instead of assuming she was fast becoming a lunatic.

She sat on the edge of Thomas's bed and held her head in her hands. What if she had more unexplained visions? If she left White Buck Hall in her current state, what would become of her? Where would she go?

No. She could not leave. Not yet. What if Thomas had the cylinder and the letters? What if he intended to tell Mr. Filmont of her whereabouts? Would he do that to her?

She pressed her lips together. She would have to take the chance.

Smoothing her hand along the bedcovers, a frisson of heat slid along her veins. Thomas made her want him. He had told her he was dangerous, and he was.

Her belly made another painful lurch, but this time she could not tell whether it was due to hunger or to the yearning she felt for Thomas.

She caught a whiff of bacon frying. She left Thomas's room and hurried to the kitchen.

By the time Thomas reached the hunter's cabin, the sun had started its descent. It did not surprise him that the tracks in the woods led to the old shack. While Silas had few friends in Stony Mill, he had become an icon of sorts, more feared than respected. There were those who believed he had accumulated great wealth but kept it hidden in a secret cache. Whoever was in the cabin could be searching for a map to the treasure.

Or the intruder could be the bastard who killed Arthur. Thomas had walked a long way and reviewed everything he

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had done last night. He was now quite positive that he had blown out the lantern—and set it on the hook high up on the beam where none of the horses would have been able to reach it.

Desolation swept over him and tore at his heart. He wanted to blast holes in the cabin, but he knew it would do no good. He had to be patient. He wondered if the man inside the cabin had actually known Silas.

Twenty years ago when Thomas was growing up at White Buck Hall, he had heard the servants talk about Silas—a man who never married and who had no ties as far as anyone knew. Some thought he had killed a man.

Thomas didn't doubt it. After all, Silas had nearly killed Molly. Longing and guilt swept over him when he thought of her. He had been deliberately cruel to her, but she was driving him insane. Not only because he wanted to take her and satiate his powerful lust in her velvet warmth. No, it was more than that. Even now, as he lay on the ground behind a log in the deep shadow of the woods, he knew her restless agitation had ceased and that her mood had calmed. He could sense her measured heartbeats—almost as if her breast nestled against him.

And that was very odd. He had always been a failure at prescience. Averill had a true gift for it, but even some minor wizards could accurately predict future events. Thomas could never get it right. That's why he had begun his study with mice. He kept searching for the proper potion or most efficient spell to assist him.

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His botanical concoction seemed to offer the most hope. At least, for mice. He had not tested it on himself—yet.

He forced his gaze back to the door of the cabin. Sooner or later, the squatter inside would come out—if only to relieve his bladder.

Thomas recognized the chestnut horse in the lean-to at the side of the cabin. That was one of the old hags the livery in town rented out. Her name was Lemon Drop. Though he rarely set foot in town, things in Stony Mill did not change much.

Lemon Drop was still saddled. Whoever was inside the cabin probably did not intend to stay the night.

Exhaustion began to take its toll on him. He had no sleep at all last night and found himself nodding off. He thought of ending the waiting game and busting into the cabin, but that was a good way for someone to get killed. Most likely him.

He dragged out some beef jerky and biscuits he had packed and gnawed on those for a while. He thought of Molly as she sat at the table with him last night. She managed to appear sweet and demure, but he had found a flame in her that matched the heat of a roaring inferno. Though the sun sank behind the trees the temperature dipped down near freezing, he hardly felt it because he had Molly on his mind.

The creak of hinges warned him to cease his dreaming. He lifted the rifle to his shoulder and held his breath. The door of the cabin lay in his sights.

A man wearing a fine Derby hat and a Mackinosh coat came out. The outfit marked him as someone who did not

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come from Stony Mill. The bright moonlight flashed on the repeating shotgun held in the man's hand.

Thomas was grateful he had the patience not to barge into the cabin.

Before the stranger hoisted himself up into the saddle, he stuffed a stack of letters into his saddlebag and a round, cylindrical tin.

Thomas narrowed his eyes. Silas had never been able to read or write. He doubted the old hunter had left a will.

Could those be Molly's letters? Had the doctor stolen them from the manor only to have another man—perhaps his murderer—take them?

His hands tightened on his rifle. What was in Molly's letters? Why would someone be willing to commit murder to take them? Should he use his wand to lift the letters out of the saddlebags?

His mind reeled with doubt. Who was Molly Coan? What relationship did she have with Filmont?

Urging old Lemon Drop to get a move on, the stranger swore. He had a slight accent—not foreign, but regional. Though Thomas had traveled extensively with the circus, he couldn't quite place the location of that accent.

Despite the verbal barrage, Lemon Drop took her sweet time, as she was wont to do. However, instead of taking the path that led back to town, the stranger pointed the horse in the opposite direction, which would take him either to White Buck Hall or the Mullica River.

Did the man have a boat waiting for him? There was one way to find out quickly.

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As soon as the stranger turned the corner of the path, Thomas ran north until he reached the secluded spot that he had discovered when he was twelve years old. There a four-trunked oak stood surrounded by a ring of thick white pines and laurel bushes. The pine boughs' interlocking branches parted for him. The air was warmer inside the enchanted circle, but as he walked across the sandy floor of the circle a tingle prickled along his shoulders. Here his magic was more powerful than it was anywhere else.

Nothing could match the feeling, not even sex.

That thought brought him to a halt as a vision of Molly floated through his consciousness. He could still taste her dainty lips. He closed his eyes and remembered the way her body melted against him. Maybe it would be different with her. Better.

Incredible.

A low growl rumbled in his throat. But she did nothing but cause chaos!

She would surely drive him insane.

Opening his eyes, he hurried to the huge tree in the middle of the ring. Before he could change his mind, he stripped off his clothes and tossed them to the ground with his rifle. The wound in his flank still pained him, but he ignored the ache and jumped up to stand in the center of the massive tree trunk. He held up his wand and took a great gulp of air to still his breathing. The crystal on his chest grew hot and hummed. It began to glow. Heat spread throughout his body until he was nearly aflame. The wand shot out an arc of light into the sky. Excruciating pain wracked his body. However, he had

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endured it countless times and he knew that within minutes the devastating fire in his limbs would be replaced with immense power.

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Chapter Eight

"Where is Thomas?" Molly wrung her hands beneath the dining room table and silently went over the appropriate apology she had fashioned in her mind. She wanted to get it over with and ask Thomas's forgiveness while everyone else was there at the table. That way, she would not be alone with him.

"He won't be back this evening." Theresa shot a worried look at Jeff who nodded back at her.

Molly frowned. "I thought he never went into town."

"He does on some occasions," Gertrude explained.

"Nobody likes him. What if they shoot at him?" Her misgivings increased.

"Aside from his magic wand, he is a thoroughly practical wizard. He has a rifle with him and he's a crack shot. He blasted the rifle out of the hand of the man who shot at the window." Theresa put a thick slab of butter on her bread.

"Nobody told me that! Maybe that's who burned the barn—in retaliation."

"Possibly." Jeff acknowledged.

Alarm sent a piercing chill through her and she almost whispered. "Did he go out to kill somebody?"

Gertrude handed her a steaming bowl of beans.

"Goodness, he's not like Silas. He has high ethical standards. He's merely seeing if he can find some tracks in the woods. He's grieving for his horse and he has to do something."

"But ... where's Cook?" Molly asked.

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"Keeping watch, of course." Gertrude patted her shoulder. "No need to get yourself into a tizzy."

"Jeff will take over after we eat." Theresa smiled at her husband. He squeezed her hand. They looked so much in love that Molly found herself envious, but she tamped down the feeling.

"Are we under siege again?"

"We're simply taking precautions," Gertrude pointed out. "If we had done so last night, perhaps we could have prevented the loss of the barn ... and Arthur."

"And four chickens." Theresa added, "Although they could have run away."

"Is that why we're having salted fish?" Gertrude sighed.

"I don't think Cook had the heart to butcher any animals today. He loved Arthur, too." There was a slight catch in Theresa's voice. "He was a noble beast."

A cold, hard stone settled in Molly's stomach. Thomas had glanced out the window in the office rather furtively once last night, but then he seemed to forget everything except her. And when she was in his arms, she abandoned all her common sense—a most unusual reaction for her.

Her pulse raced as she held her hands together so they would not tremble. He was a wizard, she reminded herself. He made mice think of nothing but mating all day long. He made *her* think of nothing but mating all day long. She dug her nails into her palms.

"Now stop worrying," Gertrude urged. "Everything will turn out right. Eat up—you've got to get your strength back."

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Molly did her best to smile. The bearded woman had a kind and understanding heart. Life must have been very difficult for someone so ... different. But it hadn't seemed to affect her positive outlook.

"You've all been so kind to me." And they had—though Thomas had not and he was the one who haunted her thoughts.

What would everyone think of her if they knew she was wanted as a thief? Who would they believe—her or Mr. Filmont? Anxiety tightened her nerves. What if everyone was lying to her? What if Thomas was not searching for tracks in the woods? What if he was talking to the sheriff? Her nerves wound into knots.

"We've hardly had a chance to talk to you with all the hubbub." Gertrude sighed. "Why don't you tell us a little about yourself?"

Blood leached from her face. "I—I—there's nothing remarkable about my life."

"But you're one of the New Women? Aren't you?" Theresa leaned forward. "Are you a Suffragette, too?"

"No, I really haven't had time for that sort of thing."

"I think it's about time women banded together," Gertrude's voice rose. "We work just as hard as men do. We should be allowed to vote. Otherwise, we aren't true citizens."

"We men take care of you," Jeff noted with a laugh. "Though it is a daunting task."

Theresa gave her husband a playful shove. "Just wait until I get you home tonight. You are in for a tongue lashing."

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They all laughed, for the two obviously loved each other dearly. Molly concentrated on the food on her plate and thought of Thomas. He did not love her, but he couldn't keep his hands off her. The attraction they had for each other mystified her. She closed her eyes for a moment and thought about the way that he spoke to her, low and purposely seductive—and the way he held her, as if their two bodies could melt into one.

She swallowed hard. So was it magic—or hypnosis? Or madness?

Theresa's voice shattered her heated thoughts.

"By the way, I thought you would like to know that Jeff and I have some wonderful news."

Molly reluctantly opened her eyes.

"We're expecting," Theresa glowed with happiness. Jeff's face turned beet red.

Gertrude chuckled. "I knew it. Don't think you can keep secrets like that from me."

Theresa sighed. "I was ... afraid, at first ... to even hope. But Jeff says I'm eating much better here as well as not doing anything too strenuous. He's sure that will make a difference."

Molly offered her congratulations, but she felt the old painful twist in her heart because babies always reminded her of Emil. His death had shown her what a very bad mother she would make—and she knew she could never bear to have another child die in her care.

She shuddered inwardly at the thought. Anyhow, she would never get married. She would probably be spending the

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rest of her life on the run, unless she could manage to convince Thomas to allow her to be his secretary. Rafe had been so sure his plan would work out, but he had left before the whole scheme had been set up.

With both the cylinder and the letters out of her hands, she worried that at any moment, someone would wrap a rope around her wrists and haul her back to New York City. Or put the rope around her neck and hang her. She put a hand to her throat and tried to swallow. She had seen Mr. Filmont in a rage and he was quite depraved.

Gertrude and Theresa spent the remainder of the meal talking and planning about what would be needed for the baby's arrival, but Molly's thoughts were far away. She fidgeted with the napkin in her lap. She feigned interest in bibs, booties, and bonnets. When the conversation ran to the choice of cotton or linen diapers, Jeff begged his leave.

Molly decided it was her chance to escape as well. She picked up dishes to clear off the table. Gertrude and Theresa were so deep in their conversation, they barely noticed.

Cook took the dishes from her when she walked into the kitchen. He set the dishes in the sink, pointed at her, and made motions with his hands, which she interpreted to mean that she should go to sleep.

She smiled and nodded. Despite everything that had happened, she had fallen into a nap at one point during the day and still felt wide-awake. Cook handed her a small candlestick with a lighted candle and she left the kitchen by using the back stairway, which she had only discovered that afternoon. Servants must have used it in the past.

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On a whim, she decided to go up to the third floor. She intended to talk with Thomas the moment he returned—before she lost her nerve. In the meantime, she needed to distract herself.

The light from the candle cast long shadows as she wound her way higher on the narrow, curving stairway. Already anxious, she found her pulse quickening with apprehension each time the candle flame swayed in the shifting air currents.

The ceiling on the third floor was quite low. Opposite the stairway, there were a few small rooms. She peered into the first one and found it unoccupied and cluttered with odds and ends—an invalid's rolling chair, a child's crib, and a cradle. The sight of the cradle had her eyes welling with tears. Indeed, it was a much grander cradle than little Emil's had been. She wished she could have given him more in his short life. Beside the cradle, lay a child's toy drum. How Emil would have loved such a toy! Had it belonged to Thomas when he was a boy? The hammered brass edge had a dull gleam despite its age, and the lithographed soldiers on the side stood at attention in their fine red uniforms, ready to march into battle. She knelt beside it and set the candle on the floor. She could not resist hearing the sound the drum made, but when she touched it an electric chill went through her.

Two of the brass knobs holding the ropes on the side of the drum caught the light and reflected the bright red color of the uniforms. She gasped, as the brass knobs became two ruby eyes staring back at her. She could not turn away from the sight. Her gaze was drawn deep into those horrid eyes

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until everything faded away to be replaced by a scene of the woods outside—and it looked as if it was a moving picture—as though someone was running through the woods. *As if she was running through the woods*

Danger stalked her. She could feel it. She could hear the footfalls behind her getting closer.

Terrified, she fought to close her eyes, to blot out the image before her. At last, she succeeded in breaking the contact. When she did, she ran into the hall. She stood there breathing hard as her heart thundered within her chest. She told herself that her short nap during the day had not been enough rest and now she was seeing things that weren't really there. Or it could be her eyes were growing weaker without her thick lenses.

Or maybe she *was* losing her grip on reality. The white buck *had* hypnotized her and that was causing her to have these terrible spells. She covered her mouth to quell the sob that rose up in her throat.

Her mouth was dry as dust, but she had to keep moving—if only to prevent fear from overwhelming her. She walked into the other room.

There among a few pieces of dusty furniture, she saw a trunk plastered with labels and a portmanteau. She set the candlestick down on the floor and knelt beside the trunk so she could read the labels—for each one had the name of a town printed on it. Topeka, San Diego, Des Moines, Carson City, Augusta, and more—that trunk had been all over the country! On the top of the trunk, in very faded letters she

could barely distinguish the words, "Property of Thomas Hillyer."

The temptation to see what lay inside overwhelmed her. After all, Thomas had looked inside her trunk, taken her letters and perhaps the cylinder as well. Her fingers trembled as she fumbled with the latch. It opened easily. Slowly, so as not to make any noise, she lifted the lid.

Holding the candle above the tray, she saw a deep blue satin printed with gold metallic stars. She lifted up the fabric to find it was a flowing robe with long wide sleeves. Beneath it lay a pointed hat. This had to be Thomas's costume. Her fingers quivered, as the outfit seemed to transmit small vibrations.

She noticed a plain, black wooden box had been tucked into one corner. For some odd reason, the simplicity of the box intrigued her. It, too, must be part of his theatrical performance.

She knew she should leave well enough alone. What if someone discovered her rummaging through Thomas's things? What if Thomas returned and found her here?

She gulped as a current of desire wound through her. He would be angry, but that would not stop him from taking her in his arms and kissing her. And she would make no protest, for she would willingly kiss him back. In his embrace, she had no control.

God help her.

Almost hungry for the taste of him, she told herself that she would simply peek inside the black wooden box and once

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she satisfied her curiosity, she would close the cover on the trunk and leave.

She set the candle down on the floor and lifted the wooden box out of the tray. It was heavier than she expected. Covered with a shiny lacquer, the box had small, decorative hinges on the back and a golden latch on the front. The latch opened easily.

She frowned when she saw the crushed black velvet inside. Poking at the soft fabric, she felt a hard sphere beneath it. She held onto the bottom of the box with one hand and used the other to gather up the velvet and pull out the sphere.

When she set it down on the floor, the slippery fabric fell away. She let out a small cry of surprise. She smoothed out the cloth and stared in shock at the clear glass globe on its ornate silver stand. A cold shiver went down her spine.

The ominous shadows in the room seemed to close in on her and a pain stabbed at her heart. What the innkeeper had told her was true—Thomas was in league with the Devil. Why else would he own such a thing?

A deep chill seeped into her bones as she drew in a ragged sigh. Thomas had enchanted her. His kisses, his touch, and the yearnings he stirred inside her—none of it was real. It must all be magic.

Her throat ached with disappointment as she moved to rewrap the ball in the velvet. However, before she covered it, the ball started to glow. Her hands sprang back in alarm.

An image formed in the ball. Even without her eyeglasses, she could see it clearly. The white buck stood proudly on a

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small rise. He seemed to be directing his ruby gaze straight at her. Below him a river flowed in the moonlight.

She could barely breathe. How was it possible for her to see the image in the crystal? Frozen with panic, she drew her arms around her as the chill in the room increased. In the crystal ball, the white buck leaped off the rise and ran through the woods. He moved with grace and power, leaping over logs with ease.

Mesmerized, she watched as he came to a pier where a ship had docked. He stood at the edge of the pier for several moments and appeared to be studying the area. A feeble light shone out from the cabin in the boat, but no one was on the deck.

Cautiously, the buck moved toward the pilings. In a few quick movements, he removed the ropes that held the boat fast to the pier. The ship began to drift away from the dock, carried by the current. The buck ran back into the woods, but he turned to watch as the ship moved further down the river.

The image faded and the light from the crystal ball dimmed.

Molly blinked. Was what she had seen a hallucination? Or had she seen something that had already occurred? What was the point of it?

Quaking badly, she quickly wrapped up the crystal ball and placed it back in the wooden box and then into the trunk. The candle had grown much smaller and she was not sure of how much time had passed.

She left the room with her own shadow stirring a sense of alarm in her. She did not want to be alone. Making her way

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back down to the dining room, she found it empty. All the plates and food had been put away.

The kitchen, too, lay silent and still. Everyone must have retired early. Wasn't Jeff supposed to be on watch? Blowing out her candle, she slipped out the kitchen door. A bank of clouds now hid the moon's bright light.

The odor of charred wood still lingered heavily in the air. She narrowed her eyes and peered out into the darkness but she could not see Jeff, or anyone else. Keeping close to the house, she walked halfway around the perimeter of it. All remained still and as quiet as a tomb. She shivered in the cold night air. She should have put on her jacket before going outside.

She knew she would get no rest in her lonely room with the doubts whirling in her mind. There was no logical explanation for what was happening to her.

She glanced around one more time before she trudged up the steps to the kitchen entrance. Her mind was in turmoil, filled with a jumble of confusing thoughts, none of which made any sense in the natural order of things. She—who had always been a practical young woman and not taken with any fancies—was now thoroughly convinced in the power of sorcery and magic.

Since she had gotten off the train in Stony Mill her life had taken a strange twist—one that made her life as a fugitive from justice seem somehow less important.

She had believed that those who practiced sorcery were in league with the devil. Did that mean everyone else in White Buck Hall was involved in dark dealings?

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The very marrow of her bones felt like ice as she reached for the door handle, but before she could turn the knob, another hand pulled hers away. She drew in a breath, but before she could let out a scream her attacker covered her mouth with his gloved hand.

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Chapter Nine

Thomas never knew when it would end, but it always did. The power eventually drained away leaving him in a stupor. He awoke in the center of the four-trunked tree with his body so cold it felt as if a thousand icy needles lay imbedded in his skin.

He moaned as the agonizing pain made even the slightest movement a torment probably reserved for the lost souls in hell. It hurt simply to move his eyelids, but he did it anyway and glanced upward. Clouds shadowed the moon, and the unusual warmth of the grove had vanished.

Dammit.

He must get warm. He never dared to build a fire in the peculiar copse for fear it would alert some passersby to the location. The closest shelter to him was Silas' old cabin. He did not know what the stranger riding old Lemon Drop would do when he found his boat missing, but if the man returned to the cabin it would take him quite a while to get there—hampered as he would be by the dark sky.

Thomas had memorized the woods as a boy. He could find his way on the darkest night, but every muscle ached as he struggled to force his frozen limbs to move. He dressed in his cold clothing and walked toward Silas's old cabin.

The barest hint of dawn's promise broke through a sky colored a somber gray as he stumbled into the cabin. The hearth lay cold, but the ample supply in the woodbox cheered him. He could not use any magic to stir up a fire for it would

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take him hours to build up his reserves of strength. But it didn't matter. Within a few minutes, he sat in front of a roaring blaze. As a boy, he had explored the cabin several times when Silas wasn't home and so he knew of the stash of homebrew in the root cellar. He lit one of the candles he found on the mantle, felt around the edge of the rug until he located the small groove beneath one board and pulled up the trapdoor. Climbing down the ladder into the cellar, he was surprised at the changes.

He had not checked out Silas's place in quite a while and the old hunter's taste had improved in the interim—or maybe he really did have a treasure lying around in the woods somewhere. On the rough-hewn shelves in the damp, stone-lined cellar were some fancy bottles of wine and not one but two bottles of Thomas's favorite bourbon. There was plenty of Silas' own homebrew as well—and though it was far more potent than the bourbon, Thomas opted for the finer flavor of the bourbon rather than the kick he would get from the corn liquor.

He grabbed a bottle and went back up the ladder, closing the trap door. The rug fell in place over it. He would never have known about the cellar if Silas had not left it open one day.

Filling a tin cup with the bourbon, Thomas drank down a long swallow. The fiery liquid seared his throat, heating the cold core of him as nothing else could.

Except perhaps, a kiss from Molly.

As the aching in his limbs subsided, he recalled everything about her and wished she lay beside him. He closed his eyes

and tried to remember the feel of her. The scent of her. Her heated skin against his. Her tiny waist and the wondrous curve of her hips.

He poured more bourbon into the cup. What was the matter with him? He knew nothing about her except for the fact that some stranger had probably murdered the doctor to get her letters.

He leaned back on Silas's old bed and the glint of metal reflecting the firelight caught his eye. Above the bed, hanging on a hook, was a revolver. He reached for it and found it to be Colt's Army Model—a fine double action, self-cocking, forty-one caliber six shooter with a six-inch barrel.

It was loaded.

Obviously, Silas had kept it handy to guarantee restful slumber. Thomas smiled wryly. Silas wouldn't need it now.

Two nights without sleep, two cups of bourbon, and a session in the enchanted grove was all it took to send him into dreamland. His weary eyelids finally lowered and he slipped into a dream where he found Molly laying naked on a bed of pine needles beneath the heavy boughs in his secret copse. Her body reminded him of sweet cream. He tasted her teats, suckling like a babe for honeyed nectar while her nipples firmed in his mouth. Her soft, pleasing moan sounded like the wind in the pine boughs above them.

He trailed downward slowly, tasting every inch of her silken skin, exploring the gentle curves until he grew so hard with his lust he thought he would explode.

Seeking the deepest part of her, he spread her thighs and she opened to him, already slick with her desire. He lapped at

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her tender folds, drinking in her essence until she writhed in pleasure.

His own consuming hunger took hold. Hot as a firebrand, he drove into her until he felt her shudder and the undulating waves of her climax sent him over the edge in a raw burst of flame that left him scorched with pleasure.

Thomas awoke hours later to the steady sound of a heavy rain falling outside the cabin. His muscles tensed. Nature's rhythms rarely roused him from sleep. Something else must have disturbed him. He opened his eyes slowly while anxiety churned in his gut.

The fire on the hearth had cooled to embers and though it had to be mid-morning, darkness persisted in the cabin for it had no windows. Only a few rays of the dull gray day shone around the edge of the door. It was enough. His eyes had adjusted to the dimness.

He lay fully clothed with his rifle beside him on Silas's rude bed wishing he could return to his dream and knowing he had been a fool to allow himself that luxury. He had wasted precious time.

He froze as he heard a horse whinny.

"You damn bag of bones. I should have shot you three miles back." The gruff voice of the stranger was unmistakable with that slight accent. He must be tying up Lemon Drop in the lean-to at the side of the cabin.

Dammit.

There was no other exit aside from the front door. Thomas grabbed the bottle of bourbon, his rifle and Silas's revolver. He had regained a small measure of power—enough to wave

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his wand and restore the interior of the cabin to the way it had looked when he walked into it. Then fumbling for the narrow groove, he pulled up the trap door to the root cellar. He closed it behind him just as the front door's rusty hinges squealed.

Molly gave up fighting after the first few minutes when she passed out for lack of air. She lost all sense of time since she did not know how long she had been unconscious. Her abductor had tied her hands and feet, put a gag in her mouth and covered her head with a rough, burlap bag. Breathing became her prime concern.

He had tossed her over the back of a horse like baggage. She struggled to stay calm but her position on the horse left her dizzy. Her hands and feet were numb with pain. With the pressure on her stomach and the gag in her mouth, her insides sloshed about uneasily. Already cold with terror, the drenching rain added to her misery.

This must be the end. There was no hope for her. She would be brought to trial and suffer for the rest of her life in jail for a crime she did not commit. Mr. Filmont would have his revenge.

She wondered who her abductor was. She knew by his strength and his voice that he was not Mr. Filmont. Besides, her former boss would never want to get his hands dirty.

She tried not to cry but the tears came anyway. Where was the white buck? Her strong hero had saved her once. She thought of the image she had seen in the crystal ball and wondered about it. Had the buck already done something to

help her? Had her abductor planned to take her back to the city on a boat?

Her thoughts turned darker. The buck should have let the hunter shoot her in the woods. That would have been less painful than what she was going through—and what lay ahead of her was only more pain and humiliation.

She had hoped she could escape her fate. She had believed that somehow she could rectify the wrong that had been done to her, but she needed a miracle worker more than a good lawyer. What jury would believe her and not Mr. Filmont? He had money and prestige. She would be accused of being a woman of ill repute with her good name already sullied by Filmont.

She sobbed, but that only made her gag again. She clenched her teeth on the filthy rag in her mouth and wrestled with her emotions. There was no sense crying.

Her abductor cursed at the horse. He struggled with the animal and whipped it over and over. The horse cried in pain and evidently tried to bite him several times, but the sadistic and cruel man succeeded in forcing the horse to do his will.

Clearly, Molly could expect no compassion in his custody.

At last, the horse stopped plodding along. The man tied up the beast, yanked Molly off the horse, and carried her into some sort of shelter. She heard the squeak of the door hinges. When her abductor dropped her onto a hard bed, her elbow took the brunt of the impact. She let out a moan.

"Well, well—and all this time I thought you was passed out." His wicked laugh had a new wave of icy fear washing through her. He pulled the bag off her head.

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She stared up at him and a shock of recognition went through her. He was the man who had been the only other customer at the inn when she arrived in Stony Mill.

"Best remember this little lady, I get paid whether you're dead or alive and dead is a lot less bother. This here gun fires pretty quick—six shots without reloading. So you try anything and I plug you full of holes."

He grinned at her as if the thought of killing her gave him pleasure. She closed her eyes as hopelessness clutched her heart.

He stomped across the floor, closed the door, and latched it. She heard the sounds of wood crackling in the hearth as he built up the fire, but while the room grew warmer, she was caught in a frozen wasteland of torment and panic. She dared to open her eyes again to look at her persecutor and found him staring at her.

"I saw your picture and I thought to myself now there's a pretty woman who shoulda been home tending to the mending, but you thought you was gonna be rich. Ain't that the way it always goes. Everybody wants to get rich quick." His voice had a ragged edge. "But me, I found an easy way to make a living as I am especially fond of taking a woman into custody. Ain't as many women as men, of course. So I gotta bring in a few men, too, now and then. I usually go for the young ones. I'll take a boy or a woman, either way. Don't matter to me. I like it 'cause there ain't nothing they can do about it—all tied up like that."

Everything inside her went still.

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"I like it when they scream, too. Makes it better somehow. So I always find me a place like this one. Ain't nobody around for miles. Ain't nobody gonna hear you." He untied the gag. "Go ahead—give it a try. Yell all you want."

She gulped and tried to talk. Her jaw, her neck, and her head hurt so badly she wished she could pass out again. "B-but, I'm not guilty." Her voice came out hoarse and gravelly. She did not sound like herself at all.

He let out a roar of laughter that shook the rafters. "That's what they all say—but it don't matter to me. There's a reward and I'm gonna collect, but I'm gonna have me a little fun in the meantime. You are a pretty little thing. Small, too." He rubbed his hand along her cheek and she shuddered.

"Real smooth and soft. Gotta see those tits of yours." He grabbed her collar and ripped her bodice open.

She screamed as he pressed his hot hands on her breasts. "Stop it! You're hurting me!"

"Well now! That's just the way I like it. You keep right on screaming and we'll get along just fine. Makes me hard." He took his hands off her and threw off his coat. He took off his shirt next, then his trousers.

Shock and rage warred in her heart. She was the prisoner of a perverted man, a man who had no compassion, and no rules except his own. He intended to take his pleasure with her and then turn her over to the authorities. Or kill her.

... dead or alive and dead is a lot less bother..

There was no point in begging. If she struggled, he would undoubtedly enjoy it all the more.

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She hated him! If she had a knife in her hand she would stab him! She rolled over on her back. She winced with pain because it hurt with her hands tied so tightly behind her, but she thought if she could lift up her feet, she might be able to kick him. If she could kick him hard enough, maybe he would fall backward.

She pressed her lips together and concentrated. She would have to be quick.

He stood naked before her and she wanted to vomit at the sight of him. She could smell the fetid odor of his unwashed body.

At that point, she realized he had tied a rope from her hands to her ankles. Tugging at her feet made the ropes cut into her wrists. She could feel the warm blood oozing out onto her hands and making them slippery. She could do nothing at all! Tears of frustration gathered in her eyes.

"I like that. I like them tears. Begging is good, too. Come on and beg me not to do it." He grinned. "You'll be screaming in pain soon. You look mighty weak. Small and tight, too, I bet. Probably won't be able to take all of me in. I'll have to cut you open—as I said, dead or alive, I still get the money."

She gasped in horror and her soul went dead. With all her hope extinguished, she closed her eyes and allowed herself to think of Thomas and the fiery kisses they had shared.

She mourned for the love she would never experience.

She did not want to open her eyes, but she felt her skirts lifted up. She saw him grinning at her with a huge knife in his hands.

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"Now I just got to git this damned thing off you. Gets in the way." He grabbed a handful of fabric and stabbed at it with the knife, but as the skirt was rent in half, a sudden explosion shook the cabin. The knife flew out of the man's hand.

Molly screamed.

The man turned, swore, and grabbed his gun with lightning speed, but before he pulled the trigger, another explosion, far louder than the first rocked the cabin. Molly's ears rang as she looked on in horror to see blood spurting from her abductor. He staggered, dropped his gun and fell backward on top of her.

The weight of the man crushed her and his hot blood poured over her. She was pinned beneath him and could not move. She fought to get more air. She could not breathe!

Miraculously, as she felt the world fading to gray, the huge bulk was taken off her. She gasped for breath, opened her eyes—and saw Thomas. Smoke issued from the rifle he held in his left hand.

He lugged the man off her and kicked him. "Bastard."

"Y-you killed him." She stammered.

He didn't speak as he picked up the dead man's gun.

"How did you know I was here?" she asked.

He leaned the weapons up against the wall. "I dropped by to enjoy some of Silas's fine bourbon. When I heard someone coming I hid in the root cellar."

A terrifying realization washed over her. He must have heard everything. He knew she was a fugitive, wanted for theft. She bit her lip to stifle another sob.

He pulled out a knife and started sawing through the bonds at her ankles. "What did he do to ... the others?" There was a slight catch in his voice.

Dread circled through her. She remembered the eerie quiet as she had searched the house before her capture. "I—I don't know. I went outside, but I didn't see Jeff—he was supposed to be on watch, but when I went back to the kitchen door, that man grabbed me from behind."

He freed the ropes around her ankles and she felt the blood rushing back into her feet. It burned as if she had walked through hot coals. She clenched her teeth together.

"I'll have to turn you over so I can cut the ropes off your hands." He moved her gently over—and swore once more at the man he had killed. "This will take a while. Be patient."

"What are you going to do with me?" she whispered.

He stopped cutting at the ropes for a moment. "I don't know."

She closed her eyes and prayed.

"Right now, I'm going to burn the cabin. Otherwise, this bastard will stink up the woods."

She swallowed hard. "But it's raining."

"A small detail which can be easily dismissed."

"With your magic?"

"That and a large quantity of potent homebrew for fuel."

The ropes at her wrists fell free. Though her hands felt as if they were on fire, she opened her eyes and began to sit up, but her head spun as she tried to raise herself up on one elbow.

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Thomas came to her with a cup. He held it to her lips.
"Drink this—all of it."

She lifted her gaze to his. Fear and worry flickered in his eyes. She put her lips against the cup and swallowed the fiery liquid. Delicious warmth flowed through her.

He stepped outside for a few minutes. The patter of raindrops on the roof ended.

When he returned, he said, "I'm going to wrap you in the blanket and put you on the horse. Can you sit astride?"

She nodded though she wasn't quite sure her injured hands were capable of holding on to the horse. She had started to tremble, even her teeth were chattering. She glanced down at her shredded clothing, which was covered in blood. She covered her mouth to prevent herself from retching.

He placed the blanket around her and carried her out of the cabin. Settling her in the saddle, he held her there as he walked the horse a good distance away. He tied the reins securely to a tree limb.

"I'll be back in a few minutes. Hold tight."

He ran back to the cabin. She leaned over onto the horse's neck. What would happen to her now?

In minutes, the intoxicating effect of the liquor stopped her from shivering, but within her where her heart should be, there seemed to be only a cold empty space that had gone numb.

She had no idea how long it took Thomas to set the cabin afire as she fought to keep her eyes open. But as the blaze

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roared into the sky, the horse turned skittish and she had to use what little strength remained in her arms to hang on.

Thomas returned with two liquor bottles and carrots. He tucked the bottles into the saddlebags and gave the carrots to the horse.

"Hey, Lemon Drop, this should give you the strength to carry us back."

The horse shook its head and Molly would have fallen off if Thomas hadn't reached out and caught her. He mounted the horse and sat behind her.

"Lean on me." His arm held her as securely as an iron band. Though his strength comforted her, she dared not gaze in his eyes for she feared what she would find there.

The horse's rhythmic canter soon lulled her into a blessedly dreamless sleep until a sudden cessation of movement startled her. Waking up, she squinted her eyes to see they had arrived at the edge of the woods. Before them in the distance, the sun shone brightly down on White Buck Hall with its great lawn spread all around like a giant green carpet. Seeing the mansion once more stirred her emotions. She had thought she would die in that miserable cabin at the hand of that perverted man, but Thomas had saved her.

"I'm so glad to be home." As soon as the words were past her lips she knew it was a stupid thing to say for White Buck Hall was not her home. And who knew what would happen to her now that Thomas knew the truth about her past.

He apparently did not hear her, or he ignored her heartfelt sentiment. "Something's wrong." He urged the horse into a full gallop and they sped headlong down the hill.

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Molly had never been on a horse going so fast! The horse's long legs ate up the ground and Molly's pulse jumped. Held tightly in Thomas's arm, she almost felt as if she had wings and was soaring over the ground.

Was it the speed or the heat of the man at her back?

Gertrude appeared at the kitchen doorway as they rode up. Thomas dismounted and lifted Molly off the horse, but when her feet hit the ground her knees buckled. He swung her into his arms. For just a moment, she allowed herself to look up into his lavender eyes, but they were as sharp and hard as finely cut amethysts.

Gertrude waved her handkerchief as she hurried to them. "Thank God you're back. Jeff was stabbed. He's not going to make it." She covered a sob.

Thomas swore.

Molly's heart shriveled up. *Not Jeff!* She wanted to scream.

Gertrude wiped her eyes. "We put him in Cook's bed. It's warmer there." She opened the door for them. "H-he's been holding on. He had to see you."

Thomas set Molly down in the chair next to the big stove.

"There's something else—a telegram from Rafe." Gertrude handed it to Thomas. He ripped it open, scanned the contents and tossed it in Molly's lap. Then he raced out of the room.

With quivering fingers, she lifted up the telegram. Rafe had discovered that she was wanted for theft. However, Rafe claimed he did not believe it. He said he would look into the matter further.

She stared at the words. She knew what Rafe would learn. Mr. Filmont had planned it all very carefully.

"Am I correct in assuming that whoever stabbed Jeff, kidnapped you?" Gertrude asked.

Molly nodded as she balled up the telegram. She leaned over, opened the door on the oven and tossed the paper inside.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

She shook her head.

"Do you think you can climb the stairs if you lean on me?"

She shrugged. She really wanted to find a cave and hide in it. Jeff was dying because of her. She closed her eyes and thought of Theresa who had been so happy because she was carrying Jeff's child.

"I'll get Cook to help me." Gertrude left the room.

Molly traced the pattern of the rope burns and deep lesions around her wrists. The bounty hunter would have killed her—eventually—once he had gotten his pleasure from her.

Her life and her virtue had been saved, but at what a cost!

She had made a mistake in answering Rafe's advertisement. She had not considered that fact that she could bring tragedy to those around her. But she had—to young and innocent Jeff and his wife.

Jeff who had found her eyeglasses in the grass. Who had blushed when his wife announced that they were expecting. Who had given her the responsibility of calming down the horse after the fire simply because she was a lady—and his wife had told him that ladies understood each other.

Jeff—who reminded her so much of little Emil with his red hair and brown eyes.

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Tears spilled onto her hands. As she sat there, she heard Theresa's hysterical wail and she knew that Jeff had passed on.

She steeled herself to the reality that she had to turn herself in. It was the only way.

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Chapter Ten

Thomas paced back and forth in front of the fireplace in his office as Molly sat demurely on the chair. Though her face appeared paler than usual, she held her back ramrod straight. Grimly, he noted that every trace of that bastard's blood had been washed away. However, he suspected her scars ran deeper than the visible ones on her wrists—and once those wounds healed there would always be a raw lesion in her heart. She had barely spoken to anyone. He worried about what was going on in her head.

Dammit. He wished he really could read minds.

"You will not attend the funeral. For now, we will keep your existence hidden and for your own protection, I am going to lock you into your room."

"I insist upon turning myself in. I don't want anyone else to suffer because of me."

He took a deep breath and clenched his jaw together so hard that it hurt. "You claimed to be innocent."

"That hardly matters. Nobody will believe me." She ran her tongue around her lips and the blood in his veins ignited. He wanted to quench the fire by wrapping her in his embrace and drowning in her sweet mouth.

He drew his hands into fists. "You are not leaving here—and that's an order. Rafe is looking into the situation. When I get his report, I will make a decision."

"You are harboring a fugitive."

"I read your letters and listened to the wax cylinder."

The palest rose vanished from her cheeks. "But ... I thought"

"The bounty hunter had them in his saddlebags."

"Oh." Her focused her gaze on her hands as she twisted them in her lap. "So now you know what a fool I am."

"No. Now I know how corrupt Mr. Filmont is. Not that I am surprised about that issue."

She opened her eyes wide in shock and he found himself once more fighting against his natural inclinations. He could swear he shared her pain. He could feel it stabbing him in the chest. He was caught in a terrible struggle to keep his hands off her.

He wished he had shot the balls off that bastard bounty hunter so he could watch him suffer before he died.

"Mr. Filmont has money and prestige."

"Mr. Filmont is ultimately responsible for Jeff's death—and perhaps for Doctor Westerly's death, too."

"No. I am."

"You will do as I say!" he thundered. "You will stay in your room. Nobody else is going to get hurt!"

He saw her begin to tremble and his throat closed up, but then she drew in a great breath.

"I am very grateful to you. You saved me from ... that man. I am very sorry I slapped you on the night of the fire, and I do sincerely apologize for that. I realize at the time you were exhausted and ... grief stricken because your horse died."

Something snapped inside him and he could no more resist holding her than he could stop the earth from turning.

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He lifted her up into his arms and buried his face in her hair. The sweet essence of honeysuckle teased his nostrils.

"I should have ripped that bastard apart with my own hands."

She whispered into his ear in a small voice filled with hurt. "I am doomed. Let me turn myself in."

"No!" The pain in his heart widened. She pressed her hands against his chest to push away, but he could not let her go. His throat ached and he held her even tighter to keep his emotions bottled inside him.

Her voice was muffled against his chest. "I shall lose my mind here with nothing to do."

"You could be dead."

"Mr. Filmont will not give up. He will find me."

Thomas set his jaw. "Let him try."

She shuddered in his arms.

"Please—let me type up your report. It would take my mind off things."

"But your wrists"

"Cook has already applied poultices and wrapped up the wounds. I can move my fingers quite well."

He cleared his throat. It was a small concession—and it could be a help to him since he had lost so much time working due to the tragic circumstances. "All right. You may type up the reports."

"Thank you."

Reluctantly, he released her. He wanted to hold her forever, but he had to pull himself together. He now had Jeff's death weighing heavy on his shoulders.

"Had known I was dealing with a madman" Shaking his head, he clenched his jaw. "I should have been more vigilant."

"I know ... I distracted you"

"I will not let it happen again." He vowed, but he did not know if he had the strength to stay away from her.

Three days later, Molly watched from the window as the funeral procession wound its way up the hill to the newly dug grave. Jeff was to be buried next to the child he had lost a year ago.

A considerable number of people had come to be with Theresa in her grief. Gertrude explained that many of them were friends from the circus. Nevertheless, some townsfolk had come as well. The blacksmith, who Jeff had visited on a regular basis whenever the horses needed to be shod, came with his wife. There were other women, too. Theresa had insisted on going to church as often as possible. Though some men held a grudge against Thomas, their wives saw no reason to hold that against Theresa. They brought plenty of food along with them. Gertrude had already brought up a plate of choice treats to Molly's room.

Molly glanced at the cookies and cake on the plate in her hand. She turned away from the window and went back to the desk to resume her task. She put the plate out of the way on the corner of the desk.

She typed much slower than usual since her wrists still hurt. But she was also intrigued as she read about Thomas's study. He had bred a large number of albino mice and divided them into three groups. Each group was given the same type

and amount of feed. However, while one group received plain water a second group was given water with measured amounts of an herbal decoction. The third group drank water that had been treated with amethysts and other crystals.

After some time, the mice were put into a maze. The mice drinking the water with the herbal decoction added to it were able to get through the maze quicker than the mice in the other two groups. Thomas claimed this proved that the herbs he had used boosted the mental acuity of the mice.

She wondered what his herbal elixir contained and why was he so concerned about enhancing the intelligence of mice. Couldn't he make smarter mice with a wave of his wand? Wouldn't sorcery work as well as herbs?

Hadn't she found his crystal ball? And didn't he make her experience sensations that no other man had ever ignited in her? Just thinking of the mysterious cravings made her want him so desperately that she was inclined to ignore all her common sense.

She shivered and stopped typing. She got up from the chair and went back to the window. The mourners were returning to the house. She could not see any individual faces, of course. Only a blurry mass of black-robed mourners, but Gertrude had told her that Rafe had returned for the funeral.

Her breath hitched up in her throat. He could be explaining the situation to Thomas right now. They would have to decide how to turn her in—without implicating themselves in any way. A cold chill went through her. She wondered how much longer she had. Would Rafe wait until after the mourners had

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gone to tell Thomas how hopeless the situation was? Or were he and Thomas even now discussing how to get her off their hands?

And what about the bounty hunter? Did no one realize he was missing yet?

The face of that horrible man swam through her mind. He now dominated her dreams.

But while she had no control of her dreams at night, during the day she would occasionally drift off into a daydream about the white buck. Had he actually released a boat from the pier? Or was that a fantasy her mind fabricated and somehow placed in that crystal ball?

Whose boat was it? Why would the buck be so focused on letting it drift away? He had killed a man. So had Thomas. In both cases, the life saved was hers.

She closed her eyes and pictured the white buck in her mind. Tall, proud, and commanding, he could move like the wind through the woods. She tried to recall the wonderful moments of the dream where she had been a doe and the buck had brought her to ecstasy.

A knot twisted in her stomach. But Mr. Filmont had been there at the end of that dream with a gun in his hand.

Over the past few days, she realized the bounty hunter had to have been the one who had stolen the cylinder from her room. If only she had told everyone then instead of assuming it had been Thomas. Jeff might not be dead if she had acted sensibly.

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A tear eked out of the corner of her eye. She could never face Theresa. She would not know what to say to her. She had ruined Theresa's life as well as that of her unborn child.

Misery weighed on her as she went back to her task and sat at the desk. She knew she should be grateful for this brief time of peace. She was comfortable. She had good food to eat. The beautiful room was much nicer than a jail cell.

She could hear the voices of the mourners downstairs as luncheon was served. She glanced at the cookies and cake on the plate. Picking up one cookie, she bit into it and decided Thomas's kisses were far sweeter. If only

She mentally chastised herself. There was no point in dreaming about him, but she could not stop aching for his arms to encircle her again. He could make her forget everything, even the terrible emptiness that threatened to consume her.

A knock came at the door.

"It's me, Rafe."

Her pulse raced. This was it. He would tell her—in his most polite manner—that he had called the sheriff.

"Come in."

He turned a key in the lock and entered the room, but he was not alone. Thomas was with him.

Rafe lifted up her hand and kissed it in his usual gallant manner. Thomas merely nodded. He looked uncomfortable, which was most unusual for a man who seemed to care so little about what anyone thought.

Her nerves wound ever tighter.

Rafe smiled. "How are you feeling?"

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"Well, thank you." She sat stiffly in the chair at the desk, but her back ached from bending over all day to see the papers she had to type.

"It seems you have gotten yourself into quite a pickle." Rafe crossed his arms over his chest. "You've been accused of stealing a thousand dollars worth of jewelry. The fact that you ran before being served with a summons made everything worse. It makes you appear guilty."

She took in an unsteady breath. "I know, but I ran because ... because I thought I had killed him." She swallowed hard as she stared at her hands in her lap. Her announcement was met with stunned silence. The hush unnerved her and she stuttered on to try and explain.

"Mr. Filmont asked me to come to his home because he had a pile of personal correspondence he needed to get through. I did not trust him, since I had been warned by his former secretary—"

"I read the letters," Rafe interrupted.

Her cheeks burned. "He was my boss. I assumed he would fire me if I did not do what he asked. He told me he would pay me extra—but he ... lied. He wanted me to" she gulped.

Rafe coughed. "I listened to the cylinder as well."

She shuddered and closed her eyes. "When he threw me on the couch and pulled up my skirt, I grabbed a statue from his desk and hit him over the head with it."

Thomas turned around to look out the window and made an odd sound deep in his throat. She had not seen him in two days but the dull ache of desire still welled up at the sight of

him now. The memory of his kisses made her hunger for more of them—even if it was foolish.

"You knocked him out." Rafe's voice startled her from her brief reverie. She glanced back at him and found him surveying her with a bemused expression.

"I should have checked for a pulse, but I did not want to touch him. He ... he" She covered her face with her hands. The man had been coarse and rough. He'd hurt her. The memory of him forcing her to kneel and take his male member into her mouth made her feel like retching.

With her stomach roiling, she struggled to force the memory back into the recesses of her mind. Taking her hands away from her face, she said, "I panicked and ran out of the house."

"Nobody saw you leave?" Rafe asked.

"I don't know. When I got back to my room I packed up my things and got on a train to Atlantic City. A week later I read a newspaper article that said I had robbed Mr. Filmont and that I was wanted for the theft of one thousand dollars worth of jewelry."

Rafe nodded. "I have to assume that being felled by a small woman would have made him a laughingstock, so he chose to accuse you of theft."

Her throat tightened. "Am I wanted dead or alive?" Her voice came out as a weak whisper.

Thomas whirled around with fury sparking from his amethyst eyes. "No! That is preposterous. The posters say alive—with a thousand dollar reward—an amount that was put

up by Mr. Filmont himself. In addition, we suspect that Mr. Filmont hired that bounty hunter."

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. Mr. Filmont's wrath would eventually fall upon her. There was no way she could escape it.

"I know I can never make amends for what happened to Jeff, but Theresa and her baby could use that money. I think it would be best if she collects the reward."

"I will take care of them!" Thomas boomed. "We do not need that reward money!"

Rafe put a finger to his lips. "Calm down. We don't want to disturb anyone downstairs."

Thomas turned around and went back to the window, but Molly sensed he was seething inside. Briefly, she rubbed her eyes, which were weary from strain and sleeplessness.

"I know this has been grueling for you." Rafe patted her shoulder.

"No, I-I'm quite all right." She put her hands back in her lap and tried to hold them still. "I did knock him out. I am guilty of that and I will take my punishment—"

"He assaulted you and would have raped you." Thomas growled. "The man he hired to kill you succeeded in killing Jeff as well as the doctor in town."

Sorrow weighed her down. The dreadful fact was that she had brought tragedy with her when she came to White Buck Hall.

Thomas moved away from the window once more and stepped forward until he came to stand near her. His drawn

brows gave him a brooding expression. "I will not allow Filmont to get his hands on you ever again."

She shook her head with regret. "For everyone's sake, it would be best if I turn myself in."

"That would be dangerous due to Mr. Filmont's vindictive nature, wealth, and fame. We have the cylinder, while I don't know if it would be admissible evidence, it proves Filmont is little more than a fool when governed by his baser instincts. It is leverage—especially since Filmont obviously wanted it as well as the letters."

From Molly's experience, it seemed that most men could think of nothing but satisfying their most elemental desires—even Thomas, though with him it was different. She tilted her face upward to admire his strong, handsome features. How could he stir such passionate feelings in her despite all that had happened?

"What if Mr. Filmont hires another killer?"

"It may take him a while to go searching for the last one he hired." His mouth made a wry twist, which marred the classical lines of his face.

Again Rafe distracted her from her fascination with Thomas's profile. "Right now, our concern is keeping you safe. However, the conference is now only a week away. We thought you could travel to Philadelphia with Thomas."

Her mind reeled with alarm. "But what if someone there recognizes me?"

"Philadelphia is a large city," Thomas explained. "Nobody will give you a second glance."

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"The bounty hunter found me easily enough." She held onto her fragile control.

"Now that we thoroughly understand the situation, we can institute better measures to protect you." He exchanged an odd look with Rafe.

They had cooked something up. Something big. Her heart squeezed with anguish.

Pressing her lips together, she fought to keep herself calm. "What about Gertrude and Theresa and Cook? Who will be here to make sure nobody burns down this house?"

"I have placed a strong protection spell on it." Thomas added, "And planted wormwood all around."

"Some of our friends will help us out, too," Rafe explained. "The lion tamer and his wife—who is also Theresa's aunt, a circus strongman and a sword swallower who is skilled at throwing knives as well."

She held back a gasp of surprise. They sounded like a bloodthirsty lot.

"I have a house in Philadelphia," Thomas went on. "It was the one my mother favored, White Buck Hall was only intended as a summer home. However, I never cared for the city."

"I think you prefer the lack of society," Rafe had an unusual touch of asperity in his tone.

"I was never accepted—despite my fortune and my lineage. None of that mattered because I am an albino. Mothers were horrified when their daughters danced with me—as if I had a contagious disease." He reached out to cup

her chin in his hand. "But you, sweet Molly, are not afraid of me."

She lowered her eyes. Her heart galloped in her chest while his touch infused a warm glow throughout her. Yes, he had her under his spell and it evidently took very little on his part for her to succumb. No wave of a magic wand—no abracadabra—simply his heated skin on hers.

"Well, then, I think our plans will work out nicely." Rafe broke in. "I will beg your leave now. I am needed downstairs."

Molly wanted to plead with him not to go, for that meant she would be alone with Thomas. However, before she could speak, Rafe exited the room and closed the door behind him.

"Look at me, Molly."

Her very bones seemed to have no substance for his touch had quickly softened them. Slowly she lifted her lashes and their gazes locked. The impact sent a wave of desire through her. The light in his eyes was savage and compelling all at once. The force of her own need for him frightened her. He had changed her, and she knew she would never be the same.

"I want to marry you. I believe that in your current circumstances it will help—for one thing, you will have a different name. I will protect you from Filmont."

It took a moment for his words to register in her dizzied senses. When she realized what he had said her heart stopped for a moment. There was no declaration of love—there was no question for her to assent to—he stated it all as a fact.

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"Under the circumstances, our wedding must be a quiet and somber affair. The minister will conduct a brief ceremony here in three days. Immediately afterwards, we will go to Philadelphia and open up the house there. You will need proper clothing as befitting your new station as my wife. As soon as we arrive I'll have a dressmaker attend to you."

"But"

"No questions now." After a deep breath, he released his hand from her chin. "I have to get back to the luncheon downstairs. Don't bother packing your things in that old trunk. I'll find something more suitable in the attic."

With a tight smile on his lips, he left her.

She heard him turn the key in the lock from the outside. She sat there for several minutes until all the warmth left her. But she was too numb to cry.

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Chapter Eleven

Thomas glanced at Molly as she stood beside him in the parlor while the minister intoned the nuptials. Molly wore Theresa's wedding gown. He could hear Theresa sniffing behind him. He told her she need not attend the wedding, but she insisted.

His throat ached as he thought of Jeff's death. He did not regret killing that bounty hunter, but the incident still haunted him. He clenched his jaw until his muscle twitched. Dumb luck had put him in the right place at the right time. If only he had some aptitude for clairvoyance! The talent he needed most he could not summon. He could do so much more to protect those dear to him if he knew what lay in the future.

What a rotten excuse for a sorcerer he was! He might have lost Molly. He knew the episode had affected her deeply. Still, he hoped that once the threats of Joseph Filmont were removed—and he would never rest until they were—her battered soul would heal.

The trembling bouquet in her hands caught his attention as the minister droned on in his monotonous voice. Trussed up in copious quantities of lace and ruffles, Molly did not look comfortable. She reminded him of the frothy foam at the bottom of a waterfall.

For a moment, he drifted off into a fantasy about how she would look, naked, beneath a waterfall with her small, perfect body next to his. Warmth surged through him. He ran his

finger under the collar around his neck. He could not wait to get out of his suit.

The minister's pointed remark as to whether anyone had any objections to the marriage suddenly chilled Thomas. He cast a worried look at Molly. Her eyes remained downcast and her lips silent.

A small twist of pain stabbed at his heart. Due to all the preparations, he had barely spoken to her for the past few days. He had sent out messages to tell the housekeeper and the butler in Philadelphia to prepare for their arrival. He had practiced his presentation for the conference and put the finishing touches on several charts. Rafe had handed him the pages which Molly had completed typing and everything looked in order, but Thomas now recalled that he had not thanked her for the work she had done.

Nevertheless, he had located a very fine trunk in the attic for her use. Cook had volunteered to refurbish it since the leather on the corners looked worn. Once Cook had shined it up, it appeared nearly new.

The minister cleared his throat and directed his gaze at Thomas to ask whether he intended to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness or in health, to love and to cherish

He answered in the affirmative. He wanted revenge upon Mr. Joseph Filmont, the man who had destroyed his father. The Hillyer railroad line had been his father's pride and joy. After years of hard work on his father's part, the line mushroomed into a huge operation. That's when Joseph Filmont got greedy. He wanted to add the Hillyer Railroad to

his holdings and he eventually succeeded in getting it after a series of unexplained accidents finally brought the rail line to a halt.

Thomas's father had been unable to prove who had been behind the disasters, but there was never any doubt in his mind as to who was responsible. He had suffered a stroke soon afterward and lingered on for a year, dying when Thomas was twelve.

That same year Thomas had found the hidden grove. He felt the pang of his conscience for he would not reveal that secret to Molly. However, he consoled himself because now he had the opportunity to avenge not only his father, but Molly, as well.

What strange twists of fate had brought them together! And to think he had, at first, wanted to get her out of his life quickly.

He strained to hear her voice as she made her vows to him. Her fragile tone reminded him of the sound of a distant bird in the woods—light and unbearably sweet.

Cook handed him the ring. He fumbled and nearly dropped it before placing it on Molly's delicate finger.

"You may now kiss the bride," the minister smiled tightly, as if he found the idea of the kiss distasteful.

Thomas turned to Molly. Her eyes were wide with terror. He bent down, intending the kiss to be as light and tender as the touch of a feather—a mere formality.

But it wasn't. As soon as his lips touched hers, an explosive reaction had him wanting to devour her right there in front of everybody. He could not control the power of his

attraction for her. He forgot about proper etiquette and slid his arm around her waist to crush her against him. How could he have stayed away from her for days? Her mouth opened to him and he probed the warm velvet inside.

The sound of several raucous laughs and a few whistles brought him back to his senses. Breathing hard, he released her. She looked as stunned as he felt, but he smiled when he saw the rosy glow on her cheeks. For days, she had been nearly as pale as the dress she wore.

He could not let her go. He held her hand, fighting the urge to go upstairs and make love to her. They cut the beautiful cake that had taken Cook an entire day to make. Gertrude had concocted some sort of punch, which Thomas suspected had a generous amount of his bourbon in it.

Theresa's aunt and uncle insisted upon formal photographs, but Thomas kept glancing at his watch. They had a train to catch.

At last, they changed into their traveling clothes while Nestor, the strongman, hitched up the horses and loaded the trunks into the wagon. It took another half-hour for everyone to say goodbye. Rafe intended to stay behind and join them in a few days.

As they drove away, he caught Molly dabbing at tears on her cheeks. She had turned her head away from him and seemed to be intent on studying the passing scenery.

Bewildered by her behavior, he asked gruffly, "Did anyone say something that upset you?"

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She shook her head, but she kept her face averted. He frowned. Maybe she was going to miss White Buck Hall. He certainly would.

"We won't be gone more than a month," he promised.

She nodded, but did not face him. Silence lengthened between them, making him uncomfortable.

"You should be quite pleased with the house in Philadelphia. It's a brownstone on Locust Street, off Rittenhouse Square. John Notman was the original architect. He designed Holy Trinity Church, too. Naturally, there have been several changes made over the years, but the house is still considered quite elegant."

He reached for her hand and clasped it in his. Her fingers curled around his, holding on as if he were her lifeline. He realized she might be unnerved by the sudden change in her life.

"I grew up in a tenement." A dull note of anxiety crept into her words.

"It hardly matters. After all, I am wealthy, have a good name, and the benefit of a fine education—but none of that has any bearing upon how society regards me because I am considered a freak. However, you are blessed with a lovely countenance. When you are dressed in fine clothing, no one will ever suspect your origins."

"I'd rather have a new pair of eyeglasses."

That brought him up sharply, he had forgotten all about the broken pair of eyeglasses. "If you have the broken frame, I can fashion a new pair." He reached inside his coat for his wand.

She stilled his hand. "No, thank you." Her lip quivered as if she might cry.

"They would not be an illusion." He did not take her refusal as an insult. After all, she had been a witness to his mistake of delivering sleet instead of rain when the barn burned. "If you would rather see an optometrist, that can be arranged. Mrs. Pilcher, the housekeeper, will know where to purchase spectacles. She wears them herself. But the new clothing is important. There are those who will be curious about you. They will call and you must be ready to receive them."

"Am I to be on display?" Her voice was tinged with hysteria. "Will people visit just to gawk at me?"

"Perhaps some will, but I'm sure your loveliness will win them over."

"Once I have new eyeglasses, I shall not be lovely anymore."

"Preposterous! Everything about you is exquisite."

She inclined her head toward him. Her huge brown eyes gazed up at him with a trace of despair. His heart lurched.

"I do not intend to have children." Her mouth set into a thin, grim line.

He frowned and hoped that Nestor, driving the rig in the front seat, did not hear her. Quite unaccountably, Thomas distinctly remembered his father's words, spoken long ago. The phrase floated into his mind.

I always tell your mother how beautiful she is. Women need to hear that, son. Sweetens them up, you know

It had been a very long time since Thomas had remembered any of his father's words, but perhaps he

needed that wisdom more than he ever had. He found Molly mystifying. He had no idea how to deal with her.

"I cannot be a mother." She kept her voice down, but each word came across as unbending as steel.

A spark of fear ignited in his gut. "Is there some physical problem?"

"I would be a very bad mother." A slight tremor edged into her voice.

"Preposterous. Women have a natural inclination to nurture children."

"I do not."

He ached to kiss her again. Simply holding her hand made his senses spin. "You will change your mind."

"I will not."

He watched a solemn shadow cross her features and he remembered he had seen that same look of despair on her face the night the barn burned when he had found her sobbing into the horse's mane.

A wagon rolled over him ... there was ... nothing I could do ... it happened so fast His scream ... it was horrible ... then the wagon stopped ... and I picked him up ... but he was gone

He had given little thought to her tears that night due to his own anger. He had told her to leave—and he'd meant every word. Heaviness centered in his chest.

He squeezed her hand. "Who was run over by the wagon?"

She stiffened as vivid scarlet appeared on her cheeks. She turned her face away and stared out at the passing scenery.

"It was my little brother, Emil."

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"I am sorry."

Her shoulders heaved. "I was supposed to take care of him. I failed. I should have had a firmer grip on his hand."

"It wasn't your fault."

"Yes, it was. Emil always did unexpected things. I should have anticipated his erratic behavior."

"Am I to blame for your abduction?"

She suddenly whipped around to face him again with a scowl on her face. "Of course not. You had no way of knowing—"

"But I have blamed myself. I should never have left the house that night. Because I did, Jeff was killed and you—" He could not put it into words. The memory seared him.

"It wasn't your fault." The color faded from her cheeks as her words trailed off into a hush.

Silence fell between them until Thomas stated gently, "Your brother's death wasn't yours either."

"I couldn't save him."

"I only saved you by sheer luck." Thinking how close he had come to losing her still tore at his insides.

She sighed and chewed on her lower lip. He wanted to taste it, too.

"Will I be locked up all the time in Philadelphia?"

"The townhouse is not as spacious or open as White Buck Hall. It is more like a fortress in many ways—quite secure. The butler, Mr. Quinn, is a former boxer. He has been apprised of your situation. I will set up a protection spell—though the only wormwood will be in planters, but it should be sufficient." He sighed. Joseph Filmont had a townhouse

only a block away from his, but he saw no need to tell that to her. Filmont was rarely in town.

"I must have something to do. I'm used to working." She lifted her chin with a defiant air.

"You are taking a holiday." Why did she have to be so insistent? He tried to contain his annoyance. "After all, you deserve some time off for typing all those papers so neatly. There are plenty of amusements in Philadelphia. My mother had a genuine fondness for city life—the dances, the plays, the opera—and the parties. For her White Buck Hall was much too quiet."

"But I do not know anyone in Philadelphia." Her voice remained neutral but gloom lingered in her eyes.

"You will find Mrs. Pilcher quite kind and I am sure you will enjoy meeting other ladies." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it tenderly, but then he moved up to her wrist and kissed her there. He felt her pulse flutter, as he tasted her skin. His tongue glided upward. He wanted to kiss all of her.

"Just hold me, Thomas, so I will feel safe." Her plea had his heart turning over and he tamped down his ardor.

Wrapping her in the cradle of his arms, he marveled that she fit so perfectly against him, as if they had been made for each other. His throat tightened with emotion. He could not speak another word.

"Thank you," she sighed, and closing her eyes, she leaned against him.

They arrived at the house on Locust Street long after dark. Molly was so tired she could barely stand. When Thomas lifted her out of the carriage and set her on her feet, it took a

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moment for her to get her bearings. She rocked as if her body was still in motion.

A gust of wind, blasting down the street, tugged at her hat. The pins had loosened during the journey and the hat threatened to fall off. She held on to it with one hand as she lifted her skirt to go up the steps. Thomas steadied her by holding onto her elbow and she felt her nerves tingle at his touch. Her intense physical awareness of him had grown during the tedious trip. Though his arms had provided a safe haven for her along the way, she knew he would expect intimacy, as they were now man and wife.

She pressed her lips together. She must refuse him. She must not have children. Little Emil's lifeless face swam before her eyes and she felt ill.

Thomas would be angry. Would he force her? Would he hurt her like Mr. Filmont and the bounty hunter?

Apprehension had her heart thundering in her bosom.

The huge front door opened for them and they hurried inside. Grateful to be out of the wind, she pulled at the pins to remove her hat.

Thomas coughed lightly. She glanced at him and he inclined his head. Following his gaze, she saw people—in uniform—standing at attention in a line at the foot of the staircase in the paneled entrance hall. They all bowed as she stared at them. She and Thomas stepped forward—close enough so that she could actually see their faces without her eyeglasses.

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"Mrs. Hillyer, I'd like you to meet Mr. Quinn, our butler." The formal tone Thomas used unsettled her further. White Buck Hall lacked any formality at all—at his insistence.

"How do you do, Mrs. Hillyer." The butler had only a fringe of brown hair along the sides of his head. The top of his head was as shiny as his shoes. He had a prominent nose, which must have been broken at some point for it swerved to one side.

"Fine, thank you, Mr. Quinn." She forced a smile though all she really wanted was to sit down and have something nice and hot to drink.

The introductions went right down the line: Mrs. Pilcher, the housekeeper, gray haired and plump; Monsieur Pierpont, the chef, black hair with startlingly blue eyes—also plump; Kathleen, the downstairs maid, thin as a rail, and Vera, the upstairs maid, who was possibly just sixteen.

Thomas asked for sandwiches and tea in the library and ushered Molly into a room on the left. As he closed the pocket doors, she narrowed her eyes and stared at the fine furnishings. To be sure, White Buck Hall was quite spacious and comfortably furnished, but this house had a richness to it that took her breath away. The library, paneled in walnut much like the entrance hall, boasted a fireplace as the focal point of the room. Carved floor to ceiling with ornate decorations, it had double columns on either side. Ceramic tiles surrounded the firebox. On the mantle sat a huge, brass clock, and above the mantle was a large mirror.

Sinking into an armchair, she lifted her feet onto an ottoman. Her mind was too keyed up for sleep, but her body

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had grown weary on the tedious journey. Removing her hat, she longed to let her hair down, too. But she dare not tempt Thomas in any way. She had to keep the distance between them.

"Would you like some bourbon or sherry?" Thomas opened a door in the massive desk and took out a decanter. He poured a glass of amber liquid for himself.

"No, thank you."

"It would settle your nerves."

"I am simply tired." She knew she sounded peevish as she began to peel off her gloves. "It has been a very long day—and one full of ... changes. I was quite surprised by your sudden formality. At White Buck Hall, you said everyone is equal, but here—"

"Yes, here things are far different." He stood by the fire and gazed into it. "Here, we have servants—as all our neighbors do. Everyone living at this particular rung of the social ladder has servants. That is what's expected, even for a wizard."

"Are the servants here even when you are at White Buck Hall?"

"Mrs. Pilcher, Mr. Quinn, and Kathleen are here all the time. The chef will only be temporary. Vera is new and in training since Kathleen will be leaving to get married in a few months."

She watched him sip the bourbon from the glass. The ornate brass clock softly chimed the hour and her gaze was unaccountably drawn to two elaborate whorls at the side of the clock. In the glow of the firelight the whorls appeared red.

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She stopped struggling with her gloves. The coiled brass ornaments merged into the glowing ruby eyes of the white buck. She could not turn away from the magnetic gaze. Within seconds, she found herself transported once more to the woods. There she watched a horrifying image play out in full clarity. Shock held her in a grip of terror.

The white buck leaped through the woods in panic while the loud report of a gun shattered the quiet in the dense forest. It was followed quickly by another blast ... and then another. The buck staggered as the bullets hit their mark. Blood poured from his heart and he fell to the ground.

She wanted to cry out, but she could not. A strange numbness chilled her to the bone as a sensation of sickness spread through her. The feeling of impending doom suffocated her. Her chest constricted and the blood froze in her veins until she feared she would pass out.

Slowly, the image faded and she fought to gather her wits. She realized that Thomas was completely unaware of her distress. He took another sip of the bourbon as he stared at the fire.

"Don't be concerned about protocol. Mrs. Pilcher will help you. She can be very instructive about the proper social etiquette as well as what dresses are appropriate for various social events. She's been here since I was about four years old. She came to the house as a young widow." He turned and frowned at her. "Do you need help with your gloves?"

"I ... I" She gave up trying to speak and nodded. How could she tell him what she had seen? He would probably

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assume she had lost her mind. She swallowed a sob that rose up in her throat.

Was the vision real? Was the white buck dead?

He set his glass aside and knelt on the floor beside her. Very gently, he tugged at the tip of each finger to remove the gloves. She fought to keep her hands from trembling.

"I grew up here and though I had private tutors, I did socialize with the other children of my age and social class. I had riding lessons, and played tennis—all very proper pursuits, and all highly regulated by rules which is why I loved White Buck Hall far more because I had freedom there."

There was a knock on the door. Kathleen brought in a tray with tea and a few dainty sandwiches. Thomas thanked her. She bowed and left the room. He succeeded in stripping the gloves from Molly's hands.

"Your hands are awfully cold." He pressed them between his and rubbed them. "But your wrists are looking better. Cook insisted on giving me a jar of his special salve for you. He said he used it on the elephants so it should work quickly on you." His voice sounded light. He let her hands go.

Pouring the tea, he continued, "Mrs. Pilcher, Mr. Quinn and Vera will be upstairs getting our room ready and emptying our trunks. So it's best if we take some time with the sandwiches."

She tried to keep her hands steady as she reached for her cup. She must not think about what she had seen. She assured herself that it was a mirage. She was tired, and ... nervous. She was not going mad.

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The hot liquid soothed her throat as she sipped it slowly. She took a deep breath and battled to keep her voice even. "How long were you with the circus?"

"Nearly eight years." He swallowed one of the small sandwiches in a single bite. "My mentor was one of the world's most accomplished wizards. Unfortunately, he died before he could pass on all of his knowledge to me. However, he left me his grimoire."

He gobbled up another dainty sandwich and licked his lips with enjoyment. She remembered the kiss he had given her after they said their vows. She had felt that kiss right down to the soles of her feet. He wasn't a man of half measures.

He smiled at her with the gleam of desire in his eyes. He wanted her. How could she stop him? Once he took her into his arms, she knew he would weave his spell and make her want him, too.

He polished off a third sandwich. Perhaps he was simply hungry. Perhaps the sandwiches would satisfy him for tonight and he would fall asleep quickly.

She closed her eyes. Her mind was still reeling from the shock of seeing the white buck killed in her vision. Had it already happened? Or would it happen in the future? Why should she assume it was true? She remembered parts of the other visions where she had sensed she was being stalked. That much had been unerringly accurate.

"By the time I was of age, I discovered the money my father had left to me in trust was gone. After getting turned down over and over again for various positions—which I don't doubt was due to the fact that I am an albino—I gave up and

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joined the circus, against Mother's objections, of course. My salary was outstanding, but Mother missed me and kept begging me to come home. I did as often as I could, but she died quite suddenly while I was in Kansas a few years ago."

Molly drew in a shallow breath and opened her eyes. "I'm very sorry."

He nodded and said no more.

Kathleen soon returned to tell them the room was ready. Thomas led Molly out into the hall again and they went up the big staircase. At the landing, graced by a gigantic stained glass window, there was a built-in bench with a large cushion. Tall urns flanked the sides of the bench. On the ledge of the window sat a small statue of a white buck.

A terrible chill went through her and she could not prevent herself from shivering. Thomas must have noticed, for he drew him up close to him. "You'll be under the bedcovers soon."

She stiffened and swallowed hard. And what would he expect of her?

When they reached the second floor, they walked into a bedroom on the left.

"Will you be needing help in dressing this evening, Mrs. Hillyer?" young Vera asked.

"No, thank you." She forced a smile on her lips. Vera looked extremely grateful for the reprieve.

Thomas closed the door after the maid left and began unbuttoning his shirt.

Her mouth went dry. She turned her gaze away from him and stared at the large bed. She did not doubt he would work

his magic and have her hungering for their union within moments—just as he had all those mice in his lab constantly copulating.

He interrupted her thoughts. "While the majority of wealthy couples sleep in separate bedrooms, my parents were different. They believed in affection and mutual companionship."

Panic stabbed her in the heart. She sat on the bench at the end of the bed and began to remove her shoes, but removing Oxfords did not take long. By the time she set them neatly side-by-side under the bench, Thomas's chest was bare except for that crystal which hung by the slender leather string around his neck.

Like the one on the neck of the white buck

An animal would not wear such a thing unless it was a pet. Could the white buck be Thomas's pet?

Should she tell him of her vision?

Anxiety rose within her like the heat on her cheeks. She needed to think—and she found Thomas's presence disturbed her. His naked chest oozed virility.

"I ... I ... where is" she stammered.

He shot her an odd look. "Do you need the bathroom? It is right through that doorway," he pointed to it.

She nearly ran. Closing the door behind her, she leaned up against it and swallowed hard. He had not touched her, but the sight of him and his nearness stirred a passionate aching inside her. A knot rose in her throat. How could she deny her feelings? But she must! She fought to get a hold of her emotions. Straightening, she reminded herself that living with

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Thomas Hillyer was certainly better than living in jail. She would undoubtedly have plenty of food. She should rarely be cold. She would have a life of comparative ease. She would be protected.

But she had never known anything like the constant pull to be with him. It took hold of her with such force that she could hardly think of anything else. When she was in his embrace, she would think of nothing but him and yearnings he engendered in her. How could she get rid of the hunger she felt for him?

She took several deep breaths but that did nothing to calm the beating of her heart. The sight of him would constantly torment her.

She should ask him to turn off his magic. But what if the powerful stirring inside her did not come from his sorcery? After all, ever since she had stared into the white buck's eyes she had experienced odd dreams and visions. The innkeeper had said the white buck would steal her soul but how could the white buck have any influence on her now when she was so far away from him?

If what she saw in the library was true, the white buck was dead.

A steel band clamped around her heart. But what if it was a vision of something that would happen in the future?

A chill slid up her spine.

She leaned on the edge of the tub and massaged her temples. She realized she had forgotten to bring her nightgown into the bathroom with her. She decided to stay in the bathroom until Thomas fell asleep.

A knock came at the bathroom door.

"Are you all right?" A hint of alarm hung in his question.

"I'm ... fine. I'll be out soon. I'm covered with coal dust."

That much was true. Small, black flecks dotted her clothes and skin after the long train ride.

She turned on the faucets in the sink, disrobed quickly and sponged herself clean. The washcloth turned black with the coal dust clinging to her neck. She even found some between her breasts. She drew the washcloth slowly around her breasts. What would it be like to have him kiss her there?

She recalled the way the white buck had nuzzled her and then slid his tongue along her neck. A tingle of pleasure hardened her nipples.

She chastised herself for her own foolishness. She should not allow herself to think about such things!

She wrapped herself in a huge towel and sat at the vanity table where her comb, brush, and two red satin ribbons had already been placed. The fact that everything had been prepared for her was unsettling. Having servants made life easier but it seemed like an invasion of her privacy. She had always been used to managing her own affairs.

She set to brushing her hair. The repetition calmed her. Her nerves unwound with the familiar chore and she began to feel—at last—ready to sleep.

She put the brush down, parted her hair with the comb and began to braid it while staring dreamily into the mirror. A bemused smile grew on her lips at the thought of the beautiful white wedding dress and her vows. She was now a married woman with a wealthy husband and far from the

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dreary tenement in New York City where she had battled roaches and rats.

She sighed as she reached the end of one braid and tied it tightly with a ribbon. Tugging at the other side of her head, she plaited another braid. Finished with the chore, she glanced at her reflection in the mirror. At once, she realized she should never have used those scarlet ribbons, but it was too late. The spell came over her and she could not move. In horror, she stared at the glass, as the red ribbons suddenly became the red eyes of the white buck. Her heart pounded furiously as that frightening gaze drew her into the depths.

This time was far worse than the last, for now it was not the white buck she saw running through the woods—she herself ran and leaped over logs and through brambles that tore at her skirts.

Her fear escalated. This was no vision. This was real. She was not in a bathroom—the woods were all around her and she had to get away, but she did not know which way to turn. She had no idea where she was and which way led home. All the trees looked the same—tall and straight.

She knew the white buck was dead. She had no one to help her now—no hero to save her and she could not save herself.

Suddenly, a man stepped out from behind a tree right in front of her. He held a rifle in his hands and pressed it against her breast. His finger pulled back on the trigger.

She shoved the gun away and screamed.

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Chapter Twelve

Stark, black fright slammed into Thomas when he heard Molly's scream and the sound of breaking glass. He grabbed the revolver he had taken from Silas's cabin and burst through the bathroom door with the gun in his hand, ready to fire.

Only Molly was there, sitting silently at the vanity table staring at the mirror where the few jagged points left in the frame slid downward. Glittering glass shards lay everywhere.

She turned toward him and he felt as if his breath was cut off. Her eyes were wide with shock and blood ran down her right arm from a cut on her hand.

He lowered the gun and grabbed a towel.

"My God! What happened?" Wrapping up her hand, he pressed hard to staunch the flow of blood.

"I thought ... I shoved the rifle away."

He could barely hear her broken whisper, but something twisted inside him.

"He held the barrel of it to" She glanced down at her bosom and touched her fingertips to the tender swell of her left breast.

A pain squeezed at his chest.

"I was running ... in the woods"

He clenched his teeth with frustration and rising alarm. "You must have fallen asleep and dreamed that."

A knock came at the bedroom door. "Is everything all right, sir?" Quinn's sonorous voice queried.

"I need bandages, Mr. Quinn. And a broom." Magic unnerved the servants.

"Right away, sir."

The towel covering Molly's body glittered with splinters of the mirror. He risked cutting himself if he picked her up, and he had to do that because her feet were bare. He gently pried off the towel.

"No!" She gasped.

"You're covered with glass splinters." He kept his voice quiet but firm. "I'll get you into bed right away."

He fought to squelch any romantic notions, but as he peeled away the towel to reveal the perfection of her breasts his heart began to pound like a sledgehammer. He barely held back a groan as her lithe limbs were freed from the cloth. When she hooked her left arm around his neck as he lifted her from the bench, his iron restraint came dangerously close to breaking.

He carried her to the bed and laid her lovely, perfect body on the sheets. True, even after a week bruises remained on her skin, multicolored splotches that marred the flawlessness of her silken beauty and brought back the fear of what he had nearly lost—a faultless pearl.

He had imagined the treasure waiting beneath the yards of her skirts, but the pure glory of seeing it with his own eyes sent an ache tightening in his throat.

Regretfully, he covered her nakedness with the blankets and applied more pressure to her injured hand.

"I guess it was another spell." Her voice quivered. "Ever since I stared into the white buck's eyes ... I see things, but

they're not really there ... only ... it's so very much as if I am present ... and it is really happening"

"You're safe. I promised I would keep you safe." He sounded hoarse and cleared his throat.

Dammit. He should have asked Quinn to bring up the bottle of bourbon, too.

"It must be magic ... the kind you use when you look into your crystal ball."

A sliver of dread crept along his shoulders. "How do you know about that?"

"I ... I peeked into your circus trunk." The way her lips parted enchanted him for a moment as he remembered the kiss he had given her after their vows. He knew he would forgive her for anything—even poking around in that old trunk.

"There's nothing magic about that crystal ball."

"But I saw the white buck in it! He untied a boat so it would drift away on the river. I saw it all very clearly, even without my eyeglasses."

He froze. She could not know that. It was impossible. "That crystal ball is just a prop. You cannot see anything in it." *I cannot see anything in it.*

"But ... I did." Her huge eyes bored into his and he felt that familiar punch in the gut.

That crystal ball had never had any power of its own for him—and Molly was certainly no wizard. He told himself she must have overheard Rafe discussing the matter of the boat with him.

"You don't believe me." She turned her face away from him and he heard the faint thread of hysteria in her voice. "Though you're the one who uses sorcery."

Her accusation disturbed him. "That crystal ball is only a big sphere of glass. There is no magic in it. The audiences who came to see me at the circus expected me to tell them their futures. I used a few tricks to fool them, but I have no aptitude for prescience at all." Admitting that fact to her hurt him more than he imagined it would.

"But isn't fortune telling part of being a wizard? You stopped the rain." Her voice broke slightly. "You made me love you."

His heart hammered against his ribs as blood surged through his veins. "I cannot do everything. It is you who have used your womanly wiles on me."

"Then it was the white buck who hypnotized me ... and stole my soul. The innkeeper warned me but I didn't believe him" She choked on her words.

Thomas rubbed a hand across his face when another knock came at the door.

"Hush." He pressed a finger to her lips. "We'll talk later."

Quinn came in carrying a small basin, salve, rolled bandages, and more towels. Vera trailed behind him and stumbled sleepily on the broom she had in her hands.

"May I be of assistance?" Quinn asked Thomas.

He could only nod, grateful to have the old butler's help.

After a brief explanation of the problem, Quinn quickly sent Vera off into the bathroom with the broom.

Gingerly, Thomas let go of Molly's hand. During Quinn's years as a boxer, he had developed considerable skill in caring for wounds—and Thomas trusted him. Quinn carefully removed the towel from the wound. Thomas swallowed hard.

"It's not so bad, sir. It's already stopped bleeding. You managed that well."

He did not miss the slight shock on Quinn's face as he noticed the other scars on Molly's wrists. But Quinn quickly masked his surprise.

Thomas steeled himself to look at the damage. A deep gash about an inch long marred the right side of her palm. He gritted his teeth at the sight.

"Perhaps a doctor?" Quinn suggested.

He shook his head. "You are better than most surgeons."

"Thank you, sir. It will heal quickly if it is stitched. Otherwise, the wound will open up every time she bends her hand."

"I know, but make the stitches small. She's" His voice failed him. *Delicate*, he thought. He had promised to protect her, but he could not guard her mind from imagined horrors brought on by the terrible experiences she had already suffered. He burned with hatred for Joseph Filmont. That man must pay for what he had done!

"You'll hardly see the stitches at all, sir." Quinn patted his shoulder. "I think some bourbon would be in order to ease Mrs. Hillyer's pain before I begin."

"Yes." He hurried out of the room to retrieve the bourbon from the library. When he got there, he took a good long swig of it himself. It didn't help. The unwelcome tension in his

body had every nerve wound tight in a seething mixture of both anxiety and alarm.

Taking in an unsteady breath, he struggled to squash his unsettling emotions. Returning to the bedroom, he found Quinn had finished cleaning Molly's hand and was threading a fine needle. Molly had her face turned toward the wall.

The sound of the tinkling of glass came from the bathroom as Vera swept up the mess in there.

He poured a hefty portion of bourbon into a glass and Molly obediently drank it. Quinn explained that she must hold still.

Thomas saw her set her lips firmly together, but he knew that each time the needle pierced her it would hurt. Quinn had sewed Thomas's skin together a few times in his younger days. He began to pace about the room. Would he have to hold her still? Would she cry? He couldn't bear to see her suffer. He went to retrieve his wand.

"Sir, your pacing is thoroughly distracting. It would help if you sat down." Quinn suggested in a mild tone of reproof.

"Would you hold my other hand, Thomas?" Molly asked with lips as pallid as her cheeks.

Her plea touched a soft part of him that only she seemed able to open. He went around to the other side of the bed and sat down so he could clasp her free hand in his.

She had accused him of sorcery, but when he took her hand, it was she who worked a special kind of enchantment in him. He stared into her deep eyes and found himself lost in her dark gaze. It confused him as nothing ever had. It was like being lost in the woods.

While he worked, Quinn quietly rambled on about some of the scrapes Thomas had gotten into when he was young.

Quinn described in detail several nasty gashes that needed mending and one very black eye.

Thomas did not enjoy hearing tales of his youthful misadventures. The memories reminded him of the frustration he had endured. "People would stare at me, or laugh and make pointed remarks. I got so angry—I wanted them to stop."

"So he would punch them, in an inept and futile manner," Quinn sighed.

"Then they retaliated, hitting me harder than I hit them."

"But that's terrible!" Molly clutched his hand fiercely. He saw her dismay and he wanted only to soothe her—to let her know she had nothing to fear, not even from her nightmares.

"I was lucky. I had Quinn here, who not only patched me up, but he showed me how to fight effectively—though without my mother's knowledge, of course. There was no need to upset her."

"I taught you how to box, sir."

"I believe there were a few tricks you taught me that are not allowed under the Queensberry rules."

"Indeed, sir. I did my fighting under the London Prize Ring rules, but it does not matter. Those who fight on the street do not follow a gentleman's constraints."

Thomas's thoughts turned somber as he thought of Filmont and the bounty hunter. The bounty hunter had been ungoverned by any conventions. However, Filmont appeared to be a gentleman—at least on the surface, but he got what

he wanted by any means necessary, usually by hiring scum like the bounty hunter.

Thomas briefly considered whether he was any better than those two men. He relished the lack of rules and the use of magic. He acknowledged that as a youth he had been careless and created enemies like Silas who had nearly killed the white buck.

A cold chill went through him.

Quinn finished the job, and wrapped Molly's hand neatly in the bandages. He went into the bathroom, inspected Vera's cleanup and sent the young maid off to her own bed.

"Goodnight, sir." Quinn gave a small nod of his head and turned to leave.

"Thank you." He said as the butler closed the door behind him.

Molly's eyes were closed, but he did not think she had fallen asleep yet. He feared leaving her for even a moment. What if she went off into another crazy dream and did something more dangerous than breaking a mirror?

He had heard of people who went sleepwalking and hurt themselves. He settled into the armchair by the fire. He was not sure how to protect her from the phantasms in her mind. However, he waved his wand and a wreath of violet flowers appeared and settled lightly on her head. At least, that way she would sleep without dreaming.

Molly woke to the throbbing pain in her hand and loud snoring. For a few moments, she thought the snoring came from her Da and she smiled. Then she remembered that Da had been dead for several years now. Grief cut through her

but then the scent of fresh violets teased her nose. She reached up and felt the wreath of flowers encircling her head. Why was it there?

Rolling over, she touched the bandage on her right hand. That's when she remembered where she was and all that had happened—her marriage, the train ride, and the strange visions. She prayed she would not have to endure any more of those horrific nightmares.

Pale light from a city street lamp filtered through the lace curtains. Thomas sat in the armchair by the fire with his head tilted back and his mouth open. His snores shook the glass chimneys in the chandelier and set them to tinkling in the brass fixture.

His robe lay open, baring his finely sculpted chest where the crystal nestled among short, curling, white gold hair. Her fingers itched to touch him. She curled her good hand into a fist.

Her gaze slid further to where his trousers rode low on his hips, baring his flat stomach. She felt a curious pull inside as she stared at him. Even though he was a few feet away his male essence filled her nostrils. Heat flushed her skin.

She slipped out of bed and groped around for her nightgown, which lay on the bench at the end of the bed. Once she managed to get the gown over her head, she padded softly to the armchair.

"Thomas," she whispered. She did not wish to have the servants trooping into the room again. When he did not respond, she shook his shoulder lightly. He closed his mouth and muttered something unintelligible.

"Thomas," she shook him a bit more. "Get into your bed."

Instantly, he jumped out of the armchair with the wand in his hand. Startled, she stumbled backward and plopped on the bed.

"Where is he?" His gruff growl frightened her more than wand in his hand. "I'm going to turn that bastard into a worm."

"Can you really do that?" She tried to keep her voice calm and smooth, but she could not prevent the slight tremor in it.

He blinked and lowered his hand. "It's not ethical, but I'd like to do it. Did you have any bad dreams?"

"No, your snoring woke me. You should get into bed."

The dim light from the window sparkled in his amethyst eyes and she watched a brief moment of confusion cross his features.

He rubbed his hand over his forehead. "I guess I was done in."

"You need to get some real rest."

"I will stay here." He sat back in the armchair again looking far wearier than she had ever seen him.

A surge of affection washed through her. "I will get no sleep with your snoring."

"You'll get no sleep if I get in the bed with you." He drilled her with a penetrating gaze.

She shivered and swallowed hard, knowing very well what contact with him could do to her. "We don't need to touch each other. You stay on one side of the bed and I'll stay on the other."

"I tend to take up the whole bed."

The pit of her stomach churned. She glanced at the bed and then back at him. Yes, he was a large man. "Then I shall sleep on the chair and you use the bed."

His gaze raked over her. "You lied to me."

Her heart fluttered in her chest. "I did not."

"You are afraid of me."

"That is not true."

"I will not hurt you."

"I simply ... I do not want children." She turned around and stared at the embers glowing in the fireplace. "I told you that."

"You were not at fault in your brother's death."

She clenched her undamaged hand into a fist. "I will not bear the loss of a child ever again."

"You think you will give birth to an albino. Like me." His voice had softened, but she heard the hurt in it.

"No. I am not concerned about what type of child—"

"Type?" His voice became harsh. "I am not talking about phlegmatic or melancholic personalities. There is a risk that you could give birth to a freak—the kind that some people hide in the attic."

She felt herself shrinking from the brittle chill in his eyes. "You do not understand. I know I could not help but love a child, no matter what that child looked like. But to lose something so precious again—"

"Most parents endure the death of one or more of their offspring. It is hardly uncommon."

"My mother never recovered. She suffered from melancholia and died of a broken heart less than a year later."

"And you blamed yourself for her death, too."

She nodded as misery stabbed at her heart. Walking to the window, she moved the lace curtain aside and stared out at the shadows cast by the streetlamp. "One night, when my mother lay close to death, I decided to steal someone else's child. I thought that if the child looked like Emil, my mother would be happy and get better. I walked for blocks staring into little faces but none resembled my brother. My father was furious when he finally found me, but he didn't hit me. He ... he cried."

She hurriedly swiped at the tear that rolled down her cheek. She had never told that story to anyone because it hurt too much. Her mother had died three days after that.

She did not hear him move, but suddenly, his arms came around her. Her heart hammered against her ribs as the strength and warmth of his flesh ignited the fire that had been simmering within her.

"I am sorry for you." He kissed the top of her head.

Closing her eyes, she reveled in his touch. She did not want to know what charm he had used to make her love him so deeply. She did not want to know it wasn't real. Sighing, she opened her eyes.

"I want children, but perhaps you need some time to get used to me." He turned her around to face him. "I will take what is my right as your husband, but for now I will use a condom when we make love."

She froze. She had heard the whispers from other women in the office. "But such things are ... are morally wrong. It is against nature and can cause insanity."

He laughed. "Physicians make that claim. They believe abstinence is the only proper way to limit the number of children a woman must bear."

"Isn't it?"

"When a man has a beautiful, sweet woman in his arms and his blood is gushing through his body in a river of heat, how can he deny his lovely wife and himself the pleasure he knows they will find in the act of love."

A thrill went through her as he drew her toward him. When their lips joined, the jolt went right down to her toes again just as it had at the wedding. Her senses spun as he devoured her. Their tongues met and danced together while the heat built up between their bodies. She slid her left hand down along his chest to feel the solid ridges of muscle.

The memory of the deep woods lingered in his mouth—the scent of pine, crushed leaves, and moss. She closed her eyes and imagined herself on a bed of pine needles beneath the safety of sheltering boughs.

His hands explored her waist and moved further down, curving around the swell of her rounded bottom. He pulled her closer to the evidence of his lust until it pressed against her thigh.

The heady knowledge that she had caused his body to react might have emboldened her further if she hadn't found herself already wild with such a strong gust of passion that her limbs trembled and she felt nearly boneless.

One of his hands slid up beneath her nightgown and sought for the slick dampness between her legs. Her body burned as hot as a wood stove while his caresses grew more insistent, probing deeper until her breath came in short gasps.

She stayed his hand and sought to calm her breathing. Deftly, he undid the buttons on her nightgown and drew it over her head to toss it away. The cool air in the room against her moist skin chilled her slightly and she snuggled back onto his chest, sure their bodies would fuse together.

A low groan rumbled in his chest before his hands wound about her and lifted her up. She stiffened.

"What are you doing?"

"You wanted me to join you in the bed."

She nodded.

He placed her down upon the mattress but with her legs hanging over the side. Lifting her legs upon his shoulders, he eased her thighs apart and kissed her soft inner flesh.

She recalled the strange dream she had of the white buck teasing her with his tongue in much the same manner. Simply the memory rattled her for it had seemed so real, though she had been drugged at the time.

Had he put something in the bourbon? Her passionate fervor cooled.

"Isn't this pleasurable for you?" He lifted his head and gazed at her with his amethyst eyes.

"I ... yes, it's ... just ... I'm not"

"You are a virgin." He tilted up one corner of his mouth. "I am honored to be the first for you."

Shock hit her and a chill went down her spine. Isn't that what the white buck had said—or rather communicated to her? But that had happened only in a dream—or a nightmare due to the way it ended, which was not far different from the image she had seen in the mirror.

Her heart pounded in her chest.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

Did she? He had saved her from the bounty hunter and promised to protect her. But could he? Mr. Filmont would stop at nothing.

"Please, let me kiss you here." He lightly touched the soft nub of her sex. A ripple of excitement once more sent heat flowing through her veins. As he drank in the soft folds of her womanhood, the intensity of her reaction grew. He handled her like a puppet until she had no control over her body.

"S-stop." She could barely speak.

"Only for a moment." He ended the inconceivably wonderful torment and she found herself momentarily bereft. She wanted something more, something just out of reach, something that made her ache deep inside.

He stepped out of his trousers and tossed away the robe until he stood before her with his manhood fully erect. The breath hitched up in her throat but her desire for him overrode the edge of her fear.

He sat down beside her and placed a condom over his hard shaft. "When your hand heals, you can do this for me."

She slid back against the pillows and he positioned himself above her. He kissed her mouth until she was drugged with the taste of him.

His erection pressed insistently against her and she opened to him. He slid in with torturous leisure. She wanted more of him and wrapped her legs around his back.

"I must be gentle."

"I want more."

But he persisted in his deliberate agony and her only control was to meet his slow thrusts with her own. He moved in a patient rhythm, gradually plunging deeper until she found herself lost in the tempo of their bodies melding into one.

At last, he buried himself to fill her completely. The brief pain surprised her, and she winced as a lone tear eked out of one eye.

"I'm sorry," he apologized and drank in the tear.

It was but a momentary discomfort, but he deluged her with more kisses.

Maddeningly, he did not move, but he had ignited the flames of desire in her. She drove against his shaft and pulled back until he groaned and met her ardor with his own.

Explosive tremors shook her until she was flooded by a hot tide of liquid fire that consumed her. As she let out a soft moan of ecstasy, he shuddered and sank into her one last time.

Spent and satiated, she laid wrapped his arms. A wealth of emotions tumbled through her—joy, amazement, and wonder. Tears of ecstasy trailed down her cheeks.

He brushed back her hair as his brow furrowed with worry. "Does it still hurt? I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have—"

"I ... I'm fine. It was so beautiful ... I'm happy. Truly, truly happy."

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The core of her still throbbed with heat. She had never imagined the raw act of passion could leave such radiance in its wake. He slid his hand down her thigh to tuck her in close. Sighing, she knew much of her pleasure was due to who had shared it with her.

Otherwise, what happened could be a cruel act of violence. She shoved the horrid memory of the bounty hunter to the back of her mind.

She was safe. She was in love.

A shadow of doubt darkened her mind. Had he simply played with her like the masterful sorcerer he was?

Could her joy ever be complete if she did not believe this was real? If he did not say he loved her?

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Chapter Thirteen

A bright shaft of sunlight crept over Molly's eyelids and woke her. Thomas's arm lay protectively over her, but he was sound asleep. Thoughts of the smoldering passions they had shared sent tingles along her naked skin and caused a lump in her throat. Her love for him nearly overwhelmed her.

Trying not to disturb him, she crept gently out of bed. As she slid away from him, the bedcovers came with her, leaving his superb body exposed. Though his skin nearly matched the pale sheets, rugged sinews bunched along his limbs. Watching him in slumber stirred her soul and her fingers longed to caress him again. She tiptoed around to his side of the bed and lifted the blankets to cover him. That's when she saw the raw scar on his flank which had only recently knitted together.

Her heart sped up. The wound looked sickeningly familiar. The gash the white buck had gotten from the bullet had been about the same length. She remembered how Thomas had a pained expression on his face when he had carried her into bed after a bullet had shattered the window. He had a slight limp, too, and there had been the edge of a bandage peeking from beneath his trousers.

He had said it was nothing.

Numbness spread through her. The scar was the same size and in the same place it would have been—if he were a deer.

What was she thinking? Was she truly insane?

A light rap sounded at the door.

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Hurriedly, she covered Thomas with the blankets. Wiggling into her nightgown, she threw on Thomas's robe as well.

Opening the bedroom door an inch, she was greeted by Mr. Quinn's solemn expression.

"Good morning, Madam, I have a telegram for Mr. Hillyer."

She opened the door a little further and held out her hand.

"I'll give it to him," she whispered.

The butler frowned. "It is for his eyes only."

"He's still sleeping."

"I see."

"I will hand it to him the minute he wakes up."

The butler's face harbored doubts. She fully expected him to turn and leave—with the telegram in his possession. She opened the door wider and lifted the telegram from the tray.

"There. Now you won't have to come back upstairs."

"It would not have been a problem, Madam."

"Perhaps not, but it's one less thing to worry about."

"Would you like your breakfast brought up, Madam?"

Until that moment, she had not thought about how famished she was. Her stomach rumbled on cue. "Yes, please. That would be wonderful," she gave him her brightest smile.

"How is your hand this morning, Madam?"

Naturally, it hurt but she would not tell him that. When Thomas had gone for the bourbon last night, Quinn had tried to get her to explain to him how the mirror had broken. But she did not trust him. She did not want him to think she was unhinged, even if it was true.

"It's fine, thank you. I'm sure it will be healed in no time thanks to you." She shut the door on him.

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She glanced at the telegram. It was addressed to Mr. Thomas Hillyer, but she was Mrs. Thomas Hillyer now. His business was her business. At least, that's the way it should be, though she suspected he would not want her prying into his affairs.

She tapped the envelope against her bandaged hand. She would steam it open, read it, and then seal it once more. He would never know she had taken a peek.

She would take a bath so the hot steam would fill the room and loosen the envelope's flap.

She hurried to the wardrobe, pulled out her old clothes and went into the bathroom with the telegram. Turning on the hot water faucet, she held the envelope near the heated water coming from the tap. Steam quickly filled the atmosphere in the small room and loosened the flap on the envelope. Gently, she pried it open and lifted out the telegram.

It was from Rafe.

Boat found. Stop. Assumed drowned. Stop. More tomorrow. Stop

The boat. The boat she had seen in the crystal ball. The one the white buck had set loose.

Rafe knew about the boat. How? Had Thomas told him?

Her fingers trembled as she struggled to place the telegram back in the envelope. It did not look as neat and the glue refused to stick. She set the telegram down on the vanity table.

She was not cold, but she trembled all over with unease. Slipping out of her nightgown, she stepped into the tub, making sure to keep her bandaged hand out of the water. The

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blessedly hot water calmed the shaking of her body, but her mind whirled in circles.

How could Thomas and Rafe know about the boat? How could Thomas have a wound exactly like the one on the white buck—in exactly the same place? Should she tell him that she had seen a vision of the white buck getting shot?

She gasped as the bathroom door suddenly opened. Thomas stood before her, stark naked with his manhood fully erect. Immediate need coiled in her. The swooping pull at her center had her spreading her legs in the water. She wanted him again. All the questions she had vanished as desire for him gnawed at her—it was as bad as hunger and the only thing that would satisfy her was to have him inside her, filling her once again with his heat.

He glanced at her with a wry smile and quickly scanned the room. Seeing the telegram sitting on the vanity table. He went over to it, opened it and read it.

Her heart nearly stopped, but he said nothing.

He walked to the bathtub and stepped into it. Without any preamble or so much as a morning greeting, he sat down. He drew her to him and gave her another of his soul drenching kisses while his hand slid down to her inner thigh to work his sorcery. Within minutes, the stroking of his fingers sent waves of pleasure rippling through her.

He got out of the tub and she gave a small, sad cry. She wanted more. She longed to experience another exquisite explosion of sensations that left her mindless with rapture. If it was sorcery, she no longer cared. She craved it far more than food.

The Fiend of White Buck Hall
by Penelope Marzec

He grabbed a towel and rubbed himself dry. She smiled as he wrapped his erection in a condom. That done, he held out his hand for her.

She shivered as she left the water, but once he pressed her snugly against his body his heat chased away the chill. He drew the towel down her back and over her hips. She pressed against his hot member, straining to rub it against her slick nub.

He shifted and sat on the edge of the low vanity bench. Guiding her to kneel upon the bench on either side of his thighs, he eased her upon his shaft. She let out a moan as she slid down the length of it. Her bones melted as his fire filled her.

"You've got to work for it this time, my little wife."

Puzzled, she stared into his amethyst eyes and bit her lip.

A hint of amusement lifted the corners of his mouth. "You are on top."

"Oh." She swallowed hard and began to move. She rose up and came down again, slowly at first, but soon the tempo built as a tempest gathered within her. Excitement took hold and she tightened her muscles around his shaft as she pulled upward.

"Good lord, you learn quickly," he gasped.

Recklessly, she swooped down once more and then the thunder struck her. She cried in the throes of passion as her juices flowed out.

"I ... love you!"

He moaned, thrust into her, and shuddered as the thunder seized him, too.

She closed her eyes and clung to him, caught in his spell. She never wanted to let him go. Tasting his skin and breathing in the scent of him, she hoped to imprint the memory in her mind forever.

Would it do any good to tell him about the vision she had? Would he believe her?

He kissed her, on her lips, her shoulder, and her neck. "Did you get that bandage wet in the tub?"

She had forgotten her injury. The bandage was damp. "I tried not to."

He sighed. "It must be changed."

"Can you do it?"

"Quinn is better at that sort of thing."

She took in a ragged breath. "He thinks I'm quite mad."

"You knocked out Joseph Filmont. If Quinn knew that, I'm sure he'd be impressed."

"I did it with a statuette, not my hands."

"Doesn't matter."

"He could have died."

"Pity he didn't."

"I would be a murderess."

"It was self-defense."

His lips came down on hers once more and the world spun on its axis for a few moments, but when he finished, she gazed into his amazing eyes and took in a ragged breath.

"I saw a terrible vision in the mirror downstairs last night when we first arrived—and I believe it was a portent of a future tragedy."

The Fiend of White Buck Hall
by Penelope Marzec

His face hardened. "How can I believe that? Few are privy to the events that lie ahead. My mentor, Averill, was the only one who could do it. The fortune-teller in the circus was a fraud. She primed her customers with leading questions."

"I did not believe in such things either until now." She must make him understand. Smoothing back the white gold hair on his forehead, she used her most earnest tone. "I know about that boat because I saw it happen in the crystal ball—and last night I saw the white buck running through the woods ... in great fear ... for he was being hunted."

She could not tell him the rest. Her throat closed up and tears swam in her eyes.

He lifted her away from him. "Don't read my telegrams again." He grabbed a towel and wrapped it around his loins. Snatching up the telegram from the vanity table, he stalked out of the room and slammed the door behind him.

Doom settled down like a black pall upon her heart. She shivered as she bundled up in a towel. Why should love hurt so much? If only she had held more tightly to Emil's hand ... if she had never walked into the woods ... if she had never stared into the white buck's eyes ...?

But, sadly, she knew she could not have avoided it.

And she could not help loving Thomas, either.

By the time she walked back into the bedroom, Thomas was gone. Her breakfast waited for her on the table. It was the most beautiful food arrangement she had ever seen. But it was cold and she was no longer hungry.

"This is most unusual, nothing like this has ever been done. There's no precedent for it." Albert Kent held the wax

cylinder in his hand. "How can you prove that is Joseph Filmont's voice?"

"Because it sounds like him, you fool." Thomas paced back and forth across the plush carpeting in his lawyer's office.

"Would you please sit? You remind me of a caged animal."

Thomas sat, although he admitted to himself that he did feel trapped. *No, not trapped*. He wanted to get back to Molly. He wanted to lie with her again. He wanted to feel her buttocks in his hands and hear her moan with pleasure. He wanted to spend all day in the bedroom.

"The sound quality is very poor and the more it is played, the worse it will get."

"But it's proof!" He found his fury mounting.

"Filmont's case is stronger. Miss Coan was seen going into the house and the jewelry she is purported to have stolen was found in a pawn shop less than five blocks away."

"Who brought the jewelry into that shop?"

"A young woman with brown hair, brown eyes, approximately five feet, two inches tall, and about twenty-five years old."

"Was she wearing spectacles?"

"Hmmm. I don't know." He put down the cylinder and picked up a pen to jot a note on paper.

"I want that man in jail." He gripped the wand in his hands. "If he is not punished, I will tie his balls in a knot."

Albert's sigh echoed in the room. "This is a nasty business, but you need not make it into a spectacle. As it is, your new wife's name—and yours will be dragged through the mud. You'll be social outcasts."

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by Penelope Marzec

"I'm already an outcast."

"Only because you do your best to make yourself disagreeable and frighten people with your hocus pocus business."

"Even if I wasn't a wizard, I'm an oddity. People passing me on the street point and stare."

"Try smiling instead of snarling at them. A pleasant 'How do you do.' would suffice."

"When I snarl, they cease pointing."

Albert rubbed his hand across his face. "Filmont has more money than the Queen of England at this point. You cannot win. We can make a plea for the charges to be dropped, perhaps offer restitution—"

"Dammit! I will not give that bastard a cent! He ruined my father—"

"Is this about your father or your wife?" Albert interrupted.

"Both!" He got out of the chair and crossed the room to the window, which looked out onto Rittenhouse Square. The trees in the park had buds on them. The grass looked lush and green. Here and there, he spotted the bright yellow of daffodils in the sun.

Homesickness for White Buck Hall nearly overwhelmed him for a moment until he remembered who now waited for him back in the house on Locust Street. The thought of their lovemaking set his pulse racing. He stared at the spring grass and wondered what it would be like to make love to Molly out in the open, in the sunshine, on the grass.

"Are you listening to me?" Albert asked.

He blinked, disoriented for a moment. He swung around and started pacing again. "Sorry. What about the letters?"

"Don't you read the newspapers?"

"Rarely."

"The woman who wrote those letters is dead. She jumped in front of a train in New York City one month ago. She was expecting a child and unmarried."

Ice slid through Thomas. He stood still as he recalled the faded ink on the top envelope of the letters. Molly's tears had washed away the ink. If she hadn't fought Filmont, she could have wound up like that other woman—pregnant with Filmont's child and desperate enough to kill herself. Unless

"Could she have been pushed?"

Albert shrugged. "There were no witnesses."

"So Filmont will get away with murder."

"I doubt that he pushed her."

"He ordered someone else to do it." He thought of the bounty hunter who had been one of Filmont's minions, but Filmont had enough money to hire more killers to do his dirty work. "He must be stopped. His perverse nature must be revealed to the public—so no one else is harmed."

"You slander him and you'll be sued."

"It's the truth."

"According to you."

"There is a recording of his voice on that wax cylinder and there are those letters—along with one dead woman." Jeff was dead, too, and Molly had come very close to death. The horror of that scene in Silas' cabin still haunted him. A pain

stabbed at his heart. Had Molly's mind been irrevocably damaged by her ordeal?

Why else would she believe she had seen a vision?

His throat tightened. He should not have been so gruff with her about the telegram. Maybe he would buy some flowers—or some expensive trinket for her on the way back to the house. His father had frequently bought his mother jewelry and she had always loved the gifts.

"As your lawyer—and your friend—I advise you to keep quiet. Meanwhile, I will see what I can do."

Thomas clenched his teeth together so hard that it hurt. He knew Albert's promise would have to do for now. "Put the letters and the wax cylinder in your safe."

Albert nodded. "Of course. And please, don't do anything reckless with that wand of yours."

He twisted up one corner of his mouth. "You've no need to worry. I'll be spending a lot of time in the bedroom."

"It's about time. I would like to meet the little woman who finally roped you in."

"We are hosting a small gathering."

Immediately, a cloud of concern crossed Albert's face. "Please watch what you say."

"I'll be the soul of wit."

"That's what I'm afraid of. Didn't you make a vow to Averill to remain ethical in the use of your magic?"

Thomas swirled the wand in his hand and aimed it at the cupboard beneath the window. The door opened to reveal a bottle of Cognac. "I think about it quite often." *Because perhaps it was a mistake.*

The Fiend of White Buck Hall
by Penelope Marzec

He took out the bottle along with two glasses and poured a generous portion of liquor into each one.

Albert's expression turned grim. "You are more lethal than ever."

"Let's keep that a secret." He lifted his glass and downed the Cognac.

Molly had little time to wallow in misery. The moment she sat down to pick at her cold breakfast, Mrs. Pilcher knocked and came into the room with a list of things to be done. Foremost on the agenda was the arrival of the dressmaker and her assistant.

When they bustled in, Mrs. Pilcher immediately took over the proceedings. Molly stood on a small pedestal and found each and every one of her own suggestions ignored. Mrs. Pilcher picked out the fabrics.

"My favorite color is blue," Molly said.

"You should never wear blue. It would never do with your dark hair and dark eyes." Mrs. Pilcher informed her. "Mr. Hillyer's mother was superbly suited for blue. She had fair hair and light blue eyes. Every shade of blue brought out her delicate beauty."

Molly bit her tongue. Evidently, Thomas's mother was a saint in Mrs. Pilcher's eyes.

Mrs. Pilcher discarded several of the dress patterns with what she termed "simplistic lines."

"I like simplicity," Molly countered.

"The wife of a Hillyer—whose mother was a Stanton—does not settle for simplicity."

"I am a secretary."

"Good heavens!" Mrs. Pilcher blanched and grabbed her smelling salts. After taking a deep whiff, she said, "Don't say such dreadful things!"

Molly gritted her teeth. It was clear that Mrs. Pilcher was in charge and there was nothing to be done about it.

Both the dressmaker and Mrs. Pilcher could not hide their surprise when they saw Molly's wrists and the various bruises on her skin, but neither of them said anything. After Molly was measured, poked and pinned, the dressmaker sent her assistant back to the shop to pick up several ready-made dresses, two suits, nightgowns, an abundance of drawers, petticoats, and corset covers.

"That should tide you over for a few days," the dressmaker smiled.

Molly's jaw dropped. "Can't I wear the same thing twice?"

The dressmaker and Mrs. Pilcher laughed, but ignored her question.

"We must have an exquisite ball gown, suitable for the opera as well," explained Mrs. Pilcher. "Mr. Hillyer informed me that he and Mrs. Hillyer will be entertaining at home, too."

"We are entertaining?" Molly asked in surprise.

"We've had several callers today, but I instructed Mr. Quinn to tell them that you are indisposed."

"Is that all the wealthy do—visit each other?" Molly liked being busy and having a task to do.

The dressmaker blinked at her in horror. "Paying a call is most necessary."

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by Penelope Marzec

"It is the foundation of polite society." Mrs. Pilcher frowned at Molly as if she saw a host of imperfections that needed to be swiftly eliminated.

Molly quailed under Mrs. Pilcher's steady glare.

"Small talk is not my forte," Molly squirmed and got another pin in her side.

"With some judicious training, you can acquire the necessary polished deportment," Mrs. Pilcher puffed up her chest. Molly could easily guess who was going to drill her in the etiquette of the well-heeled.

"What I need is a new pair of eyeglasses," she reminded Mrs. Pilcher.

"We will take care of that tomorrow."

Molly sighed. She was beginning to understand why Thomas loved the freedom of White Buck Hall. She wondered where he had gone and whether he would forgive her for opening his telegram. She also wondered how she would ever convince him about the visions she had seen.

Her throat closed up as she recalled the horrible scene in the woods where the white buck was hit by the bullets. He had fallen, and she knew he had died. She did not doubt what she saw. The vivid images had been real.

And Mr. Filmont intended to kill her as well. She shivered as she felt ice go right through her heart.

"My, my, you can't be chilly, I've got the fire blazing away here." Mrs. Pilcher's lips puckered as if she had eaten a lemon.

The dressmaker hurriedly draped a cashmere shawl about Molly's shoulders, but it did little good. She could not stop

obsessing over the visions. She had to do something. But what?

Mrs. Pilcher and the dressmaker discussed hats next. The dressmaker worked with a milliner who could match the hats to each of Molly's outfits.

The assistant returned with a ridiculous number of boxes and Molly was forced to try on each of the ready-made dresses. Young Vera came in to help. She touched each dress lovingly.

"You look beautiful, Mrs. Hillyer," Vera smiled as she straightened out the folds on one dress.

"Thank you, Vera."

"I don't like that particular green on you," Mrs. Pilcher fussed. "It has too much blue in it. The brown is much better."

"I don't like brown." Molly stated between clenched teeth.

"Well, it does suit you," Mrs. Pilcher declared.

At last, the dressmaker left and Molly sagged into the armchair by the fireside wearing one of the new ready-made morning dresses. Vera brought her some tea and then left her in peace.

But her solitude did not last long. Mrs. Pilcher returned with a small, green glass bowl full of calling cards. She positively beamed. "My gracious! I've counted them and there are twenty-two! Imagine that! Everyone is curious about you. Of course, all of them are wishing you well with your marriage to Mr. Hillyer. Isn't it exciting? Oh, we will have grand times again in this house." She set the bowl on the small table next to the armchair.

Molly glared at the cards. She did not care at all about the twenty-two cards. She picked up a few and read the names. "I do not know any of these people."

"They all know your husband and fondly remember his dear mother." Mrs. Pilcher sniffed and dabbed at the corner of her eyes with a handkerchief.

Molly thought of Gertrude, Theresa, Rafe, and Cook. She had come to enjoy their company—and she missed them. But she could not help wondering if they had deceived her. Was there a terrible secret at White Buck Hall? Did they all know it? Or only Rafe?

Was she imagining things—or becoming a lunatic?

But could it be true? Could Thomas work his strange magic and transform himself? Perhaps that is why the people of Stony Mill believed him to be a fiend. For a moment, she closed her eyes as she remembered the click she had heard after Silas had shoved in another bullet into the rifle.

A tremor shook her from head to toe. She opened her eyes.

"Mrs. Hillyer, rest her soul, was one of Philadelphia's finest." Mrs. Pilcher's jowls shook with emotion. For a minute there was silence in the room, but then she turned toward Molly once again. "You must return all calls within three days. It is most imperative."

Molly held up her bandaged hand. "I don't think I can wear a glove on my right hand—and one must never pay a call without wearing gloves."

"Humph." Mrs. Pilcher tapped her chin with her index finger. "I shall think of something, but in the meantime there

is more work to be done." She went to the bell to ring for Vera. "Idle hands are the devil's workshop, you know."

The young maid came scurrying back to the room in a few minutes.

"Vera, I want you to collect all of Mrs. Hillyer's old outfits so that we can burn them." Mrs. Pilcher ordered.

"No!" Molly protested.

"They are unsuitable for you in your new position."

"They are still serviceable."

"Your Oxfords were patched."

Molly did not miss the scorn in the housekeeper's tone, but she did not care.

"Cook patched them very nicely. I want to keep them. I want to keep all my old clothes. I worked hard to buy them, except for the wine-colored shirtwaist—that was a gift." She glared at the housekeeper.

"Very well, if you insist." Mrs. Pilcher drew in a great breath. "Vera, box the old clothes. We'll put them in the attic."

Molly swallowed hard and stiffened her spine. She was the lady of the house now. She must not allow the housekeeper to intimidate her. "Mrs. Pilcher, please send Mr. Quinn up. I'd like to discuss something with him."

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Chapter Fourteen

Thomas whistled the melody to an old love song as he entered the house with a bouquet of bright spring flowers in one hand and a small box in his other hand. He had purchased a fine Roman heart locket with a diamond in the center. He had paid a ridiculous amount of money for it. He could have gotten the same locket for far less without a diamond, but he wanted to see Molly's eyes sparkle. Surely, a fine gem could do that.

The flowers had a pathetic and lackluster look when he purchased them, but it didn't take much magic at all to brighten them up and add a heavenly smell. He had picked out carnations, but he infused them with the scent of honeysuckle because it reminded him of Molly.

Molly. His sweet, sweet little wife. He no longer cared that she had read his telegram. She could read all his telegrams—as long as she spent all day in bed with him. He took another deep whiff of the flowers and smiled.

The minute he stepped into the foyer, Mrs. Pilcher darted out of the kitchen and barred him from heading upstairs.

"Sir, I know it's not my place but you must do something. It's positively disgraceful." Mrs. Pilcher's jowls trembled. Thomas had never seen her so upset. "We shall be the laughing stock of the city if anyone finds out. I will never be able to hold my head up in public. Mr. Quinn won't listen to reason—"

"Mr. Quinn?"

The Fiend of White Buck Hall
by Penelope Marzec

"He let her have her way, but he had to do it. Mrs. Hillyer is ... she threatened us." Mrs. Pilcher opened up her smelling salts and sniffed deeply. "We—who have served the family so faithfully all these years." A tear slid down her cheek. Thomas had never seen Mrs. Pilcher cry—except at funerals.

He blinked in amazement. "She threatened *you*?" He always believed Mrs. Pilcher had the steel backbone of an army staff sergeant.

A warning cloud lowered on Mrs. Pilcher's brows. "She is wearing a pair of young boy's breeches and ... and Vera is her sparring partner. Mr. Quinn is teaching them to box!"

It was, quite possibly, the funniest thing Thomas had ever heard in his entire life. "My little Molly?" He tried to stifle a laugh, but he did not succeed.

Mrs. Pilcher's mouth took on a grim line. "Women do not box."

Thomas pressed his hand to his mouth and tried to wipe away his smile. "Indeed, Mrs. Pilcher, it is most unusual."

"They are in your old room."

He nodded. "I will assess the situation."

Mrs. Pilcher opened her mouth as if to say more, but then shut it and stepped aside. He dropped the flowers and the box on the hall table and took the stairs two at a time. As he reached the room that had been his as a boy, he heard a scream, a thud, and a crash.

He didn't bother to knock. He burst into the room where he saw Vera cowering in the corner and Molly with a fierce look of determination on her face. On the floor lay the broken

remains of the ship in the bottle he had always kept on his childhood desk.

Quinn stood by the window. "Begging your pardon, sir. Mrs. Hillyer strongly requested instructions in learning to box."

"I intend to learn to fight, Mr. Quinn—enough so that I can hurt someone who doesn't follow the rules of the boxing ring." Molly's firm voice brooked no argument.

A cold, hard stone settled in Thomas's gut. The incident with the bounty hunter *had* affected her deeply. "I promised I would protect you."

"What about Jeff?" she turned her glare on him. "Didn't you promise to protect him, too?"

Thomas's throat ached. "Jeff was stabbed in the back. He didn't get a chance to fight back." He saw the emotion cross her face as she swallowed hard and narrowed her eyes. She whirled around to face the wall. He frowned. Was she going to cry? With her arms crossed, she stood stiff and motionless.

Meanwhile, Quinn moved toward Vera. "You are to block her fist, not run away," he sighed.

"I'm terribly sorry about the broken bottle, but I'm not wanting to get a black eye," Vera mumbled.

"I did not touch you," Molly shot back. "I did not intend to hurt you at all. We are merely practicing the correct moves. Besides, I have not developed a sufficient amount of strength as yet."

"I'll spar with Mrs. Hillyer," Thomas said. "Please go and get a broom to pick up the mess."

The Fiend of White Buck Hall
by Penelope Marzec

"Oh, thank you, sir! Me mother would be turning over in her grave to see me at fisticuffs."

Molly came charging toward him. "I am not going to spar with you. You will not be serious about it." She stood before him, all five feet two inches of her, wearing the short pants he had worn around the same time his father had died. The tender swell of her breasts and the curve of her hips filled out the clothing far better than it had when he had worn it. If anything, she looked more feminine in the boyish garb.

Heat went through him and he could picture her wrapping her willowy legs around him while he drove himself into her again and again until they pooled their juices together in release.

He tamped down the idea as much as possible before the evidence of his lust became obvious. "I can be a stern taskmaster." He wanted to teach her all the pleasures of loving.

"I must learn from the best teacher and Mr. Quinn is an expert at fighting. Although since you are the expert in shooting, you can teach me how to be an accurate marksman." She gave him a tentative smile, which almost undid him until the sight of her bandaged hand reminded him of last night's incident.

She saw things that weren't there. Things that appeared so real she believed them to be authentic. She had said so herself. What if she had a gun last night? She might have blasted a hole in that mirror instead of smashing it with her fist.

Something tightened in his chest, like a metal vise slowly crushing his heart. He knew things weren't always what they seemed.

Did evil possess her? Had it warped her mind?

He should not allow her to fire a gun, but he could not deny her request directly. True, he did not completely understand his new wife, but he had dealt with her enough to know that barring her path directly would only serve to make her more determined.

"Once you've learned to box, I'll teach you how to shoot. But I will be your instructor for both. Mr. Quinn is significantly older than he was at the time he taught me to fight. I do not want you to tax his stamina."

He did not miss the look of relief on Quinn's face. "Begging your leave, sir."

"Yes, of course, but before you go do you know where my old weights are?"

"In the basement, sir."

"Good. I think we do need to work on Mrs. Hillyer's strength."

Worry furrowed Quinn's brow. He whispered to Thomas. "If you match her strength to her courage you will have a fearsome wife."

"Indeed, that's exactly what I appreciate in a wife."

The shock on the aging butler's face had Thomas holding back a smile.

Quinn left the room, shaking his head.

"I knew you would not take me seriously," Molly pouted. "I must learn to fight quickly and I must learn to shoot as well."

The Fiend of White Buck Hall
by Penelope Marzec

His gaze fell to the luscious rose of her full lips. The smoldering flame left in the wake of their morning lovemaking threatened to burst into a heated blaze once more. It took an iron will to rein in his desire. "It is most important to be thorough, to teach you so that the skills become second nature so you will react instinctively with the correct move."

"I don't have the time for that!" She twisted the end of the bandage on her hand.

He reached out to still her trembling fingers. "I promise I will teach you to defend yourself—even though I have tried to reassure you that I would protect you."

"You are not invincible."

"We are all vulnerable, but in light of Jeff's death I have taken new measures to guarantee the safety of those I have sworn to protect."

Her features clouded. "What do you intend to do? Build a fortress around White Buck Hall?"

He could not prevent himself from drawing her into his embrace. "A fortress would spoil the view."

She softened against him.

"Filmont will stop at nothing to see me dead. You do not have an army at your command."

He heard the catch in her voice and he longed to soothe it away. "Please do not worry. I met with my well-respected lawyer—who is also a good friend. He is going to see what he can do about Mr. Filmont."

She lifted a mournful face to him. "It will do no good. Mr. Filmont will succeed."

"Filmont will get his comeuppance if it's the last thing I do." He felt her shudder in his arms.

"I feel faint ... as if I cannot get enough air"

He glanced at her suddenly pale lips. He put his hand to her forehead where a cold sheen of sweat appeared. For a moment, the horror of the night in the cabin returned to him along with the terrible fear that he might lose her. The thought sent him into a panic.

He swiftly lifted her into his arms just as a knock came at the door. It was Vera, back with the broom to clean up the shattered pieces of his old ship-in-a-bottle.

"I'll only be a minute or so, sir." Vera promised as if she suspected she had interrupted an amorous interlude.

"Take your time, Vera. Mrs. Hillyer needs fresh air."

Molly breathed in the scents of spring as she leaned back against the plush squabs of the phaeton while Thomas drove it along the outer parameters of Rittenhouse Square. She fingered the small Roman heart locket on the fine gold chain around her neck. She had never possessed anything quite so extravagant, and she wanted to keep it in the box for fear that she might lose it. However, Thomas had placed it around her neck and given her a kiss. She could still taste him on her lips.

"Why did you give this to me?" she asked. "It isn't my birthday."

"It is nothing. A small trifle to make you smile."

"It's real gold."

"Did you think I would give you anything less?"

The Fiend of White Buck Hall
by Penelope Marzec

"It's like the dresses isn't it? I have to be seen in all the proper trappings because I am your wife."

"You need nothing to highlight your loveliness." He tossed out the words with the practiced charm young men often used. She knew he had used those words before—speaking them to other women to win their favor. She put on a pleasing continence, but it was a strain.

Did she hear the heavy footfalls of doom following their vehicle or was that the dull pounding of her own heart? She slid her hand over her breast. The regular beat beneath her fingertips surprised her, for inside there was a small, sad aching.

Her mind appeared to be rapidly disintegrating as the odd visions took over, becoming more frequent and more vivid. Everything had been going well as she sparred with Vera under Mr. Quinn's tutelage. Then in an instant, another strange scene assailed her and if it had not been for Thomas's strong arms, she would have passed out cold on the floor.

Had it been caused by the sunlight streaming through the window and reflecting in the glass of the broken bottle on the floor? Her vision had grown cloudy and she sensed that danger was very near, though they were far from the woods surrounding White Buck Hall.

The fog had gathered so thickly in her vision that she could see nothing at all but blackness. It had been as if she had gone completely blind—or as if she was in some dark place where no light could penetrate.

Mrs. Pilcher's smelling salts had removed the veil of shadows from her sight, but Molly still felt listless and weak.

And the sense of imminent danger continued to haunt her so that her nerves were wound in tight knots.

Obviously, the strange dizziness plaguing her since she first stared into the white buck's eyes had not faded away and apparently, regular meals were not the cure.

Thomas nodded at a few people passing by, but he did not tell her who they were as he guided the high-spirited roan around the park with ease. The street was thoroughly crowded with vehicles—much like any street in New York—and all seemed in a hurry to reach their destination.

After a while, Thomas pulled back on the reins and guided the horse to the side of the street. Flashing her a wide grin, Thomas pointed at a tree.

"I used to sit up there and drop candy on anyone passing beneath me."

"Why?" she asked. For her, sweets had been treasured—and rare.

He shrugged. "I don't know. It was interesting to see people's reactions. Some would be angry, some laughed, and some were clearly afraid of me—as if I was a ghost in that tree. But there were a bunch of poor youngsters that came by regularly and we became friends. They didn't seem to mind that I was different—or maybe they figured they wouldn't get any more candy if they pointed out the fact that I looked odd. Anyhow, I enjoyed playing with them. I often wonder about them ... where they live now ... if they're doing well"

His face clouded and he suddenly urged the horse to hurry along again.

"You were lonely."

He shrugged. "Money doesn't buy happiness."

Apprehension continued to twist inside her. She knew he would never teach her all she needed to know in time and she would be hampered in acquiring any skill at all if she constantly suffered from fainting spells brought on by the strange images in her mind.

The sun lowered behind the buildings, but as the lights went on in the windows of the houses, the city began to glitter. Of course, without her eyeglasses, the lights appeared to her as softly glowing spheres. She wished she could get out of the carriage and walk. At the very least, it might clear her head. She had been spending an inordinate amount of time indoors. She had always been fond of her brisk walk to and from work everyday.

But everything had changed and the future frightened her. She reasoned with herself. It could be that none of what she had seen in her visions was real. She could be insane, which certainly seemed a more logical explanation for what had been happening to her. She shut her eyes. How could anyone be hypnotized by staring into the red eyes of a white buck? It was preposterous.

Of course, in the woods, in the dark, it had not seemed so outlandish. Yet here, in the big city of Philadelphia, some of her experiences at White Buck Hall resembled the worst of nightmares. Undoubtedly, her mind had been affected.

She straightened and opened her eyes. She must not let herself fall into another spell. She should keep a bottle of smelling salts nearby at all times.

"Dammit." Thomas swore as he turned his head. "That fool is going too fast. This street is too crowded. I can't—"

The phaeton lurched. A sudden, sickening impact propelled her forward. She did not have time to scream. Her hip hit something and she bounced as she tried to grab a handhold, but then everything went black.

The next thing she knew, she was on the grass beside the phaeton, which was lying on its side. Feeling more lightheaded than ever, she sat up. Her hat was gone and her hair trailed down her back.

"Thomas?"

There was no answer. Panic welled up in her breast.

Loud shouts sounded nearby, as if a crowd had gathered.

A woman bent down beside her. "How are you feeling?"

She ignored the woman.

"Thomas!" Molly called out again. Again, he did not answer and in the darkness she could see very little except those round orbs of light. Terror took hold. Shaking badly, she got to her feet.

"Madam, you should rest a moment. A doctor has been summoned." Another bystander offered his advice.

"Where is my husband?" she cried. "Thomas! Thomas!" She stumbled toward the noisy crowd in the street. They were cheering, as if watching some sport. Urged onward by fear, she shoved her way to the front of the mob. There, the glow of carriage lanterns reflected off the head of a man with thick white gold hair as he stood in the center of the circle fighting with another man. It could only be Thomas.

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by Penelope Marzec

She flinched as he punched his opponent right in the face. The man stumbled backward and the crowd roared in approval.

"Thomas!" She ran towards him but another man grabbed her arm and stopped her.

"The fight ain't over missus. Stay outta the way."

"Get your hand off me!" she demanded. "That is my husband and I say the fight is done with right now."

"You ain't breaking this up." He sneered at her and squeezed her arm so hard she thought he would break it. "I got two bucks riding on the other guy."

Molly remembered one of Mr. Quinn's instructions about the most vulnerable parts of a man's anatomy. She swung around and kicked the balls of the man who held her so firmly.

Groaning in agony, he released her and doubled up on the ground.

"Molly." Thomas stumbled toward her with his face bloodied and his clothing disheveled. He used his foot to shove the man writhing on the ground out of his way.

Molly opened her arms and Thomas walked into them. He didn't say anything. He drew her into a firm embrace. She felt him trembling—but she shook so badly herself that she could not speak. She knew he was struggling to bottle up all his emotions.

After a minute, she swallowed against the ache in her throat. "Who were you punching?"

"I don't know," he murmured. "He rammed the phaeton and I saw you lying on the grass ... and I"

"I am not hurt." She was in Thomas's arms and that was all that mattered.

The crowd began to disperse around them as the carriage drivers called for them to move out of the way. Some men helped the man on the ground to his feet.

Thomas released her. They walked back to the overturned phaeton. He pulled the wand from his jacket, waved it and then held it straight. The phaeton righted itself. He slid the wand inside the jacket once more.

"I sent for a doctor." He sighed and narrowed his eyes to study her.

She lifted her chin. "I am fine."

He hugged her once more. "You do not look well."

"That is only because I lost my hat."

He reached inside his jacket, but she stayed his hand.

"Let's look for it. It can't be far away."

He gave a weary sigh. "I've lost the horse."

For some unaccountable reason she started to laugh.

"Doesn't he know his way home?"

He rewarded her with a crooked smile since his lip was swollen. "I should hope so, but perhaps he wants his freedom more than a regular bucket of oats."

She put her fingertips up to his distorted mouth. "Then he would be a very foolish horse."

"Or he might have wanted to taste the fresh spring grass in the park."

"We could look for him."

"Shall we look for your hat first?"

"We must. Otherwise, it will appear that you are not in the company of a respectable woman."

"Indeed. Simply for the lack of a hat?"

She sighed. "Perhaps the kick I gave to that man would be considered a *faux pas* in some circles."

"Never to me." He kissed her as pedestrians and carriages went by in the dark spring evening. Flames awakened in her as his tongue probed the depths of her mouth. Her fear of the future receded as passion burned the taste of him into her mind.

Thomas ran his fingers through Molly's hair as she lay beside him the next morning. "Your hair flows like dark water in a stream."

"Are you trying to wake me up?" She yawned but kept her eyes shut.

"We should begin behaving like a respectable, married couple."

"We found my hat last night, so we shall appear to be quite reputable."

"When we came home, we spent an inordinate amount of time doing scandalous things in this bed."

"I thought it was marvelous. I want to stay in this bed forever."

Her small sigh of satisfaction nearly changed his mind, but then his stomach rumbled.

"But I am famished—and Rafe is due to arrive. Please join me for breakfast in the dining room this morning."

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by Penelope Marzec

Her eyes opened and her expression grew grave. It seemed as if a curtain had fallen between them. "He is going to tell you that there is no hope for me."

The weight of her sorrow blotted out any sunlight for him. The quiet joy of a moment ago vanished.

"We will do everything we can. And we will win." He kissed her lightly, but the sweet pull of her lips begged him to delve deeper. She roused him until the blood pounded in his brain and he could barely remember what he had just said.

He forced himself to pull back. "You must not tease me, my dear."

"Yes, you're dangerous as I recall." She traced a finger along his swollen lip. "You look quite roughed up. You should stay here in bed because you'll scare everyone."

"I will scare them nonetheless." He eased himself away from her to sit on the edge of the bed. He brightened his tone in an attempt to cheer her. "You have a new wardrobe and I insist on seeing you in one of the dresses."

She clicked her tongue. "Oh, they are all dreadfully dull. Mrs. Pilcher does not think I should wear blue."

"Why not?"

"She says it doesn't suit me."

"Ha! Blue reminds me of the sky, and water, and ... the deep shadows in the grass as the clouds pass over the meadow at White Buck Hall." A dull ache started beneath his ribs and he closed his eyes. How could he miss it so much—especially when he had Molly at his side?

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He picked up his wand and went to the wardrobe. There he spied one tan dress and two dark brown dresses. With a quick wave, he turned them into varying shades of blue.

She came up behind him and wrapped her tender arms around his neck. Her soft, naked breasts pressed against his back. "I am afraid to go back to White Buck Hall. I dreamed of it again last night." The rough edge of anxiety lingered in her voice. He knew of her nightmare for she had called out in her sleep.

"That's why I must learn to protect myself." She wound her fingers through his hair. "If there isn't Silas with his rifle, there's Mr. Filmont's hired bounty hunter, or someone else trying to race on the street."

"He was drunk, too." Thomas stared at his swollen knuckles. Hopefully, he taught the fool a lesson.

"I believe the man who grabbed my arm was intoxicated as well."

Thomas ground his teeth together. She was small and delicate. Men saw her as an easy mark. He turned around and drew her into his arms. Burying his face in her luxuriant hair, he skimmed one hand along the sweet curve of her hip. Perhaps staying in this room for the rest of their lives was a good idea.

"If Mr. Quinn had not informed me of certain vulnerable areas in a man's physique, I would have been at that horrid drunk's mercy."

"You landed that kick like an expert." He mumbled, as he tasted her dainty earlobe. At first, he had thought it funny when his wife insisted on learning to fight. Now, he

understood how valuable those lessons would be for her—not only for protection but also as a therapeutic measure. "We will continue your education today."

"I must learn to shoot, too, at the same time I am learning to fight."

Grinding his teeth together, he pulled back and stared down into her dark, compelling eyes. His heart brimmed over as he remembered the way those eyes had looked in the heat of passion. She had given him so much more than he had ever dreamed of.

But how could he trust her when she might go off into one of her strange hallucinations at any moment? How could she hold a gun steady with her thin, smooth fingers? A cold shiver iced up his spine as he remembered the sound of the gun firing in his hands as he killed the bounty hunter.

"All right." He would not allow her to keep the gun. She would fire it while he was with her. Then he would lock it away.

"Thank you!" She gave him an enthusiastic hug. "Let's hurry and eat! I cannot wait to get started."

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Chapter Fifteen

Molly dressed quickly, anxious to make every minute count. Last night, she had immobilized the man who grabbed her arm and that gave her a small measure of hope. With knowledge, she could protect not only herself, but the white buck as well.

A frisson of fear slid up her spine. What if Thomas ... and the white buck

No. It was absurd. She hugged herself to chase away the chill.

But what about the boat? And the scar? And the odd way she had awoken to see the buck's image change slowly into Thomas's face.

She had not imagined it—or dreamed it. It had happened.

Hoping to run from her strange thoughts, she hurried out of the room. Thomas was busy shaving, and had said it would be several more minutes before he was ready to join her.

She turned toward the steps and the sunlight intensified behind the huge stained glass window at the landing. The colors glowed with astonishing brilliance. The sight took her breath away and she held onto the newel post to steady herself. She glanced down at her simple morning dress and found it bathed in the brilliant hues.

Casting her gaze back at the window, she gasped in surprise. The small, alabaster statue of the white buck at the base of the window grew larger before her eyes until it stood full-sized and alive. Turning his head, he locked the gaze from

his unholy ruby eyes on her. Her pulse raced as she found herself in the woods once more while the buck pawed the ground several feet away. A shot rang out and he bolted away. She ran after him through brambles and vines that tore at her skirts.

He leaped through a stand of evergreens so close together that it seemed as if he had simply disappeared into thin air. Panting hard, she came to the spot where she had last seen him. She pushed her way through the boughs and discovered a clearing with a huge tree in the center. The tree had four trunks and in the center where the four trunks met, she saw Thomas.

She called out his name, but he did not answer her. Reaching him, she found him slumped over and motionless. She touched him. His skin felt like ice.

She froze in fear. Was he dead?

The crystal he always wore dangled from his neck. Slowly, she reached for it but the moment her finger touched it, a blinding light hit her.

Stumbling backward, she turned to run, but Mr. Filmont stood before her with a gun aimed straight at her heart.

Thomas lowered Molly gently into the chair and placed the footstool beneath her feet. He did not think she had broken any bones, but she could have hit her head.

"Molly." He patted her cheek as he knelt beside her. She must have fainted. Fear tightened in his chest. He called to her again and patted her cheek once more. Her eyes fluttered open and he breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"Did you hit your head?" he asked.

She glanced around the room. "I'm in the library."

"Yes, I found you here. Did you pass out?" He held her hand. It was like an icicle.

"You are the white buck."

Her words hit him like a blow. He released her hand, stood up and walked to the window, raking his hand through his hair.

"I assume you have had another one of your visions." His mouth was so dry he could barely speak.

"Yes."

"I believe what you call visions are merely dreams."

"You wear a crystal—so does the white buck."

Her question intensified his pain. "It is for protection. I gave the crystal to him."

"You are lying."

"It is also for power." He could not look at her. If he did, he would be lost. "You are suffering from a delusion but that is my fault. I promised to protect you and I failed twice. I am sorry."

"There is a secret clearing in the woods. It is surrounded by a dense stand of evergreens. In the center, there is a large tree with four trunks."

Sweat beaded up on his brow. He wiped it away with his hand. Nobody knew where the clearing was. Not even Rafe or Quinn.

"Perhaps a cup of tea—"

"What I am saying is the truth!" Anger rose in her voice.

"Hush. The servants will hear you."

"Who else knows?"

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by Penelope Marzec

Agony cut through him as deeply as a knife. He pressed his lips together. Who had betrayed him?

"I saw the buck jump through a circle of evergreens, I followed and found myself in a clearing. You ... you were in the center of a huge tree—" She choked on a sob.

He turned to face her and saw the dampness on her cheeks. The tears undid him. He took out his handkerchief and dropped down on his knees beside her.

"Don't touch me." She swiped at her cheeks with her hand. "I want to know the truth. I want to know what kind of fiend I have married."

The accusation stung. He stared into her smoldering eyes and sought for a way to smooth away the loathing in her expression. She hated him now—his fragile, delicate wife who had less than an hour ago given him such pleasure.

He went to the cabinet and took out the bottle of bourbon. Pouring himself a generous portion, he downed it quickly. On an empty stomach, the effect would be quicker.

He closed his eyes as the liquid fire trailed down his gut. It would not hurt to tell her a little. No one would believe her. They would think she was insane.

"The white buck and I ... communicate."

The silence in the room lengthened. He could not explain everything. What good would it do? He shook his head with regret and opened his eyes. Setting his mouth in a tight line, he turned to face her once more.

She had her eyes cast down with a fist at her mouth as if holding back a sob. His heart sank like a cold, black rock on its way to the bottom of the river. But he stiffened his spine.

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He was a Hillyer and his mother had been a Stanton. He had been taught to keep up appearances—no matter what the circumstances. His feelings did not matter. Most of all, he had to be mindful of the servants. At White Buck Hall, he could be himself, but not here. Molly must learn that, too.

He held out his hand. "We will go to the dining room now. I will expect you to behave in the appropriate manner in front of the servants."

She glared at him with a mixture of anger and fear. Refusing to accept his hand, she rose slowly from the chair, but she swayed unsteadily.

With his throat too tight to speak, he scooped her into his arms,

He saw panic flicker in the back of her eyes and pain coiled inside him.

"Did you kill Silas?" she whispered.

His voice sounded rusty. "He would have killed you."

She shivered in his arms.

Molly sat opposite Thomas at the dining room table and stirred her food around with her fork. With the lump in her throat, she could not eat. She fixed her gaze on the richly carved mahogany paneling, cautiously avoiding a glance at the two stained glass windows fearing they would trigger another visionary episode.

Thankfully the other windows in the room were shuttered, which left most of the room in shadow despite the bright sunshine outside.

She struggled to keep her emotions in check and dared a glance at Thomas. In his impeccably tailored suit, he

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appeared an urban, sophisticated gentleman—so different from his usual rough woodsman's garb. Would he look magnificent or frightening in the wizard's costume she had discovered in the trunk at White Buck Hall?

His amethyst eyes met hers to catch and hold her gaze. She clenched her jaw to hold back a sob. She had married a monster, a man far worse than a sideshow circus freak. Yet no matter what he was, she loved him. And he was going to die.

"We will be accepting callers this evening." He stated it calmly, as if nothing of importance had happened between them. "There are those who wish to offer their congratulations."

"I thought you had no friends here."

"I am acquainted with a number of important business contacts in addition to some members of the metaphysical society. However, there are also a few of my parents' old friends who have a wish to see you."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Wear your prettiest gown."

There was tenderness in his look along with an almost wistful expression that threatened to melt her defenses.

"And say nothing?"

"You should encourage the other women to speak about themselves—about their darling children, or if they are young, their last ball. Let them do all the talking."

"I see."

"To avoid revealing your true identity, I will say I met you in Stony Mill which is the truth. It would be unwise to mention your former occupation or residence."

Her spirits sank lower than ever. This farce would never work. Mr. Filmont would find her anyway.

Still, she did not know if the scenes in the visions were irrevocable. She had hoped to change them, but what if her plans to fight back did not work? She mulled over the thought of leaving Thomas so that he would remain safe. However, she knew he would undoubtedly come after her. He had decided to protect her and he would keep his word even if it meant his doom.

Her morose thoughts scattered when Quinn appeared at the pantry doorway. He cleared his throat in a pronounced manner.

"What is it?" Thomas asked.

"Today's newspaper, sir."

"Leave it. I'll get to it later."

"I would suggest you read it now, sir. Especially the front page." Quinn laid the paper on the table.

Thomas took one glance and pounded the table with his fist, rattling the china and the silverware. Molly flinched.

"This is an outrage! This newspaper is dragging my name through the mud!" he thundered.

"It's hardly unusual, sir. It seems the press is especially fond of tarring and feathering you." Quinn added, "Figuratively, of course."

"I'll sue the paper! I'll sue the reporter!" Thomas roared. "It was not an unprovoked attack! Molly was thrown from the carriage. She was out cold."

The slight catch in his voice stirred Molly's heart. He did care for her—enough to have been worried about her. She fought against her reaction. Her sentiments about him did not change what he was.

"That reckless driver should be put in jail." Thomas stood, his face once more fixed into a granite mask devoid of feelings.

"Didn't you see the crest on the carriage?" Quinn asked. "It was young Oscar Filmont who rammed you, sir."

The breath in her lungs went out in a rush.

"I don't give a damn who his father is." Thomas's voice held a note of cold contempt. "He could have killed her."

Her pulse raced. She knew she had to get away. She knew Mr. Filmont would find her. She dashed to the door, but Thomas was at her side in a moment, wrapping an arm around her waist to stop her.

His tone softened, "Joseph Filmont will not know you are in town. We are mentioned in the newspaper as Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Hillyer. It was an unfortunate coincidence that his son crashed into our carriage."

She saw Quinn's mouth tilt upward at a wry angle before he made a slight bow of deference and left the room.

Trembling from head to toe, she struggled against Thomas's restraint. "His father will come here to speak to you. Then he'll realize who I am."

"You are safe." He drew her into an embrace. She heard the powerful thumping of his heart and hers echoed in response.

As he pressed her close against him, her anger and fear dissipated. His warmth started the terrible yearning deep within her and all she wanted to do was lie by his side and allow him to work his magic. He could make her forget everything with the cataclysmic power of his touch.

Why did it have to be that way? Why did her own body betray her? Why couldn't she control it?

He slid his hand down to her hip and back again, fueling her need with a deep throbbing inside.

When she dared a glance at his eyes, she saw the same hunger, one that had nothing to do with food. Whose eyes had hypnotized her? Had it been those of the white buck or Thomas's own eyes? Was he hypnotizing her right now? Did she care?

A knock came at the pocket doors that led out into the hall.

He gave a heavy sigh and released her. "Come in."

Mrs. Pilcher came bustling in. "Begging your pardon, but the optometrist will be here shortly."

"Here?" Molly asked in surprise.

Mrs. Pilcher cleared her throat. "Mr. Hillyer made the appointment."

"After a simple examination and a new pair of eyeglasses you'll be able to hit the bull's eye every time." He chuckled her under the chin and smiled, but her mind swirled with doubts. What if the doctor found something truly wrong with her

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eyes? What if the visions she saw were only the imagining of a thoroughly demented mind? What if the doctor could read that madness in her eyes? What if she was put away forever in one of those terrible homes for the insane?

"I'll stay with you," Thomas offered. He slipped his hand in hers. He dismissed Mrs. Pilcher.

She wanted to kiss him, but she found her throat so tight with emotion she could not speak. How long did they have together? How long before Mr. Filmont killed them both?

Did it matter what Thomas was—or what he could become? The union of their bodies had brought her such ineffable bliss; it seemed a treasure worth more than life itself. How many married couples experience such delight in each other's arms?

Together they walked into the reception room where she sat on one of the ornate rosewood chairs. Thomas sat beside her. She wanted to memorize every moment she had shared with him. Gazing up at him, her heart thumped so loudly, she barely heard the pounding of the heavy knocker on the front door.

But when Quinn ushered in a policeman instead of a doctor, both she and Thomas stood in surprise.

"What is the meaning of this?" Thomas asked.

"You are under arrest, sir." The policeman stated.

"What is the charge?"

"Assault and battery, sir."

Molly clutched fiercely at Thomas's hand as she watched the thunderclouds gather on his brow.

"Quinn, go fetch my lawyer." Thomas ordered.

"Right away, sir." Quinn turned and quickly left the room.

"Molly, promise me you won't leave the house."

She nodded as her eyes welled with tears.

"I should be back soon. Do not worry." He bent to bestow her with a light peck on the cheek, but she twined her hand around his neck and drew his head down so that their lips could meet. The kiss they shared blew a rush of passion through her soul. She could barely stand when he pulled back. The power of her emotions left her shaken.

For a moment, they stared at each other but she could not read the expression in his face. Then he turned and was gone. She went to the window and watched as he stepped into a bleak, black wagon. The policeman locked him inside as if he were a dangerous ruffian.

As the wagon pulled away, she felt a painful tug at her heart. What if he never came back? She could barely breathe at the thought. However, she reasoned that if he stayed in jail, he would be safe. He would not die in the woods at the base of that huge old tree.

That would prove that her visions were nothing more than the crazy imaginings of a deluded mind.

As she stared down at the street, a passerby looked up to the window and frowned at her. She stumbled back, away from the glass. What a fool she was! Anyone could have seen her, even Mr. Filmont. Wringing her hands, she sat again.

Why was Mr. Filmont's son in Philadelphia? Where was Mr. Filmont? She recalled something in those letters from her friend mentioning that Mr. Filmont had several houses. Aside from the one in New York, there was one in Newport. Was

there another in Philadelphia? She wasn't sure. She wished she still had those letters!

She jumped up when a knock came at the big front door. Her mouth went dry. Was it Mr. Filmont?

She ran from the reception room into the parlor where she hid behind an Oriental screen in the corner. After a few moments, she heard Kathleen's voice in the reception room.

"She was here a moment ago, sir. Do sit down. I'm sure the housekeeper will know where she is."

Molly covered her face. She had overreacted—like a timid rabbit afraid of its own shadow. Or like a raving lunatic who could not differentiate between reality and madness.

She sank into a heap on the floor. What had happened to her backbone? She had been a strong, capable woman managing quite well on her own. Now haunted by vivid dreams and strange images, she was as much a prisoner of her mind as Thomas was a prisoner in a jail cell bordered by steel bars.

Mr. Filmont would be pleased to know he had turned her into a quivering coward. Only yesterday, she was determined to fight in order to protect the man she loved.

Yes, she loved Thomas. She owed him a great deal and he needed her help now—no matter what he was. He did not need a wife who shied away from a knock at the door.

She drew upon the reserves of strength she knew lay hidden deep inside her. She had always been a survivor. She needed to pull herself together and defy Mr. Filmont and all those who supported him and his evil desires. She must not allow him to win.

She got up, straightened her dress, and calmly stepped from behind the screen. In the reception room, the optometrist had his back to her as he set up a chart on a stand. As she drew close, he turned. She froze. She squinted to make sure she had been mistaken, but while she had not seen him in many years, the unmistakable devilish glint in his green eyes confirmed her fears.

"Molly?" He laughed. "What a surprise. Imagine seeing you here."

"Liam Coan." She glared at him.

"Louis Cambridge. I changed my name. Being less Irish has been good for business."

"Get out of this house!" If there were anyone more inclined to turn her in for the reward money, it would certainly be him.

He crossed his arms and said, "Mr. Hillyer said you needed a pair of eyeglasses."

"And when did you become an optometrist?"

"Three years ago."

"I don't believe it."

A slow smirk tilted up one corner of his mouth before he thought to hide it with a practiced smile. "I can show you my credentials—though I am well-known here and have a favorable reputation."

Her pulse raced as fear coursed through her. She must get rid of him.

"I am sorry my husband asked you to come. He was mistaken. I do not need eyeglasses. One of the servants will see you to the door."

She turned to pull the bell to summon Kathleen, but he grabbed her arm.

"You've been nearsighted since you were five."

She bent back his thumb as Quinn had shown her and he let out a hiss of pain as he released her arm.

"My eyesight has greatly improved."

Rubbing the base of his thumb, he swore. "You bitch."

"As I suspected, your credentials haven't improved your disposition at all." She fought to quell the trembling of her body as she rang the bell.

Kathleen appeared so quickly; Molly suspected she must have been standing by and eavesdropping.

"Please see the doctor to the door."

"Yes, ma'am." Kathleen nodded.

With angry moves Liam folded his chart. Molly left the room and climbed the stairs, being careful not to look at the stained glass window. Once she was in the bedroom with the door shut, she sank into the armchair and hugged herself to try and stop the shivering.

Liam would tell Mr. Filmont and collect the reward money. Thomas could not help her. He was in jail and most likely would stay there because he had injured Mr. Filmont's son.

Mr. Filmont was a far worse fiend than Thomas.

A tear slid down her cheek. Thomas did love her—he had not said it, but she had to believe it was the truth. Her spells appeared to make him angry, but she suspected that perhaps he feared them as she herself did.

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by Penelope Marzec

He worshipped her body and gave her more joy than she had ever known. How could she let him rot in jail because of that wicked, perverted Mr. Filmont?

She stood up. She would not allow Mr. Filmont to keep Thomas locked up. She would set him free.

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Chapter Sixteen

Thomas paced back and forth in the small cell. Damn his wretched promise. Damn those fine, lofty ethics. He could flick open the lock on the cell with barely any effort at all. His fury had slowly cooled and hardened until now it was as solid as the frozen river in winter. Oscar Filmont had deserved that beating last night. He hoped he had broken the depraved fop's jaw.

He tried to focus on the problem at hand, but his mind kept returning to the fear in Molly's eyes and the taste of her kiss. To be sure, the only thing that had gone right between the two of them was their lovemaking. Otherwise, her disturbing spells and pronouncements filled him with horror. Who had discovered his secret and why had the traitor divulged the information to her?

He stopped pacing. Had she been the one following him the night the barn burned?

No. That must have been the bounty hunter. She did not have the stamina to walk that far.

Did she possess extraordinary perceptive powers? Why her? He had longed to be able to see into the future. He had tried every unblocking spell he could find—and not a single one had any effect on him.

He sat on the hard cot. Crazy thoughts and images tumbled around in his head. He stared at the blank wall but he saw Molly. Thinking of her small, perfect body with the

sweet curves filled him with a hot ache. He stood and stamped around the cell.

Where was Albert? Why was he taking so long?

Thomas wanted to get back home and take Molly to bed again.

A door opened and the jingle of keys had him rushing to the bars. Albert walked toward his cell behind the guard.

"What took you so long?" Thomas grumbled.

"Your bail has been posted at a seriously exorbitant sum." Albert did not look at him.

"How high?"

"More than the house here in Philadelphia and all its contents are worth."

"Then use my country home and land as well."

Albert winced. "I knew you would say that—so I did it, but I don't agree with it. He will ruin you. You'll have nothing left. He's buying up witnesses at the moment."

"I expected that."

"The charge is assault with intent to kill."

"What about my wife? He could have killed her!"

"The crash was an accident."

"He drove like a madman—recklessly endangering the life of everyone on the street."

"You'll have to prove it."

"Then I shall buy my own witnesses."

"You should have taken your wife to a doctor."

The ache in Thomas's heart grew. A doctor's testimony would hold more weight in court, but what if the physician discovered Molly's mental affliction. She might be placed in an

insane asylum. He could not bear to have that happen. He had promised to protect her. To send her off to one of those cruel places would be worse than death.

"I sent for an optometrist to check her vision."

Albert finally looked at him with something almost like relief. "Good. Can you get a sworn statement from the doctor that her vision has been affected?"

"I will make sure of it." Thomas cast a last glance at the cell and shivered as the jailer twisted the key in the lock. Being locked up for hours had been torture. His memories of Molly and their lovemaking had kept him sane. Had the earth moved beneath them when they made love? The exquisite bliss he had experienced when they joined made him hunger for more of the same.

An icy chill went up his spine. He had become so enamored of her he would rather die than spend the rest of his life without her. However, she was afraid of him now.

He vowed he would make it up to her—somehow.

Molly asked Vera to guide her to the jail.

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, but the only jail I know is the penitentiary and that is no place for a lady." The young maid's worried frown deepened. "A fearsome sight it is. Gives me goose bumps when I pass by. 'Tis haunted by tortured souls, driven mad inside the walls."

Molly twisted the end of her shawl and fought the tears that threatened to spill from her eyes. She had heard about the methods of the Pennsylvania System and while the torture of solitary confinement had been abandoned, the

treatment of prisoners remained barbaric. "Mr. Hillyer should not be confined to such a place. He is not a criminal."

"Mr. Quinn said Mr. Hillyer's lawyer will have him free in no time."

"It is already two hours since the police took him away."

"Yes, ma'am, but with lawyers and such I'm sure there are a great many official papers Mr. Hillyer must sign."

"You needn't go inside with me, only show me the way."

Vera's lower lip quivered. "Please, ma'am, that would make Mrs. Pilcher very angry with me. She could fire me on the spot. I have three younger brothers at home, me mum's sickly, and Da has black lung from working in the mines."

Molly rubbed her forehead. She did not want to be the cause of young Vera's dismissal, but without action the threat of Mr. Filmont would haunt her every minute. He would find her and kill her. What a blessing that Thomas had agreed to avoid the possibility of having children—for if she lived long enough to bear a child; the babe would never have a chance to know her.

Feeling lightheaded, she sank into a chair and closed her eyes. "I cannot bear to think of what my husband must be going through."

"Oh, ma'am, he'll be back soon. You'll see. Why don't you let me fix your hair in a new style I saw in Harper's Magazine? Mrs. Pilcher lets me read it whenever I've done everything properly."

Molly considered her predicament. Running off to the jail was not the wisest course of action. She should think things

through more thoroughly. Impulsiveness had gotten her into her dire circumstances in the first place.

She submitted to the eager young maid's ministrations—a luxury Molly had never experienced until now as she usually wound her hair in a simple style. Vera's nimble hands fussed with her long dark tresses, pulling, pinning, snipping, and twisting her hair into something quite becoming and fashionable. All the while, Molly mentally made up a list of possible actions she could take to insure Thomas's safety—if not her own.

The more she thought about the situation, the angrier she became. Mr. Filmont had probably had her dear friend pushed into the path of that oncoming train. The bounty hunter—with Filmont's instructions—had murdered the doctor in Stony Mill along with Jeff. Left to his own devices, the bounty hunter would have murdered her, too.

Somehow, she had to bring Mr. Filmont's perverse behavior to light—before he hurt anyone else. Turning herself in would only allow the man to continue to get away with murder. His evil deeds must be revealed to the public.

He could buy anything and anyone he wanted and if she dared to speak out against him openly, he would hire another killer. She cared little for her reputation as it was already in tatters, but she loved Thomas. Having his name dragged through the mud because of her would be unthinkable.

She set her mouth grimly. She could not sit idly by and wait for the inevitable to happen. Yes, she would still learn to fight with her limited strength. But there was more than one

way to raise questions, inform the public, and still remain anonymous.

She smiled as a wonderful idea bloomed in her mind.

Vera held up a mirror so Molly could see the intricate work in the back of her head. "Do you like it ma'am?"

"You are truly gifted. Thank you."

"My pleasure, ma'am." Vera giggled. "There'll be some jealous guests this evening. They'll be wishing they had met your before Mr. Hillyer did."

Drat! Molly had forgotten all about the evening's at home! But what she intended to do should not take long. With any luck, she would be back before anyone missed her.

She should not have much difficulty finding the way to her destination either. It was a perfectly respectable place for a secretary.

Thomas returned home famished for both food and sex. He intended to head to the kitchen first to grab a hunk of bread and a chunk of cheese before he inveigled his lovely wife into their bedroom so that he could ravish her again.

When he entered the house, he heard a commotion coming from the kitchen. A cold sweat broke out on his brow. He stopped in the pantry, from there he could look in without being seen. From his vantage point, the situation did not bode well. Quinn, Mrs. Pilcher, and Kathleen surrounded Vera, who sat sobbing on a stool.

His fear escalated as he listened to the interrogation.

"I told her the penitentiary was a horrible place and she should not go there. I told her Mr. Hillyer would be back soon and I was sure she had calmed down when I dressed her

hair." Vera swiped at her tears. "She smiled and admired the style. Kathleen saw her. Wasn't Mrs. Hillyer a vision?"

"Aye, a vision indeed. I saw her here in the kitchen, but I could tell she was up to something." Kathleen crossed her arms over her meager chest. "She looked startled when I came in, but then she poured herself a glass of milk as if that's what she had come for."

"I knew we couldn't trust that one!" Mrs. Pilcher fussed. "She was raised in the gutter I dare say. Mrs. Hillyer must be turning over in her grave."

Thomas's ire soared. He stepped into view. "You will not talk of my wife in that derogatory manner."

Mrs. Pilcher's face froze in shock while Kathleen and Vera gasped.

Quinn nodded and stepped closer. "Begging your pardon, sir, but Mrs. Hillyer appears to have left the house. We know you are concerned for her safety."

A sense of panic threatened to undo him, but he held it in check. "When did you become aware of her absence?"

"It must have been right after I caught her in the kitchen, sir." Kathleen volunteered.

Mrs. Pilcher cleared her throat; "I went looking for her soon after that, wanting to ask her preferences for the evening's refreshments. Monsieur Pierpont thought cream puffs would be a nice addition."

"I saw her upstairs immediately after Kathleen saw her in the kitchen," Vera added.

"She could have come down the back stairs when we all went up the main stairway," Quinn suggested.

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Thomas's nerves were ready to snap. He had set up a protection spell so that no evil would come in. He should have set up another so that Molly would not leave. Why hadn't she listened to him?

He tried to calm himself. Molly probably went for a walk in the park, or perhaps she decided to take a look in a few shop windows.

He drew his hands into tight fists. She was lovely and small, and there were cruel men in the world who would hurt her. Gripping the back of a chair, he knew he would strangle them all with his bare hands if they so much as messed up her hair.

He barked out commands. "Mrs. Pilcher, Kathleen, and Vera—you search the neighborhood."

"But what about this evening's gathering?" Mrs. Pilcher asked.

"There will be no at home entertainment if Mrs. Hillyer is not here. Now go! Come back in an hour to see if any of you have found her."

The women scattered. He ordered Monsieur Pierpont to forget about the cream puffs and join the women in their search. He dispatched Quinn to the park and public buildings.

Hunger no longer gnawed at his gut. Instead, fear clawed at him. He had to find Molly, but he did not know where to start. If only he could project into the future—then he would know where she had gone. But what if she was hurt or worse? What if there was nothing he could do? Could he bear it? Was that his problem all along? There would be no way to protect his heart from imminent tragedies. What if he had known of

the death of Theresa's baby—and Jeff's murder? Would he have gone crazy? Is that what was happening to Molly?

Perhaps the awful truth was that he was afraid to know what lay ahead.

He paced back and forth. If he were at White Buck Hall, it would be easier. The white buck had better hearing, an uncanny sense of smell, and could race through the woods without tiring.

But in the bustling city of Philadelphia there were too many people, too many streets, parks, and stores. Even if he had an army of searchers, the task would be impossible. If someone had forcibly taken her, she could be on a train heading in any direction.

Pain twisted around his heart, forcing him to end his constant motion. Could she be at Filmont's house? Should he go there and demand her release?

Albert had strictly ordered him to stay away from the Filmont residence. If Thomas appeared at the door, it would be construed as a reprisal and could cause a bad situation to become far worse.

"I cannot lose her!" he shouted. In desperation, he decided to try the elixir he had given to the mice. He had several vials of it which he had intended to bring to the metaphysical conference.

He ran to the library where he kept it locked in the massive desk. Quickly he pulled out two vials. Would that be enough for him? He had given the mice minute quantities in their drinking water.

He took out a third.

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He drank down each vial quickly. With his stomach empty, the elixir would be absorbed rapidly into his system. He took the vials into the kitchen, washed them, and then went back to the library to lock them away.

By that time, the elixir started to affect him. Lightheaded, with his hands shaking, he stepped out into the hall. With an effort, he held the wand with both hands and lifted it over his head.

"I want to know! Tell me!" A thin, jagged bolt of lightning rattled the Moorish-style brass fixture above his head and he glanced up at it. The shining metal reflected sharp glints of bright red, which he realized, emanated from the huge stained glass window on the stair landing above him. He turned his gaze to focus on two scarlet areas of shining glass. His eyes stung with the intensity of the light. It seemed unnatural for he remembered that at this time of the day, the sun's ray did not hit that window directly as it did in the morning.

But suddenly, he could not look away. His body locked in one position and alarm took hold of him. He no longer saw two circles of colored glass, he saw the unholy stare of the white buck boring into his soul.

A great whirl of energy swept through him, as though the very life was being sucked out of him and he could not stop it. He remained powerless, held rigidly in place by the force of that red stare.

Then suddenly, he was no longer in the hallway. He was in a grimy office where a man he did not know glared across his

desk. A large black typewriter occupied the desk along with scattered papers.

"That's libel and defamation of character." The man rolled up his shirtsleeves. "This newspaper would be sued and I would lose my job!"

"But it's true." Molly sat demurely in a chair in front of the man's desk twisting the hands in her lap. "Every word I told you is a fact."

Thomas stared at her. She was safe. However, no emotions rushed through him. Apparently, he had become a disembodied spirit. Had he died in the hallway? He didn't care. He felt no sadness. Molly was safe—for now. That was all that mattered.

"I have letters from my friend. She told me what he had done. The baby she carried was his. She didn't want him to marry her, she only wanted support for the baby and herself."

"So she blackmailed him."

"No! You keep twisting my words!"

"You have no proof that she was murdered."

"She would not have killed herself and her child!"

"The police believe she did. I'm not a policeman. I'm a reporter. I don't make up stories. I write down the facts."

"Joseph Filmont is a wicked man with a soul as black as coal."

"Last week, he gave a magnanimous sum to the orphanage."

"To assuage his conscience, I'm sure."

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"Madam, I've got a deadline and you're giving me a headache. If I wanted an argument, I'd go home to my own wife."

Molly stood up. "This could be the most important story you will ever write."

"Out!" The man stood up and moved to the door.

Suddenly, Thomas knew exactly what she wanted to do—as if he could read her mind but he had no voice and could not tell her to stop.

A grayish haze swallowed up the scene before he blacked out and saw no more.

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Chapter Seventeen

"He's a coward." Molly muttered as she hurried back to the house on Locust. How could that reporter be such a dunderhead? She had been so angry that she considered telling that man exactly who she was, and all that had happened to her due to Mr. Filmont. But something stopped her. It had been as if a cold hand had squeezed her heart, or someone had walked over her grave. Utterly chilled she had run from the office.

It would have been a foolish thing to do. As a fugitive, she would have been locked up immediately.

A block away from the newspaper building, she leaned against a tree to catch her breath. The city seemed to tilt on an axis. She wiped at the sheen of cold sweat from her brow. Her heart rate slowed but the chill inside her persisted. A pall settled on her as her bright hope was dashed. Yes, she had believed she could sway the opinion of the public against Mr. Filmont by telling the story of her dear friend.

She considered the fact that the reporter had a wife. He probably had children, too. Dealing with Mr. Filmont was dangerous. The reporter wanted to save his own hide. She really could not fault him for that.

Perhaps if she had gone to another newspaper, one where the reporters had fewer scruples.

She took a deep breath and resumed walking. She had a terrible urge to go faster but her new shoes hurt her feet. She

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worried that someone may have missed her. What if Thomas had come home and found she was not there to greet him?

Grief edged into her soul. She had caused him so much trouble. He had foolishly believed he could protect her, but he wound up becoming entwined in Filmont's web, too. What could she do other than turn herself in? Could she change fate? She had enjoyed inexpressible bliss in Thomas's arms and she could not bear to have that taken away from her.

Even if he was the white buck.

She shivered as she wondered how he transformed himself. Had he concocted some potion in his laboratory?

Church bells tolled the hour as she turned onto Locust Street. She had been gone longer than she originally anticipated. The glow of lamplight warmed the windows of the other houses she passed but as Thomas's house came into view, she noticed no light spilling out onto the sidewalk. The chill in her heart turned to ice.

She hurried up the steps and turned the doorknob. It had been left unlocked. Stepping into the entry hall, she found it dark and cold.

"Quinn?" she called out. "Mrs. Pilcher? Vera?" Her fear escalated as she stood in the darkened hall. The house seemed as empty as a tomb.

When a low moan echoed in the hall, she jumped.

"Did you ... tell him?" It was Thomas!

Groping in the darkness, she stumbled upon him lying on the floor. She got down on her knees and touched him with trembling hands. "What is the matter?"

He moaned again. She could see nothing.

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"Are you bleeding? Have you fallen?" She got no response. She went to the fireplace and found a live coal. Within moments she had the soft light of a candle beside her as she gently pushed back his hair and felt for his pulse. His eyes were closed and deep hollows lay beneath them.

"That office," he whispered. "The newspaper reporter"

She froze. He could not know that. "You must be delirious. What did they do to you in that horrible jail?" His forehead was cool to her touch. She looked for bumps on his head and found none.

"Did you tell him?" His hand gripped her arm and squeezed. He had never hurt her but now his firm grasp frightened her.

"No! No, I ... I felt ... I got scared and I left."

His hand fell limply to the floor. "Good."

"Where is everyone?"

"Looking for you."

Her throat ached as tears welled in her eyes. Once again, she had been the cause of chaos. "But why did they leave you? What is wrong with you?"

"Get the bourbon."

She dashed away a lone tear with the back of her hand. Taking the candle with her, she stumbled into the library. After lighting one of the lamps in the room, she located the liquor in the cabinet. Her hands shook as she poured a generous amount into a glass.

She returned to him and knelt down once more. Setting the glass down beside the candle, she struggled to help him into a sitting position. As he leaned against the bottom stair,

she handed him the glass. He drank the bourbon down in one long swallow.

"Please, more coal." He pointed to the fireplace.

She hurriedly poked at the grate and added more coal from the scuttle. Then she lit another candle on the mantelpiece. By the time she finished, he had managed to get to his feet. He clung to the newel post.

"They should be back any moment. You will explain that you went shopping to buy me a gift to lift my spirits—a book."

Pain flickered inside her. He would keep up appearances—keep everyone in the dark, including her. The distance between them widened. "W-which one?"

"The Red Badge of Courage, by Stephen Crane. It is there on the table. Alfred, my lawyer, recommended it to me."

She lifted the small, tan-colored volume.

"You shall wrap it and make a show of presenting it to me this evening."

"But you are not well." She choked on her words. "We cannot have a ... a party."

"We will not disappoint our friends." Stiffly, he moved toward the back of the house, but when she moved to take his arm he turned, giving her a fierce glare. "I can manage on my own."

The contempt in his tone warned her away. His amethyst eyes glowed in the candlelight and her soul shriveled beneath the glare.

"I ... I am sorry. I know I have caused—"

"Go upstairs and change for this evening. Mrs. Pilcher should be in shortly to pick out a suitable gown for you."

She swallowed the sob in her throat. "I am not a child. I can pick out a gown by myself."

"You do not know what is appropriate."

Hurt and torment gnawed inside her. "I know what I like." She clenched her teeth together and dared him to defy her. Taking the candle with her, she went up the stairs. When she reached the second floor, she heard the front door open. The chatter from Mrs. Pilcher, the maids and the deeper tones of male voices echoed upwards, but Thomas's resonant remarks carried over the din. She heard him quickly dispatch them to their tasks and ordered a tray of food to be brought to him in the library.

She forced herself to calm down, but like the pain from an open wound, her doubts and fears refused to leave her. Why wouldn't he tell her what had happened?

A knot formed in her stomach. Her brief taste of paradise had left her hungering for more. But she should have remembered who and what she was. There could be no happiness for her.

Molly chose a yellow gown in the hope that the color would buoy her through the evening. It was the color of daffodils, dandelions, and bright sunshine—all things that would normally bring a smile to her face, but not tonight. While the dress featured a daringly low neckline, the long sleeves would help to ward off any draughts. With elegant lines that must have been copied from a famous designer, the heavy silk fell straight from the waist to the floor where small pleats bordered the hem.

She summoned Vera to fasten the back of the gown.

"Ma'am, if I had known you wanted to get a gift for Mr. Hillyer—"

"It was something I had to choose myself." The words tasted like dust in her mouth, but Molly pasted on a smile.

"But you gave us such a scare, ma'am. I could barely search for you with the tears rolling out of my eyes." Vera sniffed.

The sharp edge of grief stabbed her, but she clamped her lips together to imprison a sob.

"Mr. Hillyer himself was in a state. If you could have seen him!" Vera tucked in some of the errant strands of Molly's hair. "I suppose it must have been terrible being hauled off to prison, but when he came home and found you were gone ... well ... he roared like a beast so that even Mrs. Pilcher thought of giving him notice."

Molly twisted her hands in her lap. Thomas must have suffered terribly and certainly she had given him a fright, but finding him almost senseless on the floor in the hall had shocked her to the core. Why couldn't he tell her what was wrong?

Had he seen Joseph Filmont? Had the wicked man threatened him? She shivered.

"Are you cold, ma'am?"

"No, I'm fine. Is there any wrapping paper in the house?"

While Vera went off to search for the paper, Molly considered all that had happened to her since that fateful night in Mr. Filmont's home—fleeing her own home, starving for weeks, finding that ad in the newspaper, facing the great

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white buck, fearing the hunter would kill her and then suffering at the hands of the bounty hunter.

She had endured frightening visions, a horrible carriage accident, and now her husband had some strange illness.

Would her troubles never end?

Vera brought the wrapping paper and ribbon and offered to wrap the book, but Molly insisted on doing it herself. Vera left her to the task, but before she left the room she reminded her of the imminent arrival of their guests.

"They are due at nine, Mrs. Pilcher said, though some of them may arrive considerably later, ma'am. As late as ten."

Molly dreaded the ridiculous event. How was she going to pretend that everything was wonderful?

She focused on bending the paper around the book. Hard and stiff, the paper was festooned with a winter design of evergreens; it hardly seemed appropriate for the promise of springtime. Undoubtedly, it had been left from Christmas. Tracing the image of the evergreens with her finger, she thought of the strange circle of evergreens in the woods she had seen in her vision.

Perhaps Thomas suffered because of the duality of his nature. Perhaps he could only endure being human for a set amount of time and if he could not change into the white buck, he became ill. He had stated how he enjoyed the freedom of White Buck Hall. It could be torture for him to walk on two feet.

She remembered the way the white buck bounded off through the woods with ease and grace. Despite his size, it seemed as if he weighed little—as if he flew.

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She heard the door of the room open and turned to see Thomas walk in. Her pulse quickened though she continued wrapping the book, pretending not to be affected by him.

"As our guests arrive, you will sit near the door in the parlor and rise from your seat to receive them and their congratulations."

She nodded as she looped the ribbon around the book.

"You will suggest Charades for the evening's amusement."

She allowed herself to give him a quick glance and detected a flicker of some unfathomable emotion in his amethyst eyes. She could not prevent the warmth flooding through her and fumbled when she attempted to make a bow.

He moved closer to place his finger at the base of the ribbon's knot.

Her breast tingled against the silken bodice of her dress. She could feel his breath on her cheek, the heat radiating from his body, and smell his musky scent. She circled the ribbon around one loop and then pulled tightly. He lifted his finger away before it was caught.

Tension crackled between them. She barely breathed.

"The guests will begin arriving in a quarter of an hour." In one fluid movement, he took off his jacket, tossed it on the bed, and hurried to his dressing room.

For a moment, she stood still as the wet honey flowed from her soft inner folds. Then she picked up his jacket and followed him into the dressing room.

As she entered, he stepped out of his pants with his cock brazenly erect.

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"You should not leave your clothes lying on the bed." She tossed the jacket on a chair.

A guttural curse was his only response before he drew her to him and plundered her mouth with his tongue. Her hunger for him cast off all the fright, anger, and despair of the day. Time stopped and she cared nothing about what was to come. She clung to his sweat-slicked body as he hastily unfastened her gown. She stepped out of it and left it in a puddle on the floor. He untied her taffeta petticoat and she kicked it aside, grateful she had donned only that one petticoat. But there was still her corset and the French drawers.

Her fingers could not work fast enough and she grumbled in frustration.

"Leave it." He knelt down and gently pushed aside the slit in her French drawers. The heat from his lips took in her clit and suckled it until she thought she would scream. Her legs shook and then buckled. He caught her, cradling her buttocks in his massive hands. He lifted her above his erection so his cock could tease and torment her as he slid it just beneath her tender entrance.

Then he lowered her to the chair for a minute as he rolled on a condom. After that, he lifted her in one smooth motion and leaned her back against the wall.

"You have bewitched me." His amethyst eyes bored into hers.

"It is you who have me under your spell."

"This is not sorcery—only madness."

She did not care. She was obsessed with the slick sweat on his skin and the musky taste in his mouth as he devoured her

lips. Gently, he held her steady as he slid into her. She moaned with the sweet pleasure of his heat as he thrust in and out with deliberate leisure. She wanted to hold him inside her forever and squeezed her muscles tightly around his hot member but her action only served to force his thrusts to come faster and faster. He pulled out and drove in deeper until her world fractured into a thousand sparks of heat igniting in her dark sweet honey.

She clung to him, smoothing her hands along his powerful shoulders and down his pale arms. "Take me again."

"We should not be late." He released her and she slid to the floor.

"Let them wait." She pulled off the condom and lavished his cock with her tongue until once again he was hard and ready.

He unfastened her corset. She dropped her French drawers. He carried her to their bed.

"You have destroyed my sense of propriety," he murmured as he slid into her once more.

"Then let us be reprobates together," she whispered as the tempo of their love thundered in her veins.

Thomas strolled down the stairs with Molly three quarters of an hour past nine. He could not keep his eyes from her for long. Her lips, swollen from his kisses, blazed with color and her cheeks bore the flush of a woman sated by an evening of passion.

When they entered the parlor, their guests' knowing smiles fed Thomas's pride. His little Molly clung to him as he introduced her to friends and neighbors. They feasted on

Monsieur Piermont's cream puffs and other dainties before playing Charades. Afterwards, Molly presented him with her gift.

"My dearest husband"

He did not expect to see the tears brimming in her eyes and his heart twisted. He thought their lovemaking would help her to forget the pain haunting her past.

"This is such a small token of my affection," she went on. "It cannot begin to represent all the love I hold for you in my heart."

None of the guests made a single sound. He wondered if they had all stopped breathing. Everyone waited expectantly for him to reply, but he did not know what to say. He did not want to make her tears fall.

He gave her a brief peck on the cheek. However, a strange sensation shimmered through him when his lips touched her smooth skin. He closed his eyes for the slightest fraction of a second and it was as if he were looking down from the ceiling on Molly and himself.

Startled, he quickly opened his eyes and was relieved to find he stood quite solidly on the floor next to his lovely wife. Fear chilled him. Was this an after effect of the elixir?

The edge of panic threatened but he fought it with plausible explanations. He had a harrowing day. He was exhausted. Perhaps, he had fallen when he passed out and hit his head.

Midnight drew on and the guests slowly departed. He began to worry because Rafe had never arrived. He

questioned Quinn and Mrs. Pilcher, but nobody had received any word or even a note from Rafe.

"He may have decided to wait one more day," Molly suggested. "Perhaps he was feeling ill."

"He would have sent word." His head began to throb. "He had planned to arrive well before dark. Rafe is always prompt."

After the last of the guests stepped out into the chill evening, Thomas put on his coat. "I'm going to the station. I will find out if there have been any unusual delays."

"It is late and you are tired. Please, wait until morning."

Her eyes, dark and inviting, mirrored his own. A ripple went through him and he sensed her fear. Her hand on his arm had no more weight than a feather, but—again—that wispy touch made him lightheaded.

Perhaps he *had* suffered a concussion. He rubbed his head, but he did not find any bumps, though his headache grew worse.

"I must go. Something is wrong." He could not explain how he knew it. Yet, he could not deny this feeling.

"I will go with you." The steel in her voice warned him. If he forbid her to accompany him, she would do it anyway and the truth was that he did not want to be away from her. Not for an hour. Not for a minute. The once tenuous thread between them had grown into a steel cable. Without her beside him, his anxiety for her safety would not allow him to think straight.

The old piano box buggy was brought round and they set off to the station. Once there, they inquired about the trains,

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but they were told that everything was on schedule—no trains had been delayed and no accidents had occurred.

Thomas sent a telegram to White Buck Hall, but there was little else he could do.

Driving back to Locust Street, Molly leaned against him and began to doze. The streets by that hour were relatively quiet and peaceful, but he hardly paid any attention to his route. He trusted that the horse knew the way back to her stall and the promise of more oats.

Thomas's mind kept whirling around in circles while icy steel clamped at his heart. Where was Rafe? Was he ill? Had he been waylaid by thieves—or worse? Was there some way he could locate Rafe?

Thomas thought he had seen Molly in that office. Had that been a dream or a vision? Or a hallucination? Or had his soul somehow been transported?

Was it possible that he had finally attained his elusive goal? Was he now as powerful a wizard as Averill had been?

Anxiety churned through him. Achieving a higher level of power meant little if he could not help his friend. Where was Rafe? Was he safe?

Could he transport his mind to wherever Rafe was now? He shut his eyes and tried to picture the white buck—tried to picture the chilling ruby eyes—in his mind he focused on those eyes until the darkness began to swirl about him.

The horse whinnied and trotted faster. Thomas opened his eyes. The house had come into view. He tenderly shook Molly as he pulled up to the curb.

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She yawned. "Sorry I wasn't good company."

He stepped down from the buggy, secured the reins to the post, and went to hand Molly down from her seat.

As he tilted his head up, the nearby gaslight stung his eyes. Strange, for the soft glow usually did not bother him. He rubbed his eyes, but suddenly swayed with dizziness. Grabbing a hold on the wheel, he steadied himself.

"Are you feeling all right?" Molly asked.

"I am tired, that's all." He let go of the wheel and reached out for her.

"Your eyes!" she gasped and shrank away from him. "Your eyes are red!"

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Chapter Eighteen

Molly's throat closed up and she covered her face. She could not look at him! How could his eyes change color like that? Something was terribly wrong! Was she seeing things that weren't there?

Or was he turning into the white buck?

His strangled moan drew her attention and she watched in horror as he slowly collapsed onto the street. Lifting her skirts, she jumped out of the carriage.

"Thomas! Can you hear me?" She patted his cheek, but he did not respond. Terror raced through her while her body turned as cold as ice.

In a moment, Quinn was beside her. When he could not rouse Thomas, Monsieur Pierpont joined him and they carried Thomas into the house to settle him next to the fireplace in the library.

Despite the hour, the house was soon ablaze with lights. Someone went off to fetch the doctor. Molly sat on the footstool and held one of Thomas's icy hands. It was as numb as her heart. Thomas had unlocked her soul, but now he lay unconscious and barely breathing. Her mind floundered in misery. Had she really seen his eyes change color? She had been half asleep—maybe she was dreaming.

"Thomas, please wake up," she called softly. She forced herself to swallow her despair.

Mrs. Pilcher set a tray down on the table. "Here's a bit of tea for you to keep up your strength. No telling how long the

doctor will take." She dabbed at her eyes with a lace-edged handkerchief. "He was a sickly child, you know. Frightened his poor mother half to death when he had scarlet fever. He did pull through but it took him a long time to recover. The illness could have damaged his heart. That's what the doctor said."

Molly closed her eyes. "It's not his heart."

"He was in that fight," Mrs. Pilcher reminded. "A few weeks ago a man received a blow to the heart in a boxing match and died afterwards."

"Mr. Hillyer trounced his opponent." Molly wished Mrs. Pilcher would leave her alone.

"A gentleman should not be fighting in the streets. His mother would be appalled."

"His mother is dead." Molly opened her eyes. "Thank you for the tea, but please leave us."

"As you wish, ma'am." Mrs. Pilcher sniffed and bustled out of the library, her taffeta petticoats swishing.

Molly brushed a stray hair from Thomas's brow. "I love you. Do not leave me." One of her tears fell on his cheek. She wiped away the dampness and thought she saw a movement beneath his thin-veined eyelids. Could he be dreaming?

Hope surged through her. She remembered watching her little brother dream. Emil's eyelids would twitch, and sometimes he would wake up in the midst of a nightmare and call for her.

"Are you dreaming, Thomas? Please, please wake up."

His lips moved. She bent closer to hear, but his mumbles made no sense.

"Say that again. I did not hear you."

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He did not answer, but his eyelids twitched again.

Her heart thundered and a cold sheen dampened her skin. "You must wake up and tell me what is wrong, Thomas. You are here, in the library, in the house on Locust Street—"

"Rafe—danger," he whispered.

"W-where?"

"Dark."

He went still again—as still as death. She laid her head on his chest, but she could not hear the beat of his heart. Anguish reduced her to bitter tears. What joys they had shared had been far too fleeting. Nothing but empty misery awaited her in life. She wanted to join him—no matter where.

What of the visions she had? Had her soul traveled during those incidents? Could she join his soul by entering one of those strange episodes? Would he be waiting for her?

She lifted her head. She had had a vision in this very room when the ornate brass clock had caught her gaze. She glanced up and heard it softly chiming the hour as firelight danced on the elaborate decorative whorls at each side. Focusing on those two embellishments, she squinted until her eyes smarted, but finally she saw the glowing ruby eyes of the white buck. An electric snap of power coursed through her, but this time she welcomed it and held on.

She soon found herself staring at an image of the burned out remains of the hunter's cabin in the darkened woods. The edges of her vision were hazy, as though what she viewed was framed in a fog—but the center was clear. It was a living picture as well. She could hear sounds and smell the earthy aromas of spring, the damp rich humus and the delicate,

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sweet perfume of blossoming trees—and, of course, the scent of the pines. The odor of charred wood lingered in the air, too, but bathed in the pale moonlight, all looked peaceful.

But where was Thomas? How could she find him? Why did she only see the remains of the cabin? Because of the trauma she had suffered there at the hands of the bounty hunter? Or was Thomas somewhere close by? A deep hush blanketed the area so completely she did not hear so much as a leaf rustle.

After a few minutes, the woods began to stir with life and she could detect every quick movement as animals scampered from one hiding place to another. High up in a tree, an owl swooped down to grab a mouse in its talons. The cry of the mouse echoed plaintively as it was carried off. The unhappy end of the defenseless creature filled her own soul with sorrow. Life was like that. The small and weak were always at risk. They had few champions in the world and few mourned their passing.

She became aware of the sound of odd, uneven breathing—like that of someone who had dozed off in an uncomfortable position. It brought to mind her father in his last days. He would try to sleep—if only for a little while, but no matter which way he laid, the pain would get the better of him and rouse him from his fitful dreams.

The sound emanated from the cabin. How could that be? There was nobody there. All that was left of the ruin was one charred post, which still stood upright. That post had held up the corner of the porch.

She peered intently at the scene wondering whether Thomas was nearby. She tried to call out his name, but

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discovered she could not. She could view the panorama, hear all that went on around her, but she was unable to interact. It was as if she was viewing the Vitascope, one of Edison's inventions.

Was this hell? Had she made a grave mistake in hoping to join Thomas?

Her miserable thoughts were interrupted by pain as she was suddenly thrust back into the land of the living. Light, noise, icy cold, and the pungent odor of ammonia assaulted her senses.

"Mrs. Hillyer! Wake up, now!"

She shoved the smelling salts away, but the bright light was out of her reach. Someone had plopped a chilled cloth on her head. She pulled it off.

"There! I knew I could rouse you from your stupor." Mrs. Pilcher crowed triumphantly. "The doctor thought we should simply leave you here to sleep, but the day is half begun."

"Where is Thomas?"

"Your husband's going to be all right." Mrs. Pilcher twittered. "The doctor said it was exhaustion coupled with nervousness."

Molly opened one eye and peered about the room. She lay on the lounge where Thomas had been. "Where is he?"

"Mr. Hillyer went to the train station. There was a telegram from White Buck Hall. Nobody has seen Mr. Lucchini. I believe Mr. Hillyer is going to organize a search."

Molly bolted upright, but her head spun as a shaft of pain cut through the back of her neck. She took a deep breath and

rubbed away the ache. "But Thomas—he was as still as death. I couldn't hear his heartbeat."

"Nonsense!" Mrs. Pilcher sniffed. "He was awake before the doctor arrived and in a rare mood again I dare say. He wouldn't let the doctor touch him."

"But why did he leave me?"

Mrs. Pilcher clicked her tongue. "You were out cold. Of course, I knew I could wake you up all right, but the doctor wouldn't hear of it. But here it is, nearly ten o'clock and you've not eaten a thing."

"Ten! When did he leave?"

"About eight, I suppose. Would you like a tray to be brought here? Or would you prefer the dining room."

Molly clenched her teeth together. "I'm going to follow my husband."

"Mr. Hillyer gave strict orders that you are to stay put. You'll not be escaping this time." Mrs. Pilcher wagged her finger.

The fuse on Molly's temper sparked a power keg. "I will not be treated like a prisoner!"

Mrs. Pilcher gasped. "You have been treated like a princess."

"Perhaps that is the problem." Molly took a deep breath and fought for calm. She had to hurry. Thomas had a head start. "You see, I never was a princess and I am certainly not used to being treated like one. I have been a rather independent woman. So you'll simply have to forgive me for my unconventional ways. It's all I'm used to."

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Mrs. Pilcher puffed up her chest. "Orders are orders and I've been with the family for a very long time. Mr. Hillyer expressly stated that you are to remain in this house at all times. He placed a special protection spell at every door so you cannot use them."

Molly glared at her. "Then I guess I'll have to climb out the window."

"Never!"

Thomas glanced back at the last seat in the railroad car where a man pretended to doze. Though that man had kept to himself during the trip and had not talked to anyone else, he stood out due to his sombrero-style hat, double-breasted Prince Albert coat, and opera cowboy boots. The boots were exceptionally fine with fancy stitching front and back along with two-inch heels. However, even with the heels the man was a good six inches shorter than Thomas.

The train was filled with farmers and their families. To be inconspicuous, the thug should have dressed like everyone else. However, Thomas was grateful for the lout's lack of subtlety. He did not intend to give the man an opportunity to shoot him in the back.

When he had passed out, he had some sort of vision—and he had seen Rafe, bound and gagged. He did not have the time to debate with himself whether or not he believed the illusion. He had to save Rafe—though he sensed that his friend was merely bait.

Thomas carried Silas' old six-shooter, but it did not boost his confidence. He continued to stare at the boot-licker sitting so comfortably in the last seat, but all he could think about

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was Molly. He had seen her face filled with terror. Had his eyes turned red before he passed out? Was it merely the angle of the light? Had she imagined it? When he awoke, his eyes were the same lavender shade as usual.

Did she think he could turn into the white buck right before her eyes? It felt as if he had a metal band around his chest. He fingered the crystal at his neck and his heart twisted inside him. He had never wanted to frighten Molly. He wanted to protect her. He loved her.

The revelation came at him like a thunderstorm, drenching him with a deluge of emotion. He could still taste the sweetness of her lips on his. When he left her, it felt like he had ripped off one of his own limbs. However, what else could he do? She had passed out again and he had no time to waste if what he had seen in his vision was accurate. A terrible sense of urgency had taken hold of him. Rafe was in grave danger.

At any rate, Molly would be safer in Philadelphia. In Stony Mill, anything could happen. The rules were different in the woods. The best shots with the biggest guns made their own laws.

Before he left the city, he had sent a telegram to White Buck Hall with orders to get more help and set up search parties. Evidently, Rafe had never set foot on the train. He had disappeared somewhere between White Buck Hall and the Stony Mill station, which might mean that some disgruntled Stony Mill citizen had seized Rafe.

So then why was Thomas being followed? Was the man tailing him one of Filmont's minions. Was Filmont afraid that

he wouldn't show up for a trial? Or was he there to complete Filmont's justice as the bounty hunter had been sent to get Filmont's revenge upon Molly.

Thomas glanced out the window. In about three miles, the train would arrive in Stony Mill, but the secluded grove in the woods was only two miles away from where the train was now.

He walked toward the back of the car, passing the thug. He restrained himself from kicking the shiny boots with the fancy stitching front and back. When he entered the next railroad car, he was dismayed to find a whole passel of boisterous children running up and down the aisle. Their parents and the conductor had given up trying to contain them.

However, the moment they saw him, they stopped running and stared.

"That there's an albino," one of the adults called out. "You know what they say about albinos. They make little children into stew."

The children ran to their parents in fear.

Thomas pressed his lips together. It was one of the few times his coloring proved a blessing and it gave him an opportunity—of sorts. He pulled out his wand and an audible gasp rose up. With a few strokes he wound a protection shield about himself. Then he aimed the wand at the floor and a puff of smoke appeared. When it cleared, a snake slithered on the floor of the railroad car. Shrieks pierced the air. Women fainted. Someone took out his gun and shot at the snake—but he missed.

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Thomas ran to the last car of the train. The bend around the creek was coming up fast. He leaned over the railing and watched as the scenery rolled by until the train slowed to negotiate the sharp turn.

Casting a glance over his shoulder, he saw the stalker struggling to make his way through the mayhem. A sudden lurch threw everyone to one side as the train rounded the bend. Thomas gripped the handrail, crouched down and spotted the white sand on one portion of the embankment up ahead.

The metal wheels screeched against the rails. The railroad cars straightened as the train pulled beyond the curve. Taking one huge breath, he let go and jumped.

He hit the sand and rolled. Though the impact took the breath out of his lungs, he knew he better keep moving. Scrambling to his feet, he headed for the tree line about one hundred yards away.

The first bullet plowed into the ground in front of him. The second bullet whizzed past above his head. He didn't pay much attention to the third bullet because he directed his focus on the shelter of the trees. He was nearly there, pumping his legs for all he was worth, and feeling as if his lungs would burst.

The train pulled further away. Bullet number four hit the ground on his right.

Bullet number five sliced into his upper right arm.

Hell. He must have been a little off in his calculations.

The pain seared him as if he had been branded, but he did not stop moving. He reached the shadowed woods and

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slumped down behind the foot of a gnarled old oak. Bullet number six hit the tree.

He peeled off his coat and examined the wound. He did not have a bullet lodged in his arm, he had only been grazed, but he needed to stop the bleeding.

And he had to get to White Buck Hall before the oaf reloaded his six-shooter and showed up at the door.

He pressed hard against the wound. He remembered Molly making a fruitless attempt to staunch the wound on the white buck's flank with her dainty, lace handkerchief. He wished he had her here beside him now. She could kiss away the burning ache.

He groaned and shut his eyes. If she were here, she would be in danger. It was bad enough that some crazy miscreant was on his tail. It was worse that Rafe was missing. He did not need anything else to worry about.

He opened his eyes and struggled to his feet. He had to hurry.

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Chapter Nineteen

There were two trains a day from Philadelphia to Stony Mill, and the trains were six hours apart. Evening was coming on as Molly stepped off the train at the Stony Mill station with Quinn beside her. He had insisted on accompanying her and she had been furious at first until she discovered they had been followed.

"There are two of them." Quinn whispered. His hand rested on the gun in the holster on his hip.

Molly did not turn her head or change her pace. "Can you see their faces?"

"No. But they are too well-dressed to be farmers. They have rifles."

Molly's breath hitched up in her throat. She intended to hire a carriage from the livery stable at the end of the street. She knew better than to walk in the woods, this time.

"Aha," Quinn spoke softly. "They have been met by another rogue with a sombrero, cowboy boots, and a Prince Albert coat. Quite a dandy, that one."

"Let's stop at the inn." The dingy windows of the inn might allow her to see her pursuers without being seen by them.

"I'm sure the windows of the inn have not been washed since the last time I was there."

The innkeeper did not appear when they stepped inside. Molly sat at the table by the window—which was as dirty as ever—and looked out at the depot. Quinn set down the bags and joined her. There were no other customers.

"The one in the fedora must in command," Quinn explained.

Dread pressed down on Molly, but she kept her fears to herself. She must see Thomas again—to let him know she would accept him no matter what. She did not care if his eyes were red, or if he was the white buck. She loved him with all her heart and soul. Nothing could change that fact.

She would bear his children, too. She bit her lip to hold back a sob.

The men walked down the street toward the livery stable.

The innkeeper entered the room from the backdoor. He barely nodded his head in greeting. "What do you want?"

"We needed to rest awhile," she said.

"Then you'll be ordering something to eat or drink."

"Seems there're a lot of people getting off the train here. Far more than usual," she noted.

"I didn't see nothing out of the ordinary and I don't have time to jabber."

"The last time I was here, you had plenty of time to talk." She stood. "But since you're so busy, we'll be on our way. Good day."

Quinn lifted up the bags and followed her out of the inn. "Rather unpleasant fellow."

"He's better at fairy tales," she muttered. How much had the innkeeper known about the bounty hunter? The innkeeper had talked openly while the bounty hunter sat there and listened to every word. Had the bounty hunter paid him for information?

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Would the bounty hunter have abducted her that night if Silas had not been hunting for the white buck?

Just thinking about the horrible incident with the bounty hunter set her stomach churning. Why had she had a vision of the burnt cabin? Was her conscience haunting her? And why should it? He would have killed her.

Molly and Quinn arrived at the livery stable without seeing the strange trio of men. After Molly rented an old, battered delivery wagon hitched to an equally ancient nag, Quinn took the reins and they headed toward White Buck Hall along the main road. She kept turning around to see if they were being followed, but with night coming on, she could see very little.

"What if that one man with the sombrero has already been to White Buck Hall? What if the whole place has burned to the ground?"

"We would have smelled smoke by now."

"What if all the angry townsfolk stormed the mansion and murdered everyone inside?"

"Thomas would not leave it unguarded."

"But once, when I first arrived at White Buck Hall, I saw a whole mob of angry townsfolk clamoring on the front lawn. One of them shot out a window."

"Deplorable manners. Country folk are so uncivilized."

"They have guns!"

"So do I. Calm yourself, Madam, we shall arrive soon."

His words did not make her feel any better. Could Rafe have been seized so someone could capture Thomas? The thought had occurred to her as she nodded off on the train. If it were true, Thomas could be in terrible trouble. Or dead.

Her apprehension grew until she almost wished she had taken the path through the woods, which was indeed a much shorter route.

She twisted her handkerchief into so many knots that the fabric began to fray. Impulsively, she turned around once more and saw nothing behind them but the billowing dust left by the wagon wheels.

That's when the loud crack of a rifle blast sounded close by. She screamed as Quinn made an odd noise in his throat and slumped to the side, falling out of the seat and onto the ground. The horse whinnied and reared up to paw the air with its hooves.

She jumped out of the wagon and shook Quinn but he did not move. His face lay in the dirt. She turned him over and touched the dark wetness on his chest.

Blood. Lots of blood.

She felt for a pulse but could not find it.

Bile rose in her throat and she thought she would heave up the contents of her stomach. With her head spinning, she turned, took in a deep gulp of the night air through her mouth and forced herself to think. Yes, she was at the gunman's mercy, but she must keep moving. She must see Thomas, if only one last time.

She slid the gun from Quinn's holster and tucked it into the waistband of her skirt. The weapon was heavy and loaded. She prayed she would not set it off inadvertently. With her heartbeat thundering, she slowly turned around. Trees lined both sides of the road. The killer might be only a few yards away.

And without her glasses, she could barely see a thing.

Clouds gathered above, blocking any light from the moon. It occurred to her that the bullet might have been meant for her. With her hands shaking badly, she groped in the dark for the horse's reins. When she found them, she gathered them up and climbed back into the wagon as silently as she could.

Hysteria bubbled up inside her. She had never driven a wagon, but she gave the reins a shake and the horse moved forward—slowly. The wheels squeaked and she held her breath, expecting it to be cut off at any moment by the impact of a bullet.

The old nag lumbered along. Molly leaned forward and slapped it on the rear. The horse snorted and trotted a bit faster, but any man could run faster.

A sob welled up inside, but she clamped her lips tightly together. She could not break down now. She slapped the horse's rump harder—over and over again until the dull-witted animal finally got the message and set off at a faster clip. The movement of the wagon as it bounced into the ruts of the road had Molly holding onto the armrest with one hand for fear she would be thrown onto the road. With her other hand she clutched both reins but she kept them slack, hoping the horse had better eyesight than she did.

She heard nothing but the rhythmic beat of the horse's hooves and the pounding of her own heart. Surrounded by the vast gloom of the woods, she shivered. Somewhere in the darkness, the killer had reloaded his rifle.

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The horse slowed down. Molly slapped its rump again but it responded by kicking the wagon. Then it wandered over to the grass at the edge of the road to eat.

She pulled on the reins to get the horse's head up, but the obstinate animal kicked the wagon so hard Molly lost her balance. She fell to the side and caught the armrest just as the sound of a rifle splintered the silent gloom. The explosion was so loud and so close she felt the earth shake beneath the wagon. Her blood turned to ice water.

I am going to die.

That's when she heard the scream. Deep and guttural—a man's cry. She heard the crunch as bones splintered and a weaker moan as a persistent pummeling went on in the underbrush.

All noises stopped. Nothing moved. The woods became completely silent and the hush crept along Molly's skin like the tiny feet of a thousand spiders.

She squinted and saw the blur of white coming toward her. Her breath caught.

It was the white buck.

She clattered down from the wagon. He moved closer, cautiously, a few steps at a time—as if he was listening for more trouble on the wind, but the dense quiet prevailed.

He nuzzled her breast and she threw her arms around his massive neck where the crystal dangled on the leather string against his fur.

"I love you. It doesn't matter what or who you are."

The warmth of his sigh vanished the numbness from her veins. Relief and love flowed through her and opened the

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floodgates of her tears. He licked them away with his hot tongue.

Then he tensed, pricking his ears forward. He nipped at her clothing, motioning for her to climb on his back. He bent his forelegs slightly so she could slide her leg over more easily.

Despite her weight, he moved swiftly. He went leaping over the underbrush in the woods, over logs, and across small rivulets. Within a few minutes, she seemed to be a part of him, riding along as though she weighed no more than a sparrow.

They went deeper and deeper into the woods.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

He did not stop. He continued bounding onward until they came to a solid stand of evergreens. He bent his forelegs and she slid to the ground. The white buck lifted his head and fixed his red gaze on her. She stared into human eyes.

Enter the sanctuary after me. Inside, you will be safe

The words were not spoken aloud. They floated into her mind.

She nodded her assent.

The buck turned his head, breaking eye contact with her. He leaped through the solid stand of evergreens with such ease and so smoothly, it was as if he had vanished into the air. She blinked, rubbed her eyes, and swayed with dizziness. Had she been hypnotized?

What could she do but follow him? Making her way through the evergreens presented a difficult task for her; the trees had grown so close together that the branches interlocked.

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She felt an odd tingle creep along her skin when she finally stepped into a clearing.

The white buck was nowhere in sight.

Slowly, she walked to the center of the clearing where a massive four-trunked tree stood. It wasn't until she drew closer that she saw Thomas, naked, slumped over in the center of the trunk.

Panic clutched her heart. She ran to him and found him cold and stiff. On his upper arm she saw a small gash, but the blood had dried into a hard clot.

"Thomas?" she called softly. He did not stir. Was he dead? This was exactly like the vision she had.

She took off her jacket and placed it around his shoulders, but it was far too small. Fear lodged like a stone in her throat. She took the gun from her waistband, unfastened her wool skirt, and placed it on the ground. Thomas sat slumped in a hollow between the tree trunks about ten inches from the ground. It took all her strength to topple him forward until he landed on the skirt. She found his own clothing lay beneath him.

She straightened the limbs of his magnificent body, which were like the purist white marble and just as cold. Seeing him so helpless, so quiet—as still as death—broke her heart.

She disrobed and laid her warm body above his. He was as lifeless and cold as a statue. She shivered and arranged her own clothing and his like a blanket over them both.

She was so much smaller than him. The chill night air turned her numb.

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She laid her head against his chest and listened. She heard nothing. Had changing from one form into another taken all his strength? Had she lost him forever? Would he never know the truth of her love!

"I am so sorry. I was afraid." She pushed back the hair from his forehead and then held his face between her hands. "I do not care if you are the white buck! I will always love you. Do not leave me here alone."

She kissed him. Though his generous lips did not move, they were soft and pliable. She slipped her tongue between them and tasted the icy velvet inside the darkness of his mouth. So cold—so cold! The joy of their sweat soaked bodies melding together in ecstasy was only a memory now. Thinking of that perfect rapture sliced her heart in two.

Fighting to hold back tears, she kissed his eyes, gently nipped at his earlobes and dabbed feathery touches on his neck.

The slightest pulse met her sensitive lips. Startled, she pressed her fingertips at the base of his throat.

Yes! She had not imagined it. A faint cadence of life remained in him.

She rubbed her hands together to stir her circulation before pressing against his neck and over his heart. He did not respond. She tried again.

Nothing.

She blew her warm breath onto his face, but that did not help.

She decided to add more friction by chafing her hands over his torso. She rose up slightly so she could massage her

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hands over his shoulders, down his chest, and along the side of his ribs. She stroked, pressed, and patted until her arms ached with the exertion. Perspiration beaded on her skin.

Breathing hard, she lay against him. A sob rose up in her throat. What else could she do? She could not hold back her sobs anymore. Her tears dampened Thomas's chest. She swabbed away her salty tears on his chest with a corner of her flannel petticoat. Suddenly, she realized that beneath her fingers pounded the strong, steady beat of his heart.

More remarkably, his hot rigid shaft rose against her bare bottom.

In an instant, he rolled her over and lay above her.

"How did you get here? I fastened all the doors."

"I climbed out a window."

He growled. "Why don't you do as you're told?"

"I had to tell you I love you, that I will love you even if you are the white buck."

His mouth came down on hers.

She drank in the warmth of it. She wanted to devour every hot corner—all that had been frozen had come alive once more and the joy in her heart spread to every pore. Early April's chill no longer bothered her. Her love blazed hotter than an inferno along with her need to feel him inside her.

His hands caressed her breasts and his mouth soon followed, suckling each nipple until it peaked firm with the heat of his tongue. Then he blew upon them and the chill hardened them into taut pebbles of excitement. The slightest touch sent pulsing signals radiating throughout her body.

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She was a woman in heat—a doe moaning in the darkness for her mate. A feral creature lost in the woods and now as untamed as any wild animal. Thomas's attentions set her juices flowing. She could feel the dampness oozing between her thighs. She wanted him, all of him—here on the ground with the night sky above and no shelter but the warmth of each other's bodies as the blood sizzled in their veins.

She realized this was not madness but ritual—for she had found her soul mate.

Thomas's mouth traveled downward marking a trail to her navel and sending sweet music along every nerve until at last he converged his attention on the apex of her need, that tender nub of desire already aching for fulfillment.

"No—I want you now." She reached for him but he held back.

"I do not have a condom."

"I want your child."

He did not say anything for a moment but then he drew in a great breath and smiled. "I want to drown in your juices first."

He tugged tenderly with his lips and drew in her essence. For her, the heavens whirled around in a mad dance. She could not think. She could only ache with desire. He kept her on the precipice, teasing her to the point of insanity by using his tongue as an instrument of delicious torture.

She raked her hands through his hair. "Please. Please!" she begged.

"On one condition."

"Anything," she breathed.

"On all fours."

As a buck takes a doe, she thought. Doubt distracted her for a moment, but Thomas lightly licked her engorged clit with his tongue.

She thought she would explode. "Yes, I will do it." She turned over. He lifted her into position and slid his hot iron into her wet sheath. She braced herself with her hands on the ground as he made his first thrust into her. She gasped as the earth swayed beneath her. Again he plunged, deeper this time until the very foundations of the earth rocked. Once more he propelled his hard, fiery member into her very soul and the earthquake shook her to the core, blasting apart her world.

She heard his roar as he spilled his seed into her. It was part triumph and part surprise.

She sank down upon her wool skirt, too weak to move. He curled around her, covering her with his body and their jumbled clothing.

"I love you, Molly." He drew her tightly against him and she smiled.

Then she slept.

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Chapter Twenty

The cold woke Molly. Abruptly, she sat up and listened but the woods lay deep and still. Dawn had not come, but Thomas was gone. She was alone.

Fear prickled along her spine, but she dared not call out. She scrambled to pick up her carelessly strewn about clothing on the forest floor. She pulled on her French drawers and felt the thick, sticky essence clinging to her skin. Thomas had admitted his love for her. Their volatile lovemaking had not been a dream, but why had he left her here by herself?

She could not find the small potato. She had kept it with her from the moment he had handed it to her—though she could not understand how a potato would protect her. It must have rolled away. For a moment, she stood paralyzed. There were men with guns roaming around—she needed all the protection she could get. Her panic grew as she remembered that she had not told Thomas of the men who had followed her and Quinn on the train. She had not told him of the man in the sombrero that had met those men at the station. Though one man had been killed, there were still two others roaming the darkened woods with their guns.

She continued to grope around but she could not find the potato or Thomas's clothes. Her blood turned to water. Had he changed into the white buck?

She groveled on the earthen floor seeking the gun she had taken from Quinn's holster. She scoured the area and finally

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located it on the ground near the base of the great four-trunked tree.

She tucked it into her waistband though she knew hitting a target would be nearly impossible. She could not aim at what she could not see.

How could she find Thomas? How could she find her way to White Buck Hall? How long would it be until dawn? The buck said she would be safe here, but would he be out of harm's way? Those men had rifles.

She steeled herself to leave the strange, secluded grove. Surely, she would come upon the old, worn path in the woods that led to White Buck Hall—and help.

With difficulty, she slid between the sheltering branches in the thick circle of evergreens. It seemed as though the interlocking branches fought to keep her inside. It amazed her that the white buck had jumped through with no trouble at all.

That the trees had grown together in such a manner was indeed strange. An odd tingle twisted through her as she finally stepped outside the thick maze of branches. The soft sigh of the wind through the branches called her to return to the inner circle.

But Thomas was in danger. She sensed it. It weighed on her like a black pall of sorrow and she could not stand idle if there was any chance to protect him.

She walked around the evergreen circle to see if there were any paths leading outward, but there appeared to be none. The surrounding woods were thick with small bushes, thorny vines, fallen logs, branches, and a deep layer of fallen,

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decaying leaves. To traipse through the underbrush would be exhausting, difficult, and take far too long.

For the white buck there would be no obstacles. With his long legs, he could easily bound over hurdles. He had freedom while she struggled tediously along with her poor eyesight in the darkened woods.

Nevertheless, odds were that one of the paths through the woods was not far away.

She set out, initially sighting an unimpeded trail simply from one tree to the next. She moved slowly, holding her breath, listening to every sigh of the wind, every rustle of the leaves, every snap of a branch. But there was stillness around her—as if all the nocturnal animals watched her and waited.

She stumbled upon a wide path with deep ruts dug by wagon wheels. Though it must be a well-used road, she did not know which way to go—left or right. One way might lead to White Buck Hall and the other to Stony Mill. Or some other small town in the vicinity.

She closed her eyes, said a prayer, and then turned right, but as she walked along she continued searching for a smaller footpath. She tripped on a large rock in the dark and let out a cry as she fell, which sounded inordinately loud in the silent woods. She fell face first in the dirt and got a mouth full of rotted leaves. Rising to sit, she brushed herself off. She was grateful the gun had not gone off and she had not injured herself in the fall, but she regretted the noise she had made.

She stood and decided that the rock had to be there for a reason—as a marker. She turned into a small footpath beside

the rock. Well-trodden and straight, it was easy to follow in the dark.

She came to a clearing just as the sky lightened with a gray dawn. Before her lay old Silas's burnt cabin and a chill went up her spine. This was the last place she wanted to see. In her vision, she had looked upon it and wondered why her mind had wandered there.

Now she felt it must have been an omen—a bad one. Fear crept along her skin and she knew she was not alone. She drew the gun from her waistband in readiness and turned to run but that's when the man in the sombrero stepped out from behind a large laurel bush at her left side. He held a rifle in his hand, aimed at her.

She froze with the gun in her right hand hidden by her voluminous skirt.

"Good morning, Miss Coan. What a pleasure."

She had no chance to escape, unless she could distract him or she could simply buy herself more time. She swallowed and forced her rigid vocal chords into action.

"I am Mrs. Hillyer, sir. I do not believe we have been introduced."

He gave a dry mirthless chuckle. "No we haven't and since I'm the one with the rifle, it's not necessary."

"Good manners are the glue of polite society."

"I ain't polite."

She fingered the trigger on the gun. How fast could she fire it? "It's a pity you haven't taken the pains to learn proper decorum. It's of inestimable value."

"Manners ain't slicked up that albino you married."

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Her heart was pumping double time. How could she get the horrible brute to look off in another direction? That's the only way she would have a chance to shoot him first.

"Mr. Hillyer is a very intelligent man. He has completed a complicated research project."

"Such high and mighty talk for a thief wanted for attempted murder."

"The charges against me are false."

"You can't prove it."

"I can. I have evidence." She raised her chin at a defiant angle and turned slightly so she could face him, though she kept the gun at her back.

"Hand it over." He lifted his rifle higher, lining her up in his sights.

She could not stop the trembling in her limbs. "It's at White Buck Hall."

"You're lying."

She glared at him with as much venom as she could muster despite the icy sheen of sweat beading on her forehead. "It's well-hidden, but it is there."

"I should just shoot you." He smiled as if the thought gave him immeasurable delight.

"My husband would be willing to negotiate. He can give you the evidence for a reasonable fee." How easy it was to lie to someone who intended to blast her to bits.

"Then let's pay the damned albino a visit."

He prodded her with the rifle tip and she headed back along the path. She slid the gun into the front of her jacket and held onto it. What if she arrived at White Buck Hall and

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nobody was there? She thought of one strategy after another, but none of them seemed to have any chance of succeeding.

However, the circle presented a possibility. The alarming tingle that coursed through her when she entered and when she left was odd. It could distract the man in the sombrero—at least for a minute so she could shoot him. Her stomach rolled uncomfortably as she wondered whether she had the nerve to do it, though she must. Since she did not have the evidence, he would shoot her—and anyone else at White Buck Hall.

"This isn't the way to White Buck Hall," he growled as the solid bank of evergreens came into view.

"It's a short cut." She continued toward the grove.

"It better be."

She simply shrugged. "Once we're through that grove of evergreens, it's only a mile or so."

"That's what everyone around here says—a mile or so. I'm wearing out my boots."

She reached the evergreens and turned her head as she drew the gun from the shelter of her jacket. "Stay right behind me."

He stepped closer to prod her with the tip of the rifle when suddenly from behind her she heard crashing in the underbrush.

Her attacker heard it, too, and turned his head.

"Looks like today's my lucky day." He swung the rifle to his right.

She glanced at his target. The white buck came leaping toward them, flying over a great fallen log.

"No!" Molly screamed. She brought the gun up and fired at the man while at the same moment he fired at the buck.

The explosion deafened her and the gun's recoil sent it flying out of her hand. The man with the sombrero had a startled expression on his face as blood soaked his fancy Prince Albert coat. He stumbled backward and fell. His hat rolled away.

Molly put a hand over her mouth and gagged. She had killed him! But then she looked to her left and saw the white buck lying still with his great head at an odd angle and a red pool of blood surrounding his massive chest.

She ran to him and knelt to draw his noble head against her bosom. The bullet had bored directly into his heart.

Pull me into the grove

She smoothed her trembling hand over his smooth white coat and sobbed. Life without Thomas would be a long, vast torment. She kissed the top of his head, between his splendid antlers. Then she rose and pulled with all her might until the evergreens opened for him. As the evergreens surrounded them, the task became easy and the white buck seemed to weigh nothing at all.

She suddenly remembered the gun she had dropped. While the buck had promised her safety inside the grove, she knew she would have to leave it at some point—and there was still another man at large with a rifle.

She stepped out through the branches again with difficulty. The branches closed in upon her and fought to keep her inside. She struggled against them to escape.

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She searched for the gun where she thought it had fallen, but it was nowhere in sight. She tried not to look at the dead man.

Suddenly, she heard a metallic click and froze.

"I do believe I have what you're looking for." The chillingly familiar voice spoke from behind her.

Her blood went cold as she turned to face Mr. Filmont. He held Quinn's revolver in one hand and a rifle in the other. He tucked the revolver into his waistband while giving her a nasty grin. Her hatred for the man blazed with as much heat as the consuming flames that had devoured the barn.

"I was surprised by your demonstration of love for a forest creature, but I am glad to see it dead. It was a menace, though you are a surprising hazard, too—one of the most difficult quarries I've ever encountered. Since no one seems able to complete the task, I shall have to do it myself." He stepped closer and pressed the rifle to her breast.

"You are a liar and a murderer." It was a foolish thing to say—for she knew that this time, she did not have any chance at all. Without a gun, she had no defense, but with Thomas dead, she did not care.

The wicked Mr. Filmont only laughed at her bald statement. "I can do anything I want—even get away with murder. No one will blame me for shooting you. You are a thief, and you have killed my good friend. I will report that I shot you in self-defense. There will be no questions asked."

"What about my friend? The woman who carried your child. The woman you raped. You had her pushed in front of a train. I have the letters—written by her own hand."

His eyes narrowed. "I do not believe you. I had one of my agents search for evidence."

"He stole it, but I got it back."

"So he did not drown?"

She glared at him but did not answer. Let him think about it. He thought he was invincible, but someday he would pay for his excesses.

Her gaze wandered to the gun pressed against her breast. She realized it was like the one Silas had carried, which would need to be reloaded after it had been fired.

"You deserve to die." A muscle in his jaw twitched. "You are a common whore."

She knew he did not care about the evidence. He wanted revenge. The only thing that would give him satisfaction was seeing her dead.

With all her might, she shoved the gun to the side. He pulled the trigger and blasted a hole in a nearby tree trunk.

She turned to run, but vines tore at her skirt and petticoats. She heard Filmont's laugh and then the blast from the revolver before she was hit in the back.

The pain seared her as her hot blood poured out. Fire burned in her chest. She stumbled into the evergreens and the branches seemed to carry her along as that peculiar tingle spread all through her. Sinking down upon the pine needle bed beneath the trees, she felt her life ebbing away. The world faded away as she traveled to a place beyond pain.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Thomas knew the moment the buck had been fatally wounded. The pain hit him in his own chest and brought him to his knees. Panic gripped him. If the buck had died would Molly remain safe? Thomas's magic power was augmented by the great creature. Without the buck would the protective enchantment he had generated about the grove hold out against the enemy?

Without the buck, would he be able to weave any sorcery at all?

He got off the ground and ran with all his strength. As he neared the evergreen circle, he heard another shot. Glancing to his left, he saw Filmont take aim at Molly's back and shoot. She fell into the evergreens and Filmont made an attempt to follow her.

Filled with rage and horror, Thomas slashed his wand in the air. The pine boughs obeyed him. Filmont screamed as the limbs reached out, but his cries ended as he was quickly strangled to death.

Thomas jumped into the circle and found Molly lying in a pool of blood. He touched her and found her pulse barely flickered. A few feet away, the great white buck lay still, his massive chest marred by a horrible wound. The beast was dead.

Thomas could barely breathe. He froze in a cold panic. The strength he received from the creature allowed him to

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manipulate matter, to do things that far surpassed other wizard's mere tricks.

On his own, he had limits. He could try to save Molly, but he must offer himself instead and he could not guarantee that he would succeed. He had only tried this spell once. When Silas had wounded the buck, Thomas had succeeded in removing the wound from the buck and taking it on as his own—but that had not been a fatal injury.

Still, he could not let Molly die, even if there was a chance the spell could go wrong. He did not want to be in the world without her.

"She must live." He clenched his teeth to hold back the emotion. "She is goodness, sweetness, and love."

He sketched a circle around her with the crystal at the tip of his wand. He removed the crystal from his neck and gently slid the leather strip holding it around Molly's head. Then he stood above her, with his left foot on her right side and his right foot on her left side. He held onto the wand with both hands and pointed it toward the heavens. A bolt of lightning crackled from the sky and latched onto the end of the wand. He held on as the electricity surged through him.

"Take me instead!" he cried. "Give me her wound. I will die in her place, but she will live!" He lowered the wand to point it at the crystal lying on her chest. The bolt of lightning bounced from his wand and hit the other crystal. The light became magnified, growing so intense it blinded him.

At once, he was struck and thrown down. He felt the crushing weight exploding in his chest. Landing hard on his back, he nearly lost consciousness, but he maintained his grip

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on the wand in his right hand. With it, he could rally his strength for a few minutes. He glanced at his chest. Blood gushed out in a red river, but he had to know if Molly would survive.

With difficulty, he lifted his head up slightly. He saw her stir.

"Molly?" His voice came out a whisper.

"Thomas?"

He had never heard anything so beautiful. His sweet, brave little wife lived!

At once, she was at his side. "What has happened? I was shot—and now I am healed, but you ... Thomas!"

"I have taken ... your wound as mine. You ... will live." He found it so difficult to speak. Slowly, he felt himself slipping away—longing for the release from the fiery agony of the wound.

"No!" She took the wand from his hand. "Tell me what to do with this! Tell me the magic words. You cannot die instead of me! I do not want to live without you."

"There ... is ... no more ... power."

"I do not care about power. I care only about love." She threw the wand and collapsed beside him, sobbing bitterly.

Thomas saw the wand land against the body of the white buck and suddenly, a very strange thing happened. The body of the white buck turned into a swirling mist.

Molly saw it, too. She stopped crying and seized Thomas's hand.

The mist coalesced into the shape of an old man draped in a white robe, but the figure was translucent and indistinct

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around the edges. However, from beneath the capacious hood, a pair of red, glowing eyes like two hot coals from the hearth moved stealthily towards them.

"Averill." Thomas whispered.

Molly went limp, passing out from sheer fright.

She is beautiful. The old wizard smiled.

"I love her."

Averill nodded. *You do not need me anymore*

"Were you the white buck?"

At times. You were my protege and had much to learn. I could not leave you without guidance.

"I am sorry."

Do not be. You have grown wiser. You shall be a great wizard.

"But the white buck"

Molly will be your source of power from now on. Love is the strongest force on earth. He held a glowing ball in his hands. As he lifted it toward the sky, lightning flashed and thunder rumbled until the earth shook. The ball increased in size and glowed with the heat of the sun until Averill disappeared behind it and the light became so bright that Thomas closed his eyes, but he could feel himself growing warm again.

A strange whirring filled his ears while the sky overhead turned as black as night. More booms of thunder shook the ground and the cataclysm worsened. It seemed the entire world began to spin, revolving faster and faster until Thomas, too, lost his senses and passed out.

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Molly awoke to Thomas's snores as the rain began to fall. Great drops of fresh spring rain cooled her body. She opened her mouth and drank in the moisture. She was so thirsty!

She sat up to see Thomas beside her on the ground. She did not see any blood on his chest. She touched him where the great gaping wound had been, but her fingers came against his hard, ridged muscles.

Gingerly, she touched her own body, but there was no pain, no wound. And no blood. Not a single trace of it.

How could that be? She put her hand to her head as dizziness swamped her.

She remembered the sound of the blast as Filmont shot her ... she remembered the pain ... then Thomas was there ... on the ground ... and the buck ... but she could remember nothing else.

She glanced around her and frowned. The enchanted grove had vanished. The circling evergreens were gone as was the large four-trunked tree. Instead, there were scrub oaks, white pines, blueberry bushes, and laurel—the same types of plants that normally grew in the woods.

She took in a great breath. Everything smelled like spring. Fresh and hopeful.

The snoring suddenly subsided and she looked at Thomas. His lavender eyes shone with love as he reached out to caress her.

"My beautiful wife." He sat up and kissed her. The heat went right to her toes before he pulled away. "We need to get you out of the rain."

"I won't melt." She threw her arms around his neck. "I thought I had lost you." She could not say another word as her throat tightened with emotion.

He kissed her cheek tenderly. "You do not need to be afraid anymore."

"Mr. Filmont?"

"He's dead."

She trembled. "What happened? Why am I alive?"

He stood and swung her into his arms. "No more questions. It's raining harder." His long strides soon brought them to the site of the old burnt cabin.

"Why are we here?" Her arms clung more fiercely to him.

"We'll wait out the storm in the cellar."

"But the floor of the cabin burned, too. It will be dark and damp in the cellar. It might have snakes or even rats in it." She swallowed hard. "I hate rats."

"You told me you are not afraid of mice."

"Mice are smaller."

He laughed. "Don't worry. There won't be any rats." He set her on her feet by a new trapdoor. "I cleaned it out after the fire. It's dry." He lifted the door. Molly stared down as her eyes adjusted to the dimness below. What she saw at the bottom of the ladder sent her heart thundering.

"Rafe!"

Thomas stumbled down the ladder and Molly followed him. At the bottom, Rafe lay on a ragged blanket with his hands and feet bound. He had a gag in his mouth.

Thomas pulled out a small knife and began cutting the ropes. Molly struggled to untie the gag.

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"He'll be all right." She hoped her words sounded convincing. Rafe's skin had an ashen cast to it that did not come from the dim light. "The man with the sombrero was standing near here. Maybe he put Rafe in this cellar. How could anyone be so cruel?"

She released the gag as Thomas finished cutting through the ropes.

"You're an angel," Rafe whispered in a hoarse voice that was barely audible.

"Damn it, Rafe! How could you let someone do this to you!" Thomas thundered.

"You know, Thomas, I think this is the first time I'm actually glad to hear you roar." Rafe smiled.

Molly insisted on traveling on her own two feet while Thomas carried Rafe on his back. The rain had stopped and a beautiful rainbow glistened in the sunshine along the woodland trail. In fact, it appeared as if they were walking on that colorful rainbow.

Molly did not feel like talking. Too much had happened.

Rafe, despite his gravelly voice, chattered on about the wicked man who had taken him prisoner. "He must have been grown up in a den of wolves. I have never met such a ruffian."

When they came to the edge of White Buck Hall's great lawn, they stopped. Molly didn't think there was ever a sight so beautiful.

"Home." She whispered.

"Forever." Thomas added.

"You could put me down now." Rafe grumbled.

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"Nope."

Molly laughed. They ran down the hill. Halfway, everyone inside came running out to meet them.

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Epilogue

A year later, Molly sat beside Thomas on the front porch swing one evening rocking little Emil Averill Hillyer. At three months, their son was a fine sturdy boy with light brown hair the color of the crust of one of Cook's loaves of bread. His eyes were the palest blue, but each one drooped lower until he drifted off to sleep.

She had never been so content. She loved being a mother and counted every day a blessing, but though her heart was filled to overflowing sometimes on rainy days or in the quiet of the evening the old nightmares would return to haunt her.

This evening was one of those times. Thomas appeared to be concentrating on something far off in the woods as the shades of night came on. He made small circles in the air with his wand.

"You've never explained everything to me." She spoke softly to him. "You said you communicated with the white buck."

"Well, yes—I did." He sighed and turned his gaze to her. He took to tapping the tip of his wand on each of the fingers on his left hand. "My mind took over his mind, I controlled him—but my physical body remained in the enchanted circle."

"But it was as if you were the buck. You saw everything through his eyes."

"It was a rather heady sensation, but I never knew when it would end. One minute I was leaping through the woods and

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then suddenly I was back in my own body—freezing cold, aching all over, and quite powerless."

"Do you miss it?"

He laughed. "No, because now I can make love to you all the time."

Heat rose to her cheeks and she gave him a shy smile.

"I'm sure that's not the same as leaping through the woods."

"I do believe it is better. At any rate, I have that new stallion and he's a fine jumper."

"I'd like to learn to ride."

Thomas put his hand around her shoulders and gave her a peck on this cheek. "I'd like to teach you."

Little Emil Averill squirmed and opened his blue eyes.

"You've woken our little man." Molly rubbed Emil's back.

"How very odd." Thomas commented.

Molly's heart sank. "What is the matter?"

"Emil is not looking at you or me. He's looking out toward the woods. Follow his gaze, my dear."

She turned and saw it—a young white buck at the edge of the tree line. A shiver of fear tingled along her spine.

"There's always been a white buck on this land," he reminded her.

"Is it a curse?" she whispered.

"Not for us." Then he kissed her again and she felt the passion all the way down to her toes.

The End

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