

DARK SHADOWS

THE LABYRINTH OF SOULS



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Chapter 1

He could feel the house's presence long before its angular roof and jutting chimneys rose into view above the treetops, as if the vibrations of an ancient, pulsating heart crept across the distance to welcome him darkly. The cool, salty scent of the Atlantic Ocean and the thick, earthy smell of pines blended in a unique perfume: the bittersweet fragrance of memories. The road from town was, as always, virtually deserted. A gray sky threatened snow, and even with the car's heater on full, a chill nipped at his cheeks and hands. Or perhaps the cold came from within, he thought; the very idea of returning to this place caused his stomach to flutter and blood to pound in his head like the sound of breakers beneath the cliffs. It was the same anxiety that came whenever he approached a beautiful woman—never knowing when desire and anticipation could turn to something horrible and deadly.

Ahead, to his left, he saw the stone gate that opened to the long, narrow driveway, and an icy finger wriggled from his stomach to his throat. Slowing the car, he turned into the driveway and found himself inside a dark tunnel of close-pressing pines, whose branches scabbled at the windows like the fingers of desperate beggars. Eventually the pines gave way to a dense stand of oaks and sycamores, all stripped of their leaves by the season. A cold breeze whisked through the woods, setting the skeletal limbs into clattering motion and the tree trunks bending as if in mock deference to him. Sometimes he loved them, these trees that had stood for countless years, many of which he had seen grow from saplings to towering behemoths. Sometimes he hated and feared them, for the shadows they cast were too like the shadows of his heart, concealing things that should never be seen but that sometimes ventured ominously into the light.

As he drove further, the woods ended and he found himself gazing upon a gently undulating, manicured lawn, still green even in the dead of winter. How little things changed, whether he went away for one year or ten. *Or fifty.* Far to the left, he could see the ocean, its gunmetal surface speckled with whitecaps, its eternal rolling and crashing reminding him that sometimes those waters were cheerful and warm, and he had once spent many hours on the sandy beaches, basking innocently in the rays of a hopeful, benevolent sun. Now, though, a pale mist shrouded the cliffs that overlooked the breakers, and the sun lurked behind an endless veil of steel-gray clouds.

Straight ahead, he saw an impenetrable bastion of oak and beech trees, but beyond it, something huge crouched in waiting, its sprawling contours obscured by the weblike network of treelimb. As he drove nearer, he felt his hackles rise as if an

electric current had passed through his body, for now, above the trees, a turreted stone tower gazed down at him, its windows dark yet coldly sentient. No human eyes would be watching from those portals; no one went there, not even young David, who would willingly venture into every other hidden corner and secret passage just for a thrill. Then, passing beyond the trees, he could at last see the entire structure. His heart both leaped with joy and hammered with fear, for he believed that *there* lay the answers to the questions he most feared to ask, but that could not be withheld.

Collinwood was neither a warm nor a happy house. Its oppressive hulk had perched on Widows' Hill for two hundred years, jealously guarding its secrets like a depraved mother, and within its walls, light succumbed to shadow as if in fear of what it might illumine. The house had been patterned after a French chateau, with spacious wings designed to accommodate a prosperous and prolific family; yet, since the day of its completion, rarely had even one wing of the mansion been fully occupied. Had its builder envisioned the years of tragedy and heartache that would ensue for the endlessly troubled—some would say cursed—inhabitants of the house, he would have surely burned the plans for this grandest of his dreams before construction even began.

The gray stone walls insolently cast the amplified sound of the car engine back at him. He could only wonder: How many tragedies had he witnessed here—and over how many years? For how many tragedies did he bear responsibility? Could he return without bringing yet more trouble to these distant but close-knit relatives? *I must*, he thought. *No one deserves the horror I might unleash among them. Yet I cannot stay away.*

I have every right to be here.

What would Jenny say to that? Mad Jenny...dead Jenny...one-hundred-year-dead Jenny. As he stopped the car, he looked up at the empty windows of the tower and remembered when a pair of crazed, murderous eyes had watched him from up there; eyes that once gazed at him lovingly, eyes that had cried countless tears for love so bitterly wasted. He was to blame for her death; he knew that.

Therefore, he was just as responsible for the events that followed...those that had led to his own terrible fate.

No.

Jenny had tried to kill him. She had come at him with a knife, and to save himself, he had used murderous force against her.

But she would never have tried to kill him if he hadn't driven her to it. If he hadn't taken pleasure with so many women...and then allowed her to find out about them. She was his wife. In the eyes of some, she would have been within her rights to take his life.

That was over a hundred years ago.

But the pain was today.

Real pain. The agony of transformation that he had not felt for over a century. For all these years, the curse he bore had been held at bay, but never the fear. Even after he had been “cured,” he could not face a night of the full moon without being overcome by sheer terror, ever anticipating that *this* would be the night he would again change...when his body would be altered by forces he could not understand, his blood and bones changing from those of man to beast.

A week ago, the pain had returned: a pain too terrible to remember, but too portentous to forget. He had been alone—thank God—in his New York townhouse. All hope had fled as his blood began to burn, his chest throbbing, every muscle and joint aching as his body prepared to become something inhuman. He remembered the sound of his own voice as he screamed: a deep, wolfish howl that no human vocal cords could have released. He watched his fingers become tortured talons and anticipated the moment when his nails would lengthen, and coarse black hair would begin to sprout from his skin.

But the change never came. Eventually, the pain abated, leaving him enervated and incognizant of anything beyond the panic that whirled through his brain. One name blazed in his mind like a firebrand, a name that came to his lips and leaped forth in a scream of supplication, though he knew its bearer, long dead, would never hear it:

“Magda!”

Magda Rakosi. The one who had laid this curse upon him.

God, if only he could go back. If only he could go back and kill her and keep on killing her, forcing her to eternally suffer his wrath, the way he eternally suffered. The hell with the sorrow that had driven her. The hell with her thirst for vengeance against the man who had killed her sister.

Her sister Jenny: his own tortured, insane wife.

The memory of Jenny, of the lovely, refined woman she had been before slipping over the edge of madness, brought him back to the present. He was here, in his own car, regarding the ancient stone mansion where all these things had happened such a long time ago, in days that no other mortal could know, for fate or mad design had never allotted to another soul the number of years that had already passed behind him.

No. There was one. But then, that one was not truly alive.

He shoved that thought out of his mind and slowly opened the door, getting out to stand beside the car in the cold afternoon breeze. The air smelled of woodsmoke, from the fire that would be inevitably burning in the drawing room fireplace. Yes...a

thin gray plume curled from one of the tall chimneys that jutted into the sky like a clenched fist above the slate roof. He flinched as he closed the car door, for the metallic bang echoed like a gunshot across the broad front lawn. As the sound faded and he relaxed somewhat, he looked to his left, into a hollow amid the dense trees, where he could see the stables, their doors and windows securely closed. The family had always kept horses there; he wondered if they still did. To his right, a hundred yards or so away, the guest house appeared desolate, its windows shuttered, its chimneys cold and dead. Farther away, beyond a wall of oak trees, he could see the crumbling framework of the old greenhouse, which—in its day—had been one of the most impressive pieces of architecture in the northeast.

A hundred years ago.

Heart in his throat, he took a few steps toward the great porte-cochere, his footfalls clacking on the paved drive with exaggerated clarity in the crisp winter air. To his surprise, he saw an ornate wreath of holly hanging on the front door; it took him several moments to remember that, yes, Christmas was only a few days away. Impulsively, he reached for the door handle, about to walk in uninvited—for wasn't he entitled to freely enter his own home?—until he remembered he no longer lived here. The family would consider him a guest. He turned his hand and lifted the knocker to the left of the broad wooden door and rapped it sharply three times, its sound reverberating into vast, brooding depths. An eon or more passed before he heard a cautious jiggling of the lock, and the scrape of the door being slowly pulled open.

“Mr. Quentin!”

It was a throaty, alto voice that wavered in surprise. A pair of dark eyes beneath coarse, unfeminine brows grew wide at the sight of him. Mrs. Johnson wore her usual plain black dress and white apron, her ageless features and bun of brunette hair unchanged since the last time he had seen her—how many months or years before?

“Hello, Mrs. Johnson,” Quentin Collins said in a soft, weary-sounding voice. “It's been a while, hasn't it?”

She pulled the door wide and stepped aside to let him enter. “Almost two years. We've all been wondering what's become of you.”

“Nothing good, as usual,” he said with a wry smile. “And how have the most rich and infamous residents of Collinsport fared during my absence?”

“Everyone is well,” she said, closing the door behind him. “Have you come for the holidays? You should have let us know to expect you.”

“I'm not sure how long I'll be here,” he said distractedly, taking an appraising look at the foyer. As he expected, almost nothing had changed over the years. To his right, the plushly carpeted stairs climbed to the second floor landing; above it, the

huge, arched stained glass window overlooked the chamber, its multicolored panes only dimly capturing the gray daylight on the other side. Directly overhead, an iron chandelier hung above the ancient, hand-carved wooden table that had been the centerpiece of the room since Quentin was a child. The two-century-old grandfather clock still stood in its place next to the closed drawing room doors, tick-tocking softly in a wistful welcome. The scent of the house, too, was exactly as he remembered: a delicate mélange of vanilla, lemon, sandalwood, and cedar smoke that had blended into the carpets, the furniture, even the walls, from the countless fires that had burned in the many fireplaces over the years. As he turned to glance at the wall next to the front door, he felt a little rush of satisfaction at the sight of the portrait that he knew would be hanging there.

The sad, gaunt face with haunting hazel eyes beneath a prominent brow; the comma-shaped locks of hair that fell with curious deliberation over the forehead; the hand wearing the huge onyx ring on its forefinger, holding the distinctive cane with its silver handle in the shape of a wolf's head.

Barnabas Collins.

"Do you have luggage with you?" Mrs. Johnson asked.

"Yes, I'll bring it in later," he said. "Mrs. Johnson, does Doct—"

"Quentin!"

He turned to see a slim, petite girl with long blonde hair walking quickly toward him from the hallway to the left. Her blue eyes widened as she realized she wasn't dreaming, and her lips parted in a smile of surprise and pleasure. She rushed to him and threw her arms around his waist, hugging him with uncommon strength for one so small. "Our long-lost cousin! I wondered if we were ever going to see you again," she said. "You've been gone so long. And you've never even written or called."

He returned her embrace half-heartedly. "It's good to see you, too," he said. "Carolyn, does Doctor Hoffman still live here?"

The young blonde pulled back from him with a troubled expression. "Yes," she said in a disappointed voice. "But Quentin, tell me what you've been doing all this time. What's it been like living in New York?"

"Is Julia in her room?" he asked, ignoring Carolyn's question.

"Yes, I think so," she said with a hurt look, staring into his widely spaced, brilliant blue eyes as if trying to read his thoughts. "Why? Is something wrong?"

He shook his head. "I'll have to talk to you later," he said, starting up the stairs to the landing. But he realized Carolyn remained staring after him, pouting, and he turned. "Look, I'm sorry," he said gently. "I didn't mean to be abrupt with you. I just have very urgent business with the doctor. I'll come see you in a few minutes. I

promise.”

Her face brightened, but her voice was still desultory. “I’ll be in the drawing room.”

Quentin sighed and continued on his way, regretful for having brushed off his young cousin, but determined to proceed without distraction. Better to let her think him callous and make up for it later than to be sidetracked needlessly. He entered the shadowed third-floor hallway and passed several closed doors, each step causing the hardwood beneath the carpet to creak in annoyance. Turning down a second hallway, he saw a square of dull daylight through an open door, beyond which he could hear the sound of subtle movement. He approached slowly, silently, unsure if this was what he really wanted, but knowing he had to do it. When he slid his head around the door, he saw an immaculately kept room containing an exquisite four-poster bed, an ornate, antique bureau next to it, and a dresser with a tall mirror against one wall. To his right, there was a long writing desk cluttered with books and papers. Seated there, a stern-looking, auburn-haired woman with pen in hand appeared to be absorbed in her writing, taking no notice whatsoever of his presence. She looked to be a few years older than he—anyone would make such an assumption—and her attractive features were pinched in concentration. After a moment, she lifted her pen, brought the tip to her lips, and looked up as if to formulate a new thought. It was then that she saw him, and her eyes flashed first with surprise and apprehension, then with the warmth of recognition.

“Quentin,” she said, her voice cracking with excitement as she rose from her seat. “You’ve come back!”

“Hello, Julia,” he said, stepping into the room. “Hard at work, as always. What particular Collins family mystery are you trying to unravel now?”

“Nothing...nothing important,” she said, lifting her hands and placing them in his, giving them an affectionate squeeze. “Did you just get here? How long are you staying?”

“I’m not exactly sure. Julia, I need to talk to you.”

A shadow fell over Dr. Hoffman’s face. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Something has happened. Something inside me.”

She nodded, motioning for him to sit down in the wing chair across from her desk as she slid back into her own seat. “Tell me about it.”

“Julia...you still have the portrait, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve kept it safe. It is safe, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is. Quentin, tell me what’s happened.”

He swallowed hard, despising his secret, even though he sat across from the one person in the world with whom he could speak of it. “The last full moon, I felt the change coming on. The thing I’ve feared most over all these years.”

“And did you change?”

He shook his head. “No. It stopped before the transformation was complete. But the pain...it was awful. Julia, I can’t live through it again. I can’t go back to being that *thing*. Never again!”

She nodded thoughtfully, her eyes hot with sympathy. “You think the portrait has lost its power?”

“I don’t know. I was afraid that something had happened to it. But you say it is safe. Julia, are you certain?”

“It is protected as it always has been. No one could have found it or touched it.”

“I need to see it.”

Julia’s face paled, her lips tightening. “I’m not sure that’s wise.”

“Julia, don’t tell me what I can or can’t do. I’m the one who stands to lose everything if something’s gone wrong.”

“I know that. But I’m telling you, Quentin, nothing could have happened to the portrait. If it had, I would know about it.”

“I must see it,” he said again. “I have to know.”

She gazed at him with clinical detachment, the warmth of her eyes cooling as her professional instincts assumed control. “You know what you will see, don’t you? Are you prepared for that?”

“I’m prepared for anything—except for going back to what I was.”

An age passed as she watched him with eyes narrowed to thin slits. “Yes, I think you’re right,” she said at last. “You need to see for yourself.”

The small relief he felt faltered as a new anxiety began to burn in his blood. He had lived for over a century because of the thing that Dr. Julia Hoffman kept safely hidden from any other eyes: the portrait painted by the mad artist, Charles Delaware Tate, in the year 1897. The portrait that had the power to preserve his body, his youth, while the figure in the pigment suffered the dissolution of the years—and on nights of the full moon, bore the brunt of Magda Rakosi’s curse while his own body remained unaffected.

Until those few days ago...

He could never have fathomed the power which wielded that ancient brush; which had conjured his likeness in paint and drawn the gypsy’s curse from his blood. He would never have believed that he could survive endlessly in a body of thirty-some years, remaining physically unchanged, unweathered, passing through the decades

with the immutability of a god sculpted in marble. But to live was to believe, and on those nights when the curse would have worked its effect on him, he suffered only the fear of its return, never its horrible consequences.

He could not live at the mercy of the beast again. He would die first.

Julia rose slowly from her seat and went to the closet door next to her bed. Opening it, she stepped inside and pulled a chain to turn on the single overhead bulb. Pushing aside her hanging dresses and coats, she reached toward the back wall of the closet, her fingers searching until they touched a hidden bolt beneath one of the shelves. Now, she pulled back a sliding panel that revealed a deep well of darkness; and from the opening, she withdrew a large, rectangular canvas on a stretcher, wrapped in plain brown paper. As she brought it from the closet, Quentin caught the cool odor of mold and mildew as it wafted from the dark confines of the ancient, secret compartment.

Julia placed the canvas on her bed, giving Quentin a last questioning look, as if to make certain he knew what he was doing. He nodded, silently preparing himself for what he knew lay in wait behind its protective shield of brown paper. With a hand that trembled slightly, Julia reached behind the canvas and gently tore the tape that secured the wrapping. And as she pulled away the paper, which crinkled so loudly it set his teeth on edge, his eyes began to register the horror of what was being revealed to him.

At first, he wasn't even sure the figure was supposed to be human. It was only a jumble of murky gray color: swirls of what looked like cobwebs and masses of tattered cloth. Then he realized that the rounded, brown-tinged sphere near the top of the canvas was a dessicated, fleshless skull, its empty eyes gaping at him with an uncanny expression of reproach. A papery layer of skin stretched from the corners of a leering grin formed by the gumless teeth that protruded from the oil-rendered jaws. The gray longcoat he had worn had fallen to ruin, its few dark shreds almost indistinguishable from the collapsed ribcage. He drew back in revulsion, his mental preparation wholly inadequate to face such corruption. This image—this thing that existed in two dimensions, in cracking, ancient pigment—was Quentin Collins as he was meant to be: a decimated relic of a bygone day; a withered corpse that by all rights should be lying undisturbed beneath six feet of New England earth.

“All right, doctor,” he said with a disgusted hiss, finally able to avert his eyes. “Put it away.”

“I take it you're satisfied now?” came Julia's voice, almost caustic in tone.

“I suppose I am.”

“I know that was unpleasant for you,” she said, once again with sympathy. “But you had to see for yourself, didn't you?”

“I had no choice,” he said softly. “But that still doesn’t tell me what I need to know.”

“Perhaps it does,” Julia said, turning her eyes reflectively to the ceiling.

“What do you mean?”

“The image in the painting has almost completely decayed,” she said. “I’m just guessing, of course...but it’s possible that even the portrait reaches a stage where it can no longer protect you.”

“You’re saying that the painting can no longer make the transformation when the moon is full.”

Julia nodded gravely. “Not only that, Quentin. That painting has allowed you to live for over a hundred years. It has preserved your life. But if its power has passed....”

He turned away from her, having known all along what the answer might be but refusing to accept it. He had seen the painting himself now and no longer had that luxury.

“So, Julia. It would appear that I am destined to die.”

Her face was chalky. “The question is, will you now simply grow old at the normal rate—as if your aging process were merely suspended for all this time? Or...will all those years catch up to you at once?”

He took a few steps toward the mirror and gazed at his reflection—at the long, wavy black hair, the wide, crystal clear blue eyes, the firm jawline, the strong, high cheekbones. After the last hundred years, he could not envision the effects of age upon that face; this one was permanent, indelible.

Wasn’t it?

But even the idea of sudden, spontaneous aging, right up to the point of death, terrified him less than the prospect of living through another transformation, knowing that when he returned to himself the following day, there would be new blood on his hands.

“Well,” he said softly. “This leaves me with very few options. Either we find a way for the curse to be lifted before the next full moon, or....”

“Or what?”

“Or you will have to kill me before the change can take place.”

Quentin had never seen such a look of abject horror—not even on the face of one of his doomed victims—as the one that now contorted Dr. Julia Hoffman’s face.

Chapter 2

Carolyn Stoddard's heart fluttered nervously as her gaze delved into the flames that danced and crackled in the huge stone fireplace. Even seated close to the hearth, she felt little warmth. The drawing room always felt drafty, and even now, a cool, mischievous tendril coiled around her ankles, causing her to tremble and shift closer to the flames, which shrank from her as if the vast chimney had drawn them away with a deep, belligerent inhalation. Above the mantelpiece, the face of old Jeremiah Collins glared down at her from his cracked, faded portrait, one corner of his too-thin mouth turned up in a derisive smirk. She wished her mother hadn't put the old bastard back over the fireplace. The colorful landscape by Charles Delaware Tate it had replaced was commercial and trite, but at least it never felt unfriendly.

It was hard to believe Quentin had come back, especially without so much as a letter or phone call to announce his imminent arrival. She had neither seen nor spoken to him since he'd moved to New York almost two years ago, seemingly to sever any ties with Collinsport, if not the Collinses themselves. To her, at least, he had always presented himself as a kind and thoughtful man, if sometimes sullen and withdrawn. Strange, though; no one could with any certainty trace his lineage back to his reputed direct ancestor, also named Quentin Collins, who had lived at Collinwood in the 19th century. However, prints of old portraits showed an indisputable resemblance between the two, and no one doubted his claim was genuine. Still, his familial ties to the current generation of Collinses seemed so remote that Carolyn had few qualms about indulging in romantic fantasies about him. And in times past, Quentin had scarcely discouraged them. On numerous occasions, with clear desire in his big, beautiful blue eyes, he had made playful references to "kissing cousins," and touched her with gentle, exploring hands that, to her mind, could only be those of a lover. Should there be busybodies—in the family or otherwise—anxious to declare impropriety, that was their prerogative; she could hardly care less.

"Carolyn?" came a soft, youthful voice. She turned to see her cousin David coming through the drawing room doors carrying a few gaily patterned boxes. His brown hair was long and wavy, and several thick locks hung low over his eyes. "I'm going to decorate the tree. Will you help me?"

Carolyn glanced toward the bay window, only now noticing the tall, lush evergreen that had apparently grown there since the last time she had come into the room. David set the boxes on the divan next to the fireplace and gave her a hopeful smile. He was fifteen now and seemed to have finally outgrown the radical mood

swings that had exasperated the entire family for so many of his childhood years. He could still be impish and sometimes manipulative, but his most antisocial tendencies had mellowed significantly during the last year or two.

“Carolyn? What’s the matter?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. I was just thinking.”

“Help me with the tree?”

“I might as well,” she said with a little sigh.

David smiled happily, oblivious to the shadows on her face, and tugged open one of the boxes of lights and ornaments. He began to uncoil one of the strings of multicolored bulbs and looped one end over the uppermost branches, carefully wrapping it around the thick greenery. Carolyn randomly picked a sparkling, faceted ball of sapphire-colored crystal from its box and hung it near the top of the tree, her hands moving automatically, her mind years or miles away from the task.

Why had Quentin brushed her off so coolly? Of all the people in this house, she was the one he would most want to see—wasn’t she? What was so important that he had to seek out Dr. Hoffman before he could even offer her a proper “hello?”

Was he ill? He certainly didn’t look it. He looked fitter, stronger, and even more dashing than the last time she had seen him: that day when he’d stood at the front door, suitcases in hand, looking back wistfully as if leaving her was an almost insurmountable effort. They had grown so close in those troubled times, when a series of terrible events had nearly spelled doom for everyone at Collinwood. At first, he had been there to console her after her husband of only a few days had been killed in a tragic accident. For reasons Carolyn never fully understood, Quentin had fervently disliked Jeb, but she never doubted that his sympathy for her loss had been sincere. It had taken her a long time to get over the young man’s death, but it had been Quentin who helped her through it. She had not kept Jeb’s last name—Hawkes—and now she was glad of it, for she could scarcely have put her anguish behind her with that perpetual reminder of the love she’d known for so short a time.

She heaved a wistful sigh and placed another ball on a limb; but the little hook slipped off the branch and the ornament fell to the floor with a clatter. Looking down, she was relieved to find that the delicate crystal had not shattered. “Careful!” came David’s voice, and she knelt to pick up the ball. As she did, she glanced out the window, which overlooked the rolling lawns that led to the cliffs and the restless ocean beyond. A dusky sky hovered moodily over the estate, the last traces of daylight fading rapidly. There might be snow on the way, she thought. A white Christmas this year? In this corner of Maine, there were too many white Christmases. There was simply too much white.

“Okay,” David said. “I’m turning them on.” He knelt on the floor and fumbled with the electrical plug that dangled from the lower branches, finally working it into the outlet beneath the window. The lights sprang to life, and David stood back to admire his handiwork. A hundred or more tiny candles, in all the colors of the rainbow, glowed brilliantly among the dark branches. One of the strings, which had belonged to Carolyn’s grandmother, had tubular lights filled with clear liquid; once heated, the liquid began to bubble merrily, and in a sudden, beautiful rush, waves of images from her childhood swept through her mind, for a brief, tranquil moment transforming the room, the house, even the cold outdoors into the sweeter, half-forgotten world of her past, when Christmas was a time of unadulterated joy and everyone in her family came together with genuine love in their hearts.

It is so cold in here.

She longed to be in Quentin’s warming arms.

“Come on,” David said. “Let’s put on the rest of the ornaments.”

She heard a creak out in the foyer and anxiously turned to peer through the open doors. But it wasn’t him. A dark-haired, brown-eyed woman in her early fifties, dressed in an elegant but comfortable-looking gown of gold satin stepped through the door, her attractive face beaming at the sight of the twinkling and bubbling Christmas lights. “How nice to see the two of you working together and not arguing,” she said in a silky, cultured voice. “It’s a beautiful tree, isn’t it?”

“Hello, Mother,” Carolyn said, greeting Elizabeth Collins Stoddard with a little smile. “I hadn’t even noticed it was here until David asked me to help decorate it.”

“Your uncle Roger and Jake brought it in this morning,” Elizabeth said, referring to their handyman, Jake Stiles. “I would so love to have a pleasant holiday this year. It seems such a long time since there’s been any happiness at Collinwood.”

“By the way, Mother, we have a visitor. Perhaps he’ll stay through Christmas.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. “We do? Who is it?”

Just then, Carolyn heard someone coming down the stairs in the foyer. Yes, it was his unmistakable tread. Her heart renewed its rapid pounding, and her throat felt dry. She must look nonchalant, not over-eager; she could not divulge any trace of that impetuous inner child she had struggled to leave behind, even in her adult years. Instead of answering her mother, she gazed out the window as if watching for the first sign of snow. When his footsteps paused at the drawing room doors, she did not turn around.

“Well, good evening, everyone,” came Quentin’s soft, melodic voice. It sounded different, somehow. Tired. Weak. She slowly turned around and barely withheld a gasp. He even looked different than when he’d arrived, only a few minutes earlier. His

eyes were sunken, his face an ivory mask. Oh, my God, he *must* be sick.

“Quentin!” exclaimed Elizabeth, her face brightening with joy. “How good to see you again—at last!”

He smiled, and even Elizabeth seemed to notice his wan complexion. “And you, too, my dear Elizabeth.” He turned to David, whose face registered surprise and delight. “And you, I hardly recognize you. You’re almost as tall as I am.”

David put on his most dignified manner, stepping forward and extending his hand. But Quentin took the boy by the shoulders and wrapped his arms around him in a heartfelt embrace. David hesitated only a moment before deciding it was all right, and he returned the hug eagerly.

“I’ve missed you, Quentin,” he said. “I wish you’d never left.”

“Sometimes I wish I never had.”

“What have you been doing all this time?” Elizabeth asked. “All we know is that you’ve been living in New York.”

“Mostly dabbling in the stock market. I found a very reliable broker, so I’ve managed to do quite well for myself.”

“Where do you live there?” David asked. “Do you have a place in Manhattan? Greenwich Village, I bet!”

“No,” Quentin chuckled. “Just a little place on the Hudson River. It’s in Tarrytown, actually, north of New York City.”

“You have a telephone, don’t you?” Carolyn asked softly.

Quentin gave her a hurt look, then turned to Elizabeth. “I’m sorry. I know I should have called first. But there were circumstances....” He shuddered visibly. “Well, never mind about that. I don’t want to be a bother. I’ll just take my old room, if that’s all right.”

“Of course it is. You know it will always be there for you. Quentin, is anything the matter? You look...tired.”

He nodded. “I’m fine. A good night’s sleep is all I need.”

Elizabeth studied him for a moment, as if uncertain whether to believe him. “You don’t have to go back right away, do you? Surely, you can stay through the holidays?”

“I think I can manage that,” he said with a little smile.

Just then, Mrs. Johnson appeared in the doorway and cleared her throat. “Dinner will be ready shortly, Mrs. Stoddard. Should I set a place for Mr. Quentin?”

Elizabeth looked questioningly at him, and he gave her a little nod. “Yes, Mrs. Johnson, please do.” The housekeeper turned and disappeared down the hallway, and Elizabeth touched David on the shoulder. “Come along, David.”

“What about the tree?”

“You can finish decorating it after dinner. Quentin, we’ll see you in the dining room.”

“Yes. Oh, by the way...is Roger here?”

Elizabeth frowned, as if annoyed that her brother was not present. “He’s working late at the office. Many of the staff have already taken off for the holidays, so he must make a show of handling everything himself.”

“Well, then, I’ll look forward to seeing him later.”

“Carolyn?” Elizabeth asked.

“I’ll be along shortly, Mother.”

Elizabeth nodded with a little smile and departed with David in tow. Finally, Carolyn was able to have a few moments alone with Quentin. No longer concerned about his earlier brusqueness, she asked, “What is it? What’s wrong?”

He smiled thinly. “I’m fine,” he said. “I’m just terribly tired. I haven’t slept well for a few days.”

“You found Julia?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure everything is all right?”

His eyes seemed to warm to her. “Don’t worry about me.” He went to the sideboard next to the drawing room doors and opened a decanter of brandy. “Will you join me?”

She nodded with a small measure of relief and stepped to his side while he poured two snifters—his nearly full. “Some things never change,” she said with a weak laugh.

“Oh, but they do, my dear,” he said, handing one glass to her. “Some things most definitely do.”

“And that means...?”

He smiled enigmatically. “Never mind. Look, I apologize for being short with you when I came in. I’ve had many things on my mind lately, and taking care of some business with Dr. Hoffman was first and foremost. That was no way to greet my favorite cousin.”

“I’ve missed you,” she said. “Why didn’t you ever let us know what you’ve been doing? You could have at least sent me a letter from time to time.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Carolyn,” he said, looking toward the fireplace, or beyond it. “I’ve needed to work out certain issues in my life. Just for myself. I didn’t want to involve you or anyone else at Collinwood in them.”

“And are these issues of yours resolved?”

He stared into space silently for several moments. His face was still chalky. “I don’t know,” he said at last.

“Can’t you talk to me about them? Maybe I can—”

“You can’t. If anyone here can, it’s Julia. But look, the last thing I want to do is to come back here and depress you with my problems. Let me see that smile that has always brightened my day.”

She tried to offer him a cheerful look, but her face failed dismally. She quickly lifted her glass and took a sip of brandy to mask what must surely be a foolish-looking expression of bewilderment. The drink burned her tongue and throat, but it was a smooth, comforting sensation. One she had grown quite accustomed to over the last few years.

“It’s been far too long since we’ve all spent Christmas together,” he said. “I’m glad I’m back now.”

“Are you certain?”

This time, his smile was sincere. “Yes. Yes, I am.”

She moved close to him and slipped an arm gently around his waist. He laid one arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him tenderly. “It’s so very good to see you again, Quentin,” she whispered.

“It is wonderful to see you, too. I mean that.”

Nothing seemed more natural than for him to be close to her this way. She could still feel the power in the muscles of his arms, the warmth that flowed through his hands. Surely, there was nothing seriously wrong with him. After he had spent a few days relaxing at Collinwood, he would be his old self again.

Come to me.

“Wha—?” she began, looking up, for a moment thinking Quentin had spoken. But he was gazing at the flames in the fireplace, and at the sound of her voice, he slowly turned to look at her curiously. He had not said a word.

But had she not just heard a whispering voice? A strange, yet somehow familiar voice?

“What did you say?” Quentin asked and took a sip of his drink.

She shook her head, wondering why she suddenly felt so warm. Before, the drawing room had been cold. She realized that her heart had begun to pound, and the glass of brandy in her hand jiggled nervously. She placed it on the sideboard to keep the liquid from sloshing on the floor.

“Carolyn?”

Her blood boiled in her veins, and she sucked in a deep breath trying to cool the inner fire. It was a familiar, yet almost-forgotten sensation. One hand rose to her

throat, and she touched her jugular vein to find it pulsing rapidly and forcefully.

You must hear me and obey me. Come. Now.

“It’s so stuffy in here,” she said distractedly. “I need a breath of fresh air.”

“You don’t want to miss dinner, do you?”

She shook her head. “I’ll be right back. I’m only going to step outside.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” She felt Quentin’s eyes studying her with concern.

“No. I won’t be a moment.”

She walked unsteadily to the foyer, her feet seeming to never touch the floor. Pausing at the door to take her coat from rack, she tried to slow her breathing and at least appear relaxed and composed. She knew exactly what she was doing.

Didn’t she?

No. She had no clue what was happening to her.

She glanced back and saw Quentin staring after her. From the thoughtful gleam in his eyes, it almost seemed as if *he* knew what she was doing.

She opened the door and stepped outside. A chill wind immediately took her in its grasp and tousled her hair, slapping the exposed skin of her face and hands with malicious glee. She dug into her pockets and found her pair of leather gloves, which she pulled on quickly, grateful for the warmth they offered. She stepped off the flagstone walkway onto the frost-encrusted grass and began walking across the gently sloping lawn toward the path that led to Widows’ Hill.

I know exactly where I’m going...and why.

What could Quentin possibly know? And what would he think if he had a clue? It was a terrible thing to consider. Humiliating. How could she look him in the eye if she thought he knew what she was going to do?

She had not even tried to resist.

The path led across the eastern edge of the property, taking her close to the cliff’s edge, where she could see the frothing whitecaps in the darkness beyond the precipice. Widows’ Hill. A place of tragedy. A place where, in the old days, the village women had come to watch for the return of their husbands’ ships. And many of them, their vigil in vain, had leaped from the edge, shattering their bodies on the jagged rocks a hundred feet below. Even the Collins family had suffered its share of tragedy here.

She had suffered tragedy here. The worst tragedy of all.

Jeb!

Her own husband had fallen from these dizzying heights.

Please don’t make me remember.

Mercifully, she found she could not linger and grieve for her loss; no power within her could resist the compulsion that drew her toward her destination. She continued on the path, leaving the cliff and her painful memories to be swallowed by the darkness and whipped by the furious wind. As the trail led into a section of dense woods, the trees sheltered her from the worst of the gale, though the dead, swirling leaves occasionally brushed her face like damp, questing hands, causing her to flinch. Finally, ahead, she could see a ghostly swatch of pale gray in the darkness, and she knew her objective was close at hand. Stepping out of the woods, she found herself gazing upon the Old House, its shadowed portico and towering Doric columns giving it the aspect of an ancient temple to forgotten gods. But for one dimly glowing rectangle on the ground floor, its windows were unlit. There would be no Christmas tree, no wreaths, no festive decorations within this mysterious keep.

She made her way to the front steps and cautiously crept onto the front porch, unaccountably fearful of making a sound, even though she knew she was expected. Before she could reach the front door, it opened slowly with a groan, revealing only more darkness within; not until her eyes began to adjust did she see the flickering glow of candlelight reflected on one of the interior walls. Taking a deep breath, she stepped across the threshold and saw a stocky figure holding the door for her, almost hidden within the shadows. Once she was inside, the figure slowly closed the door, and dim candlelight revealed the crude features and unkempt sandy hair of Willie Loomis—the caretaker of the old mansion. He wore an olive-drab sweater and a gray wool coat that had seen better days; the gloomy interior of the house hardly felt any warmer than the air outside.

“Hello, Carolyn,” Willie said softly. “I’ll take your coat, please.”

Without speaking, she removed her gloves and thrust them into the pockets before taking off her coat and handing it to him. He took it and then lifted an arm, motioning her toward a broad arched portal to the left. It was from this chamber that the candlelight gleamed.

Once through the doorway, she saw a tall candelabra, its three candles providing the only light in the room except for the low fire in the great fireplace in the far wall. Bookshelves lined each wall, most filled with moldering old volumes, and a beautifully embroidered but very worn Oriental carpet covered the hardwood floor. To her left, the candlelight barely illuminated an antique roll-top desk, now closed and covered with dust. A pair of plush, black- and gold-patterned wing chairs sat before the fireplace, both empty. And from the wall above the fireplace, the eyes of the house’s owner stared knowingly at her from the portrait that hung there, the expression seemingly one of wry amusement. At other times, mainly in daylight, the

face bore a look of sadness or loneliness. Perhaps it was the lighting in the room that gave it a more sinister aspect.

No. It's not the lighting. It's not the lighting at all.

She heard a rustling sound behind her and turned toward the archway, expecting to see Willie Loomis standing there. But there was no one. The caretaker had vanished, and now, except for the soft crackling of the fire, the darkness loomed empty and still, as if the arrogant house itself meant to deny her even a hint of its inner secrets. She knew that she had nothing to fear here, yet her heart throbbed noisily in her chest, blood roaring in her ears like hurricane-driven breakers, and her stomach quivered with icy anxiety. She had been through this before.

She perceived a dominating presence, like a burial shroud lowering upon her, a half-second before the cool hand that fell upon her shoulder. Slowly, she turned and lifted her eyes to meet those that gazed at her from a shadow-hidden face. They were the same eyes as those in the portrait, gleaming with supernal light; not unkindly, but with a power that rendered her entirely helpless. When the candlelight revealed the face, she took some solace in the familiarity of its aristocratic lines, the prominent brow over which several black, spiked locks fell like dark counterparts of the sharp white teeth she glimpsed in the thin smile he offered her.

“Good evening, Carolyn,” said the mellifluous voice, smooth and hypnotic. “I’m so glad you could join me this evening.”

“Cousin Barnabas,” she said softly, bowing her head to signal her submissiveness to him.

“You know why you are here?”

“Yes.”

“You are not afraid?”

“No. Not with you.”

He smiled darkly. “Good.” He was dressed in a dark suit with a gray and red patterned tie. One hand, its forefinger adorned by a large, onyx ring with a gold band, rose and caressed her cheek tenderly. His skin was cold and dry, as if no blood coursed through the veins beneath the skin—at least not living blood. He wrapped his arms around her with a gentleness that assured her she would come to no harm in his embrace. Anyone else, she knew, might not be so fortunate. She tilted her head back, exposing her throat to him because she knew it was what she must do; and she *wanted* to do it, knowing that, because of her, Barnabas Collins would survive for another night.

He lowered his lips to her neck, their chill sending a thrill of fear and ecstasy through her body like a crashing ocean wave. She felt the sharpness of his teeth as

they delicately quested for her jugular vein, then the sudden pain of penetration, quickly numbed, and the rhythmic flow of blood from the wicked punctures. She melted into his arms, finding herself at peace, all the cares of the world, all thoughts of any other—even Quentin—driven from her mind. Briefly, she thought that, for her half-willing part in this union, she must be as damned as he who partook of her body. But even these bitter thoughts were washed away as her blood pulsed into the other's mouth, and she could hear a soft gulp as he swallowed what must surely be a shocking amount of her life's essence.

But it doesn't matter. It's right that I am here.

Time had no meaning in his embrace, and she knew only contentment as he held her with care and tenderness. Briefly, the thought that she should be in Quentin's arms tried to surface amid the warm tide in which she floated, but it quickly vanished as Barnabas's lips left her throat and one of his hands softly stroked her hair. When she opened her eyes, she could focus only on his penetrating hazel eyes, which searched hers as if to lay her soul bare, to wrench all of her secrets from her with the same determination that he had consumed her blood. The room beyond him was only an indistinct swirl of shadow and dim washes of light, and she wanted him to hold her and never let go.

He touched the wounds in her neck with his cool fingers, and she felt the blood that leaked over her collarbone toward her breasts cease to flow. She took a deep, steadying breath and gazed at him as he smiled at her warmly, again touching her hair with the gentleness of a caring father.

"Go now," he said softly. "When you return to Collinwood, you will forget what has happened here tonight."

She nodded, knowing his will would guide her home, and keep her safe. For now, at least, she knew she was loved.

He does love me. I can feel that he does.

She turned slowly and saw Willie Loomis standing in the hallway holding her coat for her. He helped her slip it over her shoulders and then opened the door for her, admitting a gust of laughing wind. She glanced back once, still feeling Barnabas's eyes upon her; but he no longer stood beneath the archway to the drawing room. That he was watching her, she did not doubt; her gaze simply could not infiltrate the places from which he watched over her like a guardian spirit—or devil. She nodded once to the darkness, then stepped into the night, hearing the door groan once and then close firmly behind her.

Quentin.

She shook herself, realizing the last few moments of her walk had become a

hazy jumble of impressions that made little sense to her. She had seen someone... *yes, Barnabas, of course.* They had talked, and she had lost track of the time. Hopefully, Quentin would not be disappointed by her tardiness. She wanted to spend more time with him tonight.

Surely he would want to be with her. He had been gone for so long.

Something rustled behind her, and when she looked back, the shadows near the edge of the path were writhing and twisting. A shockingly loud, insect-like chirp erupted from the spot where she'd seen the movement. But no insect could be out in this cold! Surely, they were all dead. She quickened her step, a strange uneasiness worming its way into the blanket of contentment she wore like a garment. Collinwood was near, and she would welcome the fire in the drawing room, for her cheeks were numb with the cold. She realized she was hungry, for she had eaten nothing since breakfast. She was famished! So much of her energy seemed to have been inexplicably drained.

As she stepped into the pool of golden light beneath the stone porte cochere, she thought she again heard something scabbling in the leaves behind her. But this time she did not look around, and when she opened the front door to step into the foyer, she saw Quentin standing there with a drink in his hand, a look of worry on his face. But when he saw her, a little smile came to his lips.

And Carolyn was happy again.

Chapter 3

Julia Hoffman had lived at Collinwood long enough to feel that it was *home*, in every sense of the word. The people here meant more to her than any she had ever known—including her own parents and siblings, for whatever that was worth. Her unwavering loyalty to the Collinses through so many crises and hardships had earned her their deepest appreciation and, yes, even their love, assuring her a place in the house for as long as she wished to remain. Being a woman of independent means, under no circumstances could any reasonable person accuse her of merely having designs upon their vast wealth—although certainly there were individuals in her past who happily might have done so. But she had left those people behind a long time ago and was glad of it. The knowledge that she could truly make a difference in the lives of the members of this household gave her a sense of purpose she had never known in all her years as a physician. That she had sacrificed any professional renown, a practice that could have potentially helped hundreds—maybe thousands—of others, even the possibility of a relationship with a “normal” man...these meant nothing to her anymore. She was exactly where she wanted to be. Where she *needed* to be.

The entry of a pretty, petite blonde into the drawing room served as a poignant reminder of that fact.

“Carolyn,” Julia said, “is everything all right?”

“Yes, of course,” the girl said with a flighty little laugh. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“You missed dinner.”

“I wasn’t hungry. I went out for a walk and stayed longer than I meant to.”

Julia hesitated for a moment before asking, “Did you see anyone?”

Carolyn stepped to the sideboard and poured herself an impolitely generous snifter of brandy. “Why? What difference does it make to you?”

Julia smiled only with her lips. “I was just curious. It’s a cold night. I do believe it’s going to snow.”

“I think you’re right.” She turned, nonchalantly placing a hand over her slim throat. “Would you care for a drink?”

“No, thank you.”

Carolyn’s face was pale and her hands trembled slightly as she took a sip from her glass. To Julia, it was all too plain exactly what—and whom—she had encountered on her “walk.” The symptoms were unmistakable.

“Carolyn, did you happen to see Barnabas while you were out?”

Her laugh rang with falseness. “I took a walk alone,” she said. “But even if I did

see Barnabas, why do you ask as if it were against the law? There's no reason I shouldn't see him, is there?"

"I just want you to be honest with me, Carolyn. As you know, there are no secrets between Barnabas and myself. I would certainly never judge you for going to him. He can be very...persuasive, when he needs to be."

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean, Julia," Carolyn said, her jewel-like blue eyes turning icy. "I don't do anything I don't want to do or see anyone I don't want to see. You of all people should know that about me."

"Of course," Julia said, not wishing to press the issue further with Carolyn on the defensive. Obviously, Barnabas had not harmed her severely. But the fact he had drawn Carolyn to him after such a long time was troubling. *Very* troubling. Julia went to stand by the Christmas tree, staring vacantly at the twinkling, rainbow-colored lights. She breathed in the sweet, earthy scent of evergreen, finding that it had a relaxing effect on her tense nerves. "What a beautiful tree," she said softly. "You and David decorated it, didn't you?"

"Yes, we did."

"It's very nice."

"Thank you." Carolyn's voice was low, emotionless.

Julia turned her eyes to the frost-filmed window. "Oh, it's beginning to snow!"

"I'm not surprised. As you said, it's very cold out."

Barnabas had to feed on someone, Julia told herself. That was a fact of his existence, as she well knew. Sometimes the bloodlust could be too powerful for him to control, and when that happened, even she did not dare approach him. But he had not touched anyone in the family for years, unwilling to allow the possibility of harming one of them, however inadvertently. Knowing he sought his morbid nourishment in some other quarter was hardly a salve for her conscience, but at least she could go to sleep at night when she believed that the immediate family was safe from his predations.

If only she could find an effective compound again...something that would conquer the dreadful condition he suffered. Even the most potent concentration of the vaccine she had once created no longer had any effect on his constitution. She had attempted so many times to duplicate her initial success, and once she had—although fleetingly and with near-disastrous results. Since then, all her attempts to isolate and destroy the mysterious cell in his blood that she believed perpetuated his preternatural existence had failed miserably. And now, even the prospect of becoming a normal human being again could not persuade Barnabas to participate in any further experiments.

Outside, snow had begun to fall in earnest, with huge flakes that danced out of the darkness and quickly accumulated on the frozen ground. For a moment, she thought she saw a shadow pass over the thickening layer of white just beyond the range of the light that filtered through the drawing room window. Might Barnabas be out there right now, watching the house, perhaps intending to summon Carolyn again? If his craving had become too severe, his feeding upon her might have been insufficient to sustain him for the rest of the night. How frightening to know that Barnabas, such a good friend and ally, in whose hands she had often willingly placed her life, at times changed into a creature she could neither claim to truly know nor even begin to trust.

Carolyn went back to the sideboard, poured herself another drink, and started to walk out of the room without a further word. But Julia called after her, “Carolyn, wait.” When the young blonde turned to regard her curiously, Julia said with urgency, “Carolyn...you must not go back out tonight. No matter what. If you feel compelled to leave the house, please...come to me first. Promise me that. Will you?”

Carolyn glared at her with unconcealed fury for several moments, her blue eyes blazing, her jaw working back and forth as if she were working up a spiteful retort. But at last her expression softened somewhat, and she said quietly, “Julia, I’m not going anywhere except to my room. Look, I know you care about me, and I’m grateful for that. But sometimes I honestly don’t understand these peculiar obsessions of yours. I’m saying good night to you.”

“Good night,” Julia sighed and turned back toward the window, listening to the click-clacking of Carolyn’s heels across the stone floor of the foyer. She heard the creak of her feet on the stairs, and then the young woman was gone. But only a moment later, Julia sensed a new presence in the room, and turning, she saw Quentin standing in the doorway, staring at her with an expression of deep concern.

“Well, was I right?” he asked.

“I’m afraid so.”

Quentin entered the room and, true to form, went straight for the decanter of brandy. “Care to join me, Dr. Hoffman?”

This time, she nodded and allowed Quentin to pour her a healthy dose of brandy. The burn of the first sip did little to quell her trepidation, so she took several more to insure that the job would be done.

“Carolyn and I were talking,” Quentin said. “Suddenly, I could tell something had changed...like she was listening to something far away. Like she was being ordered to do something that she couldn’t refuse.”

“Yes. That’s exactly what happens.”

“I knew it could only be Barnabas. I see his affliction is just as persistent as my own. Only his probably won’t bring about the end of his existence in the immediately foreseeable future.”

“We don’t know that will happen to you, Quentin. Not yet.”

He smiled mirthlessly. “It certainly doesn’t do any good to hope otherwise. That wouldn’t be very scientific, would it?”

“If I didn’t always hope for something better, none of my work would have any meaning.”

“I’m sure of that.” Quentin took a long drink that brought water even to his eyes. “But at least with Barnabas, you’ve had some kind of logical starting point.”

“That’s true,” Julia said thoughtfully. “Although it’s not something I’ve ever completely understood, I was able to discover an organic means to combat his condition, at least initially. But your situation is different, Quentin. There is nothing I can find, scientifically, to account for the relationship between your physiology and the portrait by Charles Delaware Tate. Nor for the...curse you have suffered. That much is completely beyond my understanding.”

“Which makes finding a solution to my problem pretty much out of the question.”

“But Quentin, if you truly believed that, you would never have come back here.”

“Perhaps it’s merely a matter of the condemned man wanting to go to his death among familiar surroundings,” he said softly. “Collinwood is my home. Whatever happens to me, I want it to happen here.”

“And if you should change with the next full moon?”

“Then you must put a silver bullet into my heart and finish it. Once and for all.”

“Quentin...do you have any idea what you’re asking?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life, Julia.”

After a moment’s hesitation, she nodded; but she could never swear to carry out such a request. She was a doctor; her mission was to save lives, not end them. The idea of killing Quentin repulsed her, no matter that, if he changed into the wolf-beast, he would no longer be the dashing young man who stood before her enjoying his brandy. He would not even be human.

“Why would Barnabas summon Carolyn?” he asked at last. “Even before I left he had not preyed upon anyone in the family for a long time. Has he gone back to that?”

“Not until now,” Julia said. “It concerns me that he felt it necessary.”

“Can you talk to him about it?”

“I think I had better.”

“Strange that this would happen now—right at the same time that I’ve come back.”

Julia glanced up at him suddenly. She realized he’d only made an offhand remark, but her mind suddenly cranked into high gear. “I wonder if it’s more than coincidence.”

“How do you mean?”

Her eyes narrowed. “I have no idea. I don’t know why I would think such a thing.”

“But something must have led you to that conclusion.”

“I just mean it’s an avenue worth considering. One thing I have learned in my experience is never to rule out even the most unlikely of options.”

“Julia, there haven’t been any ‘unexplained’ deaths in Collinsport recently, have there?”

“You mean has Barnabas taken a life?” She shook her head. “He’s been able to control himself so that he hasn’t needed to kill. But his calling Carolyn this way makes me wonder if he is still able to maintain that control.”

“Well, Julia, if there is anyone who can get the answer straight from him, it’s you. He’s always trusted you.”

“Almost always,” she corrected him, thinking back to the early days, when she had first learned Barnabas’s deadly secret. He had come very close to killing her then.

“The times that count,” Quentin said.

“Yes.”

There was a long silence as Quentin poured another drink and Julia went to stare out the window again. The snow had gotten deeper in only the last few minutes. Something out there seemed to keep drawing her back to peer outside. But what was it? She could see nothing out of the ordinary among the swirling, drifting snowflakes. On the glass panes, the reflected Christmas tree lights winked at her ambivalently.

“You might also be able to talk to him,” she said as Quentin came to stand beside her. “Because you both suffer the effects of a curse, there is a unique bond between you. And he has a great deal of respect for you.”

“He’s a fine man,” Quentin said softly. “Perhaps I can use whatever influence I might have...if I have the chance.” He took a long sip of his drink.

“Somehow, I don’t think anything’s going to happen to you...not yet.”

He smiled. “Is that one of your scientific observations? Or just wishful thinking?”

She smiled back warmly at him. “It’s what I’m hoping for. Very much.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

“Tell me, Quentin...what have you really been doing away from Collinwood all this time? Have you been happy?”

He shrugged. “I’ve been all right. To be honest, I’d been hoping there was some chance...some way of finding a person very dear to me.”

Julia eyed him thoughtfully. In the year before he’d left Collinwood, he had lost the one woman with whom he had been able to find true love; a woman who was curiously linked to his life in the previous century—another result of the enchanted brush of the artist Charles Delaware Tate. Her name was Amanda Harris. And just when Quentin had offered to spend his life with her, she had disappeared under mysterious circumstances. There were inexplicable gaps in Quentin’s memory from that period; he had claimed she was destroyed by a shadowy stranger named Mr. Best, the self-proclaimed embodiment of death itself. But there had never been any tangible proof of her death, nor even of the existence of Mr. Best. Reluctantly, Quentin had come to believe there was a chance, however slim, that Amanda might still be alive.

So...he had been looking for her all this time.

Julia could not hide her look of pity. “You never found her. I’m sorry, Quentin.”

“I never really expected to,” he said. “It was simply too much to hope for. In my existence, I’ve learned that even the smallest hope is often too much.”

She sighed, peering out at the snow. “I wish that, at least for now, we could put everything else behind us and simply enjoy the holiday. It will be such a beautiful Christmas.”

Quentin’s laugh was harsh. “Christmas indeed. Well, why should Christmas be different from any other day in the life of the endlessly cursed Collins family?” He lifted his glass and downed the last of his drink, returning to the sideboard to pour another. “Merry, merry, merry.”

Julia could feel the pain in his voice, and her heart moved for him as it never had before. Could he be truly destined to die—and very soon? Was there nothing she could do for him, not even to spare him the pain of another night of the full moon? She felt her eyes burning. The hope she had expressed to him was as empty as her own brandy glass.

Surely, it was the tears in her eyes that made her think she saw a strange shadow creeping through the snow close to the drawing room window. She wiped her eyes with one hand and peered through the frosty glass, unable to see anything more than a few feet away. But something had moved. Something low to the ground. Not a human figure. Certainly not Barnabas. Some kind of animal, perhaps.

Just a cat, I suppose. A cat cold and hungry and looking for shelter from the snow.

For several more moments, she gazed into the swirling snowflakes and the quickly accumulating layer upon the ground. With the snow coming down and the Christmas tree lights flashing in the glass, she couldn't be certain of anything she might see. She turned away and went to join Quentin at the sideboard, holding out her glass to him as if in offering.

“I don't suppose you'd mind pouring an extra one of those?”

Quentin gave her a cool smile. “Why not? Neither of us has any other pressing engagements tonight.”

Julia envisioned Barnabas's face, his features taut, eyes fiery, his lips stained with red. She had a terrible feeling about him. Not only that he might be in danger, but that he *was* a danger—the worst part being that he wouldn't even realize it. “I hope not, Quentin,” she said with a frustrated sigh. “I certainly hope not.”

Chapter 4

After all this time, as well as we know each other, Julia Hoffman still treats me like a child. She'll never see beyond my troubled past. Perhaps she's simply too old and set in her ways.

Carolyn closed her bedroom door against the shadows that filled the silent hallway and savored the warm glow from her ornate, antique lamp, which burned like a crystal ember atop her bedside nightstand. Her room felt warm and secure, unlike the rest of the vast mansion, which seemed dank and oppressive tonight, moreso than usual. Her head reeled slightly, and she laid a hand on the tall bedpost to steady herself. She hadn't had that much to drink, so why should she feel so weak, so unsteady? Quentin's arrival had excited her so much, and her walk in the frigid air had first invigorated and then exhausted her. The alcohol on top of it must have had a narcotizing effect.

Julia Hoffman was only concerned about her; she knew that, yet she couldn't help but resent the older woman's condescending attitude. Even at the best of times, Julia's almost-arrogant demeanor was annoying, sometimes infuriating. Carolyn genuinely liked Julia, but found it difficult to spend much time with her, for, inevitably, she played the mere impulsive girl to the sagacious woman doctor, and she knew it would probably be that way if they both lived to be a hundred. Sardonicly, she wondered if things would be different if she were the redhead and Julia the blonde.

With a little sigh, she moved to her dresser and sat down in front of the tall mirror, finding herself surprised by the sight of a near-stranger facing her in the glass. *No, it really is me*, she thought. But the eyes staring back at her burned brightly within dark hollows, and her ordinarily ruddy cheeks appeared sunken and pale. The person in the mirror was surely ten years older than she. *Weary. Haunted. But why?* She had every reason to be happy tonight, for Quentin had returned after what seemed like ages, and he appeared truly thrilled to see her again. From the day they had met she adored him, and she believed he felt nothing less than protective of her. There was no reason to feel anxious or apprehensive.

Or ashamed.

She shook her head vehemently at her reflection. What was that supposed to mean? She had nothing to feel guilty about. But then she noticed the small red marks on the left side of her neck. Yes, the skin there felt tender, bruised. When she touched the marks, her flesh burned, and her hand retreated involuntarily. What on earth? Had she jabbed herself with some sharp object and not even realized it?

Come to me.

“Oh, my God.”

For a second, she remembered the voice in her head, and the baffling compulsion to leave the house, to answer the mysterious call as if it were the seductive voice of a lover she had dreamed of all her life. But when she tried to recall exactly where she had gone, what had happened to her, her mind came up blank. She knew she had done more than simply go walking along Widows Hill. Had she seen someone? Had she been harmed in any way? *No; if someone had hurt me, I would know it.* The one thing she did know was that this was not the first time she had had such an experience; it had happened before, a long time ago—years, perhaps. For a period of several nights, some strange, irresistible compulsion had seized her, and she knew she had left her room and gone outside; beyond that, everything was a blur of confused sensations, as if her body and mind had been conquered by a force that did not *wish* her to remember. But the very concept of being out of control chilled her blood. She was *always* in control of herself. No one could ever dominate her will. She had proven that over and over, not just to herself, but to everyone who knew her. To her mother. To her Uncle Roger. Even to Julia.

The voice in her head...it belonged to her cousin Barnabas. That was true, wasn't it? Could he have done something to her without her knowledge, perhaps something dangerous? No, the idea was repulsive. True, Barnabas had more than his share of eccentricities, and sometimes she thought he might even hide a wealth of secrets that, if anyone discovered them, could prove shocking. *But everyone has secrets,* she thought, and *our family is far from an exception.* Even her own mother—her kind, warm, loving mother—had for 18 years carried a heavy burden of guilt for a crime she thought she had committed, only to eventually learn that she was innocent. Still, the fact that Elizabeth Collins Stoddard believed she had murdered her own husband, even under extreme duress, meant that anyone could have a dark side that to others might seem unimaginable. No matter what kind of secret life Barnabas Collins might lead, Carolyn knew in her heart that he would never, under any circumstances, harm her or allow her to be harmed. She trusted him and cared deeply for him. She could never explain the reason for it, but in some strange way, she believed she had helped him. And that, she thought, was more important than actually understanding what had happened. As long as it was for Barnabas, she could live with the uncertainty of her feelings.

You have no choice in the matter.

She winced and shook off the nagging voice as the last vestige of lingering doubt. After a few contemplative moments, she rose from her dresser and turned on

her stereo at low volume to dispel the silence. The soft, mellow notes of an Astrud Gilberto samba washed over her with the gentleness of a lover's touch, immediately relaxing her taut nerves. Half-hypnotized, with the rhythmic movements of a ballet dancer, she slipped out of her clothes and took her favorite satin nightgown from her closet, taking pleasure in the feel of the cool, supple fabric between her fingers. The mirror reflected a near-naked body with firm, well-toned muscles, limbs lithe and perfectly proportioned. The years that seemed to weigh on her a few moments ago had slipped away, and now she looked her trim, youthful self again. Still, in the depths of her brilliant blue eyes she glimpsed a hardness that gave her the aspect of a familiar stranger. True, she was hardly the carefree young woman who had once rebelled against the traditionalism of her family, frequented every seedy pub and nightclub from Collinsport to Bangor, and attached herself to any young man who would thoroughly displease her mother and uncle. In the last couple of years, she had experienced more tragedy than most women her age: her father, gone for virtually all of her life, had returned to Collinwood in hopes of making amends with his wife and daughter, only to suffer a violent death; and soon thereafter, her husband met an equally terrible end at the foot of Widows Hill. But like the Collins she was at heart, she confronted life's tribulations with something resembling dignity and maturity.

The hell with Julia Hoffman. She has no right to treat me with anything less than respect.

Just as she slipped her nightgown over her head, a soft knock came at her door, and for a second her heart leaped, as if she had been caught in the act of doing something improper. Why should she feel that way? What had Barnabas *really* done to her? Despite her feelings of trust for him, she could not shake the feeling of shame that clung to her like a ravenous leech. Did she really have something to feel guilty about? Why did she hesitate to pull her nightgown down over her legs, leaving herself half-exposed, as she moved toward the door?

She leaned against the doorframe and softly called, "Who is it?" Finally, she tugged the hem of her nightgown over her thighs.

"It's me." Quentin's voice.

Her heart slammed into her ribcage. She had half-expected Julia or her mother, but if she could have hoped for anyone, it would have been him. Trembling slightly, her fingers twisted the doorknob, and she slowly opened the door a few inches. His tall silhouette subjugated the shadows; she heard his low, steady breathing and felt a subtle, comforting warmth radiating from his half-hidden figure. He stepped forward slowly, and the light from her bedside lamp gradually caressed his features. As his face drew nearer, his wide blue eyes leaped into hers, and she felt her illusory strength

of will evaporate under his gaze. He was such a beautiful man, almost supernaturally handsome, his expression one of both concern and appraisal, conveying both due and proper respect for her as well as assurance that he could dominate her in a moment if that was what he desired.

“Oh, Quentin,” she said softly, offering him a tentative smile. She did not step back or open the door fully to him. “I’m surprised to see you again this evening.”

“I just came to check on you,” he said, his voice resonant with calculated tenderness. “I was a little worried about you earlier.”

“You needn’t worry about me. I’m perfectly fine.”

“May I come in?”

She made a show of hesitating, but she could never have refused his eyes. “All right,” she said, “but only for a moment or two. I’m getting ready to go to bed.”

“It’s early yet.”

“I’m a little tired.”

He stepped inside and placed his hand over hers on the doorknob, gently pushing it shut. His fingers were strong but soft. They were electric. When his hand pulled away, the vacancy felt like an Arctic wind.

She backed onto the edge of her bed, self-consciously pulling her legs up next to her. Without invitation, Quentin sat down beside her, his eyes studying hers with almost predatory intensity. To her chagrin, her own gaze faltered. “Are you all right, Carolyn?” he asked softly. His eyes had lowered to her throat.

“I—I’m fine,” she stammered, her eyes struggling to draw his from her wounds. “But what about you, Quentin? You didn’t look so well earlier. And you were so insistent to see Julia.”

After a long, thoughtful silence, he said, “I’ve done a lot of traveling in the last year or so. It tends to take its toll on a body. There’s nothing wrong with me now.”

For the first time, she doubted the genuineness of his words. His voice was hollow and thin. *He’s trying to convince himself, not me.*

“Anyway,” he said. “I didn’t come here to discuss me. It’s you I wonder about. I’ve missed you, Carolyn.”

“I’ve missed you, too.”

“I have to confess, I felt uncomfortable leaving so soon after you lost Jeb. I know it was a difficult time for you.”

She nodded. “I’ve managed. But you never approved of Jeb anyway.”

He smiled wistfully. “What I thought was never important. Your happiness was. It still is. And I know what it’s like to lose a loved one.” One of his hands fell softly upon her shoulder, and she closed her eyes, again taking refuge in the warmth of his

touch. But then his fingers brushed her collarbone, and she felt his hand move toward the tender area at her throat. When she opened her eyes, he was peering intently at her neck.

“This worries me, Carolyn.”

“It’s nothing.”

“That might not be so.”

She longed to ask him what he knew, why the marks should concern him. If he understood what they meant, he could even reveal the answers to her. But the very thought of voicing her questions froze her tongue. *Something is holding me back. If I so much as ask, I will burn to ash. I can feel the heat inside me...threatening me.*

He seemed to understand her confusion, the fog that muddied her thoughts, kept them from converging coherently. His sharp gaze softened and released her, and she sighed aloud in relief, despite her desire to appear nonchalant. To her surprise, his eyes wandered around her room until they fell upon the corner of an emerald-colored strip of silk that peeked bashfully from a dresser drawer, slightly ajar. Without so much as asking her leave, he rose, opened the drawer, and removed the translucent silk scarf, which she had worn around her shoulders a few nights ago when she had gone to dinner with her mother at the Pennock Supper Club. He very slowly folded the scarf into a neat crescent and gingerly wrapped it around her neck like a luxurious bandage, tying the ends together with so that it encircled her slim throat loosely but fully.

“You’re a picture of elegance.”

“I feel a little foolish.” She tried to grin.

“It’s all right,” he said. “I can see there’s nothing really wrong with you. You’re almost the same girl I knew when I left. Only a little older and possibly wiser.”

She loosed a small, caustic laugh. “Wisdom never comes without taking a little bit of your life away. Sometimes I miss being innocent and brazen. There’s a certain purity in being young and selfish that all the wisdom in the world can never replace.”

“You sound like someone who has already lived a long time,” he said, his gaze turning inward. “Sometimes living a long time is simply lonely. Nothing more, nothing less.” His eyes snapped back to the present. “But then, you’re not lonely.”

“Nor am I particularly loved. Except for Mother. Of course, Mother loves me dearly.”

“There’s no one else in your life now?”

She shook her head. “There’s no one in this town I would care to get to know any better than I already know them.”

“You’ve become cynical. That’s different from the girl I used to know. Well, my dear cousin, I hope I’ll have a chance to become acquainted with you all over again.”

His emphasis on the word *cousin* told her that he considered their remote familial tie as nearly irrelevant as she did.

She looked at him curiously. There was a strange, almost canine gleam in his eyes. But it was intriguing, exotic. The thoughts that were beginning to form in her mind were distinctly improper.

“I would love to spend time with you again, Quentin.”

“You don’t believe Barnabas would mind?”

A sudden, inexplicable burst of hot anger exploded in her breast, and she launched herself from the bed. “What does Barnabas have to do with anything? Are you going to be like Julia and demand to know whenever my path and his happen to cross? Why should it matter to you, Quentin, what Barnabas might think about me or anything I do?”

His face remained impassive, as if he had half-expected such an outburst from her. She immediately retreated from him and turned toward the mirror, wondering why she had reacted so irrationally. But the heat in her chest did not dissipate, and the wound at her throat began to throb painfully. Blood roared like a cataract in her ears, and she took several deep breaths to try to quell her raging insides. The attempt only half succeeded.

Finally, she said in a controlled voice, “Quentin, if you came here only to discuss Barnabas, then you and I have nothing further to say this evening. I already told you I’m very tired. I think I would like to go to bed now.”

Quentin’s face was almost smug. *He had baited her.* “I’m sorry, Carolyn.” His voice was sincere, but his eyes still probed her reflection. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I’m sure you’ll forget all about it in the morning.”

“That’s very perceptive of you. Or should I say presumptuous?”

He turned toward the door, and for a fleeting moment she saw a hint of weakness in his face, a patch of ash in the bronze fullness of his cheeks. His sapphire eyes were opaque when he gave her a long last look and opened the door slowly. “It’s always easier the next day. Your blood will have cooled by then. Good night, Carolyn.”

He slipped into the shadows without another word, and the door clicked softly behind him. Gradually, the electricity in the air began to diminish, his presence no longer charging the room. Floorboards creaked as he turned down the hall toward the foyer, and then all she could hear was the low, passionate voice of Della Reese singing “Don’t You Know” on her stereo speakers. She moved to the desktop and shut it off, unable to bear the heart-wrenching intensity of the song’s upcoming climax. Silence rushed in to fill the void like a tsunami, and the sudden realization of her solitude in

her little corner of the great mansion sent her head reeling again. *Perhaps he and Julia are right to be worried about me*, she thought as she settled herself on her bed. *Why am I so utterly unnerved?*

For many long minutes she sat in her shell of silence, listening for any sounds of life from downstairs. Nothing. Her bedroom was too far away, and no one else on the floor was stirring. David was probably already in his room at the far end of the hallway, Elizabeth was almost certainly in her library downstairs, and there was no telling where Uncle Roger was. He had come and gone early in the evening, ostensibly to handle yet more urgent business at the plant, but more likely, he had gone to the Blue Whale so he could get into his cups without distractions such as his son, his sister, his niece, the Christmas tree, the good Doctor Hoffman, or even their current house guest.

Eventually, she pulled herself to her feet and went to the bathroom across the hall to perform her evening ablutions. Like everything in the house, the fixtures were old, the porcelain sink chipped and stained. The room smelled of jasmine, peppermint, and ammonia, the latter from Mrs. Johnson's overly liberal application of disinfectant during her daily cleaning. Carolyn went to the toilet, brushed her teeth, washed her face, and gave her hair a few cursory swipes of the hairbrush for good measure. The eyes in the mirror looked even older now, more sunken. But they were still clear, crystal blue.

I will never lose control. I AM in control.

She returned to her bedroom, closed the door—and found her fingers grasping the key to lock it. She never locked her door at night. Surely, she had no fear that anyone would disturb her; and if Quentin were to come back and apologize for upsetting her, she would welcome his hand upon the knob. She withdrew to her bed without turning the key, insisting to herself that she had no more reason to be nervous or insecure than she did on any other night. *Besides, they're all apparently so worried about me, none of them would let anything happen to me. They're like the damned Buckingham Palace guards.*

She slid beneath the covers and twisted the knob on her lamp, submitting herself to all but complete darkness. Her curtains were drawn, but the window framed a rectangle of pale, orange-green snowlight, and she could see a slight rippling movement on the other side of the curtains as snow continued to fall unabated. Immediately, her bare legs warmed the cool bedclothes, and she pulled the covers tight around her neck. She still wore the emerald silk scarf that Quentin had tied there, and she left it in place, a comforting reminder of his touch. She knew she could never stay angry with him. Like Julia Hoffman, he was only concerned about her. She simply did

not know how to handle the idea that other people—besides her own mother—might actually have an interest in her welfare.

All her life, people had only taken an interest in her if they wanted something *from* her.

And, most painfully, she knew in her heart that Jeb Hawkes had married her for no other reason. She had probably known it all along and simply denied it. But after he had died, she began to see things clearly. His love for her had been predicated on what *she* might be able to do for him. Financially. Sexually. *Oh, God, the pain of it.*

“But not Quentin,” she whispered to herself. “He’s not like that.”

The pillow beneath her head was soft and warm, and she curled up on her side, embracing one end of the pillow as if it were a lover. In her bed she felt safe and secure, but she desired a man’s protective arms around her. Even Jeb made her feel safe at night. If Quentin were to come to her, would she let him in? To some, no doubt, the very idea was scandalous. Yet she could not deny the appeal of the idea, to be with him. The blood ties were virtually nonexistent.

Still...even if he were willing, she wasn’t sure she could actually go through with it. She wanted him so, yet he was forbidden. The classic attraction....

A soft clattering sound near the window obliterated her fantasy before it even began. She rolled slowly over, casting her gaze at the dimly glowing rectangle in the field of otherwise total darkness. The sound was like a tree branch scraping against the glass, but the nearest limbs could not brush her window unless the big linden tree out there had been completely crushed beneath the weight of the snow and bent toward the house. For several moments, there was no further sound, and she began to drift back in the direction of sleep. But then...it came again. A low but distinct *creak-clatter-scrape* at the window. Her eyes flew open and she sat up, peering at the drawn curtains, her heart beginning to pound a little bit harder. Surely, nothing could be out there, not at her second-story window. The wind must have stirred up some twigs or something and sent them fluttering against the house.

Again, complete silence for several minutes. Her eyes closed once...twice...and down came her lids, heavy and aching from the long day’s excitement and stress. She sighed deeply and lay on her back, crossing her arms over her breasts, expecting now to be carried away on welcome, gentle waves of sleep. The muscles in her feet relaxed. Her leg muscles followed suit. Gradually, like ripples in a pond, pure comfort spread through her body, and her breathing became slow and regular, as did the beating of her heart.

Then came a hard, fast rapping at the window, and her eyes flew wide. Turning her head, she detected a shadow near the top of the illuminated rectangle: a writhing,

twisting shape that scabbled at the glass like groping, grasping fingers. Whatever it was, it looked to be the size of a cat, its figure thrusting back and forth against the windowpane, its scratching becoming louder and more determined.

“Jesus,” she whispered, rising slowly up on her elbows. “What *is* that?”

The indistinct thing seemed to jerk in an almost obscene humping motion; and then, to Carolyn’s utter shock, she saw the curtains begin to quiver. Near the top of the window, a bulge appeared in the drapes, as if whatever was out there had somehow passed right through the glass. The scraping sound became a long, screeching hiss as something hard and sharp dragged itself over the panes, and the bulge in the drape began to descend toward the floor.

Every nerve in Carolyn’s body urged her to rise from the bed, to scurry for the door, to get out into the hallway. To cry out for help. Simply to scream. *Do something*, she thought. *Anything*. But she was completely frozen, paralyzed with disbelief and terror. Something *thunked* heavily on the floor beneath the window, and she knew now that the intruder—whatever it was—had indeed somehow gotten inside. Her lungs heaved frantically, but even the air eluded her, for she could not draw in a full, deep breath. She could not scream now if she tried. A cold fist clutched her entire body, gripped every muscle in every limb. For a moment, she understood exactly how one might die of fright.

Yet her terror continued to mount, for now she heard a soft, tentative scratching at the foot of her bed, and then the unmistakable sound of something hard and rough stroking the fabric of her bedspread. In her toes, she felt the first tiny pressure of something pulling at the covers, and she somehow managed to draw her feet back a few inches from the end of the bed. Her chest was about to implode, for her lungs were empty, and her mouth began to work back and forth, trying to form a word. If she could just scream...someone would come. Her mother. Julia. Quentin. It didn’t matter. Someone.

Please! Doesn’t anyone understand what is happening to me?

The pressure on the bedspread increased, and now, at the foot of her bed, she saw a pale splotch appear against the black backdrop of her room. With slow deliberation it began to inch its way onto her bed, higher and higher, past her ankles, toward her knees. The thing slowly lifted itself onto her thighs, horribly heavy and seemingly hard as a rock. As it crept furtively onto her abdomen, she realized that it had a number of long, segmented legs that spanned the width of her body—like some kind of giant crab. And she was certain that it was peering at her with something akin to intelligence—and malice.

It lifted itself onto her chest, and now she heard a faint clicking sound from the

thing's innumerable joints. Something hard and sharp lightly brushed one of her fingers. She tried to draw her arm away, but it was then that she felt her wrist seized by a steely pincer, followed by a stinging jab in her right forearm. It felt like a knitting needle passing into her flesh; at first shocking her with a barely-felt impact and then jolting her with sudden and horrifying agony.

Now, at last, her lungs found the air they needed. She unleashed the pent-up scream so violently that her throat went raw. Thrusting desperately with her legs, she hurtled out of bed, tumbled to the floor, and began kicking at the bedspread that was still wrapped around her body. "Help!" she cried. "Somebody help me!"

She spun onto her back and propelled herself away from the bed with her elbows. The darkness in the room was now complete, and she could see nothing. She had no idea if the thing was still on her or perhaps tangled in the bedclothes. "God, help me!" she screamed again. "Please, help me!"

Light. She needed light. She tried to rise to her knees, but the clinging bedcovers held her back. Kicking furiously, she tried to extricate herself from their grasp, and one foot encountered something hard and rough. Screaming again, seized by panic, she finally pulled herself free with one superhuman burst of strength. Now she scrambled to her knees and fell toward her nightstand, reaching for the lamp with one outstretched hand; frantically, she twisted the knob, and blessed, burning light erupted in her room, whisking away the darkness like a brilliant whirlwind. She crawled into the corner away from the tangle of bedclothes in the floor and pressed herself against the wall, her eyes roving anxiously for any sign of the thing that had so viciously attacked her. It was nowhere to be seen, although she half-expected to see the bundled sheets and blankets moving as the thing began to grope its way out of them. But they remained motionless, and nothing stirred either around or beneath the bed, or in the shadowed corners where the lamplight barely penetrated.

Her door suddenly flew open, and there was Quentin, his eyes wide with concern, one fist clenched as if to deal a deadly blow to anyone he found molesting her. When he saw her on the floor, he hurried to her and knelt at her side, one hand going to her shoulder and squeezing it firmly. "Carolyn, what is it? What's wrong?"

She shook her head, her lips quivering and barely able to form words. "Something... something in here." One hand pointed to her heaped bedclothes. Quentin immediately turned and grasped one end of the bedspread and started to lift it. "Wait!" she cried. "It stung me. It's dangerous."

"What was it?"

She trembled violently. "I don't know. I couldn't see it clearly."

"Carolyn!"

She turned to see her mother standing in the doorway, now dressed in a red satin nightgown and robe. Elizabeth's face was chalky, her lips forming a small *O* at the sight of her daughter huddled against the wall and her bed in complete disarray. "Oh, Mother," Carolyn breathed, grateful for the presence of the one person whom she knew would always protect her. But then a new worry gripped her, and she said, "Don't come in. There's something in here."

"What is it? What's wrong?"

Quentin gripped one corner of the bedspread and very slowly and cautiously pulled it back toward the bed. Carolyn's breath caught in her throat, for she expected to see some giant, multi-legged horror drop out of the covers as soon as he moved them. "Be careful, Quentin."

David and Roger appeared in the doorway behind Elizabeth, and Roger slid past his sister into the room, barely acknowledging her existence. His stern features registered shock, and his bright eyes radiated true concern. "Carolyn," he said softly. "Has something hurt you? What is in this room?"

She held out her right arm, and to her dismay, she saw an angry red puncture just above her wrist, the skin around it already turning puffy and dark. "Oh, my God," she whispered.

"David, where the devil is Julia?" Roger called, raising his eyebrows in alarm. "Fetch her immediately."

"I'm here," came Julia Hoffman's voice from the hallway. "Let me in, please."

"Wait," Quentin said, as he gingerly piled the bedspread back onto the mattress. He nudged the bundled blanket and sheet with one foot. There was no movement beneath them. "There's nothing here," he said at last.

"Maybe under the bed," David suggested.

Quentin nodded and slowly knelt at the foot of the bed, lowering himself so he could peer into the darkness beneath it. "Carolyn, do you have any idea what this thing was?" he asked.

"No. It was big, as big as a cat. It had legs like...oh, my God."

She felt Roger's strong hands taking hold of her biceps. Gently but firmly, he helped her rise to her feet. "Come out into the hallway. Let Julia have a look at you."

"Can you see anything?" Elizabeth asked, her voice quavering with worry. "Quentin?"

After a moment, he rose. "I can't see anything down there. Whatever it was, I think it's gone."

"No," Carolyn moaned. "It must still be here."

"Where on earth did it come from?" Elizabeth asked.

She pointed to her closed window. "It was there. It came from the window."

"Not from outside!"

"It was scratching at the glass. I saw it. Then it got in. Somehow it got inside."

Quentin went to the window and pulled open the drapes. The glass panes were all whole, revealing only darkness and cascading white flakes on the other side.

"Carolyn, are you sure you actually saw something? You might have had a terrible nightmare," her mother suggested hopefully.

She clasped her hand around the throbbing wound on her wrist. "I didn't dream *this*."

"Let me see that," Julia said, gently lifting Carolyn's hand and studying the wound in the dim hallway light. "It certainly looks like a sting of some kind. Come, let's go to my room. I'll examine it under better light."

"Julia, do you think she should go to the hospital?" Elizabeth asked.

The doctor gave Elizabeth a concerned look. "The snow's been coming down for hours. I'd say we're all but snowed in here."

"Of all the nights," Elizabeth whispered, tenderly taking hold of Carolyn's shoulders. But Julia gently guided her away from her mother, heading toward the stairway that led to her third floor bedroom and study.

Carolyn allowed herself to be led, her eyes falling on the swollen knob of flesh on her wrist. The pain from the wound itself had diminished slightly, but a dull burn had begun to spread up her arm, almost to her elbow. A few dark streaks snaked up her forearm like angry brands. "It hurts," she said softly to Julia.

Julia's eyes beamed with concern as she sat Carolyn down in the chair across from her desk and laid her arm flat atop the blotter. She turned on her bright white desk lamp and adjusted the bulb so that it shone directly on Carolyn's wound. "You have no idea what did this to you?" she asked, picking up her medical bag from bedside the desk.

Carolyn shook her head. "All I know is that it was big. It wasn't any insect."

"This resembles a snakebite," Julia said. She opened a bottle of alcohol and moistened a cotton ball from her medical bag, then delicately swabbed the wound. The sting of the alcohol drew a gasp of pain from Carolyn's lips. "I'm sorry. I know that hurts."

"It's all right. Thank you for helping me."

"Carolyn, for the time being, I'm going to treat this as a venomous bite. I wasn't being facetious with your mother; I don't believe we can get you to the hospital tonight. But I will take some blood and do as much analysis as I can here tonight. And if necessary, we can try to get you into town tomorrow. At least by then some of the

roads may be cleared.” Julia then reached into her bag, produced a strip of rubber tubing, and tied a tourniquet tightly around her upper arm. She then produced a small syringe with a broad mouth at one end and a sheathed blade a little larger than a matchbook.

Carolyn’s whole body seemed numb, and she barely perceived anything that Julia was doing. Her head felt light, almost giddy, and the terror of the past few minutes seemed to be seeping away with every moment. Her eyes were still heavy, though, and she feared that if she moved, she might pass out. With detached curiosity, she watched as Julia again swabbed the wound with alcohol and lifted the little blade.

“I’m going to cut a small area around the sting,” Julia said softly, “and then remove any venom with the extractor pump. This is going to hurt a bit, so please prepare yourself.”

Carolyn nodded and clamped her teeth together, anticipating the blade’s hot bite. When it came, it felt cold, but stung only slightly—barely any more than the wound itself. Then Julia carefully placed the broad end of the extractor pump directly over the incision and slowly but firmly pressed it into the opening in her flesh. Now she felt pain from the additional pressure, and her back involuntarily arched, her lungs gasping for a breath of nonexistent air.

When her eyes beheld the fluid that Julia was slowly drawing from the wound, her heart missed a beat. The blood—or venom—that slowly filled the translucent cylinder was as thick and black as tar. And to her horror, within the syringe, the ichor itself began to writhe and curl of its own accord, like something impossibly, hideously *alive*.

For a second, Carolyn saw Julia’s face going pale with shock. Then she saw nothing, for her blood—and whatever poison had been injected into her—was rushing through her ears with the sound of a freight train, getting louder and louder and then fading, carrying her consciousness away on its rails. With a final sigh of misery, she slumped forward, unconscious, onto Julia’s desk, leaving the stunned doctor to gape in disbelief at the swirling, living fluid inside the cylindrical pump she held in a violently trembling hand.

Chapter 5

The scene in Carolyn's bedroom had taken a heavier toll on Quentin's nerves than he would dare admit to anyone. Although he and David had thoroughly searched the room after everyone had dispersed, they could find no sign of anything that could have gotten inside and attacked Carolyn. Still, there was no denying that she had been stung by something worse than your average insect, and at this time of year, it would be unusual indeed to find a living creature in the house with more than four legs. He had been inclined to believe Elizabeth's suggestion that the worst part of Carolyn's experience had been a dream, and her imagination had turned a prosaic house pest into the monster she described. Whether she realized it or not, her wits had already been a casualty of her tryst with Barnabas earlier in the evening, and in her own mind, even a slightly upsetting experience might turn into a catastrophe.

But Julia Hoffman turned his theory upside down when she showed him the vial of venom she had drawn from Carolyn's arm. It was like nothing he had ever seen: a thick, black mass of swirling ink, twisting and writhing as if attempting to escape its glass prison. His gut quivered at the very idea of anything so horrific invading Carolyn's bloodstream. Even if Julia had extracted most of the substance from her veins, some tiny amount must still remain, and there was no telling how it might affect her. Gravely, Julia had told him that, even if they were able to get Carolyn to the hospital, there was no laboratory in the state—probably even the country—that would be able to identify the substance in the vial. He took small comfort in the fact that, given Julia's experience with abnormalities of the blood, Carolyn could be in no better hands. Keenly aware of the distress it would bring to the rest of the family, the doctor had revealed the existence of the black venom to no one else.

Julia had kept the girl in her own suite so she could watch over her while conducting tests on the venom. For a brief few minutes, Carolyn had regained consciousness, seemingly incognizant of the ordeal she had been through, and then gone quietly to sleep, her features relaxed and peaceful. *At least she doesn't seem to be in pain or mental anguish*, Quentin thought. If anything could be worse than the idea of his own dreadful affliction, it was what had happened to Carolyn tonight.

He had bundled up in his heavy jacket, procured a flashlight from Mrs. Johnson, and set out into the snow to investigate the area outside Carolyn's window. Huge, crystalline flakes fell in lazy columns to the ground with a soft pattering sound; nearly a foot had accumulated over the course of the evening. Around him, the lights from the windows wove a bright, almost cheerful patchwork pattern in the darkness, belying

the heart-wrenching strife that had once again taken root inside Collinwood. *This damned house*, Quentin thought wearily. If ever there was an accursed place on the face of the earth, this was it. Yet he still loved the ancient mansion with all the fervor of an illicit affair; he adored its labyrinthine halls, its delicate but majestic contours. No other place could ever be home.

So...did I really come here to die?

He trudged resolutely through the thick white blanket toward the house's northern face, where Carolyn's window was located. To his right, a row of tall linden trees towered above him, their branches glistening like ivory, their trunks black and basaltic against the backdrop of snow. Above and to his left, Carolyn's darkened window glared defensively at him, as if to protest its innocence in some unknown, dire scheme against the family. Yet *something* must have gotten through it into the house, just as Carolyn had described; the poison in her veins dared anyone to refute her claim. He shone his flashlight on the ground around the base of the house, toward the trees. And then he saw the tracks:

A broad furrow in the snow, several inches deep and over a foot wide, insinuating the passage of something large within the past hour. The deluge of flakes had already begun to fill it in, but Quentin could discern a group of irregular indentations in the center of the depression, with a smaller series of crooked gouges to either side. The furrow ended at the base of the gray stone wall; when he traced its path with the flashlight, he saw that it originated a short distance into the trees—as if the thing had dropped out of the branches and begun crawling toward the house.

Or appeared out of thin air....

He arced the flashlight beam upward, studying the elaborate latticework of branches, wondering if the thing might be up there now, watching him, preparing to assail him as well.

"Come on and try it," Quentin whispered. "I wonder what my blood might do to *you*."

"I trust you are not referring to me," came a rich, cultured voice from behind him. A very familiar voice.

Quentin turned to see a tall figure wearing a black, caped overcoat, one hand casually holding a silver wolf's-headed walking stick. The snow seemed to swirl around him without touching him, for his thick, onyx-black hair was dry and bereft of flakes. Deep, dark eyes regarded Quentin with ambivalence, although one corner of his thick lips was angled upward in a wry grin.

"Well, well, Cousin Barnabas," Quentin said softly. "I hardly expected to run into you on a night like this."

“And I did not expect to run into you at all,” Barnabas said. “I had no idea you had returned.”

Quentin regarded his cousin with affection, if still somewhat warily. “I take it Carolyn didn’t mention it to you?”

Barnabas raised an eyebrow. “Carolyn? I’m not sure I follow you.”

“I thought she might have told you when you saw her this evening.”

Barnabas’s eyes narrowed, but he made no attempt to challenge Quentin’s bluntness. “No. She did not.”

“Well, I shouldn’t be surprised to see you, I suppose. I know you have reasons for keeping hours that are...unorthodox. Have you been out here long?”

“No. I just happened to see your light, so I came over to investigate. Just what does bring you out on such a snowy evening?”

Quentin cleared his throat. “You wouldn’t know what happened to Carolyn tonight.”

Barnabas’s features tightened with concern. “What about Carolyn?”

“Something attacked her a short while ago.” He pointed to the tracks in the snow with his light. “And I believe whatever did it left these. Tell me, have you seen anything...unusual...on your stroll tonight?”

“Unusual? No. Tell me what happened.”

“Apparently, something came through her window and stung her. Some kind of animal.” He shone his light at the long furrow and traced it to its mysterious point of origin. “Strange thing is it didn’t break her window. It seems to have gone straight through the glass. And it doesn’t look like anything impacted here, so I don’t think it dropped out of the trees. It’s as if it spontaneously appeared.”

Barnabas leaned over and peered at the track. “I would say your guess is correct. But what do you suppose could do such a thing?”

“Absolutely nothing that I know of. After it attacked her, it disappeared completely. There’s been no sign of it, other than this.”

“Is Carolyn all right?”

“She seems to be. Julia is looking after her. But Barnabas,” Quentin lowered his voice as if afraid to voice his thoughts aloud, “the thing injected her with some kind of venom. Julia drew it out of her, but it’s like nothing you could ever imagine. It’s as if it has a life of its own.”

“That is quite incredible.” Barnabas glanced around into the trees and then cocked an ear slightly. After a moment, he said, “Well, I’m certain there is nothing here now. Whatever it was, it’s quite gone.”

“How can you be so certain?”

“I can tell,” he said with a firm finality, his eyes seeming to blaze in the darkness. “But I must go see Carolyn myself.”

“I don’t think that’s wise. She’s asleep and in Julia’s care. Better not to disturb her. At least not tonight.”

“I would like to help...if I can.”

“I’m sure your concern is appreciated. But Barnabas, tell me. Are you worried more about her, or about possibly being deprived of a source of nourishment?”

Barnabas swiveled toward him, his eyes widening with anger. After a few uncomfortable seconds, his glare softened somewhat. “That is particularly unkind of you, Quentin. I should take offense. But you may rest assured that my concern for her is genuine.”

Quentin immediately regretted the hasty jab at his cousin. “I believe you, Barnabas. Forgive me. I trust you’ll understand my frustration.”

Barnabas studied him for a long moment. At last, he said softly, “There is more that you’re not telling me. Such as what brings you back to Collinwood in the first place.”

The cold was beginning to creep into Quentin’s collar, and his fingers were going numb, even inside his gloves. He wasn’t sure he wanted to confide in his cousin, at least not yet. “It’s a long story,” he said. “But my main reason is to be with the family for the holidays.”

“That is only part of the truth, Quentin.”

Barnabas’s inquisitive gaze was becoming hard to withstand. “Barnabas, you of all people understand being at the mercy of a...condition...that is beyond your control. As you well know, I am not entirely ignorant of what means to be cursed.”

“And if I’m not mistaken, your ‘condition’ has not been an issue in your life for some time.” Barnabas’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Has something happened?”

Quentin didn’t answer for a long, frigid moment. “I think I may be reverting to what I was. And if what I think is happening *is* happening, then...I may die soon.”

Barnabas looked sincerely mortified. “Quentin! Tell me what has happened to you.”

“Let’s go inside,” he said, giving the tracks a long last look and turning toward the front of the house. “It’s too cold out here to chat. And I’m not sure I share your certainty that the thing is not out here.”

“Very well.”

As they started to walk together toward the front door of Collinwood, Quentin noticed that Barnabas had paused and was gazing up at Carolyn’s darkened window. The glare in his eyes indicated that he felt something other than pure concern for the

young woman. He stopped and said firmly, "Barnabas. You called her to you tonight. I thought you could be trusted not to do that."

The deep-set eyes fell on Quentin like frozen embers. "You said yourself that you understood about forces beyond our control." His gaze softened and his voice lowered. "I would never harm Carolyn. You must understand that."

"I don't believe you would. But you have not preyed on anyone in the family for a very long time. At least, that's what I've been led to believe."

"That is true." After another long silence, he said, "I will make a confession to you, Quentin, one that I would not confess to anyone else. Not even to Julia. But I did experience a certain... compulsion...that was more powerful than anything I've known in a long time. I knew I could never take Carolyn's life. But had it been someone else..."

"You would have killed tonight?"

"Very likely. The hunger...Quentin, you have no idea."

"Perhaps I do, Barnabas."

"Perhaps. But my first loyalty is to the family. I would take my own life before I allowed harm to come to anyone at Collinwood. I could not swear to the same for a stranger."

"So it has come to this."

"Julia's experiments have failed. I no longer have any hope of returning to a normal life. Sometimes I wonder if that failure has actually worsened my condition. The craving grows more intense as time goes by."

"Then, Barnabas, I would have to be skeptical of your pledge not to harm any of the family. If you really were to lose control..."

"Have no fear. I shall never completely lose control."

"It would change things between us, Barnabas. You know that."

Barnabas nodded solemnly. "Yes."

They had reached the front door and Quentin kicked the snow off his boots beneath the porte cochere. "Well, I am going to go have a drink. I am sure you won't be joining me."

"I will come in long enough for us to return to our original discussion. I have been more than forthcoming with you. I believe you owe me the same courtesy."

Quentin opened the door and felt a welcome rush of warm air from the dimly lit foyer. But the very idea of exposing his feelings, his fears, the sense of impending personal doom that had so recently seized him sent a dagger of ice into the pit of his stomach. The two men stepped inside, and Quentin said, "Very well, cousin Barnabas. Allow me to pour myself a drink, and I will sum up my remaining future for you in a

hundred words or less.”

Barnabas’s face turned grim as Quentin led him to the drawing room. And then, after closing and locking the doors, Quentin poured himself a generous snifter of brandy and proceeded to describe to his cousin the terrible truth that the painting of Charles Delaware Tate had revealed to him upon his arrival at Collinwood.

Chapter 6

Julia Hoffman woke with a start, her desk lamp shining in her face, her right arm numb from the weight of her head resting on it for however many hours she had been asleep. Turning to her window, she saw dull daylight filtering through gossamer drapes, and the shadows of a few stray snowflakes still wafting from the sky. The cot she had set up for Carolyn in the corner of her study was empty; the sheets and blankets had fallen in disarray over the edge of the mattress. She had no idea what time she had fallen asleep, but it had to have been after 4:00 A.M., which was the last time she had taken note of the hour. The antique, brass-dialed Tambour clock on her dresser now read 7:38, and its soft tick-tocking clashed with the silence of the room like a hammer on an anvil. Her right temple throbbed slightly, the result of long hours studying samples through her microscope and falling asleep in a patently uncomfortable position. She groggily dragged herself to her feet, shuffled to the door, and peered into the hall. A stray wisp of auburn hair fell into her eyes, and she patted it back into place with a sigh of annoyance.

“Carolyn?” Her voice echoed through the empty corridor like a lonely note played on a clarinet.

She started down the hall at a slow, measured pace, sensing that the familiar gloom concealed an unknown, restless presence. The idea that some thoroughly alien *thing*, as eager to attack her as it attacked Carolyn, might be crouching in every darkened space sent a nervous thrill down her spine. But nothing accosted her as she approached the stairway leading down to the rest of the house, and the silvery daylight that burned its way through the frost-encrusted window above the stairs presented her with a welcome display of normalcy. As she started down to the second floor, each stair groaned beneath her tread with exaggerated clarity. The results of her tests on the venom from Carolyn’s blood, now fresh in her wakening memory, had shocked her sleep-dulled senses to a state of heightened awareness.

Her experiments with the black fluid had revealed virtually *nothing*. She found more living organisms in a drop of distilled water than in the specimens of the writhing, viscous liquid she had placed on the stage of her microscope. Even with a sample thickness of little more than 100 nanometers, all she observed was a cluster of microorganisms that might as well *have* come from water. She then prepared a series of slides using varying amounts of pure sample as well as amalgamations with several staining compounds and organic agents, including her own blood and tissue from inside her cheek.

Every slide might as well have been blank except for the cells from the control material. In none of them could she find physical evidence of the alien substance—not even a shift in color. However, in each experiment, the control cells reacted adversely to the introduction of the black fluid; in the case of her blood, she witnessed an odd phenomenon: at an impossibly rapid rate, the white blood cells became agitated, clustering as if to combat the introduction of a virus. However, like footsoldiers lacking the guidance of a general, the fast-forming antibodies simply scattered and then collapsed, in a repeating cycle that eventually ended in the blood sample becoming inert and darkening to the color of India ink.

The very absence of any observable, foreign microorganisms rattled her both professionally and emotionally. Nothing in her experience came close to the staggering ramifications of what she had witnessed in her microscope in the wee hours of this morning—not even her experiments on Barnabas Collins’s blood. Certainly, extensive spectrographic and electron microscope tests would be a logical next step, but she could hardly begin to guess what they might reveal about this *ghostly*—yes, that was the word—substance that had been released into the bloodstream of an unwitting human being.

She paused at the second floor landing, for she thought she heard a footstep somewhere in the dim hallway that led to the family’s bedrooms. Instead of heading toward the foyer and the main floor of the house, she turned down the hall toward Carolyn’s room and, as she rounded the corner, nearly collided with a petite, blonde-haired figure that suddenly materialized in front of her.

“Good morning, Julia,” came a soft, clear voice.

“Carolyn!”

“I was just about to go downstairs for a cup of coffee. Would you care to join me?”

Julia could not help but stare incredulously at the girl. She appeared to be alert and healthy, her eyes lucid and clear, her complexion almost radiant. She wore an indigo, ribbed turtleneck, with the extra touch of a silver-gray silk scarf tied around the collar; a short, black suede skirt with a matching belt; and a pair of expensive Sesto Meucci polished-leather loafers. In no manner did she appear to suffer any ill effects from the trauma of the previous night.

“Carolyn, are you quite all right?”

“Yes. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well, after your experience last night, I was afraid you might be still be suffering from shock, if nothing else.”

Carolyn smiled wryly. “I’m sure Mother was right. An ordinary spider probably

bit me, and I dreamed it was something far worse. I was very tired last night, and my imagination got the better of me.”

“I’m certain that’s not true. The venom I drew from your veins did not come from any household spider.”

“Well, whatever it was, I’m sure that if it was dangerous, I would have already become ill. But as you can see, I’m perfectly fine.”

“Carolyn, I have every reason to believe it *is* dangerous. I insist upon examining you again.”

The girl’s eyes darkened derisively, and she started toward the foyer. “Very well. But if you don’t mind, I’m going to have a cup of coffee first. If I don’t, then I might really start suffering ill effects.”

Julia chuckled humorlessly, following a step behind her. “I would advise you not to exert yourself this morning. You should be back in bed under constant supervision.”

Carolyn started down the stairs to the foyer. “I appreciate your concern, Julia. But, really, I’m fine. If I didn’t think so, you’d be the first person I’d come to. You were very kind to look after me last night.”

“You know I’m always here for you—for any of the family—in the event of trouble.”

“Good morning, Julia,” came Elizabeth’s voice. The matron of Collinwood stepped out of the drawing room, holding a steaming, porcelain cup in her own hand. Her eyes fell on her daughter with a look of concern. “Carolyn, how are you feeling this morning?”

“Quite well, Mother. I’m much better now.”

“Thanks to Julia.”

“I’m afraid I did very little,” she said, quick to deny credit for the girl’s apparent miraculous recovery. “And I think Carolyn may be trying to get back to normal a little too fast.”

“You must listen to her, Carolyn. I’m sure Julia knows best.” Elizabeth spoke with the stern tone that a parent reserves for dealing with an errant child. Julia saw the blonde girl wince as if she had been slapped.

“I’m going to let *Doctor* Hoffman examine me in a few minutes,” Carolyn said with a note of finality and marched toward the kitchen, her rapid stride telegraphing her exasperation with her doting elders.

As Julia came down the stairs, she watched the girl retreat down the long hall. “Elizabeth,” she said, “I’d appreciate it if you’d keep an eye on her. I know she resents me ‘ordering’ her to do anything.”

“But you’re her doctor.”

“We’re also close personal friends, and she is uncomfortable being in a subordinate position.” She sighed wistfully. “So goes the pride of youth.”

Elizabeth stared after her daughter with worry rippling in the pools of her eyes. “Julia, she *is* all right, isn’t she?”

Julia curled one hand beneath her chin. “She certainly seems to be. But I must be honest with you. I simply don’t know what we’re dealing with. My tests with her blood were... inconclusive.”

“I will see to it that she does exactly as you say.”

“Thank you, Elizabeth.”

The older woman started toward the kitchen, then paused. “Julia, do you have any idea what attacked her last night?”

Grimly, she shook her head. “I’m afraid not.”

Elizabeth nodded sadly and disappeared down the hall, leaving Julia to bite her lip in frustration—both with Carolyn’s headstrong refusal to obey her and her own inability to even conjecture at the nature of the thing that had appeared so mysteriously in the night—and that even now might be lurking nearby, ready to strike again.

“There’s not even a puncture remaining,” Julia said in amazement as she examined Carolyn’s forearm. “And very little swelling.”

The girl had finally returned to Julia’s study and reluctantly rolled up her sleeve to expose what proved to be an almost nonexistent wound. “I told you everything was all right,” she said softly.

Now completely in control and clinical, Julia touched the affected area and saw only the slightest hint of lividity. She placed her fingers on Carolyn’s wrist, lowered her eyes to her Lorus wristwatch, and counted the pulse beats as the second hand wound down. “Pulse is 78. That’s very good. Now, I’ll check your blood pressure.”

“I’m sure it’s quite normal.”

“I’m sure it is, too. But I’ll need to see for myself.” She removed her stethoscope and sphygmomanometer from her medical bag, wrapped the cuff around Carolyn’s left arm, and inflated it. As she then deflated the cuff and listened for the sound of Carolyn’s heartbeat through her stethoscope, she heard the girl sigh impatiently.

“So?”

“One-twenty-four over 74. That’s down considerably from last night.”

“I might have been a little overwrought last night. For that I apologize.”

“There is no need,” Julia said softly. She removed the blood pressure cuff and then produced a syringe and empty vial from her bag. She tied a rubber tube around Carolyn’s upper arm and then, with a cotton ball and dab of alcohol, swabbed the prominent vein below the crook of her elbow. “Now, I need another blood sample to determine if there’s been any change in your cells overnight.”

“There must have been. For the better. There’s nothing wrong with me.”

“I’ll be the judge of that. This is going to sting a little.”

“I know.”

Julia expertly slid the long needle into Carolyn’s exposed vein and collected an ounce of blood in the vial; then she deftly withdrew the needle and taped a cotton ball over the tiny puncture. During the procedure, Carolyn did not so much as flinch, but studied the vial containing her blood in silent fascination. Finally, Julia removed the constricting rubber tube from her arm and placed the new sample in a small tray next to her microscope. “Now, I’d appreciate it if you would undo that scarf for me.”

One of Carolyn’s hands flew to her collar and her eyes widened anxiously. “What for?”

Coldly now, Julia said, “You had a pair of puncture marks there last night. I want to see if there’s any change in them.”

“I’m not sure I know what you mean,” Carolyn said in a flat voice.

“Why are you wearing a turtleneck? The scarf, please.”

“I always wear turtlenecks in winter,” she protested weakly, but then reluctantly slipped the loose knot in the scarf and removed it from her throat. Julia gently pulled Carolyn’s hair back and turned down the collar of her sweater to reveal the twin punctures from Barnabas’s bite. They had nearly healed and showed no sign of having bled during the night. At least Barnabas had taken only a small amount of blood, and the only lingering aftereffects appeared to be pointless combativeness and a hazy memory—the typical symptoms any victim of a non-fatal vampire attack would display.

Yes...there was no other term to describe Barnabas’s feeding on Carolyn as anything other than an “attack.” The poor girl had been victimized twice in the course of one night, and she either did not remember or refused to acknowledge them. Part of her denial was certainly due to her youthful ego, but another part—certainly the more significant—was the specific result of her will having been dominated by a stronger one.

“Are you satisfied now, Doctor?”

With one hand, Julia straightened Carolyn’s collar and brushed her long, silky hair back into place. “I am finished.”

“Then I may go now?”

“You may.”

Carolyn stood up and tossed her head with an arrogant flourish, so that her hair fell in slight disarray over her eyes, framing her face with resplendent gold. But after a moment, the harsh glare in her blue eyes softened, as if she finally, reluctantly realized that Julia had only her best interests at heart. “Thank you, Julia,” she said in a thin voice. “If I feel even the least bit uncomfortable, I’ll come see you. I promise.”

“I hope you will. I expect your mother is going to keep an eye on you as well.”

“Doesn’t she always?”

Julia smiled. “As every mother should.”

Carolyn’s face finally brightened with genuine good humor. “I see I am outnumbered. I’ll see you later, Julia.” With that, she turned and started to leave the room.

“Just a moment,” Julia called, picking up the silk scarf from her desk. “You might want this.”

Carolyn took it with an abashed grin. “Thanks.” Then she disappeared into the hallway.

Julia sat back in her chair with a sigh and gave her microscope a beleaguered glance. The whole night had been an exercise in futility, and she had gotten little sleep. More than anything right now she wanted to strip out of her clothes and crawl into bed if for no more than an hour of solid, decent sleep. But she also knew that as long as the mystery of the unknown creature remained unsolved, she would hardly be able to drift away carefree.

And on top of all this, she had Quentin’s tragic problem to consider. The current series of inexplicable events had begun with him returning to Collinwood, bringing a complicated set of variables she could no more disentangle than she could explain Carolyn’s swift recuperation. Suddenly her world seemed an overwhelming, challenging, and hostile place.

“So what else is new in the hallowed halls of Collinwood?” she whispered in a weary but resolved voice. Indeed, if at any time there were no high-stakes game afoot in the place she had chosen to abide, then she knew that something in the universe must be awry.

Julia showered and changed clothes before sitting down to study Carolyn’s new blood sample. What she found was every bit as disturbing as the previous night’s phenomenon: the new blood exhibited no reaction whatsoever when exposed to the venom. *As if a total immunity had developed.* But in no way could she find any

obvious abnormality in the blood. Platelet counts, white counts, glucose, electrolytes, enzymes—all appeared normal. Finally, her eyes and brain seriously overloaded, she decided to take an hour-long breather before running any more experiments. Pouring a handful of aspirin into one hand, she made her way downstairs to the kitchen to see if the breakfast shift had left any coffee—or, if not, to request that Mrs. Johnson put on another pot of her strongest brew. Fortunately, several cups of the original pot remained, and she gratefully filled the cupboard's tallest mug and downed her pills. As soon as was practical, she thought, she would send a small sample of the venom and all of Carolyn's blood specimens to an acquaintance of hers at the Boston University Medical Center. Their sophisticated hematology lab could make a thorough study of the toxin's effect on human blood, and they would also have the internal resources—as well as outside contacts—to comprehensively research the venom's bizarre properties and possibly identify it, although she would wager that no one in *any* lab would have ever encountered anything like it before.

There was one other person she knew who would have more than a passing interest in the venom: her friend and colleague, Professor T. Elliot Stokes, with whom she had shared many a memorable experience in the dark shadows of Collinwood. Unfortunately, he had left town for the holidays to visit family and would probably not be back until sometime after New Year's.

By then, who knows what will have developed at this house?

She had filled her mug a second time and was passing through the foyer on her way upstairs when a sharp knock suddenly came at the front door. Surprised that anyone would be calling on such a frigid, snowy morning, she detoured from her path upstairs, went to the door, and opened it slowly, admitting a flurry of large white flakes before she could even see who might be standing on the other side. As she pulled the door fully open, her eyes registered a tall, black silhouette in front of an expansive white landscape that shimmered beneath the haze-diffused light of the mid-morning sun. Julia thought someone must have uprooted one of the smaller trees from the property and placed in front of the door until the figure bowed stiffly to her.

From the strange silhouette erupted a scratchy, buzzing sound like a fire alarm, and it wasn't until the ensuing silence that she realized it had been an artificial voice addressing her.

“Good morning. I take it I have arrived at the house called Collinwood?”

Julia could not help but stare at the overcoated, emaciated creature before her. His face was so creased that she could barely discern individual features. The wire-rimmed, thick-lensed spectacles resting on the man's bulbous nose magnified his eyes to a hideous size, turning them into a pair of milky blue marbles protruding from

crudely gouged bony cavities. His mouth had no lips at all; it was merely a thin, crooked slit that seemed to have been carved in the flesh by an unsteady hand. A few wisps of crinkly, silver hair sprouted like bleached Spanish moss from beneath an antiquated black felt bowler. One gloved hand was pressed against a wattled neck, apparently to activate the voice-box that he obviously required for speech; the other, disproportionately small, hung uselessly at his side.

After an uncomfortably long silence, Julia stammered, “Y-yes, this is Collinwood.”

The man lowered his head again, and pressed two fingers against a small silver disk in the hollow beneath his jaw. “I wish to introduce myself. I have bought the adjoining property to the northwest, where I anticipate living for the rest of my allotted days. My name is Dr. Maitland Karswell. I am pleased to make your acquaintance. Mrs. Collins...?”

“No, I’m Dr. Julia Hoffman.” Her right hand involuntarily rose to shake his, but then she drew it back, realizing that such a simple act was probably impossible for him.

“Are you a guest in this house?” crackled the synthetic voice.

“Not exactly. I live in one of the upstairs suites.” Wishing now that Elizabeth or Mrs. Johnson had answered the door, she glanced behind her in the vain hope that someone might appear to relieve her of this awkward situation. “Won’t you come in, please?”

“Thank you.” The man very stiffly stepped forward, his knees barely bending. But he politely stamped his feet on the mat just outside the door, leaving a broken crust of snow on the wiry fabric before entering the warmth of the foyer. “It is an invigorating morning. The snow makes walking somewhat difficult, but I relish the exercise. At my age, I must keep what’s left of this body in working condition.”

Julia hesitated to inquire as to the specifics of his “condition.” When he removed his hat, she saw that his head was totally bald, and the hair around his temples was sparse and scraggly. His wiry, striated neck appeared barely capable of supporting his rather lopsided-looking skull. On closer inspection, she realized that the creases across his forehead and cheeks were the scarred remains of what had obviously been severe burns. Her initial revulsion quickly changed to sympathy, for the man had obviously suffered greatly during his lifetime. She could not begin to guess his actual age, but surely he was no younger than 80. Awkwardly, he began to shed his overcoat, and Julia perfunctorily assisted him and hung it on the coat rack beside the door. He was dressed in an expensive, if somewhat oversized, black wool jacket of possibly European origin, a white cotton dress shirt with a black-and-red patterned tie, heavy

wool trousers to match his jacket, and what appeared to be tall, leather riding boots. His impeccable clothing could hardly disguise the fact that his body was all but wasted away beneath them.

She led the man to the drawing room and offered him a seat on the divan. “I will inform Mrs. Stoddard—the owner of Collinwood—that you are here,” Julia said, relieved—almost ashamedly so—that she could tactfully part company with this unfortunate individual. Her own reaction to him surprised her, for, in her professional experience, she had encountered many individuals with various deformities and injuries; she rarely found herself uncomfortable in their presence. However, something about Dr. Maitland Karswell unnerved her. Perhaps the sight of his virtually ruined body, in concert with the unnatural, mechanized sound of his voice, simply inflamed her already hypersensitized nerves.

“That’s very kind of you,” came the buzzing voice.

As she left to find Elizabeth, she subtly glanced back and noted that he was studying his surroundings with rapt curiosity, his abnormally enlarged eyes batting back and forth as if photographing every detail. Julia involuntarily shuddered, wondering again what terrible misfortune the poor man had experienced and if he were currently suffering any pain.

She had barely gotten past the door of the drawing room when Elizabeth and Roger appeared together, the latter apparently in a huff over the state of the local roads and his inability to drive to the office. “You’d think they could have the plows out here before the end of the day, when they’re all too late to be of any use.”

Elizabeth wore her typical impassive face, indicating that her brother’s tirade was just another of the crosses she was accustomed to bearing on a day-to-day basis. “Did I hear someone at the door, Julia?” she asked.

“Yes, we have a visitor,” Julia said. “A new neighbor. He has apparently bought the old Swift place.”

“I knew it was for sale, but I had no idea anyone had already moved in,” Roger grumbled, as if the idea of someone living so close were an absolute imposition.

“Surely he didn’t drive over here.”

“No, he walked.”

“Then we must meet him,” Elizabeth said. “Come along, Roger.”

Julia stepped up to Elizabeth and said softly, “Just so you are aware, he has suffered serious injuries in his past, and is somewhat...affected, physically.”

“Thank you, Julia.”

Together, the three of them stepped into the drawing room, and the black-clad figure rose awkwardly from his seat, again bowing stiffly. Then his hand went to his

throat, and the buzzing voice said, “Good morning. I hope I am not interrupting your schedule.”

Elizabeth’s expression radiated pleasure, but her complexion paled slightly. “Good morning. I understand you are our new neighbor.”

“My name is Dr. Maitland Karswell. I have purchased the adjoining property where I hope to live out my retirement. It is quite a pleasure to reside next to the family for whom this town was named.”

“I am Elizabeth Collins Stoddard, and this is my brother Roger Collins. You have already met Dr. Hoffman.”

Julia noticed that Roger’s face wore the same placid expression as his sister, but his jade eyes had iced over with something akin to revulsion. “It’s good to meet you, Dr. Karswell,” he said, a tad harshly. “Are you—or should I say were you—a doctor of medicine?”

“No, philosophy and theology are my chosen fields of study.”

“That’s most interesting,” Julia said. “I share an interest in those fields as well. Did you teach at a university, Dr. Karswell?”

“Yes, indeed. I was on the faculty of Miskatonic University in Arkham, Massachusetts, for many years. But your title is also ‘doctor.’ What is your area of expertise?”

“Primarily hematology, but I have a degree in psychology as well.”

“Do you have a local practice?”

“No, I was previously employed at Wyndcliffe hospital. For the last few years, I have devoted myself exclusively to the care of the Collins family.”

A gruff noise, which Julia realized was a chuckle, slipped from Karswell’s mouth. “Every family should have its own private physician. We would have a much healthier nation.”

“More likely a bankrupt nation,” Roger said, somewhat snidely.

Elizabeth frowned at Roger’s insensitivity. “But Dr. Hoffman is not in our employ. Our arrangement is informal, and she has complete autonomy regarding her practice.”

Karswell nodded thoughtfully, his huge eyes glancing from one to the other; Julia did not care for the slight gleam she saw in them. *Almost as if he is studying rats in a maze.*

Finally, the old man said, “I’m sure you are all curious as to my physical condition. You see, a few years ago, I was in an automobile accident. I survived, albeit with the serious debilities that are obvious, as well as others that are not. Sadly, my wife was killed. Losing her was the worst thing I have ever experienced. Next to that,

these—” he tilted his head to display his scars—“are of little consequence.”

“I’m sorry,” Elizabeth said compassionately. “Have you been alone ever since?”

“I have a hired man named Mathis to assist me with matters that are beyond my physical capabilities. I was blessed by the good Lord to come from an affluent family, so money has never been an issue regarding my care. Many others are not so fortunate.”

“That is very true,” Elizabeth replied.

“Your family is highly regarded in the community, so I understand. Collinwood is most impressive—one of the finest examples of post-Renaissance era architecture in the country, I can safely say.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

“Surely, for a house this size, you have a large family living here?”

“Actually, we do not. Apart from the three of us, my daughter Carolyn and Roger’s son David are the only full-time residents. Of course, we have our housekeeper, Mrs. Johnson, and a handyman, Jake Stiles. But for the holidays we happen to have a houseguest. Our cousin, Quentin Collins.”

“And of course there is Barnabas,” Roger said with a sniff, glancing at the decanter of brandy as if to convince himself it was not too early in the day.

“Barnabas Collins? An impressive Biblical name. Does he live here as well?”

“No, he lives in the original family mansion, which is also on the estate,” Elizabeth said. “It’s known simply as the Old House. He has chosen to live there because it once belonged to his direct ancestor of the same name.”

“I should very much like to see the rest of the estate—when the weather is more hospitable,” Karswell said, nodding toward the window. “If that is acceptable to all of you, of course.”

“I’d be happy to give you a tour sometime,” Elizabeth said, a little hesitantly. “When conditions are more favorable.”

Just then, Julia heard footsteps approaching from the foyer, and she turned to see Quentin entering the drawing room, his somewhat sullen eyes falling first on her and then on their unusual visitor.

“I wasn’t aware we had a guest,” he said softly, his eyes registering the inevitable look of initial shock at the sight of Dr. Karswell’s grotesque mien.

“Quentin Collins,” came the buzzing voice, very softly. Julia regarded the tall man in black with some surprise. The voice continued after a beat. “I’m sure you must be Quentin, from what the others have told me. I am pleased to meet you, sir.”

Elizabeth offered the appropriate introductions. But no sooner had Karswell made Quentin’s acquaintance than he indicated that he must leave.

“I have kept you all longer than I intended to,” he said, bowing his head curtly. “But I felt I should pay my respects at the earliest opportunity.”

“It’s a pleasure to have met you, Dr. Karswell,” Elizabeth said with forced warmth. “We shall have to visit you as well, when time permits. I would love to see the inside of the old Swift house again. It has been years.”

“I fear it is in a dreadful state at the moment,” Karswell said. “Mathis is doing his best, but moving is always a long and tedious process. However, when the house has been restored to presentable shape, I shall take great pleasure in having you over for a visit. I hope we shall have a chance to become the best of neighbors.”

“I’m sure we shall,” Elizabeth said, walking beside him at arm’s length as he started for the door. “Will you be able to walk home unassisted? I can have our man, Stiles, escort you if you would feel more comfortable.”

“Nonsense,” Karswell said with a misshapen grin. “I walk every day—probably much farther than you might expect. It is a part of my required exercise regimen. Going as far as my house, even in the snow, will present no problem.”

“Then we shall bid you good day,” Roger said, his voice polite and face cheerful, but eyes still cold.

“And Dr. Hoffman,” Karswell said, as he pulled on his overcoat with assistance from Quentin. “I look forward to having an in-depth conversation with you regarding our respective fields of study. I’m sure we have much to offer one another.”

“I’m sure we do,” Julia said, smiling with her lips. “Until then...”

“I shall say good morning.” Karswell nodded and tipped his bowler hat. Then he stiffly turned, stepped onto the walkway beneath the stone porte-cochere, and made his way into the deep, heavy snow. As his figure grew smaller and smaller in the distance, Quentin came to stand beside her.

“What did you make of him?” he asked softly.

“A fascinating character,” she replied noncommittally. “A man like that must have an incredible number of stories to tell.”

As Elizabeth closed the front door, she gave Julia a knowing glance, and then started back into the drawing room. “That,” she said, in parting, “looked to be the *oldest* living man on the face of the earth.” Then she disappeared through the double doors, and she and Roger immediately took up where they had left off on their discussion of other, practical matters.

Softly, so that only Julia would hear it, Quentin said, “If only you knew, my dear Elizabeth. If only you knew.”

Chapter 7

Carolyn had seen the stranger approaching the house from her window but had declined to go downstairs to meet him, since he was obviously coming to see her mother or Uncle Roger. Then, when she caught a glimpse of his withered face beneath the brim of his hat, she found herself seized by the sudden, absurd fear that this strange and unexpected caller could only spell trouble. Surely, she told herself, he was merely disfigured in some way; just a harmless, unfortunate old man. But what business could he have at Collinwood? He had left only a few minutes later, and when he shuffled around the bend in the driveway and vanished like a mirage, she began to breathe a bit easier. Her nerves were still on edge, she knew, for the events of the previous night had rattled her far more than she would ever let on to Julia or her mother.

She had pulled up her sleeve and studied her right arm countless times, trying to find a trace of the wound that had been so pronounced the previous night. The swelling was completely gone, and if Julia's tests had not proven the nightmarish experience so horribly real, she might indeed believe it had just been a dream. Julia, of course, had stopped in umpteen times to check her pulse and blood pressure and had drawn two more vials of blood. But the good doctor hadn't barged in with a needle for almost an hour, so Carolyn hoped that was going to be the end of it for a while. Oddly, she had begun to feel energized and restless, and now and again, she felt a stirring of euphoria, as if *nothing* could hurt her. Not last night, not anytime.

In the mid-afternoon, the sun finally broke through the clouds, and snow began sloughing off the trees to form miniature blizzards beneath their branches. Jake Stiles had gone up and down the long driveway in his pickup truck, which he had outfitted with a hydraulic snowplow, and cleared the snow sufficiently to access the road into town. An hour or so later, Carolyn heard the distant *rumble-clank-clank* of the municipal trucks at work on the road itself. It was none too soon to please Uncle Roger, but if he were so minded, she thought, he could just drive himself to the office and stay there all night.

Or drink at the Blue Whale.

She had turned on some music to alleviate the silence of her room, and the mellow voice of Bobby Darin singing "The Shadow of Your Smile" now wrapped her body in a warm embrace, its haunting melody taking the edge off the electric throbbing of her nerves. Five years ago, she couldn't stand the soft strains and saccharine lyrics of so many of the older generation's musical standards; but she had

lately come to appreciate the nostalgic warmth brought by so many of the songs her mother used to play; they reminded her so much of happier times and easier moods. Of course, as a child, she could not have known that, deep inside, her mother was suffering terribly under the burden of guilt. The concept was too alien for her youthful mind, so any outward signs of Elizabeth's distress passed unnoticed.

She was sitting on the edge of her bed and staring out the window, hypnotized, remembering her father, when a soft voice said, "Hello? Is anyone in there?"

She turned to see Quentin standing at the foot of her bed, smiling warmly at her, but with concern in his eyes. "Oh, Quentin. I'm sorry, I didn't hear you."

"I know. You didn't answer when I knocked. Sorry, but I took the liberty of coming in."

"No, it's all right. I was just thinking."

"I came to see how you were feeling. You certainly don't look like you're at death's door."

"No, I feel fine, really. What have you been doing today?"

"Catching up on old times with David. He's certainly come a long way since I last saw him."

She smiled. "Yes, he has. But don't let him fool you. He can still throw a curve ball when you least expect it."

"I'd expect nothing less." His face again turned serious. "Carolyn, are you really all right? That was a shocking experience last night, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about you."

"Quentin, I'm all right. Physically, I feel better than I have for a long time. If whatever stung me really was dangerous, then Julia extracted all the poison. It hasn't affected me."

"I'm glad to hear that," he said, obviously not convinced.

"Tell me, who was that man who came to the house a while ago?"

"A new neighbor, apparently. He's bought the old Swift place, on the other side of the woods. He came to introduce himself. A man named Karswell."

"I see. I didn't get a good look at him, but I gather there's something wrong with him."

"He's old, wrinkled, and scarred. Apparently he was in a disfiguring accident some years ago."

"How tragic. Did he strike you as a...decent...man?"

"He was very polite. I imagine his looks are the worse thing about him."

"I see. I'm sorry, I just had an odd feeling about him."

"I think we all did." Quentin shuddered slightly at the memory of Karswell's

grotesque countenance. “Well, I didn’t come here only to see how you were doing. I came to tell you we’re going out to dinner tonight.”

Carolyn raised an eyebrow. “We?”

“You. Me. You look like you could stand to get out of the house. So, I thought I would get you out of the house *and* be there to watch over you.”

“Aren’t you the chivalrous one.”

“Well, I’ve spent time with David. Now I think I should spend time with you.”

“What about the snow? Is anything going to be open?”

“Pennock’s is open. I called.”

“Thinking ahead, I see. Well, if we’re going out, I shall need to change. What time?”

“You have plenty of time. I made reservations for seven o’clock. But I doubt there will be a crowd tonight.”

“I’m sure that suits you.”

“Yes, it does.”

She knew that Quentin had no taste for large gatherings of people. *He’s always been something of a loner.* As she rose from her bed, she realized that something about him was nagging at her. When her eyes happened to stray downward, she saw that the cuffs of his trousers were damp.

“You must have been outside,” she said.

He nodded. “I didn’t *just* spend time with David today.”

Her heart thumped an extra beat when she saw seriousness in his eyes. “You were out looking for that *thing*, weren’t you?”

“Yes, I was. I’ve searched all over the house. Around the grounds. Stiles was out there looking as well, between plowing and shoveling. There’s no sign of anything. Whatever it was, I truly hope that it’s gone.”

The reminder of last night’s attack sent her heart racing again. “So do I,” she said softly.

“Well,” he said, with a reassuring smile. “I’ll leave you to do whatever you have to do. Your carriage will be waiting at six-forty-five on the dot.”

“Thank you, Quentin,” she said with a happy little smile. “It’ll be nice to have an evening out. I’m so happy you’re here.”

For a moment, his eyes took on a faraway look; then he gave her one of his most disarming glances. “I’m happy too. I’ll see you in a little while.”

Pennock’s Supper Club was situated on a bluff on the north end of Collinsport, about two miles from downtown, on a site that was reputed to be one of several safe

havens for a band of pirates who, in the early 1800s, caused considerable consternation among the crews of ships sailing in and out of Boston. The supper club itself, however, was named after one Major Charles Pennock, of the 20th Maine Infantry, who had served with distinction under Colonel Joshua L. Chamberlain at the Battle of Gettysburg. After the war, he had built a grand hotel on the same promontory, and had in fact lived in one of its suites until his death in 1884. During World War I, the hotel was converted to a hospital, but in 1939, it burned to the ground. The supper club had been constructed in the early 1950s. The long, low façade of the building, whose windows overlooked the Atlantic, incorporated much of the hotel's original stonework.

The parking lot was hardly filled to capacity, but there were more cars than Carolyn would have anticipated after such a heavy snowstorm. The roads were mostly clear now, and even the restaurant's parking lot had been scraped and salted. Quentin parked his car near the main entrance, which was protected by an almost disproportionately large portico, and, in true gentlemanly fashion, opened the car door for her and escorted her across the still-treacherous snow and ice with her arm linked in his. Beneath the pair of soft globe lights that stood before the front doors, he cut a dashing figure: his hair was immaculately combed, and his outfit was a dark navy, worsted pinstripe suit, a robin's egg-blue silk shirt with maroon-and-gray patterned tie, and Crockett & Jones patent leather shoes.

Carolyn wore a sleek, black, mid-length turtleneck dress, girded at the waist by a wide, gold-buckled leather belt, black silk hose, and black leather knee-high boots; against the cold night she had donned a medium-length crown sable fur coat and deerskin gloves. Because this was inarguably a special occasion (*any* occasion with Quentin was special), she had also worn the Cartier diamond necklace and matching bracelet that had originally belonged to her grandmother. Of course, she had waited until they were in the car before putting them on, or her mother would have had a coronary. For what the necklace itself was worth, she could have bought a Jaguar.

Her mother had brought her to Pennock's the previous week, but only for lunch, which hardly constituted a major event. Now, however, she found her euphoria returning as they stepped through the doors into the near total darkness of the foyer, certain that the two of them would make the most striking couple in the restaurant tonight. An attractive, black-and-scarlet-clad hostess with long raven hair greeted them with a smile and guided them to their reserved table, which hid in a cozy corner near the large stone fireplace, in which a low but very hot fire now crackled cheerfully. A tall, glass-encased candle burned brightly in the center of the table, illuminating a single live rose in a crystal vase, its petals the color of blood. Carolyn

hung her coat on a hook next to the table and allowed Quentin to maneuver her chair for her as she sat down. She found herself facing one of the windows, through which she could see the twinkling lights of town across the bay. Closer to the restaurant, in a valley to the right, flashing colored lights sketched the shapes of Christmas trees onto a pitch black canvas, broken here and there by splotches of white snow that shone under moonlight.

“What a beautiful night,” Carolyn breathed, absorbing the atmosphere as if it were some exotic locale she had never visited before. “I’ve always loved the view from here.”

“It is lovely,” Quentin said, without taking his eyes off her. “And so are you.”

She felt her face warming, realizing that, at least for tonight, Quentin was surely as drawn to her as she was to him. “Thanks,” she said, lowering her head and smiling. “You bring out the best in a person.”

His smile was sardonic. “I’m sure others might take issue with that. But from you, it’s quite a compliment.” His eyes continued to hold hers like magnets. His crystal blue irises seemed to have enlarged, reducing the whites to insignificant slivers. After a moment, his head slowly turned to the window. “I can see the moonlight reflected in your eyes. I wish I had a picture.”

A young blonde woman, also wearing red and black, came to take their drink orders; for Quentin, a Lagavulin scotch on the rocks with a twist of lemon, and for Carolyn, a Tanqueray and tonic with lime. When the drinks arrived, they ordered their meals; both chose the house filet mignon—Quentin requesting his extra rare. Then, once the waitress had left, they sipped their drinks in silence for a few minutes, savoring the dark warmth of the setting and intimacy of each other’s company. But Carolyn had barely put a dent in her drink when Quentin upended his glass to let the last golden drops trickle between the shards of ice into his mouth.

“Good, is it?”

“I recommend it highly.”

She chuckled. “Don’t make me call a cab to take us home tonight.”

“A cab? I’ll settle for nothing less than the town’s best limo service.”

“There is only one limo service in town. We can have Jake Stiles pick us up in his truck, how’s that?”

“Even better. We can ride in the back and keep each other warm.”

“Yes, I can see Mother and Uncle Roger now, waiting for us at the doorstep and scolding us as a pair of drunken teenagers.”

“You, at least, could still pass for one. I’m surprised they didn’t ask for your ID at the door. I, on the other hand, do not remember who I was as a teenager. I must

have been someone altogether different.”

“You’ve never told me about your youth. I’d like to hear about it. Where you grew up. Your own family.”

Quentin’s eyes dulled. “It was a very long time ago. There’s nothing I care to talk about from those days.”

Carolyn studied him curiously, taken aback by his sudden shift in mood. She noticed that he glanced at the moon several times, his eyes taking on that faraway look they sometimes had, as if he were remembering something...sad. Her hand crept across the table and fell gently upon his. “It’s not important. Talk to me about anything that makes you happy.”

He smiled at her, his good humor returning as quickly as it had fled. “Well, I believe that *you* do.”

She blushed again. And in a way, she was glad that their meals arrived then, because their subtle innuendo was becoming more heated. With only a little more stoking, something might happen that she wasn’t sure ought to happen.

The filet was the best she had ever tasted. The chef had outdone himself—as if solely and specifically for *them*. Quentin’s steak was—as he requested—blood red, and when he took a bite, for a second, she swore that his eyes flashed with a supernal, cyan light. She could see the haze-shrouded, crescent moon over his shoulder, casting its light through the window onto their table. And for one brief instant—*only* an instant—she saw his face darken and appear as something altogether different. Something with great, gleaming eyes, and numerous sharp, spiked teeth. She drew back from him suddenly, a gasp coming unbidden to her lips. A wave of heat seemed to pass over her, and she put a hand to her forehead, closing her eyes to stop the world from spinning.

“Carolyn?”

She opened her eyes and saw him peering intently at her, deep lines of concern furrowing his brow. “I’m sorry,” she breathed. “I felt a little dizzy there for a moment.”

He took hold of her hand and slid one finger onto her wrist. “Your pulse is racing. If there’s anything wrong, we’ll leave right now.”

“No,” she protested, suddenly embarrassed at her ridiculous display. “I’m fine. Maybe just an anxious moment, after all that’s happened.”

“Maybe we should let Julia have a look at you.”

“Not again,” she said firmly, euphoria again beginning to creep into her blood. “I’ve taken all the poking, prodding, and jabbing from her I’m going to take. I think, dear Quentin, all I really need is another drink.”

He studied her warily for several moments, his face finally relaxing, indicating he accepted her judgment, albeit it reluctantly.

Once they finished eating, each ordered an after-dinner liqueur. Quentin chose a Grand Marnier Cordon Rouge, and Carolyn selected a Hennessy V.S—perhaps not coincidentally, her Uncle Roger’s favorite brand. By now, she was feeling thoroughly relaxed and uninhibited, and what had seemed a frightening idea before dinner was now a challenge to be surmounted—with all possible delicacy. As she studied his brilliant eyes, she saw the spark in them that told her all she needed to know.

Then, a slight commotion erupted from the far end of the room, as a number of well-dressed gentlemen came through a door at the back of the club and marched toward the small stage that until now had hidden under darkened lights. The men took their places on the stage, and another array of golden lights sprang to life above the dance floor in the center of the large room, hidden from Carolyn’s view by several tables and a row of supporting columns. A heavysset, bearded man in a tuxedo stepped to the front of the stage, blew into his microphone, and said in a deep, mellifluous voice, “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. We are the Glenn Miller Tribute Ensemble, and we’ll be here till midnight, playing your favorite swing and jazz tunes. We hope everyone is having a wonderful evening, and a hearty thank you from everyone at Pennock’s Supper Club.”

A muted round of applause rose, and Carolyn and Quentin exchanged amused glances, for although the ensemble was a mainstay at Pennock’s, neither of them had actually been here when a performance was scheduled. “Want to stay and listen?” Quentin asked.

“Sure,” she said, delighted at the prospect of spending more time in this darkened corner with him. Now, she rose and slid her chair around the table and seated herself beside him. As the lights went down and the smooth, brassy sound of “In the Mood” began to swell in the great room, she felt his arm encircle her shoulders; she leaned back against him in barely restrained ecstasy. The waitress came by, and Quentin ordered another round of scotch and gin, apparently as ready as she to settle in for the duration.

The ensemble belted a respectable tune, capturing the authentic, distinctive Glenn Miller sound with a clarinet and tenor sax playing melody, with three alto saxes joining in harmony. After their opening number, they broke into a spirited rendition of “Tuxedo Junction,” and several couples headed for the dance floor to work off their dinners. “Pennsylvania 6-5000” followed, and by now several couples were cutting a rug—with varying degrees of panache—in front of the diners.

It was when the band began to play the Hoagy Carmichael classic, “Stardust,”

with unabashed champagne sweetness that Quentin rose from his seat and extended his hand to her. "Shall we?"

One hand went to her breast, and she smiled nervously. "Oh...I'm not much of a slow dancer."

"You don't have to be. I'm sure this isn't your favorite style of music, but I happen to think it's very romantic."

"I'm enjoying it," she said. His eyes beckoned her, and she could not refuse. She rose to her feet, took his waiting hand, and followed him as he threaded his way through the tables to the dance floor.

A dozen couples had begun to sway slowly under the soft, atmospheric lighting. Quentin's right arm encircled her waist, his left hand tenderly touched hers, and their fingers entwined. She pressed close to him as he began to move smoothly in rhythm with the music, her eyes at first meeting his with a gaze of desire and longing, then closing so that she could allow the soft sighing tones of the woodwinds to sweep her away. Euphoria enveloped her completely, and, entranced, she began to follow his movements not only with confidence, but with an intensifying sexual flair. She pressed her body firmly against his, then teasingly pulled away, her feet never missing a step. He responded in kind, and she felt the furnace of his own desire heating the scant space between them. At the end of the number, obviously aware of the amorous atmosphere they had generated, the band segued right into a remarkably romantic interpretation of "Moon River," the saxes and clarinets almost taking on the aural character of viol strings. The bearded band leader took up the microphone and began to sing, his voice mellow but ardent, his eyes wandering over the crowd, obviously pleased by the audience's reception of the performance.

"Moon River, wider than a mile, I'm crossing you in style someday.

Old dream maker, you heartbreaker, wherever you're going, I'm going your way.

Two drifters, off to the see the world; there's such a lot of world to see.

We're after the same rainbow's end, waiting round the bend, my huckleberry friend...

Moon River, and me."

Carolyn now found herself transported to another realm entirely, one of pure, dreamlike joy, all worries of the past and present forgotten, the future a dim netherworld laden with promise. Quentin's arms felt like gentle bonds, his body a protective blanket that would cover her and shield her from all harm. She had never felt so safe, so needed, so adored. When she dared to open her eyes, she saw that his were closed, and his face wore a look of contentment that she had not seen since he

arrived.

The music ended, and the couples began to disperse. For a few moments, they continued to hold each other; then the spell began to loosen its hold on them. Drawing himself up as if his expended energy were only gradually returning, he led her back to their table, and they sat down to find another round of drinks awaiting them.

“I do like the service here,” he said, taking a long swallow of his scotch. “Thank you for the dance, my dear. It was quite exquisite.”

She lowered her head and glanced up coyly at him. “I never knew you were such a fine dancer. We’ll have to do it again sometime. Perhaps there is much that you can teach me.”

“I’ve learned a lot of things over the years. A century is a....” He suddenly cut himself off, took a long drink, and turned to face the window. After a minute, he said softly, “The moon is so damned hot tonight.”

“What?”

He turned back to her and shrugged. “Nothing. Just musing on some old, old thoughts, I suppose. Nothing to trouble you with.”

He was obviously starting to become intoxicated. But after a few moments, he was entirely himself again, without the slightest sign of drunkenness. They listened to several more songs, several of which were Christmas songs, and, finally, Quentin called the waitress over for the check. After the girl had presented it to him, he said to Carolyn, “Well, it’s been a wonderful evening. I suppose I should be the responsible date and get you home—so as not to keep your mother up waiting.”

“Yes, I’m sure she’ll be worried about the company I’m keeping.”

“She ought to be.”

Carolyn giggled. “Now I’m worried.”

“That’s a healthy attitude.” Quentin paid the bill and then rose, taking her coat from the hook and slipping it over her shoulders. As they started to leave, Quentin plucked the red rose from the vase on the table and placed it in her hand. “For you, my dear. A token of my appreciation.”

“For a wonderful evening?”

“For making sure my bank account doesn’t stagnate.” He smiled and slipped his receipt into his jacket pocket. She gave him a playful swat on the shoulder. But as they walked out of the restaurant and into the cold evening air, again arm in arm, she felt a strange distance between them that hadn’t been there only five minutes ago. *He’s lost his nerve*, she thought. *Now he actually has the opportunity to be with me, he can’t bring himself to go through with it.*

When he opened the car door for her, she saw him rub his left hand as if it

pained him. He held up his fingers, as if inspecting them for some kind of injury; finding none, he shrugged and held her hand as she slid into her seat. Before he closed the door, she held up the red rose to breathe in its aroma—only to discover that, instead of having lustrous, scarlet petals, it was now withered and black. When she touched one of the petals, it crumbled to dust in her hand.

“Oh, my God,” she exclaimed. “How utterly strange.”

Quentin studied the ruins of the once-beautiful flower. “Very odd,” he said. “Who’d have thought it?”

She shook her head dubiously. “Must be the cold. I’ve never seen anything like that.”

In dismay, she tossed the remains of the rose into the snow. He closed her door, went around the car, and climbed into the seat behind the wheel.

“Is everything all right, Quentin?” she asked. “You don’t seem quite yourself.”

He nodded and gave her a reassuring glance. “Sure, I’m fine. It’s been an exhilarating evening, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes.”

He started the car, backed out of the parking space, and drove out of the lot a tad faster than necessary. Carolyn pressed herself into her seat and gripped her seatbelt with one hand, now certain that *something* must have happened to affect him. But what? She’d been there the whole time. Nothing had changed. She couldn’t have done anything to put him off.

He only spoke sporadically on the drive home. Every few seconds, she noticed, he looked up at the crescent moon, which sailed over the treetops like a luminous, phantom ship. And he continually wrung his left hand, as if it burned him. Her heart began to sink, for she realized that the possibility for yet more intimate moments with him appeared to be out of the question tonight.

By the time they turned into the driveway at Collinwood, she had accepted the fact that their beautiful evening was over. Once inside, she even asked him if he’d care to have one more drink with her, but he politely declined, saying he had better retire for the evening. His eyes suddenly had that worn look she’d seen when he first arrived, as if he carried some terrible weight on his shoulders. But he did take her in his arms for one long, final embrace—and when she lifted her head and pressed her lips against his, he did not resist. It was a long and glorious moment, and she reveled in the feel of his body in her arms, and she wanted to hold him and never, ever let him go.

But after a time, he extricated himself from her arms and, with a rueful expression, turned toward the steps and slowly made his way up to the landing. Once

he disappeared through the door to the upstairs hallway, she heard his footsteps creaking on the ancient floor, gradually growing softer.

Then, for a second, she heard something else: the rapid sound of *pattering* feet, as if his footsteps had become light and fast, as if for some reason he had gone bounding through the hall.

Oh, my God, she thought. *What if he had seen that thing up there...?*

But no. That wasn't it, she was certain. As she stood in the foyer staring up at the great stained glass window that overlooked the stairs, she suddenly had the feeling that tonight's tranquil beauty had merely been an oasis in the vast desert of tribulation that seemed to forever encompass the ancient mansion. The cycle of mystery that had begun with Quentin Collins's arrival at Collinwood had not come close to resolving itself. Nor had it even taken a respite.

It was crouching and glowering in the shadows, anticipating an opportunity to spring. That fact burned in her blood along with the venom that she knew still circulated there, biding its time, waiting to work its effect like an insidious virus.

When she climbed the stairs, her knees were weak and her hand on the railing trembled like a wounded sparrow.

Chapter 8

The cold dawn of a new day found Julia Hoffman already out of bed, dressed, and hard at work on her research of the venom in Carolyn's blood. In the last 24 hours, she had discovered no new properties, isolated no unusual compounds, observed no variation in fresh samples, or otherwise made any more headway than she had on the first night. She felt thoroughly frustrated and very nearly defeated. Today she would send off a number of specimens to her acquaintance in Boston, but after everything she had been through, she felt certain that even the most highly specialized and well-equipped laboratory would be hard-pressed to make advances with such mystifying subject matter.

But what had upset her most was a late-night visit from Quentin. With panic-stricken eyes, he had burst into her room and told her, "I felt it coming on, Julia...the transformation. *But it wasn't a full moon!*"

"Did you complete the change?"

"No," he said. "I felt the pain, the terrible hunger. So I ran...I locked myself in my room. But no...thank God...I didn't fully change."

He had apparently recovered after a few minutes. And together, they had examined the portrait in her closet. Captured in oil, Quentin's desiccated corpse stared at them with incognizant, glassy eyes, but there was no sign of the painting having assumed the characteristics of the werewolf.

He had finally retired, shaken and fatigued, and she had tried to sleep, without success. And this morning, she had risen even before Mrs. Johnson, which was no mean feat. Most days, the redoubtable housekeeper had coffee and breakfast waiting for everyone as soon as they came down the stairs; while the family was eating, she made beds and straightened rooms; and before any of them left the house for the day, she had a complete schedule of comings and goings in her hands. If Elizabeth wanted salmon croquettes for lunch at 12 noon, and Roger wanted a medium-rare ribeye steak at 12:45, then that was exactly what they got and when. But this morning, when Mrs. Johnson ambled down the stairs and headed for the kitchen, she smelled the rich aroma of percolating coffee and found Julia Hoffman already sipping her first cup while peering out the kitchen window at the hazy dawn.

"Well, good morning, Dr. Hoffman," she said in her warbling alto voice. "I'm surprised to see you up and about so early."

Julia turned around and smiled weakly. "So am I."

"You didn't sleep well?"

“Didn’t sleep at all.”

“Well, I can’t say I’m surprised, not with all the goings-on around here since the other night. Have you found anything to help Carolyn?”

“Help her? She doesn’t appear to need any. But I haven’t learned anything new, I’m afraid.”

“I just hope nothing else happens to that poor girl. She’s already had such a shock.”

“Yes, she has,” Julia agreed. Unwilling to share more information than necessary, she bid the housekeeper a curt good morning and, with her coffee cup in hand, returned to her room. There, she buried herself in unrelenting work at the microscope, still hoping to discover some agent, some catalyst—anything—that would reveal the venom sample’s innermost properties to her.

Nothing.

The next time she glanced at her clock, it was nearly eleven. Again, she had been at it for hours, without a break and without realizing the passage of time. But an idea had been forming in her mind, and she had finally decided to follow through with it. The previous day, the enigmatic Dr. Karswell had indicated that they shared certain interests, and he was anxious to have another opportunity to talk with her. No time like the present to take him up on it, she thought; why not pay him a call at his new residence?

She bundled up in her well-worn dun overcoat and green scarf, informed Mrs. Johnson she would be out for a while, and then set out into the sparkling but frigid morning. The driveway glistened like black ice, for the sun had erased any patches of snow left after Stiles’s plowing. Ahead and to her right, the broad, ivory-coated lawn undulated lazily toward the distant line of snow-crested pines and cedars, which concealed the sheer precipice of Widows Hill. A smoky wreath of haze hovered over the conifers, and above it, the branches of several barren oaks reached toward heaven like supplicating, skeletal hands. To her left, the driveway wandered along the edge of the lawn, disappearing into the balustrade of thick pines and naked white poplars, whose limbs wavered slightly in a low, cold breeze. The old Swift house lay beyond this frozen, towering bastion—a distance of perhaps three-quarters of a mile. She had the choice of either walking all the way out to the main road, then a half mile or more to the adjoining property, and finally down the long driveway that led to the house, or cutting directly through the woods. She frequently strolled in the woods—although usually during better weather—so she decided to take on the deep snow and rough terrain and chance the shorter route.

Although there was no path beneath the trees, the oaks, elms, and sycamores

were spaced widely apart, and the snow was not deep enough to seriously impede her stride. Ahead of her the woods thickened, and she could see glittering spiderwebs of limbs, tangled and entwined. High above, a soft breeze hissed in and out of the branches, but down here, the air was still and almost perfectly silent except for the muted crunching of her boots in the snow. Several times she paused just to gaze at this perfect example of nature's unspoiled beauty, for these woods had never been cut or otherwise impinged upon by the hand of man. In years past, some members of the Collins family had ventured into timber as a source of income, but they had understandably left the forestland close to the house untouched. *Bravo for them*, Julia thought, for nowadays it was getting more and more difficult to find places where humankind had not intruded and devastated the most wonderful elements of God's creation.

As she strode into the heart of the woods, the breeze died, and the silence became profound. Even the *swish-crunch* of her footsteps seemed to come from miles away, barely detectable to her ears. The trees grew thicker here, taller, and more tangled. She frequently had to push her way past low-hanging branches, and occasionally she thought she heard a distant crackle of movement—as if something were passing through the woods on a parallel course. She stopped walking and stood absolutely still, barely even breathing; but she heard nothing, not even a whisper of wind in the high branches. Surely, she had nothing to fear in broad daylight, in surroundings she knew almost as well as the interior of Collinwood itself. But she found that her pace involuntarily quickened, and her hearing remained preternaturally sharp, sensitive to the slightest sound that might indicate she was not alone out here.

A loud *snap* to her right alerted her, and a quick glance revealed a flurry of snow amid the trees, a short distance above her head. Something appeared to leap from one branch to another, sending a few of the smaller trees into rhythmic, swaying motion.

Just an animal. There are animals in the forest, she told herself.

Then a strange, crackling noise erupted from the trees, followed by a sharp, rapid clicking sound.

Her feet began moving faster and faster, for even though reason assured her that there was nothing even remotely odd about such noises in the woods, her instincts drove her to *move*, for fear had begun to gnaw at her brain; rational or irrational, she believed it was better to respect the feeling than to brush it off as nonsense.

"Sskkkrrreeee-kreee-skrreeeEEEEEE..."

The sound rose from all around her: an insect-like, chattering screech, piercing her eardrums with deafening volume. Without conscious effort, her legs propelled her at breakneck speed through the snow, her eyes staying straight ahead, unwilling or

unable to seek the source of the terrible cry. Nothing in the woods of Maine could ever make a sound like that. Nor could anything the face of the earth, as far as she knew.

Just as nothing on Earth could inject into Carolyn's blood the kind of venom I have been analyzing for the past two days.

The woods flashed past her in a gray and white blur, but her lungs, heart, and muscles refused to tire. She thought she heard another scabbling sound behind her, but now the rush of blood in her ears drowned all else, and her eyes refused to turn. Then, before she realized it, the woods suddenly ended, and she found herself emerging into full, gleaming daylight, facing a wide expanse of unbroken snow. A hundred yards ahead, nestled within the arms of the woods, lay a two-story, cream-and-umber Tudor house with smoke curling from the pots of one of its two tall chimneys. Parked in front of it, a pristine-looking, pale gray Rolls Royce Silver Seraph of recent vintage advertised the presence of considerable wealth. The Swift house was not large, but against the backdrop of snow- and ice-frosted trees, it appeared imposing, almost stately. A pair of darkened gables stared ambivalently at her from the face of its steeply angled roof. She could only gather from the signs of habitation that the property's new owner was at home.

Finally, she turned and peered into the depths of the woods she had just escaped. Not a branch stirred, nor did so much as a flurry of snow fall from the upper reaches of the trees. And there was no repetition of the hideous sound that had so horribly shocked her senses. Whatever she had heard and *almost* seen was no longer nearby, she was certain. A wave of heartfelt relief passed over her, but when she turned again to regard the house, her nerves refused to completely relax. She made her way through the snow toward the front door, momentarily regretting that her footsteps were disturbing the otherwise unmarked white coating.

She went up four narrow steps to a covered stoop, lifted the ornate brass knocker, which was shaped like a hawk in flight, and rapped firmly on the great wooden door. Very shortly afterward, she heard shuffling footsteps within, and the door creaked open to reveal a tall, muscular young man with close-cropped, burnt sienna hair, very deep-set emerald eyes, a broad, Roman nose, and a tight, thick-lipped mouth. He raised one heavy eyebrow at the sight of her and said in a deep, resonant voice, with a very faint French accent, "How do you do? You must be Dr. Hoffman."

"Yes...yes, I am," she said, somewhat taken aback. "How did you know?"

"Dr. Karswell said you would stopping by. Please come inside." He made an expansive gesture with one arm and swiveled aside to allow her to enter. He was dressed casually: a soft-looking, rust-colored sweater, well-worn beige slacks, and umber brogan boots. As soon as Julia stepped through the door, she detected a spicy

aroma—gold musk incense, she thought—masking the harsh, unmistakable odor of mothballs. She stood inside a small foyer, with doors to the left and right, and a dark mahogany-railed staircase in front of her.

“You must be Mr. Mathis,” she said.

“Just Mathis, if you please. I shall let Dr. Karswell know you have arrived. This way.”

Julia followed him through the door to the right, which led into a spacious living room, furnished in elegant, almost feminine Victorian style, but cluttered with cardboard boxes and wooden crates, some still in various stages of being unpacked. “I’m sorry to show up unannounced, but I didn’t know how to get in touch with you.”

“Quite all right,” Mathis said. “We have not yet had a telephone installed. Please make yourself comfortable.”

The young man left her in the living room, and she went to stand before the window that faced the front yard, peering anxiously toward the woods. She still saw nothing unusual, and a tiny voice began to deride her for perhaps overreacting to what might have been nothing more than the cry of a bird that her overwrought imagination translated as something malevolent and unearthly. Still, she knew better than to succumb to the typical human desire for normalcy, to reduce the inexplicable to prosaic terms; beyond all question, the organism that had stung Carolyn was anything but mundane.

“Dr. Hoffman,” came the now-familiar but still disconcerting, buzzing voice of Dr. Maitland Karswell. “I am surprised to see you so soon, but it is certainly a pleasure.”

She turned to see the old man, again dressed in black from head to toe, still wearing leather gloves, standing in the doorway at the far end of the room. She fastened on her most sincere smile and stepped forward to greet him. “Good morning, Dr. Karswell. Or perhaps by now, I should say good afternoon.”

“Please forgive the clutter in the house. As I mentioned to you, there is still much to be done. But Mathis has made great progress, and I have done what little I may to assist him.”

“You’re fortunate to have such reliable help.”

“Yes,” Dr. Karswell said, searching her face with his huge, distorted eyes. “I fear it has not always been so. Wealth occasionally attracts individuals who merely wish to take advantage of any opportunity that presents itself.”

Julia smiled. “Yes, that is sadly true. The Collins family has hardly been immune from such...predators.”

“An apt way of putting it. Well, Dr. Hoffman, why don’t you follow me into my

study? It is the one room in the house that has already been made fully habitable. Naturally, I tend to spend most of my time there.”

Julia nodded politely and followed several paces behind the old man. With a slow, shambling gait, he made his way through a doorway, down a short hall, and into a warmly lit room that faced the back of the house, its windows revealing the close-pressing branches of the trees. The room appeared cluttered, but not in disarray; and, immediately, it became apparent to Julia that Dr. Maitland Karswell was no mere dilettante, but a serious and fully established devotee of things *outré*. The entire wall to the left of his desk was a display of hand-carved, multicolored African ceremonial masks, the hollow eyes of which seemed to stare at her with unnerving sentience. She recognized one as a Mwenzi star festival mask; another as a Samburu “murrani” or warrior mask; another was a Masai wedding mask. Their stylized features were nothing less than grotesque, but expertly crafted and, in their own ways, quite exquisite. They were obviously not reproductions, but the genuine items.

“May I offer you a drink, Dr. Hoffman?” Karswell motioned to a decanter of brandy atop a cabinet behind his desk.

“No, thank you,” she said, her eyes still roving over the study. On Karswell’s large desk, entrapped by the coils of a metallic silver serpent, stood a large oblong of smooth, glittering crystal, and after a moment, Julia realized that it was shaped like a human skull. The wall behind the desk was one great bookcase, filled to overflowing with books of every size and variety, some of which were crumbling with age and frequent use. Next to the desk, resting on its own stand, a huge, leather-backed tome lay open to a page covered in intricate designs that resembled mathematical symbols.

“A most enthralling text,” buzzed Karswell, pressing his fingers to his throat. “And quite priceless. I don’t believe there is another copy in this part of the country, even though it was written in Boston—in the year 1687.”

“What is it?”

“Its title is *Of Secret Passages and Catacombs Within the Realms of Shadow*. The author was Keziah Mason—a witch of some renown in the region in those days. Are you perhaps familiar with the name?”

Julia shook her head, her eyes still taking in the fabulous *objets* that decorated the room. In the far corner, near the door through which they had entered, she saw a large glass case on a wooden pedestal. She could not tell what it contained, but something about the contours of the large, pale gray mass within struck her as vaguely disturbing.

“You have a most...interesting collection,” she said to him, noting that his eyes had narrowed behind the thick, smoky lenses.

“I have always been fascinated by mankind’s darkest side. Spiritual darkness is pervasive, Dr. Hoffman, and it is celebrated and romanticized by cultures dating back to the beginning of time. Man instinctively shuns his baser nature, yet he erects monuments to it. He offers sacrifices to nebulous entities, which he hopes will refrain from revealing themselves and thus shatter the fragile illusion of security he has woven.” He waved a gloved hand toward the African masks. “So many ancient rites of worship are what the common man would call barbaric and brutal, yet they are also strangely wondrous. In my travels, I have witnessed the practices of many cultures, both old and new.” He noticed that her eyes had fallen to a small item on his desk, and he picked it up and held it out for her to study. It was a small ceramic object: a distorted, vaguely human figure, boasting three arms and a tall, pointed crest of gold on its head. “The Babylonian *Baal*, the bringer of storms. Most ancient cultures have similar figures in their pantheons. The Egyptian *Ra*, the sun god, with his all-seeing eye. The Hebraic *Moloch*, the god of fire. The Mongolian *Huu*, the skeletal bringer of devastation and renewal. All quite fascinating. Wouldn’t you agree, Dr. Hoffman?”

She nodded. “I do. But I sometimes fear that enmeshing one’s self too deeply in dark legends tends to give one a bleak outlook on life. I find the prospect of healing others to be far more uplifting.” She swallowed hard, thinking of Carolyn and Quentin. “And at times, when the world appears as dark as—all this,” she motioned toward the masks, “there must be something else...*hope*, perhaps...to keep us going.”

“Indeed, Doctor. Where would we be if we did not have souls of light to save us from the ever-encroaching darkness? It is clearly evident that you have experienced a great deal of that darkness yourself.”

“I—I believe we all have, in our own ways,” she said, somewhat unsteadily. Karswell’s penetrating stare was starting to prey on her nerves.

He leaned forward slightly, studying her the way he might examine an unusual insect. “But you, Dr. Hoffman, have the distinct aura of someone who has seen far more than the average person. You have gazed into the wells of darkness that surround man at every step, threatening to swallow him if he so much as slips from his path. What a rare person you must be. I should enjoy your telling me of some of your experiences, if you were so inclined.”

“You’re a very perceptive man,” Julia said, shaking off the nervousness that threatened to derail her composure. She decided to assert some measure of control by ignoring his request. “Tell me, what brings you to Collinsport? Have you been here before?”

One corner of his lipless mouth tilted upward. After a few moments, he pressed his fingers into his neck. “Not for many years. I had...acquaintances...here, long ago.

But I fear they would have passed on before you were born.”

“You must like this area, if you came here from Arkham.”

He nodded. “Very much so. I have always found it exactly the sort of place that suits my temperament. I value my privacy, and this town—this house—could not be more perfect. However, do not let my desire for privacy dissuade you from visiting me whenever you desire. This door shall always be open to you, Dr. Hoffman.”

“I appreciate that,” she said with a cautious smile.

“To return to what we were discussing. Not only have you dealt with human evil in the extreme, you have witnessed *signs*, if nothing more, of that divine darkness from which all human evil springs. Would this be a fair assessment?”

Julia cocked her head. “Do I give you such an impression, Dr. Karswell? I must wonder why that would be.”

“As you said yourself...I am a perceptive man. I trust my impressions of other human beings implicitly. If I may ask—do you have any particular religious beliefs?”

“I believe there are certainly powers that man does not understand. That they have their own purposes, which may or may not be apparent to us.”

“A reasonable answer.”

“I also believe that meddling with them can be...dangerous. You speak of the darkness swallowing those who slip from their paths. I believe that the danger is especially real to those who intentionally seek to enter that darkness, even if it is simply for the sake of gaining knowledge.”

Karswell nodded sullenly. “So you espouse the idea that ignorance is bliss, and the dangers that *might* await one in the unknown darkness are too vast to risk the rewards?”

“I do not believe in recklessness. And there are more rewards to be discovered in the light of truth.”

“Truth has many shades, Doctor, as I suspect you well know. But you are quite correct. The dangers may certainly be fatal to the seeker who is ill-prepared for what he might find.”

“I assume you consider yourself adequately prepared to make such ventures.”

The black-clad man drew himself up somewhat proudly. “I have made many such attempts, Dr. Hoffman.” He pointed to the great book on the stand beside his desk. “Keziah Mason, labeled a witch by her contemporaries, was truly a scientist. The formulae she developed far exceed anything Einstein ever dreamed of. By purely mathematical means, she learned to open doors in the dimensions of time and space, and travel from one point to another—not just theoretically, but physically. And my experiments in the same field have produced similar results. To master the ability to

move between dimensions is the goal of my life's work.”

Julia looked upon him in wonder, trying to determine if the man were truly inspired or merely demented. *If it is dementia, it is cunning and calculating. He certainly believes in everything he says.*

“I see you are dubious. That is to be expected of the conventional mind. But I believe yours is not a conventional mind, Dr. Hoffman. You have personal knowledge that can verify my theories. I would wager a large sum on that.”

Julia shrugged. “It is true that I have experienced things that are beyond my understanding. And I would certainly agree that there might be ways to traverse time and space.”

The first Quentin Collins had done so. He had built a stairway by which one could move from one time to another. But this was not something she would reveal to anyone, especially not this man, whom she neither knew nor trusted.

“I understand your reticence to discuss certain matters, so I will press you no further. I hope that, in time, we will become good friends, and you will be comfortable sharing certain things that you must keep to yourself because they would not—how shall I say it?—endear you to the practical minds of mundane men.”

“I applaud your perceptions, Dr. Karswell. Time will tell...whether we shall become friends.” Julia found her eyes again drawn to the glass case in the corner, and she finally crossed the room to get a better view of it.

And what she saw absolutely chilled her blood.

It was the shed carapace of some gigantic creature with numerous, segmented appendages; a giant spider, it seemed, although it had too many legs. The body was the size of a large rat, its shell the color of curdled milk, marred by swirling patterns of gangrenous black. A pair of chelicera the size of ice picks protruded from its cephalothorax, and its dozen dead eyes appeared to gaze at her incuriously, as if sizing up an opponent. The legs were shriveled and bent, but gave the impression that they had once been capable of great power. Julia could barely suppress a shudder of terror and disgust. *No such creature had a right to exist on a sane Earth.*

“That is the rarest item in my collection, and possibly in the entire world,” Karswell said, all but beaming. “Modern science cannot even classify its species, for it is the only one of its kind on Earth. Based on certain esoteric texts from more than one ancient culture, I have deduced that its actual name is *Xianges*.”

“One of its kind? But surely, Dr. Karswell, where there is one, there must be others.”

Karswell uttered a prideful chuckle. “Indeed there are. But no one on this planet will ever see them.”

“Are you saying this is some kind of *alien*?”

“I brought this carapace forth from its own time and space—its rightful dimension, so to speak. There, these creatures are surely plentiful. But I will confess to you, it was not a place I went eagerly exploring.”

“It’s quite incredible,” Julia whispered, studying the impossible contours of the withered shell. Noting the sharp, deadly-looking fangs, she asked, “Dr. Karswell, what would happen if such a thing were to bite a human being?”

“That, I assure you, is quite impossible. For as I have said, there are none in this world.” His eyes took on a faraway look, and he trembled visibly. “As you so astutely stated, there are grave dangers in making contact with the *things* that exist on the other side of what we perceive as reality. This is one of them. Some doors, once opened, must be closed and remain so forever. I have no intention of ever traveling that particular path again.”

Karswell’s fearful expression was startling, and she had no doubt that his dread of the thing was genuine.

But did not this very object prove beyond a doubt that Karswell actually had the ability to do the things he claimed?

She did not care to mention Carolyn specifically. But in a guarded tone, she said, “Dr. Karswell, I will volunteer this much. I know very well that, sometimes, in spite of our best intentions, the doors that we close behind us have a way of creeping open again. What assurance can you possibly have that no other such creatures exist...in *our* world?”

“On that, you may trust my word. I have sealed that door forever, and nothing...*nothing*... could ever coerce me to open it again.”

“So you believe this thing truly is something to fear?”

After a long, thoughtful silence, Karswell said, “My feeling...my *belief*...is that the *Xianges* arachnid may in fact be the basis for the ‘locusts’ described in the Book of Revelation. If so, given the consequences foretold by the Apostle Paul, I should very much pity the unfortunate soul who might encounter one of these creatures alive.”

The smile that now spread across Karswell’s ruined face was horrifying to behold. And Julia Hoffman could barely suppress crying out at the thought that, not only was such a creature alive and loose at Collinwood, its living, twisting venom at this very moment flowed through the veins of the innocent and unwitting Carolyn Stoddard.

Chapter 9

“Yes, poisonous thing!” repeated Giovanni, beside himself with passion. “Thou hast done it! Thou hast blasted me! Thou hast filled my veins with poison! Thou hast made me as hateful, as ugly, as loathsome and deadly a creature as thyself—a world’s wonder of hideous monstrosity! Now, if our breath be happily as fatal to ourselves as to all others, let us join our lips in one kiss of unutterable hatred, and so die!”

—Nathaniel Hawthorne
Rappacini’s Daughter

The violins and violas filled the drawing room with a sweetness that had long been absent from its drafty confines, and the warmth of the poignant melody made the crackling blaze in the fireplace seem feeble in comparison. He had first listened to the music in this very room, which, even with completely different furnishings, barely seemed to have changed. How many times must he have stood with a brandy in his hand, listening to the piece as he did now, his countenance all but untouched by age even after a century. Once upon a time, the musical notes had scratched their way out of an old gramophone, beautiful despite their crude method of transmission; now, the recording was on a high-quality magnetic tape, and the music flowed from an expensive stereo system enclosed in a faux-antique wooden cabinet in one corner of the room.

The lyrical fugue still soothed him as it always had, conveying to him an inner calm even as he struggled with emotional storms as ferocious as the waves that smashed against the boulders at the foot of Widows Hill. The music crystallized his memories, drew them from the hazy depths of his subconscious, until, with devastating clarity, he could see the faces of his brothers Edward and Carl: the former stern, rigid, and ostensibly proper, his air of superiority manifest even from the time they were children; the latter youthful, handsome but coarse, his features changing little between adolescence and adulthood. Even when he reached maturity, Carl remained a callow, undisciplined schoolboy, until events late in his life forced him to confront reality in its most horrifying form—with fatal consequences. For a moment, Quentin felt a rush of anger and regret, recalling how needless his brother’s death had been.

He had forgiven Barnabas a long time ago. There was no longer any blame.
And Judith, his older sister: so intelligent, so caring, yet so often distant and

self-absorbed. Yes, he missed them all, even though when they had been alive and together as adults, he seldom had any use for them and vice-versa. The passage of years so often changed one's perspective, and he had had more years to reflect—and mourn—than any human being had a right to.

He had fought in two wars. He had gambled, made and lost fortunes, seen the sun rise over the Egyptian Pyramids, climbed Mt. Fuji. He had met Samuel Clemens, Charles Lindbergh, John F. Kennedy, the Dalai Lama. He had sought after more women—successfully and unsuccessfully—than he could possibly remember. For a time, a few years ago, he had been unable to remember his past, for amnesia had claimed him, erasing everything and everyone he had known and cared about. When his memory had returned, he wasn't sure he wanted it. Family, friends, and enemies, all had aged and died—or just died—while his heart beat on and on. At least when he couldn't remember, he couldn't regret.

So many times he wished he would not live to see another sunrise. But now that he actually faced the possibility of succumbing to death's cold touch, he wasn't sure he could readily accept it.

What if tonight should be my last?

"I haven't heard that music in a long time," came a low, flat voice from behind him. He turned and saw Julia Hoffman standing in the doorway, her hair glistening with tiny crystals of ice, her cheeks ruddy from having just come in from the cold.

"Your definition of a 'long time' and mine might be very different."

Without another word, she entered the drawing room and went to the fire to warm her hands. He watched her as she spread her fingers, held them near the flames for several moments, and then slowly and deliberately thrust them down at her sides, simultaneously drawing a deep, rasping breath. Her eyes turned upward as if she were waiting for God to scrawl a message for her on the ceiling.

"Julia, what's wrong?"

She turned and her eyes were those of a doe caught in the headlights of an onrushing truck. "Quentin, I think I have seen the creature that attacked Carolyn. Or...at least one like it."

He stopped the tape, and the sudden silence felt as if the air had been sucked out of the room. "When was this?"

"Just a short while ago. I went to visit Dr. Karswell. And I saw it, right there in his study."

"What?"

She cleared her throat nervously. "Karswell has a very passionate interest in the occult. His house is a veritable museum of rare pieces from many ancient cultures.

And one of them was something that had once been...alive. It was a shed skin, like a huge spider. He claimed it came from another reality—a whole different dimension.”

He shook his head. “It sounds fantastic.”

Julia raised an eyebrow. “So does a painting that keeps a man young and prevents him from changing into a werewolf.”

“I know, I know,” he said. “Strange as it all is, Julia, I’m still as cynical in here,” he tapped his chest, “as any ‘normal’ man. But tell me, what did you find out? What does Karswell have to do with anything?”

“He said that he had found ways of opening doors to other dimensions, and this creature is native to one of them. He called it the *Xianges* arachnid. And he assured me that it is...deadly.”

“And this is what attacked Carolyn? You’re sure?”

“He said there was no possibility of one existing here and now, and I think he sincerely believes that. But Quentin, if he somehow—even inadvertently—allowed something so terrible to cross into our place and time, we could all be in danger.”

“How could he accomplish such a thing?”

“Well, we know from our own experiences that doors to...*other*...places can be opened. Like Professor Stokes, I happen to believe that in 1840, your ancestor’s stairway through time set into motion certain temporal disturbances—resulting in our occasionally witnessing parallel dimensions—even though the staircase was destroyed. If those disturbances extend beyond this house, it’s possible that something Karswell attempted might have unforeseen consequences.”

“That’s not a reassuring thought.”

Her eyes wandered lazily to the bubbling lights on the Christmas tree, and she sighed. “No, it isn’t. Tell me, where is Carolyn?”

“She went down to the stables to go riding. She wanted to spend some time outdoors. I can’t say I blame her.”

“I’m not sure that was wise. We still have no idea what physical problems might manifest themselves. And there’s a very strong possibility that that creature is somewhere on the grounds.”

Quentin felt his left hand burning again. The pain had come back several times, and the skin on his fingers all the way down to his palm look inflamed. He rubbed it—vainly—in frustration. “I should have gone with her. I’m not feeling all that well, though.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Just fatigued, I guess.” He held up his hand. “And this. It started burning last night.”

Julia examined his hand, gently pressing on his reddened skin. “It looks almost like a severe allergic reaction of some kind. Is it very painful?”

“It seems to be getting worse.” He suddenly felt a stinging around his lower lip and touched his mouth with his right hand. “And I think it might be spreading.”

“You haven’t come into contact with anything...unusual...have you?”

“No, not at all. And I certainly haven’t seen any sign of that creature since the tracks in the snow the other night.”

“Any fever? Chills?”

“No.”

Her fingers encircled his wrist—they were cool—and touched the throbbing vein beneath his thumb. “Your pulse is racing,” she said.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” he said, downing the last of his brandy, irritated that something so meager as an allergy might affect him adversely. There were so many other, far worse things to face. He went to the sideboard next to the foyer door and poured another drink from the decanter. “Care for one?”

“No,” Julia said. “Quentin, I want you to let me know if the condition worsens. I don’t wish to be alarmist, but under the circumstances....”

“Of course I will.”

A long silence followed, and Quentin sipped his drink morosely. Finally, Julia said, “I’m worried about Carolyn. I don’t like the fact she’s out there alone.”

“We can’t watch over her 24 hours a day. Especially since she’s not showing any ill effects from that sting.”

“True. But I’m beginning to suspect that the venom might have affected her immune system in some way. For a short time her blood formed massive amounts of antibodies; then by all indications, they simply disappeared. Her body was already weakened after having gone to Barnabas, and she’s tried to do too much since then. On top of everything else, she runs the risk of becoming anemic.”

“When I spoke to Barnabas, he promised he would not harm anyone at Collinwood. Do you believe he’s still trustworthy, Julia?”

It was barely perceptible, but Julia’s face paled. “I—I’m certain he is. But the fact he preyed on Carolyn at all is disturbing. When you spoke to him...did he seem all right to you?”

“He seemed perfectly normal—such as it is.”

“My attempts to cure him reached a dead end quite some time ago. And now he refuses to cooperate with any further experiments.”

“I wish he would reconsider. But I certainly understand his reluctance.”

“Perhaps...if you were to discuss it with him. He respects you. He might listen to

you.”

“Julia, you know as well as I do that once Barnabas has made his decision, nothing will change his mind. And if you haven’t made any progress in devising a cure, attempting to persuade him is premature—if not pointless.”

She clenched her jaw. “If his bloodlust were to get out of hand...I could never live with myself if he were to harm anyone at Collinwood.”

“I know how you feel.”

“Quentin, if his condition worsens...if he reaches the point of having to kill in order to sustain himself...*something* will have to be done.”

“I take it you mean...destroying him.”

Julia shook her head, a sickened expression on her face. “You know I could never destroy him any more than I could take my own life. But remember, all those years ago...his father chained him in his coffin to prevent him from harming anyone else. If it came down to it...”

He gazed deeply into Julia’s eyes, seeking the depth of her resolution. “Are you certain you could bring yourself to do that?”

“If I must.”

He nodded thoughtfully, unconvinced by the promise in her eyes, and threw back the last of his drink. “What about me?”

She gazed at him questioningly, apprehension burning in her eyes. “What about you?”

“If it becomes necessary—to spare the lives of others—would you be willing to take my life?”

She swallowed hard. “I will do what must be done. But I will never take your life, if it can be avoided.”

He smiled bitterly. “I know. You would move heaven and earth to spare another poor member of the Collins family from his fate. It’s your life’s work. It’s practically the reason for your existence. I’m not sure I’ve ever understood your devotion, Julia.”

Her eyes hardened. “Is it necessary that you do?”

“No.” His smile warmed a little. “I should be grateful to you. And I am. You’ve done more for me—and for the entire family—than anyone could ever ask. For that you have my gratitude.”

“I’ve never asked for it, nor do I expect it.”

“Nevertheless.”

Julia gazed at him for a moment, her eyes searching his, her frustration burning like hot embers. *It’s Barnabas, he thought. Her feelings for him are all too obvious. And she knows he will never return them—not in the way she would wish.*

Just then, he heard the front door open and close violently, and a moment later, Carolyn appeared in the drawing room doorway, dressed in warm riding clothes, with a long wool scarf around her neck. Her liquid blue eyes were wide and gleaming, her cheeks streaked with tears; for several seconds, she looked at Quentin with such an expression of misery that he wondered if she might actually be dying.

“Carolyn! What is it? What’s wrong?”

Her eyes swiveled to Julia, then back to Quentin. “Oh, God. I was out riding on the trail toward the old northwest cottage. I was on Ceres, our youngest one. He started stumbling, and then he fell over. And now he’s dead. He’s dead!” Carolyn lowered her head and began to weep.

Julia laid a hand on her shoulder. “Carolyn, are you sure?”

She nodded. “Jake Stiles heard me and came to see what was wrong. He said Ceres was dead.”

“Are you all right?”

“I wasn’t hurt. But he just fell over and died. How could he die like that? How?”

Quentin quickly poured another snifter of brandy and handed it to Carolyn. “Here, drink this,” he said, actually relieved that her distress was over nothing worse than a horse’s tragic fate.

She nodded her thanks and took a long swallow of the drink. After a moment, her hands stopped shaking and her breathing became more regular. “Thank you. I’ll be all right in a minute. It’s just such a shock.”

Julia’s look of concern, however, had only intensified. “Carolyn, when you were riding... did you see anything? Anything on the ground? In the trees around you?”

The girl’s eyes widened as if she had read Julia’s mind. “You mean...that creature? The thing that stung me? No, I didn’t see anything.”

“Julia,” Quentin said, his own nerves starting to throb. “Are you suggesting that that...arachnid...might have killed the horse?”

“Possibly.” She suddenly began rubbing her own hand, and Quentin noticed that Julia’s fingers looked red and inflamed—exactly like his own.

“Julia, look at that,” he said softly.

Julia held up her hand and saw the fiery red rash, which seemed to grow hotter and brighter before their eyes. She winced as the pain became intense, and she thrust her hand beneath her other arm as her eyes began to tear.

Quentin realized the pain in his hand and lips was increasing as well, and with growing fury, he poured a third brandy for himself and downed it in one swallow. The alcohol’s anesthetizing effect barely touched the burning. “Damn,” he growled. “Julia, whatever’s causing this, it’s worse than any allergic reaction.”

“What’s happening?” Carolyn asked, her eyes blazing again. “What’s wrong with the two of you?”

“I don’t know,” Julia gasped, giving Quentin a look of alarm. “It’s as if we’ve come in contact with something toxic.”

Quentin ran his fingers over his burning lips and looked first at Julia, then at Carolyn. “Last night,” he said. “We kissed....”

Carolyn shook her head and whispered, “What are you saying, Quentin?”

His memory went back to the night before, after dinner. “The rose. That rose I gave you. It withered almost instantly.”

“And your horse,” Julia said, turning to Quentin with dread in her eyes. “Oh, my God, that horse.”

“No,” Carolyn said, her voice quavering. “No, it’s not me. It’s not.”

“The sting,” Julia said, her voice barely audible. “Carolyn, it’s done something to you. Your body has been affected.”

The look on Carolyn’s face shattered Quentin’s heart. Never had he seen a more pitiable expression of disbelief and sheer horror. She shook her head violently. “No,” she said, her voice cracking into a sob. “No, it can’t be.”

At that moment, Elizabeth stepped into the drawing room, her face shadowed with worry. “I thought I heard your voice, Carolyn. What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, Mother,” she whispered, her eyes melting into pools of pure helplessness. “Oh, Mother, help me, please.”

Seeing her daughter in such despair, Elizabeth’s jaw dropped in sorrow, and she opened her arms to take Carolyn in a protective embrace.

“No!” Quentin said. “Elizabeth, don’t touch her.”

“What?”

“Listen to him,” Julia said, her voice a razor. “She’s been infected with something—something that has already proven itself deadly.”

The words drew shocked gasps from both Elizabeth and Carolyn. For a few seconds, they stared wordlessly at each other and then Carolyn began backing toward the door.

“Oh, my God, no,” she whispered, and her voice began to rise. “No... no... no!” She suddenly turned and bolted for the stairs, her horrified sobs trailing after her, twisting their way like barbed blades straight into Quentin’s soul.

As Carolyn disappeared into the depths of Collinwood, her cries echoing through the halls, Elizabeth staggered slowly toward the divan and slid into it, her dazed eyes locking on the Christmas tree as if it were a talisman. “Oh, God,” she moaned in a low, hoarse voice. “Not Carolyn. Please...not Carolyn.”

“Elizabeth,” Julia said helplessly, unable to find another word. Then she looked at Quentin. “Go find her. She must not leave the house. But for God’s sake, *don’t touch her!*”

With only a nod, he went through the door, into the foyer, and up the stairs at a sprint, his heart starting to pound like a piston engine, the ache in his chest far worse than anything he had ever felt—even the raging furor that exploded within him when the searing, blistering full moon took him in its merciless embrace.

Chapter 10

“What’s that?” Carolyn asked warily, her voice hoarse from crying, as Julia—wearing two pairs of latex gloves on each hand—gently rolled up the sleeve of her sweater with one hand and held the syringe like a swaying serpent before her eyes in the other.

“Nembutal. It will help you relax,” Julia said, giving her a heartening smile. She swabbed the exposed arm with alcohol and prepared to administer the injection.

Carolyn, sitting on the edge of her bed, flinched as the needle penetrated her skin. Quentin and Elizabeth stood anxiously at the foot of the bed, watching every move Julia made, their faces taut with worry. David had tried to come inside three times, demanding to know what was going on, but each time, Elizabeth sent him out, telling him she would explain everything later. He had unleashed a few of his well-practiced groans of displeasure, but he finally returned to his room with a promise not to intrude for at least the next two minutes.

“I feel like a pincushion,” Carolyn sighed, as Julia withdrew the needle. The doctor had already drawn two new vials of blood, explaining that she needed to determine if Carolyn’s seemingly lethal blood exhibited any different properties than it had previously. Carolyn closed her eyes and leaned her head back as pure golden warmth rushed through her veins, relaxing and reassuring, blunting the sharp edge of terror that had so brutally flayed her body and mind. After the first paroxysms of panic, she had retreated to the shelter of her own room, where Quentin found her weeping like a lost child. The death of her horse; Julia’s pronouncement that she was “untouchable,” like the declaration of her own doom; the sheer implausibility of her condition; it was all too much to accept. She had curled into a fetal ball at the foot of her bed and wailed her disbelief to the heavens until her throat and lungs simply gave out.

“Now, no matter what happens,” Julia said, “you *must* remain here under my strict observation. Above all else, you must not have physical contact with anyone. We don’t know how your condition may affect another human being.” She rubbed her gloved hands together, her own discomfort plainly visible in her eyes.

Right now, Carolyn felt too dazed to even think of leaving her room. The soporific effects of the injection were already starting to work on her. She nodded indifferently. “I understand.”

“Julia,” Elizabeth said weakly, “shouldn’t we take her to the hospital? Surely, they would be better equipped to find out what’s wrong with her.”

Julia turned to Carolyn's mother and shook her head. "Elizabeth, you must trust me. No one at the hospital is going to be in a better position to help Carolyn than I am. I am the only one who has been able to study a sample of the venom in her blood."

"But have you come any closer to finding an antidote?"

Julia lowered her eyes. "No." Then she looked at Quentin. "But I may have an idea or two about our mysterious Dr. Karswell. I'm certain he will know something about what's going on."

"You don't believe *he* might be of assistance, do you?" Elizabeth said, her eyes darkening with disapproval.

"I don't know," Julia said. "But he knows much more than he told me, and I intend to get some answers out of him."

"I don't know anything about that man, but my impression is that he's not trustworthy. I don't think you should involve yourself with him, Julia."

Julia put on her most placating expression and nodded. "I believe your impression is probably correct."

"I'm so tired," Carolyn said, lowering her head into her hands. The voices around her were becoming a whirl of meaningless sound from miles away. "I think I would like to be left alone for a while."

"It's best if she does get some sleep," Julia said softly. "But she should not be by herself. Quentin, can you stay with her for a while?"

He nodded resolutely and stepped forward to look Carolyn in the eye. "I'll be here for you, Carolyn. I want you to try not to be afraid. You're going to be in good hands."

"I shall stay with her as well," Elizabeth said. "I can't just sit by and do nothing while she's in this condition."

Julia and Quentin exchanged long glances. Julia finally said, "Elizabeth, your natural instincts are to protect her. But you will also be inclined to touch her...to hold her. I cannot let you do that."

Elizabeth's eyes were watering, but she gave Julia a penetrating stare. "She's my daughter. I *must* be with her."

"I'll make sure Elizabeth doesn't touch her," Quentin said. "Let her stay."

After a moment, Julia sighed and nodded. "Very well. But Elizabeth...do not forget for one moment that her touch may be deadly."

Carolyn heard those last words echoing through her brain, over and over again, until they became a pulsating rhythm deep inside her body. She found herself sliding back onto the bed, its secure warmth beckoning her like a lover. She closed her eyes and listened to the sound of her heart beating. For a lucid moment, she understood that

the vital organ in her chest was pumping some unknown toxin through her body, something that brought death to anything she laid her hands upon. She had killed her own horse. Her kiss had burned Quentin's skin.

No! How could I have known? It's too terrible....

What if she were to stay like this forever? What if, eventually, the poison began to work on her as well, incinerating her little by little, from the inside out?

Oh, God, NO!

Then the soft caress of the pentobarbital in her system calmed her again, smothering the wildfire in her nerves. From a great distance, she thought she heard Quentin's voice saying, "Don't be afraid, Carolyn. I love you. We all do. Don't be afraid...."

But fear had already taken its toll on her. Her energy was spent, her brain overloaded. A slow, rolling tide captured her body, and soon she was adrift on a dark sea beneath a sparkling, midnight sky, her ears filled with the susurrus of a low, comforting breeze that sounded like music—music that touched her with both joy and sadness, longing and fulfillment, excitement and tranquility. It was the sound of Quentin Collins's soul, a living, liquid current, washing over her and melding with her own, letting her know that she was not alone, and that, somewhere, somehow, everything was going to be all right again.

When consciousness began to sweep away the clinging strands of slumber, it was to the consoling strains of Quentin's music, the notes softly brushing her skin like a sable glove. The plaintive violins sang as clearly as if the musicians were in the same room with her, but when she lifted her head, all she could see was the dim silhouettes of her bedroom furnishings. The darkness beyond her window indicated that night had fallen. When she looked up at the vaulted, pale blue ceiling, which was embossed with tiny golden stars, to her surprise, she saw a thundercloud of roiling darkness that seemed to be slowly creeping across the paneled surface like something alive: a slithering multitude of snakelike shadows moving slowly toward the walls and down to the floor.

With a gasp of surprise, she sat up, still groggy from sleep. A soft movement in the darkness told her that someone else was in the room, but her uneasy, roving eyes found no one. Then, like a ghost of black smoke, a tall, dark silhouette materialized at the foot of her bed, and although she could not see its eyes, she knew that the figure was staring intently at her.

"Hello?" she said softly, her tiny voice almost deafening in her ears. "Who is that?"

Like an ocean wave slowly gathering strength, the music gained in volume and power, and she smelled *his* scent, the sweet mélange of evergreen, sandalwood, and salt, a fragrant but subtle aroma that unambiguously conveyed his essence to her strangely heightened senses. A rush of relief replaced her fear, even though, above and around her, the shadows danced and swirled like spiders in an exotic mating ritual. The figure at the foot of her bed slowly moved around to her side and knelt next to her, and she saw the palest glimmer in the blue eyes that gazed at her from the unseen face.

“Oh, Quentin,” she breathed. “I’m so glad it’s you.”

A warm, tender hand suddenly found her wrist and stroked her arm ardently. But with a gasp, she pulled away from him and whispered sharply, “No! You mustn’t touch me. I can’t let anything happen to you. Not to you.”

She sensed that he was smiling, but his hand withdrew slowly. The dark figure rose and slipped back into the darkness, his eyes remaining dimly visible from afar. Then his low, melancholy voice came to her, in time with the music, and she drew in a deep breath, hypnotized, as he softly recited:

*“Shadows of the night...falling silently.
Echoes of the past, calling you to me.
Haunting memories veiled in misty glow
Phantom melody, playing soft and low.
In this world that we know now
Love is here and gone,
But somewhere in the afterglow
Love lives on and on.
Dreams of long ago meet in rendezvous.
Shadows of the night...calling me to you.”*

A moment later, he was gone. She felt his presence depart as if a portion of her life’s essence had been cleaved from her body. “Quentin?” she called. But there was no answer. And his music began to fade, dissolving to a total, enveloping silence, into which the beating of her heart insinuated itself like a mad percussionist thumping out a heated rhythm. The black patterns on the walls spun and reeled like ebony cyclones, and she began to hear a distant, heavy pounding noise—a syncopated counterpoint to her thundering pulse. She noticed that her skin appeared to be limned with red, and, glancing toward the window, she saw that a dim, bloody light had begun to pour through the filmy drapes, drenching her body—and everything in the room—with increasingly brilliant crimson.

The pounding was coming from outside. And it was growing louder.

Fear reasserted its grip on her. This was a dream! It *had* to be a dream! Yet she felt fully cognizant of herself, of her surroundings; it was all real. No...it was *more* than real. Her every nerve resonated with a sense of sheer alienness, of being separated from everything she accepted as familiar, not by miles or minutes, but by *light years*. Her sense of dislocation so profound, she began to feel nauseated.

Where am I?

This spectral chamber only *resembled* her bedroom. In truth, it was a hollow framework, the mere ghost of a place she knew intimately; a place where she felt safe. Unable to do otherwise, she rose from the bed, and her stockinged feet came to rest on a floor that felt like a cloud—insubstantial, incapable of supporting her weight. Yet she stood and she walked, and the floor somehow held her up. Her first tentative steps felt awkward, as if she were learning to negotiate a bizarrely angled and sickeningly pliable surface. She began to cautiously make her way toward the door to the hall, seemingly miles away, not daring to guess what she might find beyond, aware only of the fact that she wanted—*needed*—to escape from here.

The drumming sound was growing louder and heavier, like the footsteps of some unimaginable giant. With mounting dread, she turned toward the glaring red window, and, instead of an ordinary night sky, or even some distorted view of the trees outside, her eyes beheld a vast, seemingly endless blood-hued vista: a blasted, barren landscape that resembled the surface of the moon, or perhaps Mars—all overseen by a huge, chilling, black orb that might have been a sun. But this dark sun pulsated as if alive and breathing, and from its center, a tiny pinpoint of crimson was very slowly roving back and forth: the questing eye of some monstrous, unnamable *living* entity, a black monarch floating obscenely in the scarlet pool of the sky. And, scattered around the landscape, hundreds of tiny figures crawled and scuttled grotesquely beneath their monolithic master's baleful eye, scratching and scraping at the earth, emitting loud peals in their chattering, yammering voices; sounds that she realized were nothing less than songs of praise and adoration for the lord of their blasphemous realm.

The pounding continued to escalate, and the black sun grew larger and larger as it steadily approached. Then, as Carolyn's heart hammered faster and louder in her ears, she saw the red eye come to rest on her window, and, as if a laser had fired directly into her brain, she knew that she had been discovered. A shrill, yowling cacophony rose from the host of arachnids, and the sudden eruption of clicking and scraping sounds told her that, beyond any shadow of doubt, they had begun to march.

Straight toward her.

"No!" she cried, and with a superhuman effort, she turned toward the door to the

hall, the only portal that might offer her sanctuary. But now, caught in a web of dream gossamer, she found herself unable to advance. For a panicked moment, she thought that some unseen creature had captured her in coils of unbreakable silk, but then she realized that her body was simply unaccustomed to the awry laws of this alien dreamland. It was up to *her* to break the bonds that prevented her escaping. With a determined cry, she *pushed* with her mind, forcing her benumbed limbs to submit to her will. Her legs cracked as if frozen by rigor mortis. But she began to move, and with arduous effort, her fingers closed on the cold brass doorknob, and she was pulling with all her strength, but the door barely moved, it wouldn't open, *it wouldn't open!*

Something began tapping on the glass behind her. She did not dare turn around, for she knew that the burning eye was upon her, and if she looked at it now, it would mesmerize her, freezing her so that its rapacious servants could seize her, rend her flesh, devour her. *What else could they possibly intend to do?*

With a sudden snap, the door flew open, so rapidly it barely registered in her brain. And then she was on the other side, in the hall, pulling the door closed again, slamming it shut, sealing the scabbling horrors on the other side. In the one instant before the door closed, she saw that the window was completely filled by the black orb, its questing eye now stationary and focused directly on her. A horde of *Xianges* was pouring straight through the glass, over the sill, and clattering awkwardly to the floor like huge, blood-drenched crabs.

The sound of the door slamming was a gunshot in the darkness. But when its echoes faded, she found herself again in total silence. Her breasts heaved violently as her lungs struggled for air, and she propped herself against the wall to keep from collapsing to the floor. Placing a tentative ear to the door, she listened and listened, but was unable to discern the first movement on the other side; no hint of clawed, chitinous legs scabbling on the hardwood floor; no chattering, screeching peals of reverence to the monstrous lord of that hideous bloodrealm. No more heavy pounding.

Now, dread still running cold in her veins, she turned slowly to learn what new horror might be waiting for her in the darkness of the corridor. Almost to her surprise, her eyes fell upon an ordinary cherry-paneled hallway, warmed by distant lamplight filtering through a half-closed door—probably from David's bedroom.

She was at Collinwood again.

Her relief was palpable, and she realized that she could finally move without supreme physical effort. But the hall still seemed preternaturally silent, bereft of the sounds of life that ordinarily flowed like a current through the house, even when there was no one else on the floor. Instinctively, she knew that something still was not *right*, and when the sudden impulse came to open the door again—just to learn if her room

were actually empty—she forced it back, afraid that by doing so she might set in motion a new, inescapable cycle of terror.

“Carolyn?” came a low, sonorous voice. A familiar and comforting voice.

She turned and saw a caped figure holding a silver wolf’s-headed cane, the dark eyes in the gaunt, handsome face regarding her curiously. The finely chiseled mouth was arced in a thoughtful frown, as if he were surprised to see her.

“Barnabas? Is it really you?”

“Of course,” he said, his voice somewhat cold. “I was under the impression that you had taken ill.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” she said, taking a cautious step toward him. “I don’t even know if I’m really here. Or if you are. Or if this place—” she gestured with her hand “—is really Collinwood.”

“A most curious predicament,” Barnabas said. “What does Dr. Hoffman have to say about your state of...confusion?”

“Barnabas,” she said, grief surging up from deep in her heart, “there’s something very wrong with me. My blood...my touch...is dangerous.”

Barnabas Collins took a step toward her, and for a second, she felt inexplicably afraid of him. His eyes were glaring at her with unusual harshness. He never looked at her that way, even when he summoned her to provide for his most vital needs.

“Barnabas, what is it? Is something wrong?”

With a rhythmic motion, he placed his cane against the wall and then held out one hand to her. Her initial response was to reach for it, for she trusted him. But then she drew back, knowing that even the slightest contact with her skin could have unimaginable consequences for him.

Then, to her shock, like lightning, his hand took hold of her wrist, and with the elegant flourish of a dancer, he spun her into his embrace, one hand encircling her throat and forcibly tilting her head back to expose her jugular vein.

“Barnabas, no!” she cried, now in fear for herself. “What are you doing? Stop it!”

His arms were steel vises, his hands unbreakable manacles. Without a word, he lowered his face toward hers, and when he opened his mouth, his canines were extended like the fangs of a viper, and his red-rimmed eyes bored into hers like the crimson eyebeam of that black orb in the bloody, alien sky. He looked like a rabid animal, and she tried in vain to draw back from his dagger-like teeth.

“Please,” she whispered. “Barnabas, stop.”

It was no use. The gleaming fangs came down and she felt their sharp tips pierce the flesh of her neck. *Oh, God, the pain! But Barnabas had never hurt her before!* Hot

blood poured from the vicious wounds, and she felt his cold lips press against her throat, drawing her life's essence into his own body. But then he suddenly stiffened and tore away from her, his fangs leaving a long, burning gash in her skin. He thrust her away from him, and his eyes went wide with fury.

"Your blood," he growled in a voice that seemed not his own. "It burns. It *burns!*"

Before she even realized what was happening, his body seemed to change: black smoke began pouring from his collar and sleeves, and his caped coat billowed like wings at his sides. Then came a piercing screech that sent her flesh crawling, boring into her ears like blades of ice, and, out of the smoke, a huge black bat appeared, its wings thrashing and whirring as if it had been set alight. Then, like a rocket, the creature zoomed away in the dark corridor, leaving behind a thin trail of gray smoke, its screams echoing eerily through the mansion long after it had vanished. Where Barnabas Collins had stood, only empty space remained.

Stupefied, Carolyn gazed endlessly into the darkness after the bat, telling herself again and again that this was all an incredible dream; yet it was utterly unlike any nightmare she had ever experienced. All of her senses were charged and alert, her mind fully aware of her body, her surroundings. One side of her throat felt scalded, as if she'd been stung by a hornet; but when she touched the wound, her fingers came away without a trace of blood. Gingerly, her fingertips probed the area where she'd been bitten and found only unbroken skin.

This is just a dream.

But after a few moments, she became aware of a terrible weight upon her, as if the air itself had grown unbearably heavy and stagnant, and she realized it was the oppressive sensation of being watched by unseen, hostile eyes. Truly, she seemed to be the subject of some outlandish, otherworldly experiment, and someone—or something—was studying her, gauging her actions and reactions, judging whether she retreated from fear or faced it down.

I'm not sure I'm making a very good showing.

If this were a nightmare, then she was in no real danger. But if it were not, then her life might even now be hanging by the slimmest of threads.

She could still think and feel and reason; therefore, she would have to assume that, on some level, this was reality, and she must conduct herself accordingly.

If I am to die, it will not be as a whimpering coward.

And that hopeful resolution was dashed not seconds later, for when she turned to face the light she had previously seen at the end of the hall, it was no longer there—just a solid wall that had not existed only moments before. She turned around and

around and saw, on all four sides, only unbroken walls; no doors, no windows, nothing above her but blackness. The sensation of airlessness closed over her like a fetid shroud, and the first twinges of renewed panic began to chisel away at her resolve.

But wait...there *was* a door. Barely visible in the dark paneling—a thin line of golden light, outlining the promise of an exit. She turned to study each of the confining walls but found no trace of any other egress.

“Only one way to go,” she whispered to herself.

With a sigh of fatalistic determination, she faced the half-hidden door and reached out to find some means of opening it. But before her hand could touch the dark, wooden surface, she heard a sharp, hollow click, and the light around the rectangular panel began to slowly widen and brighten. *The door was opening on its own!* Slowly, it swung away from her, revealing a dull, smoky haze, within which she could descry no details. But someone was standing on the other side of the opening—a black silhouette against an orange backdrop. She thought she heard voices somewhere beyond the figure, but she could not be certain; her heartbeat deafened her to all other sound. The figure in the doorway remained motionless until she began to approach. Then it raised an arm and motioned toward the orange haze, beckoning her to enter.

As she drew closer, she saw that the figure was a young man, lean but muscular, dressed in black, with close-cropped dark hair and eyes that smoldered beneath heavy brows. She did not recognize him, but from his expression, it seemed plain that she was somehow expected.

From the unknown space beyond the door, she heard an odd, hollow buzzing sound. At first, it seemed a meaningless, ululating drone, but then she realized that it was actually a voice of some kind—one that filled her with dread, for it was obviously speaking directly to her.

“Welcome, Carolyn Stoddard,” it said. “You have passed through a land that few human beings have ever witnessed. You are to be congratulated. And you are also to be very afraid, for this is but the beginning. I am sorry to say that you will appreciate your future journeys far less than the one you have just undertaken.”

Chapter 11

In horror, Julia Hoffman watched the bizarre spectacle unfolding on the stage of her microscope, its scale miniscule, but its ramifications enormous.

The healthy blood cells—her own—were being attacked and literally liquidated by the invading cells—Carolyn’s—which no longer resembled ordinary corpuscles any more than the *Xianges* arachnid resembled a garden spider. The marauding cells appeared as black, spiny spheres with faintly glowing crimson nuclei, and the speed with which they destroyed their victims was shocking to behold.

Julia regarded her own reddened fingers with a mixture of relief and trepidation. The swelling had diminished significantly, and the pain had dwindled to little more than that of a poison ivy rash; limited contact with Carolyn’s skin in the early stages of the intruder’s gestation period appeared to have inflammatory but non-lethal results. Certainly, direct, prolonged contact increased the chances of fatal exposure, and there was no telling how far the invader’s evolution had advanced in the last few hours. What she could not understand was why Carolyn’s body itself suffered no apparent ill effects from the virulent substance circulating in her bloodstream.

She had twice checked on the girl; both times she had been sleeping, though somewhat fitfully. Elizabeth, standing vigil by Carolyn’s bed, had herself finally passed out, and Roger had taken her to her room where she might hopefully sleep for the rest of the night. Quentin had remained at Carolyn’s side, ready to alert Julia in the event of any change.

And it was while Julia was pondering what could possibly be done to reverse the horrific perversion of the girl’s constitution that Quentin appeared in the doorway, himself looking haggard and drawn.

“Are you all right?” Julia asked.

“Exhausted,” he said. “Carolyn is sleeping calmly now. She was very restless for a while.”

“I hope she will sleep at least till morning.”

“It’s already past one. You should get some sleep too. I don’t see what more you can do tonight.”

“I’m finished here. Why don’t you retire for the night, and I’ll watch over Carolyn for a while.”

“Are you sure you’re up for it? You look as worn out as I feel.”

Julia smiled humorlessly. “I couldn’t possibly sleep. But I may wake you before dawn to relieve me.”

“Fair enough.” He gave her a long, thoughtful gaze. “Julia, do you think she’s in any real danger?”

“Impossible to say. So far, her body doesn’t appear to be adversely affected, but the substance in her blood is unbelievably destructive. I can’t imagine her being able to survive this way for very long.”

“Julia, despite your reservations, we may need to take her to a hospital. Even if they can’t cure her, a team of physicians can certainly investigate more quickly and thoroughly than one person.”

She nodded reluctantly. “Still, I’m hesitant to allow anyone else to see her at this point. Her situation would raise questions that might be...uncomfortable.”

“You needn’t worry about Barnabas or myself. There will be no need to bring our personal...misfortunes into it.”

“Speaking of which—how are you feeling? Your complexion is very pale.”

“I’m all right,” he said, his eyes betraying his fatigue and perhaps even pain. “It’s just been a difficult few days.”

“Go to bed. I’ll wake you if necessary. Hopefully it won’t be.”

He nodded wearily. “Don’t hesitate. I’m far from having one foot in the grave...yet.”

“I know.”

Quentin gave her a long, affectionate smile before he turned and left the room. She could not help but feel moved by his determination to put Carolyn’s needs before his own. In the shadow of the girl’s unexpected calamity, she had all but forgotten Quentin’s reasons for coming back to Collinwood. Yet his circumstances were no less dire and his life no less dear than his young cousin’s.

Julia heaved a deep sigh and let her head fall into her hands. The sad fact was that she felt thoroughly spent and utterly powerless to help either of them. They both suffered maladies that defied logical explanation, and she could scarcely speculate about any possible treatment, conventional or otherwise, without some understanding of the processes going on in their respective bodies. Perhaps Quentin was right; Carolyn, at least, ought to be admitted to a specialized research facility, such as Johns Hopkins, Yale, perhaps even Cambridge or Frankfurt. For that matter, closer to home, the medical center at Miskatonic University—where Dr. Karswell claimed to have held a position—boasted a remarkable number of breakthroughs in their studies of rare diseases and disorders. As the consulting physician on the case, she would hardly be alienated from the process of examination and research, and there might even be prospects for long-term grants, access to state-of-the-art facilities, significant advancements of her own career; there was no shortage of reasons why she should

make Carolyn's case known to her peers.

But she could not. She could not bear the idea of taking Carolyn away from Collinwood to become the subject of endless, unimaginable experiments—assuming her physical condition did not deteriorate suddenly. Although Elizabeth wanted her daughter to receive the best possible care, she would hardly condone the invasive, possibly dangerous exploratory procedures that Carolyn's case would involve. Even if she remained physically stable, her mental and emotional health stood to suffer serious impairment. At least if she were at home, among family and friends, her state of mind could be better preserved.

Who am I trying to fool? I simply don't want to open every aspect of our lives to outsiders. They would find out everything there is to know about the Collins family—and me. Who among us could afford such scrutiny?

She swallowed hard and gazed at her image in the mirror across the room. The eyes that peered back at her glittered with icy rebuke.

No...you would do nothing that might separate you from Barnabas. Even if it means placing the lives of others in jeopardy.

“That's not true,” she whispered to her reflection. As if to convince herself of the fact, she pushed herself away from her desk, groaned to her feet, and started toward the door to the hall, for she needed to check on Carolyn again. With Quentin having gone to bed, no one was watching over her as she slept. Julia stepped out of her warmly lit room and into the shadow-cloaked stillness of the corridor: a grim, lightless place, seemingly worlds away from the bright oasis she claimed as her tiny portion of the great house. As long as she had lived here, she had never been entirely comfortable in the mammoth, almost-medieval keep, despite her familiarity with virtually every inch of its interior. Indeed, she probably knew more about its secret panels and passageways than any of its rightful owners. But she was not a Collins, and this house, for all the malevolent twists it had subjected its residents to in its 200-year history, belonged *to* the Collinses and existed *for* the Collinses. If another individual or family were to purchase the estate, lock, stock, and barrel, it would no more belong to them than did the sky and sea. For now, the ancient mansion tolerated her and accepted her presence within its confines, albeit with reluctance. It was the best she could expect.

She started down the stairs to the second floor, her footsteps uncomfortably loud in the breathless silence of the night. Down in the hall that led to Carolyn's room, she could see a soft golden light, and she hurried toward it like a wayward explorer to a beacon. At the bottom of the staircase, a candelabra of electric bulbs smeared pale, liquid light onto the floor and walls, barely potent enough to diffuse the encroaching darkness. As she walked almost furtively toward the closed bedroom door, a low

scraping sound from behind her suddenly came crawling to her ears, and she turned back toward the stairway, her eyes thoroughly searching the dimly lit area and the empty shadows.

There are always sounds in this house. It was nothing.

She took several more steps toward Carolyn's door, but the impression of a nearby, lurking presence gripped her so insistently that she again turned and peered back the way she had come. What if the venomous *Xianges* had returned to strike at another member of the household? Or to inflict some greater, unimaginable horror on Carolyn herself? For a moment, she wished she had a gun, for—surely—if the creature were sufficiently solid to harm its prey, it was solid enough to be destroyed by a bullet. There were several guns in the house, and she knew that Roger kept a snub-nosed .38 revolver in his study that she could procure with minimal effort if necessary. But to get to it, she would have to go downstairs; by the time she acquired the weapon and returned upstairs, it might be all too late.

Something was definitely moving near the staircase. She could hear a low swishing, sliding sound, faint but distinct; however, it was impossible to tell whether it came from the floor above or below, or whether it was approaching or moving away. But it sounded far too *heavy* to be the spider-like creature whose carapace she had seen in a glass case at Dr. Karswell's house—unless this one were as large as a human being....

Her eyes detected a movement in the darkness near the top of the stairway; something pale and ghostly, weaving slowly from side to side, a shade to indistinct too identify. It was obviously not the creature. An eerie whispering sound drifted down the stairs: a voice, enunciating only nonsensical syllables, a rushing string of indecipherable, blurred consonants and hissing vowels like a subdued ocean breeze. Now more curious than afraid, she crept forward, her fingers still clenched into nervous fists. But she had only gone a few steps when the pale shape on the stairs began to descend, wriggling over the runners like a gigantic snake, a subtle sliding sound like leather on wood accompanying its passage. Julia backstepped, realizing that the thing was moving very quickly now—and straight toward her. Her breath caught in her throat as the apparition slithered forward, still hissing a stream of malevolent-sounding glossolalia.

As the shape drew closer, Julia raised a fist to her mouth to hold back a cry of shock. The creeping, slithering thing on the floor was Carolyn: completely naked, her arms tucked tight against her body, bending only slightly as she propelled herself forward by thrusting with her wrists and elbows. Her lips spread in a hideous leer, and her sapphire eyes rolled upward to regard Julia with a look of animalistic rage, without

a trace of recognition or even humanity.

My God, she has gone completely insane!

“Carolyn!” Julia whispered, her heart breaking at the sight of such monstrous indignity. “Carolyn, what has happened to you?”

The girl’s face tightened into a mask of sheer madness, and her babbling voice rose as if in supplication to an insane, malicious god. She began to rise to her knees, her muscles tensing as if to spring, her disheveled blonde hair hanging wildly in her face. Julia took another step back, fully aware that the first touch of Carolyn’s hand could bring her own death. Her every instinct urged her to retreat, to get a door between her and the advancing, naked young woman whose eyes gleamed with an inhuman, predatory light. But she remained transfixed, torn between terror and pity. Carolyn began making a rumbling, purring noise in her throat, almost like a wildcat, and Julia suddenly found herself pressed against the wall without means of escape. Carolyn raised her arms like a praying mantis and took two lurching steps forward, her intent to deal a deadly blow now all too apparent.

“Carolyn, no,” Julia whispered hoarsely. “Please...remember who are you are. You’re Carolyn Stoddard. You don’t want to harm anyone.”

The girl showed no sign of even hearing her. Carolyn’s eyes blazed like magnesium flares, the whites plainly visible all around her blue irises. Her fingers spread wide and her hands lunged straight for Julia’s throat.

Julia did not cry out. Instead, she let her knees buckle, and her weight carried her straight to the floor, just as Carolyn’s hands slashed the air above her head. It was only a temporary respite, however, for now the girl’s pale fingers came groping after her, reaching straight for her face. She tried to scramble away, but Carolyn came after her at lightning speed, her muscles charged with adrenaline. Julia felt the heat of the girl’s body as she drew close to her, cutting off her retreat.

Would death be quick? Or would it be slow and agonizing as her body became a pyre, burning to cinders from the inside out?

She drew in a deep breath. *Her time had come.*

Suddenly, a strong hand took hold of her wrist, and she felt herself being whisked across the floor and into the air as if she were as light as a feather. When she next saw Carolyn, it took her several seconds to realize that it was from ten feet away. Even Carolyn’s eyes had not registered what had happened, and when she finally realized her prey had been stolen from her, her jaws spread like a snake’s, and the sickening, screeching hiss that issued from her throat made Julia’s stomach lurch.

“Julia,” came Barnabas’s voice, “get behind me.”

Her head swiveled, and there he stood, his black Inverness cape melding with

the darkness, his wolf's-headed cane in one hand, his other still gripping her wrist. She submitted to his strength as he pulled her behind him, apparently unwilling to wait for her to move of her own volition. "Barnabas," she whispered. "Y-You saved my life."

"I daresay that's true," he said softly. He took a step toward Carolyn, motioning for Julia to remain where she was. "Carolyn, listen to me," he said in a firm voice. "You must obey me. Do you understand?"

Carolyn's eyes met Barnabas's with defiance. She lowered her body into a catlike crouch and took a small step forward, again leering like a mad woman. Barnabas's fingers tightened on his cane, and he slowly raised it so that its tip pointed accusingly at her.

"Carolyn, stop where you are."

A perplexed expression came over the girl's face, and she began to stare at Barnabas in wonder, as if some small part of her mind might finally have recognized him. She shook her head dubiously, as if distrusting her own senses, and then she started to approach again. Barnabas now slammed the tip of his cane against the floor.

"Carolyn!" he said forcefully. "You *will* obey me."

She stopped in her tracks, and a low moan rushed from her lips, her features tightening in apparent anguish. She raised her hands and pressed them against her temples, clearly in Barnabas's thrall but still fighting him with all her strength.

Or rather, with the strength of whatever madness had taken her

She dropped to her knees and then cried out loud and long, as if some entity within her were being forcibly ripped from the very fiber of her body. Somewhere on the floor, around a corner, a door creaked open, and Julia heard footsteps rushing down the hall toward them. A second later, Quentin appeared at her side, his hair disheveled, his eyes dark with weariness.

"What the hell is going on?" he asked, shocked by the sight of the tortured, naked girl cowering in front of Barnabas, his cane again raised.

"She...she tried to attack me," Julia said brokenly, her senses still barely able to absorb the tableau before her. "Barnabas showed up just in time."

She felt Quentin's hand fall on her shoulder, its firm touch instantly heartening to her. "Barnabas," he said softly. "Can you handle her?"

"I believe so," he said, taking a small step toward the girl. "Both of you remain where you are. I don't want her to attempt to run."

"Very well," Quentin said. But then he told Julia, "Stay right here. I'm going to get a blanket for her. Maybe we can handle her that way, if necessary."

Julia nodded, her eyes never leaving Barnabas's tall figure. Truly, he had just saved her life, and not for the first time. For a moment, a wave of guilt at the idea of

entrapping him in a coffin crashed over her, nearly bringing tears to her eyes. Behind her, Quentin disappeared down the hall, while, in front of her, Barnabas took a few more steps toward the distraught young woman, whose eyes now regarded him with pure terror.

“Carolyn,” he said softly. “I will not harm you. But you must listen to me. You are not yourself. I want you to remember who and where you are. You are Carolyn Stoddard, and this is Collinwood. You know where you are, don’t you?”

Carolyn eyed him warily as he lifted one hand and firmly took hold of her bicep; for a moment, she looked as if she might scream, but then, slowly, the fear began to leave her eyes. She gazed at him with growing recognition, and suddenly she gasped as if remembering something utterly horrifying.

Julia saw Barnabas flinch as he held her; apparently, the touch of her skin even affected him. “Barnabas,” she said, “contact with her is dangerous. You must release her immediately.”

“I’ll be all right,” he said in a reassuring voice, although his face took on a look of disgust. “Her blood is...contaminated. But she cannot harm me.”

A few moments later, Quentin returned carrying the blanket from his bed. As Barnabas’s hypnotic glare held her motionless, Quentin gently wrapped it around her naked body, taking care not to allow his bare fingers to so much as brush her skin. He held it in place around her shoulders and started to lead her back toward her bedroom, but Barnabas said, “Wait a moment. You’d better allow me.”

Quentin glanced at Barnabas half-suspiciously for a moment, but then nodded reluctantly. He released her, and Barnabas took Carolyn in his arms and effortlessly lifted her off the floor. Quentin opened her door, and Barnabas carried her to her bed and gently laid her on top of the covers. He continued to gaze at her, his hazel eyes now brimming with compassion and tenderness.

Carolyn stared at him curiously, and then her eyes turned to Julia, after a moment widening with recognition. “Julia?” the girl whispered. “Julia, what’s happening to me?”

“Everything will be all right,” she replied, trying to sound as sincere as she could. “You’ve had a terrible nightmare, that’s all.”

“I remember...an awful place...and an eye. There was a red eye, and it was looking for me.”

“It’s all over now,” Barnabas said to her. “You must go to sleep. And when you awaken, you will not remember the bad dream.”

“Barnabas,” she whispered. “You...you helped me. Didn’t you?”

“We’ll talk about it later. Right now, I just want you to sleep.”

Carolyn nodded weakly and closed her eyes, her taut features gradually relaxing. It was all Julia could do to keep from touching her as she arranged the blanket to keep her warm. Then the three of them stepped quietly into the hall and Julia drew the door shut, leaving it slightly ajar so she could look inside if need be.

“What the devil is going on here?” came a harsh voice from the end of the hall. A moment later, Roger appeared out of the shadows, dressed in a navy, velour bathrobe with matching bedroom slippers. “Barnabas, what are you doing here at this hour?”

“He came to see me,” Julia said quickly. “Carolyn has had a terrible nightmare. She was quite excited, but she’s all right now.”

The annoyance didn’t leave Roger’s stern face, but his eyes softened somewhat. In a low voice, he said, “Has her condition improved at all?”

“I’m afraid not,” Julia said. “We still cannot touch her safely. Quentin and Barnabas helped me get her back to bed.”

“What was she doing up?”

“I believe she was sleepwalking,” Quentin said. “At first she didn’t recognize us. But she’s settled now.”

Roger nodded. “I’m glad it’s nothing worse. I insisted Elizabeth stay in bed and allow me to find out what was wrong. If anything happened to Carolyn, she would be absolutely devastated. ”

“That was wise,” Julia said. “But I don’t believe Carolyn is in any danger now.”

Roger nodded gravely. “Very well. I will let her know that you have the situation under control.” He glanced at Barnabas. “I suppose it’s well you were here, Barnabas, although your odd hours never cease to mystify me.”

Barnabas’s face remained impassive. “I knew Julia would be awake, so I took the liberty of calling upon her. As it turned out, it was fortunate that I came when I did.”

“Yes, I suppose it was,” Roger said with a brief scowl. “Well, I shall bid you all good night...such as it is. I hope the rest of the night passes uneventfully.”

“So do I,” Julia said with an earnest smile. She watched Roger amble down the hall and vanish around the corner on his way to his bedroom. She then turned and touched Barnabas’s arm. “Barnabas, what *did* bring you here?”

For a second, his dark eyes avoided hers. “I was concerned about Carolyn,” he said. “I wanted to see for myself if she was all right.”

“As you said, your timing was indeed impeccable,” Quentin said.

“Yes,” Julia said. “Barnabas, I owe my life to your being here. If she had managed to touch me, I might very well be...dead...right now.”

“That is true,” he said. “I had no idea it had come to this.”

“But you knew that something was terribly wrong. Because of your...connection with her. Isn’t that right?” Quentin asked.

Again, Barnabas’s eyes lowered, and Julia realized he must be feeling a certain amount of guilt. “You knew you could not take her blood,” she said. “So you came to get information from her, didn’t you?”

Barnabas firmed his jaw. “I felt it was important to determine exactly what is wrong with her. Whatever attacked her has done more than simply poison her blood. She is in some way... changing.”

“You intended to use your power and hypnotize her,” Quentin said. “And you didn’t feel we would approve.”

Barnabas nodded. “I’m certain you would not. But I had to do what I felt was best. As it turns out, I was too late to even make the attempt. However, had I not been here...”

“Then Julia would be dead right now.”

“Yes.”

“Barnabas, of course you have my gratitude,” Julia said. “And I understand what you wanted to do. Under any other circumstances, you know I would not approve. However, the situation we face is not like any other. I happen to believe your idea may be...sound.”

“Barnabas,” Quentin said, his eyes gleaming in the dark hall. “If you were to hypnotize her, do you think you could learn exactly what is behind all this?”

“There’s no way to know for certain,” Barnabas said. “But Carolyn may possess knowledge that she is not aware of. If so, it may be possible for me to uncover it.”

“Have you met Dr. Karswell?” Quentin asked.

“No,” Barnabas said. “Do you believe he is somehow involved?”

“After what I saw at his house, I’m convinced that he is,” Julia said. “And I have other suspicions about him as well.”

“What sort of suspicions?”

Julia shook her head, realizing she had been thinking aloud. “Nothing. I mean, nothing that I am prepared to elaborate on until I have more information.”

“Julia, anything you might reveal is strictly between us. You know you can trust Quentin and me implicitly.”

“Of course,” she said. “But I would prefer to say nothing—not even to you—until I have investigated certain...facts for myself.”

“Very well,” Barnabas said, looking less than satisfied. “You know, of course, that I trust *you*.”

“As you should.”

“So what do we do about Carolyn?” Quentin asked, somewhat impatiently.

“Barnabas, I for one am willing to let you carry out your plan—as long as absolutely no harm will come to her.”

“She will not be harmed,” Barnabas said firmly. “All I will do is question her.”

“And I want to be present when you do,” Julia said. “I don’t feel it would be prudent for you to be alone with her.”

“Doctor Hoffman,” Barnabas said, somewhat coldly. “Not a moment ago, you indicated your trust for me. I cannot have another present when I question her. Your presence could be...disturbing to her.”

“Nevertheless, I insist upon it.”

Barnabas drew himself up. “Then I will have to refuse. I’m sorry, Julia. I have given you my word that no harm will come to the girl. If that is not sufficient for you, then our friendship is not as firm as I have always believed.”

Julia felt her face getting hot, her heart stung. Perhaps she was being too anxious to take control of the situation. So far, everything had been spiraling *out* of her control, and being excluded from anything involving Carolyn’s care seemed almost intolerable. But Barnabas could not feed on the girl; her blood was poison, even to him. Surely, she *must* trust him.

“Very well, Barnabas,” she said softly. “You understand, I only have Carolyn’s best interests at heart.”

Barnabas’s eyes warmed to her. “Of course, Julia. I understand your apprehension. Nonetheless, what I do I must do alone. That is the only way.”

She finally nodded. “All right. Quentin and I will wait for you here. But you *will* share with us anything that you learn.”

“Of course.” His face took on a thoughtful frown. “Assuming that I learn anything at all. Her condition is decidedly...peculiar.”

“That it is,” Quentin said, looking at his cousin anxiously. “That it is.”

“I am going to subject her to mild hypnosis,” Barnabas said. “She will not be aware of my presence at all. When I am finished, she will simply go to sleep and remember none of this in the morning. I will come to you here when I am done. It will not take very long.”

“All right, Barnabas,” Quentin said. “Let’s get it over with, shall we?”

He nodded, and started to open Carolyn’s door. Julia suddenly reached out to him and touched his arm again. “Barnabas,” she whispered, finding herself at a loss for words. At last, she stammered, “Thank you for being here. You did save my life. And I do trust you. I trust you with my life. And with hers.”

Barnabas smiled wanly. "Thank you, Julia. And I know I can always count on you."

She nodded wordlessly. *He knows how I feel about him, she thought, but he cannot return my love. Not while he is what he is. And he no longer has any desire to change.*

As if he had read her thoughts, Barnabas turned his eyes from hers and started to enter Carolyn's room. But as he opened the door, he suddenly froze, and his back stiffened. Then, he pushed the door wide and turned to Julia with shocked eyes.

"I'm afraid our plans have been altered," he said softly, as both Julia and Quentin peered into the empty bedroom in disbelief. "It would appear that Carolyn is no longer here."

Chapter 12

Julia's face was pale and her voice was strained. "I would advise not waking the household," she said. "Especially Elizabeth. She has had more than enough shocks for one night."

"Agreed," Barnabas said. "At the moment, there is no sense in adding to their worries. But it is imperative we discover what has happened to Carolyn."

Quentin still could hardly believe his eyes. Somehow, Carolyn had vanished into thin air while the three of them were no more than a dozen feet away. He knew there were no secret passages in or out of her room, and the window had not been opened. As he had fully anticipated, their search of her room revealed neither trace of her nor clue as to *how* she might have disappeared. The blanket that had lain over her body was still spread out on the bed as if she had simply dissolved beneath it. It seemed impossible, yet Quentin knew better than to distrust his own senses; since his return, everything that had happened to Carolyn defied rational explanation, every bit as much as his own perilous situation. And though the idea seemed absurd, he could not help feeling as if, somehow, he himself were to blame—or at least shared in the responsibility for her misfortunes.

"I suppose all we can do is search for her," he said, his voice heavy with hopelessness. "But if she's not in her room, something tells me we'll not find her anywhere in the house."

Barnabas nodded grimly. "And we have no way of knowing whether she vanished of her own accord or if some other force is responsible."

"Barnabas, you said she was 'changing,'" Quentin said. "What did you mean by that?"

He frowned. "I cannot answer that question specifically. I rely on my senses—which I can only tell you are different from your own—to provide certain information about the environment or individuals. In Carolyn's case, I perceive that her blood is assuming properties that are unknown to us. It is altering her entire constitution. Beyond that, I cannot speak with authority. All I know is that the prospect is frightening."

"Barnabas," Julia said, "for at least a few moments, you had control of her will. That is to be expected, since you have recently fed on her blood. But you had to struggle to achieve it. And I suspect that, at this moment, you have no influence upon her at all."

"I am afraid you are quite correct. Whatever the cause, it has taken her beyond

my ability to reach her.”

“Then you believe she is somewhere far from here?”

“It is possible. But not certain.”

“The question is—how do we even begin to look for her when we have no idea how she could have vanished from under our noses,” Quentin said, his words seeming to drift to his ears from a distance; after a few moments, he realized that he felt feverish. When he took a deep breath, his lungs seemed to tighten, and the muscles in his arms and legs began to ache.

No, he did not have a fever. It was something much worse.

“Julia,” he whispered, as a cold shroud of dread fell heavily upon him. “It’s happening.”

The doctor’s face paled, and she turned to Barnabas with stark, bulging eyes. “No!” she exclaimed. “It can’t be that. It’s not a full moon.”

Quentin shook his head. “That no longer seems to matter.” He recalled that his own direct descendent, Chris Jennings, who also suffered the curse of the werewolf, had been known to change regardless of the moon’s phase. But such a thing had never happened to Quentin before—not until the past month, when he felt the pains of transformation surging through his body, even while the moon was in its first quarter. But he had not completed the metamorphosis.

What about now? Was he going to change now?

“Let’s get him away from here,” Barnabas said. “We must prevent him getting loose in the house.”

“Where can we take him?” Julia asked.

“We’ll lock him in your room. It’s more remote. And I will be able to handle him, if necessary.”

“How?”

Barnabas lifted his cane. “There is silver in the handle. I shall stop him with this...if I must.”

Quentin felt a sharp jab in his abdomen, and an electrical spike arced down his back. “God!” he cried. Then his voice dropped to barely a whisper: “I think it’s happening this time.”

“Come with us. We must hurry,” Barnabas said. He took hold of one of Quentin’s arms and forced him to walk ahead of him. “I’m sorry, Quentin,” came Barnabas’s soft voice. “You understand what we must do.”

He nodded painfully. “Of course I do.” Then he reached for his cousin’s arm and clutched it desperately. “Barnabas...if I change...if I even begin the transformation...you kill me with that. You do it.”

Barnabas shot him a look of understanding. "Perhaps it will not come to that."

As they reached the stairs, Barnabas kept holding his arm so that he would not stumble. His legs felt weak, and the pain in his back was growing more intense with every second. He caught a glimpse of his hand on the railing and saw that his flesh had darkened, and a few tufts of black hair shadowed its edge. The pressure on his arm became more insistent as Barnabas all but dragged him up the stairs. At the top, he tried to walk under his own power, but his legs gave out as if they had been chopped with an ax. He cried out at the sudden, sharp pain, and he felt both Barnabas and Julia take hold of his arms and quickly pull him toward her door. Once inside, Julia quickly closed and locked it, her eyes wide and glaring.

"Julia," Quentin whispered, propping himself against the side of the bed. "You must get out of here. Leave me with Barnabas."

"No," she said resolutely. "I'm staying with you."

"But you know I will kill you," he groaned. "I won't be able to stop myself." Then his voice failed him as a wave of pain swept through his entire body, and he fell to the floor, thrashing back and forth as if he were on fire. His wrists felt as if they had been broken, and in a brief flash, as if lightning had struck, he saw that his fingers had grown long and were tipped, not with nails, but sharp, glittering claws.

"Jesus," he whispered. "Barnabas, do it. You must do it now."

He saw his cousin's face shadowed with grief, but the cane was in his hand, and it was rising toward the ceiling.

"Barnabas, no," came Julia's soft voice. "You can't kill him."

"Julia," Quentin said, his voice becoming deep and guttural. "He must do...what he must do." His eyes met Barnabas's, and he saw in them the darkness of deep regret, like a cloud passing over the stars in a nighttime sky. And he knew that, if he must die, he wanted it to be this way. No one besides Barnabas could possibly understand what it meant to suffer such a cruel, inhuman affliction; it was right that he be the one to end both his life and the evil within him, unintended though it might be. His body jerked spasmodically a few times, and he cried out again. And this time, his voice was no longer human, but animal.

"Barnabas! Stop!"

Through a red haze, he saw Julia standing in apparent shock near her closet. In her hands was his portrait, held at arms length, the canvas seeming to glow as if the pigment were made of molten magma.

His image, which had previously resembled a crumbling, decaying corpse, had changed to a vicious-looking, red-eyed beast with snarling jaws and long, razor-sharp teeth that gleamed like polished metal. The once-skeletal body had become muscular

and sharply defined, covered with thick black hair. The creature was crouched on its haunches, as if to launch itself straight out of the painting. For a second, Quentin could swear that he saw *life* blazing in the crimson, inhuman eyes.

And then, like a fire doused by fresh, cool water, the pain in his muscles and nerves sputtered and died, leaving him a cold, spent ember on the floor. But when he finally stirred and passed one hand in front of his eyes, it was no longer a beastlike talon; it was merely his own flesh and blood, curled with the physical memory of the agony that had gripped it.

“The painting is still effective,” Julia said softly. “It barely prevented the change this time. But it is working.”

Barnabas lowered his cane, placed a hand on Quentin’s shoulder, and squeezed it reassuringly. “You have been spared,” he said, relief melting the stone of his face. “I’m sure it will take some time for you to recover your wits, however.”

“I’ll be all right,” he said, struggling up to sit on the bed. “It’s Carolyn we have to worry about. Give me a minute, and we’ll start searching.”

“I want you to stay here and rest,” Julia said as she rewrapped the portrait and replaced it behind the panel in the back of her closet. Then she looked at Barnabas. “We must also consider that this may only be a temporary reprieve. Forgive my bluntness, Quentin, but we have to accept that possibility.”

He nodded. “I understand that. But if you leave me alone and I change, it doesn’t matter where I am. There is no place in this house that will hold me. I’m better off staying with Barnabas.”

She frowned. “I don’t like the idea of you up and around so soon after this attack. Fatigue may make you more vulnerable. I can’t allow you to endanger your life needlessly.”

“Nothing I do now is needless,” he said. “Fact: Carolyn is missing and must be found. I refuse to sequester myself pointlessly in some forgotten part of this house while I might still be able to do some good.”

Julia glanced at Barnabas, who nodded his agreement with Quentin. “Very well,” she said at last, her eyes protesting that her opinion had been unfairly overridden. “If that is your decision, then...Barnabas, I must hold you responsible for him. I know you are prepared to do what must be done. Let us pray that it doesn’t become necessary.”

“That sounded almost spiteful, Julia,” Quentin said with a scathing grin. “I seem to recall that, only a short time ago, you were begging Barnabas not to kill me.”

She ignored his remark. “Barnabas, do you understand?”

Barnabas nodded solemnly, his eyes flashing acknowledgment of the

responsibility she had charged him with. Then he turned to Quentin and said, “I am certain that, five minutes from now, you will wish to separate so that we may cover more ground in a search. However, I will not allow it. Consider yourself duly cautioned.”

“I understand, Barnabas,” he said softly. “I’m feeling much stronger now, and we are wasting time. It will be dawn in less than five hours. I would suggest that we not sit here chatting until the sun comes up. For some of us, that would be...awkward.”

Barnabas did not appear to appreciate the jibe, but he did not respond in kind. Instead, he led them into the hall, heading toward the stairs, and said, “I think I can safely say that Carolyn is not inside the house, or I would be aware of her presence. Quentin, do you recall the first night you showed me the creature’s tracks in the snow?”

“Yes, of course.”

“You said that they simply appeared from nowhere. I believe this may be a clue regarding what has happened to Carolyn. It would seem that—either on her own or at the behest of another—she has in effect moved from one place to another...not across space, as we would move...but *through* space. To do such a thing would require a great deal of psychic energy. Wouldn’t you agree, Julia?”

She shrugged. “I suppose I would, in theory. Professor Stokes, I’m sure, would be better able to shed some light on the situation.”

“Indeed,” Barnabas said with a nod. “A pity he is away, for I should very much like to call upon him. So...we are left to our own devices. First of all, if Carolyn vanished intentionally, then the power to do so was almost certainly imparted to her by the creature that attacked her. I doubt that, in her condition, she would have the psychic resources to move very far. So I propose we search the grounds near the house. There is still snow on the ground, so it may be possible that there will be evidence of her passing.”

“But where on earth would she go?” Quentin asked. “She didn’t even have any clothes on. If she’s outside, she’ll freeze to death.”

“Barnabas,” Julia said, “your theory has merit, but what would be the point of simply disappearing and re-emerging from space outside the house? I don’t believe she is suicidal, and if some outside force is manipulating her, it obviously does not mean to kill her. It could have done that already.”

“Agreed,” Barnabas said. “But we must begin somewhere. And I trust my instincts. Quentin, you and I shall search the grounds. Julia, I recommend that you remain indoors, in case she should return while we are outside.”

“Very well,” she said with a sigh. “I will at least make a circuit of the house and

see what I can see.”

They were just starting down the stairs to the foyer when Barnabas paused, his fingers tightening on the handle of his walking stick. Quentin was about to ask him what was wrong when a sudden, repetitive knocking sound shattered the silence of the great house.

Who the hell would be calling at almost two in the morning?

“I’m not sure I like this,” Quentin said, moving slowly toward the door. “Barnabas, do me a favor. Stand out of sight, would you? I’m going to answer it. If there’s any trouble, I want you to back me up. Will you?”

“Of course,” Barnabas said, taking up a position next to his portrait, out of sight of anyone at the front door, and then he nodded to indicate his readiness. Quentin stood in front of the door for a moment, listening, while Julia pressed close behind him, every bit as curious as he and perhaps even more apprehensive.

“It might be Carolyn,” she said hopefully. “She wouldn’t have a key.” But when she glanced at Barnabas, he gave her an uncertain shrug.

Quentin took a steadying breath, his legs feeling rather wobbly, and grasped the door handle. When he pulled it open, a burst of cold air swept over him, its force enough to nearly send him stumbling backward. He was still terribly weak. But when he saw a tall figure dressed in a heavy overcoat holding an unconscious young blond in his arms, a blazing surge of adrenaline steadied him immediately.

“Carolyn!” came Julia’s voice. “Oh, my God, Carolyn!”

Quentin threw the door wide, and the figure bearing the girl stepped inside. She was wrapped in a heavy wool coat, borne by a pair of strong, gloved hands, and there was ice in her hair. He almost reached out to brush away the sparkling crystals when he realized how fatal such a mistake might be.

“Mathis,” Julia said, her voice overflowing with relief. “Where did you find her?”

The young man stood easily as tall as Quentin. He wore no hat, and his close-cropped, brown hair also glittered with flecks of silver. Without waiting to be told, he carried the girl to the drawing room and laid her gently on the settee, gazing at her with apparent concern in his deep violet, almost black eyes.

“She came wandering near Dr. Karswell’s house,” he said, his slightly accented voice hoarse from exertion. “She did not know where she was and seemed quite incoherent. It was a most curious situation. So I brought her here immediately.”

“My God, she must be nearly frozen to death,” Quentin said.

Julia leaned close to her, but did not touch her. Then she looked up at Mathis and frowned thoughtfully. “Did you touch her with your bare hands?”

Mathis cocked his head as if he wasn't sure he had heard right. "I cannot say that I did. If you are concerned about impropriety, Dr. Hoffman, I can assure you...."

"No," Julia said. "No, she suffers from a serious contagion. If you made physical contact with her skin, you could be at risk."

Mathis held up a gloved hand. "I was wearing gloves. I don't believe I have touched her bare-handed."

"May I ask what you were doing when you found her?" Quentin asked.

The young man turned and eyed him with ill-concealed disdain. "You are Mr. Collins, yes? I was moving some boxes inside for Dr. Karswell, which is why I happened to see the girl when I did."

"You have not met her previously, have you?"

"No, I have not. Why?"

"You said she was incoherent. How did you know she was from Collinwood? Did she tell you?"

"As a matter of fact, the only comprehensible thing she did say was that she wanted to return to Collinwood. So I brought her here immediately. I hope this meets with your approval."

"Yes," Quentin said coldly. "It meets with my approval. I must say, Dr. Karswell is quite a night owl if he has you working at this hour."

"Dr. Karswell keeps the hours that suit him—and which therefore suit me. But it does not appear that I have roused anyone out of bed at Collinwood, does it?" Mathis rose to his full height, stared critically at Quentin for several moments, and then turned toward the foyer. "And now I shall wish you good evening. I was not aware that performing a service for one of your loved ones in need would meet with such an inhospitable reception."

"Forgive us," Julia said, half-sincerely. "It has been a long and stressful evening. You must understand, we didn't know what had happened to Carolyn, and seeing her like this was a shock. Your kindness *is* appreciated."

Mathis's glare softened only slightly. "I have been kept from my duties long enough. Dr. Karswell sends his regards."

As Mathis started out the door, Quentin called after him, "Please send him ours, if you would be so kind."

The tall man gazed at him with a curiously smug expression; then he said curtly, "Goodnight, Mr. Collins...Dr. Hoffman," and closed the door behind him.

Quentin quickly returned to Carolyn's side. Julia glanced at him knowingly. "I think she will be all right. At least, as well as can be expected. I don't think she was out long enough for hypothermia to set in."

“She wasn’t out long enough to even get to Dr. Karswell’s. Much less back here with his man there.”

Julia nodded, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully. “Before he knocked at the door, I didn’t hear a car pull up outside. Did you?”

“No.”

“Then he didn’t drive here. It would be quite impossible for him to have walked this far carrying her, don’t you think?”

“He didn’t,” came Barnabas’s voice. When Quentin looked around, he saw his cousin standing in the drawing room doorway, his walking stick in hand. “In fact, my guess is that if you were to look outside right now, Mathis would be long gone.”

“What are you saying?” Julia asked.

“It would appear that this man Mathis has the ability to move considerable distances, quickly and unseen.”

“Do you believe he’s responsible for Carolyn’s disappearance?”

“I doubt it,” Barnabas said. “He has a unique ability, to be sure, but my feeling is that his power is somewhat limited. He does not strike me as having the capacity for anything so... elaborate.”

“But Dr. Karswell would,” Julia said. “I’m certain of it.”

Barnabas gave her a long, thoughtful stare. “I think I should like to meet this Dr. Karswell. He must be quite a fascinating character.”

“I’m not sure that’s the word for it,” Quentin said. “His predilection for the occult is quite sinister, if you ask me. And his physical appearance is rather ghastly. He was disfigured in an accident, or so he claims.”

Barnabas then cocked an ear and, without a word, turned and strode into the foyer, his walking stick clicking hollowly on the stone floor. A second later, a gentle knock came at the door, and Barnabas was there to open it immediately. Quentin glanced at Julia as if she might provide some explanation, but she merely shrugged; apparently, Barnabas knew exactly what he was doing. When the new arrival entered, Quentin was surprised to see none other than Willie Loomis—Barnabas’s own right-hand man.

Willie was wearing a somewhat natty wool jacket, heavy denim jeans, and snow-caked brogan boots. He pulled a knit cap off his head and stuffed it into his jacket pocket, leaving several sprigs of his sandy hair jutting chaotically from his scalp. “Good evening, Mr. Quentin,” he said with a polite nod, rubbing his gloved hands together for warmth. “Sorry to bother you at this hour.” Then he turned back to Barnabas, and his face took on a bewildered look. “I was watching outside, just like you told me, Barnabas. And you’re not gonna believe what I just saw.”

Barnabas gave Willie a reassuring look. "Go on, Willie."

Willie glanced at Quentin, as if embarrassed, and then he blurted, "That man just appeared at the front door, carrying Carolyn. I never saw where he came from. He was just there all of a sudden. And then, when he came back out, he started up the driveway, went a short ways, and then he made a some kinda sign with his hands, sorta like this." Willie traced a meaningless geometric pattern in the air with his hand. Then, in a quavering voice, he continued. "And Barnabas, so help me, he just vanished into nowhere. It was like a hole opened up in the air and swallowed him. One second he was there. The next he was *gone*."

In the drawing room, Carolyn moaned softly. Quentin turned and saw Julia standing in the doorway, looking at Willie with a thoughtful gleam in her eye.

The house seemed to hold its breath for an endless span of time.

Then the grandfather clock next to the drawing room doors began its melancholy chiming of the hour. It was two A.M.

Chapter 13

At precisely 8:05 in the morning, Julia Hoffman dialed the number she had been given by the Miskatonic University operator and waited impatiently through several muted rings. She knew there was a fair chance that everyone on the faculty had left for the holidays, and she was about to hang up the phone in defeat when she heard a sharp click on the other end of the line. A slow, husky voice answered, “Philosophical Studies, this is Dr. Russell.”

“Good morning,” she said. “My name is Dr. Julia Hoffman. I’m calling from Wyndcliffe Hospital in Hancock, Maine.” Her heart thudded loudly in her ears a few times, disapproving of the lie. “I’m following up on a reference given to us by a prospective contract consultant that lists Miskatonic as a previous employer. I’m hoping you can verify that he was actually a member of your department. His name is Dr. Maitland Karswell.”

“Karswell,” came the voice on the other end; the professor’s tone indicated some uncertainty. “Ah. Several years ago we had a Dr. Karswell. An older fellow. Isn’t he retired by now?”

“I believe he is in retirement, yes. However, we are interested in his services only as a consultant, not as a full-time staff member.”

“I see. If he’s the old bird that I remember, then I can vouch for his employment. He was a rather unhealthy-looking man; his face was quite scarred.”

“Yes, that would be him,” Julia said, surprised to learn that Karswell had been at least marginally forthright about his background. “If I may inquire—without violating any confidentiality, of course—what sort of individual was he? Did you regard him as trustworthy?”

“May I have your name again, please?” Dr. Russell asked cautiously.

“Dr. Julia Hoffman,” she said slowly and succinctly, hoping the professor wouldn’t take it to heart to attempt to verify *her* credentials.

“Hoffman,” he repeated, rolling the name around in his mouth as if to determine its flavor. “You say you’re from Maine?”

“That’s right.”

“Are you by chance a colleague of Professor Elliot Stokes?”

“Why, yes I am.”

“Ah. I thought your name sounded familiar. He has mentioned you in the past. As I’m sure you know, he comes here occasionally to do research at our rather...extensive...library. I haven’t seen him in quite a while, though. Is he doing all

right?”

“Yes, the professor’s fine, though he’s presently away for the holidays. Actually, I was afraid you might have left as well. I’m glad I was able to reach you.” Julia’s heart relaxed somewhat, glad that the conversation had taken on a congenial air.

“You were just in time. I’ll be out of the office as of this afternoon, until the third of January. Anyway, to return to your question. If memory serves, Dr. Karswell was a rather odd man. Not a troublemaker, just full of unconventional ideas. But we do value that kind of individuality here. He was certainly competent in his position. But Wyndcliffe...that’s a mental hospital, isn’t it? What interest do you have in Dr. Karswell, if I may ask?”

Julia replied without missing a beat, “The doctor has a number of interesting ideas regarding certain mental disorders whose roots may lie in...aberrant religious beliefs.”

“I see. That definitely sounds like our man.”

“Could you tell me how long he was on the faculty?”

“Oh, must’ve been four, maybe five years. Mind you, he resigned nearly ten years ago. He left to pursue some research project with one of his former students who ended up becoming his partner. I can’t imagine him still working at his age.”

Julia’s stomach quivered. *The “former student” could only be Mathis!*

“I see,” she said after a long moment. “Let me ask you this...do you happen to know what he did *prior* to his tenure at Miskatonic?”

“Well, not offhand. I’d have to do some checking, and I couldn’t get to it till after New Year’s. Is there some question regarding his credentials?”

“Oh, no,” she said, a shade too quickly, afraid she might be rousing the other’s curiosity. “It’s simply as you said...he’s a rather odd gentleman. But I’ve taken enough of your time, Dr. Russell. Thank you very much. You’ve been a great help.”

“You’re welcome. Please give Elliot my regards when you see him.”

“I’ll do that.” She started to put the phone down, but then, on an impulse, she added, “And Merry Christmas to you, Dr. Russell.”

“Thank you, Dr. Hoffman. Merry Christmas.”

It seemed to take as long to drive to the old Swift house as it did to walk to it through the woods. Once she turned out of Collinwood onto South Beach Road, she had to go nearly a mile to the driveway of the adjacent property, which then wound treacherously through several acres of snow-coated woodland on its way to the old Tudor house. Karswell had not cleared the driveway, so Julia had to drive slowly and

cautiously to avoid either getting stuck in a deep drift or sliding on a patch of ice into the close-pressing trees.

Finally, around a long curve to the left, she saw the steeply angled roof of the house in the distance. As she drew nearer, she could see the gray Rolls Royce still parked out front, seemingly unmoved since her first visit, but unblemished by even the first flake of snow. Her heart fluttered as she pulled up behind the big sedan, for she knew that the moment she crossed the threshold of this house, her life would be in danger. With a trembling hand, she reached over to the seat next to her, scooped up the wool coat that Mathis had wrapped around Carolyn the previous night, and pushed open the door, shivering as a gust of cold wind swept into the vehicle like a reproofing hand. But she could not bring herself to get out of the car. Instead she simply stared at the ominously blank windows of the lower floor of the house.

I'm only here to return this coat. There's no reason to be terrified.

If only it were so. Neither Quentin nor Barnabas would for one moment approve of her venturing here on her own, but her true errand, as far as she was concerned, simply could not wait.

Karswell had sent a clear message last night: He had the power to either manipulate or destroy Carolyn, and he wanted them to know it. Why else would he have literally spirited her away from Collinwood and then had her returned by his hired minion? The question was: what was his ultimate aim? If the answer were what she suspected, then the entire Collins family faced the possibility of an ignominious downfall, administered swiftly, arrogantly, and without mercy. Julia had taken it upon herself to prevent that happening by whatever means necessary. But stopping Karswell would not be easy under any circumstances. She could not let Quentin know of her suspicions, for he would almost certainly either react violently or simply disappear again—probably forever. Barnabas would agree to help her, but she could only count on him after nightfall; and under the circumstances, she could not afford to wait.

After Quentin's episode last night, she was more certain than ever that the portrait was losing its power to preserve him. The next time the shadow of the werewolf fell upon him, the painting was *bound* to fail. And, in her heart, she felt that it would happen after sunset...tonight.

She had left Carolyn in her mother's care, with a strict reminder to Elizabeth not to touch her under *any* circumstances. Quentin was still in bed and, after his ordeal from the previous night, would probably sleep for the rest of the morning. Though his presence would have certainly comforted her right now, she could not in good conscience allow him to accompany her straight into the lion's den.

Finally, she pulled herself out of the car, into the biting wind, carrying the coat

and her purse, and made her way down the flagstone path to the house, which had thankfully been shoveled, no doubt by Mathis—Karswell’s “former student.” Her teeth chattered noisily as she mounted the three stairs to the front door. But she could not let Karswell see her this way! He would know something was amiss. She tried to fight down her rising panic, with only marginal success. Despite the old man’s physical frailness, the *other* resources he must have at his disposal were surely formidable beyond her imagination. And she could not underestimate Mathis’s own cunning as well as his prodigious strength. Together, the two of them represented a danger as deadly as any that had ever menaced the Collins family; of this she was certain.

Swallowing her dread, she lifted the hawk-shaped doorknocker and rapped sharply on the door.

It only took a moment for the door to swing open, exposing a deep well of blackness within. Then Mathis appeared, dressed in dark-colored work clothes, his face shadowed with obvious displeasure at seeing her.

“*Doctor Hoffman,*” he rumbled.

“G-good morning, Mathis,” she said unsteadily, and then fell silent for a moment too long. Finally, she raised the coat for him to see. “I came to return this to you. And to express my appreciation for the courtesy you showed us last night. It is regrettable that we were somewhat...short with you.”

The smile that split his face looked like a barracuda’s. “Won’t you come in, please. I know Dr. Karswell will be delighted to see you.”

She swallowed hard. “Thank you.” She stepped inside the foyer, and when Mathis closed the door behind her, her knees almost gave way.

“I’ll be happy to take that,” he said, reaching for the coat in her hands.

She handed it over to him, her near-frozen fingers barely able to release it. “Thank you.”

“Feel free to hang your own coat here.” He pointed to a coat rack next to the front door, but made no move to assist her. She struggled out of her overcoat and hung it on the rack, then picked up her purse and clutched it tightly at her side. Mathis again gave her an intimidating grin, raised one hand to guide her, and turned into the living room. “Dr. Karswell is in his study. I shall take you to him.”

On legs of rubber, she followed him through the immaculate Victorian room, all traces of the piled boxes from her last visit now gone. But her eyes barely registered her surroundings; they were drawn solely to the opening to Karswell’s study, from which dim sunlight spilled onto the oriental carpet like an anemic watercolor wash. Mathis escorted her to the door, exposed his straight white teeth in a disdainful smile,

and then silently turned and marched away, carrying the old wool overcoat with him. She could hear faint sounds of movement coming from inside the study. When she stepped through the door, the first thing she noticed was that the glass case containing the *Xianges* carapace was gone.

“Good morning, Dr. Hoffman,” came Dr. Karswell’s metallic, buzzing voice. The old man stiffly rose from his desk, clothed in his typical, well-tailored black suit, along with the ubiquitous black gloves. The thick, smoky spectacles regarded her like the dead eyes of a shark. One hand touched the metal disk at his throat, and the artificial voice said, “Please sit down. I’m happy to see you again. I understand that there was considerable distress at Collinwood last night. I hope everything has worked out for the better.”

Julia sat down in a somewhat uncomfortable wooden chair across from his desk, placed her purse on the floor next to her, and forced her lips to smile. “Things have settled down. At least, I hope so. I...I wished to thank both you and Mathis for your kindness last night. It was good of you to see that Carolyn was returned safely. She has been very ill.”

“So I understand. Naturally, we wished to see that the girl was properly cared for. I debated calling an ambulance or sending her straight back to Collinwood. I opted for the latter because I knew you would be able to provide her with the best care. The poor girl. She was in quite a state.”

“Indeed,” Julia said. “And it is fortunate that you—and Mathis—acted so quickly to prevent her from freezing in the cold.”

“Mathis is a thoroughly...compassionate...young man.” Karswell’s lipless mouth leered at her. “And he is most efficient. I knew he would get her safely back to you without incident.”

“The Collins family appreciates it. And in that regard, I feel that Mathis is owed an apology. I fear that Mr. Collins, in particular, might have been somewhat less than gracious. I hope Mathis understands that we were all merely upset under the circumstances and does not take offense.”

“I will see to it that he takes your message to heart, Dr. Hoffman. Thank you for delivering it.”

Julia’s voice nearly failed her now. “However,” she said, her throat constricting painfully, “there seems to be some confusion over exactly where Carolyn was when Mathis found her. He said that she was...*here*, as a matter of fact.”

“That is true,” Karswell said. “Mathis found her wandering near the house. He was moving some of my belongings inside from the car.”

“And yet,” Julia continued, trying to keep her voice from faltering, “we had

been with her, in her bedroom, only a few minutes before he returned her to our door. It is difficult for us to understand how she could have found her way to this house and then been returned to Collinwood in such a short amount of time.”

Karswell gave an exaggerated shrug. “A most curious occurrence, if what you say is accurate. Are you certain of the amount of time that she was gone? Could she have slipped out of the house somewhat earlier without your realizing it?”

“I would say that was quite impossible.”

“Most curious,” he said again.

She leaned closer to his desk now, feigning an expression of concern. “Dr. Karswell, I would like to speak candidly with you. When I was here previously, you indicated in no uncertain terms that it was impossible for one of your...*Xianges* arachnids, if that’s what you call them...to exist in this world. But I believe that one does exist. I am certain that such a creature attacked Carolyn, which has resulted in her fragile condition.”

Karswell’s face showed no emotion, but she sensed that his eyes were laughing mockingly at her. “I stand by my original statement, Dr. Hoffman. But please do continue. You are obviously speaking with conviction. I respect you for that.”

“I notice you no longer have the creature’s carapace on display.”

“No,” he said. “I found that it was an unhealthy reminder of experiences that are best forgotten.”

“Dr. Karswell,” she said, infusing as much sympathy in her voice as she could summon, “we spoke the other day of doors to other realms. You indicated you have securely closed all of yours behind you. But I can only believe that, somehow, one of them has swung open, perhaps unknown to you. Or...is it possible that you are attempting to protect yourself? If something has happened that might pose a danger to you, or others, it may be that we could help each other.”

Now Karswell chuckled openly. “You believe that I might be afraid, Dr. Hoffman? It is kind of you to be so concerned about my welfare. However, I can assure you that I do not fear the doors that I have opened and closed of my own volition. Nor do I require any manner of assistance from someone such as yourself, whose knowledge of my activities is certainly limited.” She had touched on the old man’s pride, and he now appeared to be growing agitated—which Julia had fully expected.

“Doctor,” she now said, matter-of-factly, “my belief is that Carolyn did not simply wander here. I believe that—whether on her own or by force—she was drawn out of what we would term a normal existence and relocated elsewhere, which I can only assume was here. You have spoken of the ability to alter space, to move between

the dimensions we perceive with our ordinary senses. I believe you have done something, either intentionally or unintentionally, that has affected Carolyn Stoddard quite profoundly.”

“Dr. Hoffman, while I have believed from the beginning that you have a more open mind than most human beings, I would hardly have expected you to come here and make such a fantastic statement. Based on my confessions to you regarding my experiments, you apparently have leaped to the conclusion that I am somehow responsible for what has happened to Carolyn Stoddard. I am not certain whether to consider your charge an insult or an unqualified compliment.”

“Take it however you like, Dr. Karswell. All I am saying is that, based on my personal experience, there are times that our actions have unforeseen consequences. I know enough about activities such as yours to understand that things we have done in the past sometimes return to haunt us when we least expect it. And sometimes, they affect other people, despite our best intentions.”

The eyes behind the spectacles blazed like blue lanterns. “Perhaps, Dr. Hoffman, you are more correct than you realize.”

“What do you mean?” she asked. Slowly, her right hand lowered to her purse and touched the clasp that held it closed.

“Most human beings live their lives day to day, relegating certain people and events to the past, where they belong; where they should hopefully remain forever. I am certain that this is the case with the Collins family; they have no choice but to forget their ghosts, for there are too many to remember. Perhaps even with you, as well. But as you indicate, Dr. Hoffman, sometimes the past returns to haunt the living.”

The silence between them grew long and strained, and her heart began to pound faster and faster. The spectacles dared her to say the words that tried to form on her lips. At last, with her breath catching in her throat, she whispered, “I was certain you would understand my meaning.”

Karswell very slowly placed the metal disk he used to amplify his speech on the desk before him. Now in his own, low, hoarse voice, deadly familiar to her, though subtly changed by the years and the damage to his body, the old man said, “You had your suspicions from the beginning, didn’t you, Dr. Hoffman? But they were too vague for you to identify them. I admire your perceptiveness.”

“I have no desire to be admired by you,” she said, her voice as sharp as a spearhead. “And I do not have the patience to listen to more of your conceited ramblings about your accomplishments.” Her hand slipped quickly into her purse and emerged with a steel-finished Colt 9mm revolver, which she raised and trained on the

old man's heart. "I think you know that I will use this if I must. I will not hesitate to shoot either you or Mathis, should he make the mistake of attempting to challenge me. Your presence here can only mean one thing. I think from our past experiences, you know that I absolutely will not allow you to harm Quentin Collins. Or Carolyn Stoddard."

"What do you intend to do?"

"I intend to stop you. Count Petofi."

The ancient creature behind the desk slowly rose to his feet like a black-clad, animated skeleton. The lipless mouth opened in a ghastly smile, and a growling sound like a laugh gushed from the black pit. "I have no doubt that you would shoot me if you felt it would actually do me harm. Do you believe that it will?"

Julia's finger tightened on the trigger. *Wait for the right moment*, she told herself. She had reached the point of no return now. She did not dare waver in her resolve. "I know enough about your unique powers—and vulnerabilities—to have come prepared to do what I must do."

"So you bring that?" Count Andreas Petofi pointed at the revolver with his one articulate hand. "I would have expected an unconventional mind such as yours to devise a less conventional method of exerting control in a situation where your personal resources are obviously inferior. By pointing that at me without pulling the trigger, I must assume you want to question me. Well," he chuckled gruffly, "if you do not unduly try my patience, perhaps I will oblige you with a few answers."

"Smugness does not become you, Count, although I know to expect it from you. You are, of course, correct in your assumption. The first thing I want to know is how to reverse Carolyn's condition. There must be a way."

"Of course there is a way. There are ways to all desired ends. All one must have, Dr. Hoffman, is the necessary key."

Petofi turned slightly toward the window, exposing a portion of his right forearm. *A little more...*

"And then you will tell me how to save Quentin Collins," she said, somehow forcing her gun hand to remain steady. "If you do not, he is likely to die anyway, and your plan will fail before it begins."

"Whatever do you mean by that?" he asked with a leer.

She listened for a moment to make sure there was no sign of Mathis lurking anywhere nearby. "The portrait's ability to preserve Quentin as a normal human being is diminishing. If its power fails, then it will not preserve you, either—even if you should succeed in gaining control of Quentin's body."

At this remark, Petofi unleashed a ghoulish cackle. "Losing its power? Dr.

Hoffman, I'm afraid you're mistaken. The power in that portrait is not diminishing. If anything, it is more potent now than it ever was. The most certain means of preserving Quentin Collins's life is to simply refrain from interfering with my designs. However, that admonition comes somewhat late at this juncture."

Julia's heart went to her throat. The portrait was growing *stronger*? How could that be? The revelation—if it were true—stunned her. But it was too late to change her course of action.

"I see from your expression that you do not know nearly as much as you thought you did. Exactly as I foretold. Your coming here was a grave mistake, Dr. Hoffman." At last, Count Petofi lifted his gloved, mummified right hand—the very source of his mystical, malignant power. The atrophied arm somehow succeeded in maneuvering the hand to point accusingly at her. And knowing that it was now or never, Julia thrust the gun forward and squeezed the trigger.

In the confines of the study, the powerful blast nearly shattered her eardrums. Her hand jerked with the recoil, but she saw that her aim had been true. With a cry of anguish, Petofi twisted around and fell against the wall, clutching the smashed remains of his right hand. His breath rasped in and out of his lungs in ragged gasps, and, finally, the eyes behind the spectacles rolled around to meet hers. She had never seen terror in those marble-like orbs before, but now they positively radiated fear and hatred. She quickly rose from her chair, moved to the study door, slammed it shut, and locked it. She heard Mathis's rapid footsteps approaching from elsewhere in the house, and his voice called, "Master Petofi!"

Julia knew that her time was short. Mathis might well have means to enter the room that she did not know about. She stepped forward and aimed the gun directly at Petofi's wizened face. She growled, "I know that, given time, your hand will reassert its power and restore itself. But I do not intend to give you that time. If I pull the trigger right now, you are a dead man. And all your plans will amount to nothing."

Clenching his teeth in agony, Petofi hissed, "I clearly misread your intentions, Doctor. It is a shame that you have chosen to interfere, for—up to now—I had no particular desire to do you harm. But I must ask you: Do you have the wherewithal to finish what you have begun? Surely you realize that, even if I give you what you want now, you *must* kill me to ensure that I do not return to haunt you again. Do you have the fortitude to finish me now, thus freeing you—and the Collins family—from any future attention I might be inclined to pay you?"

Julia's thumb pulled back the hammer of the Colt. "I know exactly what I am risking...the consequences of my actions to myself and to the Collinses. If you do not think so then you have indeed underestimated my resolve."

“No, Dr. Hoffman, I do not believe I have underestimated you. However, even if you should utterly destroy this hand, it has already set in motion certain events that you cannot undo. Whether you kill me or not.”

“You have only moments to undo them yourself, or I *will* destroy you here and now. No matter what happens to me, Count Andreas Petofi will have been removed from the world forever. As you have proven time and again, Count, your sad devotion to preserving your own life is your weakness. I advise you to consider the prospect of losing it very carefully for the next five seconds because that is all I am giving you.”

“Then you are overly generous, Doctor,” Petofi said in a pained whisper. But suddenly his voice grew stronger. “For I am giving you only three.”

Julia heard a rustling sound behind her, and she spun around with the gun raised, expecting to see Mathis moving to disarm her. What she did not expect to see was Carolyn standing before her, dressed in the same nightgown she was wearing when Julia had left her in her bedroom only a few minutes before.

Julia gasped as Carolyn stepped forward, a terrible gleam in her sapphire eyes. Her lips spread in a malevolent grin, her arms raised, and, very softly, she began to sing: “*I want to dance with you; want to dance our cares away. I’ll be so close to you; in my arms you’ll always stay.*”

Julia involuntarily stepped backward and suddenly found her arms pinioned at her sides. The revolver fell heavily to the floor, and she heard Mathis’s menacing voice whisper, “I’m afraid that will be enough of that, Dr. Hoffman.”

She twisted violently, trying to break Mathis’s grip, but she succeeded only in sending a blaze of agony through her entire body. She cried out in shock and terror, and through a red haze of pain, she saw the withered, black-clad body take a faltering step toward her, his ruined hand tucked gingerly beneath his other arm.

“Daring and inventive, yet as foolish as a child attempting to manipulate a sage. I appreciate your quandary, Doctor; I honestly do. Forgive my lack of manners now, but you have forced me to behave disagreeably. You may have compelled me to slightly rearrange my plans, but I can assure you that you have not come close to thwarting them. Now. A few minutes ago, you spoke of a certain item that I know you have in your possession. Unless you would care to spend the last few moments of your life in the embrace of your beloved Carolyn Stoddard, you are going to tell me exactly where to find it.”

Chapter 14

Quentin opened his eyes and saw a few beams of cold sunlight cutting through the wine-colored, antique satin curtains that covered his window. He sat up quickly, momentarily uncertain whether he was awake or still dreaming. He had slept fitfully, his dreams constantly invaded by dark, half-seen shapes that threatened him, chattering and growling, some small and insect-like, others as large as men. As his eyes registered the dim shape of his dresser, the velvet-upholstered rocking chair, the framed still-life on the wall, and his own clothes draped over the cedar chest at the end of the bed, he confirmed with some relief that he was truly awake.

He dragged himself from beneath his warm covers, wishing he could have at least a few more minutes of sleep untroubled by nightmares, but knowing that he would never be able to drift off again now that his senses had come fully awake. He glanced at the clock on the nightstand next to his bed and found to his chagrin that it was after ten. Growling to himself about wasting away the morning, he stumbled down the hall to the bathroom, relieved himself, and splashed some cold water over his face. The crystal-blue eyes in the mirror were rimmed with red and peered at him from hollow, kohl-dark sockets. His hair sprang from his skull in all directions, and with a sigh of disgust, he swiped his damp hands over it so that it looked slightly less like a rat's nest. He returned to his room, pulled on fresh clothes, and set out for the kitchen, hoping to find some hot coffee remaining in the pot.

"Good morning, Mrs. Johnson," he said as he ambled through the arched doorway. His voice came out as a hoarse grumble, and he nearly froze as he remembered that, last night, his vocal cords had begun to transform into something altogether inhuman.

Did that really happen? Or had it been one of his terrible nightmares?

"Good morning, Mr. Quentin," came Mrs. Johnson's warbling voice. Her brow furrowed disapprovingly as she took in the sight of him. "Did you know that you look like a vagrant?"

"I've been trying not to notice. Thanks for reminding me."

She poured a cup of coffee, handed it to him, and then unplugged the pot. "That's the last of it. I hope it's enough to fix you."

Quentin took a long sip and nearly spewed it out of his mouth. It was still scalding. He sucked in several quick breaths to cool the burning; then, once the pain began to subside, he asked, "Since no one came to wake me, I assume there's been no change in Carolyn's condition?"

“None that anyone’s bothered to inform me about.”

“Is Julia with her?”

“Dr. Hoffman left on an errand a while ago. Frankly, I thought she would be back by now.”

“Did she say where she was going?”

“Not to me.”

Quentin started for the door, carrying his steaming cup with him. “I doubt she’s gotten a minute of sleep. So...is Elizabeth with Carolyn?”

“Yes, as far as I know. And she hasn’t come out of there since Dr. Hoffman left. Mrs. Stoddard needs a break as much as anyone. I feel so bad for her. And for Carolyn, of course.”

“I’ll go check on her,” he said, feeling a quiver of concern ripple through his gut. “Thank you, Mrs. Johnson.”

He went up the stairs with an increasing sense of misgiving. Julia hadn’t mentioned needing to go anywhere. And she must be running on no more than an hour’s sleep in the last 24 hours. Not only was it unhealthy, she might actually pose a danger to herself and others if she were anything less than alert. If she let down her guard for one minute while she was examining Carolyn....

As he passed through the door to the second floor hallway, he heard shuffling footsteps around the corner, and suddenly David appeared, dressed in his warmest coat, gloves, and snow boots.

“Quentin!” he said. “I was wondering if you were still here, since I hadn’t seen you this morning.”

Quentin gave him a smile from his heart. “I’m still around. Just slept in a bit late and went to finish off Mrs. Johnson’s coffee. Where are you off to?”

“Out to go walking in the snow or something. I’m tired of being cooped up indoors.” He nodded in the direction of Carolyn’s room and sighed. “Everyone’s still very upset, aren’t they?”

“Yes, we all are.”

The boy’s eyes flickered with youthful hope. “Carolyn’s going to be all right, isn’t she?”

“I think she will. She’s a very strong girl. And she has a family that loves her very much.”

David smiled wanly. “Would you come outside with me? I’ve hardly gotten to see you at all since you’ve been here.”

He shook his head regretfully. “I’m afraid I can’t right now. I need to relieve your Aunt Elizabeth. She’s bound to be exhausted, with all she’s been through. I’ll try

to spend some time with you later. That's a promise."

David looked crestfallen, but he nodded. "It's all very serious, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. But you enjoy yourself. Try not to worry and just have some fun. Carolyn is in excellent hands."

"I know. I'll do my best," he said and began shambling toward the stairs. Quentin watched after him for a moment, proud of the maturity the boy was showing under such trying circumstances. It was quite a change from the impudent, often antisocial young man he used to know.

Then, for a second, he thought of the lurking creature that had attacked Carolyn. *What if it had not finished its work?* But if it chose to strike again, it would not matter whether its chosen victim was indoors or out. He suddenly called after David, "Hey!"

The boy looked around the corner, just as he was about to start down the stairs. "Yes, Quentin?"

"Be careful. Don't go far from the house."

"I won't." David smiled half-heartedly, then went on his way.

Quentin shrugged to himself, trying to shake off his fears. No matter the dangers, they could not live their lives as if they were in a prison. And he *would* spend more time with David, as soon as he had the chance; he owed the boy that much. He went to Carolyn's door, reached for the knob, and gently pushed the door open to reveal a darkened room, curtains drawn, lights off. To his right, he noticed Elizabeth seated in a comfortable, sky-blue upholstered chair, her head drooping slightly toward her chest. His eyes wandered toward Carolyn's bed, and he stopped in his tracks.

No! It wasn't possible. Not again!

He turned to Elizabeth and firmly grasped her shoulder. "Elizabeth? Wake up."

He touched her face and found her skin disturbingly cool. He reached for her wrist to feel for her pulse; to his relief, blood was still pumping through her body. But she seemed to be totally unconscious. He knelt before her, gently placed his hands on either side of her head, and slowly massaged her temples with his thumbs.

"Elizabeth," he said in a soft voice. "Wake up. Come on now." He swiveled her head in his hands, first slowly, then a little more forcefully.

After a moment, she finally began to stir. Her lips parted as she drew in a sudden deep breath, and her eyes flew open with a look of shock.

"Quentin," she whispered. As awareness slowly returned to her, her eyes moved to the empty bed, and she gasped in horror. "Oh, my God! Carolyn...."

"What happened?" Quentin asked. "Did anyone else come into the room?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "No, no, I was here alone with her. I was watching over her so carefully. But I didn't fall asleep. I know I didn't...."

“You weren’t just sleeping. You had passed out. Or were rendered unconscious in some way. You’re sure you were alone with her the whole time?”

“Yes, of course. Oh, Quentin, where can she have gone?”

“I don’t know,” he said, as anger began to simmer in his chest. *He should never have left Carolyn’s side.* “Where the hell has Julia gone?”

She shook her head in abject misery. “I don’t know. She said she had to step out, that it was very important. But she wouldn’t say where she was going. I did exactly as she asked. I didn’t fall asleep, Quentin.”

“I know, I know,” he said, placing his hands reassuringly on her shoulders. “Look, we’ll find Carolyn. I’m sure she’s going to be fine.”

“We should have put her in the hospital to begin with,” she said, setting her jaw firmly. “I know Julia is perfectly competent and means well, but in this, I do not believe she has used her best judgment.”

“That’s as maybe,” Quentin said. “But I’d like to know where she went. She shouldn’t have left Carolyn.”

“Perhaps it’s time we called Sheriff Patterson. If Carolyn were to leave the house....”

“Don’t think about that,” he said quickly. The last thing he wanted was to get the local law involved. “Look, I want you to stay here, in case Carolyn comes back on her own. I’ll go look for her. I’ll get Stiles to help me, if necessary. Is Roger at the office?”

“Yes, naturally.”

“All right. Please try to stay calm and don’t call anyone else. Not yet, anyway. I’m going to try to figure out what’s going on. If you need anything, call Mrs. Johnson, all right?”

“Very well,” Elizabeth said with a sigh. “I still think we ought to call the sheriff. Do you know where David is?”

“He went outside just a few minutes ago. I’ll make sure he’s all right, too.”

“Thank you, Quentin,” Elizabeth said, her eyes glistening with desperation. “Please find her quickly.”

“I’ll do my best,” he said. But as he stepped into the hall, his anger began to burn hotter and hotter. After what had happened last night, he was certain that there was only one place that Carolyn could be. With whatever incomprehensible power he possessed, Dr. Karswell must have again taken her away, intent on playing her against the family for reasons he had yet to divulge. What could he possibly hope to accomplish? Who *was* this mysterious, disfigured travesty of a man who seemed bent on terrorizing them—if not something worse?

Who would have such a vendetta against them?

During his unnaturally long life, Quentin had both suffered at the hands of evil men and inflicted suffering on the undeserving. There were portions of his life that were simply hazy in his memory, and others that he had intentionally repressed because the burden of his guilt was too great to bear. Had someone that he had grievously wronged returned to avenge himself? Or—although he believed otherwise in his heart—might this campaign of terror have nothing to do with him directly but with some other member of the family?

What about Barnabas? Barnabas had certainly made enemies in his time.

A Leviathan, perhaps? His blood curdled at the very idea. There was no proof that all remnants of that deviant, blasphemous cult had been swept away after it had attempted—unsuccessfully—to awaken certain entities, malevolent and far older than mankind, that existed in some distant plane of time and space. Indeed, Carolyn's late husband, Jeb Hawkes, had been an integral player in their sinister conspiracy until he had turned on them. Had some surviving individual or group dispatched Karswell to exact retribution upon Carolyn for her role in their defeat? Did not the *Xianges* arachnid itself come from an alternate reality—some hideous domain that might very well be the spawning ground of the Leviathans themselves? Barnabas, too, had certainly contributed to their demise; any remaining cult members would be all too happy to see him—and any other member of the Collins family—cruelly destroyed.

Or was Karswell a new enemy altogether? Someone who had only by chance drawn the Collins family into some unfathomable scheme of his own?

No. Quentin could not believe that. There were too many possibilities from the past, his own in particular. He thought back to the days of his mad wife, Jenny, and the curse that Magda Rakosi had placed upon him. At that time, there had been a singular madman with designs on his life, one who had very nearly brought about his ultimate destruction.

No. That man was long dead. To even imagine that he could have somehow returned after all these years was unthinkable.

But that man *had* been burned. Was that not so? And Karswell admitted to having been nearly killed in a terrible fire.

Then there was his hand: his one, immovable, obviously atrophied hand.

No! Count Petofi does not exist. He cannot exist

Yet every time Quentin tried to justify his reasoning with facts and logic, all he had to do was look in a mirror to know that the truth was often stranger, and even less rational, than the wildest imaginings of an insane dreamer.

The hall seemed unnaturally dark, for no light issued through any of the open

doors; it was as if all the windows in the rooms had been bricked over. Even the single, tall window at the far end of the corridor was covered by a heavy satin drape that admitted virtually no sunlight. He turned his back on the gloom and started walking toward the stairway to the foyer, anxious to leave the shadows behind, for they were too grim a reminder of the horror that might yet await him after nightfall. *What was he going to do tonight? What if the change were to come upon him? Was he going to have to lock himself away where he would pose no danger to others? Would Barnabas perhaps agree to imprison him in the cellar of the Old House?*

Ahead, he could see the door to the foyer landing, and on the wall beyond, an array of prismatic colors painted by the sunbeams that swept through the stained glass window overlooking the mansion's grand anteroom. He was almost to the door when he heard a soft, whispery voice behind him, seemingly calling his name. He turned around and peered curiously into the darkness, which appeared quite empty, wondering if his ears might have deceived him. But as he gazed, he again heard a low, distinctively feminine voice call to him: "Quentin."

The voice was Carolyn's.

"Carolyn?" he called. "Where are you?"

"I'm here," came the thin, distant voice. "Please...help me."

He hurried back down the hall, passed her bedroom door, and turned the corner to the passage that led to the west wing. He saw no one. But his ears seemed unnaturally sensitive, and the hair on the back of his neck prickled his skin. There *was* a presence here, he thought. Was she in one of the closed-off rooms—perhaps hiding from some perceived threat?

"Carolyn, tell me where you are."

"I am close to you," the voice said. "You must help me. Please."

He continued walking cautiously toward the far door, and then he suddenly stopped in his tracks. Something in the gloomy corridor struck him as completely wrong. He turned to his left and was unable to stifle a gasp of disbelief. Instead of the vacant wall he knew to exist there, he found himself facing an arched opening, beyond which a dark passageway disappeared into unknown depths.

"Impossible," he breathed, even at that moment recognizing the futility of his denial. "This cannot be here."

"Quentin," came Carolyn's voice again. "I need you."

Her voice was coming from deep within the black portal.

"Jesus," he whispered, peering hopelessly into the void beyond the archway. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could see that the floor appeared to continue into the passage, while the walls and ceiling simply melted into an abyss as black as outer

space. However, rather than the silence of space, a rising susurrus of whispering, humming, buzzing sounds crawled from the opening, insinuating the presence of living beings, however inhuman; in his mind's eye, he pictured a grotesque congregation of giant insects, all hiding in the darkness, singing and screeching their mad refrains. Could Carolyn truly be somewhere within this incredible black passageway, the far end of which must lie in some unimaginable sphere of existence, incredibly distant from his own familiar reality? The very idea of such a vastly alien, yet obviously inhabited domain overwhelmed him, sending him staggering away from the archway on weakened, wobbly legs, his mind unable to withstand the awful implications of what his eyes apprehended. Facing the passage, he felt the weight of pure, mindless horror bearing down upon him, and he realized that, if Carolyn were truly inside it and facing her own shocking end, he could not help her, for no force on heaven or earth could coerce him to take one step through that leering archway. He backed into the opposite wall, propping himself so that he would not fall, his knees no longer capable of supporting him unaided.

“Quentin, please,” came her sobbing voice. “Help me! *Please!*”

The sheer helplessness in her voice broke his heart. “Carolyn,” his lips uttered, barely audible to his own ears. “Where are you?”

“Here. Help me, Quentin!”

His instinct to tear himself away, to flee with all possible haste from the hellish mouth wrestled with his aching desire to help Carolyn. But fascination and terror rooted him to his spot, and as he stared into the fathomless darkness, his eyes detected something pale and willowy taking form in the distance: a floating, smoky wraith amid endless shadows, its contours indistinct but vaguely human. Unable to stop himself, he leaned forward to see more clearly—and suddenly, as if grabbed by an invisible hand, he found himself being dragged across the floor, straight toward the gaping hole in space.

“God!” he cried, his hands flailing wildly to find purchase on anything that could halt his inexorable slide. But even as he tried to grasp the wooden edge of the archway, he felt himself pitching into space, as if the passage had become a *pit*, and then his sense of direction completely disintegrated amid the pitch black, and he was falling, falling, watching the dimly lit archway rapidly shrink in his field of vision until it finally dwindled to a tiny dot and disappeared. The keening chorus of whispers, chirps, and hisses assailed his ears like insects on a summer night, loud and eerily derisive, as if they had somehow achieved malevolent sentience. He tried to twist around to view of the pale figure that had lured him into the black maelstrom, but he could only thrash his arms and legs in vain, unable to shift his body or alter his

descent.

How long he fell he could not begin to guess, but the passage seemed endless. A cold wind battered his body without making a sound, for his ears heard only the chaotic piping of the unseen watchers. Now and again he thought he glimpsed pairs of tiny, twinkling red eyes that peered curiously at him from invisible perches and were quickly left behind; once, he felt something hard and sharp, like a living bullwhip, slash viciously across his back, stinging his skin with deliberate malice. But horror eclipsed any pain he felt, for the idea of even the slightest physical contact with the monstrous denizens of this fantastic realm caused his stomach to lurch violently.

He expected that, at any moment, his fall would reach its end, and his body would be smashed to atoms and dispersed like shards of broken glass into spaces unknown. With every passing second, he knew he must be moving farther and farther into a universe that shared no common boundary with the one he knew; here the air was becoming thinner, and his lungs had to struggle harder with every inhalation. At last, though, the rush of air against his face seemed to diminish slightly, and the clutch of vertigo lost some of its strength. Was he actually decelerating? He could not be certain. But after a time, he had the impression that he was no longer falling so much as floating, though the pure darkness around him continued to puzzle his senses.

Sometime later—hours or days, if time could be measured in this abyss—he realized that the sensation of movement had ceased altogether. Now, like a fly trapped in a spider's web, he hung suspended by some force he could neither see nor feel, his limbs unable to find any unyielding surface. His skin felt chilled, and a cool, musty odor crept to his nostrils.

Sometime later still—and much to his horror—he saw an array of those twinkling red eyes slowly converging from the distant darkness to surround him, and like a parody of the sound of ocean waves, their chattering, piping voices began to overwhelm his senses, mocking him with undisguised contempt. Now he fully expected to be attacked, to have his flesh slashed and torn, his body either ripped to shreds or gouged by fangs filled with the same venom that had turned Carolyn's body into an instrument of death. But whatever the nature of the unseen spectators, they remained content to chirp menacingly at him without approaching, as if held back by a will greater than their own. However, Quentin knew that, should that higher power but wish it, the creatures would be unleashed to work their deadly desires on him.

“What the hell are you?” he whispered to the glaring red eyes. “What do you want with me?”

To his surprise, he heard a distant murmur, as if a voice were attempting to answer him. He craned his neck, peering up, around, behind him, hoping for a sign of

anything to indicate that he might not be alone with the half-seen inhabitants of this lightless underworld. Nothing moved in the darkness, not even the red eyes; but he thought he detected a brief draft across the back of his neck, as if something had passed rapidly nearby.

And then, in booming tones that nearly shattered his eardrums, a voice thundered out of the darkness, surrounding him, crushing him beneath its sheer volume. At first, he could not understand it, nor did he recognize the speaker. The sound stabbed his eardrums like daggers and hammered his temples with merciless ferocity. Only after the voice had pronounced his name, over and over again, did his brain begin to register the syllables it spoke.

“Welcome, Quentin Collins.”

It was a voice he recognized, and now—as something resembling clarity of thought began to return to him—his mind latched onto its awful familiarity and clung to it, like a man holding onto the edge of a razor to keep from tumbling into a chasm. “Welcome to your portion of eternity, Quentin. For after your soul has been ripped screaming from the body that plays host to it, here, in this labyrinth, it will be discarded and forgotten, and your only company will be those monstrous creatures that even now wait to devour your very essence. You have no idea how pleased I am to finally see you here, Quentin. No idea whatsoever.”

Chapter 15

“It...it doesn’t matter what you threaten to do to me,” Julia said shakily but defiantly. “I will tell you nothing.”

Petofi glowered at her for several moments, still cradling his shattered hand, and then nodded thoughtfully. “I would expect nothing less from you. But you confuse courage with stubbornness. Make no mistake. When you at last succumb to death, you shall welcome it. And it will come only after you have given me what I require. Now. I do not intend to waste time with idle chatter. Mathis, hold her carefully, for the pain will cause her to react violently.” Mathis’s strong hands gripped her even more tightly, and she felt herself being pulled close to his muscular body. Petofi’s eyes swiveled to Carolyn, and he said in a soft, ominous voice, “Carolyn, you will do exactly as I order you. At the first sign of resistance, your own blood will begin to burn. And you shall suffer as Dr. Hoffman is to suffer. Is that perfectly clear?”

The young blonde nodded slowly, her eyes never leaving Julia’s. Her gaze was intense but impersonal, as if she barely recognized Julia at all. Like a puppet under Petofi’s complete control, she stepped forward and raised one hand, finally lowering her eyes to study it with detached curiosity, as if uncertain it was her own. Mathis forced Julia’s right arm upward, and try as she might to resist, she was no match for his strength; he thrust her arm out to Carolyn as if in offering, drawing a hiss of pain from her lips. The blonde girl glanced appraisingly at the helpless limb and then raised her head to peer at Julia’s face again. If she were in any way unwilling to follow Petofi’s orders, there was no evidence of it in her gleaming eyes.

“Carolyn, no,” Julia whispered. “Think of Quentin. If you do this, it is not me you are harming but Quentin.”

“Your entreaties are a waste of breath you will soon desperately need,” came Petofi’s gruff voice. “She is as lost to you as Quentin Collins is about to become. You have only moments to willingly tell me what I wish to know.”

“No,” Julia moaned. “Never.”

“Then I absolve myself of any responsibility for what is about to happen to you. Know now that the agony you face is the result of your own foolishness. I am sorry for you, Dr. Hoffman. Truly, I am.”

Julia watched in horror as Carolyn slowly reached for her arm and carefully pulled back the cuff of her jacket sleeve. A second later, she felt cool fingers brush the skin of her wrist and begin to gently stroke her inner forearm. For several moments, Julia felt nothing but the ordinary tingle of contact with the flesh of another human

being, and she dared hope that the deadly venom in the girl's blood had finally lost its potency.

But then, the moment Carolyn's fingers pulled away from her arm, she felt a dull burning at her wrist, which began to creep up her forearm like an acid-secreting beetle. Little by little, the burn grew hotter, and she saw a fiery red worm appear on her pale skin, gradually brightening as it wriggled toward her inner elbow. The fire intensified, and now her arm involuntarily tried to pull away from Mathis's unbreakable grip. But the harder she fought, the tighter his fingers held her arm, and she felt his body tense as he braced himself for her increasingly violent struggles.

"This can be made to last longer than you can dream of enduring," Petofi said. "I pray you. Spare yourself, Dr. Hoffman."

"Not so that you may take Quentin's life. You underestimate *me*."

"We shall see. Do you not understand that I will eventually find what I am looking for—with or without your cooperation? And your sacrifice will have been in vain."

Now Carolyn's hand slithered up Julia's arm, to her shoulder, and then to her exposed throat. As the girl's fingers slowly closed on the flesh of her neck, Julia hissed, "If what you say is true, then this only illustrates the pleasure you take in the suffering of others. It *will* come back to haunt you, Count Petofi."

The wizened figure shook his head wearily. "I cannot begin to count the number of times I have heard that from the lips of some doomed soul. I take no delight in your demise, Dr. Hoffman. I have offered you a way out, and you have refused it. Carolyn...please continue."

Julia felt the gentle pressure of Carolyn's fingers around her neck. She tried to pull away, to shake her head, to lash out at Carolyn with her foot, but Mathis's vise-like arms held her immobile. She could get no leverage to move either forward or backward; her arms were now pinioned immovably at her sides.

And the burning began just above her collarbone, slowly spreading toward her jugular. She felt a prickling heat behind her ears, and suddenly her breath caught in her lungs.

Agony!

Her back arched as an electric spasm jolted her entire body. Even Mathis was unprepared for the violence of her reaction, and he staggered backward into Petofi's desk. But he regained his balance in an instant, and Julia cried out, her hands desperately seeking to pry themselves loose, to encircle her own throat as if their touch might somehow bring relief. The fire was working its way through her skin, into her trachea, to her lungs. In her mind, she visualized the invading, alien microorganisms

cascading from Carolyn's flesh to hers, attacking her body tissue, layer by layer, burrowing through to muscle, blood vessels, even bone, annihilating her own cells as they traveled. How long could her body withstand such an onslaught—and how long could she endure the intense pain? The inner blaze raged hotter and hotter, and now her tortured lungs unleashed a furious scream.

But no one could hear her. Only her tormentors and their unwitting pawn.

Carolyn suddenly released her, but the fire in her veins subsided not even a degree. For a moment, something akin to recognition flashed in the girl's eyes, and her jaw dropped in horror at what she was doing. But then her sapphire eyes glazed over to dull gray, and she stepped back, again staring at Julia with distant curiosity.

Julia struggled for breath. Barely able to force her lips to obey, she haltingly whispered, "Carolyn...please...you must resist his will. For all of our sakes...do not let him control you."

Petofi took a step toward her, gazing into her eyes, evaluating her pain, measuring the depth of her remaining reserves. "She cannot understand you, Doctor. Her mind is now as much *Xianges* as human. However, I am sure you will be interested to know that the melding of her body and soul with the intruder's can only last a relatively brief time. Otherwise, both will die. Have no fear. I do not intend to let that happen. But when she is freed from its influence, her memory will not be mercifully wiped clean. She will remember in every detail what it felt like to take your life. She will recall every nuance of her part in your misery, and in doing so suffer unimaginably herself. In the end it shall destroy her. Bear in mind that you now have that on your conscience if you continue on this course."

The smoky spectacles regarded her with contempt, but the lipless mouth spread into a half-grin, signifying his satisfaction with the quandary he had presented to her. Julia swallowed hard, her throat so constricted she could barely breathe. "You are a coward, Count Petofi. Forcing an innocent girl to perform your work for you, when she has nothing to do with your personal vendetta. Your willingness to let her be destroyed proves that I would be a fool to cooperate with you, no matter the cost."

"Can you say with certainty, then, that you are any different than I? You would sacrifice Carolyn simply to deny me what I require?"

"I am not the one forcing her to take a life. And she would never choose to do so freely." Julia's tear-filled eyes could barely make out the figure that suddenly leaned close to her. She caught a whiff of his scent: an acrid, antiseptic smell, almost like ammonia. She could feel the heat of his gaze upon her, his eyes boring into her mind like a pair of steel drill bits. She knew that, in his heart, he was nothing more than a man; a twisted, mad, unthinkable old man, but no less human than she herself. Yet as

he gazed at her, she could not escape the impression that he was more an unstoppable, unreasoning force of nature. She had as much hope of bargaining with him as she would with a shark.

Truly, then, she was doomed.

“Quite extraordinary,” came Petofi’s rasping voice as he finally pulled away from her. “I can see in your eyes, Dr. Hoffman, that you are committed to the end. I was always quite right, you know. Yours is no conventional mind. Such a waste. But so be it. I shall have to find the portrait the longer and more tedious way.” He turned to the blonde girl. “Carolyn. Finish her.”

A chill of dread passed down Julia’s spine. Mathis’s arms tightened around her again, and Carolyn stepped forward, her face as cold as a marble sculpture. She reached out with one hand, and this time, her fingers closed on Julia’s jaw, pressing hard, working back and forth as if to intensify the transference of death itself into her bloodstream. The burning began immediately, and she could not hold back a sharp cry of pain and shock. But this time, she felt strength beginning to drain from her body. Her arms, still vehemently struggling to escape Mathis’s grip, were beginning to feel limp and rubbery, and her legs began to sag beneath her weight; if not for the powerful hands holding her erect, she would have slid to the floor. Her vision started to go dim, and when she tried to suck in a deep breath, it caught halfway down her windpipe. The trapped air slowly expanded in her chest, causing her to choke.

Oh, my God, I’m dying. I’m actually dying.

“You are nearly at the point of no return,” Petofi whispered, his mouth close to her ear. “If you are determined to see your ordeal through to its end, I suggest you make your final peace. You have only moments left.”

What would happen to her? Would she drift away into unending dreams? Mere nothingness? Endless bliss? Or was this torment the precursor to something far worse: a never-ending cycle of suffering and separation from eternal peace? Would she pay a price for her sometimes less-than-godly life on Earth? She had faced death before, yes. But she had never actually felt her very essence slipping away moment by moment, or been able to perceive her heart struggling and winding down like a worn-out clock.

But then a new wave of pain tore through her body, washing away all rational thoughts of the hereafter. All she knew was blinding agony, the horror of being unable to breathe, and the air around her turning white hot and as thick as magma. After a few moments, the scalding fire inside her diminished to a throbbing ache. She could no longer move her limbs.

The point of no return, he had said. Yes...the point at which her body could not recover from the damage Carolyn was inflicting upon it. She was only seconds away

from slipping over the edge of forever.

Perhaps only in her mind, she heard her voice whisper, “God...please forgive me. Forgive me my trespasses....”

Then she felt herself slipping to the floor. The back of her head struck the edge of Petofi’s desk, but the jarring *thud* barely registered in her brain. Through a crimson veil, she saw Mathis’s legs moving away from her, toward the door; he had released her. No matter, as far as Petofi was concerned. She could not possibly have risen on her own. At first she thought they must have mistaken her for dead, that they were now simply going to forget her and continue with Petofi’s twisted scheme to enslave Quentin’s body. Then she realized that her chest was not rising and falling; nor could she move a single voluntary muscle. If her heart were still beating, she could no longer detect it.

But consciousness had not fully departed.

She had called God’s name. Perhaps for the first time in all earnestness.

Am I...am I actually dead?

For untold eons, she lay unmoving, unfeeling. Not only had the pain left her—*all sensation* had left her. Complete silence in her ears; no voices, no movement, not even the ticking of a clock. Cold began to replace the heat that had enveloped her entire body.

But then...with a lurch and a gasp, her chest heaved. Cool, refreshing air entered her lungs. Suddenly her heart was pounding in her ears, and her throat burned as if she had swallowed acid.

I am alive!

But only barely.

What is happening?

As if from a vast distance, she heard Mathis’s voice, “Did you see him? At the window.”

“Yes, I did,” Petofi growled. “Go after him. He must not get away.”

“Do not fear,” Mathis said. “I shall bring him to you in a moment.”

What was he saying? Whom did he mean?

Little by little, sensation began returning to Julia’s numb arms and legs. And she wished it would not, for her nerves had been flayed, and they screamed in protest when she tried to slightly shift her arm. Rolling her eyes upward, she saw Carolyn staring blankly at her, unmoving, no longer the puppet of a merciless master but a vacant, soulless void waiting to be filled.

Julia managed to turn her head slightly to the right. Mathis was nowhere to be seen; apparently he had exited in a hurry. But she could see Petofi, holding his right

hand to his chest, cradling it with his left arm; a thin trickle of blood stained his immaculate black suit. Of her he appeared quite heedless, showing no more concern for her condition than he would for a dying insect. But his ruined face was haggard and drawn. Something had happened to thwart his plan, and he was troubled.

Then whatever it was, it was a good thing.

Or so she thought until she heard a thumping sound just outside the door, and a high-pitched but weak voice crying out in protest. A moment later the door opened, and Mathis stepped inside, dragging a much smaller figure with him, bundled in a heavy winter jacket and snow-covered boots.

“David,” Julia managed to croak, horrified at the sight of him in Mathis’s clutches. “Oh, my God, David!”

“Julia!” the boy cried, his eyes widening at the sight of her on the floor. “Tell me what’s happening? Why are they doing this to us?”

“David, what are you doing here?” Julia could barely hear her own voice.

“Yes, David,” came Petofi’s viper-like voice. “Please tell me why you have come. I don’t recall offering you an invitation.”

David glared at the old man spitefully. “I know you are doing something to harm my family. I don’t mean to let you get away it.”

Petofi stared at him in apparent disbelief for several moments. And then the lopsided skull tipped back and the gash of a mouth opened to release a gurgle of harsh laughter. “Such a brave young lad. Truly, you take after your distant relative, whom you admire so much. But David, if you had any idea about your dear cousin Quentin’s true nature, you might have very different ideas in mind. You might, perhaps, look upon him with more terror than you look upon me.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” David said, his shaky voice and flitting eyes belying his bravado. His gaze fell upon Julia. “Dr. Hoffman, I heard a shot. Are you injured?”

“I...I’m not shot,” she whispered. She tried to pull herself to a sitting position, but even that effort was too much for her. “You shouldn’t have come here, David.”

Petofi laughed sharply. “No. That’s not so. David, I believe your timing was actually quite propitious.” Julia heard the shuffle of his feet as he approached her. “Perhaps, Dr. Hoffman, you will wish to rethink your denial of my request for information.”

A terrible thought began to form in her mind, and now she actually was able to lift her throbbing head and prop herself on one elbow. “Let him go,” she hissed weakly. “He is innocent. He has nothing whatsoever to do with this.”

Petofi’s eyes gleamed madly behind the spectacles. “On the contrary, Dr. Hoffman,” he said, his voice tinged with ice. “He has everything to do with this. He is

a Collins.”

Mathis dragged the struggling boy toward Carolyn, and her eyes briefly flashed at the sight of him. Perhaps, if only for a moment, her face lapsed into an expression of fear and hatred of her captors. Then Petofi stepped in front of Julia, obscuring her view of the others.

“Carolyn,” came his steely voice. “I want you to take your young cousin in your loving embrace. And you are to hold him until I tell you that your job is finished. Is that quite clear?”

After an endless time, her weak voice came back: “Yes.”

“And now, Dr. Hoffman. This is what your foolishness has led to. The taking of yet another ‘innocent’ life, as you so aptly put it. I trust your eternal sleep—which is still soon to come—will be quite untroubled.”

“No,” she moaned, trying to rise and again failing miserably. Her forehead struck the floor with a painful crack. “No, Count Petofi. Do not harm him. Please.”

“Dr. Hoffman, what would you offer me to spare the lad?”

“Please...you can have me. Just let him go.”

“Would you exchange the boy’s life for that of Quentin Collins?”

“Count Petofi...”

“Carolyn, place your hands around the boy’s throat.”

“No, no, no...”

“What would you offer, Dr. Hoffman?”

Julia’s voice was failing. Her breath had once again caught in her lungs, this time with fear and horror. Struggling to form the words, she whispered, “The portrait.”

“Again?”

“I...I will give you the portrait.”

Count Petofi stepped away from her, so that she could now see Carolyn and David. Mathis was still holding him, presenting him to Carolyn like a gift. Her hands were raised before her, only inches from closing on David’s throat.

Her eyes were filled with tears.

“There,” Petofi said, giving Julia a chilling look of satisfaction. “That was not so difficult, was it?”

Chapter 16

As if in a dream, Carolyn saw the old man called Petofi draw himself up before her, motioning with one hand for her to move away from her young cousin. His other hand, covered by a ripped leather glove, hung like a broken claw from the curled, misshapen arm, dripping black blood onto the dull oriental carpet. Only occasionally could she hear anyone's voice, and that was when Petofi spoke directly to her. Most of the time, strange piping music filled her ears, sometimes lulling her into a state of dazed tranquility, other times jolting her into a near-panicked frenzy with a sudden cacophonous burst of sound.

She obediently stepped away from David, for the painful aural assaults mainly came whenever she attempted to resist the old man's will. Her senses seemed terribly confused, and she could not quite understand the reasons for the things she was being instructed to do. At one point, she had recognized Julia Hoffman, and she vaguely recalled placing her hands on the doctor's arm and neck. Something about that simple act seemed so very *wrong*, although she could not remember exactly what. And it was far better to submit unquestioningly to Petofi's wishes than face the onslaught of sound that nearly shattered her mind when she refused.

The thought that kept returning to her was how much she longed for Barnabas. She wanted to be in his arms, to feel his body wrapping her in his protective embrace, to feel his tender lips upon her skin. If he would come to her, she would feel safe, and the weird music would leave her in peace, and maybe she would remember everything she was supposed to remember.

Why can't I remember?

A sharp croaking sound came from behind her, and she slowly turned around to look for its source, *almost* knowing what she would see. Yes, there it was. A ghastly, rat-shaped thing the color of curdled milk with an array of huge, chitinous legs splayed around it at odd angles. It stood upon a marble pedestal like a bizarre sculpture on display, motionless except for the occasional shifting of a leg or barbed chelicera. Its pair of gleaming amber eyes looked as lifeless as bubbles of smoked glass, but at the same time strangely cognizant, unsettlingly aware—and critical—of her every move.

None of the others in the room appeared to perceive its presence, and Carolyn was fairly certain that she was the only one—except perhaps for Petofi—who could see it. Where it came from or what it wanted she did not know, but she was certain it played some part in the muddling of her senses; very likely it was also responsible for the piping music that continued to weave in and out of her brain like a spider spinning

silk.

At the moment—against all logic that she was accustomed to—she felt no fear of it, although she did have vague visions of some terrible experience in which it must have played a role. She also knew that it *would* harm her if she did not continue to obey that wizened old man’s commands.

If only Barnabas were here.

A low voice like a mellow bell rang in her head, urging her to keep focusing on Barnabas, to visualize his face, to imagine his touch on her skin. The pealing music lowered to a soothing, benign drone as her mind followed this course, and, very briefly, Petofi turned to her and nodded, as if by holding Barnabas in her thoughts she were pleasing him.

She did not care about pleasing Petofi. But she did care about keeping the painful spikes of noise out of her head. So she did as he desired.

After a time, she forgot all about the multi-legged horror that regarded her with its dead but cunning eyes, the flutelike harmonies drifting out of the ether, the hideous mien of the scarred human monster with the ravaged magical hand. Every ounce of energy within her she devoted to transmitting her desire for Barnabas to rescue her from the netherworld in which she floundered.

Good, came a distant, rasping voice. Keep calling him, Carolyn. He cannot rise while daylight remains. But as soon as the sun sets, he will hear you, and he will come. Keep calling him to you. He will not be able to resist.

I don’t want him to resist, she thought. If he comes to me, all will be well again. I know it will.

And so it seemed to her that eons passed as her desire for him escalated from vague longing to raging desire, burning hotter and hotter with each passing minute. Although she was unaware of it, the more she pleaded to the heavens for Barnabas to come, the louder and more vigorous the musical piping became. Streams of warbling notes gathered like the voices of whippoorwills into rhythmic layers, building one upon another, intermingling in a complex symphony of inhuman sound that both reflected and shaped the direction of her mental appeals.

But now and again, she sensed emanations of helplessness from somewhere nearby, and once, in a moment of lucidity, she saw David, gagged and bound to a wooden chair in one corner of the room, his eyes begging her to break free of the baffling paralysis that held her, to help him escape his painful bonds.

And Julia Hoffman...she lay half-propped in a plush chair in front of Petofi’s great desk, her complexion pale, her eyes almost as dead as the monstrous *Xianges*’s. Once, Julia’s eyes flickered her way, and for a second they radiated both anger and

forgiveness—and perhaps even hope.

But Carolyn could not maintain her grip on that world to which she had once belonged. The music pulled her back into the foggy recesses of the *Xianges*'s realm and turned her thoughts again solely to Barnabas. Julia seemed to sense the passing of Carolyn's soul into the world of darkness, and the hope that had flickered in her soul vanished.

Carolyn did not—*could not*—care.

The sun had not yet set and, until it did, she must continue to focus on Barnabas, to let him know how much she needed him.

The eyes of the arachnid watched her, empty, cold, and unfeeling.

The eyes of Count Petofi watched her with overt scheming and mounting jubilation.

Chapter 17

Once a man of imposing stature and unexcelled prowess in the black arts, Count Andreas Petofi had lived far longer than any mortal man; longer even than Quentin Collins, whose ever-youthful eyes had witnessed the passing of more than a century. Indeed, it was Petofi himself who, in the year 1897, had imbued supernatural potency into the brush of artist Charles Delaware Tate, whose magic-charged portrait of Quentin Collins not only prolonged the subject's life but protected him from the ravages of the werewolf curse. But Petofi had hardly granted these gifts to Quentin for altruistic reasons. Indeed, in characteristic, self-serving fashion, his ulterior motive had been to use the younger man's body as a receptacle for his own life force, or spirit, while imprisoning Quentin's in his own deteriorating shell. His reasons had been manifold, but first and foremost was his desire to escape a band of gypsies who sought to kill him for reneging on a bargain.

Like Quentin Collins, Count Petofi had once suffered the curse of the werewolf. The gypsies, through their own brand of powerful magic, had cured him of his affliction—but at the cost of his right hand, the very seat of his supernatural power. Enraged by the gypsies' hubris, Petofi had stolen his own mummified hand and, by means of the black arts, reattached it to his arm. But in his betrayal of the gypsies, he had ensured their everlasting hatred and desire for vengeance. By swapping bodies with Quentin Collins, Petofi planned to throw them off his trail as well as outfit himself with a young, powerful physique that—because of the portrait—would neither grow old nor suffer the effects of Magda Rakosi's monstrous curse. And then, using the mystical secrets of time travel—the possibilities of which had been proven by Barnabas Collins and Julia Hoffman, who had traveled back from their own time in attempt to avert a series of tragedies that would otherwise result from the events of 1897—Petofi intended to escape into the future, safe from any possibility of being discovered by the murderous gypsies.

However, his plans thwarted by Barnabas and Julia's efforts, Petofi had lost his hold on Quentin's body and in the end was presumed dead—by all indications burned alive in a raging fire. And for all the following years, Collinwood had been free of his evil influence.

But a mere fire could hardly spell the end of a man such as Petofi. Although the blaze ruined his body and further blackened his already poisoned mind, his strength of will kept him alive, and for untold years, he labored tirelessly to restore himself to the point that he might yet make his enemies pay a dreadful price for having interfered

with his affairs.

Now, physically debilitated and embittered beyond the understanding of ordinary mortals, Count Petofi devoted his every energy to discovering the secret of traversing years in the blink of an eye. Sadly for him, the answers remained elusive. But his studies had taught him new and frightening truths, and while he never succeeded in opening doors to past and future years, he did discover paths to distant and unimaginable physical *realms*. Such dimensions—like the horrifying world of the *Xianges*—he learned to reach by utilizing certain mathematical formulae, such as those developed by Keziah Mason, who had lived long before his own birth. Once he had mastered the process of reaching those places, he began devising methods of manipulating them and, in so doing, fashioned what he became fond of calling the *Labyrinth*: an endless maze of pathways that led from one chaotic dimension to another, riddled with hidden doors that only he could open. Together with his most brilliant pupil, the young Philippe Mathis, Petofi fashioned the equivalent of the Christian concept of Hell—a place of eternal darkness, solitude, and suffering—specifically and solely for the individual whom he had catastrophically failed to enchain:

Quentin Collins.

And now, with Quentin imprisoned and Julia Hoffman at his mercy, he stood on the verge of gaining everything he wanted. All he awaited now was the arrival of the last individual upon whom he intended to exact revenge, and the hour for it was fast approaching: the moment when the sun set and Barnabas Collins would rise from his coffin, his hunger insatiable, his body and mind unable to resist the summons that even now Carolyn Stoddard was psychically transmitting to him. As his victim, she was telepathically linked to him, and—many days earlier, even before the Collins family was aware of his arrival—Petofi had seen to it that Barnabas *would* prey upon her.

Very soon now, Petofi would once and for all inhabit the physical body he had so long desired; Julia Hoffman and Barnabas Collins would be destroyed; and Quentin Collin's very essence would be doomed to wander—lost, horrified, and alone—for all eternity in Petofi's Labyrinth of Souls.

* * * * *

Only a small portion of Julia's strength had returned, and she could still hardly so much as lift a finger. Petofi had not even bothered to tie her to the chair, knowing that, even if she should have opportunity to escape, she would be unable to move under her own power. Her body was still racked with pain, and her vision was so

blurry that she could make out only dim shapes in the waning light through window. She had lost all perception of time; it was obviously late in the day, but for all she knew, it could have been the middle of the night or even the next morning.

David was bound, completely immobile, in an uncomfortable wooden chair in one corner of the room. His eyes occasionally flicked toward hers, searching in vain for some sign of reassurance. Mostly, though, he simply kept his eyes closed and surreptitiously tried to loosen the knots in the coarse twine that held him securely in place. His efforts were no more effective than Julia's feeble attempts to comfort him. Near the pedestal upon which the carapace of the *Xianges* had once rested, Carolyn still stood as motionless as a department-store mannequin, her eyes dull and vacant, perhaps unable to view anything other than jumbled visions within her own tortured mind, which Julia suspected must be as trapped within that body as she was in her pain. She knew that Petofi was waiting for sunset, and that he somehow anticipated Barnabas's arrival; indeed, he seemed to *desire* Barnabas's coming.

Somehow she must protect him. It was her obligation...and her greatest desire.

A short time ago, Mathis had appeared before her, holding Quentin's portrait up to her eyes like a cruel reminder of her betrayal. She could almost smell the corruption of the desiccated body and feel the contempt that flowed from the hollow sockets in the cracked, brown skull. To save David's life, she had broken down and told Petofi exactly where to find this most priceless of treasures, realizing at the last that she had far from secured David's freedom. Petofi would never let him go. Indeed, the demented Count would simply murder every remaining member of the Collins family, and finally—in Quentin's body—install himself as the master of the estate, his desires fulfilled, his future secured. Anyone who might be the wiser would be eliminated—Mathis included. But Julia knew that attempting to appeal to Petofi's servant would be a waste of her energy. The young fool was hopelessly devoted to his master, and certainly addicted to the power with which he had been endowed.

Mathis had since disappeared with the painting, but Julia had no idea where he had gone. Now Petofi simply sat at his great desk and regarded the tableau in his study with unbridled pleasure. Summoning as much of her energy as she could spare to speak, she finally said to him, "Where has Mathis gone?"

"To ensure that the final preparations are complete. It will not be long before your precious Barnabas arrives. And then we may proceed."

"What makes you so certain he will come here?"

"Dr. Hoffman, I did not commence this venture without some measure of forethought." He opened a drawer of the desk, withdrew a pair of cloth bundles, and placed them gently on the desktop before him. "You will be amused at the simplicity

with which I orchestrated events before I ever introduced myself to you as Dr. Maitland Karswell. Do you recall, shortly before Quentin's arrival, that Barnabas Collins began to show signs of uncontrollable bloodlust? Over the years, I have not only mastered certain archaic formulae to alter the fabric of physical space as you know it; I have also spent some little time devising methods by which I could affect the inclinations of one who suffers the curse of vampirism. Of course, in this area I am merely a dilettante. You, I am sure, in your long experience with Barnabas have learned far more than I ever could. Nonetheless, given my special...advantages...in the realm of the black arts, I have sufficiently achieved my aim: to bring Barnabas and Carolyn together so that his demise might be initiated by a member of his own family. Who better than his own young cousin, upon whom he has fed in the past?"

"How—how could you know these things? And how could you affect his very nature?"

"Dr. Hoffman, you yourself are quite familiar with the process of hypnosis. And as you know, I have more than a passing acquaintance with its practice. I simply introduced myself to the one who knows Barnabas Collins best. The one who sees to his needs, day after day."

"Willie!" Julia gasped.

"Yes, Dr. Hoffman. Willie Loomis. Of course, he has no recollection of what he has done. And he shall not until it is all over. And then, like the unfortunate Carolyn Stoddard, the memory of his betrayal shall return to him and destroy him."

"My God," she whispered as hot tears began to burn in her eyes. "Tell me what you have done. Tell me!"

Petofi's single articulate hand gently unwrapped one of the cloth bundles on his desk, and from it he carefully plucked a featherlike cluster of black hairs, mingled with several strands of gold. "A few carefully selected locks, clipped as he slept in his coffin. Unnoticeable, but immensely valuable to an individual with the requisite knowledge. Procuring a small amount of Carolyn's hair was infinitely easier. All I needed were some strands from her hairbrush, which Mathis acquired by...clandestine...means. The same means by which Carolyn has on more than occasion mysteriously 'vanished.'"

"And by now Elizabeth will have notified the sheriff. With Carolyn and David missing—not to mention Quentin and myself—surely, this house will be the first place they will come looking."

"Come now, Dr. Hoffman. Do you think I would not see to such a small but necessary detail?"

Julia gaped at him in horror. "Surely, you have not...."

Petofi shook his head. “I have not killed Elizabeth Collins Stoddard. Not yet. She and the devoted Mrs. Johnson are simply enjoying an afternoon of peaceful, uninterrupted sleep. As will anyone who enters the doors of Collinwood, at least until the evening’s schedule is complete.”

Julia could not help but breathe a sigh of relief. As long as Elizabeth—and Roger—remained alive, she could not give up hope.

But then she noticed that Petofi’s eyes were riveted on her, and she swallowed hard, suddenly stricken by the fear that he was weighing her for the kill. She tried to avert her eyes, but he held them with irresistible authority. At last he said in a low voice, “You must be curious about how Barnabas Collins is to meet his end. As you know, there are few foolproof methods to destroy a vampire. But one of them is fire. Most appropriate, I believe, when you consider the damage that fire caused to my own body.” Then, loudly, he called, “Carolyn, come here.”

A marionette drawn by the puppet-master’s hand, Carolyn slowly glided toward Petofi’s desk and at his silent command held out one hand to him. His good hand rose, now gripping a small, glittering knife, which he must have taken from his desk drawer. Julia’s stomach fluttered as the old man drew a long cut across Carolyn’s palm. She did not so much as flinch as a thin streamer of blood began to dribble down her hand toward her wrist. Now Petofi placed the knife on his desktop, took hold of Carolyn’s hand, and guided it slowly toward the bundle of cloth that contained Barnabas’s hair.

“You have personally felt the devastating effects of Carolyn’s touch. Now witness what her blood will do when Barnabas feeds upon her—as he inevitably must.”

Petofi tipped her hand, pouring several drops of blood into the cloth.

Immediately upon contact with Barnabas’s hair, a plume of smoke rose like a gray snake. And a second later, with a dull *whump*, the cloth burst into flame, vaporizing into nothingness almost instantly.

Behind the spectacles, Petofi’s bulbous eyes blazed with satisfaction.

“You will bear witness to Barnabas Collins’s final predation. All too closely, I’m afraid.” With a wave of his hand, he dismissed Carolyn, who returned to her corner to stand as silently as a statue.

Barely able to breathe, her eyes burning with tears, Julia said, “If you wish to destroy Barnabas, there are far less complex ways.”

“But none so satisfying, my dear doctor. In all things, there are numerous means to a desired end. If an artist used the same approach to render every composition, what a deadly dull body of work he would produce. By that same token, I have employed an equally novel technique to bring about Quentin’s final downfall. As you will recall, all

those many years ago—although they will seem far less to you than they do to me—I had ample opportunity to secure any personal items I wished from Quentin Collins. Given my intimate, though unfortunately transitory contact with his person, I was in a unique position, to say the least.” Petofi chuckled dryly. “Naturally, once my spirit inhabited his body, I had no inkling that our respective positions would ever be reversed. However, one must always be prepared for any contingency, so I had the foresight to collect a few noteworthy items, although I confess I had hoped never to need them.”

From the second bundle of cloth, Petofi took several locks of black hair; a single black button; and a plain, gold ring. “Given the dire circumstances Quentin faced once his spirit returned to its rightful body in 1897, he was too preoccupied to notice the absence of such insignificant trinkets as these. Insignificant to *him*, I might add, but as vital to me as if I possessed his very heart. Now, having thought to provide myself with *this*,” he said, holding up a small, black ceramic vial, sealed with cork and red wax, “is a detail I am particularly proud of. Inside this vial, I have preserved a small quantity of Quentin’s blood. With it, I have been able to conduct a number of...experiments, if you will...on his constitution. I have recently conjured certain forces to simulate the effect of the full moon on his blood—to test both its effect upon his body and the efficacy of the portrait, you understand. But as an additional benefit, each time I have done this, Quentin has suffered horribly—and come to believe that the portrait is losing its effectiveness. Quite the contrary. Each time the werewolf curse takes Quentin in its grip, the power of the portrait is renewed. You would liken it to recharging a battery. Thus my own longevity in his physical form is assured.”

“That’s what you meant when you said the portrait was growing stronger,” Julia whispered, her heart sinking deeper and deeper into despair. “I must give you credit, Count Petofi. Your scheming has been nothing less than thorough.”

“I might take exception to so banal a term as ‘scheming.’ But I accept your compliment in the spirit it was intended.” Petofi offered her a sardonic grin. Then he glanced at the window. “Well. I see that the hour of destiny is nearly upon us. There is little left to prepare now except for us to remove ourselves to the station I have selected for the evening’s culminating activities.” He called, “Mathis!”

A second later, the muscular young man appeared in the doorway. Without waiting for instructions, he moved deliberately toward Julia and easily swept her from the chair into his arms, allowing her not even a moment to protest. The sudden shift in her position sent a terrific jolt of pain through her body, and she could not stifle the agonized gasp that burst from her lips.

As Mathis carried her toward the door, she called back weakly, “Count

Petofi...whatever you intend to do now...please...leave David out of it.”

Petofi’s smoke-shaded eyes gazed at her contemptively. “The lad’s time has not yet come. The events that are soon to follow are not for his eyes. He shall remain my prisoner until his own appointed hour. Now. Let us delay no further. Come, Carolyn.”

The young blonde fell in behind Mathis as he carried Julia through the drawing room and into a hall that led to the back of the house. There, an open door awaited them, and Mathis stepped through it into darkness, slowly descending the stone staircase into the dank cellar of the old Swift house with Julia draped in his arms like an empty dress. From below, she could hear the faint crackle of flames, and pale washes of gold roiled on the gray, mildewed walls like dancing spirits, bereft of any warmth. As Mathis neared the bottom, a musty odor filled Julia’s nostrils: the warm, sour smell of ancient earth, as if the floor of the cellar had been churned up to expose the lairs of gigantic, burrowing worms. Farther in the black, claustrophobic space beneath the house, she saw a huge, stone-trimmed fireplace, in which a roaring fire sent tongues of flame high into its chimney; yet the encompassing darkness seemed to swallow the light, for only a small island of glowing warmth surrounded the great stone hearth. But as her eyes adjusted, she made out the ghastly portrait of Quentin Collins resting on a tall easel, facing the licking tongues of flame.

From behind the portrait, she thought she detected a faint, chilly draft. Finally, as her eyes began to discern details in the surrounding sea of blackness, she realized that an archway had been cut into the rough stone wall, wider than the span of a man’s arms and rising almost to the ceiling. As she peered into the seemingly endless emptiness, she imagined that the passage continued far beyond the three dimensions of space that bounded the universe that she, as a rational human being, understood and accepted as reality. Something about the terrible maw spoke of sheer *alienness*, of strange curves and angles that defied any conventional geometric or mathematical regularity. Briefly, she thought she heard a strange, muted piping sound coming from the terrible mouth, but the crackling of the fire drowned out all other sounds.

Except for one: a sudden, sharp chirping sound that turned Julia’s blood to ice water.

As Mathis lowered her body to a waiting stone dais on one side of the fireplace, she turned her head, and her eyes fell upon the most horrifying sight her brain could have ever concocted: a gigantic, arthropodic creature perched atop a tall stone pedestal, its multiple-jointed legs sprawled at asymmetrical angles, easily spanning a full yard. Its amber, glistening eyes reflected the firelight like living crystal balls, and its huge, rat-like body pulsed grotesquely as it breathed the alien air. Surely, it was

the living occupant of the discarded carapace she had previously seen, but that empty shell had conveyed none of the true malice that surrounded the monster like a thick, reeking mist. A pair of foot-long chelicera slowly spread and closed in a rhythmic, repetitive action that Julia interpreted as an overt threat directed at her. A few moments later, as Carolyn slowly made her way into the firelight, the arthropod became agitated, its legs clattering noisily up and down, its body scraping back and forth against its pedestal with the sound of sandpaper on stone. Then, to Julia's utter disgust, Carolyn lowered her bleeding hand and placed it on the thing's thorny shell. A thin trickle of blood dribbled onto its pale, milky exoskeleton, and immediately the thing exulted, issuing a long, whistling screech from whatever unseen organ produced its voice.

"Oh, my God," Julia whispered, barely able to feel the cold stone that pressed against her back. The blazing fire...the portrait...the gaping portal to unknown spaces beyond space...the monstrous thing on the pedestal...all these elements combined to overwhelm her mind, destroying her sense of balance, her very sanity. In this surreal darkness, the hopelessness she had felt earlier—the certainty that she was going to die—paled beneath the threat of the horrors that Count Petofi had promised to unleash upon the people who meant the most to her. Whom she truly loved.

"And so, here we are," Petofi said, moving to stand before the fire. "For a century I have been forced to languish in this wretched flesh; to bide my time; to wait until all elements could come together in perfect harmony. Now they have, and my moment is at hand."

Mathis silently went to the black archway and positioned himself next to it like a sentry. Petofi then turned to the passage and softly said, "Quentin Collins. It is time. Come forth. Enter the world of the living that you know for the last time. And despair in the knowledge of what shall befall you—and all who bear the accursed name of *Collins*."

For several seconds, nothing seemed to happen. But then, Julia made out a vague figure, moving slowly in the darkness like a floating wraith. Finally, from the black opening, Quentin stepped into the firelight, his face pale, his eyes wide and incognizant. *The horrors he must have seen*, Julia thought, realizing that he appeared to be in shock. He shuffled toward the fireplace like a moth to flame, and only when he had stood in its crackling warmth for a full minute or more did he draw himself up and turn to face the others in the room.

"Julia," he said, as his eyes fell upon her prone figure. "My God, Julia." He looked at Petofi. "You're responsible for this. You're going to pay for what you've done."

Petofi's maimed, gloved hand rose, supported by his one good hand. "I shall get no less than I deserve," the old man whispered. "And so, my dear Quentin, shall you."

Quentin took one threatening step toward the Count, but then he froze as if he had run into a huge, clinging silk web. Julia shuddered. *The hand of Count Petofi possessed its terrible power still!*

"Before your final moments, Quentin Collins, you will witness the destruction of all those you hold dear. Now, remain where you are until you are commanded." In a soft voice, Petofi added, "Have patience, dear boy. You do not have long to wait."

The moment seemed frozen in time, the darkness heavy with an oppressive silence. Julia could no longer even hear the crackling of the fire; only the low, rapid thumping of her heart in her chest.

And then her heart skipped a beat.

Above, inside the house, someone was moving. And a few seconds later, she heard *his* distinctive footsteps on the stone stairs that led down into the dark pit, moving closer, tentative but steady. As they drew nearer, she turned her head toward him, but a broad stone column blocked her view. Then, with a low, sinister laugh, Count Petofi's voice sliced through the darkness, "Good evening, Barnabas Collins. You have arrived precisely on schedule—at the defining moment for the Collins family as you know it. I have anticipated this event for a long, long time...even by your standards.

"I trust you will believe me when I tell you how very, *very* wonderful it is to see you again."

Chapter 18

The ache in his head and the stiffness of his limbs had worsened the moment he caught sight of the old man standing before the great hearth: a living skeleton backlit by crimson flames. Petofi's blazing, hypnotic eyes prevented him from moving, but his rigid muscles twitched uncontrollably, sending daggers of pain into his pelvis and shoulders. His body felt chilled after his unspeakable journey through the netherworld of the Labyrinth, and only the thought of his family being cruelly sacrificed horrified him more than the prospect of being consigned to it again—"for eternity," in the words of the revenge-crazed count.

He tried to avert his eyes, and when—after a hellish effort—he succeeded, they fell upon his cousin Barnabas, standing similarly frozen next to the seductively smiling Carolyn Stoddard, and Julia Hoffman, lying prone on a raised bed of stone, just at the edge of the firelight. But beyond the trio, something pale was moving slowly back and forth with a rough scraping sound, and when he finally made out the dim shape of the multi-legged monster that had turned Carolyn into a mindless but lethal puppet, his mind nearly snapped beneath an onslaught of horror and fury.

"Quentin Collins," came the harsh, rasping voice of Count Petofi, drawing his eyes back to the figure before the fire. "Before your soul's final moments on this earth, your immortal shell shall suffer one last time—and in so doing insure my own well-being when I take it for my own." The old man raised his damaged but still powerful hand and pointed to the grotesque portrait, the features of which seemed to quaver and swirl eerily in the flickering firelight. Then in his good hand he produced a small, glittering object, which he held out for Quentin's inspection. "You will no doubt have forgotten this particular trinket, so let me refresh your memory. It once adorned your right ring finger—on 'special occasions,' one might say; particularly when you wished to flagrantly advertise your wealth and charm to some impressionable young 19th-century woman. During the time when your body all-too-briefly served as the host for my own vital essence, I tucked it away for safekeeping. And I have guarded it jealously over this past century, so that it might be employed a final time on this very night."

Petofi carefully placed the ring in the palm of his mummified hand and then slowly extended it before the roiling flames. As the gold band caught the firelight, it seemed to absorb the light, its contours brightening with a supernal glow; and as Petofi held it closer to the fire, the brilliant gold intensified to white, finally gleaming in his hand like a miniature moon in a fiery, twilight sky.

Pain gripped Quentin's heart like a vise, and he nearly doubled over as his entire body spasmed. He dropped to his knees, his eyes rolling upward to seek Petofi's. They were alight with mad satisfaction, and through his agony, Quentin felt a tremor of sheer hopelessness. He could not break the hypnotic spell with which those shining pupils bound him. More than life itself, he wanted to free himself simply so that his hands might encircle the scrawny throat and bring to Petofi the terrible death he deserved. If he could only make his arms obey his own commands!

But now the muscular aches that he knew foreshadowed the transformation began to set in—through his arms and legs, and down his back. Somehow Petofi had mastered a way of bringing him to the very brink, and only the power of the portrait halted the full metamorphosis. Now, he knew, Petofi was putting him through this only for spite, to bring him to the apex of physical suffering before his body was no longer his.

“God,” he groaned through clenched teeth. “Petofi, stop. Stop it.”

“How reassuring to know that you are capable of begging,” Petofi's voice rasped. “But I'm afraid I shall have to refuse you. For now I intend to take your agony to entirely new heights. This will be the final time your body ever undergoes the transmutation; but the pure energy of the full moons you *would* see in your extended life—for hundreds of years to come—is now being channeled through your body and into this painting. By the time your soul is separated from this envelope of flesh, you shall welcome it.” The old man chuckled. “At least until you understand that to which your essence has been consigned.”

“No,” Quentin whispered. “God, no.”

Petofi leaned close to him. “All these years I have been trapped in this helpless, withered, *living* corpse. Tortured and maimed by gypsies. Burned by fire. And then victimized by every human frailty and infirmity the mind can imagine—year after year after year. Yet this body does not die. Can you imagine *my* suffering, Quentin? How else shall you atone for my years of unbearable agony—for which you and your family are responsible? What do you expect of me, Quentin Collins? Mercy? Do you believe I could be capable of offering it after the existence *you* have forced upon me?”

“I—I had nothing to do with your suffering, Petofi,” Quentin hissed, his jaws nearly locked in pain. “You...you brought it on yourself.”

“It was *your* audacity those many years ago to stand in the way of designs that might never have involved you—or your family. And now those deeds have returned to you, as it was inevitable that they must.”

Quentin managed to give Petofi a long, defiant glance. “Your memory is distorted, Count Petofi. Or is it that you actually *believe* your own lies now?”

“What I believe is that my time to transcend this wretched existence is at hand. And that you are soon to step across the threshold of infinity into your own personal hell—which *I* have wrought. And now, Quentin...behold the power. Behold the beast within you now taking form in the work of Charles Delaware Tate.”

Quentin could not avoid turning his eyes toward the painting. And his stomach lurched at the sight of the indescribable *thing* visibly assuming shape in the pigment on the canvas. Blacker than the abyss of outer space, with eyes hotter than twin suns it gazed back at him; a figure larger and more *evil* than anything he had ever witnessed.

Or felt.

His guts heaved as if bolts of electricity had been unleashed upon him, and the muscles of his arms went rigid, locking themselves in the shape of a cross in front of his chest. He pitched sideways, falling stiffly to the floor, unable to keep his head from cracking against the solid stone. His legs twitched uncontrollably now, and the muscles in his shoulders clenched and unclenched in involuntary rhythm. Dimly, he saw that the flesh of his hands was discolored, his nails unnaturally long.

His body was trying to change—more painfully than it ever had before.

Unable to stop himself, he screamed. A long, agonized howl that, even to his ears, no longer seemed human.

Petofi now faced the hearth and, with an awkward movement of his hand, tossed the ring into the fire, a thin smile evident on his lipless mouth. “This shall take some time, Quentin. But for me there is no deficit of time.” He finally turned, regarded the others in the room for several moments, and then took several steps toward Barnabas and Carolyn. Pointing at Quentin’s writhing form, he said, “And now look upon the fate of those who would oppose Petofi...for your own fate is very soon to come. I shall relish the sight of your body, Barnabas Collins, becoming a living pyre at the first taste of her blood.”

Barnabas glared spitefully at Petofi and tried to lift a hand—but the eldritch power restraining him was too great even for his will. He grimaced in frustration. “You have not succeeded yet, Count Petofi. And every moment that we still live, your future is far from certain.”

“You are accustomed to having the upper hand, are you not, Barnabas? Yes, it is *you* who have always wielded power over others. How does it feel to be subjugated by a force beyond the grasp of your feeble intellect? To be deprived of control of your body—undead though it might be?”

“Your powers have grown strong indeed,” Barnabas said softly. “But they are not absolute. Even if you succeed, you will always have enemies in this world. Just as when we first met, your existence will never amount to anything more than a continual

retreat. Perhaps you are actually the creature to be pitied.”

Petofi’s mouth opened in a hoarse laugh. “To think such words could come from a monster who sleeps in a coffin by day, forced to live a lie night after night, unable to share love even with members of his own family. I daresay that such words have previously been directed at *you*, Barnabas Collins. I should hope for something more original from a being as...experienced...as yourself.

Julia’s voice floated out of the darkness: “He is far more human than you, Count Petofi. His soul is beyond the understanding of a creature as...*empty*...as you.”

Petofi’s face became a mask of exaggerated sadness. “Yours is such a tragedy, Dr. Hoffman. Had you not taken it upon yourself to interfere in my affairs, we might be sharing stimulating conversation over tea on pleasant afternoons. I have always admired your highly developed, intuitive mind—although in this case, your intuition has only served to put us at cross-purposes. Truly a shame, my dear doctor. After Carolyn has extinguished your life, I believe I shall actually miss you.”

“You have misspoken,” Julia said softly. “That would require some measure of human feeling. For you, I don’t believe that is possible.”

Petofi went to stand next to Julia, though his eyes darted anxiously toward the pale, quivering horror on the pedestal behind Carolyn. “You misjudged me in the beginning and continue to do so,” he said in a low voice. “What would you say if I were to offer you life? If I said I would forgive your trespasses against me, how would you respond? Would you show gratitude?”

“Not for myself. Only if you were to...free the others.”

“Fascinating. So...would you be willing to die so that your friends might live?”

Julia shuddered visibly. But after a moment, she said, “Yes. Yes I would.”

“Most fascinating,” Petofi repeated. “And again, tragic. Freeing your friends is outside the realm of possibilities. But I would consider sparing you under certain conditions.”

“And those would be...?”

Petofi smiled, having discerned the tiny glimmer of hope in Julia’s eyes. “All I would require is a token of your good faith—that you would never again cross my path with malice intended.” He cleared his throat deliberately. “Your word would be sufficient. My intuition assures me that I may trust your word.”

Julia’s face fell.

“Think of it, Julia. You would be able to return to Collinwood, and no one would know that anything is different. That the Quentin Collins who lives there is not what he appears—or more correctly—is *more* than what he appears.”

She shook her head. “I...I would never agree to such conditions. Not to spare my

life.”

Petofi leaned so close to Julia that his face nearly touched hers. “I offer you this chance only once. Do not cling to those whose fates I have otherwise ordained, for with them you will perish. Speak your allegiance to me, and you shall live. Not only live...but exist for hundreds of years. You know that it is within my power.”

“I do,” Julia said, her voice cracking with renewed hopelessness. “And I refuse it. I would offer my life for theirs. That is all I can do.”

Petofi straightened. “But your life is not yours to offer. I already hold it in the palm of my hand.” He held up his broken, mummified hand. “I am aware of your feelings for Barnabas, Dr. Hoffman. I know that his demise will bring you much pain. Prepare yourself now, for his time is at hand.”

“No, Petofi,” Julia groaned. “Don’t do it.”

The old man turned a deaf ear to her and took several slow steps toward Barnabas and Carolyn. In a soft, hypnotic voice, he said to her, “It is time, Carolyn. Bring Barnabas Collins to the end of his vile existence, and be glad that this shall be the final time his inhuman eyes fall upon your throat.” He now held up his hand before Barnabas’s face. “The bloodlust is upon you, Barnabas Collins. You feel it burning in your veins, in the pit of your very soul. You must have her. You must *take* her.”

Before the blazing fire, Quentin lay in a trembling heap, pain shooting like poison arrows through his limbs, his heart, his brain. A roaring in his ears, like a freight train through a tunnel, all but deafened him to the other sounds in the room. But he could hear Petofi’s voice clearly: a low, mesmerizing stream of words, each syllable laden with pure, malevolent *power*. How could anyone refuse the will behind such a voice? Somehow they must, Quentin thought. *They must, or we all face our doom.*

Painfully rolling his head so he could see Barnabas, he tried to speak, to form words that might interrupt the spell that Petofi was effectively weaving. But he could barely breathe, much less utter a comprehensible word. Barnabas’s eyes were hot with desire, and his hands trembled violently as he courageously but vainly attempted to withstand Petofi’s psychic assault. Quentin shifted his focus to Carolyn, who stood before Barnabas with longing eyes, her head slightly cocked to expose her throat to him. The sight of her so helpless, yet so unimaginably *deadly*, nearly shattered his heart. He tried again to speak, to regain control of his heaving lungs, to force his tongue to obey his will. And somehow, between the sound of crashing waves in his ears, he heard his voice utter, “Carolyn...Carolyn...”

For a moment, she hesitated, as if a fly had buzzed past her ear. Then her eyes slowly shifted toward his, and for a brief second, he saw recognition there. Behind her,

the *Xianges* arachnid became distressed, violently thrashing its many legs against the stone, chirping repeatedly like a wounded bird. *Something is happening to it*, Quentin thought. *But what?*

Count Petofi's eyes rolled toward the scuttling monster, his one good fist clenching tensely. "No," he hissed. "You may not withdraw from her yet. Your time has not come!"

Something was going wrong—for Petofi. Barnabas and Carolyn were still frozen in their places, but her eyes had widened with increasing realization that something was very wrong. The renewal of her spirit energized Quentin's own, and once again summoning all his strength, he cried out, "Carolyn!"

Her eyes turned to his. And for the first time in what seemed like eons, he knew that she saw *him*—and understood the dire predicament they all faced.

Barnabas moved. One of his hands rose, took Carolyn by the shoulder, and pushed her away from him. He swung around toward Petofi, but the old man moved with stunning quickness toward the shadows where Julia lay.

Then, two things happened simultaneously. The great *Xianges* monster rocked for a moment on its pedestal and then launched itself straight at Barnabas Collins. And from the darkness behind Carolyn, Mathis appeared, his gloved hands raised to restrain her.

He reached for her, one hand closing on her bicep. But then one of Carolyn's hands thrust upward like a bolt of lightning and closed around Mathis's throat.

Quentin saw the young man's eyes grow suddenly wide, and his face quickly began to darken to the color of charcoal. Smoke began rolling from his skin where Carolyn's fingers clutched him, and he started squirming violently, his mouth opening and emitting a weak, pathetic squeaking sound.

The *Xianges* latched onto Barnabas's shoulders, its forelegs slashing at his face like bullwhips. It screamed with an almost human voice that grew louder and louder, ringing in Quentin's ears like a harsh dirge. But with a quick slash of his own hand, Barnabas dislodged the creature, which fell heavily to the floor with the sound of a dropped watermelon. Then, as if by magic, Barnabas's wolf's-headed walking stick appeared in his hand; he raised it like a club and then brought it slamming down on the pale, squirming creature. The stick made contact with the sickening sound of wood against a flesh, and a glob of green fluid gushed from the creature's abdomen. Barnabas raised the stick and struck again, this time drawing a deafening screech from the monster's unseen voice organ. A third time...and the creature's cephalothorax collapsed beneath the blow, its voice suddenly silenced.

As the monster died, Carolyn staggered and spun, and her hand pulled away

from Mathis's throat. But the young man was now obviously dead, for his eyes bulged ludicrously from blackened sockets, and his tongue hung obscenely from his slack jaw. His body fell heavily to the floor, and a second later, Carolyn sank to her knees, then pitched over, unconscious.

For a few seconds, Count Petofi stood gazing at Barnabas and the fallen Carolyn, uncomprehending, shocked at the suddenness of the inexplicable events. He glanced toward Julia's prostrate figure, and for a second, Quentin thought he was going to reach for her throat. But then he raised his terrible hand, stopping Barnabas in his tracks, and his eyes fell upon Quentin.

"The creature had been too long in this world," Petofi said hoarsely. "I underestimated its ability to survive in our atmosphere. But this is hardly the end, my friends. No, not at all." He took several steps toward Quentin. "Now the game shall end."

The hand rose before Quentin's eyes, seemingly growing larger and larger, and he felt something new happen inside him: a wrenching, tearing sensation, as if his very soul were being ripped forcibly from his body. The agony was exquisite, as if each of his cells were exploding with the energy of a supernova. He arched his back and screamed, and through rapidly blurring eyes, he saw Count Petofi slowly walking toward him.

And for a few seconds, he did not know where he was. He seemed to be looking down on himself from some distant point, with darkness closing all around. Then he was peering out of his skull with his own eyes again. But he could feel his own essence becoming displaced. In seconds, Petofi's spirit would crowd out his own, and his body would be lost forever, his soul condemned to the eternal hell that Petofi had arranged for it.

I am lost, he thought, certain it would be the last coherent notion to ever originate in his brain.

But then, in a brief flash, he saw the only remaining way out. The sole means by which Count Petofi could ever be stopped.

With superhuman strength, Quentin struggled to his feet. Crying out in pain, barely able to maintain his balance as invisible talons tugged at his soul, he staggered to the portrait, which still displayed the monstrous likeness of the beast that *he* should otherwise be, gripped it in his pain-clenched hands, and with the last ounce of energy remaining in his body, flung the infernal image into the roaring flames in the fireplace.

For a long moment, pure silence replaced the thunder in his head. His eyes took in the sight of the licking tongues surrounding the canvas-covered stretcher and then burning their way through its center. The image of the wolf-beast shriveled and

blackened, and then the fire seemed to explode from the confines of the fireplace, curling its way up the stone walls around the hearth. Within seconds, Charles Delaware Tate's masterwork had vaporized, taking with it countless years of one man's unnaturally lengthened existence on this earth, the vile power inherent in the pigment turning the flames a brilliant, bloody crimson.

Count Petofi gaped in dumbstruck disbelief as the painting burned away, his hands trembling violently as if with palsy. His breath escaped his lips in ragged huffs, his shocked eyes widening so that the milky whites showed all the way around the smoky blue irises.

Finally, his features sunken, his face as chalky white as the dead *Xianges*, his tear-filled eyes shifted to regard Quentin.

And Count Andreas Petofi's jaw dropped to emit a long, piercing scream, its every note resonant with the sound of pure, hopeless, unadulterated horror.

Chapter 19

Julia's eyes could hardly take in what was happening, for the world seemed to be falling apart around her at lightning speed. Barnabas had destroyed the *Xianges* horror, but Carolyn had simultaneously collapsed—after apparently killing Mathis. And then, cold dread curdled in Julia's stomach as she saw Petofi move toward Quentin, obviously intent on destroying his soul once and for all before possessing his body. But Quentin, his features taut with desperation, grabbed the portrait of the werewolf, hesitated only a second, and then thrust it into fire—drawing a sudden “No!” from Julia's lips.

The change was almost instantaneous. Where Quentin stood, a black shadow seemed to swirl out of the surrounding darkness, enveloping his body like a living shroud; then the shadow began to grow, rising higher and higher, almost reaching the ceiling. The strange figure seemed to absorb the firelight, for although it appeared solid, its features remained obscured by the dense shadows.

Until the thing opened its eyes.

Like a pair of lanterns blazing with green fire, the glaring jewels illuminated the cellar, sharpening the monster's horrifying features to crystal clarity. The thing stood a full head taller than Quentin, balancing itself on long, canine-looking legs. Shreds of fabric that appeared to be the remains of Quentin's clothes hung in tatters from its black, fur-covered body, but Julia would swear that—even having seen the image of the beast in the painting—that there was no way her friend could have ever transformed into *this*. Its head was huge and shaggy, with a long, snarling snout that bristled with jagged, gleaming fangs; a pair of pointed ears extended from the top of its head, bending backward as the thing leaned forward to sniff the air like a creature of prey seeking its quarry. The muscles of its torso and arms stood out in stark relief, swelling and rippling grotesquely with every move it made. Its eyes rolled unhurriedly toward Julia's, and her heart froze as its gaze flayed her mental defenses and bored into her soul, marking her as insignificant vermin to be cast into the black pit of death if it so desired. It glanced briefly toward Barnabas and the fallen girl and rumbled ominously in its cavernous throat, but it gave no more heed to their presence than it did to hers.

But then the thing's eyes swiveled toward the skeletal figure standing before it, and spreading its jaws in a ghastly grin, it threw back its head, gathered a deep breath, and howled. The sound nearly ruptured Julia's eardrums as, within the stone confines of the cellar, it rang on and on, swirling like a glacial phantom through the darkness,

its vibrations creeping hideously over her skin like a horde of insects. Count Petofi unleashed an almost pitiable cry of terror as the thing lowered its head to peer incuriously at him, but after a moment, instead of retreating in fear, as Julia expected, he raised his trembling, magical hand and held it defiantly before the glowering giant. To her surprise, the beast snarled angrily but took a single step back toward the fire.

Count Petofi's terrified features relaxed slightly. But then Julia saw that the werewolf had simply been bracing itself to strike. Like a bullet, one taloned hand shot forth and gripped the mangled, gloved hand, drawing a new scream of pain and fear from Petofi's lips. "No!" he cried. "I command it. Release me! Release me now!"

But the creature was oblivious to the count's entreaties. Its right hand was a steel vise around Petofi's wrist. Then, grasping Petofi's shoulder with its left, its muscles contracted, and the clenched right hand pulled back—still clutching Petofi's wrist. With a sickening *crunch-rip*, the once-indomitable limb tore free of Petofi's shoulder, and the old man's shocked scream rose a full octave. A geyser of dark blood spurted from the mangled socket, and Petofi staggered backward, his good hand automatically rising to cover the terrible wound. Using the severed arm like a club, the werewolf battered the old man's head, smearing his face with blood and sending his spectacles flying. After several more blows, Petofi pitched to the floor, his eyes—now bright with pure, mortal panic—locking on Julia's with a look of pleading.

"Help me," he cried, as the huge silhouette behind him, backlit by flames, rose to its full height. "Dr. Hoffman, make it stop...please."

Julia swallowed hard, her brain barely able to absorb the scene before her. The thing disdainfully tossed the broken, dismembered limb into a shadowed corner of the cellar and took a small step toward its victim. Slowly, she shook her head. "I could not help you, Count Petofi, even if I wanted to." Then, in a whisper, she said, "Your sad devotion to preserving your own wretched existence has proven your own undoing. As I predicted."

Petofi's jaw dropped in anguished disbelief, and then he was grabbed from behind. His body swiveled around, no longer under his control. The thing that had once been Quentin Collins clutched him with glittering talons, lifting him off his feet and holding his face close to the parted, slaving jaws. Huge emerald eyes peered into Petofi's with inhuman intelligence, seeming to savor the helplessness of its victim, the pupils narrowing to thin, reptilian-looking slits.

"Stop, Quentin," Petofi moaned. "I shall release you. I swear it! I swear it!"

But even Petofi knew it was too late—that the creature holding him was beyond all human reasoning. Yet with careful, cunning precision, the werewolf slowly lowered its jaws, closed them gently around Petofi's throat, and began to apply

gradual pressure. The old man started to writhe spastically in the creature's grip, his supplicating voice now coming out as a series of sputtering gasps. Blood from his ruined shoulder flowed over the creature's claws, splattering on the stone floor with a revolting plopping sound.

Surely, this is now the end of him, Julia thought. But it was not to be. The giant wolf almost playfully swung the old man back and forth, causing his remaining arm to flop uncontrollably up and down, almost like a marionette's. *How fitting*, she thought, *after he played the rest of us as puppets for his convenience*. Yet she could not help but be sickened by the deliberateness of the monster's torture. *Just let him die*, she begged the beast with her eyes. *His time is past*.

The creature opened its mouth and released the squirming Petofi. He fell helplessly at the beast's feet, for a moment lying motionless. But then, his chest heaved, and somehow angling his head so that his swollen, tormented eyes fell directly on Julia, he hissed, "If you could...you would show me mercy. Wouldn't you?"

Julia felt her eyes burning, and hot tears began to flow down her cheeks. "I could never wish such evil as this upon you," she whispered. "I'm sorry."

The monster's steel-tinged claws dove on Petofi's neck and shoulders, and, with a sudden heave, lifted his body higher into the air, until it almost reached the shadow-painted ceiling. Then, slowly, the werewolf turned to face the giant hearth and, with a bark of triumph, hurled the squirming figure straight into the licking flames. A shrill, agonized shriek erupted from the blaze, and Julia saw Petofi's legs kicking furiously, the one remaining arm batting uselessly at the gold tongues that now began to consume his body. One of the creature's arms lowered into the inferno, completely oblivious to the searing heat, and held the struggling figure down until its thrashing began to diminish. The cloying stench of burning flesh and fabric rolled out of the fireplace, eddying through the cellar and into Julia's nostrils like a noxious fog, nearly causing her to gag. But despite her revulsion, she could not turn her eyes from Petofi's death throes, and it seemed eons before the gurgling screams finally fell silent and the kicking legs stopped moving.

This time forever.

As silence finally replaced the sounds of the horrific struggle, she realized she had forgotten to breathe. With a gasp, she sucked in a lungful of foul-smelling air, nearly choking on the fumes of violent death. Her eyes remained locked on the huge, black figure, which now slowly turned its murderous gaze on Julia herself. Carefully but awkwardly, she managed to rise from the stone dais where she had lain and cautiously began to inch her way into the shadows.

A cool, firm hand took hold of her arm. "Do not move," came Barnabas's voice.

“He may not recognize us.”

“He recognized Petofi well enough,” she whispered.

“He knew him as an enemy. He may not draw any distinction between Petofi and us.”

“What about Carolyn?”

Barnabas glanced at the young girl, still lying unconscious where she had fallen. “If she does not rise, he will take no notice of her.” He then grasped her arm almost painfully. “Stay here, and do not move—no matter what happens. Is that clear?”

“Wha—what are you going to do?”

Barnabas shook his head. He then turned from her, faced the crouching beast, and took one cautious step forward. The green eyes followed his every movement, and as Barnabas drew nearer, the jaws spread, and a low, rumbling growl thundered from its massive lungs. The silver-headed cane appeared at Barnabas’s side, and he slowly lifted it, so that the wolf-shaped handle gleamed in the firelight.

“Quentin. Do you recognize me? It is I, Barnabas.”

The growling grew louder as Barnabas took another step forward. The giant beast’s muscles tightened, as if preparing to spring.

“I once made a promise to you. A promise that you begged me to honor, should circumstances require it. Do you remember?”

Julia felt her hands beginning to tremble, and no mental command, no force within her body could make them stop. And to her dismay, the huge wolf head shifted away from Barnabas, and the jewel-like green eyes fell upon her. A sound between a snarl and a rumble came from its throat, and she saw its feet rock slightly as it shifted its weight.

“Quentin!” Barnabas said in a loud voice. “Look at me. You must look *at me!*”

The walking stick had now risen above his head, and Julia saw his shoulders tighten as he prepared to strike. The green eyes now rolled away from her and returned to Barnabas.

“You have claimed your victory, Quentin,” he said softly—compassionately.

“Your enemy is dead. *Our* enemy is dead. You have saved us.”

The monster cocked its head, as if half comprehending Barnabas’s words. The fire in its eyes cooled for a few seconds. But if there had been true recognition there, it was fleeting. The predator’s instincts again assumed control, and the beast lowered itself to its haunches in preparation to attack.

“Quentin, no,” Barnabas said softly, taking another step forward. *One more and he would be near enough to bring the silver-headed cane to bear on the werewolf—with surely fatal consequences.*

But it was not to be. The beast's muscles constricted and then exploded, launching its body like a rocket—not at Barnabas, but *past* him.

Straight toward Julia.

“No!” Barnabas cried, and with supernatural speed—in the blink of an eye—he interposed himself between her and the onrushing monster. Before she understood what was happening, she found herself wrapped in Barnabas's strong embrace, felt one of his hands pulling her head close to his chest. Then something slammed into him with the force of an express train, sending him wobbling on his feet but failing to displace him. Julia heard a shrill *swish* and saw a giant hand tipped with steel claws slash across Barnabas's neck. He flinched but held his ground, his protective arms keeping Julia safe. The great black wolf, its momentum disrupted by its intended victim's failure to yield, lost its balance and crashed to the floor, shaking loose a rain of dust from the ceiling. Barnabas turned, again placing his own body between Julia's and the monster's.

How long can it keep up the attack? Julia thought. And how long can Barnabas last against it?

The creature now roared angrily, its eyes narrowing as it sized up its adversary with new respect. Then—this time without warning—it sprang into the air, again slamming into Barnabas with force that would have broken every bone in the body of an ordinary man. The beast's talons scabbled at the floor as it tried to maintain its balance; it somehow spun around without falling and lowered its head to peer angrily at Barnabas Collins.

Then, drawing in a long, deep breath, the werewolf raised its head, spread its jaws wide, and bellowed, the sound so loud, so *huge*, that Julia could not help but bring her hands to her ears to try to shut out the hammering waves.

The thing was trying to shock them into lowering their defenses.

Barnabas's eyes were bright with anger, but his face looked haggard. The battle was taking its toll, even on him. Julia knew the wolf could not destroy him; but it could wear him down to the point that he could no longer effectively defend her. *If that were to happen....*

“Do not fear,” Barnabas said softly, as if he had read her thoughts. “As long as I exist, no harm shall come to you.”

“Barnabas....” she whispered.

But then, she heard a faint stirring off to her left. A small sigh. And Carolyn's weak voice rose from the darkness, “Someone...someone help me.”

Julia managed to cry, “Carolyn, do not move!” But it was too late. The werewolf had become aware of her, and turning its attention away from Barnabas and Julia, it

slowly began to advance toward the helpless girl in the shadows.

Barnabas swiveled so that he could view his young cousin, and Julia saw that his handsome features had twisted into a mask of sheer helplessness. Carolyn had risen to her knees, unaware of the shadow of death swiftly and silently closing in on her.

Her sapphire eyes saw Barnabas first. For a second, relief reflected in her icy irises, but then, as the monster materialized before her like a tall, black-shrouded specter, her face went ashen, and her lips parted to release a scream that her lungs lacked the air to produce. As she silently gaped at her towering executioner, Barnabas shifted so that he could leap to Carolyn's defense. But Julia knew that, the moment he did, *she* would be vulnerable.

Barnabas could not protect both of them. Surely, one of them was going to die. *And he knew it as well as she did.*

The wolf leaned close to Carolyn, sniffing at her like a curious dog. For a second, it began to growl deep in its throat, but then it paused. And a strange—perhaps miraculous—thing then happened.

The emerald eyes, as they studied Carolyn's terror-frozen face, gradually softened to a pale, liquid blue. *The eyes of Quentin Collins.* He had recognized his young cousin. At first, Carolyn appeared too terrified to realize the fact; but then as her bulging eyes took in the sight of the thing, her fear began to slowly dissipate.

The werewolf slowly backed away from her, glancing at Barnabas and Julia, its shockingly human eyes brimming with true regret. It swung around to regard the smoking, smoldering corpse that lay in a heap in the fireplace, and Julia saw the canine shoulders constrict with either anger or disgust. As the wolf peered at its own deadly handiwork, its muscles began to ripple, and it slowly leaned back on its haunches, threw its head back, and unleashed a deafening, ululating howl that went on and on, shattering stone and causing a hail of gravel-like debris from the cellar's ceiling. The sound drove into Julia's brain like a steel spike, and her jaw clenched as her hands smashed against her ears to try to keep the agony out. Even Barnabas reeled beneath the power of the wolf-cry, his hand clutching his walking stick so fiercely that his knuckles looked like bone. The endless howl gradually lowered to a mournful, sonorous wail, its power spent but the emotions behind it still fervent.

Julia did not know when the sound finally stopped, for its echoes continued to reverberate in the darkness long after the animal's jaws had clenched. When it turned to regard them a final time, its eyes had reverted to emerald green. And then, with a rushing sound like a whirlwind, it launched itself toward the stairs, bounded up them at lightning speed, and crashed through the door to the main floor. She heard a rapid scrabbling on the floor above, the sound of glass shattering, and then...silence.

At last, she felt Barnabas's eyes on her, questing, searching, hot with concern that the wolf's flailing claws might have scratched her. If it had, she thought, then she was as doomed as Quentin Collins....

Anxiously, she scanned her body for any sign, no matter how subtle, that the thing might have infected her with its curse. She felt no pain anywhere—other than the aftereffects of Petofi's hypnosis and Carolyn's torture—but she knew that in her state of shock, it was possible for her flesh to be lacerated without her knowing it. As she verified that her body was free of any wounds, she gave Barnabas a thankful nod. Then, without a word, the two of them turned to Carolyn, who knelt on the floor gazing half-vacantly into space, her eyes wet with tears.

"Carolyn," Julia whispered, desiring desperately to reach out to gently stroke her cheek, but remembering the almost immediate, lethal effect her touch had had upon Mathis.

But Barnabas placed a hand on her slim throat, and one of his eyes widened thoughtfully. "Her blood is no longer tainted," Barnabas said. "She is safe."

Julia could only shake her head, stunned by the revelation. But she placed her hands firmly on Carolyn's bare shoulders and found her skin warm and soft—exactly as it ought to be. The young blonde bowed her head, rolling her eyes up to regard Julia with sorrow and disbelief. "I saw him," she whispered. "I saw Quentin. But that couldn't have been Quentin. *It wasn't him, it wasn't him.*"

Breathing a gloomy sigh, Julia took Carolyn in a comforting embrace and let the girl cry and cry. Eventually, she would have to explain everything—and Carolyn would have to accept it in whatever way she could. When the time came, she would be strong, Julia knew. But for now, she was nothing more than a shocked, confused little girl who had no idea what had happened to her or the evil things that she had been forced to do by one of the blackest minds that had ever existed on the planet Earth.

But she *would* remember, Petofi had said. And Julia did not disbelieve him. It would have been too merciful of him to allow Carolyn to simply forget.

Barnabas glanced at Mathis's sprawled, lifeless body, and then at the grotesque wreckage of the *Xianges* on the floor nearby. "Its death freed her somehow," he said. "It had to be alive to keep her in that state."

Julia nodded. "What it injected her with was an actual part of itself. What entered her body was not a toxin as we know it, but an offshoot of the creature. When the arachnid died...so did the part of it that existed in her body."

"Why tonight, though?" Barnabas wondered. "What made it die at this particular time?"

"Petofi told me that if the thing stayed in control of her too long, *both* would die.

Now I understand what he meant. At the end, Carolyn had begun to realize what was happening, and was struggling to free herself. The creature was beginning weaken—and finally, when Quentin called to her, her realization broke the thing’s control. That’s when it attacked you.”

“Petofi was trying to manipulate things that no human being had a right to.”

“It’s horrifying that such things could exist,” Julia said softly, holding Carolyn tightly, stroking her hair comfortingly. After a time, she said, “We must get her back to Collinwood. And make sure everyone there is all right.” Then, a terrible thought came to her. “David! Petofi left him bound upstairs! Could Quentin have...?”

“No,” Barnabas said firmly. “You heard him. He bolted out of here as fast as he could go. I’m afraid he is by now long gone. David will be all right.”

Julia gazed grimly at the body of their tormentor. “Quentin *must* have recognized Petofi. He tortured and killed him. But he didn’t devour him—the way the werewolf ordinarily would.”

Barnabas nodded. “Perhaps some small part of him was aware of what Petofi had done to him. But I assure you, when he attacked us, he was completely at the mercy of the monster. He was not responsible for what he was doing.”

“Perhaps,” Julia said. “But the thing was so *cruel*. Do you believe that cruelty has been hidden in Quentin’s heart all along?”

Barnabas shrugged. “Who can say? When driven to extremes, people can be *very* cruel.” He gave her a sardonic smile. “As can those who are no longer wholly human.”

Julia raised an eyebrow, realizing that Barnabas was referring to himself. She let the remark go, for despite the fact that he himself had committed horrific acts in his long lifetime, she knew he was not evil in his heart. *He tries so hard to redeem himself. Even his cold, impure heart somehow retains its humanity.* As she had borne witness all too closely, there were humans far less humane than the undead man who stood at her side.

“Let’s get out of this place,” Julia said. “I don’t think I can stand it here any longer.”

Barnabas nodded and helped her to her feet, then gently lifted Carolyn into his arms. The young blonde clung to him fiercely, even though she showed no sign of comprehending where she was or what was going on around her. “The shock has been too much for her,” Barnabas said. “Take good care of her, Julia. And then...”

“Yes?”

“Take care of yourself as well. You have been through as horrible an ordeal as anyone could ever imagine. You, too, will need to heal.”

“I will,” Julia said, giving him a little nod. “Yes, I will.”

“I intend to see to it that you do.”

She looked into his eyes and found that his face was glowing with one of his rare smiles. “I’m...glad, Barnabas.”

They mounted the stairs, leaving the dead and the foul stench behind in the dwindling firelight. The atmosphere of the utterly silent house felt eerie and oppressive with the memory of its former occupant, and Julia could not get out of the place fast enough. But there was still David to tend to, and they would need to find some wrap for Carolyn, so that she would not freeze in the bitter cold night. A chilly breeze was blowing through the hallway from the living room, and when she peered around the corner, she saw that, behind fluttering curtains, the window overlooking the front yard was smashed.

He’s out there somewhere, she thought. But how long will he last? Without the portrait to sustain him...is he destined to die? Perhaps tonight?

It was entirely possible that she would never know the answer; she wasn’t sure she *wanted* to know. After this night, there was so much she wanted to wipe from her memory forever, and to never again have to face such a vicious, inhuman creature as the thing that Quentin had become. In his way, she knew, he had saved them. But at what cost? To fight evil, he had become evil—willfully. And despite the fact that the monster had assumed complete control of his body and mind, after the way he had attacked her—and Barnabas—she was not sure she would ever be able to look at him the same way again.

He had lived so long already. Perhaps it was simply his time to die.

Barnabas gave her a long, wistful look. Again, as if he had read her mind, he said, “I don’t believe it is quite his time. And I know that, in your heart, you care too much for him to hate him—or what he became. Given time...you will forgive him.”

Julia glanced at him thoughtfully. “How do you know that?”

One corner of his mouth turned upward, *almost* smiling. “Because after all that has happened to us in our past, you have forgiven me.”

Chapter 20

Christmas Day dawned cold and gray over Collinwood, and the gathering clouds suggested that more snow might fall before dusk. A melancholy wind swept over the old mansion and grounds, its mournful whistle dully punctuated by the waves that battered the base of Widows Hill like thunderous drums. Skeletal tree branches clacked together in noisy counterpoint as the crystal-flecked breeze, like a mischievous hand, set them swaying restlessly, and a loose shutter on one of the upper windows occasionally struck its sash with the sound of a cruel slap.

It was the third day since Quentin Collins had vanished, and there had been word neither from him nor of him. His car remained parked on the cracked asphalt apron at the back of the house, and all his belongings still waited expectantly in his room, many of them never unpacked since his arrival. His scent lingered there like a memory that refused to fade, but despite the lights and holiday decorations, the house seemed cheerless without him, its halls and chambers as barren and frigid as a vast sepulcher.

Carolyn had regained her strength, but with it came the memories of the things that had happened to her—and because of her. She had slept the entire first day after her return from the Swift house, but after that, she could not sleep for more than a few minutes at a time. Her hands trembled constantly, and her voice quavered with every word she uttered, but after more than a few exhaustive examinations, Dr. Hoffman had pronounced her physically healthy. Strangely, the melding with the extradimensional creature seemed to have in some respects actually purified her constitution; her heart and lungs were exceptionally strong, her muscles firmer and better-toned than they ever had been, and her metabolism seemed to have increased significantly. Apart from the tremors, physically she could not have felt better—which in itself was a source of some worry, both to her and Dr. Hoffman, for there was no way to know if the changes in her body presaged unknown, perhaps dangerous, future ramifications. But by all indications, she was completely free of the invading life form, and for everyone's peace of mind, they accepted her enhanced physical condition as a benign side effect of her experience and nothing more. It brought her no comfort and did nothing to assuage the pain of remembering that she had been made a mere pawn—a weapon—to be used against her own loved ones.

To think that she had succumbed without so much as a struggle. In Petofi's hands, her mind had been as pliable as potter's clay.

Julia, as well as her mother, had impressed upon her the absolute need for her to

avoid feelings of guilt. Petofi's aim had been to prey on her vulnerable conscience, and after using her as an implement of destruction, he had intended to see her mind destroyed by the conflict within. If she succumbed to self-blame—or self-pity—then she was still playing into his hands, even after his death.

But she had killed a man. How could she reconcile that in her mind? No matter that Mathis, even as much as Petofi, deserved the hideous death she had dealt him; she had blood on her hands, and her conscience refused to spare her. Willful or otherwise, she was a killer. But even the fact that she had murdered a man disturbed her less than the suffering she had inflicted upon Julia Hoffman—her friend. She had, with cool deliberation, tortured the older woman to the brink of death. She could remember how it felt to lay her hands on Julia's body, knowing full well that every touch of her fingers brought exquisite agony and pushed her a few steps closer to a horrific end. On some deep level, she *must* have been a willing participant. If she were not, she would have been stronger. She would have resisted. She would have fought harder.

Only at the end had things begun to come clear to her. Quentin's supplicating voice had shattered the trance, exposing the monstrous evil that had taken root inside her body.

But what if the spell had not been broken at that moment? In a few more seconds, she would have also destroyed Barnabas. How could she so vividly remember her own cruelty—and how pleasurable it felt at the time—and feel no guilt? Her mother, of course, had taught her that forgiving one's self was as vital as forgiving others. And Julia and Barnabas had both openly forgiven her, even though both denied the actual need. The time had come for her to effect her own healing.

Easily said, even imminently comprehensible to the rational mind. But hardly facile for a gravely wounded heart.

Christmas tradition had carried the morning. All had come together in the drawing room just after breakfast and exchanged gifts. Elizabeth, still terribly fatigued from her own ordeal, braced herself like an old soldier after battle and carried out her matronly role with customary grace and even humor. How she managed it, Carolyn had no idea. Uncle Roger, on the other hand, having been semi-oblivious to most of the goings-on under his nose, had turned introspective and sensitive—oddly, the most sober among them. He barely spoke the entire morning, except to inquire if Carolyn felt up to continuing. Though she saw the gathering as a charade, it was perhaps a necessary one, and she had done her best to emulate her mother's nonchalance. At least Roger's concern was genuine, and he seemed to carry his own burden of guilt for having put his own interests above the family's during their gravest crisis. With unusual candor, he had confessed to her that if he had opened half an eye, he would

have realized the seriousness of the Collinses's peril and done all he could to protect them.

What he could not know was that, had he drawn Petofi's attention to himself, he would almost surely have met his own untimely end. Ironic, Carolyn thought, that his selfish lack of involvement had likely saved his life.

Apart from Roger, David had suffered the least harm, both physical and psychological. He had not been subject to the worst of Petofi's machinations, nor had he witnessed the violent spectacle in the cellar. As far as the boy was concerned, the family had fallen victim to a pair of especially vile predators, who at the end had received their just rewards. David knew something about the strange powers that had more than once brushed the Collins family; but in this case, they had not presented their faces to him beyond a mere glimpse. And to his credit, he knew better than to ask too many questions.

God grant us small favors.

Carolyn had unenthusiastically given the gifts she had picked out for the family well prior to Count Petofi's arrival. An Italian gold moonstone necklace for her mother, to match the bracelet she had given her last year. A Rochester satin jacquard smoking jacket for Uncle Roger to replace the one he had been wearing since he had a full head of hair. A Mexican silver brooch in the shape of Quetzalcoatl, the winged serpent, for Julia. And for David, a gas-powered, radio-controlled airplane—a replica of a vintage World War II P-51 Mustang. The delight in his eyes upon seeing it nearly brought back the joy that Christmas mornings had always held for her. She even managed to take some pleasure in the gifts she received: a bottle of expensive perfume from her mother, a beautiful pair of leather boots from Uncle Roger, a book of stories by James Thurber—her favorite writer—from David, and from Julia—whose deadpan expression actually caused her to giggle—a pair of turtleneck sweaters.

In a way, she was glad she had not had an opportunity to shop for Quentin, although she had intended to. A gift that could not be given would only serve as a painful reminder that he was lost.

He *was* lost, of this she was certain.

There were moments from that night at the Swift house that seemed unfocused and unreal, in particular those following Count Petofi's gruesome demise. She vaguely recollected seeing a huge black shadow, with blazing green eyes and that howled like a banshee, attack Barnabas and Julia with murderous fury. Somehow they had escaped without injury, although Carolyn could not begin to understand how. Then she had seen the thing's eyes turn blue—and they were Quentin's eyes. She knew them intimately and had seen herself reflected in them. There was no denying the

inescapable truth: somehow, that thing *was* Quentin. Every rational cell in her brain told her it was impossible, that her condition had caused her to hallucinate; but the sheer prevalence of the irrational during the past days flew in the face of all she had ever come to accept as “normal.”

Hardly for the first time.

After the morning’s rituals and the following extravagant, if sullen, luncheon, with stomachs full and senses overwhelmed, they all retired to their respective chambers to recuperate, each in his or her own fashion. Carolyn actually managed to get some sleep, and when she finally awoke, it was early evening. No one else seemed to be stirring, however, so she made her way to the drawing room and took up a station in front of the hearth with a brandy snifter in hand.

Already, she was falling back into her traditional habits; shades of Uncle Roger.

“I had a feeling you would end up here,” came Julia’s voice.

She did not turn around. “I had a feeling you would, too.”

“I’m not going to lecture you,” Julia said reassuringly. “In fact, I’ll join you. If you don’t mind...”

Carolyn glanced back at the older woman. Julia looked dead tired, and her face was marred by an abstract pattern of red welts.

The sight of the damage to her face wrenched her heart.

“It’s all right,” she said, turning her eyes to the twinkling Christmas tree lights. “I’m still surprised you can stand to be in the same room as me.”

“We’ve been through all that. Carolyn, you are completely blameless. Surely you realize that.”

Her nod was merely obligatory. “I’m trying to.”

Julia poured herself a small snifter of cognac and came to sit by Carolyn’s side. “I’m glad we were able to carry on with the Christmas festivities. It’s healthy for the family to be together and to try to restore some sense of normalcy—especially for your mother. She suffered so much, knowing what you were going through.”

“Yes, I agree. I know it was very good for Mother. And probably for David too.”

“And for you. I know you may have a hard time accepting it, but you’ve held up remarkably well. No one could ask for a more honest effort.”

“Thank you. And thank you for your gift.”

“And you for yours.”

After a long silence, Carolyn finally turned to look Julia fully in the eyes. “Dr. Hoffman, what happened to Quentin?”

Julia’s eyes narrowed. “What...what do you think happened?”

“I think Quentin changed...somehow...into something horrible. And I think you know more about it than you’ve let on.”

Julia’s eyes took on a faraway look. “It would be inappropriate to lie to you.” After a few moments, she said softly, “It is true. It is a curse he suffers. But it has not been a part of his life for a long, long time. Until now.”

“It was because of Petofi, wasn’t it?”

“Not directly. But Petofi was a part of it. He was always very much involved with Quentin’s fate.”

“Julia...is Quentin dead?”

Julia could not keep her face from going pale. “I...I don’t know. Carolyn, it’s likely that he is.”

Hearing Julia speak the words should have stunned her. But by now, she was simply too numb. When she took a sip of her drink, some of it sloshed onto the floor.

“Carolyn?”

“If nothing else,” she whispered, “it bothers me less that it was my hand that killed Mathis.”

“Those men died by their own hands. They set the events in motion, and they paid the price. If not for Petofi, you would never have been in a position *to* kill. It’s as simple as that.”

“If you wish.”

“It’s the truth.”

Carolyn nodded, unwilling to contest the point. Instead she ventured to voice a feeling that had begun to creep into her mind. “You know, Julia, I remember seeing the old pictures of Quentin’s ancestor. It always struck me how closely they resembled each other.”

“Yes. Very much so.”

“Wouldn’t it be a miracle of sorts if the old Quentin Collins could come forward in time. I wonder what he would think of how things are at Collinwood in this day and age.”

Julia smiled thinly. Then she gently placed an affectionate hand on her shoulder. “Stranger things have happened in this house, haven’t they?”

“They never seem to cease.”

Julia drained her glass. “Well. I’ll leave you alone. Thank you for sharing your thoughts with me.”

She smiled. “Julia, I know you don’t feel it’s necessary for me to apologize for what happened. But I want you to know I am so grateful I did no more harm to you than I did. And that...you and Barnabas were not injured. He saved your life, didn’t

he?”

“I do owe him my life. And for more than just that night.”

“I thought surely he—and you—would have been killed. But that thing did not hurt him.”

“We were both fortunate.”

Carolyn swallowed hard, envisioning the somewhat sad, gaunt face of her distant cousin. “What a remarkable man he is. I am fortunate to be a part of his family.”

“He loves his relatives very much. He loves *you*.”

“I know,” she sighed. “And I know that...sometimes...he needs me.”

Julia gave her a knowing look. “I think from now on he will simply...care for you.”

She nodded. “I’m glad.”

Julia smiled again. “I’ll leave you alone now. Don’t drink too much.”

“Is that an order, Doctor?”

“Have you ever followed doctors’ orders?”

“No.”

“Then it’s just a word of wisdom from an older friend.”

Carolyn smiled and put down her glass. “I shall stop right here.”

“Thank you.”

“For now.”

Again, Julia gave her a warm, loving smile. Then she turned and left the drawing room. As much as they sometimes clashed, Carolyn thought, they cared deeply for each other. Julia was a steadying, stabilizing force, even if she sometimes rubbed Carolyn quite the wrong way.

I hope someday to have her strength.

Right now, Carolyn felt wrung out, as if even her heightened energy state had finally begun to dwindle. In his way, Quentin had energized her the moment he had arrived, and now that she was deprived of his spring-like essence, her heart felt like a flower wilted by a killing drought. In the short time following his arrival, before she had been subjected to Petofi’s evil designs, they had bonded like never before. It wasn’t fair for him to be taken away like this.

She had lost her father. She had lost Jeb. And now Quentin.

It’s not fair!

“Collinses don’t feel sorry for themselves,” she whispered to the Christmas tree; then she glanced at her half-empty glass. “At least that’s the story among those who want to believe it.”

But instead of picking up her drink and finishing it, she went to the stereo console in the corner of the room and looked down at the dusty, vinyl LP on the turntable. With a deep sigh, she turned on the player, and a few seconds later, clear, wistful violins began to weep from the speakers. The ethereal, floating notes wound around her like the scent of bittersweet perfume, and as she began to drift away on waves of beautiful memories, she softly sang:

*“Shadows of the night, falling silently.
Echoes of the past, calling you to me.
Haunting memory, veiled in misty glow.
Phantom melody, playing soft and low.
In this world that we know now, life is here and gone.
But somewhere in the afterglow, love lives on and on....”*

She was unable to bring herself to continue. Her voice caught in her throat.

*“Dreams of long ago meet in rendezvous.
Shadows of the night...calling me to you.”*

Carolyn wasn't sure she had actually heard the voice. But her skin prickled as she felt the presence of another in the room, and turning to the drawing room doors, she saw a tall figure gazing at her with crystal blue eyes.

“Oh, my God.”

The face was Quentin's, although it looked somewhat older than just a few days before. New creases in his forehead and a sprinkling of gray at his temples lent his face a distinguished, sagacious air. But when he smiled at her, it was his youthful warmth that swept over her body like rays of summer sunshine.

She rushed to him and fell into his waiting arms. He held her so tightly that at any other time she might have winced and tried to draw away, but now she simply wanted to melt into his body, to make sure he would never leave her again. “Quentin, you've changed,” she whispered peering deeply into his bright eyes.

He nodded. “For the first time in...ages...I am growing older. I can feel it.”

“Growing older?”

“I am no longer frozen in time. But neither am I dead.”

She wasn't sure what he meant, but she didn't care. He was here, and that was all that mattered. “I can't believe you're back. But I'm so happy. Oh, God, Quentin, I was so afraid for you.”

His eyes were serious. "There may yet be a reason to be...on the next full moon."

She drew back from him slightly. "You're talking about becoming like...that night, when you changed...."

"It may happen again."

She swallowed hard. "Or it may not."

"You're not afraid of me now, are you?"

She shook her head. "Of course not. But the idea of you changing into that...thing. It horrifies me."

He lowered his head to her shoulder and pulled her head to his. "And me. But only time will tell."

"Quentin, I don't want anything to happen to you ever again. Please say you will stay with me. Don't ever leave."

"I could never stay if it meant endangering your life. Or anyone's at Collinwood. You must understand that."

"We will find out together. Julia will help you. She can find a way to save you, if it's necessary...."

"Julia knows that I am beyond her help. And you must accept that, too."

"Quentin, no...."

He finally released her, but she could not force her arms to let go.

"You didn't come back...just to say goodbye," she whispered.

"I must."

"No, Quentin! Please...."

He gave her a small smile. "If I had known how upset you would be...I would have just gone quietly. But I thought it was better for you to know. To understand."

"I won't let you leave like this. To give me hope and then go away again...."

"Petofi said that there would never be another change. But the portrait was destroyed, and I don't know how that affects my future. Carolyn, if nothing happens...then I will come back. I swear it. But I cannot risk your life to find out. I must go my own way."

"What if it does happen? What if you do change?"

Quentin's eyes turned slowly toward the window. "Then I will have to seek the one way out. The way that will stop the curse forever."

"You can't mean...."

"Don't think about that."

"Until you come back, I won't be able to think of anything else."

He finally extricated himself from her arms. "Then I beg you to offer a prayer

for me. That's all I could ask of anyone. And I know that yours would be the most sincere of all."

She nodded, the lump in her throat keeping her from speaking.

"No matter what happens, Carolyn...I love you. Always remember that."

"I love you too," she managed to whisper.

She lifted a hand to wipe the tears from her eyes. When her vision was clear again, Quentin was gone.

Unable to stop herself, she ran to the front doors and threw them open. Outside, snow had begun to fall, and a low wind whipped the flakes swirling cyclones. Quentin was nowhere to be seen. But from somewhere in the distance, she heard a faint sound, and as she listened, she realized it was a song, floating on the breeze like an angelic chorus. There were carolers somewhere out in the night, and they were singing:

*"I heard the bells on Christmas Day.
Their old familiar carols play.
And mild and sweet the words repeat,
Of peace on Earth, good will to men!"*

The song was so beautiful and so full of hope that, for the moment, all her fears seemed to fade into oblivion. She stood in the frigid wind, feeling nothing but an inner peace she feared might have vanished once and for all. Then, when the last notes of the carol had drifted away to blend with the faint, distant rumble of the sea, she turned and went back into the welcoming warmth of the foyer. Slowly she closed the door, but her hand lingered on the handle, as if releasing it signified her acceptance that Quentin might have left for the very last time.

Finally, she let go.

A few minutes later, Elizabeth came downstairs and found her daughter lying on the couch in the drawing room, fast asleep.

The tearstains on Carolyn's cheeks indicated she had been crying.

But her lips were smiling.

END