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First Volume in the Victorian Age Trilogy

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*And after all, what is a lie? 'Tis but
The truth in masquerade.
—Lord Byron, Don Juan*

Prologue
Cairo, May, 1886

*In which one nefarious plot is undone
and another set in motion.*

Beckett hadn't expected laughter.

Ritual chants, perhaps. Or the screams of victims of unspeakable acts. Even simple conversation. But not laughter. He had come far enough, though, that he could hardly turn back now because of some madman's unexpected mirth.

He dropped from the stone wall into the garden below and moved toward the house. The place was a shambles, long disused and the victim of at least one fire in the last decade. Once, this had been the home of a wealthy merchant, probably built in the early years of Mameluke rule, if Beckett was any judge of architecture. To hear the locals tell it, though, the last hundred years had not been good to this place—the Ottoman tax collector who had lived in the house in the middle of the last century had been murdered by the son of a farmer who'd been evicted from his land. The official's body was never recovered since the murderer took the liberty of feeding him to street dogs. Beckett liked that image, but the story did not end there. The Arab murderer had been caught by the authorities and flogged before his execution. He supposedly pronounced a curse on those who dwelt in the house of the man who'd evicted his father. The next year, the Mameluke pasha who'd taken possession of the fine manse cut himself on a nail that protruded from one wall. The scratch became infected and ultimately gangrenous. His arm was amputated, but too late, and he died an agonizing death. His two wives both contracted a terrible withering disease shortly

thereafter and died within another year. One of Napoleon Bonaparte's aides took up residence there for a few months during the French occupation, but he grew palsied and left it for better lodgings.

From that point on the house stood empty, an oasis of quiet decay in the prosperous Bab al-Khalq district. The high walls that surrounded it on all sides kept out casual observers, but invited squatters and beggars in. None knew how many of these unfortunates lost their lives inside, because few even took note.

Beckett reckoned it was time to rectify that, regardless of the risks—or the laughter. He made his way through the tall grasses that had invaded the inner courtyard toward the smoke-blackened stone entryway. The moon was full and it bathed the area in wan light, but he knew a great many things could be hiding in the deep shadows. Crouching behind what had once been a well, he tried to join them.

Beckett's contact in London, an antiquarian named Halim Bey, had sent him word that the British authorities had acquired a variety of artifacts that might be of interest. Beckett was a scholar and suffered from an insatiable desire to uncover the secrets of the past. Just like Heinrich Schliemann had at Troy and Mycenae and Alphonse Mariette had at Memphis, he sought to peel back the layers of time. That Beckett, like the subjects of his chosen field of research, was what folklore variously called "undead" or "vampire" only made his existence that much more interesting.

Tonight was certainly a case in point. In all likelihood the British archeologists who had collected relics from a tomb just east of Luxor had thought the unique designs hinted at a heretofore unknown dynasty or cult. Beckett, on the other hand, had recognized in the hieroglyphics reproduced from the tomb in the head

researcher's notebooks several passages referring to aspects of the vampiric condition: the desire for blood, the fear of the sun, and so forth. This told him that the relics themselves were worth inspecting. Unlike the researcher and his notes, however, these had not returned to England, and so Beckett set off for Egypt. He had not been surprised to find that the artifacts had disappeared by the time he got there. The hieroglyphs also spoke of a variety of rituals and although Beckett was no sorcerer, he understood that ritual magic was no more superstition than vampirism was. It was rare, but it existed.

Some of the mundane pieces in the stolen collection ended up on the black market and from there Beckett had been able to find the seller, a boy named Fahd Benezra. He'd watched Fahd for several nights, and the boy always came back to this abandoned house.

Anwar al-Beshi smiled. There was a fissure running through the earthen tile of the home's central room. It had started as a simple nick in the center-most tile, just another random mark of the passage of time in this old dwelling. Then, while he made the first preparations for tonight's rite, it had graduated to a crack.

With the first incantations to the storm and shadow, the crack had grown, spreading first to one and then to many other tiles. When the first slave, the Arab man Fahd, knelt in the northeastern part of the room, making obeisance to a specific place in the western desert, other cracks had appeared, joining their progenitor and becoming the dark, jagged line that now split the room in twain.

"Her blessings upon us." Anwar's voice was a reverent whisper. He nodded to the other slave, the Englishwoman Emma. She stood in the north, aligning herself with the power of the Great Nile

itself. Fahd whispered invocations in a language all but dead centuries before the first Arab invader came to the Delta.

Emma shed her simple dyed-cotton robe to expose the marks of the Goddess's favor. She took seven deliberate steps southward, the fissure widening with each one. Anwar placed a small golden plate and scalpel at her feet. On the plate was a shriveled, petrified gray mass, whose shape implied something organic. Neither Emma nor Fahd would consider questioning its nature or import—the master treated it with reverence and so blessed it was.

Anwar looked up at his fair-skinned chattel, handed her the scalpel, and nodded. Emma took the thin, sharp blade in her right hand, holding her index finger along its dull edge for stability. She looked up at the stars twinkling down through the ruin of the old house's roof, placed the tip of the blade at the top of her sternum, and pulled down.

The blade ran along her bone, sending jolts of ecstatic agony through her. Red, hot lifeblood welled from the incision, forming like a crimson river in the valley of her milky breasts. It flowed down her stomach, to her pubis and along her left thigh. Blood collected on the underside of her slight belly and in the folds of her sex, before falling in thick droplets to the plate waiting under her.

The first drop hit the withered organ on its tip, others soon covering it in a red sheen. The first wisp of smoke rose from the crack and it smelled of great pestilence.

His broad smile exposing snake-like canines, Anwar al-Beshi laughed anew.

Well, that was enough of that.

Crouched in the shadows that gathered amid the ruined remains of the top floor of the home, Beckett

had a good view of the ritual going on downstairs. He'd just watched thus far, taking notes and looking for an easy opportunity to gather what he needed to. But now, things seemed to be going too far.

Beckett generally disliked blood sorcerers, but they were an occupational hazard and he hadn't expected the goings-on to be especially bothersome. He'd given up using ghouls long ago, but most of his ilk still fed their blood to a choice few living slaves to serve as majordomos, daylight guardians and attendants. He'd guessed that Fahd was one such slave and it was nice to be proven right—sorcerers were, if anything, more likely to have need of such seconds.

The flow of blood streaming down the nude woman's chest was a bit more problematic. Its rich odor called to the hungry beast that had sat in Beckett's breast ever since he took his last breath. But one did not survive as a vampire for as long as he had without being able to control the urge to feed. And the woman was obviously long gone into the addled servitude and ritual requirements of her bondage—her pale skin was marked with a delicate pattern of scars emanating from her shorn crotch and highlighted by the blood that clung to the white puckers of tissue. She was long past any compassion that might still linger in Beckett's heart.

No, what pushed him to act was the smell. It rose from the cracked tile like a pillar of smoky bile, rotting the very air in the room. Beckett's nostrils flared and the noxious stuff curled into his disused lungs. Undeath had sharpened his senses in countless ways, but now he regretted it. His chest convulsed in a dry heave, trying to expel the pestilence within.

Simultaneously, the vermin began to call to him. Beckett was a thing of the night and had long ago discovered he had a unique empathy for the other beasts who made it their home. Now, he heard the buzzing of

flies and gnats emerging from the crack, the scurry of beetles and locusts flocking from miles around, and the scabbling of rats crawling from under rocks to feed on the carrion to come.

He jumped down.

The intruder ruined everything. Anwar was pronouncing the twenty-third of the seventy-five secret names when he barreled in from above. Tall and stocky, he slammed into Anwar and strong-armed Emma to the ground.

"Apologies for the interruption," he said. An Englishman it seemed, fair-skinned and brown-haired. He wore heavy cotton pants, a leather jacket, heavy boots and an infantile smile.

Anwar focused his attention on the man, trying to peel back any and all lies this one might have shrouded around himself. His instincts for such things, sharpened by years of moving unseen through the bazaars of North Africa, told Anwar that this one was a blood-drinker too, a vampire, though unlikely to be a child of the Dark God.

Fahd sensed his master's anger and responded unbidden. Rising silently, he drew a large flat blade from under his robe and moved to attack. Anwar appreciated the effort, of course, but he knew it was futile. The boy got to within two steps of the intruder before the man pivoted on his left foot and struck out with his right hand. Anwar watched in mild fascination as the man's fingers sprouted terrible, animalistic talons, which raked across Fahd's chest. A jet of the boy's blood splashed against the eastern wall an instant before he collapsed.

This foreigner was an excellent killer, and despite everything, Anwar appreciated that.

"You should run," the stranger said. His voice had lost its flippant mirth and came out a rough growl. He

held up his hand, now dripping with Fahd's blood, and his lips curled back to reveal thick fangs. "Now."

"If only things were that simple, *khawaga*." Anwar noted with more than a little chagrin that the great fissure had already sealed itself. All that remained was a pattern of hairline fractures in the tiled floor. The ritual was irrevocably ruined and he could feel the effects working upon him already. "In such things, a price must always be paid."

The foreigner must have expected an attack because he kicked out at Anwar with a strength that spoke of potent blood indeed. The sorcerer took the blow to the chest and fell back several yards away, feeling bones break and organs rend within him. Experienced with the mystic ways, he wasn't terribly shocked to see the subtle marks of fate reveal themselves to him.

"Give my regards to the Lady," he said, sure that the stranger had no idea just whom he had served this night. Then, he propped himself up with his weakening arms and his torso, riddled with the dry tumors and bleeding cancers that had emerged when the ritual was ruined, gave way and separated from his shattered pelvis.

The darkness took him then, and Anwar al-Beshi rotted away with a smile on his face.

Beckett took some time to survey the ritual chamber. The woman he'd tackled was unconscious but breathing. Assuming she had been tied to the main ritualist, she was probably in for a rough patch. Vampiric blood was highly addictive to the living and when the vampire in question was destroyed it left the mortal bereft and alone. Fahd, who'd led him here, was good and dead, and the ritualist himself was just a pile of ash now.

But that didn't mean the room wasn't of interest. Beckett gathered up what artifacts he could and then

examined the walls in detail. The ritualist had decorated it with a complex series of hieroglyphs that seemed to be a continuation of the ones Beckett had lifted from the notebook in London. The central image took up the entirety of the east wall, right where the sorcerer had been performing his rite. It was of a female figure, in the typical twisted profile of hieroglyphs, sitting on a throne. What was interesting about this woman, though, was that instead of a head, she had a black disc on her shoulders. Except for its color, it might be a solar image, because it had long rays reaching out to a variety of smaller figures. These were human males—probably servants—who bore large animal heads on their shoulders. It was these heads that were connected by black rays to the woman's head-disc.

Beckett had never seen this figure before, but some instinct told him it was worth remembering. He was making a sketch of it when the shooting started.

When the bullet dug into his shoulder, Beckett cursed himself for getting distracted. He turned around—the shot hurt, but it would take a lot more than that to stop him—and saw a middle-aged man in the uniform of a British cavalry regiment. He was holding a smoking pistol.

"Get away from my wife!" he said in English.

"Be careful, Colonel Blake," came a second voice, this time with a heavy Egyptian accent. "It is a devil." The Arab with the gift for hyperbole was a religious man, dressed in flowing traditional robes. He was holding a simple torch, which cast flickering light in the room.

This is getting out of hand, Beckett decided. He grabbed the satchel in which he had placed the major artifacts and ran. Blake shot him again as he jumped up and through a high window, but that didn't stop him.

One more strange story from the colonies.

Part One:

County Durham, Christmastide, 1887

*In which death pays a visit to Bernan House, along with
several other strange guests*



Chapter One

Regina had never been overly fond of her family's ancestral home. Bernan House, as the mansion itself was called, was built on a slight rise some twenty miles from Durham proper, near the border of Northumberland. It overlooked the great estate that was the foundation of the family's wealth and position. Tenant farmers raised a variety of crops and livestock, making some fine cheeses and other products. Bernan House and its lands were all that a viscount like her father might need to support his peerage—namely land, title, and plentiful grouse and other game for sport. At this time of year, the lands took on the gray-brown hue of trees stripped bare and farmlands made fallow by the winter. The house, however, was decked in garlands of holly for the Christmas season. A gilded cage indeed.

Approaching her eighteenth year, Regina longed for the days when her father's steward oversaw the estate and kept the house in his stead. Father, Mother, Daniel and she had left for Egypt when she was but a babe and she had grown up there, far away from the moors of north England. Many, she knew, would see assignment to Cairo as a hardship—"an existence with all the pains and none of the pleasures of India," she had heard one grumpy captain in Father's regiment call it—but for Regina it had been a marvelous adventure. At first in the safe company of her brother Daniel or one of her parents, she had explored the bazaars and souqs, listened to the call of the muezzin from the Mohammedan minarets that dotted the city, watched the *fellaheen* bringing their crops to market, and looked at the wonders of the ancient Egyptian past. There were perhaps a score of other girls in all of England who had seen Giza under the light of the full moon, and she had met none of them here.

There had been hard times, of course. What had started as assignment to some of the British overseers of the khedive's debts turned into military occupation with the Arabi Revolts by violent nationalists opposed to the longstanding British and French presence in Egypt. Regina was a child then, but she still had memories of Europeans being targeted in the streets before her father's regiment of hussars (and others) had restored order. Throughout her years blooming into a young woman, Cairo's British enclave had grown into a beautiful outpost of the Empire. She'd explored it and many other parts of the great city on the Nile thanks in large part to the complicity of her brother and several of the house servants. Father had given a stern warning about the dangers of the streets and the strange people who might wish to ensnare her. Surely he would have thought her already the slave to some foreign cult had he seen her moving through the *souq* dressed in the robes of a local woman, flanked by her brother and Fallah, whom her father called her maid but she looked to more as a guide.

All that had changed two years ago, when Regina's mother fell ill in Cairo. Lady Emma had never been of the strongest constitution, but her downturn was nevertheless quite sudden. Fifteen-year old Regina had had a long and pleasant conversation with her about a certain lieutenant who had caught her eye on a Monday. By Friday, Emma Blake was bedridden, her hair and brow soaked in sweat and raving about plagues of snakes and toads. Father had already been under pressure to return to England and assume the full responsibilities of his rank as a viscount now that the Arabist threat was ended, and his wife's malady convinced him it was indeed time. That spring, they had set sail for London and ultimately for this dreary estate. All save Daniel, of course, who—

"Daydreaming again, Regina?"

She started at the sound of her father's voice so close at hand. Lord Blake was already dressed for dinner, and

looked to all the respected aristocrat and military man. His black hair, shot through with gray, was still cut in a military style, an effect accented by his mustache and the medals pinned to the sash under his dinner jacket. Once a hussar, always a hussar. A smile spread across his face as he beheld his only daughter, and she was quite sure some of it had to do with having successfully entered her drawing room without her noticing. It reminded Regina of the games they had played when she was younger.

"I was thinking of..." Her mouth dried to a nervous, parched cavity. "Yes, daydreaming."

"There is not much day left to dream away, Daughter." Indeed, although it was barely four in the afternoon, the sun, beautifully crimson, was dipping toward the western horizon, and the snow-tinged countryside seen from Regina's window was plunged into elongated shadow and ruddy light. Winter days were very short in County Durham. "Shepherd's delight, it would seem," her father added.

"Yes." She turned to face her father. "Father, I..."

"Hardly the same as the sun between the pyramids in Giza, is it?"

Regina smiled. "No. No it isn't. I miss it still, Father."

"As do I, my dear." He took a seat next to her. "Your grandfather was much better at shouldering the requirements of status and title than I. Do you remember at all any of the balls you attended at Monroe House before we left for Cairo?"

Regina gently shook her head. Monroe House was the family's London residence and although she had fond memories of time spent there, they were the faint recollections of childhood. "Not especially, although Mother has always talked fondly of them."

"Yes, your mother enjoyed those evening affairs a great deal before..." He looked his daughter in the eyes, who nodded her understanding. Some things were better left unspoken. "Well, before."

"What about you, Father? Did you enjoy them?"

He smiled. "Some, yes. Your grandparents were the finest hosts in London, some said, and one always had a fine time with the finest people. But your grandfather always said that he was born to the manor and I to the saddle, and I must agree with his judgment. Give me a regiment of fine men at my side and my duty to the Queen in my heart."

"How could you give it all up, Father?"

"Hush, Regina. I have never had a fool for a daughter and I won't have one now. You know full well that the choice was not mine to make. It was only the revolts and the needs of the Empire that kept me in Egypt after my father died. The family needs its lord at home now."

"Yes, Father." She wanted to scream, to lash out at the man who was damning her to balls and parlors and being seen but not heard.

"But enough of this talk of gloom and duty. I am here with happy news for you, Regina." He smiled and looked at his daughter's doubting eyes. "I have received a cable from London that Lieutenant Seward will be joining us in time to see the New Year in."

Regina couldn't suppress a smile of her own, one that brought a chuckle to her father.

"You see, happy news. And happier still. When last I was in London, I met with Seward and he made a request of me, my dear. He asked me for your hand in marriage."

Regina felt a chill run through her, followed by a flush of heat. Marriage! With Seward, the one man who—how to put it?—had made his way into her thoughts again and again.

"We shall discuss the details upon his arrival, my dear, for if the life of an army man's daughter is not easy, the life of his wife is truly Herculean. I wish you to be happy my dear, and I need to know that you would be so at his side—his career is in the colonies, I think."

“Oh, Father! Yes, yes, and again, yes.”

“Careful, Regina, do not make any hasty decisions. I have not yet given my assent to this union. Do not be in a rush to spend your life in the heat of Java, Honduras or Lagos.”

Could he know, she wondered. Could Father understand that that was exactly what she was in a rush to do? To get away from this large and empty house a stone’s throw from the Northumbrian border. To get away from the things expected of a proper young girl and see the places others only dreamed of.

“We shall have plenty of opportunity to discuss matters. I have invited Seward to stay with us through Twelfth Night.”

“Yes, Father, of course.” She embraced him. “Thank you.”

“Yes, yes. Now off to bed with you.”

James, Lord Blake watched his daughter head for her bedchamber with a happy scurry and it brought to mind the child she had been. The child she no longer was, he realized with a touch of chagrin. What had happened to the little girl with unruly brown locks who had a thousand questions he was happy to answer? The girl who’d hiked up her skirts to run across the decks of the steamship to Alexandria?

The answer was simple, of course: she’d grown into a fine young woman. Unruly locks had become well-tended curls. All the pudginess of childhood was long gone and the fine features of a beauty had emerged, one that not even the dour clothes of the day could conceal. She reminded him of Emma on their wedding day, of the lithe and cheerful beauty who’d stolen his heart and turned a marriage of obligation into something more. To think he’d railed against the fates that compelled his

father to select for him a wife based solely on the fact that her dowry and inheritance would make solvent a viscounty just as ancient as it was impoverished. How he had bemoaned that decision! Only to find in Emma Ducheski that rarest of flowers: a true love.

That was before, of course. Before those terrible nights on Hampstead Heath in London. Before poor Lewis—who’d stood as his groomsman on that happy wedding day—met his awful fate. Before the departure for Cairo and the sickness, the scars and the betrayals.

Lord Blake didn’t even notice the smile vanish from his face and the cold thing curl up in his gut.

Alone in her bed, Regina’s dreams and memories came to celebrate with her. Closing her eyes, she returned to that night little more than a year ago. One of her last in Egypt and her first alone with Seward.

It was September and a pleasant heat tinged the Cairene night. In the three months since Father had announced that the family would be returning to England, hardly a day or night had seemed to go by without some new visit or social gathering. Father had been under a great deal of pressure to return to the mother country and take up the duties of a viscount, something that colonial service precluded, but now that he had given in, the task of relocation seemed epic in scale. Sea captains, land agents and military officers paraded through their home in the growing Garden City district of Cairo, and Father was constantly going over their reports. His military mind attacked the task of uprooting himself with vigor, but it seemed to Regina that he was making things more difficult than they needed to be. It was intentional, she knew now, a way for him to delay becoming the man he’d fought long and hard to avoid being—a country lord.

What Regina remembered most, however, was the parade of doctors attending Mother. A “tropical fever,” Father called the ailment that kept his wife in bed much of the day and sent her through raving nightmares most of the night. Regina had been shocked by her mother’s screams the first time she’d heard them and run to find her father, but the night terrors became a taboo after that. Everyone in the house knew they existed, but Father would only discuss them in the vaguest terms and usually only with stern-looking medical professionals arrived on the latest train from Alexandria or Port Said.

All this meant that he’d had little time for Regina or her feelings about returning to England. Despite the visitors who increasingly insisted on calling her “Lady Regina,” she had little interest in the life of a viscount’s marriageable daughter. She had enjoyed the freedom of living among the Queen’s subjects in Egypt, where the pressures to marry and produce an heir were less severe. Her father had been in no hurry to dowry off his daughter to a colonial social climber, but she feared he would succumb to the pressures of expectation once back in England. In the meantime, she had found herself in the lone company of various house servants.

But this evening, Lieutenant Malcolm Seward was her accompaniment. The young man, perhaps ten years Regina’s senior, had served under her father since the military occupation of 1882. Colonel Blake’s style had never been so rigid as to discount the value of his junior officers and the two had become as close to friends as possible under the circumstances. That bond only grew tighter when Seward wrestled a manservant with Arabist sympathies to the ground just before he could run Colonel Blake through with a knife. Regina was aware of the high regard in which her father held the young lieutenant and their paths had crossed at several social functions.

And, truth be told, she’d thought of him much at other times. His features—fine blond hair, broad and

muscular frame, steel-gray eyes—refused to leave her be. She’d even found herself in an uncharacteristic girlish fit when he arrived at the ball with the daughter of one of Sir Evelyn Baring’s aides on his arm. What was that girl’s name? Oh, yes.

“I’m surprised you aren’t with Paulina this evening, Lieutenant.”

Seward, standing on the balcony overlooking the twisting lanes of the Garden City and the Nile beyond it, looked away. “No, not tonight. Her father wouldn’t want that.”

In her memory, Regina could perfectly read the anger and frustration Seward tried so hard to hold in check. At the time, she’d just thrilled that Paulina might no longer be a concern. She couldn’t resist a mild jab. “Oh? Are you not to be trusted, Lieutenant?”

His gaze turned on her and for a second something dark roiled behind his eyes. “Did Paulina say anything to you?”

“Hardly.” Regina had barely even seen the girl in the last few months. “I’m sorry, Lieutenant. I did not mean to upset you.”

He walked from the balcony’s Grecian railing to one of the white stone benches designed for a comfortable view of the river. He sat with his back to the Nile, facing the doors into the house proper. “No,” he said, his voice defeated and deflated, “I’m the one who owes you an apology. It’s...”

Regina went to him, interposing herself between the bench and doors, kneeling to look him in the eye. The whalebone spine in her corset dug into her sternum. “Please, Malcolm, what happened?”

A thrill of fear went through her. Without realizing it until the deed was done, she’d used his Christian name. Doing so without invitation was to assume an intimacy she only hoped existed between the two of them. He would be well within his rights to be cross.

"The truth, I suppose." He looked into her eyes and she saw his agony, but no anger. "Her father decided I was not a proper match for his daughter. A minor officer, untitled and unlanded, just wasn't what he expected."

"Oh, Malcolm..." Regina hoped she'd kept the relief out of her voice.

"My father purchased my commission with his last pound and I have no land or estate to offer. It was foolish of me to even entertain a girl of Paulina's status."

"She..." Regina found her throat suddenly dry. Her thoughts were her own, but to share them... "She is the one who was a fool."

"What?" His eyes grew soft and Regina feared she'd be lost in them forever. "What did you say?"

"You heard me, darling." And she kissed him.

She'd never kissed a man before and feared she wouldn't know how. Her lips trembled and when he didn't immediately react, she thought she'd damned herself as a foolish child. But then his hands were cupping her face, pulling the two of them closer together into a deep embrace. His lips parted and enveloped hers and she felt heat welling up in her body. The painful corset faded from her awareness and all she could feel was him. She inhaled his scent, felt the tickle of his mustache, tasted the saltiness of his lips tinged with tears she didn't know were hers.

Something told her to remember everything about the moment, and those memories (backed by letters to and from Malcolm) had sustained her for over a year. Now, with her father's happy news, memory gave way to dreams thus far undreamed. Alone in her bedroom at Bernan House she felt his lips part anew and a delicious thrill went through as she felt his slick tongue probe her. She knew these desires were improper, but that very fact made them all the more enticing.

Like a wanton woman from one of the secret books she had found in her mother's study last year, Regina's

dream-hand traveled down his chest to the source of his manhood. For his part, her imagined lover explored her body suddenly and fantastically devoid of the corset, petticoats, gowns and garments that had bound her in reality. Delicious heat rose from her naked skin and she felt his ardor grow.

"Darling..." Her raspy whisper was the only real vocalization of the passionate moans of her fantasy. It was enough.

Regina preferred Bernan House at night, truth be told. Her head still full of images of Malcolm Seward, she walked the empty hallways of the third floor. It was cold, certainly, but she was well bundled and now too restless to remain in bed. She slipped into one of the upstairs rooms with a view to the north. It had been her grandmother's sewing room, if the enameled workbox and bolts of fabric were any indication, but it probably had not been used in the years since her death seven years before.

Regina wondered what the woman had been like. She'd only known her as an infant. Her only real image of her grandmother was the sepia-toned daguerreotype taken of her and her husband—Regina's grandfather—lying in their graves before they were buried. The Arabi problem had made a return to County Durham impossible for the new Lord Blake and his family, but the funerary cards had arrived by ship some months later, there to complete the black wardrobe the family had adopted in mourning. Black, like the bolt of dyed broadcloth ready for sewing that lay nearby and would for a while to come. Indeed, Mother hadn't been able to use the room since her arrival here, her sickness keeping her mostly in bed, but the room was cleaned and ready for her. Mary, her

lady's maid, had prepared it and maintained it without having to be told to.

Regina had passed by an entrance to the servants' quarters below-stairs earlier in her midnight wanderings and Mary had emerged as if on cue, seemingly aware of every movement in the old house. Regina had sent her back to sleep, shushing away complaints that it wasn't proper or some such. Regina had suppressed a smirk, wondering just what Mary—with her concern for propriety—would think of the dreams that had sent her mistress's daughter wandering the halls.

She took a seat in the rocking chair by the window, allowing herself a smile at the thought of shocking Mary. Beyond the thin windows of the house, the Durham countryside had been swallowed by a moonless night. A tapestry of stars spread across the sky, with bands of gray clouds creating a pattern within them. The landscape was a uniform black, like a bottomless sea or some preacher's description of the purgatory between luminous heaven and fiery hell. An expanse of sheer nothingness.

Regina smothered the candle she had been carrying to light her way and stared out into that nothingness. Sitting in a darkness almost as absolute, she strained to find some detail in the lands that were her father's. Some nocturnal bird or scavenger whose movements would betray it, some lonely farmer heading out by lamplight to the fields he would till at first light. A daughter returning from a secret rendezvous with the son of a neighboring family. But she found none of it. The land was dark and empty, devoid of the endless variety she had known in Cairo, devoid of any hint of a life other than that expected of her.

"Oh Malcolm," she whispered to the night.

The two men—one tall and thin, the other

short and corpulent—had walked several miles in the dark, through the light snow covering the frozen ground. They'd set out at sunset and it was well past midnight now, when they arrived on the grounds of the great house their wayward cousin inhabited.

The tall man looked to the upstairs window from the darkness of the grounds. He carried no light and needed none thanks to the gifts his servitude brought with it. There, lit by the flickering light of a candle, he saw the young daughter of the house. A beauty, that one.

"Come." The short man whispered, but the tone of command was unmistakable. The tall man responded—the master had charged him to accompany the other man, after all—but he felt his bile rise. If he were to keep his composure, he'd have to find a way to sate the hatred he felt toward this pudgy little fellow.

The girl in the window extinguished the candle. To others that would hide her as well as the darkness hid the two of them, but not to him. She was still there, and he had to admit, she looked delicious.

Yes, she would do nicely.

Chapter Two

“Do you ever dream of escaping, darling girl?”

The question sent fingers of numbness through Regina. She'd had Mary wheel her mother out to the north balcony outside her bedroom to enjoy the unexpected warmth of the noonday sun, but Emma Blake hadn't spoken before she asked that question. Despite the day's comparative warmth—last night's frozen fields would be muddy and wet, now—a woolen blanket seemed to keep her nestled in the wooden, wheeled chair Mary had used to move her mistress from her bedchamber. Beneath it, a simple but heavy dress, covering her from the top of her neck to the tip of her toes, and a matching bonnet completed the envelopment of the sickly woman. Until she spoke, Regina had thought her mother was sleeping.

“Sometimes.” Regina looked down at her mother, who seemed as pale and thin as ghost. Tears had welled in the corner of her eyes and that sent dread to Regina's heart. “But what do you mean? Escape from what?”

“From everything. From me, from this house, from... from yourself... from...” She looked out at the estate, unable or unwilling to put into words just what bondage she felt her daughter might wish to escape.

“Oh, mother.” Regina sat by her mother, looking into the clouded eyes of the woman she'd once thought of as so strong. “Do not worry about me. Lieutenant Seward arrives soon and he brings happy news. I—”

“Be careful, Regina,” her mother interrupted. “Your father has been a good man, but it isn't enough. It's never enough.”

“I...” Regina's throat tightened. Despite the sickness and spells that had plagued her over the last two years, Emma had always been a role model for her daughter. Regina looked to her mother as a guide for the ways in which a woman might find partnership, respect and

security with a proper husband. To hear her give voice, after twenty years of marriage, to some of the same fears she herself struggled with was more than worrisome. Truth be told, it felt like a betrayal.

“What are all these dark tidings, Emmy?”

Regina turned around toward the room and the unfamiliar voice. Mary was standing to the side of the door, demurely positioned to usher in two visitors. The first, the man who had spoken and now smiled broadly in Regina and Emma Blake's direction, was short and more than a little round. He wore a beard and his black hair was turning gray. Spectacles with small but absurdly thick lenses straddled a slightly crooked nose, giving him the appearance of a mole dressed as a man. Behind him, mostly obscured by a combination of the first man's girth and the shadows of the room, stood a taller man. He gave off the impression of an undertaker, his eyes sunk under a heavy brow and the brim of a tall black hat.

“Uncle!” said Emma. Her voice rose to a semblance of happy energy, better than Regina had heard in months. “Happy Christmas. When did you arrive?”

“Just now, Emmy. We left Durham by coach this morning and came straight here.” He waddled slightly as he stepped onto the balcony, and the image of a countryside burrowing creature stayed with Regina. “We could hardly have made another stop before coming to visit my favorite niece.”

The other man stepped forward as well. If his portly companion was a mole, then he was a serpent, moving with quiet and deadly grace. His long, thin arms ended in gloved fists clenched around a wooden walking stick. His eyes, pinpricks of reflection in shadow, darted about and Regina had the unsettling impression he was looking for prey. She stood to greet them.

“Uncle Thomas,” Emma said. “You remember my daughter Regina. Regina, Mr. Thomas Ducheski, your great-uncle.”

“Dear Regina,” Thomas the Mole said with a smile of broad, white teeth. “I haven’t seen you since Lord Blake’s departure for Egypt. You were but a child then.”

“No longer.” The tall man’s voice was as reptilian as his body, a slithering cold thing laced with threat. “Our cousin has grown into a woman.”

“Yes, yes.” Thomas looked slightly discomforted, but covered it with a chuckle. “Emma, Regina, may I present Mr. Gareth Ducheski, solicitor with offices in Durham and London.”

“A pleasure,” Emma said without conviction.

Regina held her tongue altogether. Her mother had never spoken very much about her family or her life before she married James Blake, then a dashing lieutenant in the hussars. The Ducheski were merchants and manufacturers, removed from aristocratic circles by their professions and their Slavic origins. They were successful in the age of industry, however, and grew wealthy from warehouses in Newcastle and Liverpool, mines in County Durham, and a growing number of factories across the north of England. Regina knew well that her parents’ marriage had been a strategic one—an old title paired with new capital. Marriage as an exchange of goods was hardly the thing of the romantics, however, and it made Regina uncomfortable given the news her father had brought her. Did Malcolm see her as a conveyance for some similar social exchange?

“What brings you to our home, Mr. Ducheski?” Regina directed her question squarely at Thomas, avoiding Gareth’s cold, hungry gaze and her own lingering doubts.

“Why, the pleasure of seeing you and your mother, of course.” The smile again.

“Now, Uncle Thomas,” Emma said, her voice growing tired anew, “My husband and I have never tolerated foolishness in Regina or in those who addressed

her. I will not have my own blood’s lies undo that policy. The truth, please.”

Gareth placed his hand on his smaller relative’s shoulder, his long black-clad fingers bent slightly and digging into the wool of the man’s jacket. “Yes, cousin Thomas. No need for dissimulation.”

“Of course, of course.” His smile almost covered his wince. “To be fully up front, there is some familial business to attend to. A matter of your... inheritance, Emma.”

“Oh.” Emma Blake’s eyes closed for several seconds and it seemed to her daughter that she was fighting for consciousness. “I had hoped this could wait for another time. In London, perhaps?”

“That it could wait?” Gareth asked, his incredulity eclipsing his predatory menace. “This is hardly the attitude I’d expected in one such—”

“Now, now,” interrupted Thomas. “Please forgive Gareth’s brusqueness, my darling niece. He is less used to the niceties of society than you or I.”

“Not at all,” said Emma. Regina remained silent but was not at all displeased to see the tall, serpentine man put in his place.

“I would have liked nothing more,” Thomas continued, “than to discuss all this in the quiet confines of Lady Merritt’s garden on Park Lane once you had come south to London for the season, but Aunt Eleanor tells me there is a certain urgency to matters.”

“Is Eleanor here?” Emma raised a weak hand to her chest, suppressing a shudder.

“No, she remains at Lion’s Green. But she is anxious to hear from you.” Lion’s Green, Regina knew, was a small property some ways from Bernan House, near the city of Durham proper.

“Of course,” Emma said. “We should go inside.”

“My, um, my thoughts precisely,” Thomas said.

“Mary,” Regina said, “will you please get Father and—”

"That won't be necessary, dear," her mother interrupted. "I'm sure there's nothing that needs your father's attention."

"No, certainly not," put in Thomas. "If we could just discuss matters alone?"

"Yes, of course," Emma answered. "Regina, thank you dear. We can continue our conversation later. Mary, could you assist me?"

And with that, Mary was wheeling her mistress inside with Thomas and Gareth Ducheski in tow. Regina was left behind, a child dismissed by adults concerned with serious matters. No tolerance for foolishness, indeed.

"Begging your pardon, ma'am," said Mary, "but I trust those people not a whit." Mary's accent gave her judgment the semblance of a pronouncement from some medieval midwife or even, if one overlooked gender, a rural sheriff. "They are a strange lot."

"I know what you mean, Mary." Regina was sitting in one of the downstairs rooms, trying to read through one of the literary supplements she'd received from London. She was not being very successful as thoughts of Malcolm, of Mother, and of her own newly arrived relatives affected her concentration and made her lose track of Mr. Hardy's latest story. Mary's commentary pulled her out of the tales of Wessex once and for all.

"There are stories about them in Durham, ma'am." Mary took a seat. Her slight frame was draped in a simple woman's dress, blue cotton sewn by her own hands late at night when the mistress hadn't needed her. She never quite looked Regina in the eyes—such wouldn't be proper. "Mr. Collinsworth the innkeeper says they were accused of witchcraft years ago."

"Mary, don't tell me you believe such tall tales." Regina smiled, the maid's quaint superstitions doing more

than she could know to calm her. If there was one thing she'd never worried about, it was her mother dancing under the moon at a witch's Sabbath. "You'll be telling me to tie foxglove and wolfsbane on her door next."

"I don't know just what to believe when it comes to their lot, ma'am. But the Devil works in strange ways, I know that much. And the Devil has a long history in these lands."

"And God is everywhere, Mary." Regina stood and walked toward the hall. "I'm more concerned with the affairs of Man these days, if you must know."

"If you don't mind me saying, Lady Regina, all is God's affair." Mary moved toward the back staircase, and the hidden world of servants. Before she vanished, she added, "And the Devil's too."

He liked the girl's smell, Gareth did. A fine odor, like a lily wilting under a too-strong sun, or peat moss just beginning to ripen on the moor. Sweetness laced with the prospect of decay. A bud in need of picking.

Let Thomas play at liking and loving dear Cousin Emma and her pathetic life of aristocratic normalcy. Let him mournfully bring her the news. Pathetic to carry what should be a great honor as if it were a condemnation.

Sitting in the drawing room chair, his eyes closed and his nostrils flaring, he concentrated on the smell of the girl imbued in the very furniture. He turned his head and brushed his long nose against the satin fabric and the cover placed to protect the chair from the hair oils of gentlemen. He inhaled sharply with an audible sniff and gulped in the air and its odors.

She'd been here much of the afternoon, reading and talking with that prattling, bony maid. The scent told the story of dear Regina—confusion, anger, with an

undercurrent of what, anticipation? Yes, and deeper than that another scent, the lingering pungency of sex.

The thought of that fine little thing rutting like a mare played itself in his mind's eye and the scarred vestiges of his manhood unfurled themselves as best they could. Savoring the image, he inhaled anew and played with the perfumes of this wet, young thing. Ah, no. She was no country whore, riding the stable hand in some cheap novelette passed discreetly in parlors and uproariously in taverns. No, her scent had the tinny flavor of dreams and imaginings. This girl's legs parted only in some private fantasy. She dreamed of what she could not have, what she hadn't the courage or gifts to become.

Poor girl. He wondered what it would be like to be as blind as she was, to live like the rest of the world. What would he be if he did not know the pleasure of scent and sound, of the rich unholy ichor that brewed in his veins and opened the benighted world to him? What if he did not share the gifts of his master and his line and was nothing more than another weakling of a man? That would be a very unpleasant thing indeed.

He breathed in her scent again and smiled.

Chapter Three

That night, Regina dreamed of dark things. She was trapped in the dream, sealed away in some forgotten labyrinth, with serpents and beetles crawling across the walls of weathered stone. A great weight was upon her too, as if terrible shackles held her down lest she should become loose in her fury.

And furious she was. Anger as she had never known boiled in her breast, a slaving hatred directed at all those who had wronged her. Against the father who had brought her back to England. Against the mother whose illness had forced that fate on the family. And against Daniel, especially against her brother Daniel, who had had the ability to say no, to flee to the Navy to escape his duties as his father's son. Gnashing against the hard leather strap that passed through her mouth and kept her teeth from clenching, she knew just how ready she'd be to pay her brother's price for freedom. So what if hated-father and coward-mother banished her from their thoughts? What were familial bonds if they ended in shackles or a noose?

Flies, bloated on the meat of corpses, buzzed through her dark prison and laid their eggs in her very flesh. She raged and felt a great scream welling up within her parched throat. A scream terrible enough to shake the foundations of her jail and tear the bonds from her mouth so she could feed the broiling hatred once and for all. Screams that would never end—

And it was screams that woke her, but not her own.

Regina sat bolt upright in the bed, with only the wan light of earliest morning coming through the east window of her bedchamber. For a second all was quiet, and then the shrill screech returned. Mary.

Without even grabbing a housecoat to cover her shift, Regina ran to the hallway, following the maid's cries. They led her down the east wing of the house, toward

her mother's apartments. Lady Emma rested in the north wing in the hopes that isolation from the bustle of main house would calm her spells. This morning, at least, there was no calm in the north.

Regina ran along the mezzanine overlooking the main hall, which connected the wings of the house, and took a servant's door directly into her mother's foyer. She found Mary at the threshold of the bedchamber. In between her cries, great wet sobs came upon her as she stared into the room. Regina pushed past her, hoping against hope that her mother was well. She was not.

Emma, Lady Blake lay across her bed not at all as Regina had left her the evening before. Where once she had been wrapped tightly in the downy covers, they were now strewn across the floor. She was naked, save for the shreds of what had one been her silk chemise. Her head lolled over the side of the bed away from the door and her skin was pale in the half-light, so that she looked like nothing so much as some Greek statuary—save that this statuary had been marred by vandals.

Pink puckers of scar tissue covered her flesh like the tattoos of some Pacific warrior or pagan priestess. They formed intricate patterns on her skin and came in a variety of shapes and sizes. Small round points, as if she had repeatedly stabbed herself with a knitting needle, formed a V on her stomach, pointing at the more definite lattice of lines around her most intimate areas. An ugly, glossy line of tissue ran down the middle of her chest above all those marks, a clear testament that someone or something had tried to cleave her in twain along her breastbone. Regina had never seen her mother unclothed before, clearly for reasons that went far beyond propriety.

Regina ran to her mother's side, quickly picking up one of the blankets to cover her nakedness. It was cold and clammy in her hands, soaked with the sweat of a fever, no doubt. She made it around the bed and gasped. Emma Blake's cold, empty eyes stared up at her daughter

and smears of something that could only be blood ran from her mouth.

There was no doubt in Regina at that moment: her mother was dead. Nevertheless, she felt for the beating of a heart, and found only a chill expanse of unmoving flesh. A layer of perspiration, like dew on the cool grass of morning, covered Emma's skin. Regina threw the blanket over her and tried to raise her head, which hung like a dead weight. She managed to ease her mother's back into a recline and saw more evidence of a sickly fever, great stains of sweat soaked into the sheets on which she had lain.

"Oh, Mother." Regina leaned in and kissed her lips. They felt clammy as the skin of any fish in the sea, and tasted coppery with blood. She closed Emma's eyes with her fingertips. The corners were caked with the white, salty residue of tears, the result of the fever, perhaps, or great sorrow. "Rest in peace."

Regina felt tears of her own welling inside her, and searched for some activity with which to hold them at bay. She landed on Mary, still sobbing and screeching intermittently, frozen at the threshold of the bedchamber.

"Hush, Mary," Regina said, to no visible effect. The maid stood, crying, looking at the bed. "Mary!"

Still no response. Regina walked back to Mary and waved a hand in her face, but she reacted not at all. Standing where she was, Regina clearly blocked Mary's view of the bed and the body of Emma Blake, yet she still seemed to be looking that way, sorrow and terror playing out on her face. She mouthed the word "no" over and over between her cries.

"Mary! Wake up!" Regina said, grabbing her at the shoulders and giving her a solid shake. She vaguely remembered that such was hardly what one should do with sleepwalkers and others in shock, but that seemed unimportant. She just wanted Mary to be quiet, to stop screaming and to let her mourn her mother. "Quiet!"

Regina slapped her then. It was harder than she had intended, harder than poor Mary deserved, but it did the trick. The maid fell quiet for a second, and then exclaimed, “Milady! Get away from—”

Her eyes focused on Regina for the first time. “Lady Regina... What...? Your mother...”

“I know, Mary. I know.” She embraced her then, holding the maid to her and surrendering some tears of her own. “I know.”

“Emma.”

Regina opened my eyes to see her father standing not three feet away, looking past Mary and her. Dressed in a housecoat, his gray hair standing in strange angles, his mustache unwaxed. No more the royal hussar or viscount—just the mourning husband. “My Emma.”

He pushed past his daughter and the maid and went to his wife’s bedside. It took Regina a moment to extricate herself from Mary’s grip and join him. He was stroking Emma’s raven-black hair, whispering some quiet nothings to his companion of many years. Such softness was not typical of Lord Blake, which had made his wife’s illness all the harder, since his reaction to adversity was always to fight against it. Regina knew she had benefited from his tendency to leave her to her own devices, but such a display of tenderness coming after her mother’s final hour only made her long for it all the more.

Regardless of her desires, the display of affection ended as soon as Regina came close. Standing bolt upright like the cavalryman he was, Blake took charge of the situation. “Mary, stop your bleating and go ready us some breakfast. Snap to it.”

“Yes, my lord.” She nodded and headed out.

“Regina, go get yourself dressed and we will begin making preparations. When you are ready, find Mrs. Baker and Nelson and have them ready mourning dress. Someone will have to fetch the vicar as well.”

Regina had of course seen this behavior from her father many times before, but never in a situation that struck so closely to her heart and his. “But, Papa, I can’t...”

“You can and you will!” he thundered. “There are things I must attend to alone, and I will not have you in my way. Now hurry.”

James Blake had long taught his daughter to value honesty above all else. *The plain truth is the highest of monarchs*, he would say. So she refused to back down from him at this moment. “No, Father. The marks on her skin, I have to—”

He was upon her in a second, his face red with fury. “Quiet your prattling! I am your father and I will be obeyed in this matter! There will be no talk of savagery and paganism in this house, young lady!”

For the first time in her life, Regina feared her father would strike her. Instead, he laid his hand on her shoulder. She felt him tremble, and although his voice fell to a whisper, there was still steel in his words. “Your mother died of a fever brought from Egypt, nothing else. She will be buried in sanctified soil and I will hear nothing else on the subject.” With that he walked back to the bedside, and gathered up the sheets to cover her completely, hiding all signs of the arcane markings across her flesh. He placed her properly on the bed, in a position of quiet repose, and used his thumb to wipe the crusted blood from her lips. “Absolutely nothing else.”

Finding her mother had opened a chasm of grief within Regina, and she now saw her father on the other side of it, separated from her. “Yes, father.”

With that he turned from her, as if Regina had suddenly ceased to be relevant. She slowly backed out of the room, watching her father attend to his “things.” First he wiped the last of the bloody residue from Emma’s lips and face with a washcloth and then he went about the room, gathering up the various artisanal items Regina had always associated with her mother. The engraved

cartouche of Egyptian hieroglyphs, the lapis-lazuli beads that evoked the shape of blue eyes—he gathered them all into a makeshift sack made with a flap of his housecoat, as if they were poison to him.

“Dirty superstition,” he muttered. “Bloody witchcraft.”

Regina didn't feel much of anything the rest of the night, and into the wan light of the next morning. Under the watchful eyes of Mrs. Baker the housekeeper, the servants ushered in a pall of blackness on Bernan House as the Blake family adopted heavy mourning dress. The boughs of holly and other signs of the season vanished from the house, and Regina wandered into her own dressing room to find Mary gathering up her white and gray dresses to be dyed a deep black. She knew layer upon layer of crinoline would come to engulf her as was proper for a mourning daughter. The Queen herself, in long lament for her dear departed consort Prince Albert, had set the stage of the depths of dreary somberness the bereaved of standing should aim for and in this, it seemed, her father had decided to accept all the requirements of his station.

Standing aside as the servants attended to their lengthy work of banishing all signs of color and joy from her quarters and the rest of Bernan House, Regina took a moment to gaze at the jewelry of her trousseau. One of the great benefits of being the daughter of a colonial military man was the access her family had had to the great bazaars of Cairo and the Far East. Her trousseau was full of exotic jewels in fine settings of filigree and arabesque. The Mohammedan prohibitions on figurative art, she'd observed, made their artisans all the more expressive in the fine geometric patterns of their jewelry. Some would say her trousseau was lacking in cameos and

other figurative pieces, but she far preferred what she had. Not that it mattered now—jewels were banished during deep mourning and even a half-year from now, only blackest jet would be proper.

That day, Father Duncan, the town vicar, came to visit and whisper last rites, and he mentioned to Regina and her father that the Bishop of Durham and perhaps even the Archbishop of York would make the journey to Bernan House. If this was meant to hearten her, it did not at all. The visitors who would soon follow would only make her discomfort worse.

In the late afternoon, Regina could stand the questions of her own mind no longer and went to the north wing. Malcolm had yet to arrive and her father had adopted a stoicism she thought beyond even him, concentrating on the minutia of mourning and paying no heed to his daughter's trauma.

As the day wore on, and sleep had not come, Regina had wondered if perhaps she had imagined some, if not all, of the terrible scene. For an awful, beautiful moment after she rose herself from an open-eyed daze on the divan of her drawing room, she had even hoped her mother's death was a phantasm created by fatigue and anticipation. But no, the sentiment of loss came crashing down upon her too quickly to be a falsehood. But the scars and strange ritual markings? The blood on her mother's lips? Those she was less certain of. She had to know, to make sure.

The necessities of death had been tended to early on, she supposed, and the north wing of the house was eerily quiet. No maids scurrying, no sounds of the kitchen down below wafting up through ceilings and floors. Instead, only the cloying, dark heat of a house closed against even the slight sun of winter. It was as if the shadows emanated from her mother's bedchamber because

the closer she moved to it down the long, broad hall, the scarcer light became. Cracks of sunlight pressed through shutters only to be blocked by drapes. Wan candles and lanterns vanished, replaced by unlit wicks and empty sconces.

When Regina opened the double doors into the bedroom itself, the darkness was complete. She could be looking into the stygian depths, so absolute was the shadow that awaited her. She waited a few moments for her eyes to adjust, but even then she could only make out a few vague shapes thanks to the measly light coming in from the hall behind her. There the rough contour of the four-poster bed that held her mother's corpse, near it the bulk of a large chair, across from that a heavy dresser.

"Enough," she whispered to no one in particular and made her way through the darkness toward the window she knew awaited her at the far wall. She braced herself for contact with some unseen trinket or piece of furniture, but made it to the wall in a few long, easy strides. There, she grabbed the heavy curtains, found the part between the two where a bit of light might make its way in despite the shutters beyond and drew them apart.

"No!" The voice was loud and panicked, half merging with some guttural growl. Regina, startled, stepped away and turned toward the bed, to see her mole-like uncle, Thomas Ducheski, hurtling himself at her from the chair where the shadows had hidden him. "You mustn't!"

The short, round man, moved with astonishing speed, pushing his young niece out of the way and shutting the curtains tight against the single blade of sunlight that had pierced the room. Regina stumbled, knocked aside with a force that hardly seemed possible from such a little man.

"What..? Who?!" Regina's heart was racing.

"It is me," said her uncle. A sudden smell of sulfur and a sharp scratching sound accompanied a flare of light as he lit a long match. He proceeded to light a candle on

a nearby dresser, before shaking the match out. "I'm sorry, my dear but you must not open the drapes or shutters."

"And why not?" Regina's voice was hard and accusatory, but she spared a quick look behind the man toward her mother. The candlelight barely reached the bed and the woman laying under its covers. The long shadows gave Emma Blake's corpse an animal aspect, deepening the lines on her face and turning her fine lips into something akin to a snarl. Regina gaped.

"Because..." Thomas too looked back toward the bed and promptly shifted his position to interpose himself between mother and child. "Because it is tradition, Regina. We Ducheski come from the east and we still bear some of the ways of the Slavs. To expose a departed soul to the light of day is to curse it, Regina. Your great aunt Eleanor will explain it all when she arrives this evening."

"I certainly hope so," Regina said as she moved closer to her mother's deathbed. The tricks of the flickering candlelight had passed and Lady Emma looked to be in quiet repose—pale and drawn, but no snarling beast. "I hope so."

Thomas was true to his word, at least in terms of the timing of Eleanor Ducheski's arrival at Bernan House. The black four-horse coach arrived just as the horizon swallowed the last red rays of sunlight, the team's hooves and the cab's wheels crunching through the packed earth and gravel of the long drive. Regina—who had been on watch for the possible arrival of her betrothed from the Durham station—watched Morris the coachman greet the horses. Thomas Ducheski emerged from the house as if on cue to receive his relatives, opening the coach's door to help the passengers out.

Regina, watching from a front-facing window on the second floor, tried to make out the details in the twilight. The driver, sitting high in the front of the carriage to man the reins, wore a long overcoat against the winter chill. He wore no hat, but it was too dark to make out any features—Regina had the impression of baldness, but could not be sure.

Gareth Ducheski was the first to disembark from the coach's innards. Regina had no trouble at all recognizing him in the gloom. His tall, thin form, all angles and sharpness, made him unmistakable, as did the harsh way in which he pushed his cousin aside to help the next passenger out. Regina remembered with sudden clarity a moment in Cairo: street dogs fighting for status and the right to pick at a discarded lamb bone, the most dominant of the mangy creatures pinning the other momentarily to remind it of its inferiority.

The woman who emerged from the black coach, Regina concluded, must be Aunt Eleanor, the very mention of whom had had such an effect on her mother the day before her death. Physically, there could be no greater contrast than between her and her nephew Gareth. If he was a serpent—long and sleek—then she was a small, gnarled spider. She walked with the help of a cane and seemed bent over with the weight of years unnumbered and acts unspoken. She moved slowly but with assurance, swatting away Thomas's attempt to interpose himself as the helpful nephew. Her dress was a deep black shell, a simple accessory to the shadows that seemed to cling to her like a second skin. Her face, what Regina could see of it, was a convergence of lines and wrinkles tied together with steel-gray hair in a tight bun.

She had moved only three small steps from the coach when she suddenly looked up—straight at the second floor window where her little niece was watching. Regina felt a chill like a cold blade run down her spine and tension coil in jaw, at the hinge just behind her ears. For a moment

she feared she would be sick, but then the old crone looked away and continued toward the front door where Mrs. Baker was surely awaiting them.

Regina headed downstairs. It was time to greet the family, it seemed.

"Other family members will arrive later," Thomas was explaining hurriedly when Regina made it downstairs. The little man was holding up the rear of a party made up of her father, the crone Eleanor and her apparent favorite Gareth. "Aunt Eleanor is here to make initial preparations for the funeral."

"Yes, well," Lord Blake put in as they made their way toward the staircase. "There are some matters to be discussed on that front."

"Later." Eleanor Ducheski's voice was a cold thing, lacking in volume but powerful nonetheless. She sounded like the aggregate of a governess and a military officer, with an accent that spoke of foreign and less-civilized lands. "First, I see Emma. Then we talk."

"Of course, but—"

"Ah!" Eleanor exclaimed looking up from her crouch to see Regina. The old woman's eyes were two black peas set deep in the furrows of her wrinkled flesh. When she spoke, she exposed teeth set at odd angles and discolored by the years. "This is the daughter."

"Um, yes. Mrs. Ducheski, my daughter, Lady Regina." Her father, she noted, was struggling to maintain his composure.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, madam." Regina bowed down to reach the crone's eye level.

As a response, Eleanor Ducheski walked right up to Regina and began to inspect her as she imagined a butcher might an animal for slaughter. One hand still clutching her cane, she used the other to grasp Regina's waist, then her hips. "Yes, I see."

Ignoring Regina's dumbfounded reaction, she continued her inspection. She felt her niece's bosom

under the tight corset, pulled the girl's face forward and, handing her cane to Gareth, used both hands to pull back Regina's lips and inspect her teeth.

"Mrs. Ducheski!" Lord Blake forcibly moved his daughter away from the old woman. Regina, for her part, could only raise her hands to her face where the woman had pinched skin and pulled flesh. "That is..."

"She is truly Emma's daughter, yes? More beautiful than her mother, even."

"Th... Thank you..." Regina stammered out.

"Tsk," the old woman scoffed and started up the stairs. "Beauty makes a woman weak."

Regina's stupor lasted through the night and into the early hours of the next morning. The shock of her mother's death and the procession of strange events that happened over the following twenty-four hours—the unexplained scars, the Ducheski traditions, Eleanor's "inspection," and most of all, her father's refusal to address any of it—simply overloaded her heart so that she was barely aware of collapsing in bed that night. It was finding Mary, the poor woman who had actually found Emma that terrible morning, that finally revived Regina's spirit.

In the year Regina had spent at Bernan House—interrupted by the summer season in London—Mary had never struck her as the strongest of women. She seemed rather to be of that breed of house servants who survive the vagaries of their masters' humors by doing their very best to remain invisible. Regina knew that was a commendable skill, one that she was sure had served Mary well, but it had the unfortunate side-effect of making the maid seem more mouse than woman. Her screeching and stammering before Emma Blake's body had hardly seemed out of character. Still, when Regina found her wrapped into a tight ball in the corner of her small quarters, it was

enough to shake off the last bit of stupor. This was not right.

Regina's stunned sleep after her dismissal on the staircase lasted only a few hours and gave way to tossing and turning. She felt fevered and flitted between tense consciousness and flashes of dark dreams that mostly fled from her memory as soon as she awoke. Only a few details of the nightmares remained behind as terrible reminders, most prominently twisted images of the crone Eleanor Ducheski. Regina saw her great-aunt's wrinkled and wizened face streaked with blood, her eyes turned black as coal, and her emaciated fingers tipped with nails like talons. *She tried to escape me*, the apparition said, *but she could not. And neither will you, little cousin.* Several times, Regina woke with a start, gasping for air and convinced the old woman's hands were at her throat.

Eventually, she gave up on bed and sleep altogether and returned to her Egyptian habit of early morning wanderings. Regina expected to find Bernan House empty at that hour, but instead she only avoided her maternal cousins by luck. The crone herself was seated in the downstairs library where Regina had intended to nest for a few hours, attended by both Gareth and Thomas Ducheski. Regina peaked in through a door and remained hidden from view, listening to their idle conversation, much as she had done as a girl in Cairo when spying on her parents.

"I had thought the initiation wasn't to be until Michaelmas," said Thomas. "That is months away."

"You need not remind me of the calendar, nephew," Eleanor answered in a voice full of scorn. "All is as it should be."

"But I had just carried the news the day before," he continued. "There was no time—"

Regina was sure she hadn't moved, but she must have made a slight noise at that moment, because Gareth turned in her direction much like a cat who has suddenly

detected a mouse. She quickly retreated down the hall into adjoining rooms, and then headed to the second floor by the back stairway. Breathing all together too heavily for her own peace of mind, she crouched at the top of the thin, spiraling stairs and listened for signs of pursuit. After a few minutes of silence she opened the top door and crept into the maids' foyer.

There she found Mary, curled in the darkest corner of the room, muttering quietly. At first, Regina thought she might even be snoring, but as she crept closer to the woman, she could make out words. "The eyes... the eyes... the eyes..." Mary said, over and over.

Regina extended a hand toward her, hoping to comfort or rouse her, but she would have none of it. Mary lashed out with her arm, pushing Regina's away and screaming incoherently. She then flattened herself against the wall, trying to back away from her master's daughter. Her eyes were wild with terror and Regina could see cold sweat beading on her brow even in the half-light of the two candles illuminating the small foyer. Regina was convinced the maid was in some sort of sleepwalking state.

"Mary! Wake up! It's Regina..."

"No! The eyes... No!" And with that she collapsed anew, clutching at her own face with the fury of a child ready to spite itself. Regina rushed to pull her hands away, but Mary still managed to raise several large welts on her cheeks and brow before Regina clamped her hands to the floor. She struggled with the strength of the mad for a few seconds, but thankfully Regina could bring the weight of her body to bear, holding her hands down. And then, as suddenly as it had started, the maid's fit ended.

"Oh, what...?" Mary blinked back a few tears. "Oh, Lady Regina, ma'am, I'm..."

"Shhh," Regina said, trying to console her. "It's all right. What happened to you, Mary?"

"Oh, Lady Regina, I... well... that is..."

"It's all right, Mary. I won't tell my father or anyone else. Please, I only wish to help."

"It's just that, it's as if I've caught your dear mother's humors, milady." The maid continued to babble as Regina guided her to a small bench on the far wall of the foyer, where she might be more comfortable. "Ever since I saw... that is, found her... I can't sleep at night."

"That's to be expected, Mary. You've had quite a shock and it was only the night before last. I can't sleep either."

"Yes, ma'am, that's kind of you to say. But the nights, and most of all the early mornings, have been like pieces of hell itself, if you'll excuse me saying."

Regina nodded quickly to forgive her understandable blasphemy, not wanting to stop her speech now that it was flowing at last. The maid continued unbidden. "The time before dawn is when I get the great bulk of my work done, milady, getting the house ready and all. But now, when those hours come and I wake as I always have, it's like the nightmares wake with me. Oh, ma'am."

"Shhh, I have had dreams as well, Mary. What do you dream of?"

"The most terrible things, ma'am. Like seeing your fine mother again and again, and her night gown all torn and... revealing... that is... I see her naked ma'am, like a harlot, and covered with those terrible marks, like witch's teats."

She braced for the physical retort she expected from a peer who's just heard her mother called a harlot and a witch. Instead, Regina just stroked her loose auburn hair. "Go on, Mary, it's alright."

"And I see eyes, ma'am. Dark and terrible, like wells into the Pit itself!" She sobbed again. "All through the hours before dawn, I see them everywhere, looking at me and *into* me. Like the Devil Himself, I swear it. He's cursed me, I think." She broke into quiet sobs and, although Regina half-hoped she would say more, she couldn't bring

herself to impose further suffering on the poor woman.

"It's all right, Mary. You are not cursed." Regina wiped away some more tears from Mary's cheek. "But perhaps you should take some time to yourself. Do you have kin you could stay with? We can certainly do without you for a few days and the rest might do you good."

"Oh, ma'am, yes, I suppose I could stay with my brother Harold. He is a cottager on Gables Heath."

"That's the estate of Sir Milner, yes?" She nodded. "Fine, I will make arrangements for you. Now go get yourself dressed."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you ma'am." And Mary was gone.

Once she had left, and Regina was alone in the little foyer, she felt tears of her own coming. She hadn't yet cried, and now they came first in quiet crystal beads and then in wracking sobs that shook her to the core. The image of her mother, marked as if by some devilish artist or ancient torturer, returned in staggering detail: her skin, white and bloodless, glowing in the light of the moon, the splash of dried blood across her mouth. Regina collapsed on the ground, tears streaking down her face and her chest convulsing for air. She saw again her mother the next day—was that truly just yesterday?—in that room turned into a dark crypt by shutters and heavy drapes.

In her grief, details of the scene became visible for the first time. Her mother's lips curled back, revealing animalistic teeth in the wan candlelight. But then she had seemed in quiet repose when Regina finally approached, so peaceful and flushed. Her lips a deep red that belied her paleness just that morning.

And what was this talk of initiation? Some deep secret was weighing on Regina's heart, some fact about her mother that had remained hidden for years. A secret that only death could reveal. Mary saw the signs too and could hardly handle the strain. Regina wondered if she could herself.

A vast pit of sorrow opened in Regina's chest, and from it billowed pain and anger. The numbness was gone and now there was agony. This was her mother, the woman who had raised her and loved her like no other. Where others were cold and distant, she was warm and kind. Where others were petty and small, she was wise and caring.

What terrible truths had she hidden beneath her demure clothes and caring smiles? Who was Emma Blake?

Chapter Four

The creature known as Victoria Ash glided more than walked into the dining car of an overnight train from London. The whole conveyance bumped and swayed with the irregularities of the rail, but she seemed not to be bothered at all. Grace in all circumstances had rarely been a problem for Victoria since she stopped breathing.

The car should, by all rights, be closed at this late hour. The train had left London in the afternoon, heading first toward the coast and then turning north toward Durham, from where it would proceed to Newcastle-upon-Tyne and then on into Scotland. Victoria had been carefully ensconced in a large wooden crate at the time of departure, of course, her mind made insensate by the deep, dreamless slumber that took her each day. The wood of the crate and the careful layers of packing within it had protected her alabaster flesh from the rays of the sun, which had an unfortunate effect on her kind. In her more romantic moments, Victoria spoke of missing the delicate touch of sunlight warming her bare skin as she lay in the fields of Aquitaine in the heady days of June or July. The truth was, she was unsure if she could even remember that sensation. What was worse, she didn't know just when she had forgotten it.

The three men at the back of the car were likely responsible for keeping the car open long past its accustomed hours. The tired looking barman who was the only attendant still manning a station carried over another round of sherry and did his best to hide his exhaustion. His three clients were all young gentlemen serving in the hussars, if their waxed mustaches and uniforms were anything to judge by. They were playing cards—casino, she guessed, from the quick play—and laughing about days gone by. Victoria stood in the shadows of the car's forward section and watched them. There were

others of her kind who might be interested in the goings on in County Durham, some of whom collected soldiers.

“Marriage, eh Seward?” Easton lifted the glass of sherry that the barman finally brought around and toasted his brother in arms. “To the fine lady—what was her name again?”

“Regina.” Seward laughed a bit at his large friend's forgetfulness. Drink always did this to Easton, made him a loud, mirthful, clown. Hard to believe this bellowing, smiling drunkard was capable of acts of true savagery and true heroism in combat. “Her name is Lady Regina. Lord Blake's daughter, yes?”

“Don't mind Easton,” Pool put in. Thinner and swarthier than the loud lummock Easton, Lieutenant Pool had been Seward's friend for far more years. They'd served together in Egypt under Lord Blake's command. “He's only jealous.”

“Ha!” Easton exclaimed. “A wife is a shackle I don't need. They're only good for dragging one about and squeezing out a brat every few years. No thank you!”

“Not all of us,” Seward said, “are the second sons of a senile marquis who covers up our every indiscretion. Some of us need to establish ourselves.”

“And not all of us,” Pool added in support, “are content to know only the pleasures of every whorehouse from Whitechapel to Calcutta!”

“Ha!” Easton bellowed. “Give me a wet whore over every dry lady in Mayfair!”

“You,” Seward said, “have been visiting the wrong ladies.”

Victoria moved forward in the car, her senses sharpening and taking in every detail of the three men.

So this was the fiancé of the daughter Blake, tall and handsome in the pedestrian way of English men. He had a hunger to him, she would give him that, some drive that put him a notch above a generation of well-bred, badly behaved aristocrats.

The others, Easton and Pool, fit more into Victoria's tastes for the bizarre. Easton, the connoisseur of flesh if his friends' jibes were any indication, was a mountain of a man whose heart beat faster than it should, making him ruddy and flushed. His red mustache and mutton chops only added to his barbarian flair and rough edges. A modern-day Viking, this one.

As for Pool, he was shorter than either of his companions, the more proper stature of a cavalryman. A fine scar ran down the side of his cheek and along his neck, tracing a line of fair, hairless flesh in the black beard and swarthy skin of his face. Italian or Spanish blood perhaps, surely on his mother's side with a name like Pool. Had his father married a foreigner or simply diddled with an immigrant maid and had the decency to see to his education? Aristocrats had a tendency to do that—when the bastard child was male.

"May I join you, gentlemen?" The three were satisfyingly surprised by her approach, although shock soon gave way to a wave of hungered emotions Victoria took in with the pleasure of a gourmet tasting a new dish.

From the larger-than-life Easton, a hungry and boring grin of lust. His thoughts, in all likelihood, never strayed beyond his desire to mount this fortuitously arrived female. His only reaction was to shift in his seat to accommodate his swelling member. Typical. She dismissed him.

"Of course, madam." Seward, the soon-to-be-wed young lieutenant, reacted with a propriety that belied his own hungers. He half-stood to welcome the lady and looked about nervously. His hand shot out to catch the rim of his chair as the train swayed in the night, and his

eyes took her in with apprehension. He was no chaste choirboy, this one, but he saw danger in a beautiful woman approaching in the night—a risk to his engagement perhaps? Or to some other plan? His apprehension was interesting, the type of emotional flavor she enjoyed, but not tonight.

"A fourth, splendid." Pool, the short illegitimate, looked up at her with an easy smile and began dealing cards. "Whist it is, then."

Victoria sat opposite the man and marveled at his sheer calm. Flickers of emotions played themselves out under his façade—no breathing man could completely hide his feelings from one such as she—but they were only mild reactions. This man had faced enough in his life that the appearance of strange women on night trains was nothing to get excited about. He simply accepted the new circumstances and carried on.

She picked up the cards of her first hand, ordered them with ease, and focused her attention on the little man. Or, more properly, she focused his attention on her. The dark, cold blood in her veins grew hot and she pulled his eyes to her. To her flesh, her eyes, her hair. *Am I not beautiful, Lieutenant Pool?*

He reacted, certainly. She saw admiration, lust, even fascination, bloom in him. His pupils dilated and his neck developed a few stray beads of sweat. His hands shook just a bit. But the fascinating thing was that there was no fear. These new hungers swept over him and he neither thrilled to them nor ran from them. It was clear to Victoria that he simply accepted their presence and carried on.

As Seward put down the first card to her right, she looked across at Pool, her partner. The scar on his neck ran just near the jugular. Whatever wound had caused it must have bled profusely. She felt her sharp teeth extend behind full, moist lips.

She would taste that blood this night.

Chapter Five

Malcolm arrived that day. Taking the train from London and then hiring a hackney carriage from Shincliffe station just south of Durham proper, Easton, Pool and he all arrived in the middle of the afternoon. Seeing him descend from that coach, dressed in the finery of a hussar, Regina felt true joy for the first time in days.

She had been busy much of that day making preparations with father. He agreed with her suggestion of sending Mary to stay with relatives, but only after he spent some time with the poor woman himself. Perhaps too curious for her own good, Regina managed to overhear their conversation much in the same way she had spied upon the Ducheskis in the early hours of the morning, by staying unseen in an adjoining room.

"It is good that you find rest with your own family, Mary," her father said, in the tone of a loving *pater familias*. "You have been a great help to us, and I know my dear wife was very fond of you."

"Thank you, your lordship. I was very fond of her ladyship myself."

"I must warn you, however," he said, steel suddenly running through his voice, "that this is no time for gossip."

"Your... your lordship?"

"I will not have tongues wagging across the shire with spurious tales of my beloved Emma's death, do you understand? The fevers of Egypt took her at last and that is all we can ever know." He must have actually grabbed her then, for her breath caught with shock. "I will tolerate nothing else, Mary. Nothing."

"Yes, your lordship." Her voice cracked with tension, even fear. "Of course."

"Very well, now gather your things and Milton will take you to your family."

Regina slipped away before Mary could excuse herself and sought some quiet corner to think. It had not even been two days since her mother's passing and she already felt the fabric of her life unraveling. Strangers calling themselves kin had descended on the house throughout the course of the day, more Ducheski cousins and other relatives with names stranger still. They came in from Durham and from the port of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Some stank still of coal dust, attesting to their duties near the mines that dotted the horizon of the county. They even had servants of their own, and by the afternoon the whole north wing of the house was given over to them. Most certainly including the bedchamber in which lay Emma Blake.

Worse still than this plague of invading black-clad locusts, Regina's father, who had seemed like a pillar of strength her entire life, was crumbling along hidden fault lines of lies and secrets. He must have known about the scarring and whatever dark associations had caused it, but he would not discuss them with his daughter. She understood his desire to keep the memory of his wife as untainted as possible, but just like Regina's brother Daniel's decision not to return to Bernan House, this seemed like another subject that would drive father and daughter apart. In fact, James, Lord Blake had barely managed to speak to Regina at all since that terrible dawn discovery. It seemed to her that he was too conscious of betraying the truth he had always told Regina he worshiped, and now could not face the accusations he imagined in her eyes. Beneath it all, the creeping suspicion that her father might possibly bear matching scars and markings wound its way through Regina's thoughts, widening the gap between the two.

So to say that Regina Blake was relieved to see Lieutenant Malcolm Seward arrive would be a great understatement. Although they had shared only one precious evening of solitude, their letters had been like a

rescue line for her in her prison of proper English living over the last year. Now, with tragedy and secrecy conspiring against her, she needed his companionship more than ever, and she rushed to him with little concern for propriety or decorum. He and his mates were just entering the main foyer when she raced down the stairs and collided with him in an impromptu embrace.

“Oh, Malcolm! Thank Providence you’re here.”

“Regina, my darling.” He enveloped her in his arms for a brief few seconds. “I’ve just heard the terrible news this morning. I am at your service.”

The previous year, during her father’s first parliamentary season in London, wagging tongues had called Regina a “New Woman.” She had taken it as a compliment, given her intolerance for fainting weakness in her sex. Seward’s appreciation of her as a person of worth, one not to be coddled or discounted, was one of the critical things that forged her own affection for him, and despite a longing to this once be weak, she decided to be strong with him instead. Stepping back from him a step, far enough for a certain propriety but close enough to feel his presence and he to feel hers, she was able to catch her breath.

“Thank you, Lieutenant. My father and I welcome your presence and wish you a merry Christmastide despite the grief we know you share.” The pretense of formality surely seemed strained, but Regina noticed it put the other officers at ease and that must have relieved Malcolm. Pretense was an important part of military command, it would seem. “And my heart lightens to have you by my side.”

“You are very gracious, Lady Regina.” He bowed ever so slightly, although Regina spied a small smile on his face at the pretense. “And may I present to you Lieutenant Easton and Lieutenant Pool, also of the 12th Hussars, and stalwart companions both.”

“Milady,” they said in unison, bowing as well.

She took them in for the first time. Easton was something of an oversized version of the traditional dashing hussar, taller even than Malcolm and red-haired. His mustache was well trimmed and his eyes blue and deep enough to cause a flutter in the hearts of many a countess or heiress, she was sure. Pool was slighter and darker, with finer features despite his thin beard and the scar along his face. His thin lips parted in a slight smile as he looked at Regina, and she had the impression of a corsair from a bolder time.

“Pool was a classmate of mine as a child and served under your father’s command as well. Easton is newly attached to the regiment, but has already proved his worth many times over. In fact, I dare say I owe both these men more than I could ever repay after our latest battles in Sudan.”

“Were you hurt, Malcolm?” Regina did her best to keep up with the news from Egypt and her father’s old regiment, helped at times by reports Lord Blake shared with her. She knew well that the Empire maintained itself through force of arms as well as trade.

“No, or at least not seriously. We faced some harsh moments, however, and Lieutenant Pool managed to outmaneuver some of the insurgents as they were trying to cut us off from reinforcements. All ended as it should.”

“Glad to hear it, my boy,” came Lord Blake’s thundering voice from atop the grand staircase. Regina thrilled to hear that officer’s tone in his voice, evidence of a strength she had not seen in him in the past few terrible days and nights.

“Colonel.” All three lieutenants snapped to attention, but Regina could see a smile creeping onto Malcolm’s face. He had been her father’s closest man in Egypt and their reunion was one of true friends more than of a commander and his subordinate. “A pleasure, sir.”

From that point on, the day was taken up in happy reunions, earnest condolences and talk of happenings in

Egypt and elsewhere in the colonies. They spent a goodly amount of time discussing the recent declaration of the canal at Suez as a neutral waterway open to ships of all flags, and the implications for the flow of goods and relations with France. The political power of Sir Evelyn Baring, Her Majesty's Consul General of Egypt, had continued to grow and there was talk of ascension to the peerage. The prospect of who would succeed the aging Khedive Taufiq as the nominal Egyptian head of state seemed moot—whoever it was would answer to Baring.

Pool and Easton participated in some of these discussions, but for the most part it was Seward, Lord Blake and Regina chatting away as they had on a few occasions in Cairo. If the two newcomers seemed taken aback by a woman's participation in these discussions of supposedly male matters, they kept their comments to themselves. Regina would have liked to believe they were awed by the vigor of her own personality, but she knew that in all likelihood they were but taking their cue from their superiors in the matter.

A few times, Seward tried to move the conversation onto matters more grave. What had finally happened to Lady Blake? What arrangements were being made? Who were these visitors he had spied upon his arrival? Lord Blake would have none of it. He made cursory answers, but always returned the conversation to politics, economics and military affairs.

The Ducheski kin, for their part, kept well away. They continued to use the north wing as their preserve and while a few of their servants came and went down the halls near the drawing room in which the Blakes and their guests chatted, neither Eleanor, Thomas, nor Gareth made an appearance. All the better, Regina thought.

That night, Regina found that sleep still would not come. But this time it was not dark images of dread relatives, or the black eyes of poor Mary's delusions, that kept her from Morpheus's arms, but visions of the man who slept in the guest chambers nearby. Closing her eyes, her fantasized memories returned. She felt his arms around her and smelled the subtle perfume of his skin. She thrilled to his hands, paradoxically both rough and gentle, caressing her cheek and his lips finding her own.

Propriety easily gave way to the longings of the night, all the more so because the reality of Regina's days had become so bleak. She welcomed her imaginary Malcolm's caresses, his touch along her neck, her arm and her leg. Unable to sleep, but as if in a dream, she felt heat building within her and writhed with forbidden sensations. To feel his kisses, to return them with the fire that she felt, wiped away all her sorrow and dread.

"Malcolm..." She moaned and imagined his hands exploring her skin. Her own hands acted as his, pushing her shift up her thighs, exposing her sex. He, or she herself, pulled the muslin fabric higher, over her head until it fell off like some discarded skin. She lay back on the bed and felt his imaginary hands run over her stomach and cup her breasts, suddenly tender and aware in the cold air of a country house at winter. She tossed her head back and ran her hands back down between her thighs, like a wanton harlot or a pagan she-thing, like—

Mother.

She froze with the sudden image of her mother's naked form, drawn back over her bed in a final apoplexy of want, the pink lines of arcane scarring attesting to long years of depravity. Regina quickly drew in Mary's ravings of Emma Blake writhing just as she had been, and a sudden chill came over her. Gooseflesh rose on her skin and she felt sweat beading her brow. She trembled and curled onto her side, spasms and tears overcoming her. The sorrow within her opened further to swallow her whole.

A knock.

Suddenly overcome with shame and the fear that it might be her father, Regina ran to the door to make sure it was locked. “Who is it?” she asked through the wood, trying and failing to keep her voice from sounding frantic.

“Darling, it’s me.” A shudder went through Regina at the sound of Malcolm’s voice. What would he think were he to enter and find her naked and flushed? What would he do? Embarrassment and forbidden pleasure fought for control over her. “Let me in,” he said.

“No... Father wouldn’t allow it.” Her stage whisper carried through the door and she turned the lock, which caught with an audible click. “He... he’s had more than enough to deal with.”

“He is asleep, darling. I must see you.”

“Not here, Malcolm. He’s bound to wake.”

“Where then?”

Regina searched her memory for some safe haven. Milton had yet to return from Gables Heath where he had brought Mary—no doubt Father had asked him to watch over the poor girl for a night before coming back. “The coach house. It will be empty. Meet me there in a quarter-hour. Hurry, before Father wakes.”

She heard him walk off with a final invocation that was reduced to a mumble by the wood between them and his haste to leave. She scurried to the bed and slipped on her shift again and then a housecoat and slippers as well. She did her best to cancel out the marks of thrashing and sleep on her, pulling a brush through her hair and dabbing her face with a washcloth at the basin. She tied her hair back with the silk ribbon Malcolm had given her that night on the Nile and pinched her cheeks to bring some color to them.

All these minute tasks of womanhood served to focus Regina’s attention somewhat, but she was well aware of a tense heat building within her. Sudden recollections of the desire to which she had so recently abandoned herself

bubbled up and caused flashes of heat. She tried her best not to run along the hall and down the stairs—*Quiet, lest you wake Father.*

Gareth Ducheski watched Regina Blake from the shadows. Standing stock still in the darkened corner of the upstairs hall not twenty paces from the door to the young lady’s bedchamber, he’d listened with some interest to her whispers to her lover. That wastrel of an Englishman had passed directly in front of Gareth without noticing him, so focused was the lieutenant on the passions in his loins. Gareth hated the stink of that man, full of pride and hunger for things he felt the world owed him. A bastard son unless he missed his guess, or perhaps the last child of a poor pseudo-aristocrat who could just barely scrape together the twelve hundred pounds to buy his boy a commission in the cavalry. Pathetic. Gareth only hoped that Her Majesty’s Army had taught him to fight, so that he could at least enjoy killing the boy.

The lady behind the thin wall to which Gareth pressed his back, however, was a far more interesting flower. He remembered well the scent of her on the drawing room chair. That scent had drawn him here tonight, the predator’s instinct that she would be fruit ripe for the picking.

And how true his instinct had been! He’d arrived not a half-hour ago to the delicious aroma of rising blood and engorging labial folds. His keen hearing had made him privy to her moans and tremors as forbidden thoughts gave way to heated explorations. He could hear the slip of fabric on heated skin, of palms on stimulated flesh, the sudden inhalation of pleasures discovered. He had been mere moments from proceeding to the next phase—seasoning his prize with a dash of fear—when that

weak-chinned Lieutenant Seward had come up the stairs on his own illicit journey.

Gareth had waited for the two lovers to exchange their whispers and now, at last, Regina emerged from the room to head downstairs to find her laughable paramour. His prize so close at hand, the shriveled root between his legs leapt to its twisted, painful fullness, but still he waited. They were headed outside, where they would be safely away from prying eyes, where he could play with them more freely.

Lady Regina vanished down the hall stairs and Gareth allowed himself a smile. He would have his fruit tonight. Yes, indeed.

Regina made it outside reasonably sure she hadn't woken the house, and trotted across the frozen grounds, clutching her winter cape tightly. It was a cold winter night marked by only a touch of damp, but Regina felt only the heat in her blood as she wound her way down the darkened path toward the abode of Milton the coachman.

She found no lights on at the coach house, but when she tried the door into the simple quarters there, it was unlocked and slipped open without even a creak. As soon as she entered, she saw the faint light of an oil lamp turned low in the corner and spied Malcolm's silhouette near it. He increased the flame slightly and she saw him there, dressed in light clothing, having already stoked the small oven to create some warmth. He was beautiful.

"Darling," she said and ran into his arms. Away from the eyes of propriety, they searched for and found each other's lips in short order and shared the deepest of kisses. His arms curled around her back, lifting her into him as her lips parted to accept his tongue. She clutched at his hair and head, welcoming his warmth. She thrilled to

the forbidden nature of their encounter, which made each breath sweeter.

When they finally broke that initial embrace, they collapsed onto Milton's simple bed in the corner of the room. Malcolm lay on his back and she curled next to him. She savored the simple joy of being with him and felt the undercurrent of passion long denied building anew.

"I've missed you, Regina, more than you can know." To hear an admission like that from a man of the world like Malcolm was a little shocking, but heartening as well, for she certainly had felt the same. To read sentiment in letters was one thing, to hear it coming from his very lips was another. It was his honesty that Regina loved most and his understanding that she would not stand for pretense. "The fighting in Sudan has been very difficult. There's been a great deal of blood shed...."

"Shh, my love." She touched his lips with her fingertips and turned to face him. "You are here now."

He smiled. "Yes, yes, of course. I am a fool at times, my darling, to burden you with my troubles at a time such as this. Lady Blake was of the kindest sort and was so good to me and the men in Cairo. I... I'm so, sorry."

"Thank you." She lay with her head on his chest, listening to the beating of that beloved heart for long minutes. To speak more seemed unnecessary. She just wanted the warm safety of his company, the assurance of being with one who understood. Malcolm seemed to feel the same, for he did not speak either for a long time.

It was Regina who finally broke the comfortable silence. "I wish we could still marry, Malcolm."

"We shall, my love," he said, "only later than we had both hoped. It would be wrong to bring so joyous an occasion in conflict with the proper mourning of one so loved as Lady Blake. We must wait."

"I know, but waiting is like a stabbing pain to me, Malcolm. Father is folding in upon himself and the house

is full of cousins each more distant and ill-tempered than the last. I feel myself going mad already.”

“I cannot account for your cousins, darling, but I know your father to be a good and strong man. He will come through well enough, as will you I’m sure. And I shall not be so far away, my love, for I think assignment in London is in my near future.”

“Truly? On what account? I thought you were to stay in Egypt or even India...”

“Ha,” he interrupted. “Your father has been gossiping, I see. Yes, there was talk of the East Indies, but I have friends in many regiments and they have let it be known that I could have a post more close at hand if need be. And seeing you, my love, tells me that need is.”

“Oh, joy!” She did not wait for his embrace to come, but took it for herself, turning to find his lips anew. She felt him start for a second and then respond, and it was as if the dams of prudence were breaking like some rotted wall before a flood. Her body lay atop his like a blanket, pressed as close as could be without shedding clothing. She felt not only his heart, but his entire body moving and responding to her own.

Such intimate, proximate contact was hardly the purview of proper young women and Regina had only ever been so close to a man in half-remembered dreams, but instinct filled the gap left by inexperience. Her thighs, pressed against his midriff, felt him swell with envy, and they responded as if on their own, writhing to accommodate his manhood. Wanting, needing to feel more, she let her lips descend to her beloved’s neck and kissed the salty, stubbly flesh there. A gasp escaped his lips and his hands moved down her back, finding her sides, thighs and rear.

Regina slipped her hands to Malcolm’s chest to undo the jacket that tied at his neck. For his part, he reached down and gathered up the skirts of her chemise and housecoat, finding her bare flesh for the first time. All

thoughts gone from her head, she bucked slightly, arching her back to push more tender flesh toward his probing fingers. His collar came loose, exposing muscular and downy chest for her hungry mouth. She kissed along his collarbone to the divot at the top of his sternum. Her tongue momentarily tasted cold metal as it passed over an iron bull’s-head pendant Malcolm wore, but she spit aside without a second thought.

His hand stroked up her thigh till there was thigh no more, and she gasped in response, blood pumping through her veins so loudly that she did not hear her own exclamation. That was enough to loose his own fiery lust, it seemed, for before she could even react, his strong arms were flipping her over onto her back and he was atop her, her head pressed tightly against the wall of the coachman’s quarters. Her skirts were up to her waist and her legs wrapped around him trying to pull him within. She felt his swollen organ pressing through his breeches onto her most sensitive flesh and cries of pain and delight escaped from her throat.

He moved down her neck, opening both housecoat and shift, his hands roughly grabbing her breasts and his mouth licking and biting her flesh. Desire raged within her, and her heart was fit to explode. Then, instead of rising up her body anew, he yanked her lower under him like a hungry animal ready to be sated. At that moment, she wanted nothing more than to be his prize, so when he bent to roughly bite at the flesh of her neck, she pushed herself into his manhood while raising her head to accommodate his bites.

She saw a silhouette at the open door of the coach house.

Chapter Six

Victoria Ash's carriage, hired out near the train station in Durham, made its way down Bernan Lane. The coachman—a mountainous mulatto named Cedric—had accompanied his mistress from London along with her maid Theresa and he kept a careful eye on these two horses as they pulled the vehicle forward in the dark. The moon was up, thank Providence, but Bernan House had none of the gaslights of London to chase away the dark and the winter chill was deadening. They advanced into the blackness of night between two barely seen rows of elms. He only hoped the lane did not take any sudden turns, lest he end up pushing the carriage out of the Northumberland muck. If he had longed for the country life, Cedric would have stayed in Jamaica.

"This is far enough, Cedric." Miss Ash's voice easily carried to his ears, despite the clip-clop of the horse team, the crunch of frozen gravel under steel-banded wheels, and the wood frame between cabin and driver's seat. Cedric suspected that no barrier could truly stop him from hearing his mistress's voice and he was right.

In fact, Victoria had not spoken aloud at all, simply mouthed the words she wished her servant to hear. She was constantly aware of him, and of his unquestioning devotion to her. The carriage slowed and then stopped.

"Wait here," she said—aloud this time—after she descended from the carriage. "If I do not return by dawn, proceed to the house."

"Yes, ma'am."

Victoria did not spare him a backward glance as she proceeded afoot the last few hundred yards toward the grounds of the house proper and its entourage of stables, coach houses and other subordinate buildings. She knew very well Cedric would sit ramrod straight until she called him anew or the day's light emerged from the east. He'd

fed from her slit wrist just a few hours ago, so her leash around his heart was tight indeed. More importantly, she'd spied something of interest down the lane and she had little time to waste.

Gareth loved the hunt, especially out here in the country. London's alleys and lanes provided him with some sport among those who would not be missed, but the chances of unwelcome witnesses and other distractions limited his opportunities. Even a Limehouse whore might attract the attention of a foolishly curious passerby and that meant a second body to dispose of. Now Gareth certainly had no objections to a second trophy, but such things could easily get out of hand and before long one was looking at massacre rather than murder.

But the country! In the country he could let his prey run and scream and plead. Already delicious Regina was heading for the coach house and from there it was not far to acres of farmlands and fields quiet as the grave. And the fop of a lieutenant was no trouble, because he would make for an interesting motivation for his nubile paramour.

The possibilities played themselves out in Gareth's imagination while he followed Regina at a discreet distance. Perhaps he would cut out Seward's weak heart and show it to the young lady. That had worked very well two years ago with that Welsh couple in Brixton, after all. Would it be too much to actually eat the poor hussar's heart before moving on to Lady Regina? That would be a new twist on matters.

Gareth cursed under his breath when he realized his prize had already entered the coach house. Too distracted by future possibilities, he'd lost track of present necessities. He imagined Aunt Eleanor's raspy voice scolding him.

Concentrate on actions, she would say, *not imaginings*. He hurried toward the darkened coach house—

Only to be stopped a few paces later by a strong hand on his shoulder.

“Excuse me,” said a woman’s melodious voice, “but perhaps you had better leave them alone.”

Gareth had already turned around by the time she completed her sentence, and in fact he had intended to lash out at whoever this interloper was. Instead he found himself looking straight into the deep eyes of a true beauty. Much more so than little Lady Regina, this redheaded woman, in her fine gown and evening shawl, with her hair in perfect little ringlets of crimson, was a rare prize. Like a piece of cold porcelain.

Absently, in some part of his mind not quite so enraptured with this beauty, he wondered just how she had appeared behind him so suddenly, but that didn’t seem terribly important. No, all that mattered was scenting this new prize. Gareth called on all the hunter’s senses Master Wellig had granted him and inhaled sharply.

He nearly gagged. Her scent was subtly sweet, like a rosewater bath or beeswax candles, but it carried an undercurrent of cold earth. It was the hint of things dead that clings to gravestones and swamps, the remains on a blade no matter how well oiled. It was the master’s smell, and that of all his inner circle of unbreathing and unliving acolytes and worthies. This woman—this creature—was a vampire. And a vampire unknown to him could mean only that she was a threat to the master.

That thought broke the spell her gaze had put on Gareth—no lust could be greater than his devotion to the master. He smiled then and in one fluid motion drew his long hunting knife and struck. It took him a second to realize the woman was no longer there.

In the instant it took his blade to travel out, she had circled to his left. She moved so quickly that she appeared even to Gareth’s impressive senses more like a mirage

shimmering from one place to another than a solid person. Only the faint whisper of robes shifting and gravel being kicked aside told him she was material at all, until he felt a quick knock at his right hand and a sharp pain in his gut. He looked down to see his own knife sticking out of his stomach.

“Get to bed, boy,” the vampiress said, now standing a good ten paces away. “It is late.”

Gareth collapsed. He smelled his own blood on the air.

Victoria could feel sharp canines pressing out of her palate and longed for the taste of blood. The ghoul, surely one of the inbred degenerates who infested these parts, would survive if she left him be. He had fed on his master’s vitae copiously and it would heal the stab wound she had inflicted given a bit of rest. It would be easy to slit an artery right now and drink deep of him, sending him into a well-deserved grave and sating her own hunger for the time being. Yes it would be very easy—

No. He was the thrall of another of her kind and vampires rarely took well to spiteful assassinations of well-trained slaves. No, he would be on his way and she could deal with the repercussions of hurt feelings. Let the little ghoul stew in his evident hate, she had better things to do. Like head for the coach house where Emma Blake’s child was hiding.

Victoria walked to the isolated house near the stables at a more moderate pace than she had used with the ghoul. With every step, she focused her keen senses on the house. She could hear whispered conversation easily, but the night air carried other sensations. Passion. Desire. Fear. They blended into a heady soup that delighted Victoria.

Getting within a few yards of the house, she concentrated a little further. The emotional waves lapped

up against her with a salty caress and she responded. The hot blood that sat in her cold, dead veins began to circulate, creating a current that caught those same waves and sent them back stronger. She felt the paramours' desires becoming overwhelming, cracking through the carefully constructed dikes of propriety and decorum.

She pushed the door open and found them in a deep embrace. The heart of the moment came in tall breakers, smashing against her and returning to the two young lovers as a spray of carnal want. For the first time in nearly ten years, Victoria took a sudden, involuntary breath. She felt her skin, normally cold as marble, grow flushed and then paradoxically pucker with goose bumps.

She absentmindedly undid her shawl and let it drop to the floor, but she could not take her eyes off the beautiful, unrestrained display on the bed across the small room. This young lieutenant whom she had so casually dismissed on the train from London seemed transformed by the presence of the beauty who had her bare legs wrapped about him.

Victoria shifted just slightly to the left so as to better see the girl's features. Another inhalation. Emma had been a rare flower in her nights in London, but young Regina was exceptional. A prize above prizes.

Look to me, Victoria mouthed to the girl. And she did.

Regina's sudden scream broke the spell of her and Malcolm's passion and he understood almost instantly that they had been seen. He quickly rose off the bed and covered her by throwing over her the blanket they had lain upon. Not the best pretense of virtue, but it would have to do, and Regina clutched it to herself as if it were as infallible as a nun's habit.

Malcolm sought no cover but instead stood between the bed and the door as his beloved's protector. How could a man go from hungry animal to stalwart gentlemen in naught but a heartbeat, Regina wondered.

"Who is there?" he demanded. The figure was in the dark of night and barely visible. "Show yourself!"

Regina did not quite see the newcomer's entrance, for Malcolm blocked her from the door, so she had to read the surprise and awe in the sudden softness of his posture. What had been a military man's *garde-à-vous* became a boy's surprise. He took a step back and to the side and Regina saw, in the low light of the single oil lamp, the most beautiful creature she had ever known stride slowly into the coach house.

The woman was taller than Regina, with hair of a red that spoke of Irish or Scots blood. In another woman, such ruddy locks might have marred her beauty, but not with her. Indeed, that hair was short and expertly curled to frame her fine, rich features. She wore a gown in the style of Regina's mother's or grandmother's day, but it seemed not at all outdated on her, with its flowing skirts beneath a tight bodice that itself rose to a low, open collar. Her breasts, white porcelain orbs, were exposed practically—but not quite—to the aureoles. A choker of black or emerald was at her throat, centered on a cameo of ivory or bone that held the image of a black rose. But all this was merely a fine frame for the twin masterpieces that were her eyes. It seemed to Regina that they caught the wan light and reflected it back a hundred-fold, sparkling between blue and green.

She knew she could lose herself in those eyes.

"Forgive me," the woman said in a lilting voice Regina associated with singers of operetta, "but I seem to have lost my way. I'm sorry for interrupting your sleep."

This beautiful stranger must have known, even if she had not been watching for more than a second, that sleep was not what she had interrupted. Regina felt a pang of

guilt, but it faded before it could take hold. Indeed, the fires that this mysterious lady's arrival should have quenched with icy shame, instead returned to the young aristocrat. The red-haired woman looked straight at her, half-naked below a thin coarse blanket and she felt her heart pound. Her right leg, still mostly exposed to the air, moved up and Regina delighted to the friction. She could not look away.

"I am looking for Bernan House," the mysterious woman said, without a hint of the fire she was stoking. "I wish to pay my respects."

"I... I will show you," said Malcolm.

"That would be very gracious of you, sir."

She looked away from Regina to take Malcolm in and his betrothed felt a sudden shiver run through her as the extent of her current position finally came to her. As had long been her custom, Regina covered her shame with words and questions. "Who... who are you, madam?"

"Forgive me," she said with a smile. "I am Miss Victoria Ash. I was a friend of your mother's in London and came as soon as I heard of her tragic fate."

"Yes, Miss Ash, this way." Malcolm grabbed his jacket and led her out the door and toward the house, leaving Regina to make her own way. It took Regina until she was fully clothed to let go of the pique that had grabbed her at being discarded thus and realize the full consequences of being caught in such a condition. This could very easily mean her ruin, and still she felt more jealous than mortified. It took her until she was at the house to realize she was as jealous of Malcolm for taking Miss Ash from her, as she was of Miss Ash for taking Malcolm.