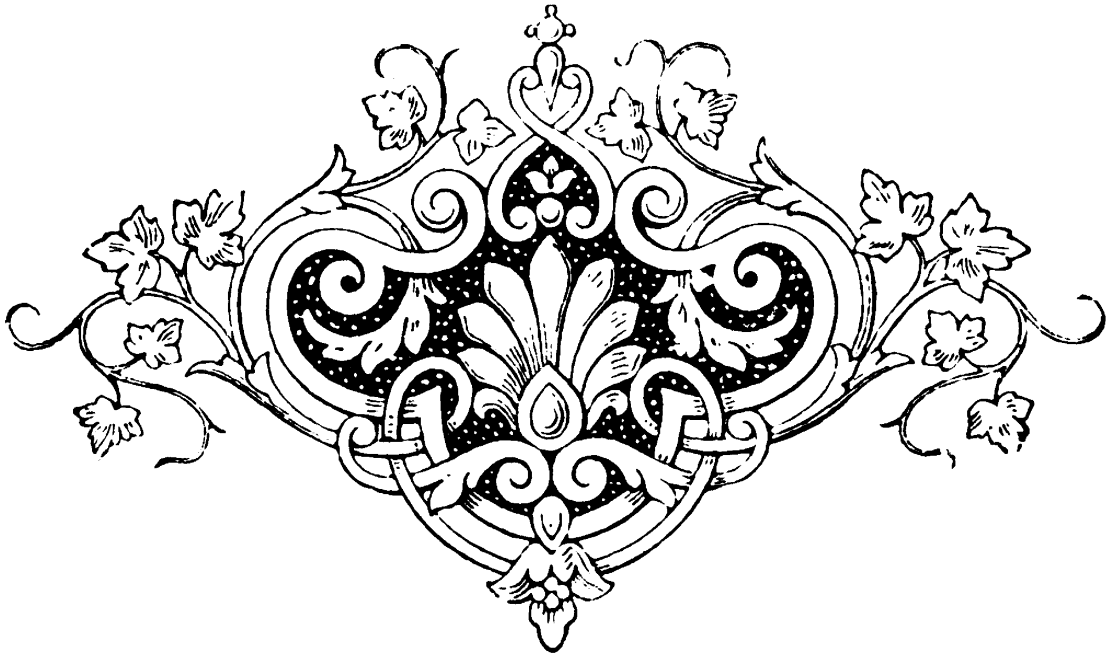


Shadowplay



by Lily Rowan

This novel is for Alec.

Prologue

I vividly remember my mother's blood.

Bent at the waist, a twig ready to snap in half. It was that day I believe that she knew I was not... well, not as she. I mean, truly knew. It was I who caused it, the blood, the pain, the doubling over of pale skinned limbs in that sweltering market on the Rue Banquette. She was beautiful then. That mass of wildly curling hair the color of rich chocolate, eyes of a golden hazel that men called "beguiling" and a delicate slender figure that seems to remain the fashion for decade after decade. Yes, my mother was beautiful, but that had been Paris. That had been in the early days. My early days. Her beauty would fade as I grew. The smells of that market were distinct. The perfumeries was nearby and I could smell the scent of civet, sickly sweet in the air. I watched my mother fill a basket with apples, spotted and brown, the ones no one else wanted that the vendors sold cheaply. I watched her delicate white hands squeeze a brown loaf of bread and reach into her apron to pay the vendor. There was nothing to anger me. That alone is the mystery to me of that day. Yet, somehow I know it was I who did it. It was my want that made my mother bleed. It was my looking at her. Maybe that was enough at that young age of four.

The blood spilled from her. Crimson blossomed over her muslin dress, staining the pale blue fabric in splotches from her very pores. It came from her nose, her ears, her mouth, her eyes, and it ran in thin rivulets down the neck of her dress like some tragic Madonna crying in a churchyard. It came from her skin, the very tiny pores, like she had pierced with hundreds of tiny needles. It covered her. It would be dramatic to say that havoc broke loose in that French market, that merchants toppled over produce stands and children grappled at their mothers skirts, but the truth is duller, and perhaps more eerie. No one moved. Eyes fixed to her. She bled and she fell to the floor in a writhing body of pain and blood, but no one said a word. I think that in Paris at the time of so much pain, no one wanted another drama. No one wanted another death. And this woman fallen in her own blood was either a disease burst into the open, or a witch that the devil just claimed. Either way, the patrons in that afternoon market simply hoped she was a hallucination in the heat of Paris.

If we make no movement and no sound, perhaps she will simply vanish.

She did not vanish. I cried over her, my tiny hands too weak to pull her up or help her, and my mind, I knew I had done it. And she knew as well. I saw it in her eyes, honey colored gold and alive with fear. I wondered even then if she felt the collective heartbeat of the humans in the market, the pulse of fear that was beating in the silence. I felt it. Perhaps I even heard it. It was my first taste of that

thing within me that has power. I shook her, my hands bloodied from her dress, and I must have said mama, but she only looked up at me from baked clay earth in the sunshine and her eyes... her eyes I will never forget, je te assure.

A kindly farmer's wife, come in from the country to sell apricots and baked hams, took a fearless pity on us, and she barked at her two burly sons to wrap the woman up in a sheet and take her and her little daughter to their home, wherever their home might be. Understand that her action was not a dismissal, but a kindness and one taken at great risk to her and her sons. My mother was assumed to be diseased with consumption, and if it were not that, many would assume some kind of sorcery (and they would be right.) Punishments for either were severe. With some hesitation, the two boys wrapped my shivering mother in a cloth and lifted her into the cart of their wagon, then gestured to me to sit with her and tend to her.

That I did, and I managed to direct them to the single room flat we shared with several rats and a few other undesired creatures. The boys carried my blood soaked mother up the stairs and deposited her on the threadbare bed, then wished me "un dieu soit avec vous" and hastily left me alone with my mother. I do not know how long I lay there with her, curled against her blood soaked frame as she shivered and spasmed but it was long enough that my tears exhausted me and I fell asleep.

When I woke, I was alone.

I found my mother in the tiny wash closet where we kept a copper tub for bathing. She was stripped down, the bloody soiled dress on the floor. She sat in the tepid water, her hair plastered to her face, the water dark pink with the filth from her.

"Mama?"

She said nothing.

"I'm sorry, mama."

And she cried.

Chapter 1

New Orleans, 1872

The rain had not stopped for three days, though it was the warmest month of the Summer and the heat forced everyone outdoors. Those cobblestone streets of the French Quarter knew the silent beating of my feet upon their stones every day of that Summer, and in truth, for two years. There was no rest for me. I walked that same path down the Rue Chartres to the brightly painted door that would open to Madame Maginot's salon. It was not in the opulently decorated French parlor where ladies of fashion were fitted for lavish gowns for the opera that I did the brunt of my work, but instead, I labored upstairs in the workshop. Madame Collette Maginot had set up shop in this fashionable townhouse twelve years before, after her husband, a prominent businessman visiting from Paris, decided he wanted nothing more to do with her.

The arrangement was clear, and everyone knew of it, though no one would speak of it without hushed whispers. Monsieur Maginot would provide for Collette in a certain amount of style if she remained out of his life and far enough away to never displease him. Apparently, New Orleans was far enough from Paris. The most important condition, however, was the care of the Maginots daughter, Sophie. If Madame Collette raised Sophie to be a gentle lady, this would please M Maginot and the generosity with money for all those silks, taffetas and pearls would continue. Sophie Maginot was the key to Madame Collette Maginot's success.

I do not know if Madame Maginot truly loved her daughter, Sophie. In my years of toiling upstairs in that boiling hot room stuffed with taffetas and silks, I do not know if I ever witnessed any emotion from Madame Maginot that could be construed as 'love.' It was no secret that Madame Maginot was a cold woman. Many times I called her Madame Blackheart in jest when I spoke of her to Sophie, and Sophie shared in my jest of her mother. The salon of Madame Maginot was at it's busiest in the Spring and Summer, when the ladies of New Orleans ordered finery for the theater season. In the past two years I had not been given a day to myself. My work began at sun-up and ended whenever Madame Maginot was satisfied with my work. Madame Maginot spent most of her waking hours having tea and chatting with the ladies who came to her salon to peruse lace and ribbons. Of course, though the labor was done by myself and two slaves named Opal and Ruby, it was Madame Maginot who reaped the rewards of that labor, in fame and in payment. I was paid, though it was barely enough to survive. I should not complain, for those poor girls, Opal and Ruby were paid nothing but sweat and tears.

It was never in that upstairs workshop that I saw Sophie, but rather on my walks home to the shotgun cottage my mother and I shared in Marigny. Sophie would often accompany me on that walk along the river front until we reached the Indian Market where she was not permitted to go past. I do not remember

how these walks together began. Was it she that began to accompany me? Or perhaps I that coaxed her? Regardless, we became unlikely friends; she the prim and well bred young lady of quality and I, well, what was I? Unruly? Poor? A harlot? A witch, perhaps, one that boils the fat of babies in a black cauldron? All of these things had been said of me, even in the dark voodoo riddled bastion of superstition that was New Orleans. I was not a woman of fine reputation. However, the gowns I stitched for fine ladies were considered the most fashionable in the South. This was my worth to Madame Maginot and the reason she kept me on, despite my reputation of loose virtue.

Sophie did not mind my damaged reputation, but rather found me mysterious and something she would not likely meet again. Our friendship was forbidden by Madame Maginot and I am sure Sophie's father would have had me whisked forcefully away to some convent had he discovered his daughter's time spent with me, but Sophie and I found time for each other in secret. When I was sent across the river to the plantations to purchase dye and fabrics, it was Sophie who playfully dressed as a boy and stood in the distance as her own mother dropped coins into my hand, sending me off to task with my 'gentleman friend' to accompany me. It was this innate playfulness in Sophie that made me love her. Yes, I loved her. I would like to think she loved me too. She knew my life, knew my sorrows, my indiscretions, and yet, she refused to judge me as others did. For rich wives of the Plantation masters and the quadroon mistresses of the same men, I made gowns for the opera that would satisfy their need for attention, for praise. For Sophie, I made garments to compliment her delicate beauty, that tall, willowy and pale beauty that was so different than my own appearance. I envied her that beauty. I stitched silk and ribbon late into the night by the flame of a candle. I made hats for her, gloves to cover her slender, tapered fingers. Slippers to compliment each gown. Ribbons for her flaxen hair the color of wheat.

It was only Sophie who truly knew me. She had seen the often frightful things I could do, the things I could will to happen. I believe she did not fear it, but was instead intrigued by it. Perhaps she was less afraid of my 'power' than I was. When my sadness brought on the rains, when my frustration raised flames to her mother's damask curtains in the salon a year ago, it was Sophie who whispered,

“Calm yourself, my love.”

My love. She had said it in the faintest movement of her lips, and I had become drunk on those mouthed words like the strongest brandy. I wanted her. I wanted nothing more in the world than to be at her side forever. Friends did not feel this way, only lovers did. The next step came swiftly. To my surprise it was she who kissed me. In the shadowy and quiet alcoves of Lafayette Cemetery, surrounded by the grand Greek Revival mansions of planters and the smaller but equally grand mausoleums of the dead, Sophie had taken my hand in hers and pressed her lips to mine.

From that day on, we were inseparable. Still, we were forced to be secretive. How could two young women in love go about in public together? When one was a fluttering bird and the other an alley cat? No, we would keep this secret, for it was ours to keep when nothing else really was. I would remain in the service of Madame Collette Maginot, taking home just enough pay to maintain myself and my mother in that narrow shotgun cottage. I could have found other work, perhaps. There were markets where I could shuck oysters, bail hay, churn butter. There were plenty of riverfront taverns I frequented where gentlemen were happy to pay for my services as companion. I could spend my days and nights there in those crowded saloons with absinthe and the musk of men, and there were nights when I did just that, but my sunshine would be Sophie. My nightfall stars would be her pale blue eyes. Yes, I was an idiot.

Our love affair went on with childlike innocence for a full year before that three day rain came in the Summer. Still, I can hear the click of my own steps on the steaming stones of the Rue Chartres. I remember her; the scent of violet perfume, of her clean skin, the smells of that house next to the Spanish Plaza. The house where I would see Sophie for the last time.

The Lamaurie House stood on a lamp lit corner at the edge of the Quarter where it slopes into the Spanish Plaza. It had stood already a hundred years and though it had once been grand, it now was ramshackle and leaning precariously to one side as if saddened by its current state. The once gentle olive tone of its exterior paint had washed and faded into an eerie patina of ghostly green and yellow that seemed to seep from the walls. The portico of the house leaned dramatically and the effect on any visitor was one of disorientation and the feeling that one must lean to the side to feel at ease that the house might not crash down in a crumbling shower of plaster and stone. The floors of Lamaurie House sagged, its windows cracked like broken teeth. Creeping vines of Azalea covered an entire wall of its exterior and had begun to infiltrate the house through gap toothed grinning windows like a shadowy spy.

I had always been drawn to that leaning disaster of a house, since the day I saw it as a child my first day in New Orleans. My mother had pointed it out to me in one of her better moods,

“Anais, look...doesn't it seem to be dying?”

I had stared at that house until my mother pulled me away from it. Later, with Sophie, I had walked past that house to peek into its candle glow windows and see the odd men who lived there. Artists. When they had taken up residence in that leaning house I cannot say, only that it seemed they were born to that house, or the house was born to them. Of course these artists would be drawn to this dilapidated house in all its decaying beauty. They would enjoy living there

amongst creaking walls and chattering rats and all the while they would paint and fill the rooms with the scent of linseed oil and sweat, feeling more like the suffering artist for their labors. It had been the dead of winter, which is windy and cold in New Orleans, when one of them saw me peeking into a window one evening. His name was Marcello and he had called to me not very subtly,

“Ciao bella! Bellissima! Such dark hair, such piercing eyes, come inside, beauty and I will make you immortal!”

I had laughed, of course. The invitation was so florid in its nature, but he was tall and had a way about him that boisterous Italian men have, a sensuality that is unhindered by any shame. I was charmed by him. I don't think I had ever met an Italian and I loved the waving rhythm of his voice. I would like to be able to tell you, reader, that I hesitated, that I played the coquette and batted my eyelashes shyly at him, refusing such a thinly veiled offer to warm his bed. However, I am, in fact, a woman of loose virtue. I love making love and this tall, broad shouldered Italian who laughed with wine on his breath warmed my blood. I entered that leaning house and came to know all the inhabitants inside it, those five artists who took their turns with me and after so much wine and absinthe, our neatly unobtrusive waiting game became one of orgiastic confusion and we all shared one bed.

We became friends and lovers, all of us. I posed for them, among hung lins and draped fabrics I borrowed from Madame Maginot's workshop. In those silks and taffetas I created for ladies, I posed as Saint Theresa clutching at my breast in agony. I was their Persephone and their Demeter, their Athena on the hunt and their solemn lady drowned on the rocks of the sea. I came in the evenings, once or twice a week to let them paint me. They paid me what they could, and our sessions always ended with blissful sensuality. Marcello; the lusty Italian from Rome. Claude, who was only seventeen, my age, and orphaned by his parents. Niall, the Irish dock worker from the channel who was rough hewn and brawny, yet his hands could make paint tell a story so beautifully. Christian, who was angry and dark, so much that I feared he may someday do himself harm, and Etienne.

Yes, there was Etienne.

Of all the painters, Etienne was the one I knew would be a master. He would be famous some day, of that I was sure, but with painters you see...well, he may have to be dead many years first. He was not a boy. In fact, he was around forty years of age, I guessed. I never asked, for none of it mattered. Etienne was from Salem, Massachusetts, his voice a smooth butterscotch tenor which always lulled me to sleep after our trysts. He read to me often, of Milton, Dante and Chaucer and the lot of it in Latin. When he was not reading to me, he rarely spoke. It was not shyness, but rather a feeling that there was nothing to say that he could not

express with his brushes. When the others painted me, I felt special. When Etienne painted me, I felt immortal.

A month before the rain came, I asked Sophie to come with me to Lamaurie House. She hesitated. It was dangerous to go, she knew, for if her mother discovered her indiscretions... Alors, she came. They welcomed her of course, lavished well deserved praise upon her beauty, again, so different than my own. They begged her to pose for them, and after absinthe and kisses, she did. We both giggled, embracing each other as they draped us in fabric that they pinned and pleated.

“The Vestals...the virgins!” Marcello exclaimed with an overdone gesture of his hands. “Beautiful, aren't they? Two of those six legends of Rome, only these two, yes, these two have been disgraced...do you know of the Vestals?”

I admitted that I did not, but Sophie, with her superior education, knew something of the history of Rome.

“Six women, trained from childhood to guard the sacred fire of Aeneas...”

“Si, bella mia, the Vestals were the mortal goddesses of Rome who guarded the safety of the city by guarding those fires.”

He moved so close to us, standing behind us, his arms moving around us to drape a sheer swath of silk over our hips, his fingers lingering too long to be merely friendly. “Do you know how they lived?”
Sophie was breathless,

“They were honored, treated as demi-goddesses, but...” she whimpered a little as his fingers clenched her and dug into her hip, his lips close to her ear. “Their lives were strict. They must remain virgins, the first ten years in training, the second ten in service and the last ten as teachers to their apprentices. They were...”

“Si, bella, tell me...”

“They were expected to be perfect. If they broke the rules, they were...they were, buried alive.”

Marcello's hand moved to my bottom and pinched me there, but unlike shy and maidenly Sophie, his attentions did not unnerve me, but instead made me wet between my legs. I gave him a look to let him know as much and he smiled.

“Buried alive in the Campo Scellerato, beauty, the field of villains. Do you know what was the rule they broke to be buried alive in such a place?”

She gasped a little as his hand explored over the thin draped fabric, her slender body. I saw his fingers slip inside a draping of silk to find a hardened nipple and pinch it lightly with his fingertips. His attentions to her caused me no jealousy. Marcello was a talented lover and Sophie had never been with a man. He could show her a pleasure I could not. She struggled to answer him as he toyed with her,

“They broke their vow of chastity.” she said with a barely audible whisper.

“Si, bella. Chastity. They died for making love. In such a life, without the touch of a man, how would a woman find love, but the love of her sisters? The touch of another woman?”

I don't know what made me do it. I suppose it was his voice, his words, but I kissed her. I took her in my arms and I kissed her. We embraced their on that makeshift dais, decorated with crumbling plaster columns and damask thread-bare chaise chairs, I tasted her lips, as I had done before, but it seemed she was sweeter this night. I knew it would not just be a kiss. Marcello stepped away from us, slowly moving to the rest of the artists who had been preparing their paints and brushes, whitening their canvas and mixing oils.

“I will paint them embracing in the pool of the Temple of Vesta. The petals of flowers in the water near their thighs...” I could hear Claude say.

“I see them on an altar of the temple, a dark palette with shades of blue moonlight on the white of their skin...” This was Christian.

“And I will paint them on a bed of their own silks.” Etienne said, his warm buttery voice tempting me. He moved closer to us, interrupted our kiss. “Remove them.” he said lowly, brushing a fingertip over the silks that were so carefully wrapped around us.

With trance like obedience, we slowly dropped the top layer of silk draping, letting them fall around our hips, baring our breasts. Sophie was close to tears, but I sensed no fears. Only exhilaration. Etienne, beautiful, quiet Etienne bent in front of us and with a soft feathery touch, he kissed the tips of our breasts, as one might worship at an altar at the foot of the statue of a God. He gestured to the chaise lounge and both of us sank down with each other, entwined in a sinful poetry of limbs and breasts. She lay beneath me, graceful and slender, one arm bent beautifully to touch her own curling blond hair, the other falling toward the silk draped floor. Her knee arched up, inviting me, her face tilted to the side, blushing.

I spent hours kissing her, lying above her, propped up on my own elbow, my black hair spilling over her pale stomach. I entwined with her, until we became one body sharing space as two. We remained sufficiently still, though I dipped my head to kiss her stomach, her breasts and to move my hand between her thighs and bring her to pleasure there. Her shyness dissolved after so many hours, for we remained this way most of the night, listening to the sounds of glass jars clinking with brushes and paints, the labored, passionate breath of artists on fire with creativity, and the sounds of our own wet kisses.

The rains began that very night.

Our sessions as the disgraced Vestals continued for three days. We slipped away each night for hours to that house with leaning walls and we became slow lovers. Each night moving deeper into passions only women can know together. There was a dream-like strangeness to it all, how free we both were with our love. For me, it was not much of a change, but for Sophie, this philistine behavior was labeled wicked in her world of morals. But it was so much pleasure and she could not deny herself the indulgence of it.

The artists moved brushes frantically over canvas, their brows knitted with concentration, and their thighs taut with anticipation, for the second night Sophie gave in not only to me, but to the beautiful lot of them. I watched her little fists clench as Marcello took her in the rickety canopy bed that sat in the painting studio, and Niall joined them as casually as a brute man might join in a game of cards. They took their turns with her as they had taken their pleasure of me so many times before, but they touched her with a gentleness and reserve as if she might be made of glass. I watched her with Marcello, with Niall, then with Claude and Christian. She found her sexuality there with them, and with me, for I took her as well. The only one of us who did not was Etienne. He simply painted. His graceful hands moved over the canvas with a ferocity I had never seen in him before. He seemed a man possessed. Only when the pressure in his hands began to cramp and he was forced to stop for a moment did he look away from the canvas, and then it was me that he looked at, with a gray eyed intensity that frightened and intrigued me.

“Anais,” he said over the sound of rain hitting the roof. “Walk with me.”

I walked along the riverfront with him, in the pouring rain, both of us soaked to bone with warm rain that would wash the city clean and make it smell of magnolia blossoms. He took my hand in his, held my palm out flat to the sky to let me catch raindrops. I smiled at him, and I felt my heart skip. Etienne was nothing like the other artists. He was wise where they were impulsive. He was quiet where they were boisterous. He was experienced where they longed for experience. He was not a conventionally handsome man, like Marcello or Christian,

but he had an enigmatic way about him. His quiet mysteriousness made me desire him. His talent made me fascinated with him.

With my hand full of raindrops, he pulled me closer to him. I thought he would kiss me. He was prone to such romantic impulses in his nature.

“You are a witch of some sort. I have seen what you do.” he said then, almost accusing, but his face softened when he saw my fear. “What are you, Anais?”

“I do not know.” I answered honestly.

“You bewitch that precious creature, Sophie. You fascinate my brothers. And me? Dear God, what you do to me. You are my muse.”

“Your muse...” I said flatly, not sure what to make of what he said.

“The Vestals.” he said with a dreamy look in his blue-gray eyes. “It is my best work. It makes everything I have done in the past invisible.”

“Perhaps when it is finished...” I began.

“Marry me.”

“Etienne...”

“Anais, marry me and live as my wife. I haven’t much to offer you but I have some money saved, enough to not live in that house.”

“I like that house.” I said.

“Then we shall live there. That house, a house in the country, or we can go to Paris. I would live in your childhood home if it made you happy.”

“I was born right here in New Orleans. Paris has never been my home. Only a place for my mother to escape from...” I stopped and dropped my head into my wet hands. “Etienne, how little you know of me.”

“I know enough! I know you inspire me! Anais, it is me you do not know. I think of you every day. You wander through my every dream and it is an invasion that angers me to want to drink it all away. I cannot find peace from it. You, there, in my dreams...”

“You speak like a romantic.” I said, exasperated, and touched as well.

“Romantic? You think these dreams romantic? No, let me tell to you these dreams. You, in a field of poppies, but it is night, and all around you are the withering bodies of people emaciated and dying, and it is you who holds a black chain connecting all of them together. I see this in every dream, Anais! You! Dressed in a white gown with red ribbon and blood...oh God...blood on your hands, your throat, your breasts...the blood of innocent people. I know this in my dream, this cosmic knowledge I know is right. It is you there, the queen of this sick fucking atrocity and I see you smile...”

He shuddered then, his whole body shaking and it took a moment for him to calm himself. I looked at him in the rain, horrified. What was he saying? Then, he continued, for I could say nothing.

“That smile in the dream; it is the smile I have grown to love, and yet in this same dream I know the blood is on your hands. I do not know who you are, or what you are, Anais, but I know that your witchery has set on me, and I beg of you to let us both submit to it. Be my wife and we can calm this dream. I will do anything to make you happy. Let me love you, Anais.”

With that, he placed a ring on my finger, a simple gold ring set with a small red garnet. He held his hand over mine and with the other brushed wet strands of hair from my face. This brilliant man loved me, and yet, all I could think of was Sophie.

“Etienne, I cannot.” I simply said. I could feel the heat of my face. Tears would start soon, but perhaps the rain would mercifully mask them. With genuine regret, I slipped the ring off of my finger and I placed it in his hand. He bowed his head and took a deep breath.

“Sophie.” He said. I nodded. There was a long silence before he said, “Then think of me when you touch this.” He placed the garnet ring back in my hand and folded my hands together, raising them to kiss them with a tenderness I had never known.

We walked back to that leaning house together, arm in arm.

The lamps had burned out when we returned to the house. We found Sophie asleep, tangled in masculine limbs and naked heat. They slept as peacefully as children. I did not want to wake them, though Madame Maginot would be furious at the thought of her daughter out so late. It didn't matter. I had plans for Sophie and I. Etienne's proposal had broken my heart as well as his, but it had made me realize that I must talk to Sophie. The third night of rain, Sophie and I dressed fine, she in her own dress and me in a borrowed one that did not fit well at all. But it was finery and a passerby might not recognize the stark eyed, unruly haired daughter of a madwoman if I pinned my hair under a bonnet and dressed in linen and lace. I had asked her to accompany me to the Cafe Bon Temps on the Rue Royale. She protested at first,

“Anais, my mother's friends often dine there. If they were to see us together...”

“Shh, don't worry. No one will recognize me in this dress. I look almost respectable.”

She smiled sweetly. I coaxed her again and she relented, though her nervousness was evident. The Cafe Bon Temps was an elegant parlor where the fashionable of New Orleans took in sips of steaming chicory coffee and delicious beniegts in the afternoon. The cafe was little more than a glittering gathering spot for the elite of the Quarter to sow off their finery (most of which I created) and gossip. It was a place of Sophie's world, not mine. I wanted to prove to Sophie that I could be in her world, if only for one afternoon. This day, as rain pattered against the stones of the street and a line of rushing carriages passed the silk valanced windows, Sophie and I sat at a table in the Cafe Bon Temps and she told me of her father, how she had missed him all these years.

“He writes me letters, so many of them.” she said. “I do not write back as often as I should. He is a good father, just despises my mother.”

“What do you think of her?” I asked.

“My mother? Ah, well, she is my mother. There is nothing to think. She is cruel to you, I know. It is difficult for me to love her for that.”

She shrugged her slim shoulders and sipped the thick coffee from a demitasse cup. Her eyes darted around the room, searching for anyone who might recognize her, or more importantly, me. She noticed the garnet ring, which I had laced through a ribbon and strung around my neck.

“It's pretty.” she said, touching it.

“Etienne gave it to me. He asked me to marry him.” I explained.

Her eyes widened and to my surprise she smiled,

“You are getting married then!”

I shook my head,

“No. I refused, of course.”

She looked disheartened and a little worried. It annoyed me to think she would want me to marry another.

“We should go.” she said then, her voice carrying none of the silvery charm it usually did.

We walked toward the Rue Chartres, toward her mother's townhouse below the workshop. The rain pelted us and I offered to hail a hansom cab but she refused, wanting to walk in the rain.

“I have something I must confess to you, Anais.” she said, her voice cracking. “I do not know how to say it gently. I fear I must simply say it.”

“You can tell me anything, je te assure.” I touched her face.

“I must leave for Paris. I will be leaving...”

“How long?” I asked.

“No, no, no. You don't understand. Anais, I will not be returning. My father has arranged... he has arranged for me to be married.”

My face fell in shock, but she went on, her voice rattling at double speed as if it hurt her to say these words.

“He is a fine match, a gentleman of property and a title. He has an estate in the Loire. Anais, please tell me you understand.”

I could say nothing.

“I have little choice! It has been too long here in this place! There is no future for me here! I must go back to Paris. Anais, don't you miss it? Don't you miss Paris?”

I shook my head, recalling my mother's blood in that sweltering market.

“Don't go.” It was a quiet, weak plea because I could say nothing else.

“I must. My father will not support my mother and I forever. He despises her very name. I must do this for our future. It is a match the likes of which I will never be offered again. Please understand.”

“I love you.”

“What we have cannot be love, Anais. I do not know what it is, but I cannot imagine it is love. Both of us women, and you with your...” she hesitated. “the way you are.”

“Tell me what I am then, for I do not know.” I was crying.

“I must go to Paris.” she said, with gathered strength.

“Then I will go with you.”

She bowed her head sadly and her locks of feathery blond curls fell over her face,

“I am not asking you to go with me.”

With that, she found the door of her mother's townhouse and she twisted the handle.

“When will you go?” I asked.

“In the morning. I am sorry. I have wanted to tell you, but, I could not.”

“Sophie...”

“Anais, please. Don't hurt anyone because of this.”

She looked at me a long while, as if she might kiss me, and then she closed the door and she was gone. For days I dreamed of Sophie posing for the painters

in that leaning green house. It has grown hard for me to picture her any other way.

Shut out in the rain like a lowly dog, I made my way home. I dreaded home. My home was a rickety, narrow shotgun cottage in the back end of Marigny. The drain and swell of the rain gutters kept me awake at night. The floorboards creaked and a hive of stinging red ants had recently made their home beneath the floorboards of the bedroom, crawling up through little cracks in the wood to bite at my ankles in the night. For all of it's dreariness, I might have loved that little hell-hole of a cottage had my mother not lived in it with me.

My mother was no longer a mother to me. I called her Helen, her Christian name, for no longer did I feel an obligation to play pretend games of happiness and house. Helen had begun a slide into madness that day in Paris so long ago. The day of the blood. She feared me, and perhaps she had good reason to. However, what love she had shown for the tiny child I was began to rot and grow fetid with hatred as I became a young woman. She was obsessed with my father, whoever he was, and she refused to tell me his identity. She wailed about demons and mothering the child of hell. Dramatic, she was. Still, her insanity grew impossible to understand. Whatever past she was running from, she had tried to escape it by moving us to Paris when I was a small child. Even in Paris, her demons found her. I believe her demon might have been me. After six years in Paris, we were begging in the streets. Helen had been beautiful once and a beautiful woman will never starve of her own will. Her gentle beauty had been enough to secure her a meager living for herself and her little daughter by checking coats in Paris taverns and taking tickets at the Paris Opera House. I played in those magnificent halls as a child, hiding behind the ornate statues.

But her madness haunted her and like some tragic opera played out before those fashionably dressed audiences, my mother lost her mind. She spoke of a devil who seduced her and of drinking the blood of an incubus. Her dreams were plagued by these visions. She went days without sleeping, weeks without eating until her once beautiful body became sunken and grotesquely thin. Her eyes lost their luster and became two sallow orbs, her lips dry and cracked to bleeding. She could find no work, and the establishments that had once thought she might entice customers with her prettiness, now kicked her out into the Paris gutters to live like a rat. And my mother, she screamed that they were devils, all of them devils, and that God would punish them. She had spent what little money we had on a rosary, and she kept it clutched in her hands every moment of the day.

We slept in the street, no longer able to afford even a meager room. She had no taste for food, and what bread she found, she tossed at me, disgusted. She grew frightfully thin, and yet she did not die. My twelfth birthday in Paris was spent in rat infested squalor. My mother had decided life was not worth living and had procured laudanum. She had ingested the laudanum and then lost control of

her bowels. We had found a warm place to sleep in a condemned house at the side of a dark alley and the smell that filled that house was my mother's stench. The putrid stench of vomit, urine and feces permeated every molecule of air. And yet, she did not die.

That night that I turned twelve I decided we must leave Paris, for there was nothing for us there. I remembered the New Orleans of my birth and I wanted to return, or to find some better place than where I was. I needed to raise money to take us there. I sold trinkets I made of scraps of ribbon to passersby in the street, but the only women who bought them were the whores, such tacky things they were. Those painted women took me in their confidence and taught me the ways of the street. In a matter of weeks I was selling myself to the drunks who stumbled from the taverns where my mother once checked gentleman's coats. I saved the money, and in time I had enough to book passage to New Orleans. Just days later I found work with Madame Maginot, mending gloves and hats. And of course, I saw Sophie.

The shotgun cottage leaked and coughed, but it would have been a welcome home without Helen. Her state had not bettered, but worsened. She became an invalid, only moving to scream at me of her devils, and call me the daughter of hell and a whore. Dutifully, from some natural obligation to care for a woman who was my mother, I made her breakfast in the morning, washed the filth from her linens, bathed her when I could force her to do it, and I brushed the tangles from her long, constantly matting hair. It became a ritual between us, my brushing her hair, and every evening as I sat in front of the crackling fireplace with her, brushing her tangles out, I asked her the same question. The night that Sophie left me, I asked this question,

“Helen, who is my father?”

This, she would only laugh at,

“You are the daughter of hell.”

“Mama, please. Tell me why you think that.”

“I should have killed you when you were born...I knew I should have...” she mumbled, and oddly, this did not sound malicious, but rather merciful. “...I took pity on you...it was my weakness and now...the devil's whore...”

“I am not the devil's whore, mama. Please, tell me of my father. Tell me, anything. I need to know. I do not understand what I am or why I can do these...things.”

I bent my head to kiss the crown of her hair, feeling a deep sympathy for her suddenly, but she flew up from the rocking chair and she glared at me with a hatred that sent me reeling backward.

“Do you want to know what you are?” she hissed, her thin voice like the whipping tongue of a snake. I only nodded, frightened of her.

“I will show you what you are, devil's whore...”

She dashed around the rocking chair, knocking it over in her frantic, awkward movement. She slammed against the mantle of the fireplace in anger, seeking to destroy something. Anything. I watched her bend down to the floor and she began to scratch at the floorboards just to the left of the fireplace.

“Mama, let me help you.” I said, seeing her fingernails crack and bleed with her frantic effort to pull up a floorboard.

“Don't touch me! Your wicked hands will draw the devil closer!” She screamed, coughing after her words a miserable hacking that threatened to rip her lungs apart. She stumbled then, her unsteadiness knocking her over and crashing her frail, skeletal body to the floor. I heard bone shatter. I felt the heat of flames, but it was the rancid smell of burning flesh and hair that made me realize what had happened.

Helen had fallen backward and knocked over a small kerosene lamp toward the fireplace. The weak crackle of the fireplace became a roar. The fire had caught on the threadbare rug and raced up the hem of Helen's skirt. She was bursting in flames, the fire spreading over her body, her arms flailing in a grotesque comedy of dance. I instinctively lunged toward her, with every intention of trying to put out those flames with whatever means I might find, though in retrospect, there were none. Suddenly, my eyes cast down and I saw the scratches in the floorboard where her nails had dug at the boards. I had a choice then and it became clear. I could save my mother, maybe. Or I could dig up whatever secret was lying buried beneath that floorboard. I would like to tell you, reader, that I chose the honorable thing, the human thing. My mother. But I did not.

The floorboard was loose and came up easily enough in my hand. I reached under and found a soft leather bag, filled with something heavy. I pulled it up. When I looked up, I saw Helen's flesh, will be haunted by it in every dream. The flames had consumed her and the pressure of it had raised her up so that she was almost standing. The fire had made her an animated doll. The top of her head had melted and was not dripping but rather folding down the rest of her face. The image gutted me. I screamed. I think I may have cried out, though I do not know what I might have said if my words had meaning or form. The flames had also be-

gan to consume the meager furnishings of the room, climbing up the curtains and sparking into small explosions when it reached the bottles of cheap perfume I kept on a bedside table. In a matter of minutes, the house would be falling with the fire. Clutching the heavy sack under my arm, I knew I must leave.



Chapter 2

That cottage burned behind me as I fled the waterfront of Marigny. Helen's ashes dusted my skirt. I heard her voice in my mind,

Do you want to know what you are?

I knew the satchel under my arm would tell me. I had chosen truth over my mother. You would like to read that I broke down over her death, such a horrific destruction of a fragile woman. You would like to read that I felt such wicked remorse for watching her die that the pain in my heart crippled this daughter for the love of her mother. I apologize then, for I felt nothing but a morbid relief.

Walking swiftly along the waterfront, I felt the rains become gentle. The fat thick droplets that pounded tin roofs for three days became a light spray of mist. The rain would not aid the quenching of the fire. Even as I walked toward Lamaurie House, I could glance over my shoulder and see the flames spreading. With a lurch of my heart I saw that the flames had spread to other houses and was now consuming the rows of connected townhouses nearby with alarming fierceness. Street lamps lit with gas were popping and hissing, sending destructive sparks that exploded onto the street and caught flame to all they touched. The fire was moving down the waterfront, destroying all in its path. It seemed that it was chasing me. Women and children in their night dress scrambled for safety, running from their houses, climbing from windows where the fire had consumed more conventional escape routes. I saw hordes of young men racing toward the fire, bringing buckets to scoop water from the river and toss them onto flames. I gathered my skirts and raced toward Lamaurie House.

As I knew I would, I found Etienne at his canvas, brush in hand. For a moment, I don't believe he knew I was there. His eyes looked tired, his shoulders slumped. I made a noise; a rustling of my skirt to notify him of my presence, but still, he did not look my way.

"Anais." he simply said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"I hurt you," I said, regretfully. "and I never meant to hurt you."

"I still love you."

Only then did he look up from the canvas and when his eyes fixed on me, they widened in surprise. He saw the ashes on my dress and my face.

"There was a fire. No, there **is** a fire."

“Were you injured?”

I shook my head,

“No. The cottage, it is... It is in flames.”

“Your mother.” His voice was flat. He already knew.

“She is dead.”

“I saw this too, in a dream last night. You and this skeletal woman both pushing a rocking chair back and forth, but she began spinning wildly and she threw herself into the flames of a fireplace.” Etienne came closer to me.

“I did not kill my mother.”

“I know. You can stay here, with me.”

The conversation we had was simple, without artifice. Etienne rarely spoke that night in flowery poetics as he had before. We were beyond that. He came so close to me that his breath, laced with absinthe was a spiced licorice breeze against my cheek.

“Come and look at the Vestals.” he said simply, and I followed him.

The painting of the Vestals has been finished in a frantic burst of creativity that had kept Etienne awake for days, his brush flowing on canvas until he was too exhausted or too drunk to continue. The canvas consisted of a triptych; three panels of canvas, the center one being the widest, flanked by a narrower canvas on either side. The center canvas was almost finished, while the side panels had been only painted with background scenery. The intensity of the painting was magnificent. In a temple of marble at the head of a bathing pool were two women embracing upon a stone altar. The floor beneath them dotted with their discarded robes and flowers from their hair that still bore stray petals. The more slender woman, Sophie, was a vision of delicate purity. The painting conveyed that the pale blond woman was of strong sexuality and knew of her sexual power, and yet she was pure, innocent and bore the expression of a virginal maiden. She lay back on the altar, locks of long blond hair spilling onto the floor below her as the other Vestal kissed her from above.

This other Vestal was a woman of shorter stature, and where the blond Vestal was slender and willowy, this one was lush and full breasted. Everything about the woman with dark hair the color of curling ink suggested sexuality. The

fierce smoky green eyes, lips as full as the taste of a juicy peach, the strongly fanned collarbone like the wings of an angel, leading down to full breasts, the tapering waist creased by the slightest softness of belly to flaring hips and bottom. The dark haired Vestal seemed to crouch over the more delicate woman, as if the blond were her prey. Lips fixed, ready to devour, her fingers clenching the soft skin. That darker Vestal was me.

The painting was shockingly erotic. Etienne had painted the lust in each woman's eyes. He had painted every detail, as well as every flaw. The little scar just below Sophie's knee was painted in delicate pink. The tiny half moons of our cuticles were painted with strokes like the head of a pin. The fabric that had bunched onto Sophie's hip was painted whereas any other artist would have ignored its presence. The layer of silk I wore at my hips had slithered up into folds at the curve of my hip and exposed my bottom, the thighs spread slightly. He had painted the dark little thatch of hair at the apex of my thighs. He had painted the wet coral pink of the inner folds that glistened like a seashell plucked fresh from the ocean. I could see every nuance of my body in that painting. Each individual eyelash, the tiny creases of my mouth, the freckles just below my eyes and the minuscule pores of the flesh. Delicate blue-gray veins were veiled beneath the skin at our wrists and throat. The darkened flesh of our nipples was dotted with tiny bumps where the flesh had hardened with arousal. Nothing could have been so real in a painting. No painter before his time had ever captured such eerie reality on canvas.

"Etienne, you've made this paint come to life." I said, in awe.

"It is not finished."

"What will the other panels be?"

"The death of one, and the death of the other."

"You will paint us buried alive?"

"I will try to capture it. Will you sit for me? And Sophie..."
I lowered my head.

"Etienne. I am sorry."

"Sophie, in the fire?" his eyes narrowed.

"No! No. I don't think so. She is leaving for Paris in the morning. Her father arranged for her to be married. She will make a good match." I parroted the words to him, feeling it strip my heart.

“I am sorry. I know you loved her.”

I watched him move away from me, his graceful stride taking him to the cabinet where he extracted two glasses and a bottle of familiar iridescent green liquid. He held a silver slated spoon over the glasses and placed sugar cubes on the silver, setting flame to the sugar and pouring the sinister looking absinthe over the cubes.

“I found this,” I showed him the leather satchel I had tucked under my arm, “under the floorboards. I think it was my mother's.”

“Open it.”

“I am afraid.”

“Then I will open it.”

He took the satchel in his hands and unlaced the top, pulling it open wide for us to peer inside. A thick book of vellum pages with a heavy tooled leather cover stared at us. On it's face was a medallion clasped to the book. Two serpents entwined into a scrolling symbol much like the letter Y, but a dagger centered it, the dagger topped by a crescent moon. The symbol was beautiful, etched in brass and set with jewels of impressive size. I lifted the book, savored it's thick heaviness. I opened the cover and saw inside,

The Diary of Helena Blanchard

I longed to read it and discover it's secrets, but Etienne poked at the bag again and we heard the rattle and clink of other objects. He extracted one; a bracelet for a woman. It was of delicate design in gold and featured a hummingbird and a blossom. He extracted another and it was a finger ring, done in gold and set with a sparkling stone of emerald the size of my fingernail. I blanched at the sight of these things, for my mother had hoarded them and the sale of these jewels could have fed us many a cold and hungry night. We emptied the bag onto the scratched oak table. Out fell rings, brooches, necklaces, charms and trinkets of such beauty as to be for a lady of great wealth, and of value to match. There were cuff bracelets with designs of Egypt etched into gold, elaborate jeweled necklaces of ruby and deeply colored sapphire. Pearls dotted hair combs of tortoise shell and coral. There were odd long sticks to pin into one's hair that featured characters in Chinese writing, painted with gold and set with the blackest pearls, which I had never seen before. Little figurines of the deities of India were wrought in filigree and studded with gems.

“It is quite a treasure.” Etienne broke the silence.

“She had all this, and yet we starved.”

“There is a story with all this, certainly.” he took my shoulders in his hands and I felt a rush of love for him. “Do you want to know what you are?”

I shuddered, for my mother had said those words before the flames. But this was Etienne, beautiful, faithful Etienne, and he was asking if I really wanted to know the truth. If I did not, he would protect me from it. I pictured him throwing that book into the river, the crocodiles chomping into it's leather like soft flesh. No, I couldn't.

“I want to know.” I said.

He nodded. He moved to take candles from a drawer and light them.

“Then take up that book and your treasure and I shall paint you wearing your mother's wealth while you read that godforsaken book.”

I scooped up the book and the jewels and followed him up the stairs to his bedroom, where he set up candles, paints, a fresh canvas and mixing jars as I played with the jewels, sadly, slipping the sparkling rings onto my fingers, the baubles onto my ears, the dripping jeweled necklaces onto my neck. When I finished, I wore every piece, garishly, six bracelets on one arm, four on another, a dozen chains of jewels falling over my breasts, longer ropes of gold and gems strong around my waist, my thighs, my ankles. Combs swept up my mass of black curls into a heavily decorated pile of straying curls. I had taken off my dress and my petticoats. I stood now in only this mass of jewels and my corset, plain white linen beneath glittering richness.

“Sit back on the bed,” he instructed, setting the scene. “and hold the taper in one hand, the book in the other. Let me see it's medallion, yes, that's it.”

I sat in my stockinged feet and corset, with the cool touch of gold tickling my bare skin. I watched him prepare the canvas. He mixed the paint, making the paint copy nature in tone and color.

“Now,” he said, settling himself at the brushes. “Read to me this book, and let me hear your voice as I paint.”

I opened the book and turned the first page.

New Orleans

1846

--- *What a thoughtful gift mama has given me. This book shall be a close friend and I shall record all my thoughts and dreams so that when I am an old babbling woman, I can read about a time when I was seventeen and happy. On this first page, I must record a confession. Papa has made arrangements for me to meet an English planter's son, Marcus Pernell. I know it is Papa's goal that I marry this Marcus Pernell. His father owns the most profitable sugar crops in Haiti. Honor thy father, I am told. Yes, I will, for I love my father and he is kind to me. Marcus Pernell. It is a slightly unusual name, and has some resonance. I hope he is handsome. My confession is this: though I will honor my father and marry this Marcus Pernell if he so demands it, my mind is distracted by another. This evening after the opera, I walked with mama and auntie Cicily. Standing near the salon Fouchalle, I saw Samuel Fynn and I confess, my childhood infatuation with him has not completely passed. Oh, how handsome he is! He noticed me, and I suppose he knew I stared at him. Papa would be horrified to know that I still pine for the lowly son of a furniture maker, but that is my confession, for I do pine for him---*

January 7

--- *St Francisville is nothing as graceful as the townhouse in New Orleans. I miss it so. This house is a sprawl of white and columns and austerity. It is grand and certainly beautiful in it's own way, yet I will always know that townhouse on the Rue Royale as my home. I have unpacked my boxes and made my place in a bedroom fixed with plaster angels upstairs. It is beginning to feel like my own bedroom. Mama feels the same way about this place as I do. I know Papa wants us closer to the plantation, closer to him, but we are women of the city and I fear we will never fit in here in this swampy*

countryside. Still, Papa has been most generous and to make up for our moving away from the city, he has given me Josie, a house servant that is to be a lady's maid. Imagine that! She is my age and a half breed. I believe she is some kind of Indian mixed with the negro. She is pleasant enough in any regard. Papa says she is knowledgeable in the latest fashions and hair styling. How frivolous and yet this morning I spent three hours in her attentions, having my hair wrapped with hot irons---

January 17

--- day I spent with mama and Auntie Cicily in a suffocating little salon in the city. Mama insists I have a new wardrobe suitable for the Mardi Gras. There have been invitations arriving at the townhouse which the housemaid, Anabelle has saved for us to read when we visit the city. "I'll not have you looking out of place." Mama tells me. I should not complain. An unpleasant woman who smells of tobacco and sweat took my measurements and draped fabrics across me, preening for my mother and my Aunt. Aunt Cicily- whom everyone assures me is the most en mode of the Blanchard women- took a fancy to the idea of a pale blue silk creation that would hang in a Grecian style---

January 22

--- a plantation in Haiti. Marcus is handsome indeed, but it is a sedate kind of handsome. Strong chin and very determined eyes he has. I cannot say I found him charming or sparkling as I do Samuel, but he has a well mannered way about him. I do like him. Papa is pleased that we took well to each other for Marcus certainly likes me. He made as much known in that embarrassing display at the table. I do not think he knew what he was doing, but still, it was sweet, and I like him. I wonder what his father is like? Such a powerful family to be from. And Haiti? What will my life be like in such a place? I imagine it as a wild jungle of bright flowers and savage people ---

January 28

--- This house is in chaos. I am the bride to be and it seems I am the only one with a grain of sanity left. Mama and Aunt Cicily have begun to arrange a wedding. It will be at St. Francisville, I am informed, and it is to be an event that everyone for miles will talk about for a decade. How lofty. I understand their meaning. We must show these English planters that they are not marrying down. It is good business to show our wealth. So here is Cicily, my mad aunt, surveying the silver, my mother ordering attendants. There are musicians to learn elegant pieces to entertain guests, flowers to fill grand vases at the edge of every row, the slaves working round the clock to gather up what needs to be done for a wedding with only five weeks of planning. And me? I am being fitted for my bridal gown, a magnificent thing of sky blue taffeta. I feel lost in such a thing! Papa has ordered a banquet fit for royalty that will be served to three hundred guests ---

February 1

--- the festival to continue. There seems too much to do, and yet, there is always time to enjoy the Mardi Gras festival. The scent of boiled crayfish and fried corn is in the air and the negroes have been carrying their iron torches in processions through the streets to mark the beginning of the celebrations. My dresses have been fitted with their final touches and tomorrow I will have them when we arrive in the city. I miss the townhouse and I want to see Anabelle and Little Maza's daughter who must be all of five years old ---

I stopped reading a moment and let the heavy journal fall into my lap. Etienne looked up from his canvas, curiously.

“She was rich.” I said, musing.

“It seems so.”

“St. Francisville? The plantation along the River Road...”

“It was sold several years ago to a Scotsman named Travis.”

“Then her family – my family – no longer lives there?”

“It is doubtful. The cotton failed after the hurricane. Most everyone in that area sold their property.”

He gestured for me to continue reading. I skimmed the pages, searching for some clue to anything.

February 6

--- the brilliant glow of light from the streets. I cannot tell you how beautiful the night was. I do not have words for it. With all of the magic of the festival, nothing can be above him. Christopher. He only whispered his name and I heard it over the crowd as if his voice was in my mind! He is grace itself! He is tall and fair skinned, with a crop of blond curls that I imagine must feel like corn silk. Oh, it is wicked what I think of! Touching those angelic curls! Though there is nothing cherubic about him. He walks with powerful strides, his shoulders broad and his smile with just a hint of mischievousness. It is powerful, the hold he has on everyone he meets, and his smile melted me---

Frustrated, I put the book to my side and folded my arms across my chest, bracing myself against the draft in the room. Etienne scowled at me and I quickly put my hands right again and let him have his posed model. He returned to his paints.

“Another man.” I said flatly.

“It seems that way. She was young.”

“She was a twit.”

“Impressionable, I would say. At what age? Seventeen perhaps?”

“My age.”

“Yes, and typical for her age.”

“I am not in love with every man I set eyes on.” I huffed.

“Maybe not, but you are in love with Sophie...” he stopped, bit his lip and looked at me with a gentle and apologetic smile. “I’m sorry.”

“Let’s skip this love nonsense.” I picked up the heavy book and laid it across my lap.

I turned the pages, all written in a tiny neatly crafted script, looking for any words, any names that might mean something to me. I saw Christopher’s name many times but only after several dozen pages did I notice that all other names had ceased to be mentioned.

--- only to lie to her and tell her I will walk in the gardens alone. These lies pain me and yet, they fall from my lips so easily. I can only think of my Christopher. I know his secrets. I know his heart and he knows mine. He does not frighten me, though he feared he might drive me away with his secret. Never. I only love him more. How splendid his truth is! I did not believe it at first, but it is the truth and it has become so clear to me. He lives in shadows. He has lived for a century and still his youth remains! Magic exists. I have always believed this, for God has created us and what more magic can there be but the greatest magic? Creation! Christopher is magic itself and I find him beautiful ---

“A century?” I asked, musing aloud. “And magic? She is mad.”

Etienne glared at me, his eyes a crystalline blue with wisdom. A droplet of indigo blue paint had somehow found its way to stain the pale flesh at the nape of his neck and I stared at it, where it stained his collar and mixed with the flaxen blond of his hair. A painful ache to touch him coursed through my body. He was my partner in this discovery. With him, I was whole, if only for a moment. The ache slowly spread and I felt an urge to reach out to him and press my thumb against the droplet of blue paint and smear it across his skin, but I would not. He would scowl at me for ruining the pose he had so carefully set up, but just for a moment, I wondered what it would be like to feel that slick paint and his skin under my fingertips, and to pull him over me and make love on those dusty sheets, with this treasure jingling between my breasts and the heat of him when he was painting, when he was truly brilliant.

“She was not mad. Not then.” he said, stopping for a moment to ponder his own words. “He was something unnatural, and she knew it. Don't you see?”

“I see that my mother has left me this piece of hell to dissect and to torment me.”

“No, Anais...I have always known it about you. How can you not know it? You do know it, and you can't understand it. What you are.”

“The blood.”

“Yes, the blood. Keep reading,” he said. “and keep still.”

--- before he kissed me. The hunger was in his eyes. I can see it when he is that way, in need. I wonder how it is for him? To have such a need? I should be repulsed and God forgive me, I should run from him. I know this and still, I love him. How does he take the blood, I ask him and he tells me it is painless for his prey --- his prey! --- sometimes even pleasurable. Yes, but their lives are taken, aren't they? Blood with life. Yes, he hates what he is and what he must do... ---

“Blood with life. He is talking about the blood...” I suddenly said, dropping the book into my naked lap.

“I expected as much. There are stories of it in mythology, in folk tales. Creatures that take blood for survival.”

“Creatures?”

“Read.”

--- that I beg him to know more. It is an obsession, I know. I crave it. Mama worries about me. She complains to Papa I am sure. I see the looks of the servants, disapproving and vicious. I do not care. I have my Christopher and we will be together forever. When I walk with him in the gardens, I know this. When I see his face in the moonlight, I know this ---

“When will she simply get to it?” I asked suddenly, dropping the book again. Etienne looked at me impatiently and he put down his brush for a moment, tired of my interruptions.

“What is bothering you?” he asked, wiping the indigo paint from his skin.

“I am hungry.” I said, honestly.

“I will fix you something.” he moved from his canvas. “We have bread and cheese.”

I grabbed his arm though and stopped him.

“No, not for that.”

I said no more. I simply pulled him down over me, our bodies crushing against trinkets of gold and gems.

I could not stay. Even my beloved Etienne could not keep me here. A lynch mob was gathering and as the morning light peeked over the horizon, I slipped away from Etienne, regretfully, and rummaged through his clothing until I found a suitable set of clothing to act as my disguise. Etienne was a small man, not much larger than I, and this was fortunate. After I was dressed in his clothing, and I had strapped down my chest to be flat, I sheered away my long locks of hair until it hung just to my chin. A man’s hat fit on my head and finished the illusion. I would pass for a man, but just barely, and only because people see what they expect to see. Packing up the jewelry and my mother’s diary, I slipped out of Lamaurie house, leaving behind one more lost love and the remnants of my heart.

Quickly, I went to the train station and bought a ticket for the next departing train.

The days that week grew warmer and the sweltering heat followed me in the cramped confines of the train going North. I kept to myself, fearful that someone might recognize me from the poorly done drawings that were nailed up to the walls of public houses and hotels. I was wanted for the murder of Helen Blanchard - “the terrible girl’s own mother” - and for being the prime suspect of starting a fire that had ripped through the heart of New Orleans and killed four

persons, including one infant child, as well as destroyed several blocks of the French Quarter. I was that wild eyed girl in the sketched posters, with untamed curling hair and lips that were too full and had been described in a newspaper I read as "lascivious." I was painted as a horrible daughter, a tart, a vicious and calculating tramp of a women who took male lovers with no thought of sin, and even had "unnatural appetites" for the carnal affections of women. Well, most of that was true. The train rumbled along it's tracks and I remained in my little corner of dark, only taking tea and toast when I felt too hungry to stay in the compartment which I shared with six other miserable souls just as hot and sweating as I was.

I saw these sketched posters when we stopped just outside of Atlanta. My reputation had gone that far, and later I would find, as far north as Richmond. I bought newspapers that sensationalized my mishaps in the most amusing ways,

...the fiendish killer with no regard for human life took a torch to the cottage where she and her tormented mother lodged and she savagely set her own mother to flames...

But how many papers would they sell if they knew that it had all been an accident; the unfortunate turning over of a lamp too close to a fireplace? Hmm. Not many, I suppose. The Baton Rouge Gazette had been somewhat flattering;

--- the poor girl's tragic life has offered no respite from misery and this writer must feel compassion for one so sorely misled into a life of prostitution and degradation ---

So, I was either a wicked murderess or I was a lost tragic moll. I could only sigh. Being either would have been so much simpler. Oddly, I clipped these stories from the papers and kept them all together in my bag. There were plenty of them.

Because of this, the boy's clothes became a necessity instead of a temporary guard. I sold a pearl bracelet from my stash and procured enough money from the sale to purchase two sets of boy's clothes that fit me better than the too loose trousers I currently wore. The new clothing was smart, but not too fine, for I did not wish to draw attention to myself. I bought a hat, and gloves, and boots with a bit of a heel on them to make me appear taller. The jacket I had instructed the seamstress to make loose, not tailored, this to hide the all too obvious curve of my breasts. To assist with this problem, I bound myself up in a poorly fitting over bust corset with tucked my breasts in and then I wrapped my chest in layer upon layer of gauze and wrappings. This was terribly

uncomfortable, but without it, I could never have passed for a boy. My only choice was to pass for a chubby boy, my tapered waist and flaring hips hidden by wrappings and a loose coat. I took shears to my hair and regretfully, I clipped the heavy mass of it away, leaving it to bounce much lighter just brushing the slope of my shoulders. I could not bring myself to cut it shorter. I allowed myself this one vanity and I tucked the curls up under the hat and hoped I would pass for a slightly effeminate and chubby boy. The guise seemed to work, for people will see only what they expect to see, and no one expects to see a young woman in trousers and a man's coat.

I found that passing for a boy -I say a boy for I could never quite pass as a man- was not so difficult. People assumed me to be a fat little student from one of the universities going on a travel somewhere, home to see mother and father perhaps. I did my best to keep my eyes cast away from people, to hide the brilliant color of them, the unusual color. They assumed I thought myself too good for them. When I had to speak, and I did so very rarely, I did it in my natural voice, which has always been low and rich, a very androgynous voice. There was nothing I could do about the occasional curl that escaped my hat, or my lips, which are full and set on a generous mouth. I could only keep to myself and hope no one noticed me.

I found that having money helped with my disguise greatly. When I had a handful of bills, no one asked too many questions. The men I encountered cast only a brief second glance at the dark featured boy who stood barely over five feet tall. They thought me queer, perhaps, a strange looking fellow, and they felt sympathy that I was so small in stature, so soft cheeked as to be made fun of in whatever aristocratic school I attended. Soon I found that women felt differently about me. Some were attracted and tossed loose glances my way, a wink here or a coy smile. I pained myself to remember to sit with my legs bowed and not delicately crossed like a girl, and to remember to hold my shoulders in a fashion that a man would, lest someone take me for a nancy boy.

I avoided conversation whenever possible, but it turned out that some people are determined to meet a new friend, particularly one Mrs. Grace Wittersby of Richmond, Virginia. She was twice my age, and it showed in the fine lines of her face and the little dusting of gray at her head. She wore expensive clothing, dressed down to try and fit in, but any fool could see she had money. Her gloves were fine silk, her dress, however plain and brown, was perfectly fitted and very new. The way she spoke, the way she walked and moved, were evidence of her wealth. I took her to be some businessman's wife, going to visit some long lost cousin, and trying to blend for safety. It was smart of her, but her disguise was easily unveiled.

Mrs. Grace Wittersby was no more from Richmond than I was from Rome. She had an accent, obviously English but hard to place. She was determined, perhaps in her loneliness, to strike up a conversation with the odd, soft cheeked young man who sat for a while in the common compartment, burying his nose in a book by Verne.

“Around The World in 80 Days, oh I do love that book!”

I smiled politely and nodded to her, then turned my eyes to the book, raising it a little higher.

“I must admit I find Mr. Verne's novels thrilling, don't you?”

Again, I gave her a polite smile and a nod, but she went on.

“A lot of people say it is not important literature, fiction at all that is, but particularly Mr. Verne's kind of fiction, you know, adventure and intrigue...”

I only prayed for her to shut up and leave me be.

“...but I believe it is very important to stretch the imagination, oh and it can be so sweet, can't it? To be able to escape the drudgery of life in such stories. That one is one of my favorites, but of course I do like his other works too.”

I dropped the book a little, not letting down my guard so much as in curiosity that we were now quite alone in this compartment. The lunch bell had rung and everyone had scampered off to the lunch car, leaving me with Mrs.-I-Do-Love-Literature.

“Oh, what lovely eyes you have!” she exclaimed, forgetting herself I was sure. Or at least I hoped. She reminded me of a fairy tale. A wolf would say such a thing.

“Thank you, ma'am.” I said, and instantly regretted speaking, for she took it as an invitation to become friends.

“I have a nephew named Charles who has eyes very much like yours, so vivid and that rich smoky blue color, oh but yours are so much more crystal clear. Forgive me, how rude! My name is Grace Wittersby.” she extended a gloved hand. Reluctantly, I took her hand and not quite sure what to do with it, I kissed it. I don't know why I did such a thing. I only knew that when men took my hand, they often kissed it.

She blushed instantly, easily impressed and she pressed a hand to her heart,

“Oh my, how charming! The very way a gentleman greets a lady in Paris. Have you been to Paris?”

“When I was a small child.” I answered.

“I do love Paris, such a beautiful city, truly the city of lights. Let me guess, you are French...yes, I can tell, one of your parents at least has French blood...”

“My father.” I said, just to say something. I had no idea where my father was from, but I imagined it could be France, since that was where Helen took me in her hopeful days.

“Yes, yes, I knew it! It is in the smoothness of your face, and your mouth. Very European! And might I say you have eyelashes a girl would kill for! I am out of place, am I? I don't mean to embarrass you, young man. Forgive me.”

“Forgiven.” I simply said, hoping to raise my book and be done with her.

“Are you going to Richmond?” she asked.

“Boston. My train connects in Richmond.”

“Boston! How splendid! I have a sister-in-law in Boston. She and her husband have a school there for the blind. Isn't that remarkable...”

She babbled on about her in laws (Albert and Judith) who ran a school for the blind in Cape Ann, which was not far from Boston, she said. She told me about her own charitable projects in Richmond, which included volunteering at a hospital for the mentally ill, though, she said she never had many duties aside from reading an occasional book to the patients who were calm and not too much trouble. I remained silent as she told me her life history, unprompted. She was from England (“hadn't you guessed!”) from Brighton, and she had four sisters, yet she was the eldest and still the last to marry. (“imagine! At age twenty-eight, and unmarried! An old maid!”) Her husband had turned out to be a charming American from Virginia who had been attending King's College. They had fallen in love, of course, and he had taken her back to America with him, where he started a successful business making canvas and brushes for artists.

“They are enormously popular,” she said brightly. “considered better than the Italian imports, and of course, more affordable. Artists as far as California use them!”

She made me think of Etienne. I wondered if Etienne had painted my portrait using her husband's canvas and brushes. I laughed a little and she mistook it.

“Are you an artist then?”

“No, ma'am. I am a...student.”

“I guessed you were.” she smiled. “Bilton University is my guess.”

“You guessed it.” I lied.

“Splendid. You simply must say hello to my friend Loretta's boy, Nevil. He is a third year at Bilton...”

“I will, ma'am.”

“Well, we will be at Richmond soon enough, and I must go and freshmen up, so as my husband doesn't;t thin me a straggler! Here,” she took from her handbag a piece of paper and a pencil, and she wrote out an address and a name; her own, and gave the paper to me. “You must come around if you are ever in Richmond again.”

I took the little paper and made a show of neatly folding it into my pocket. I took her hand and kissed it again, glad to see her get up and start toward the water closet. She had not recognized me, my wild eyes or my unusual lips, though she had seen both as clear as day. I had passed as a boy. I felt a little smug, but I put away the smug smile as the crowd came back from the dining car and the train screeched into Richmond. I wondered if Mrs. Grace Wittersby realized she gave her address to a a man whose name she did not know.

It was in Richmond that I decided to find a lodging house and spend a night in peace and quiet. I would catch my train to Boston in the morning. This was a mistake. Finding lodging was easy enough. I found a middle class traveler's hostel called “Millie's” which offered comfortable, clean, safe rooms. I rented one for the night and asked that a meal be brought up to the room as soon as possible. I took a bath, bound up my hair and wrapped a coat around myself when a serving girl brought up a tray of steaming roast pork and cabbage. I spent hours in that room as the sun went down, reading the tales of Jules Verne, happy to not have to be

bound up in a corset and costume. If only I had stayed there and minded my own business.

It was half past six and the sun had just started to set in a muggy and hot sky. I heard a gunshot and I perked up. I heard another, and then a crowd cheering. I rose out of bed and dropped the book on the nightstand. I was curious, and curiosity had always been one of my worse features. Quickly, I wrapped myself up in corset and bandages to suck in everything that should remain tucked away. I pulled on trousers and a loose coat, boots and my hat and I ran out to see what was happening in the square nearby.

What I found was a lynching.

A young black man named Yates was accused of defiling a white woman and the crowd was screaming for vengeance. I could see a crowd gathered, several men with shotguns and women with their hands over their mouths, trembling. I stood on tiptoes and looked through the crowd to see several large white men holding down Yates, who was buckled at the waist from the beating they had given him. I had seen a lynching before, in Baton Rouge, when a black man was accused of killing his master, but in that case it was true. In this case, I was shocked to see, it was not.

A gray haired man stood not far from me, looking on casually,

“He is accused of attacking a woman this morning. He stole some jewelry from the house and then he ran, and he did something awful to that woman, there.”

“Is that so?”

“Hmm, that's her. They just caught him.”

I looked over the crowd and my heart jumped. Standing there, with her pale gloved hands over her mouth was Mrs. Grace Wittersby. She was telling her tale of woe to the men who captured Yates.

“For stealin', well, they'll whip him alright, but for attacking a lady...that's a hanging one.”

“You said he did it this morning?” I asked.

“Just after he ran off with the jewelry and silver. This mornin' round eight. They been lookin' for him all day. Found him in the woods.”

Eight. This morning.

Yates might have stolen jewelry and silver, but Mrs. Grace Wittersby was talking my ear off in a train at eight that morning. And she hadn't gotten off of that train until eleven. If I looked around hard enough, I was sure I would find other faces who knew this as well as I did, others who had been on that train and knew she had been on it too, but the fact is, that crowd didn't care. They saw what they wanted to see, which was a big black man who was guilty of attacking a prim little white woman.

I wanted to scream out what I knew, that this Wittersby woman was in desperate need of attention and God only knew why she would do such a heinous thing as lie about something that would end a man's life, but whatever the reason, she was lying. I supposed that a woman like Grace Wittersby, a woman craving attention might see glory in accusing a man of attacking her, with the attention she would receive after the accusation. Maybe she accused him and assumed they would never catch him. It didn't matter. Yates was going to die.

“You just tell us what this ape did to you...!” one of the white men was saying.

And she told a fierce tale of Yates chasing her down at the edge of town and pushing up her skirts, how he tried and tried and failed because he couldn't get her linens off. I laughed at that, for Yates was a giant of a man, and if he had wanted her linens off, he simply would have ripped them off. I listened to her tale of his giant black hand over her face, holding her down and I recognized it for what it was... a fantasy. She had wanted it to happen, but in the dull life of Mrs. Grace Wittersby, nothing exciting ever happened.

I stepped forward and then thought better of it. If someone recognized me... Instead I went to stand close to Mrs. Wittersby as the brute men busied themselves punching the guts of Yates. I brushed my hand against her puffed sleeve. She turned and saw me and it took only a moment for her heart to leap into her throat.

“You were on a train at eight this morning, and you know it.” I said flatly.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, frantically, but then she lowered her voice. “You were supposed to transfer to Boston...”

“Richmond is a nice town.” I shrugged.

“You mustn't say anything...”

“How can I not?” I gripped her arm. “You would have this man killed!”

“It has gone too far, and I cannot stop it now! I didn't think...I didn't think...”

“You didn't think.” I said with a hiss. “And he will die for it. Is he yours?”

“My husband's worker.” her face lowered and people were beginning to turn their attention from the beating of Yates and to her again.

“Tell them you have a friend who is a planter in Tennessee and will buy him. Tell them not to kill him, for it would be a waste. Tell them what they need to hear, but save him. I will buy him from you myself and take him North. If he dies, I will pay a visit to your house.”

“Wait!” she shouted suddenly. I backed away into the shadows. “I have a friend who is a planter and he will take him for a field worker! It would be a waste to kill him. I should have spoken sooner.”

“Ma'am...this one is dangerous...” someone protested.

“Still, my planter friend can handle him. The loss of that money would be too great for my husband. Surely he would tell you the same if he were here.”

I wondered then why Mr. Wittersby was not there. With the severe attention getting schemes of his wife, I could imagine he was a neglectful husband. She said other things to soothe the situation. Her mysterious planter friend would be here tomorrow, she said, and if they would be so kind as to just lock him up in until morning, her planter friend would take him to Tennessee which was a far worse penalty than death.

To this, some of the farmers laughed and agreed. There were murmurs of “poor damned nigger...off to Tennessee...be lynched out there in a week...” She gave them a good yarn and I could see that the prim Mrs. Wittersby was a practiced liar. When she finished her tale, the brutes were taking Yates to the jail house to lock him up and wait for this planter from Tennessee.

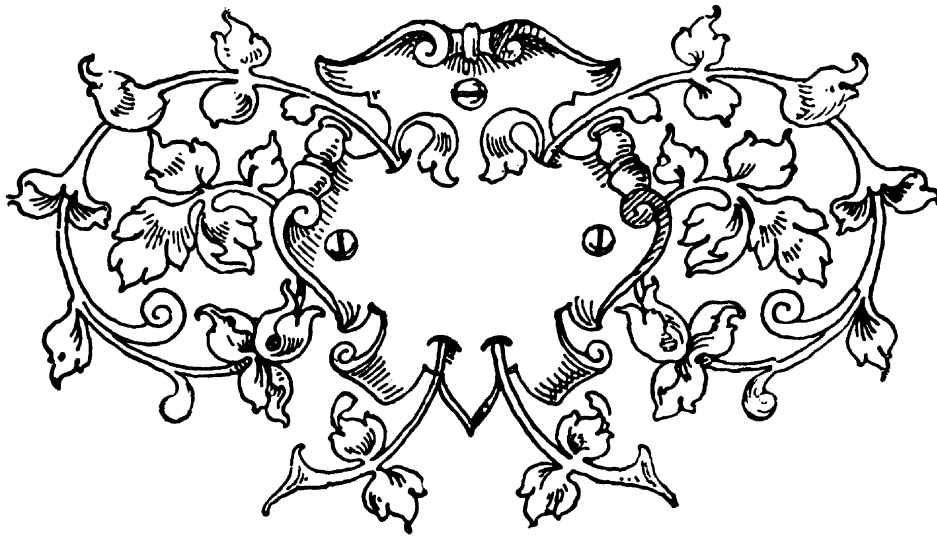
The crowd was disappointed. They began to disperse and Mrs. Wittersby found herself quite alone...with me.

“Why did you do that?” she cried into her handkerchief, as if I had been the one who had caused trouble.

“Where is your husband?” I asked.

“Away in Annapolis on business. I am alone here!” This seemed to agonize her more than anything.

“Show me to your house.” I said. It was an order, not a request. I had the upper hand now, and she knew it. She looked at me with terrified eyes for a moment, and I sighed, exasperated and grabbed her arm, “You want to be a victim? Just show me to your house!”



Chapter 3

The Wittersby House was not a grand, nor modest house, but rather something in the middle.. It was two stories, and in the Greek Revival fashion, painted white with green shutters. There was an expansive lawn in the front with a fountain that had dried up in the Summer. I followed Grace's steps, the jiggling of her bustle, and I call her only Grace now because I ceased to think of her as respectable enough to call her anything but her familiar name. She knocked at the door and a wide eyed little black servant answered, a girl that could be no older than thirteen. Grace called her Betsy.

“Betsy, this is my friend from a University in Boston. Go and make us some lemonade, and then lay out a fresh dress for me.”

“Yes'm.” the girl said and quickly went to her chores.

“How will you get that oaf out of jail? Hmm?” Grace asked primly, with a hand on her hip.

“You are going to help me.”

“I will certainly not.”

“You will,” I stood up, and though she was an inch or two taller than me, she backed away from me, and I knew it was my eyes. Wild eyes. “Or I will let this whole town know who you are, what a liar you are. There are station workers in this town that will vouch for the truth, and your address, my dear, you wrote on the back of your ticket.”

She looked horrified, and angry, but these expressions passed into something more cunning. She suddenly looked complacent. She knew she had been caught. I saw her fluster for a moment and then she reached for a drawer next to the couch and she lit a cigarette and put it to her lips, drawing a long breath. A tear streaked her face, but she no longer cried.

“I am lonely.” she said matter-of-factly. “It has made me quite mad.”

“Do you know someone big and dumb?” I asked.

“My husband's friend has a son, very big and very dumb. Slow even.”

“Will he play the planter, if we pay him?”

“I suppose he could, yes. He would. He gambles and always needs money.”

“Can the jailer be paid?”

“They always can.”

“You'll bring money to the guard then. We'll do it first thing in the morning, when there is less attention paid to such things.”

“That nigger would have attacked someone eventually anyway.” she said, and her face, which was not beautiful to begin with, turned ugly.

“Maybe so. Maybe not. It doesn't matter. You are the criminal here, and if anyone knew what you have done, it would ruin you. It would ruin your husband.”

“You won't tell a soul?” she bit at her lip, playing the princess again. Then I had a delicious idea.

“Maybe not.” I took a glass of lemonade from Betsy and waited for the girl to leave the room. “But for now, stand up, and take off your dress and lock that door.”

“Why?” she crossed her arms over herself and looked shocked.

“You wanted to be a victim.”

Grace removed the dress, as I ordered her to do, and the subservience gave me a thrill. For a brief moment, I owned her, the way she thought she owned that accused man named Yates. I wondered if she ever took liberty with him. He was handsome enough and she lonely enough. I wanted this moment, this... forceful moment. The craving I had felt stir my blood came upon me again and I was determined to satiate it, however that might be done, and at that time, I was not sure how it could be done. I was certain, however, that with this woman, I would let the events unfold as they may.

I stood then, as Grace Wittersby's trembling hands unfastened the last of the buttons on her dress and let it fall to the ground. She stood near the fireplace mantle, in her stockings and stays, and I was oddly reminded of Helen and how she had caught flame near the fireplace of our cottage. I blinked hard and reminded myself that I was now standing here with this witch of a woman, and I was dressed as a boy. It would not do to break the illusion by traipsing down memory lane. This woman, so ill named Grace, had very little grace about her

at all. This is not to say she was ugly. No. She was neither attractive or ugly, but something, like her house, in between. It seemed to me that Grace lived in a permanent spectrum of in between. Everything about her life was only just enough, never any more than that. Grace was not short, and not tall. Her body was neither thin or fat. Her hair was the kind of colorless brown that can be described by one person as fair and by another person as brown. She had pleasant eyes, of a soft cornflower blue but even this was only pleasant, not pretty.

I noticed then, that above the mantle was a painting, recently done from the look of it and the fashion of the gown worn for the sitting, was a portrait of her, and this spoke clearly of the in-between nature of Grace's life. The artist had been kind to her, for he had painted her with lustrous hair of a flaxen color, similar to Sophie's, and her cornflower eyes were the right shade, though they glittered with an intelligence that the flesh and blood Grace Wittersby's eyes did not possess. Her waist was a little thinner, her fingers longer and more tapered, her skin fairer. I wondered then if the portrait embarrassed her whenever a guest sat in this parlor and realized that the real Grace was something far duller. For all of Grace's dullness, as she stood there in her stays, I could see that this was Grace's beauty. This moment. Something remarkable was happening in Grace Wittersby's life, and be it good or horrifying, it was happening, and it was... me. I saw that her skin was flushed pink with the excitement, her hands trembling and her eyes had come to life, sparkling with a touch of fear and something underneath, harder to identify.

“What will you do with me?” she asked.

“Whatever I like.”

She accepted this, for she could do nothing else. I went to her husband's cabinet and took out a bottle of cognac, pouring a glass for myself as she stood shaking. I felt the craving and I hoped the cognac would dull it just a little.

“Why did you do it?” I asked her.

“I...I don't know.”

“Because you are lonely? You wanted sympathy?”

“Perhaps.”

“Did you ever take him to bed with you?” I asked, bringing the warm cognac to my lips.

She looked offended by this question and she pursed her lips.

“No! I wouldn't... never.”

“But you would bed me. That is why you gave me your address, to invite me to your bed.”

“That's not true.”

“I haven't even told you my name, and you would invite me to your home while your husband is away. A sweet invitation, that is.”

“I just wanted...”

She could not finish. I came closer to her and I could feel the heat of her skin.

“I know what you wanted.” Even in my days as the tart of Lamaurie House I could not be as saucy as this, but I was enjoying it, and there was the pressing matter of this unnatural hunger that must be satiated. I remembered the taste of Etienne's blood, the salty sting of it firing through my veins, and I needed it again. “And I know what I want as well.”

She looked flustered, and the pink blush that rushed her blood made her almost pretty. I drained the cognac from the glass and set it aside, moving closer to her, close enough to smell her lavender perfume and the veiled scent of sweat and nervousness. I found I liked that scent, the mixed scent of fear, tinted with lavender. In the many years, I have come to love the scent of lavender, for many women wear that common scent and it is most pleasurable when accompanied by the fragrance of fear. Raising a hand to trace a delicate path across the stiff whalebone of her corset, I felt her shiver.

“Take it off.” I said simply, and she moved quickly, excitedly, to obey.

The stiff casket of linen came apart at the busk and kept its hourglass stiffened shape as it fell to the floor around her feet. She slipped the thin cotton chemise away from her shoulders and slipped it down her hips. Beneath the linen and ribbon Grace had pale white skin, a shade lighter than that which was not covered. The paleness of her flesh did not make her delicate, but rather, made her intriguing, for banded across white skin were pink marks from the bunching of fabric trapped beneath a corset too tightly laced. The random pink marks banded across her breasts and belly, and appeared as miserable little welts of soreness. With no tenderness at all, I touched her, pressing my fingertips against the pink welts that crossed her breast. She flinched, but also, she sighed and at that, I smiled. There was fear in her eyes, and a certain amount of hatred. She arched

her back to my touch and I pushed her roughly against the mantle of the fireplace, bending to take a swollen nipple into my mouth. Her gasps, I ignored. When I laughed at her as she made a girlish whimper (for there was nothing girlish about her) she looked at me with angry eyes, yet longing. I took the other nipple in my mouth, enjoying touching a woman, even if it was this wretched one. I slapped at her breast when she whimpered again and somewhere in this entanglement, we slipped to that couch together and I found myself on top of her, a parody of some sapphic duo.

As much as I may have hated this woman of pathetic conscience, I was strangely drawn to her, maybe her wickedness itself cast a spell over me. She was not beautiful, or even pretty, but she was sexual, for every touch I gave her elicited some lascivious response. I sucked at her breasts, rubbed my fingers between her legs and between the wet folds of hot flesh there, and I felt her arch into me. She soon enough abandoned all pretense and she began clawing at me, not to push me away, but to draw me closer. I kept her hands away from my crotch, which she seemed most fascinated with. She would find nothing there of use to her.

Closing my eyes, I thought of Sophie, and then I found I could think of no one but Etienne. His blood seemed to tickle my senses. In that moment, I felt a rush of longing so intense that I could wait no longer. I slid down then, to kiss at her thighs, and I felt her press her hips up, inviting me. I wondered if she had been fucked by a woman before, and I had to remind myself that she still did not recognize me as a woman, but instead some randy teenage boy. The thought made me smile. She was wet between her legs. It had taken no great accomplishment to make her so, for she was desperate for touch, and now she squirmed restlessly as I found my place at the apex of her thighs. Parting the folds, I tasted her. I expected... I do not know what I expected. Sophie and I had never done such a thing, but that is not to say I did not know it could be done. My Lamaurie House lovers pleased me this way many times, and from them, I learned this was a path to pleasure. I admit that the thought of kissing such an intimate place was a bit frightening to me, and I did so with trepidation, but she sighed and quivered and in that response I found a flood of wanting rush upon me. I went to the task with determination then, for sending this woman into the same amount of hypnotic bliss that my Lamaurie House lovers had sent me into would serve my purpose. Whatever skill I possessed that clumsy first time, managed to do the trick, for she writhed and moaned as I lapped at the stiffening little nub that I found, quite by accident, and her eyes rolled back so that only the whites showed, like some possessed church proprietress.

Now was the time. Deftly, I replaced my kiss with my fingers and I turned my kiss to the curve of her inner thigh. In case you think the folk tales of uneducated mountain folk true, let me give you the truth of it. There are no fangs involved in this, not anyway until a vampire is many centuries old do the canines

extend and sharpen to the point that they may be used for piercing the flesh. In my lifetime I have seen it only twice. The drink of blood we take is most likely to be taken in the same fashion as I took a taste from Grace Wittersby- with a razor. I found a letter opener, quite sharp, on the table near the couch and it was that I used to make a little incision in the pale flesh.

She bled prettily -for I do find the sight of crimson upon pale lily white quite pretty- and her blood, sickly sweet and metallic nourished me instantly. Many tales of vampires and ghouls will tell you the taste of blood is salty, but any of you who have ever pressed the bleeding cut of your finger to your lips to soothe it will know, that the taste is not salty, but metallic, like sucking at a copper penny. However, no copper penny had ever tasted as delicious as the blood at Grace Wittersby's thigh. Etienne's blood had been not so delicious, but rather sacred. I had loved Etienne and feared hurting him. With this woman, it was not so. I felt I could drink a fountain from her, and it mattered not to me if she lived or died from it. But stupid, I am not, and I did not need a bloody corpse on my hands, so I stopped after I had enjoyed a swelling rivulet of blood warming my throat.

Raising up, I was shocked to see that Grace did not seem to be frightened, or for that matter, in pain at all. Her eyes were closed, and her body in ecstasy. I had buried my fingers inside her, fucking her with them (I got the feeling that no one could ever really make love to Grace, but only fuck her. In reality, who could love a creature as sad as Grace Wittersby?) If Grace noticed at all my cutting of her skin, she did not show it. How odd, I thought, that I can make this hypnosis happen! For it was a hypnosis I would learn later, that makes them so complacent. However, I get ahead of myself. Grace was complacent, and I drank of her. The blood served to warm me and satiate that wicked desire. The rush of it sent a hot flash of fire into my loins and made me something of an animal... perhaps something like a man. I fucked Grace, or in only slightly more polite words I could say I pushed my fingers into her, searching perhaps for salvation, but no that is not it. I fucked her because I needed to feel in control. I know that about myself now, that I need that control, but it has taken me so many years to learn it.

When we finished, she was exhausted on that couch of imported silk, her hair tousled and escaping the neatly bound coif she had worn it in at the beginning of this tryst. Her skin was flushed with heat and sweat, and she said to me,

“Sir,” (Sir!) “You have ravished me.”

Indeed. She did not look down, at the blossom of red at her thigh, how it trickled onto the cream colored silk, and I did not bother to point it out to her. I only rose to pour another glass of her husband's cognac. She smiled and stretched and like some happy lioness she rose from the couch and stretched, yawned and rubbed her shoulders as if a settling warmth had overtaken her.

“How do you feel?” I asked, not because I cared, but because I was curious.

“No one has ever touched me that way before.” she said, in a daze.

“Well, now someone has. I suggest, Mrs. Wittersby, that you begin finding what is needed to pay that guardsman for the release of your slave, for I won't be doing it with my own purse.” I said, directly to business.

“Oh,” she began, putting an arm around me in her best impersonation of a seductress, “surely we can spend a little time together. Your touch, sir, is divine.”

“Is it?” I said, recoiling from her. “Look at yourself.”

At the command, as if by magic, she looked down at her own body, arms spread like Christ on the cross, and she saw what I saw, that her thighs were smeared with crimson and thin rivulets of it made tributaries on the pale of her thighs. The tin streams of blood trickled freely down her leg and pooled on the expensive Persian carpet at her feet. She shook, as I knew she would. Quickly, I covered her mouth with my hand, and stifled the scream,

“The fun is over, madame.” I said. “Find what I ask. Your jewels perhaps? Or the silver. But do so, for I grow impatient.”

“I'm bleeding!” she hissed, but loudly.

“So you are. Because I have cut you. Clean yourself up. Stay quiet. Go on now, clean up and dress yourself.”

She did not know what to make of that, these simple instructions. She could only obey them. She stumbled away from me, and started toward the bedroom to dress her wounds and return some time later dressed in a prim gown of soft lilac, her hair piled on top of her head in some quickly pinned fashion. Her lavender perfume was stronger, as she had dabbed it behind her ears and at her throat. The haunt of fear was in her eyes again, which pleased me.

“What do you want with me?” she asked, all pretense of ladylike propriety gone from her.

“What I ask for. Do as I ask and I will be gone from your life soon enough.”

“Then instruct me so you can be gone from my house.” she might have added “devil!”, as Helen would, but she had not Helen's disregard for self preservation.

I poured another glass of cognac, finishing the bottle this time, and I fixed my eyes on her,

“Gather what valuables can be packed easily. Then instruct your girl, Betsy to go and fetch my belongings from Millie's. She will bring them here to me, and I will spend the night with you. What company we will have, heh?” I teased her. “And if you have a girl to spare, have her fix some supper. I am famished.”

Looking upon me like a priest upon a demon from the underworld, she gnashed her teeth in anger, but she would comply. She feared me, and what I could do to destroy her. She wanted me gone from her house, and she reluctantly nodded as she called in the little black girl, Betsy, to fix up a supper and to fetch my belongings from Millie's. As much as I never expected it, I looked forward to spending the night as the master of Wittersby House.