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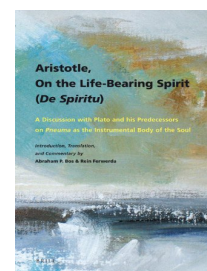
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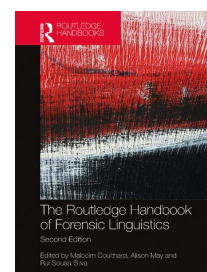
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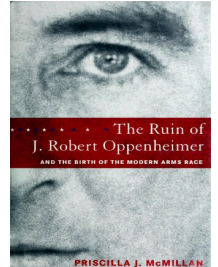
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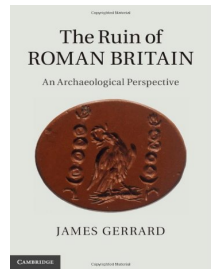
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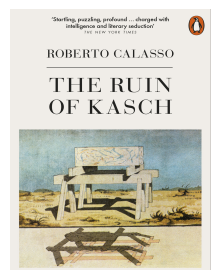
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THE SHADOW WALKERS SAGA

THE
RUIN
OF
SOULS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LILY WILDHART

THE RUIN OF SOULS

THE SHADOW WALKERS SAGA #1

LILY WILDHART

The Ruin of Souls
The Shadow Walkers Saga #1
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The Ruin of Souls/Lily Wildhart

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There is no light without shadow, just as there is no happiness without pain.

ISABEL ALLENDE

CHAPTER ONE

THEN



Looking into his piercing, bright blue eyes, I question how we managed to get to this point. After everything we've been through, to end up here, with him in my arms and me praying to a god I don't believe in... that this isn't the end of our story.

There have been so many moments throughout our history that could've killed either of us. Where we could've killed each other. But we survived it all.

The rise and fall of empires.

Wars of the world.

The breakdown of the world we once knew.

Not once, during even one moment of our past, did I think I'd be the one hoping beyond all hope he'd survive. That he wouldn't leave me. Especially not like this. When he has given so much for me. Something I never would have thought possible.

I scream as I lift him onto my shoulders, his groans of pain matched by mine. I will save him if it's the last thing I ever do.

Because a Dracul saved me. My immortal enemy.

In more ways than I ever knew I needed saving.

CHAPTER TWO

NOW



“Colt, I am not having this conversation again.” I breath out an exasperated sigh and blow my hair out of my face as I struggle with my bags up the stairs to my apartment. The summer heat is stifling and everything is sticky. I swear, parts of me I didn’t realize even touched are practically glued together. So freaking gross..

“Remy, come on. You cannot be serious about marrying that douchebag. He couldn’t be more wrong for you if you’d picked up a total stranger off the street, blindfolded!” he shouts down the phone.

Colt might be my favorite brother, the one I’m closest to, but he’s also been gone since his disappearing act twenty-one months ago, just after his birthday. His disappearing act which kind of broke me because I didn’t hear from him for six months. Then I broke all over again when my bestie, Creek, went to join him traveling the fucking world eight months later and ghosted me too.

“You get to have an opinion when you’ve spent some decent time with him and are actually present, Colt. Even then, your opinion doesn’t necessarily weigh in on the decisions I make about my life. Because it’s exactly that,” I tell him as I fumble with my keys to open my front door.

“Fuck!” I screech as I trip forward over my cat, Sushi, and try not to drop my bags. My phone flies from my hand, and I huff again.

“Fucking cat,” I moan at him, placing the bags on my counter before grabbing my phone from its hiding place under the couch. Sushi wraps himself around my feet, meowing at me to feed him like the little dictator he is.

“Fall over the cat again, Remy?” Colt laughs when I finally bring my phone back to my ear, and I roll my eyes.

“Fuck you, Colt. Just because I’m clumsy doesn’t mean you get to make fun of me from a million miles away.” I tear open a packet of cat food from the grocery bags and put it down for Sushi, then refill his water.

“Aw, come on, sis, you know I love you just the way you are. You’re my favorite sister.”

“I’m your only sister, dickhead.” I laugh. “Are you coming home anytime soon?”

“That’s actually why I’m calling... Creek and I land in two days, would you mind grabbing us from the airport?” I can hear the cheesy grin in his voice, and even if he did disappear on me, I can’t deny him.

“You’re home for my birthday?”

“Of course, we wouldn’t miss your twenty-first for anything.”

“Well, considering I haven’t heard from Creek for over a year, I didn’t really know if he’d be

around, and you left before my last birthday too. I didn't expect you to be here for this one." I hate how whiny I sound, but Colt and Creek were the two people I was closest to in the entire world before they just both up and left with almost no explanation.

"He's been going through some stuff. I'm sure he'll tell you all about it when we're home. He's missed you a lot. You should cut him a little slack." Colt chastises me, but all that does is piss me off more..

"Maybe, or maybe he can learn what it's like to be ghosted with no reason or explanation. Your bromance is strong—I'm sure you'll dry his tears." I put away the rest of my groceries, then pop the leftover mac and cheese from last night in the microwave. I grab a can of Pepsi Max, my ultimate weakness, and drop down onto my couch.

"You and I both know that's not how it's going down, Remy. So, you'll get us from the airport?"

"I will, as long as you both promise not to talk shit about Jack on the drive home. It's three hours to the airport. I can't deal with your bullshit for that long."

"Fine... but you really need to dump the douchebag. I know Creek made his opinion clear before he left, and from what Dad and Bauer said, the guy's a real tool."

"Seriously, Colt? Give me a break. You met him once, for about ten seconds, before you disappeared halfway across the world. Maybe when you spend some time with him, you'll see what I see. You'll see how much he loves me."

"That man loves numbers and facts. He's a fucking robot."

"There is nothing wrong with wanting to be sure about things, Colt! We can't all be as spontaneous as you. Some of us want to make calculated decisions. Like mine to move to pre-med next year instead of dance. It's a better life choice. I'm still going to dance, but just for fun." I wince, knowing that he's not going to like what I just told him, but better to break the news when he's on the phone. A thud makes me pull the phone from my ear and laugh. "Stupid fucking phone, stupid fucking slippery bastard case. I hope the screen isn't smashed," he mutters, followed by a spatter of cursing before the fumbling noise of him picking the phone back up.

"Baby sister, you have danced your entire life. One year engaged to the biggest douchebag on Earth—because who the fuck proposes on the anniversary of your mom's death, by the way—one year, and your entire fucking plan has changed. This is bullshit and you know it!" he shouts, and Creek's voice calls out in the background.

My heart stutters at the sound, and I shake my head. Stupid, traitorous heart. That door closed a long time ago, and it's never going to open again. I love Jack, and he loves me. He'd never leave me the way my family has.

"A lot can change in twenty-one months, Colt. You've been gone a long time. Maybe you don't know me as well as you used to. I'm going to go. I have a big night planned, and I need to sort shit out."

"Don't lie to me, Remy. You have a night with the new episodes of that cop series you're obsessed with planned. I'm still addicted and it's all your fault, so I know exactly what your night consists of." I stick my tongue out at him even though he can't see it.

"Fine, I have a date with the boys in blue, but, still, I'm done having this argument. Text me the details of your flight and I'll get you both from the airport. Okay?"

"Okay, but this isn't over, Remy."

"If you say so, Colt." I sound as frustrated as he does, but I really am over this whole thing with him. We've done nothing but argue the last few times we've spoken. I miss my brother. Don't get me wrong, we've always fought, but lately it feels like all he's done is judge my decisions because it's

not what he wants for me. I understand that he's concerned, that he wants what's best for me, I just wish he'd trust that I know myself. That I know what I'm doing. I might be his little sister, but that doesn't mean I need protecting in every instance of my life. The microwave beeps at me, reminding me that I put food in and I grab the mac and cheese, doing a little happy dance at the gooey goodness.

"I love you, baby sis. Always have, always will. I know you don't believe me yet, but I have your best interests at heart, and that guy isn't right for you. I'll text you later."

"Love you too," I say and hang up the phone.

"Babe, look at this place, imagine waking up on your twenty-first birthday with this view. We should celebrate every chance we get. Life is all about the memories, right?" Jack thrusts his iPad screen in front of my face as I'm trying to put on my mascara, and I swallow the frustrated huff that threatens as I smile at him. He's been so excited about making sure I have the best birthday, and I love him for it, but birthdays are not my favorite thing.

"It looks amazing, like paradise," I admit as I look at the sea cottage. I've never even been on a plane, but this place really does look like paradise, even if it is a day's flight away.

"What better way to celebrate than just you and me and our own piece of paradise, away from everyone and everything?" he asks as he wraps his arms around my waist and kisses my neck. I sigh contentedly and sink into his embrace, shaking off the stress of starting a new year at college.

"It will be the perfect break before the chaos begins. My residency. The wedding planning. It's exactly what we need."

He kisses me again and squeezes me.

"My treat for your birthday," he tags on the end, and I try not to roll my eyes. Jack is a trust-fund baby, and after growing up the way I did, it makes me a little uncomfortable when he throws his money around, but this is my birthday I suppose, and he's right, time is precious. We should make all the memories we can.

"Plus, the anniversary of when we got together is the day after your birthday, we could try and make a proper vacation out of it. Think of all the things we could knock off your bucket list. Skydiving, swimming with turtles, cave diving, zip lining through the jungle. We could have so much fun before adulting and life becomes a heavy reality for us both."

"It sounds like heaven, but, remember, we'll need to have dinner with my family too. Colt and Creek are coming back."

"How could I forget?" He releases me and turns me so I'm looking at him, the frown on his face hurting my heart. "Your dad and brothers hate me; I can't wait for us to move away from your oddball family after the wedding. Don't even get me started on your so-called best friend."

"Hey, they're not that bad," I counter, but we've had this conversation more times than I can count. My family aren't exactly The Brady Bunch, but they're good people. "And they don't hate you, they're just very protective of me. I'm the baby, it's just the way they are."

"If you say so, babe, but I don't want our kids growing up the way you did, with the weird survival bullshit. It's bat shit crazy."

I smile at him, I know he's not a fan of my family, but I don't want to argue with him. Not today.

"I know you don't, it's part of why we're moving, remember? Now, let's look at this trip some more before I have to get to work, and you should get to the hospital too. You don't want to be late for

rounds.”

“I’ve got time, how about we celebrate today being a great day again?” I laugh as he picks me up, my legs wrapping around his waist instinctively as he lowers his lips to mine. He kisses me until I’m breathless and I forget about anything but him.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of you,” he whispers into my ear before he rolls us so that I’m straddling him. I kiss him again, and as I feel him harden beneath me, I groan. My phone rings and he grumbles, “I swear if that is your fucking brother. Cock block,” as he sets me back on the floor. I dig my cell out of my pocket and see my favorite person’s name on the screen.

“Fallon, you okay?” I answer the call with a smile and the disdain on Jack’s face is clear. My family aren’t the only ones he’s got issues with, he’s not a fan of my “kooky” friends either.

“Bitch, that is not how you answer the phone. Is that asshat fiancé staring you down while you’re on the phone again? That shit is toxic.” I pinch the bridge of my nose, my frustration flaring at her words—the cavern between Jack and the people I love is great and I have no idea how to fix it, or if it’s even a possibility.

I really wish they could see the side of him that I get to see, the loving guy who wants to look after me, take me away for my birthday to make me smile. All they seem to see is a controlling, rich dickhead. I just don’t get it.

“I’m great, thanks, Fallon, wonderful of you to ask.”

“Oh, don’t even. You know I love you; he just rubs me wrong, there is something about him that screams bad juju. Anyway, I was calling because I heard that fine-ass brother of yours is heading back to town for your birthday. You want me to come with you to get him?”

“How did you... In fact, I don’t want to know the answer to that. Your obsession with Colt still gives me the heebie jeebies.”

“Girl, it isn’t an obsession, it is straight up lust. Have you seen that boy lately?”

“No, he hasn’t been around for nearly two years, remember?”

“You need to get over that fire. He left because it was what he needed to do. You’ll understand eventually. Same with your boy, Creek.” I roll my eyes and Jack signals to let me know he’s going to go. He looks angry, but I just blow him a kiss with a wave as he leaves. That’s a problem for future Remy.

“Is there a reason you called, other than to talk about dick bag one and two?”

“Nope, you know I’m firmly team Creek. The boy lost his mind when he found out you were getting engaged, and you didn’t even notice he was acting weird. Admittedly, you didn’t *know* what was going on, because Jack told him weeks before he even asked you, just to piss Creek off. Seeing you with Jack, when Creek is so obviously in love with you, knowing you’d likely say yes, *which you did!* I’m not all that surprised he left.”

“Don’t start, Fallon. Creek and I were never like that and you know it. You, me and him were The Three Musketeers. Creek didn’t even say goodbye, and you were as worried as I was.”

“No, I wasn’t. I knew he was going; you just couldn’t see past your worry and then anger. But if he’s coming back, maybe you two can finally work through all your issues and fall madly in love.”

“My life is not some sitcom, Fallon. I love Jack. Just because Creek is coming home, that doesn’t change anything. We’re friends, or at least, we were.”

“Yeah, you keep telling yourself that, girl. I’m telling you I’ll voodoo Jack’s ass if he doesn’t sort his shit out, clear the path for my boy, Creek.”

I roll my eyes at her. This is one thing we’ve never seen eye to eye on, especially because she knows I crushed on Creek for a while when we were teenagers, but it was just a stupid crush.

“We both know your voodoo is all in your head. Anyway, to answer your first question, no, I don’t need you to come with me, I can handle those two idiots. I’ve got to run, I’m due at the bar in thirty, Shelly called in sick again.”

“Okay, if you say so. My voodoo is as real as you and I. I’ll let you stay in denial about Creek for now, but one day, you’re going to see just how right I am.”

“Uh-huh, if you say so. I love you. Talk later.”

“Love you too, in-denial girl.”

The airport arrivals area is so freaking busy that for once I’m thankful for my height. I’m not exactly supermodel tall, but being five-foot seven means I don’t have to jump up and down to look for these two bozos. I wait what feels like forever, and the arrivals lounge empties, so I start to think that I’ve been punked and Colt gave me the wrong flight details. I check the time on my cell again and search back through my messages from Colt to find the flight details.

Nope.

This is the flight number he gave me. What the actual fuck?

I turn to go and sit down and settle in for the long haul when voices shout from behind me.

“You leaving already, short stack?” I turn as I’m lifted off the floor and spun around. I can’t help the squeal that escapes my lips. “I missed you so much, little sister!”

“Put me down, you giant oaf, you’ll drop me!” I tell him. He puts me back down and I take a step back wondering who the fuck this is and where the hell is my brother. Behind him I spot Creek and my jaw hits the goddamn floor.

“What the fuck did you two do while you were traveling? Fall into a tattoo gun and mainline steroids?” The words fall out of my mouth, my filter’s never been great, but what the hell? The two men in front of me are not the ones who left. They both look like they’ve grown about six inches and packed on about two hundred pounds of muscle, which they decided to then cover in ink. “Who even are you?”

“Don’t do me like that, little bit. I’m hot!” Colt wags his eyebrows at me, making me realize his fucking eyebrow is pierced too, and I can’t help but laugh at his stupid ass. Apparently while he’s changed completely, he hasn’t really changed at all. He wraps me up in a hug and I groan, but despite my anger at him full on ditching me, I’m so happy he’s back. I’m just not going to let him know that, that would be too easy.

“Come on, Hulk. A girl needs to breathe.” I laugh and he releases me with a sheepish look before slinging his arm over my shoulder.

“Hey, Remy,” Creek says quietly when I push Colt’s arm off and come face-to-face with my former best friend. It takes every ounce of willpower I possess not to fucking drool over the man-god in front of me. Holy. Fucking. Hell. His long dark hair is up in a man-bun, his beard is long but hot as fuck, even though beards have never really done it for me, and every inch of beautifully muscled skin is covered in ink of some form.

Think about Jack, you love Jack. This guy is a huge dick bag. Remember he’s a dick bag.

“Creek. I see you decided to join my brother’s steroid and ink marathon. I guess that’s why it’s been radio silence, huh? Let’s go, I’ve got things to do.” He runs his hand down his face, and his eyes plead with me not to give him shit, but he was my best friend. He’s the guy who didn’t leave my side

for two weeks when my mom died so I didn't feel alone, and then he dropped me thirteen months ago like I was nothing but trash and I haven't heard from him since. I shove my cell in my jacket and head toward the exit without looking back.

I hate being a bitch to them, but also, fuck them. I'm here, I didn't have to be. They're the ones that left. Ugh, I hate being so conflicted. These guys are my family, but also, like, who just ups and leaves without so much as a goddamn goodbye, and then ghosts you for just over a year? Yes, I'm sore about it, but then, neither of them have given me an explanation as to why they both left either. Colt at least reached out since Creek disappeared and let me know Creek was with him so I wasn't just worrying he was dead somewhere, which I legit was for the first week he went MIA. Like I said, dick bag.

I climb in the front seat of my baby, an '87 Mustang that Bauer has been helping me modernize a little. He might be a pain in the ass and like eight years older than me, but the guy is a genius under the hood of a machine. Colt lets out a whistle when he sees her. "Damn, Bauer really has been helping you make this beauty shine. He always did love machines more than humans."

"Will you guys get your asses in here already?" I sigh. I have a dance class this afternoon and if they don't get a move on, I'm going to miss it. I take them both in, and eye up my back seat, trying not to laugh too much. Creek sighs as Colt laughs before folding himself in two and climbing into the car, his knees by his ears because there is no space for someone his size back there.

"If I'd known you two had, like, tripled in size, I'd have asked Bauer for his truck."

"You and I both know our big brother would never let you drive his truck." Colt rolls his eyes as he gets into the passenger side and slams the door shut.

"If you hurt Betty with your ridiculous meathead muscles, I'm going to break you," I growl at him and pat the dashboard. Betty was my mom's car, and I always loved it. Dad gave it to me when I got my license and she's been a pet project of mine since then, well, with Bauer's help.

"I'm not going to hurt the damn car, and the ladies love these meathead muscles." He wags his eyebrows again and I can't help but laugh at his ridiculousness. I spot Creek in the rearview mirror watching me but decide to not pay attention to it.

"I'm sure they do, buddy. Let's get this show on the road. I need to drop you guys off and head out."

"You're not hanging out?" Creek asks quietly, and it's almost like I can feel his relief. It stings, and I bite my lip.

"No," I tell him sharply and put the car into gear, ending the conversation.

CHAPTER THREE



“Babe, are you about ready?” Jack shouts from downstairs as I finish setting my long hair into curls.

It’s my birthday tomorrow, but tonight is giving me so much freaking anxiety. Usually, tonight’s meal would be on my actual birthday, but Jack wanted to do something special tomorrow, although I’m not sure he ever actually sorted anything. Oh well I guess, it’s about par for course, but it’s fine. He’s busy. I get it. In the past, my birthday meal has always been something I really look forward to, and this year in particular is a celebration for me turning twenty-one, but really tonight is just going to be one big macho-bullshit-fest between my family and Jack. I just hope Maddie and Fallon help me keep the testosterone in check. I shudder even thinking about my engagement party, but let’s not go there.

“I’ll be down in a minute,” I shout back from his bathroom and straighten out the dress I’m wearing. Touching up my eyeliner, I give myself a once over before grabbing my shoes and heading down to where Jack’s impatiently waiting.

“You look hot, babe! You sure we have to go?” he says with a playful laugh, but the tension around his eyes confirms it’s not really a joke.

“Come on, it won’t be that bad, and we just won’t stay too late, okay?” I tell him, hoping to placate him while guilt eats at my stomach for dragging him with me when he obviously doesn’t want to go. I bite my lip and contemplate telling him he doesn’t have to come, but I just know that if I show up alone, I won’t hear the end of it.

He rolls his eyes at me, handing me my purse as I slip my heels on. “Let’s just get this done, shall we?”

I swallow the lump in my throat. If it wasn’t my birthday, we wouldn’t be doing this. I love Jack, and I love my family, but having everyone in one room is a nightmare. I swear I feel more stress with this than I did with my exams to get into med school. Jack opens the door and gestures for me to head out, so I smile at him and place a chaste kiss on his cheek before heading out to the car.

The drive to the restaurant is tense and despite trying to make conversation, it ends up being a quiet ride. We pull into the parking lot behind the restaurant and Jack’s even more wound up now than he was when we left, and my stomach flips. Maybe I should’ve come alone.

He climbs out and slams the door as I unbuckle, making me flinch. What a night this is going to be.

I know he doesn't like my family, but I kind of hoped he'd suck it up for my birthday meal. I swear, when it's just the two of us, he's the guy I met. But I put him near my family and it's like the dark side of him comes out of hiding. I slip from the car and round the front to join him, reaching out to take his hand in mine and he rewards me with a small smile.

"Sorry, babe. I don't mean to be an asshole. Your family just put me on edge, but it's no excuse to be such a jerk. It's your birthday dinner, I know what it means to you. I'm not going to let my issues mess with your night."

"Thank you," I say softly, glancing at the floor before looking back up at him. He seems sincere, but I already feel a little on edge from 'handling' him so far tonight. Here's hoping he can actually do the whole, 'live up to his word' thing tonight.

We walk into the restaurant and I can't help the big grin on my face. We've come here for my birthday for the last eight years, and I have so many happy memories here.

The hostess waves us to the private room in the back we always book, and I lead Jack through the restaurant. I feel him take a deep breath as I push the door open to the room and noise explodes around us.

"Happy birthday!" voices shout, and I can't help but laugh. Bauer is closest to me and picks me up in a bear hug that is signature Bauer.

"Happy birthday, baby sister. Welcome to the grown-up table," he says in my ear before placing my feet back on the ground and Maddie, Creek's mom, wraps me in her arms, with tears in her eyes.

"I can't believe how quickly you've grown up!" I sink into her embrace, soaking up the love from her, the woman who became everything I ever needed after my mom passed. I squeeze her tight before she releases me and takes my face in her hands, shaking her head. "Too quick."

I laugh at her and turn to find the rest of our small group: my dad, Colt, Creek, Fallon, my other bestie, and her little sister, Rebel. Jack stands off to the side, excluded from the group, as if trying to keep himself from catching their crazy as he so delightfully calls it. I roll my eyes and finish saying hello to the group before taking my seat at the table, with Dad to my right and Jack to my left. The noise dies down as our server comes in and takes everyone's drink orders.

Jack squeezes my hand under the table, and I gift him a small smile. I take a deep breath, because so far so good.

"So, Colt, how long are you guys back for?" Fallon asks, with a wicked smile on her face as I groan internally.

"Well, since you asked so nicely, I think me and the man bun are done with our adventures for now. It's time to come back home," he says to her and winks at me. My gaze drifts to Creek next to him at the table. He's stiff as a board, and his jaw is clenched, looking to Jack at my side, who is equally as tense.

Awesome.

"Are you guys really sticking around?" I ask, my gaze bouncing between Creek and Colt as the table turns silent.

"We are," Creek says, pulling his gaze from Jack and hitting me with those bright green eyes of his. There's so much emotion in his eyes, it's always been the same way.

"I guess you guys should take the next few weeks to spend as much time together as you can then, since we'll be moving after the wedding in a few months," Jack says, and the table explodes. I drop my head into my hands, because this is not how tonight was meant to go. Happy Birthday to me.

"Over my dead body," Colt says, while Bauer pins Jack with a look that could be classified as deadly.

“Now then, boys, I’m sure they’re not going far, right?” Maddie, ever the diplomat, speaks up, trying to calm my thunderous father.

“Well, erm...” I sigh.

“We’re heading over to the East Coast. I have a once in a lifetime opportunity with a fellowship,” Jack tells the table, and I can almost feel the rage coming from my dad.

“I forbid it,” he says, his voice booming across the room. Fallon sends me an apologetic look, while Rebel sits next to her wide-eyed.

“Dad, come on... You can’t do that.” I take his hand and he snatches it away.

“The hell I can’t! And you, Boy Wonder with a giant stick up your ass, if you think differently, you’ve got a lot to learn.”

“This. This right here is part of the reason why we’re moving. Your family has no idea about real life or boundaries. Remy and I are engaged. We’re going to be married. There isn’t anything you can do to stop it.” Jack levels my dad with his stare, a battle of two titans in a single look.

“Watch me,” Bauer says, his voice lethal as he pulls a gun and lays it on the table.

“You see! You’re all fucking crazy. Who the hell brings a gun to dinner?” Jack shouts and stands, yanking me up with him. “Come on, babe. We’re leaving. This is ridiculous.”

“You let go of her right the fuck now,” Creek growls as Jack’s fingers press into my upper arm. I try not to wince at his grip, but I’m pretty sure that’s going to leave a mark.

“You don’t get to speak to me like that,” Jack says, pulling me toward the door, which Colt and Creek block.

“You guys, it’s fine. We should just go,” I say, tearing my arm from Jack’s grip. He looks at me like I’ve lost my mind, but I lift my chin and look him in the eye. “You started this. You couldn’t just let me have one nice night with everyone I love.

“As for you two, I appreciate the sentiment, but standing up for me now after ditching and ghosting me for a year...it’s too little too late. Maddie, Fallon, guys, I’m sorry. I’ll be over for dinner in a few days, but we’re just going to go.”

“Okay, sweetheart, you take care, and happy birthday,” Maddie says from her chair, her hand on my dad’s shoulder, I’m pretty sure keeping him from leaping across the table in anger.

“Love you, girl.” Fallon blows me a kiss and Rebel gives me a little wave. I turn back to the door, but Colt and Creek haven’t moved.

“Please, you guys,” I say quietly, and their faces drop. I can’t quite read them, but the disappointment streaming at me from the room is overwhelming. They separate, framing the door, and Jack storms out as soon as there’s space.

“I love you, little bit,” Colt whispers and kisses my cheek as I leave, trying not to let the tears in my eyes stream down my face.

I drag the covers up over my head and sink into my pillows, ignoring this shitty week. It’s my twentieth birthday, which means it’s also a week to the day before the seventh anniversary of my mom’s death. A senseless, stupid moment of time, which spun my entire life out of control.

I remember the day the week after my thirteenth birthday like it was yesterday. We were meant to go shopping, go get our hair done. A rite of passage she said. She just had to pop out for some grocery shopping first. She and Maddie had a weekly date, though I know it’s because my stupid

brothers ruined my cake. I heard her yell at them last night when she thought I was asleep. So, she said she'd go shopping and then she'd be back. That's what she told me, at least...

I remember baking in the kitchen. Bauer and Colt were outside playing football with Creek, while Fallon and I were eating more of the cookie dough than we were baking, and my dad was out in the shed, doing whatever the hell it was he did out there. The kitchen phone rang, and I answered the phone laughing. Maddie's voice sounded strained, but I didn't think anything of it when she asked for my dad.

I yelled for him to come to the phone, and he ran in from the shed, his face pale. It was like he knew. He picked the phone up off the counter and I went to the oven to pull the cookies out. His cry rang out around us as he fell to his knees, and the guys all came running in. My father doesn't cry. Ever. But it was the noise he made, like a wounded animal close to death. His hands shook as Bauer took the phone from him and raised it to his ear. He listened before mumbling his acknowledgement and hung the phone back on the hook.

Bauer grabbed the keys to his truck, his twenty-first birthday present from Mom and Dad earlier that year, and lifted my dad off the floor. Colt took Dad's other side without any word.

"There's been an accident; we need to get to the hospital," Bauer said calmly, and my dad just stood there like he was numb. I remember putting the cookie tray down and burning my hand, but not thinking much of it because it was obvious something really fucking bad was happening.

The ride to the hospital took what felt like forever, cramped in the back with Fallon, Creek, and Colt while Dad sat up front as Bauer drove. I don't remember seeing anything of significance until we got to the hospital. Bauer led the charge while my dad was completely spaced. Creek and Colt walked with him until we saw Maddie and it was like Dad came back to life. She strode right up to him, and he hugged her tight.

"She's in surgery but, Denny, it's not good," she said, her voice breaking on the words. A nurse led us all to a waiting area, and I sat there, one hand in Creek's, the other in Fallon's, just waiting. No one said it, but it was obvious.

I felt a tug at my heart, and tears fell from my eyes. I knew right then, without anyone even telling me. A few minutes later a doctor arrived and took my dad and Maddie aside. That was the only time I've ever seen my dad cry.

My mom was gone. I felt it.

Maddie came back into the room and crouched down in front of me, calling Colt over, while Bauer went to my dad.

"I am so sorry," her voice cracked, and the tears ran faster down my face.

So today, on my twentieth birthday, I'm sitting in bed, like I do most birthdays until my family dinner tonight. I do the same each year—it's how my birthday dinner tradition started, even though Colt and Creek have disappeared off the face of the Earth this year. This year could go eat shit. The only good thing about it so far has been Jack. He's been my rock, especially since those two split. Colt's been gone thirteen months, and Creek, well, he up and disappeared just after his birthday a month ago. I haven't heard shit from either of them, but I know they're together from Maddie and Dad.

Asshats.

"Babe? You up?" Jack's voice rings out through my apartment. I grumble incoherently back, but I hear his laugh as his footsteps get louder. "Come on, it's your birthday, and I made breakfast."

The comforter is ripped away from me and I groan at the sudden onslaught of light. I guess he

Random documents with unrelated
content Scribd suggests to you:

perfection, and the wig was so perfect in its simulation of nature, that I doubt if any one but a painter or a woman would have detected that it was a wig. He dressed in a careless semi-picturesque style—turn-down collar, loose necktie, velvet coat—and with that long hair of his, he had altogether the air of a painter or a poet."

"And you never painted him?"

"Never. I have sketched his head many a time from memory, for my own amusement, both before and after his disappearance; but he never sat to me. I might have made money by giving the police one of my sketches, when they were trying to hunt Georges down as a suspected murderer: but I am not a Judas, to betray the friend at whose table I have eaten," said the painter, whose Scriptural knowledge was derived solely from the Old Masters, and who regarded the disciple's crime from a purely social point of view.

Heathcote was careful to show the least possible curiosity about the vanished Georges. He listened with the air of a man who is charmed by a delightful conversationalist, who admires the *raconteur*, but who has no personal interest in the subject of the discourse. And Eugène Tillet was accustomed so to talk and so to be heard. He was an egotist of the first water, and was not a close observer of other people.

Heathcote was now assured of the one fact which he wanted to know. The painter had made numerous sketches of his friend, and no doubt had some of those sketches still in his possession, as they could have had little value for the dealers. The question now was to get at his sketch-books as quickly as possible.

"The mention of your sketches recalls the object of my visit, which your very delightful conversation had made me almost forget," said Heathcote.

Eugène acknowledged the compliment with a smile.

"I am very anxious to become the possessor of a few of your sketches in black and white, colour, pencil, what you will. There is no

kind of art that I love better than those first airy fancies of the painter's mind, those jottings of inspiration. I am the possessor of a few very nice things in that way"—this was strictly true—"sketches by Mulready, Leslie, Maclise, and many other of our English artists. I should much like to add yours to my collection."

Eugène Tillet's sallow cheeks flushed faintly at the compliment. It was very long since any one had offered to buy the work of his brush or his pencil. It was very long since he had touched money of his own earning. And here was an English milord, an enthusiastic simpleton, ready to give him gold and silver for the sweepings of his studio. His pale cheeks flushed, his faded eyes kindled at the thought. His hands were tremulous as he unlocked a cupboard, and drew forth three or four dusty sketch-books from the place where they had lain for the last ten years, neglected, forgotten, counted as mere lumber.

His hand had long lost its cunning, and, in that slough of despond into which he had gone down, he had lost even the love of his art. It has been said that an artist may lose in a twelvemonth the manipulative power, which it has cost him many years to acquire; and it is a certainty that Eugène Tillet's hand could not, for the offer of thousands, have produced anything as good as the worst of the drawings in those half-forgotten sketch-books.

"If we can find anything in these books that you would care to possess," he said, laying the dusty volumes in front of Heathcote. "You had better wait till I get them dusted for you."

But Heathcote was too eager to endure delay. He wiped off some of the dust with his cambric handkerchief, and opened the uppermost volume.

The sketches were full of talent, intensely interesting to any lover of art. They were sketches over which Edward Heathcote would have lingered long, under other circumstances. As it was, he had considerable difficulty in concealing his impatience, and appearing interested in the book on artistic grounds. He remembered himself

so far as to select two pencil sketches of girlish faces before he closed the first volume, which contained no drawing that bore upon the object of his search.

The second was also a blank; but from this Heathcote chose three or four clever caricatures, which the painter cut out at his request.

"You must kindly put down your own price for these things," he said, as he opened the third volume.

On the second page he saw the face he had been looking for, the face he had expected to see. But, although this thing did not come upon him as a surprise; although that pencilled likeness, the last link of the chain, served only to confirm the settled conviction which had gradually taken possession of his mind, the shock was sharp enough to drive the blood from his face, to set his heart beating like a sledgehammer.

It was so, then. It was as he had thought, ever since his conversation with Barbe Leroux. This was the man. This was Marie Prévot's lover, and her murderer. This was the cold-blooded assassin of Léonie Lemarque.

He sat silent, breathless, staring blankly at the face before him: a vigorous pencil-drawing of strongly marked features, eager eyes under drooping hair, a sensitive face, a face alive with passionate feeling. The eyes looked straight at the spectator; the lips seemed as if, in the next instant, they would move in speech. The attitude was careless, hands clasped on the back of a chair, chin resting on the clasped hands, the whole bust full of power and intention. Yes, just so might an ardent thinker, an eloquent speaker have looked at one of those midnight gatherings of wits and romancers. The sketch was evidently an immediate reminiscence, and must have been made when the subject was a vivid image in the artist's mind.

Happily for Heathcote's secret, his agitation entirely escaped Eugène Tillet's notice. The painter was dreamily contemplating the sketches he had just cut out of his book, and thinking what a great man he had been when he had made them.

"I should like to have this one," said Heathcote, when he had recovered himself, "and this, and this, and this," he added, turning the leaves hastily, and choosing at random, so as to make that first choice less particular.

Monsieur Tillet cut out all that were indicated to him.

"That is the man I was talking to you about," he said, as he laid the portrait of Georges with the rest of the sketches. "It is a wonderful likeness, too, an extraordinary likeness, dashed off at a white heat one morning, after I had been particularly impressed by the charm of his society. He was a man in a thousand, poor devil. A pity that he should have got himself into such a disagreeable scrape later. But he was a fool for running away. He ought to have given himself up and stood his trial."

"Why?"

"Because he would have inevitably been acquitted. You may murder anybody you like in France, if you can show a sentimental motive for the crime; and this business of poor Georges was entirely a sentimental murder. He would have had the press and the public with him. The verdict would have been 'Not Guilty.' The populace would have cheered him as he left the *Palais de Justice*, the press would have raved about him, and he would have been the rage in Parisian society for a month afterwards."

"But you who knew both the victims; you who had received kindnesses from Maxime de Maucroix—surely you cannot judge that double murder with so much leniency," expostulated Heathcote.

The painter shrugged his shoulders with infinite expression.

"Maxime de Maucroix was a most estimable young man," he said, "but what the devil was he doing in that galley?"

"And now if you will kindly tell me the sum-total of my small purchases, I shall have great pleasure in giving you notes for the amount," said Heathcote, shocked at the Frenchman's cynicism.

Monsieur Tillet handed him his hastily jotted account. The prices he had put upon his sketches were extremely modest, considering the man's egotism.

The amount came in all to less than a thousand francs, but Heathcote insisted upon making the payment fifteen hundred, an insistence which was infinitely gratifying to fallen genius.

"I shall remember, Monsieur, on my death-bed, that there was an Englishman who appreciated my work when my countrymen had forgotten me," he said, with mingled pathos and dignity. "Allow me to put up the sketches for you. I do not think you will ever regret having bought them."

While Eugène Tillet was searching among the litter of papers, wood-blocks, and Bristol-board upon his son's table, in the hope of finding two stray pieces of cardboard within which to guard his sketches, the door was quickly opened, and two girls came into the room.

The first was Mathilde Tillet, the second was Heathcote's sister.

"Hilda!" he exclaimed.

Hilda stood before him in silence, with drooping head, pale with surprise and embarrassment.

"Somebody told you I was here," she faltered at last.

"Nobody told me," he answered, smiling at her confusion. "I have not even been looking for you, or making inquiries as to your whereabouts. Your letter was so very self-assertive, you seemed so completely mistress of the situation, that I felt it would be folly to interfere with you. As I opposed you when you wanted to marry Bothwell Grahame, it would be very inconsistent of me to oppose your renunciation of him."

Hilda gave a faint sigh. This speech of her brother's was reassuring, but it implied discredit to Bothwell. She would fain have stood up for her true knight, would fain have praised him whom she had forsaken; but she felt it was safer to hold her peace. By and by,

when her sacrifice was completed, and when Bothwell Grahame was Lady Valeria's husband, she could afford to defend his character.

"No, my dear child, our meeting is quite accidental. I came here to see Monsieur Tillet's drawings."

"Our young friend is known to you, Monsieur?" inquired Eugène Tillet, who had looked on with some appearance of interest at a conversation of which he did not understand a word.

This Mr. Heathcote was evidently Hilda's brother, of whom Mdlle. Duprez had spoken before she introduced her *protégée* to the family circle.

"Your young friend is my sister, Monsieur," answered Heathcote; "and since she was determined to run away from home, I am glad she fell into such good hands."

"And now you have found her you are going to carry her off, I suppose," said Tillet. "It will be a pity, for I hear that her talents have made a strong impression upon one of the cleverest professors at the Conservatoire, and that she may do great things with her voice if she pursue her studies there. My young people will be in despair at losing her."

"They shall not lose her quite immediately," replied Heathcote, "though if she is bent upon studying at the Conservatoire, I think it would be better for her to have her old governess to look after her in Paris."

"Fräulein Meyerstein!" exclaimed Hilda. "She would worry me out of my life. She would talk about—about—the past." She could not bring herself to mention Bothwell's name just yet. "My only chance of ever being happy again is to forget my old life. There is some possibility of that here, among new faces and new surroundings. And they are all so kind to me here—Madame Tillet is like a mother."

All this was said hurriedly in English, while Monsieur Tillet discreetly occupied himself putting away his sketch-books. Mathilde had

withdrawn, and was telling her mother about the unpleasant surprise that had greeted her return.

"How did you come to know these people?" asked Heathcote.

"Mdlle. Duprez brought me here. She has known the Tillets all her life. She will answer to you for their respectability."

"Well, we will think about it. Let me look at you, Hilda. You are not very blooming, my poor child. It does not seem to me that Paris agrees with you over well."

"Paris agrees with me quite as well as any other place," she answered quietly.

He took her hand and led her to the window, and looked thoughtfully into the sad, pale face, with its expression of settled pain. Yes, he knew what that look meant; he had experienced that dull, slow agony of an aching heart. She had surrendered all that was dearest in life, and she must live through the aching sense of loss, live on to days of dull contentment with a sunless lot. He who himself had never learned the lesson of forgetfulness was not inclined to think lightly of his sister's trouble.

"You look very unhappy, Hilda," he said. "I begin to question the wisdom of your conduct. Do you believe that Bothwell really cared more for this audacious widow than for you?"

"He had been devoted to her for years," answered Hilda. "I saw his letters; I saw the evidence of his love under his own hand. He wrote to her as he never wrote to me."

"He was younger in those days," argued Heathcote. "Youngsters are fond of big words."

"Ah, but that first love must be the truest. I never cared for any one till I saw Bothwell; and I know that my first love will be my last."

"I hope not," said Heathcote. "I hope you have acted wisely in your prompt renunciation. There were reasons why I did not care for the match."

"You surely have left off suspecting him," said Hilda, with an indignant look. "You are not mad enough to think that he was concerned in that girl's death!"

"No, Hilda, that suspicion is a thing of the past. And now let us talk seriously. You have set your heart upon pursuing your studies at the Conservatoire?"

"It is my only object in life."

"And you would like to remain in this family?"

"Very much. They are the cleverest, nicest people I ever knew—with the exception of my nearest and dearest, you and Dora—and Bothwell. They are all as kind to me as if I were a daughter of the house. The life suits me exactly. I should like to stay here for a twelvemonth."

"That is a categorical answer," said Heathcote, "and leaves me no alternative. I will make a few inquiries about Monsieur Tillet and his surroundings, and if the replies are satisfactory you shall stay here. But I shall send Glossop over to look after you and your frocks. It is not right that my sister should be without a personal attendant of some kind."

"I don't want Glossop. If she comes here, she will write to her friends in Cornwall and tell them where I am."

"No, she won't. She will have my instructions before she leaves The Spaniards. She shall send all her Cornish letters through me. And now good-bye. It is just possible that I may not see you again before I leave Paris."

"You are going to leave Paris soon?"

"Very soon."

"Then I suppose you have found out all you want to know about that poor girl who was murdered?"

"Yes, I have found out all I want to know."

"Thank God! It was so terrible to think there were people living who could suspect Bothwell."

"It is horrible to think there was any man base enough to murder that helpless girl—a man so steeped in hypocrisy that he could defy suspicion."

"You know who committed the murder?" inquired Hilda.

"I can answer no more questions. You will learn all in time. The difficulty will be to forget the hideous story when you have once heard it. Good-bye."

They were alone in the Tillet *salon*, Monsieur Tillet having retired while they were talking. He reappeared on the landing outside to hand Mr. Heathcote the parcel of sketches, and to make his respectful adieux to that discerning amateur.

"Monsieur your brother is the most accomplished Englishman I ever met," said the painter to Hilda, when his visitor had disappeared in the obscurity of the staircase.

He patted his waistcoat-pocket as he spoke. The sensation of having bank-notes there was altogether new. He had been fed upon the fat of the land by his devoted wife; he had been provided with petty cash by his dutiful children; but to touch a lump sum, the price of his own work, seemed the renewal of youth.

"Do you remember the curious name of that picture of Landseer's, *ma chatte*?" he said, chucking his wife under the chin when she came bustling in from her housewifely errands. "'Zair is lif in ze all dogue yet.' Zair is lif in ze all dogue, *que voici*. See here, I have been earning money while you have been *flânochant*."

He showed her the corner of the little sheaf of notes, coquettishly. She held out her hand, expecting to be intrusted with the treasure; but he shook his head gently, smiling a tender smile.

"No, *mon enfant*, we will not trifle with this windfall," he said. "We will treat it seriously; it shall be the nucleus of our future fortune, *j'achèterai des rentes*."

The tears welled up to the wife's honest eyes, tears not of gratitude, but of mortification. She knew this husband of hers well enough to be very sure that every *sous* in those bank-notes would have dribbled out of the painter's pockets in a few weeks; and that no one, least of all the squanderer himself, would know how it had been spent, or in what respect he was the better for its expenditure.

CHAPTER IX.

WAITING FOR HIS DOOM.

Life for Dora Wyllard was more than ever melancholy after Hilda's disappearance. The girl's companionship had been her only ray of sunshine during this time of sorrow and anxiety. In her sympathy with Hilda's joys and hopes she had been able to withdraw herself now and then from the contemplation of her own misery. Now this distraction was gone, and she was alone with her grief.

Julian Wyllard had shown much greater anger at Hilda's conduct than his wife had anticipated. He had taken the lovers under his protection, he had been curiously eager for their marriage, had talked of it, and had hurried it on with an almost feverish impatience. And now he would not hear of any excuse for Hilda's conduct.

"She has acted like a madwoman," he said. "When everything had been arranged to secure her future happiness with Bothwell, her devoted slave, she allows herself to be driven away by the audacity of a brazen-faced coquette. I have no patience with her. But if Bothwell has any brains, he ought to be able to find her in a week, and bring her to her senses."

"Perhaps Bothwell may not care about running after her," speculated Dora.

"O, a man who is over head and ears in love will endure any outrage. He is a slavish creature, and the more he is trampled upon the better he loves his tyrant. It remains to be seen which of the two women Bothwell would rather marry—Hilda, with her rustic simplicity, or the widow, with her slightly damaged reputation and very handsome income."

"He does not waver for a moment between them."

"Ah, that is all you know; but if he does not give chase to Hilda, you may be sure it is because in his heart of hearts he hankers after the widow."

Bothwell had gone back to Trevena, intending to pay the builders for the work they had done, and suspend the carrying out of the contract indefinitely.

He would have to give them some compensation, no doubt, for delay; but they were good, honest, rustic fellows, and he was not afraid of being severely mulcted.

Julian Wyllard spoke of Bothwell and his love affairs with the irritability of a chronic sufferer, and Dora listened and sympathised, and soothed the sufferer as best she might. Her burden was very heavy in these days. To see her beloved suffer and to be unable to lessen his pain, that was indeed bitter. And in his case the palliating drugs which deadened his agony seemed almost a worse evil than the pain itself. The constant use of morphia and chloral was working its pernicious effect, and there were times, when the sufferer's mind wandered. There were dreams which seemed more agonising than wakeful hours of pain. Dora sat beside her husband's couch and watched him as he slept under the influence of morphia. She listened to his dull mutterings, in French for the most part. He rarely spoke any other language in that troubled state of the brain between dreaming and delirium. It was evident to her that his mind, in these intervals of wandering, habitually harked back to the days of his residence in Paris, ten years ago. And his hallucinations at this time seemed always of a ghastly character. The scenes he looked upon

were steeped in blood, doubtless a reminiscence of those hideous days of the Commune, when Paris was given over to fire and carnage. She shuddered as she saw the look of horror in his widely-opened yet sightless eyes—sightless for reality, but seeing strange visions—shapes of dread. She shuddered at the wild cry which broke from those white lips, the infinite pain in the lines of the forehead, damp with the cold dew of anguish.

In his waking hours, when free from the influence of chloral, the sufferer's brain was as clear as ever; but the irritation of his nerves was intense. A sound, the slightest, agitated him. A footstep in the corridor, a ring at the hall-door, startled him as if it had been a thunder-clap. His senses seemed always on the alert. There was no middle state between that intense activity of brain and the coma or semi-delirium which resulted from opiates.

Sir William Spencer had been down to Penmorval twice since the invalid's return, but his opinion had not been hopeful on either occasion. On the second time of his coming he had seen a marked change for the worse. The malady had made terrible progress in a short interval. And now, on this dull gray autumn afternoon, within twenty-four hours of Heathcote's visit to the Rue du Bac, the famous physician came to Penmorval for the third time, and again could only bear witness to the progress of evil.

Wyllard insisted upon being alone with his physician.

"Sir William, I want you to tell me the truth about my case: the unsophisticated truth. There will be no end gained by your withholding it; for I have read up the history of this disease of mine, and I know pretty well what I have to expect. A gradual extinction, disfigurement and distortion of every limb and every feature, beginning with this withered, claw-shaped hand, and creeping on and on, till I lie like an idiot, sightless, speechless, tasteless, with lolling tongue dribbling upon my pillow. And throughout this dissolution of the body I may yet, if specially privileged, retain the faculties of my mind. I may be to the last conscious of all that I have been and all that I am. There is the redeeming feature. I shall perish

molecule by molecule, feeling my own death, able to appreciate every change, every stage in the inevitable progress of corruption. That lingering process of annihilation which other men suffer unconsciously underground I shall suffer consciously above ground. That is the history of my case, I take it, Sir William."

"There have been such cases."

"Yes, and mine is one of them."

"I do not say that. The fatal cases are certainly in the majority; but there have been cures. Whatever medicine can do—"

"Will be done for me. Yes, I know that. But the utmost you have been able to do so far has been to deaden pain, and that at the cost of some of the most diabolical dreams that ever man dreamed."

"Let us hope for the best, Mr. Wyllard," replied the great physician, with that grave and kindly tone which had brought comfort to so many doomed sufferers, the indescribable comfort which a sympathetic nature can always impart. "As your adviser, it is my duty to tell you that it would be well your house were set in order."

"All has been done. I made my will after my marriage. It gives all to my wife. She will deal with my fortune as the incarnate spirit of justice and benevolence. I have supreme confidence in her wisdom and in her goodness."

"That is well. Then there is no more to be said."

Ten minutes later the physician was being driven back to the station, and Julian Wyllard was alone.

"And Swift expires a driveller and a show," he repeated, in a tone of suppressed agony. "Yes, that is the horror. To become a spectacle—a loathsome object from which even love would shrink away with averted eyes. That is the sting. Facial anæsthesia—every muscle paralysed, every feature distorted. O, for the doomsman to make a shorter end of it all! The face has been spared so far—speech has hardly begun to falter. But it is coming—it is coming. I found myself

forgetting common words this morning when I was talking to Dora. I caught myself babbling like a child that is just beginning to speak."

He took up a hand-mirror which he had asked his wife to leave near him, and contemplated himself thoughtfully for some moments.

"No, there is no change yet in the face, except a livid hue, like a corpse alive. The features are still in their right places, the mouth not yet drawn to one side; the eyelids still firm. But each stage of decay will follow in its course. And to know all the time that there is an easier way out of it, if one could but take it, just at the right moment, without being too much of a craven."

He glanced at the table by his sofa, a capacious table, holding his books, his reading-lamp, and his dressing-case with its elaborate appliances.

"If I did not want to know the issue of Heathcote's inquiries! If—O, for some blow from the sledgehammer of Destiny, that would put an end to all irresolution, take my fate out of my own hands! A blow that would annihilate me, and yet spare her—if that could be."

A loud ringing at the hall-door sounded like an answer to an invocation. Julian Wyllard lifted his head a little way from the silken-covered pillows, and turned his haggard eyes towards the door leading into the corridor.

After an interval of some moments there came the sounds of footsteps, the door was opened, and the servant announced,

"Mr. Heathcote."

Heathcote stood near the threshold, hat in hand, deadly pale, grave to solemnity, mute as death itself.

"You have come back, Heathcote?" asked the invalid, with an off-hand air. "Then I conclude you have accomplished your mission, or reconciled yourself to failure."

"I have succeeded in my mission beyond my hopes," answered Heathcote. "But my success is as terrible to myself as it must needs be to others."

"Indeed! Does that mean that you have solved the mystery of the French girl's death?"

"It means as much, and more than that. It means, Julian Wyllard, that I have solved the mystery of *your life*—that double life which showed to the world the character of a hard-headed financier, passionless, mechanical, while the real nature of the man, passionate, jealous, vindictive, the lover and the slave of a beautiful woman, was known to but a few chosen friends. It means that slowly, patiently, link by link, detail after detail, I have put together

the history of your life in Paris—the secret door by which the financier left his lonely office at nightfall, to drink the cup of pleasure with his mistress—or his wife—and his boon companions. By the inevitable sequence of small facts, by the agreement of dates, by a pencil sketch of the murderer's face, made from memory, yet vivid as flesh and blood, I have been able to identify you, Julian Wyllard, with the man who called himself Georges, who was known to a few privileged Bohemians as the lover of Marie Prévol, and who disappeared from Paris immediately after the murder, so completely as to baffle the police. The murderer vanished utterly, before the crime was twelve hours old; yet he was known to have visited the grave of his victim up to March '74—the exact period at which you, Julian Wyllard, left Paris for ever. It means that in you, the man who came between me and the happiness of my life, who stole my betrothed—in you, the successful speculator, the honoured of all men, I have found the murderer of Léonie Lemarque and of her aunt Marie Prévol, and of her aunt's admirer, Maxime de Maucroix. A man must have a mind and heart of iron who could carry the consciousness of three such murders with a calm front; who could clasp his innocent wife to his breast, accept her caresses, her devotion, her revering love—knowing himself the relentless devil that he is! Julian Wyllard, thou art the man!"

"I am!" answered the white lips resolutely, while the haggard eyes flashed defiance. "I am that man. I have obeyed my destiny, which was to love with a desperate love, and hate with a desperate hate. I have gratified my love and my hatred. I have lived, Heathcote; lived as men of your stamp know not how to live; lived with every drop of blood in my veins, with every beat of my heart: and now I am content to rot in a dishonoured grave, the abhorred of pettier sinners!"

"Julian!"

A wail—a cry of agony from a despairing woman—sounded in the utterance of that name.

CHAPTER X.

"ALIKE IS HELL, OR PARADISE, OR HEAVEN."

It was the despairing cry of a woman's breaking heart that came with that low wailing sound from the curtained doorway. Dora had been told of Heathcote's arrival, and had hurried from her dressing-room on the further side of the bedchamber. She had reached the threshold of the morning-room in time to hear Heathcote pronounce the dreadful word "Murder," and she had heard all that followed. She had heard her husband's proclaim himself triply an assassin.

"It is my wife's voice," said Wyllard quietly. "You knew that she was there, perhaps. You wanted her to hear."

"I did not know she was there; but it would have been my duty to tell her all I have discovered. She has lived under a delusion; she has lived under the spell of your consummate hypocrisy. It is only right that she should know the truth. Thank God, she has heard it from your own lips."

"You have not forgotten the day when we were rivals for her love," said Wyllard, with a diabolical sneer. "I won the race, heavily handicapped; and now your turn has come. You have your revenge."

Heathcote was silent. His eyes were fixed upon the figure which appeared against the glowing darkness of the plush curtain, and came slowly, tottering forward to Wyllard's couch, and sank in a heap beside it. The white, set face, with its look of agony, the widely-opened eyes, pale with horror, haunted him for long after that awful hour. It was he who had brought this agony upon her, he who had unearthed the buried skeleton, he who, going forth from that house to do her bidding, her true knight, her champion, her servant, had come back as the messenger of doom. Was he to blame that Fate had imposed this hateful task upon him? He told himself that he was blameless; but that she would never forgive.

"I congratulate you upon your perseverance and your success," said Wyllard, after a pause. "You have succeeded where all the police of Paris had failed. Was it love for my wife, or hatred for me, that stood in the place of training and experience?"

"It was neither. It was the hand of Fate, the mysterious guiding of Providence, which took me from stage to stage of that horrible story."

"And it was my wife—my redeeming angel—who sent you forth upon your mission, who appealed to your love of the past as a claim on your devotion in the present. There is the irony of Fate in that part of the business," said Wyllard mockingly.

He had always hated Edward Heathcote; he had hated him even in the hour of his own triumph as Dora's accepted lover; hated him because he had once possessed Dora's love, but most of all because he had been worthy of it.

Julian Wyllard's head leaned forward upon his folded arms, and for some minutes there was silence in the room, save for the sound of suppressed sobbing from that kneeling figure by the sick man's couch. The face of the husband and the face of the wife were alike hidden. Dora's head had fallen across her husband's knees, her hands were clasped above the dark coils of her hair, in the self-abandonment of her agony.

Heathcote stood a little way off, feeling as if he were in the presence of the dead. The mystery of those two hidden faces oppressed him. He almost hated himself for this thing which he had done. He felt like an executioner—a man from whom the stern necessity of his craft had exacted a revolting service.

"Julian, is this true?" murmured Dora, after a long silence. "Is all or any part of this dreadful story true?"

Her husband looked up suddenly, as if vivified by the sound of her voice.

"What would you think of me if it were all or any of it true?" he asked hoarsely. "Look up, Dora. Let me see your eyes as you answer me. I want to know how I am to stand henceforth in the sight of the woman who once loved me."

She lifted her head, and turned her deathlike face towards him, tearless, but with a look of anguish deeper than he had ever seen before on any human countenance.

That other look, that last look of Léonie Lemarque's, which had haunted him waking or sleeping ever since the 5th of July, had been a look of horrified surprise. But here there was the quiet anguish of a broken heart.

"Who once loved you," she echoed. "Do you think such love as mine can be thrown off like an old gown? Tell me the truth, Julian—it can make no difference to my love."

Wyllard remained for some moments gazing dreamily at the low wood fire opposite his couch, silent, as if looking into the pages of the past.

"Yes, your story is put together very cleverly," he said, "and it is for the most part true. Yes, I am the murderer of Marie Prévol. I am that jealous devil, who in an access of fury destroyed the life that was dearer than his own. It was not that I believed her guilty. No, it was the agonising knowledge that her love had gone from me, in spite of herself—had gone to that younger, brighter, more fascinating lover. I saw the gradual working of the change—saw coldness, dislike even, creeping over her who had once tenderly rewarded my love—saw that my coming was unwelcome, my departure a relief. She, who of old had followed me to the threshold, had hung upon me with sweetest caresses at the moment of parting, now could scarcely conceal her indifference, her growing aversion. I saw all this, and Satan took hold of me. Again and again I was on the verge of unpremeditated murder. My eyes grew dim, veiled by a cloud of blood; but I held my hand before the deed was done. I have had my grip upon her throat—that milk-white throat, which was purer of tint

and lovelier of form than that of the Louvre Venus. I have seen the pleading eyes looking into mine, asking me for mercy, and I have fallen at her feet and sobbed like a child. But there came a time when this sullen devil of jealousy and hatred took a firmer hold of me, and then I swore to myself that they should both die. There was no help, no other cure. If she lived, she would leave me for Maucroix. She, the wife I had honoured, would sink into the mistress of a fop and a fribble, to be cast off when his fancy staled. I knew that was inevitable, so I made up my mind, all of a sudden, when I got wind of her intended jaunt to Saint-Germain, from the spy I had employed to watch her. I put my revolver in my pocket, and followed her to the station, disguised by a pair of dark spectacles and a style of dress in which she had never seen me. I stood by the doorway of the waiting-room, and saw her sitting side by side with her favoured lover, they two as happy and as absorbed in each other as children at play in a garden. You know all the rest. Yes, it was I who watched in front of the Henri Quatre, saw those two laughing together in the candle-light: it was I who sprang out of the thicket in the forest and shot them down, one after the other, left them lying there side by side, dead. I had a strange wild feeling of happiness as I rushed away into the depths of the wood—a sense of triumph. I had won my love from her new lover. She had been mine only; and she would be mine now until the end. I had saved her from her own weakness—saved, her from the dishonour which her folly must have made inevitable."

He paused for a few moments, but neither Dora nor Heathcote spoke, and after the briefest silence he went on with his confession.

"I never meant to survive my victims, except just so long as would be necessary to put my affairs in order, and to transfer my securities to England, where those of my own flesh and blood might profit by my fortune. In order to do this I got quietly back to Paris, and began to take up the threads of my business life with a view to closing the book for ever. You know enough of my character and my history to understand that I have always had perfect command over my emotions, and you will therefore believe that I was able to go about

my daily business, to mix with my fellow-men, with as serene a manner and countenance as if not a ripple of passion had crossed the stagnant surface of my plodding nature. I had so trained myself that the man of passion and emotions was one being, and the man of business another, a creature totally apart. And now, for a while at least, the man of feeling was dead and buried, and only the money-making automaton remained.

"It happened at that time that a cloud of disaster swept over the Paris Bourse. Had I wound up my affairs at that period, I should have been a heavy loser; and I, to whom the science of finance was a passion, could not submit to losses which I knew how to avoid. So I delayed the settlement of my affairs, and even allowed myself to be tempted into fresh enterprises. Yet scarcely a night passed on which I did not look at my pistols before I lay down to rest, and long for the time when I should feel myself free to end my miserable life."

"And in those days you went frequently to the cemetery, to place your tribute of roses on your victim's grave," said Heathcote.

"It was the only mark of affection I could show to the woman my love had killed," answered Wyllard; "the only token of respect for my wife."

"Your wife?" exclaimed the other. "Then Barbe Girot was right in her supposition. You loved Marie Prévot well enough to marry her."

"I loved her too well to degrade her," answered Wyllard. "It was in the flood-tide of my financial success, when I was almost drunk with fortune, and had not one thought above money-making, that Marie Prévot's face awakened me to a new life. That lovely face—so like yours, Dora—yes, it was the likeness to my good angel of the past that drew me to you, my good angel of the present, my comforter, my better-self. O, but for that second unpremeditated crime, the evil work of a moment's savage passion, I might have gone down to the grave in peace, believing that I had expiated that first murder, atoned for that double bloodshed by the agonies that had gone before and after it. But that last crime wrecked me. It revealed the

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