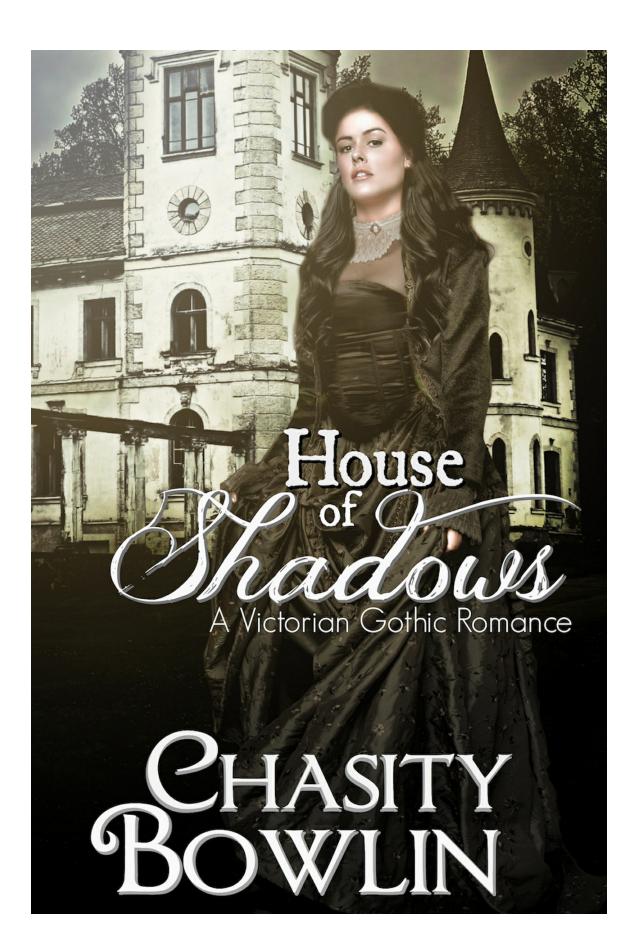


CHASITY BOWLIN



HOUSE OF SHADOWS

THE VICTORIAN GOTHIC COLLECTION, BOOK ONE

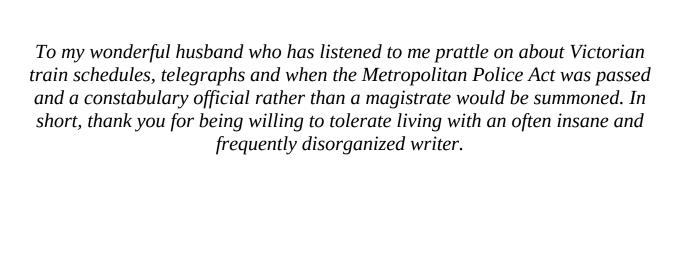
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Contact the author

Also by Chasity Bowlin

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PARANORMAL HISTORICAL ROMANCE:

THE VICTORIAN GOTHIC COLLECTION

House of Shadows

Veil of Shadows

Passage of Shadows

DARK REGENCY

The Haunting of a Duke

The Redemption of a Rogue

The Enticement of an Earl

A Love So Dark

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STANDALONE

The Beast of Bath

The Last Offer

Worth the Wait

PROLOGUE

October 17th, 1898 Passmore Edwards Cottage Hospital, Falmouth

"A HOSPITAL IS no place for the sick!" Muriel Hampton Parke declared as Adelaide observed her stepmother sitting gingerly on the edge of the narrow, cane chair that was next to her bed. Muriel had never been one to tolerate sickness, infirmity, or anything that inconvenienced her in any way. That included the sinking of the ship they'd only recently booked passage on to return to New York, the *SS Mohegan*.

Even thinking the name made her shudder. Adelaide's heart skipped and her breath caught as she recalled the screams and the icy black water that had submerged their ship.

"You just shivered! Please tell me you are not catching a chill! I will not have it, Adelaide! I will not. I have booked passage for us two days hence. We will be on that next ship and back in New York to enjoy the remnants of the social season! Do you hear me, girl?"

"How can you think of getting on another ship?" Adelaide asked. It seemed that every time Muriel came to the small cottage hospital, she would become overset and begin shouting. "Just the thought of it strikes terror in my heart!"

Muriel rolled her eyes. "We are not all given to your fits of dramatics, Adelaide. Your poor father! How he tolerated you and your hysterical tendencies for so long I will never know. He feared we'd need to put you away somewhere, you know?"

Adelaide's eyes widened at that. "I'm not hysterical. I've never been hysterical in my life!"

"Except when you rant and rave about my lies and how I plot against you?" Muriel asked with a cold smile. "Every lunatic denies their insanity, my dear. It's a symptom of the disease, after all."

Adelaide didn't doubt that her stepmother was telling the truth in one regard. She would likely have been working on her father for months, undermining her and making her appear to be a madwoman so that when Muriel finally did provoke her into a temper, she'd be able to sway him to her way of thinking. They would have locked her up in Bellevue and left her to rot there, all thanks to the scheming of the woman beside her.

Rather than address those concerns, Adelaide focused on something else instead. "I cannot board a ship now, Muriel. Are you truly so heartless, so without feeling, that you are not consumed with dread at the thought of it?"

"Well, of course I am a bit anxious at the prospect. But I will not be ruled by fear and neither will you! I simply will not allow it... There are other concerns, you know? Not just the social whirl we might miss! There is the matter of your father's will, Adelaide. And while I do hate to be the bearer of bad news, I must inform you that he changed that will some time ago. The bulk of the estate is now mine entirely, at least until Stephan comes of age," Murial said, referencing her son who looked suspiciously like the dance instructor she'd employed for Adelaide in preparation of her debut. "I will proceed with the debut your father had planned for you as it is largely paid for already. You do have a rather substantial marriage settlement that was set aside for you and is overseen by a group of trustees. But you cannot access it without marrying and you're penniless otherwise!"

The last bit had been sneered, as if Muriel found it distasteful that there was any part of Winston Hampton Parke's fortune she could not lay her grasping fingers upon. "I'm not entirely certain what point you are getting to with all of this."

Muriel smiled, a simple tightening of her lips. "I will return to New York. You may return with me and find a husband for yourself by the end of the year. Assuming you can find a suitable man who will tolerate your general lack of charm and the obvious physical imperfections."

"And what constitutes a suitable man, then?" Adelaide demanded. "Shall I just marry the first one who would have me?"

"If he's of sufficient rank. He must be a successful businessman or at

least someone who can move comfortably in society. It's not as if you'd be permitted to just go to the docks and latch onto some stevedore!"

Adelaide's head was pounding. "And if I do not?"

Muriel's glee was evident in the brilliant smile that spread over her lovely, full lips. "If you do not, you will need to leave the Park Avenue House."

"It's my home!" Adelaide protested. "I've lived there my entire life."

Her stepmother shrugged, as callous and cold as any one could be, "Your father is gone, my dear. If there is one thing certain in life, it's that change breeds change. Nothing will ever be the same for you again. Look at this as an opportunity for a completely fresh start... Of course, there are other possibilities. You do not have to return to New York. If you could find a man here who would be willing to take you on—your settlement could very well buy you an earl, so long as he isn't too terribly poor."

"I'm in mourning," Adelaide protested. "How can you be so cruel?"

Muriel patted her hand, the picture of a caring relative. Only Adelaide felt the threat of Muriel's claws against her skin. "I understand this is difficult for you, dear. It's difficult for me, as well. But we all must move on with our lives. I've wired to that man in Wales your father just partnered with to inform him of the sinking, though I daresay it was hardly necessary. The news of it has spread like wildfire. I'll be talking to the attorneys to see if we cannot break that contract, but I imagine it is airtight on both sides. Your father was always such a stickler for the details."

"When did you wire him?" Adelaide asked.

"The day after the accident," Muriel said.

"Yesterday morning, just after the accident. Why ever does that matter?"

"Because they didn't find father's body until this afternoon. You were already trying to squeeze every last cent from his estate before you even had a husband to bury," Adelaide accused. "You'd given up all hope for him when he might very well have been clinging to a bit of wreckage still or stranded on the rocks somewhere!"

Muriel's lips firmed into a line of disapproval. "I'll not be judged by you, Adelaide. It's not your place, girl. And mark my words, if you cling to this idea that you must mourn your father publicly for a year, you'll find yourself doing so on the streets! Get a husband or get out. Those are your only choices. It's bad enough I'm saddled with my own child, why anyone would expect me to be saddled with the hysterical and grown girl from my

husband's first marriage is simply beyond me!"

Adelaide watched her stepmother sail from the simple hospital ward and out to a waiting carriage. She had no notion of what she would do, but she could not go back to New York with Muriel. The very idea of it left her shaking, both in fear and in fury.

Touching her head, she felt the bandage at her forehead. She would be well enough in a day or so to leave. But where on earth would she go?

The first order of business would be to wire Mr. Eldren Llewellyn, her father's partner in the expansion of the Welsh railroad and apprise him of Muriel's schemes.

CHAPTER ONE

November 1st, 1898

THE INCESSANT WHINE AND CHUG OF THE TRAIN'S WHEELS AGAINST THE track had made Adelaide's head ache, or perhaps it was that she'd strained her eyes attempting to peer out from behind the dark veil she wore. It was a nuisance at best and a hazard at worst.

Either way, the pain was maddening. The physician at the cottage hospital had said to rest and recover from her ordeal. That eventually the headaches would go away and would only take time. But what time did she have? From the moment the SS Mohegan had struck the Manacles off the coast of Cornwall and begun to take on water, everything in her life had taken on a sense of unparalleled urgency.

Of course, it was all well and good for them to issue platitudes and offer her placating promises of it would get better. When, she had pressed them. In time, in time, they would all reply. Their words had been empty and hollow, as empty as her life now was. Her father was lost after all, taken by the sea. She prayed still that his body might be recovered, but so many were lost that night only a few short weeks ago that hope for such a thing was dwindling.

Pushing those thoughts aside, Adelaide determined that she would not dwell on them further. It was her future that she must see to, as Muriel had put it. That was the very reason she was on the infernal train, after all. Dressed in her newly purchased mourning clothes, though her father's body had never been recovered, she was on her way to meet her intended.

It might have been more scandalous had she not been half the world away

from her home and that, aside from a stepmother who now wanted nothing to do with her, she had no family at all. And he had been her father's business partner in one particular endeavor, after all, even if that relationship was not a longstanding one. Very few people would raise an eyebrow at the notion that a young woman alone in the world should marry quickly, regardless of her state of mourning.

She was presently in such an untenable situation that marriage was her only choice. She had no money of her own and no way to make her way in the world. She had wired her father's attorneys herself, not entirely trusting her stepmother. They had replied and confirmed precisely what Muriel had said, however. All of her father's estate had been left entirely to her stepmother, save for a marriage settlement that had been put aside for her. Hearing that had broken her. Muriel had taken everything, it seemed. She'd connived and cheated her way into their home, then she'd systematically destroyed the relationship that had once existed between Adelaide and her father by telling copious lies.

Lies, machinations, schemes. Adelaide had been undermined at every turn until even servants that had been in their home since long before her mothers' death had begun to look at her with a mixture of distrust and pity. Had her father not perished and Muriel could finally be rid of her, Adelaide had little doubt that she would have found herself in the asylum Muriel had spoken of, being treated for the hysteria she did not suffer. But her father was gone now, and Muriel had everything she wanted. There was nothing left for her to take.

The train began to slow and the porter approached her. "This is your stop, miss. We're to arrive in Machynlleth within moments. There is transportation awaiting you?"

"Yes, thank you," she said. She certainly hoped there would be. The telegram had been sent ahead and she'd received one in reply that all was in order for her arrival.

Their entire engagement had been arranged by telegraph. The series of them must have set the telegraph operators tongues wagging for certain.

October 19, 1898

My stepmother is attempting to break the partnership agreement. Stop. She is my father's sole heir. Stop. There is nothing I can do. Stop. A. Hampton Parke.

October 19, 1898

She will not succeed. Stop. Agreement is airtight. Stop. Will you return to New York with her? Stop. E. Llewellyn

October 20, 1898

I cannot bring myself to board a ship. Stop. I have nowhere to go. Stop. A.

October 20, 1898

Come to Cysgod Lys near Machynlleth. Stop. You will be welcome here. Stop.

October 21,1898

It isn't proper. Stop. I cannot reside with a bachelor. Stop. A.

October 21, 1898

You will arrive as my betrothed. Stop. We will wed immediately. Stop. I shall send word to your father's attorney to make arrangements if you agree. Stop. E.

October 22, 1898

You have my agreement. Stop. A.

THOSE BRIEF EXCHANGES via telegraph were the only communication she'd had with him, but she had seen him once. He'd come to New York and met with her father. She had been much younger then, barely fifteen. Her only recollection of Mr. Eldren Llewellyn was that he was impossibly dark. His hair had been as black as the coal dug from the mines he owned. She'd been struck by how handsome he was and when she'd been caught staring, she'd ducked her head and rushed away with a blush staining her cheeks.

In truth, she knew very little of him other than that her father had thought highly of him and he was too handsome for words. But he'd offered a place for her that would not see her crossing the ocean on another ship, terrified and alone. If she spent another week at sea, staring down at the water, she'd surely go mad and need the asylum that Muriel had planned for her all along.

The rain began to slow, the screeching of the brakes replacing the endless hum of the wheels. On legs grown unsteady for sitting so very long, Adelaide rose and moved toward the end of the car where the porter awaited her. He'd opened the door for her and put the steps down. Another porter awaited her on the platform. She could see them already unloading her bags from the baggage car. A single cart was nearby, the driver wearing disheveled clothes and a surly expression.

Cautiously, Adelaide approached him. "Are you the driver Mr. Llewellyn sent for me?"

The man's face took on an expression of shock, his bushy eyebrows climbing almost to the bill of his tipped back flat cap. "Aye," he said finally. "Mr. Llewellyn sent me." He cackled at that as if it were some great joke.

"I hardly see why that is amusing, sir," Adelaide admonished, startled by his rudeness and his rough manner.

The man shrugged. "I don't suppose an upstart American would. All them yours?" he asked, gesturing toward the bags.

"Yes, they are," Adelaide answered. Seeing little point in antagonizing him further, she elected to simply ignore his odd and gruff behavior. Instead she looked back at the stack of baggage. It represented the very last of happy times she'd had with her father. He'd been especially doting. Had it been guilt because he was half convinced to lock her away at Muriel's urging? She desperately didn't want to believe that. Instead she thought of the various silks, satins and velvets in those trunks and how treasured they would always be.

Those gowns her father had purchased for her in Paris had arrived at her home in New York, only to be promptly shipped back to her in England. It would be ages before she could wear them, but she had another trunk filled with the mourning attire that was called for.

"I'll have to stow some here and come back for 'em in the morning. Only enough daylight left for one trip to Cysgod Lys," the man said and glared at her, as if daring her to challenge him. He seemed offended by her very presence.

Adelaide was not in the mood for a battle, especially when she could see the cart was far too small. "The two on top are all that I will require for now," she said, in as conciliatory tone as she could muster.

The man climbed down with a grunt, tossed the bags into the back with

far less grace and far more force than necessary, then helped her in after them. The rest he hefted and carried into the red brick train station. She stood there watching him, watching those treasured items disappear into the cavernous building. Panic suffused her. What if someone took them? What if she lost that last link to her old life and the family that she'd once been such a treasured part of?

Forcing herself to take deep breaths, and calm her raging nerves and pounding heart, Adelaide did all she could to present a calm appearance. She'd barely gotten herself situated in the cart before he clicked at the horses and they shot forward. Bobbling on the seat, she managed to right herself. From the corner of her eye, she saw the man smile. If she'd thought it was an accident, that smirk was all the proof she required to believe otherwise. Would Eldren Llewellyn be as unwelcoming to her as his servants were? What had she gotten herself into?



"What on Earth were you thinking, Eldren? Really? She's an American! You know what they are like."

Eldren closed his eyes behind his hands as they rested on his face. Head tipped back on the top of the chair, hands covering his face, he was certain in that moment that he looked exactly what he was, a man exasperated beyond his endurance.

He'd been doing accounts all day and now he would be listening to his sister-in-law's snobbery for the remainder of the evening it seemed. "Her father was a business partner and friend who lost his life in a terrible manner. The girl is traumatized from her experiences and her stepmother is a grasping —well, she has her hands on the bulk of Winston's money and has no intention of caring for his grown daughter by another woman. What was I to do, Frances? Leave her to the tender mercies of a woman even colder than you?"

"You could have found a husband for her that was not part of our family! An American! She's not even an heiress! And what of the title?" Frances continued, ignoring his insult to her. There was no love lost between them. The fact was evident in the way she sneered at him, her voice dripping with disdain and the snobbery that he so despised in her.

In fact, Miss Hampton Parke was an heiress, but Eldren did not see the need to inform Frances of that. She'd simply find something else to complain about other than the girl's finances, her breeding, her pedigree, her nationality. The list was endless it would seem. But as to the money, the marriage settlement that Winston had provided for his daughter was far more generous than he had ever imagined and was certainly more than her stepmother would have wished. He had to wonder if perhaps that wasn't the reason she'd been so cold and callous to Miss Hampton Parke.

As for his title, he doubted the girl was even aware of it. He had not used it in his dealings with her father as he'd found most Americans to be either unduly fascinated or completely repelled by his claims to nobility. In the end, it had been easier to simply refer to himself as Mr. Llewellyn rather than Lord Llewellyn, Earl of Montkeith.

"I need a wife, Frances. You, Warren and nearly every one else of my acquaintance have insisted upon it. Now you are displeased because I have chosen one. It stands to reason that displeasure must be your natural state of being."

She huffed out a breath. "Eldren! How dare you say such things to me after all that I have done for this family! Had I not consented to marry beneath me—to a younger son, no less— to accept your brother's proposal, all these business ventures you have involved yourself in would have gone to someone else entirely. I alone saved the Llewellyn family and the Montkeith Earldom. Your precious mines would have been abandoned and fallen to ruin!"

There was a grain of truth to that statement. The influx of cash that Frances had brought with her upon her marriage to his younger brother had spared them the worst of financial ruin and had allowed them to rebuild the mining empire their father had nearly destroyed. Frances also never let any them forget it. Eldren often wondered how frequently his brother was reminded of that in private. It might explain why the man spent more time nursing his brandy than attending his duties on the estate or at the mines. Of course, despite her beauty, Frances had not had so many offers to choose from. The coldness of her disposition went much deeper than simply being proper and circumspect.

Despite that, she'd dangled her charms before him frequently enough, angling always for a chance to be the Countess of Montkeith. He'd rather have died than wed her, and that, he suspected, was her true contention with

Miss Hampton Parke.

"Frances, I am grateful for the generosity of your family. At this moment, I would be more grateful if you would leave me in peace. I wish to finish these accounts before Miss Hampton Parke arrives. It would not do, as her betrothed, to spend her first night in this house with my nose stuck in a ledger while she is left to fend off your vicious attacks!"

"Hampton Parke! It sounds like she was named after an estate!" The other woman sneered derisively.

"And your name prior to marriage was Deerfield. I've heard enough from you today. Go. Go to my mother. Go to your rooms. You may to go the devil, but you may not stay here," he said firmly. Glancing over at his highly inebriated brother, he added, "And take Warren with you while he's still able to walk out of his own accord!"

Her face took on that pinched expression that he abhorred, but after a moment's hesitation, she spun on her heel and stalked out, the train of her green gown swishing behind her like the tail of a temperamental cat. There was little doubt he would pay for it later. She was hardly the forgiving sort and Warren unfailingly did her bidding. She was a termagant and one he was quickly losing patience with. After a moment, Warren rose, tipping sideways for a moment before righting himself and following his shrew of a wife from the room.

Eldren stared at the door long after it was closed, considering how to proceed. He could always send them packing. While he hated to do so to Warren, and certainly for the sake of their mother who was not at all well, he could not abide Frances and her attempts to manage him just as she managed her husband. It had been Frances, after all, who had continued to provide Warren with liquor even after it had become apparent that he was no longer simply drinking socially or occasionally allowing himself to become inebriated. It was a daily thing now, and she was the architect of it. And if he demanded that she leave and return to their own home in Bristol, it would likely be the last time he would see his brother alive. The situation was intolerable, no matter what he did, but at least at Cysgod Lys, if Warren were to become ill someone would tend him.

Turning his attention back to the column of numbers, he grimaced at the crack of thunder outside. It was late in the year for that type of storm, but Welsh weather was nothing if not unpredictable. He hoped the journey would not be too terrible for Miss Hampton Parke. There was much to love about

their desolate corner of Wales, but there was just as much to fear. The harsh and rugged landscape had its charms, but the cold and wet of late autumn when the entire world appeared bleak and gray would never show them to their benefit.

Eldren did not know the girl. He'd seen her once and she had seemed unaccountably shy, but she had also been very young. She'd been dressed in the costume of a school girl, with her dark skirt and prim white blouse. Her dark hair had been in simple braids, a hallmark of her youth. At just past thirty, he was far too old for her. While some men had no qualms about marrying a girl fresh from the schoolroom, he was not one of them. Of course, his motives were pure. He only wanted to help her, to provide some sort of protection. Regardless of the oddness of Cysgod Lys, the darkness that seemed to hover about the property, it generally only had any impact on those who bore the Llewellyn blood. She would be safe from its influence. Besides that, he owed her father. The man had taken a risk and invested with him in something that could change the very face of their country.

He'd liked Winston Hampton Parke, had genuinely respected and admired the man. Even then, Eldren had to admit it had been remarkably short sighted of the man to believe that his wife, Muriel, would see to the girl's welfare upon his death. The few times he'd been in her presence, she'd made it a point to speak as detrimentally about Adelaide as possible. Perhaps it was his exposure to Frances' particular brand of venom over the years that he'd been immune to hers. Winston had not been and had seemed to believe everything she said.

If ever there had been a case of love being blind, that was it. Muriel was dazzlingly beautiful, but for all the warmth in her eyes, she might as well have been carved from ice. He'd learned from the lawyers almost immediately that Muriel had telegraphed them. They, in turn, had telegraphed him to apprise him of her schemes. He'd known of her plans for Winston's daughter likely before the girl ever did. It had been telling that she'd immediately contacted him to disclose Muriel's plans. Was it the case of the girl actually having scruples, or had she simply been trying to get her stepmother's goat as Winston had been fond of saying?

Of course, he reflected that could simply be the product of her age. She was little more than a child, after all.

Eldren sighed. She was so terribly young. It seemed morally reprehensible to him, and yet what choice did he have? There was no one else

to see to the girl's welfare, no one to care for her. Yet, she was not family and he had no legal right or obligation to care for her, unless they were to wed.

The trustees assigned to oversee her marriage portion had jumped at the opportunity, immediately suggesting that it was the perfect solution to everyone's problems and as he'd been a business partner of her father's no one could suggest that her father would not have approved the match. At the same time, it also made him feel the union was destined for failure. How on earth could a girl like her be happy with a man his age—a man who was solely focused on his work to the exclusion of all else?

With nearly a decade and a half separating their ages, they could have little in common. She'd likely grow bored and resentful and he'd find himself fairing no better than his brother. Theirs would be a loveless marriage and devoid of even the hint of passion. It was the only way to end his family's curse.

Would she even consent to such a thing? Part of him questioned whether to tell her prior to their wedding, but his honor would not allow him to withhold such information. She had the right to choose, after all. If she did say no, he'd help her to find a suitable husband, one who would perhaps offer her all that he could not.

Eldren closed the account books, his wayward thoughts refusing to be reined in. For that brief time, he allowed himself the luxury of simply brooding in silence.

CHAPTER TWO

The skies had opened and rain had poured down as if being tipped from buckets. The heavy wool of her traveling costume was soaked through as was the heavy veil that covered her face. Her teeth chattered and even in her gloves, her hands had grown impossibly frigid. So much so that they were numb and she could barely grip the edge of the seat with every jolt of the cart. It was pitch dark. There were lamps hanging on poles beyond the edge of the cart, illuminating the horses and the road beyond, but only by mere feet, making it impossible to anticipate those jolts and brace herself effectively for them.

"How can they possibly see where they are going?" She demanded of the churlish man who held the reins.

The driver, whom she'd learned was named Mr. Waddington, scoffed. "Don't need to see, do they? Just need to pull. I'll do the seeing for them, won't I?"

"And how can you possibly see?" she demanded.

"Don't need to see. I knows this road like the back of me hand!" he snapped angrily at her.

Adelaide said nothing further as the cart lurched, one of the wheels hitting a deep rut in the road. They traveled only a few yards further when that same wheel snapped altogether. The loud crack of it rent the darkness as the cart listed alarmingly and Adelaide was left clinging to the wooden seat for purchase lest she end up on the muddy road, trampled beneath the horses' hooves or the remaining wheels.

Mr. Waddington cursed, or she assumed he was cursing. It was in Welsh

so it sounded utterly incomprehensible to her.

"There's no fixing it tonight and I'll not leave me horses to be stolen," he groused, taking one of the lamps down from the pole. "If you cut through yon moor, it's less than a quarter mile to the house."

Adelaide was horrified. "I can't walk there alone in the dark. I don't know the terrain. What if I fall?"

"I'd advise you not to then!" he snapped, clearly more concerned with the plight of the horses than with her. "Go on with you, girl! Don't be standing here in the wet like you're daft!"

As Mr. Waddington was clearly unmoved by her situation and as the rain showed no signs of letting up, Adelaide knew he spoke the truth. It would have been different if he'd come in a carriage that was covered where she could wait. But she was facing the devil's own bargain. Stay with the cart and freeze or risk life and limb crossing an unknown field in the dark and rainswept night?

"I'd advise you to remove your veil. Widows weeds will not impress folks about here anyway," he groused with his familiar ill humor and sharp tongue. "And if you try to cross the moor like that, you'll step in a hole and break your fool neck!"

Adelaide took the lamp he extended toward her with great trepidation. "Are there wolves?"

"Some," he said, not even bothering to offer her any reassurance.

"You must have a pistol with you. Give it to me," she ordered.

"I will not! No woman ought to walk about armed!"

"No lady should have had to ride in a farm cart in the rain only to be set out miles from her destination to walk alone in the dark," she snapped back at him. "If I cross that moor unarmed and unescorted, what do you think Mr. Llewellyn will have to say about it?"

Waddington grumbled, but he did return to the box at the front of the cart and came back with a small revolver. It was similar to the one her father had taught her to use years ago. Taking it from him, Adelaide checked it over, making certain that it was actually loaded and then carefully placing it in the pocket of her skirt. If Mr. Waddington was surprised that she knew how to handle firearms, he did not let on. His face was as stony and impassive as it had been since he fetched her from the station.

Gathering all the courage she could muster, Adelaide left the relative safety of the small cart and crossed to the side of the road he'd indicated.

There was a small stone fence there. She placed her lamp atop it long enough to scramble over it. Holding the light carefully in front of her, she set out across the field. In the distance, she could see the dim glow of lights and prayed that she was going in the right direction. A part of her, something paranoid and bordering on the hysterics that Muriel had accused her of, wondered if it wasn't all a sham. Perhaps Mr. Llewellyn hadn't even really been the one to wire her? What if it had all been some ploy by Muriel to lead her to her death and reclaim whatever moneys her father had set aside for her? It was not out of the question, much as she might wish otherwise. What did she really know of her betrothed, after all?

Carefully placing one foot in front of the other, testing the ground with every step to make sure that the earth was solid beneath her, it made for slow going. She'd rather arrive late than lay there in the darkness all night to be feasted upon by whatever beasts might be roaming in the dark, Adelaide reasoned.

The rain lashed at her skin until she was no longer capable of feeling the cold. Her arm ached from holding the lamp aloft but if she were to arrive at Cysgod Lys unharmed, there was no other option. But it was something else altogether that unnerved her.

Crossing that wide expanse of dirt and grass, with the light of a house in the distance and the hulking shadows of mountains just behind it, she felt exposed and vulnerable. More specifically, she felt *observed*. There was an overwhelming sensation, a prickling sense of unease, that someone or something watched her in the darkness. Was it Mr. Waddington watching her? Or was it something far more sinister? Or possibly a product of her own overworked and overwrought mind?

The wind whipped at her veil until she simply yanked it from her head. The fluttering of it about her only added to her terror as it often blinded her. But with it gone, there was no logical explanation for the fluttering sound she heard. Not like the beating of wings, but rather like whispered voices overlapping in a crowded room. Like the hum of conversation in a church or at a funeral, she thought, where everyone had something to say but no one wished to say it loudly enough to be fully overheard.

From her peripheral vision, she could see dark shapes flitting to and fro, moving quickly, always just out of her line of sight when she turned to confront them. Surely, if it was a pack of wolves, they'd have howled or made some sort of noise to communicate with one another? But only that

fluttering sound beat at her ears, that and the rain. Every time she whirled in the direction of one of those swiftly moving figures, all she managed to do was make herself dizzy. Whirling again to her right, she stumbled, sinking to her knees on the soggy ground.

"Stay there. Just stay."

The soft whisper was insidious. It sounded at once as if it had come from inside her own head and also as if had been whispered against her ears. She could almost feel the movement of air over that sensitive skin. It was the same voice of hopelessness she'd heard that night as the ship sank, the voice that had said she should just let go of the ropes, sink into that abyss and let it claim her.

"It's your imagination, Adelaide," she said, trying to convince herself of it. "Get up. Get up and move or you'll freeze to death right here!"

Somewhere, she found the strength to stagger once more to her feet and step forward. One agonizing step after another, she pressed on. Realizing that paying mind to those fleeting shadows and fluttered sounds was only exhausting her further, she forced herself to ignore them and instead focused all her energy and attention on the lights in the distance.

Yet the more she ignored those things, the more insistent they became. It was an assault on her senses, relentless and terrifying. Near tears; exhausted and beyond cold; her imagination was getting the better of her. Adelaide repeated that to herself every few seconds, hoping that she would come to believe it more firmly. Patting her pocket and feeling the heavy weight of the gun, it offered her a small measure of assurance. If something living stalked her on the open moor, she would defend herself, no matter the cost. She refused to consider that she might be stalked by anything else.

Adelaide was close enough that she could now make out distinct windows and the dark shape of the roof line. *Almost there*. Buoyed by that thought and by the slight feeling of empowerment the brutish weapon gave her, she marched on, ignoring the whispers, the shadows, the rain, the cold, the aching fatigue, and the unrelenting sadness that threatened to swamp her. It was her constant companion since her father's death, since that horrible night aboard the Mohegan.

After what seemed ages, Adelaide reached the gentle slope of a drive covered in fine gravel. There was a gate just beyond it, the large brick columns on either side supporting an intricate work of art in wrought iron. Those gates were open wide, probably in anticipation of her arrival.

The very moment she stepped through those gates, the whispers stopped. The feeling of being watched abated, and it seemed as if even the rain had lessened it's terrible assault upon her. The hundred yards or so between the gate and the house were conquered by nothing more than will, for her body had been pushed far beyond the limits of what she could possibly endure, certainly in her already weakened condition.

As she reached the front door, dark and ornately carved, she bit back a whimper as she lifted her hand to the door knocker. The heavy ring was clutched in the talon of a fierce looking dragon. His expression appeared gloating and superior. It was silly, but she felt the overwhelming urge to stick her tongue out at that mocking bit of ironwork. Luckily, good sense prevailed as the door was opened almost instantly.

The butler was a man of indeterminate age. White haired, tall and possessed of a regal bearing, he could have been forty or seventy. It was utterly impossible to tell. "May I help you, madame?" he queried, clearly perturbed by her bedraggled appearance and unseemly arrival.

"I am Miss Adelaide Hampton Parke. I am expected," she managed, despite her chattering teeth.

His eyes widened, his silvered brows arching upward in a manner that might have been comical. "Miss Hampton Parke, do come in. Come inside at once! Where is the carriage?"

"There was no carriage," she said. "Only a cart driven by Mr. Waddington."

The man blanched, his face turning the same shade of white as his hair. "Mr. Waddington? Did he set you out at the end of the drive in this?"

"The cart hit a rut on the road and the wheel snapped... I walked."

"On the road at night?" He said it as if she'd told him she was a dancer from the Moulin Rouge.

Adelaide frowned. "No... Mr. Waddington said to cut across the moor as it was a much shorter distance that way. In truth, I doubt I could have walked any further."

He didn't say anything at all to that. Instead, his face had been schooled into an inscrutable mask. But there was something in his eyes that was not so easy to hide. Fear. Was Mr. Llewellyn a terrible man to work for, she wondered? Did he berate his staff and treat them ill?

As if summoned by her thoughts, a door just off the large foyer opened and a man appeared there. Dark hair disheveled, as if his fingers had combed through it repeatedly, his satin necktie was askew and his previously starched collar now rumpled, he appeared to be nearly as exhausted as she was. And he was as handsome as she'd remembered. Any hope that she'd exaggerated that in her memory was now gone.

"Miss Hampton Parke!" he exclaimed. "What on earth has happened to you?"

Adelaide meant to answer him. She opened her mouth to do just that, but no sound would emerge. As she stared at him, the room began to grow dim, the darkness robbing her of her peripheral vision first and then slowly closing in until only blackness remained. Her last conscious thought was that she was sinking.



IT was a breech in etiquette but a necessary one. As Miss Hampton Parke began her descent to the floor in a dead faint, his butler, Tromley, caught her before her head could strike the hard and often uneven surface of the stone tiles. Rushing forward, Eldren swept her up into his arms. "Her room has been readied?"

"Yes, my lord. There is a room for her on the third floor."

"The third floor? Why is she not in the room down the hall from mine? Those were my instructions!"

The butler looked chastened. "Many things about Miss Hampton Parke's arrival have been altered, my lord. I fear Mrs. Llewellyn has had a hand in things. It was not the carriage that fetched the young lady from the station, but Mr. Waddington in an open cart. It became disabled on the road and he sent her—."

"He sent her miles in the dark alone?"

"No, my lord. He instructed her to take the shorter route across the moor," the butler finished, his face pinched and tight as he disclosed that last bit of information.

Eldren didn't curse, but the urge was there. If Waddington were in front of him, he'd have planted his fist right in the man's face. "No wonder she fainted. I've seen grown men run at even the mention! Have someone go out in search of Mr. Waddington and fetch her things. I'll have the maids borrow something of mother's for the time being so we can get her warm and dry."

"I'll see to it, my lord, and I'll have a tray of tea and soup sent up to the Rose Room."

"No. If it hasn't been aired out it would be worse for her. Tonight, she will take my chambers and I will sleep in the Rose Room. Have one of the maids see to it quickly," Eldren said and turned to take stairs up to the second floor. At the foot of them, he looked back, "And Tromley, if at any point in time Mrs. Llewellyn gives orders to the staff that countermand my own, they are not to be followed... If they are, the person who does so will be dismissed."

"Yes, my lord."

She was not overly plump, but she had a curvaceous figure. Of course, she was also draped in sodden wool which added considerable weight. By the time he reached the landing at the top of the staircase, he was winded. It was easier going down the corridor to his room. Maids scurried past him in the hall, having emerged from one of the many hidden panels in the hall that concealed narrow, dark corridors and servants' stairs. Some made for the Rose Room, others made for his chamber.

By the time he reached it, the fire had already been stoked to blazing. He placed her atop the counterpane. "Get those wet things off her before she succumbs to a chill."

"Yes, my lord," the maid replied with a curtsy.

Eldren turned to leave. He was furious—with Frances and with his servants. He'd given explicit instructions and every last blasted one of them had been countermanded by his managing, conniving, hateful sister-in-law. But if there was one positive aspect to the chaotic and horrible conditions in which his betrothed had arrived, he had been pushed beyond his limits with Frances and come hell or high water, she would be on her way. He would no longer tolerate her presence in his home.

A maid was scurrying down the hall, a nightrail and wrapper in hand. He stopped her. "When you are finished assisting with Miss Hampton Parke, you will go to Frances' chamber and pack her things. She will be leaving tomorrow."

The maid's eyes widened in terror. "Aye, my lord. I'll see it done."

He continued on his way, stalking along the corridor, his booted footsteps muffled by the aged carpet. The sconces on the wall, cast long shadows as he passed. They flickered and moved in an unnatural way, stretching out toward him like long, seeking fingers. He ignored it, just as he always did, but it

made him cognizant of his temper. If he did not keep it in check, things would only get worse.

He'd learned over time that any strong emotions on his part would only make those unsettling encounters intensify. Those same shadows had tormented him as a child, along with whispers and strange occurrences in the house. But with all the talk of ghosts and curses and not to mention the superstitions the servants had whispered within the earshot of a young boy with an ailing mother and a father already gone from the world, it was little wonder that he'd struggled. It was only as an adult that he'd managed to finally gain some sort of control over those occurrences by learning to control his own emotions. In the last few days, since he'd made the offer to Miss Hampton Parke to make her his wife, that control had slipped. But getting rid of Frances would alleviate a huge source of his current distress.

Outside Frances' chamber, he paused, raised his hand and banged loudly. Within seconds, she flung the door open, her lips curved in a triumphantly wicked smirk and the unmistakable flash of victory in her eyes. He'd never struck a woman in his life, nor would he, but she certainly seemed to know just how to push his buttons.

"I hear your bride has made her arrival... at long last. I had feared she might have changed her mind," she goaded, a wicked smile curving her perfectly formed lips.

"Was that the purpose of sending Mr. Waddington for her? To scare her off? Or was having her ride in an open cart, ill sprung and dangerous to boot, in the coldest and wettest weather we've had in years an attempt on your part at something even more sinister?" he demanded.

Frances shrugged. "She's an American. Do they not pride themselves on being of such 'sturdy stock'? What's a little rain to them?"

"That girl has been through hell. And you unnecessarily and intentionally put her through yet more of it," Eldren replied, managing to just keep his temper in check. "You will leave here tomorrow, Frances, and you will return to your own home in Bristol. I will never entertain you in this house again."

She gaped at him. "What? You cannot mean to throw me out? And your brother? How can you bar him from his childhood home?"

"I am not barring Warren from his childhood home. Nor is he leaving here tomorrow. Without you forever shoving a glass or a bottle into his hands, it is my hope that in your absence, we might be able to free him from the demons of drink which torment him! You've done more than enough damage already. A maid will come to assist you in packing. Take all that you wish to for if it is left behind, I will see it burned." With that, he turned on his heel and left her to shriek her rage at his departing back.

CHAPTER THREE

ADELAIDE AWOKE SOMEWHAT DISORIENTED, but memory quickly returned. She had fainted. It was, so far as she could remember, the only time in her life she had done so. Perhaps it wasn't a faint, since she considered that far beneath her dignity. Perhaps instead it was some lingering effect of the minor head wound she'd sustained only two short weeks earlier when the Mohegan had begun its descent into the pitch black waters of the Atlantic at night.

Pushing such distressing thoughts aside, she managed to sit up in the bed. The heavy wool traveling costume she'd donned for her journey had been removed and in its stead she wore a lovely nightgown of fine lawn with elaborate and beautiful embroidery at the sleeves and along the button placket at the front. A dressing gown of heavy brocade lined with velvet was draped across the foot of the bed.

Above all, in all the things she noticed, she was warm. Her hair, though still damp, had obviously been toweled dry and braided. Unless of course she'd been unconscious for significantly longer than she'd realized, the thick mass could not have dried so much on its own. Scanning the room, she noted the clock on the mantle and pushed back the covers. The wooden floors, inlaid in a lovely herringbone pattern, were cold beneath her feet as she made her way to check the time. Her brow furrowed as she realized it was nearly ten o'clock. Had it taken her so very long to cross the moor, then? Recalling how gingerly she'd placed her feet and carefully calculated each step, it likely had. How long had that torment lasted, she wondered?

A knock sounded at the door and she retreated quickly to the bed, shrugging into the heavy dressing gown as she called out for the person to

enter. It was likely a maid, she thought, bringing water or tea or some other thing that might be needed in tending to an invalid such as herself. *How humiliating to have fainted in the foyer in front of her intended!* What an impression she must have made.

The door opened and she turned to face it, but it was not a maid who entered, or rather not just a maid. While a girl did enter bearing a tray laden with a small tureen and a pot of what she assumed would be tea, it was none other than Mr. Eldren Llewellyn who held her gaze. He was taller than she'd remembered, but then she'd never seen him at such a close distance before. His broad shoulders filled the doorway and his well tailored coat conformed to the strong lines of his chest. He was a wealthy man, with business enterprises that spanned two continents, and yet he had the figure of a man who labored, with wide shoulders and thick, heavy arms. Why that should be the thing she noticed and why it should make her heart race to think of it, she did not know.

"Mr. Llewellyn," she began, and paused to glance at the maid who'd let out a squawk of surprise. Electing to ignore the girl, Adelaide continued, "Forgive me for making such a spectacle of myself upon my arrival. It must have been terribly inconvenient for you."

"It is I who must apologize to you, Miss Hampton Parke. It seems that the very explicit orders I left on how you were to be transported from the station to Cysgod Lys were countermanded by someone who presumed to know better. Suffice to say, they have been dealt with. I cannot tell you how very sorry I am that you were forced to endure the cold and damp in a rickety farm cart rather than a closed carriage. As to Mr. Waddington and his behavior, that will be dealt with as well. It was far too dangerous for you to cross the moor alone and at night no less, if you had fallen into one of the bogs, there is nothing that could have been done... regardless of how well armed you were. Tell me, do you always carry a pistol when you travel?"

Adelaide blushed furiously. "No. I certainly do not. The pistol is Mr. Waddington's and I insisted that he give it to me before I set off across the moor. I was terribly afraid that I would be set upon by wolves."

"No wolves would attack you on the moor, Miss Hampton Parke." There was something unsaid there, evidenced by the strange emphasis he put on certain words, as if the moor itself might have kept the beasts at bay.

"Please, you must call me Adelaide. That is such a ridiculous name to have to utter repeatedly!"

"Very well, Adelaide... and you may call me Eldren."

"Is the moor safe then? Mr. Waddington implied otherwise," she asked. There was something in his manner and in the furtive glances of the maid that made her feel as if some important fact were being concealed from her.

He paused and the maid behind her had grown deathly still. "No, it is not safe. But there are no animals who dare cross it at night."

"Will that be all, my lord?" The maid asked.

"Yes, Dyllis, that will be all," he replied.

Adelaide frowned as she watched the girl bob a curtsy and depart. "My lord?"

"I am the Earl of Montkeith. It's an old title and one that is practically worthless outside of Wales itself. I never use it when I travel in America," he explained, taking a seat in front of the fire where a small table had been laid with the food the maid had brought.

"Did my father know?" Adelaide wasn't sure why that mattered.

"He did know. But he elected to keep the matter private, as I requested. He felt that if your stepmother knew of my title, she might get ideas."

It was sound reasoning and one she could not easily dismiss as it was entirely likely her father had been correct. Muriel would have thrown her in the path of this enigmatic man before she was even out of the schoolroom. "I see. I fear I've made rather a fool of myself then, referring to you as Mr. Llewellyn to all of your people here."

He grinned. It was an expression that transformed his features. There was no denying that he was a handsome man, but there was something about him that tended toward the dark and brooding. But that smile gave him the look of a fallen angel, she thought, as beautiful as the morning star himself. It left her unsettled, nervous in his presence for an entirely different reason than she had been before.

"Will you join me, Miss—Adelaide?" He asked, gesturing to the second chair that had been placed at the small table. "I realize that it is highly irregular for me to be in your chamber unchaperoned, but this is something of an irregular household. And since we are to be married as soon as possible, there's hardly any harm in it."

Again, it was sound reasoning. Adelaide moved forward and settled herself at the small table. Her brow furrowed as she tried to recall when she'd last eaten. Breakfast, she thought, though it had been nothing more than a slice of bread with jam and a bit of coffee. She hadn't wanted more. Now it

made sense why she'd fainted in the foyer of this great house.

"Did you not eat on the train?" he asked, almost as if he'd plucked the very thoughts from her mind.

"No. There was no dining car after departing Birmingham and I just didn't think of it earlier," she admitted.

He frowned at that, his dark brows drawing together in concern. "You must eat. You've been through a terrible ordeal. Such things can leave one prone to more serious illness or complications. It is important now, more than ever, to be certain that you are taking proper care of yourself."

"I will not be a burden to you. I suppose it was simply a case of rattled nerves at the thought of traveling such a distance alone," she admitted.

"I should have sent someone to accompany you, or better yet, I should have come myself. That would have been the proper thing to do!"

"I am more than capable of retaining a traveling companion on my own. I did not... Because frankly the idea of being forced to make idle conversation and chit chat with someone for the twelve hour journey was far more than I could stand," she admitted. "I should tell you now that since the... since the accident, I find that my patience is not what it should be. I will strive to not allow that to get the better of me here."

He started to reply, but just then, the wind kicked up outside. It howled through the house, rattling shutters and causing the fire in the hearth to flicker and dance wildly. The sound it made was unlike anything she'd ever heard. It wailed like a woman in pain, the keening cry echoing along the heavy stone walls in a manner that raised gooseflesh on her skin and made the hair at the nape of her neck stand on end. "What on earth is that?"

"This is an old house, Miss Hampton Parke, full of passages and tunnels... the wind travels through them, around long sealed doors and windows. It creates a racket that, I grant you, can be unnerving at first. Like many things about life at Cysgod Lys, you will become accustomed to it... I must go and look in on my mother. She is not well," he offered vaguely. "The wind upsets her greatly and very little will calm her when that occurs. Please, eat and once you've had a good night's sleep, we can discuss all the pertinent arrangements in the morning."

He rose and walked toward the door, pausing before he made his exit. "If you have need of anything through the night, please do not hesitate to ring for one of the servants. I bid you goodnight."

Adelaide watched him leave. He'd been deliberately vague about his

mother's condition and his explanation of the noises that had thundered through the house had been far too pat. Was he lying? And if so, what on earth for?

Lifting the lid from the soup tureen, she ladled a small amount of it into her bowl. It was fragrant and tasted well enough, but she had no appetite, even without having eaten for the entirety of the day. Still, she forced herself to take as many spoonfuls as she could stomach. All the while, she waited with bated breath for that horrible shrieking sound to come again and terrify her out of her wits.



ELDREN MADE his way down the hall to his mother's chamber. The screaming had ceased, but inside, he could hear the broken sobs that always followed one of her spells. No doubt when he opened the door, there would be broken glass and rent fabric throughout. It amazed him that a woman so small, so delicate and frail in appearance, could fly into such a rage that she could shred the strongest of fabrics with her bare hands. She'd smashed furniture before when he couldn't even fathom how she'd lifted it.

Opening the door, he stepped into the small sitting room that adjoined her bedchamber. It was left unlocked, as was the outer door to her dressing chamber. But the door to her actual bedchamber was locked at present. Given the vagary of her moods, that could shift and change. Sometimes she had the run of her suite. At others, she was confined only to that one room. The risk was too great otherwise. On nights such as this one, and it was always worse when it stormed, she lost all reason and could do great harm to herself or others.

Crossing the room to the small chest that rested atop a table, he withdrew the black leather case that contained the syringe and the medication that had been prescribed by her latest physician. Drawing up the amber liquid from the vial, he then moved towards her chamber door, careful to make no noise as he unlocked it. It would not be the first time she had rushed the door as he entered. She'd made it as far as the stone fence that separated the house from the moor the last time. It could not be permitted to happen again.

Entering the chamber, he found her kneeling on the floor. Two large footmen held her arms as they attempted to place the restraint jacket on her.

Her head was thrown back, every muscle and cord in it standing out in stark relief as she strained against them. Her eyes were wild, and the sobbing had given way to grunts and growls, the sounds more animalistic than human.

"Mrs. Alberson," he said to her nurse, "Take this and I will help them."

"It'll only make her worse, my lord," the nurse replied, but dutifully she came forward and accepted the syringe from him.

"She can get no worse. It might upset her to see my face, but it's of no matter now. She's already overcome," Eldren replied.

Moving towards her, he took the jacket from the footman and began working it over her arms as the footmen held her. It all went well until he had to move in front of her and she saw his face. The screaming began again, louder and more terrifying than before. As he struggled with the various buckles and straps, she hissed at him, she spat in his face, and she even attempted to bite him. When she'd shouted until her voice was no more, giving way only to the hoarsest of croaks, she uttered the words that always broke his heart. "You killed him! You took him from me," she accused. "It should be you, Amner, rotting in that grave! It should be you and not my precious son!"

He didn't correct her when she called him by his father's name. Nor did he deny the truth of it. Her son had been killed, and he had done it. He'd killed his own brother, his twin no less, because his brother had been consumed by the same madness that now afflicted their mother. In that madness, she'd forgotten Eldren entirely. She only acknowledged four of the five children she had birthed. His twin, elder by ten minutes and gone from their mortal plane for nigh on a decade, Warren, and the two sisters, Fanny and Leola, who had died as children, likely from their eldest brother's cruelty. She acted as though he had never existed. Alden had been the most vicious, brutal boy to have ever lived and yet their mother had loved him above all else.

Once the restraint was in place, he helped them lift her, still kicking and struggling onto the bed, where yet more restraints were placed at her ankles and the jacket itself was fastened to brackets bolted to the floor beside the bed. The injection was administered via one of the veins that protruded from her neck, engorged from her exertions and the unnatural tension of her muscles.

"The devil will take you," she said. "The devil will take you for all that you have made me suffer."

Eldren didn't answer. She might be a lunatic, but even in the midst of her insanity, she often spoke the truth.

Rising, he turned back to Mrs. Alberson, "If she awakens again and is agitated, you may give her more but not before three in the morning, I would think. If you cannot administer it, have me awakened and I will do so."

"Yes, my lord," Mrs. Alberson said. As he passed her, she spoke again, "I hope your betrothed has improved, my lord. I heard she was given a terrible fright as she traveled here."

"She was, Mrs. Alberson. But I daresay she will rally. It appears that Miss Hampton Parke is indeed made from sturdy stock, as Frances put it." He turned his head, his gaze resting once more on his mother's now drugged and pliant form. He hated her. He hated himself. Everything about their lives was a misery and he was bringing an innocent girl into their midsts. "Thank you for caring for her."

Eldren left the room and didn't look back. There were no tears to shed, no mournful prayers for his mother that he had not already uttered. But dealing with her in such a state had left him far too agitated to sleep. So, he did what he always did and made for the cellars and the heavy bag that hung there and allowed him to pound his frustrations into something that would never be hurt by them, that would never prompt even more guilt to burden his already overwhelmed shoulders.

CHAPTER FOUR

IT WAS SOMETIME in the wee hours when Adelaide awoke again. She wasn't entirely certain what had dragged her from her restless slumber. As she had once more been dreaming of those final fateful hours aboard the Mohegan, it was a relief in some ways to have been pulled from it.

But there in the darkness, in an unfamiliar and decidedly odd house, Adelaide didn't feel relief. She felt something else entirely. There was an oppressiveness in the room, a feeling of something she hesitated to label impending doom. Yet that was precisely what she felt. Watched. Observed. Threatened. It was like what she'd felt on the moor, she thought, but so much stronger. The intensity of it was overwhelming.

She had almost succeeded in convincing herself it was nothing more than her own overactive imagination. Until her eyes were drawn to the far corner of the room. The shadows there were impossibly thick, so black her gaze could not penetrate them. It seemed unnatural somehow. The dim glow of the hearth and the faint light filtering between the curtains was enough that the rest of the room was covered in shades of gray and a soft orange glow near the fireplace. Yet that corner was blacker than pitch. Staring at it with dawning terror, Adelaide felt her heart thundering in her chest.

Reaching for the wrapper draped across the foot of her bed, she drew it to her and clutched it to her chest. Easing from the far side of the bed, keeping it between herself and that growing, spreading darkness, she made for the door. But as she neared it, she dared to look behind her. The darkness was gone. That corner was no longer black. Within it, she could see the large ornamental vase and the outline of a framed painting on the wall.

Puzzled, wondering if she'd dreamt it or if she was in fact losing her senses, Adelaide stood there, frozen to the spot. Until she felt something twining about her ankle. Thinking it was the ties of the wrapper dangling free, she looked down and a scream burned in her throat, the muscles to frozen too with fear to let it emerge. The darkness was pouring in beneath the crack under the door, twining around her feet and ankles. Sucking her down as surely as the black waters of the Atlantic had tried to do.

Stumbling back, she reached the safety of the bed and clambered up onto it. Her gaze never left the door and the writhing black shadows that seemed to be pouring beneath it. Like a nest of snakes, it moved like liquid, like something living.

It wasn't the same as the feeling on the moor, after all. It was worse. So much worse. This, alone in that chamber with only a thin nightrail to shield her, felt much more sinister.

With her back pressed to the massive, carved headboard, she watched it like a hawk and prayed for the dawn.



IN THE MORNING, Adelaide was seated in a chair before the hearth. Hollow eyed and exhausted, she found herself questioning everything from her decision to travel to a remote and desolate location in Wales to whether or not her own senses could be trusted.

The events of the night before, the dark mass that had seemed to grow and undulate in the shadows of the room seemed distant but no less terrifying. But the dawn had brought doubt. Doubt of her senses, of her sanity, of her current grasp on reality. Had it been nothing more than a dream, a waking nightmare where she hadn't managed to fully rouse her terrorized mind? With the morning sun streaming in, there were questions now about whether or not things had occurred as she recalled them or if those horrible moments of terror in the darkness had been a result of her many recent traumas and exhaustion. Heaven knew her life had been turned upside down and that alone would be enough to perhaps loosen her hold on reality to some degree. She'd been beyond physically exhausted by the rigors of her journey, and she'd not been at her best even before it had begun.

A soft knock on the door drew her from her musings and she called out

softly for them to enter. The same maid who'd attended her the night before entered bearing a tray of tea or coffee. She wasn't certain which. It was placed on the table before her and then the girl began tidying up.

"His lordship sent footmen to get your bags from Mr. Waddington's cart last night and a cart has been sent to fetch the rest of them this morning from the station, miss," the maid explained as she bustled about the room, straightening the bed clothes.

"That was very kind of him," Adelaide said.

"His lordship has always been very kind, miss," the maid offered reassuringly, a nervous smile pasted on her lips. "When you're ready, I'll help you dress so you may go down for breakfast. Or if you prefer to remain here, some can be brought up to you."

No, she did not care to stay there. She wanted to be free of that room, at least for a few hours. It was a vain hope that she might be able to entirely forget the events of the night before but at least getting out of it for a bit might help her to feel somewhat more secure.

"I daresay it was a good thing his lordship sent for your things. Mr. Waddington isn't to be trusted," the maid said. The words were uttered softly and beneath her breath, almost as if she spoke more to herself than to Adelaide.

Her ears perked at that and Adelaide demanded, "He would steal my clothes? Mr. Waddington? What on earth for?"

The maid blanched, clearly taken aback at having been heard. "I don't mean to imply that Mr. Waddington is a thief! Oh, no, miss! Not that at all. It's only that, he can be a bit petty if he takes it into his head that he's been wronged. And since the earl gave him such a dressing down this morning, he'd likely be in a mood to do something to get even like," the girl explained. "A favorite dress would fall from a trunk and get trampled in the mud, or your trunks would be scratched, locks or straps broken—that sort of thing. Childish really, more than truly harmful."

"Why on earth does Mr.—does the earl keep him on then?" Addy asked as the maid dressed her hair, piling the dark mass atop her head in a loose chignon before tugging several strands loose and leaving them to curl becomingly over Adelaide's shoulder.

The girl's face became a mask at that moment. Open and friendly faded away to be replaced by an expression that was hard and secretive. "I cannot say why the earl does anything, miss. It is not my place to do so... just as it

was not my place to gossip about Mr. Waddington. I apologize for making free with my tongue and saying what I ought not have. I can have one of the other girls attend you from now on, if you prefer, miss."

"Oh, no, Dyllis... I'm not angry at you or displeased with you in anyway. I certainly didn't mean to give that impression! I'd much rather have you continue on with me. You've rather done wonders with my hair," Adelaide replied. While it was true, that the girl had managed to arrange the thick mass into a pleasing style, she also understood that a bit of flattery might go a long way.

The maid blushed a bit, but a proud smile curved the girl's lips. "Thank you, miss. It is very kind of you to say so. If you don't require anything else of me now, I'll be heading back downstairs to help out in the kitchens."

"I don't need anything else for now, Dyllis. Thank you... What are the meals here? Do you have luncheon or tea? Is supper an elaborate affair? I'm afraid I'm a bit out of my depth."

"His lordship does like to have luncheon served, though most folks here about don't do that. He says he got into the habit in America and quite likes it. It is usually served around one o'clock. Supper is formal and served in the dining room promptly at seven. Tromley, that's the butler, miss, he will sound the dressing gong at a bit after six and then I'll come to assist you."

When the maid had curtsied yet again and left, Adelaide rose from her dressing table and gave herself a cursory inspection in the full length cheval mirror. There was nothing to be done for the unrelieved black she wore or the dark circles beneath her eyes. If they remained in the country and she did not travel with Eldren after they married, she would likely not stay in mourning for the full year because it simply horrified her to look at if everyday and be reminded of why she wore it. By the same token, the gowns she'd bought in Paris would hardly be appropriate for country life. They had been intended for glittering social affairs in New York, after all. She'd need to see about obtaining some simple walking dresses and less ornate evening wear that would be suitable for their current situation.

Her face was more pale than usual and with deep shadows beneath her eyes, there was no hope of impressing her future husband with her charms. It had been a restless night, and yet looking at herself, Adelaide recognized that it was more than just lack of sleep or the after effects of the terrible fright she'd endured.

She appeared haunted, she thought. It was a ghoulish thought, but no less

than the truth. And if she appeared that way, then there was no denying that she'd clearly come to the right place. There was obviously something occurring at Cysgod Lys, whether it was the dark and metaphysical things she thought she'd experienced in the middle of the night or something far more corporeal but equally as sinister.

There had been more shrieking after he had left her, and while it had been indistinct, at times she'd thought she'd heard actual words buried within those inhuman sounds. If there was one thing that Adelaide was entirely certain of, it was that no wind had produced such cries. But she also could not imagine that a person had, for they had been horrifying beyond belief.

Recalling her own terror and the fact that even more screams and wails had risen through the walls after that darkness had dissipated from her own room, Adelaide had to wonder if perhaps it had not simply spread its torment elsewhere. What was it then? A ghost? A banshee? Some dark entity of unknown origin roaming the halls of Cysgod Lys? She reminded herself to ask what the name of the house meant and to be certain she was pronouncing it correctly. The Welsh language was completely alien to her, after all, and the last thing she wanted to do was offend anyone. It could make things decidedly awkward for her if she did.

Exiting her room she found herself in a long corridor. She did not know her way, but she imagined that the large coat of arms adorning the wall would be near the staircase and made her way toward it. As she neared it, another door opened further down the hall and a woman emerged. She was lovely in a very typically English way, possessed of soft blonde curls, artfully arranged and that perfect pink and white complexion. It made her only too aware of how pale and washed out she must look given her journey the day before and the hideous black bombazine she wore. It flattered no one in her opinion. A wave of guilt assailed her then. She was not wearing it for her own vanity, was she? But to commemorate the life of her father and to display her respect and admiration for him to the world as she grieved his loss.

The blonde beauty glanced in Adelaide's direction and smiled, revealing small, perfect white teeth. They might have been a string of matched pearls for all that, but they did not appear dainty or delicate. Instead, they gave the impression of being rather predatory. "Good morning! Did I see you coming from that room?" she asked, pointing toward the door to Adelaide's chamber.

Ignoring her initial misgivings and hoping that she might have a friendly acquaintance in the house beyond the enigmatic man she was to marry and

the rather timid maid, Adelaide offered a smile in return. "Yes, I arrived late last night and unfortunately, I fainted for having been a ninny and forgetting to eat anything during the journey. I must confess, I find myself a bit lost."

The other woman's smile turned into a smirk and Adelaide immediately realized that her initial assessment had been correct. This woman was not her friend. She was no one's friend.

"You can't have been too lost. You managed to make your way into Eldren's bed just fine. Were you afraid he'd change his mind unless you allowed him to seduce you? Or did you, bold American that you are, do the seducing?" The words and tone were biting and cold. Whoever this woman was, she was clearly someone with an agenda of her own.

"I don't suppose it would be any of your concern regardless of who seduced whom or if any seduction occurred at all... And who are you precisely?" Adelaide demanded. She was not about to be cowed by a bully like the woman before her. She'd encountered their ilk in New York often enough.

"I'm Mrs. Frances Llewellyn. I'm married to Eldren's imbecile brother. Tell me, did you hear her shrieking through the night?"

Adelaide's blood ran cold. "Who do you mean?"

The woman laughed then. "So, he didn't tell you! Well, never let it be said that I would willingly play fast and loose with the family secrets. Just this once, I'll keep what I know to myself. Now, I'm off to Bristol since Eldren has decided to turn me out of the house in your honor... Enjoy every wretched, cursed stone in this little corner of hell, Miss Hampton Parke. Enjoy it while you can. Very few people who come here can survive the darkness that is the Llewellyn family and this bedeviled pile of rocks."

Adelaide stared on in horror as the vile woman just walked away. What on earth had she meant by all of those dreadful things? She longed to call her back, to demand if she had seen anything such as she had witnessed the night before. But the overwhelming belief that nothing the woman said could be trusted gave Adelaide pause.

A panel in the corridor wall opened, giving Adelaide such a fright that she screamed and jumped back. Her hand flew to her heart and she stared at Dyllis' face in that opening. "You scared the daylights out of me!"

"I'm ever so sorry, miss," Dyllis replied, instantly contrite. "I stopped on me way down to the kitchen because I heard her saying them things to you. You can't pay Mrs. Llewellyn no mind. A more miserable and unhappy person I've never known. It was her that sent Mr. Waddington for you in that cart. And you were only in Lord Llewellyn's room because she'd told the servants not to prepare the Rose Room for you like he'd asked. She'd have put you up on the third floor in that tower where you'd have been nothing but a solid block of ice this morning! He meant no disrespect to you, miss."

To see Dyllis so very distressed at the notion that someone might believe ill of her master went a long way toward providing the necessary reassurance that Adelaide required. She hadn't even realized until that moment that she was having second thoughts about going through with the marriage. Of course, the harsh reality of her situation had not changed and aside from facing her fear of sailing again, a fear that left her breathless and weak with the mere thought of it, she had no other options.

"I am quite all right, Dyllis. It's very apparent Mrs. Llewellyn simply has a case of the sour grapes."

"Sour grapes?"

"It's an expression meaning that she is bitter and resentful. It's from Aesop's Fables. Have you read them?"

"Oh, I can't read, miss. Weren't no school where I grew up and my mother couldn't read or write to teach me and my brother."

Adelaide's love of books was something that sustained her. She'd lost count of how many books she'd purchased while recuperating in Cornwall. She'd left them behind, of course, as a donation to the cottage hospital where she had been treated. "Would you like to learn to read, Dyllis? I'd be happy to teach you."

The maid smiled sadly. "No, miss, but I thank you. I likely couldn't learn it anyway, and it might interfere with my duties."

"If you change your mind, Dyllis, you have only to say," Adelaide reiterated before taking the stairs down. At the foot of them, the butler, Tromley, waited.

"May I show you to the breakfast room, miss?"

"Yes, Tromley. Thank you... Will Mrs. Llewellyn be at breakfast?"

"No, miss," the butler said. His expression was utterly neutral as he added, "Mrs. Llewellyn will be departing this morning and the duration of her absence is not yet known."

Adelaide nodded thoughtfully. "I see... and is her departure a direct result of her interference in Lord Llewellyn's travel arrangements for me?"

The butler remained impassive. "I could not say, miss."

He didn't have to. They walked silently on to the breakfast room, the entrance tucked behind the massive staircase. She would likely have never found it on her own.

"You will learn the house in time, miss. It must all seem very strange to you," the butler observed.

He was a kindlier man than she might have first imagined, based on their initial meeting last night. "I'm certain I will, Tromley. It just may take a bit. Thank you again."

Entering the breakfast room, Adelaide's eyes were drawn to the mountain of food heaped on the sideboard. She wouldn't eat that much breakfast in weeks, she thought. At the head of the table, Eldren was reading a newspaper. No one else was present.

"Is your brother not joining us for breakfast, my lord?"

"Eldren," he corrected. "Or did we not agree to dispense with such formality?"

Adelaide felt her cheeks heating at the reminder that she had spent several minutes alone with him not just in any bedchamber, but in his bedchamber. "I had assumed that we would do so in private only."

"My dear girl, we are in one of the most remote regions of Wales. We have nothing but privacy here," he answered. "And no, Warren will not be joining us. He imbibes too freely in the evenings to ever rise this early."

"I apologize. I should not have asked such an impertinent question."

He scoffed at that. "It's hardly impertinent to make inquires about whether or not you will be sharing a meal with the other members of the household. Warren rarely rises before noon and his she-wolf of a wife has been sent packing. Her interference yesterday and the danger she placed you in for nothing more than her own pettiness and spite were the last straw. Had it not been for your suffering, I might have continued to tolerate her indefinitely. It is my hope that with her gone, my brother will stop drinking himself into a stupor during every moment of his waking hours." He stopped then, as if realizing he'd said far more than he intended. "Between this house, and the nighttime disruptions, and now my unfortunate lack of tact in discussing private family matters, I'm sure you'll be asking for the first ship back to New York."

"Nighttime disruptions?" She queried.

"The wind, Adelaide... this house is not conducive to a restful night."

"Oh," she said. It was not the wind. They both knew it. But she lacked the

courage to mention the dark shadow that had terrorized her last night. He would think her mad.

Adelaide had filled her plate far beyond what she could actually consume, but even with only a bite or two of the prepared dishes, it was far more than she could possibly eat. Seating herself near him, hoping she was not breaking some rule of etiquette she'd missed due to her own lack of attention to her governess' teachings, she replied, "We both know that returning to New York is not an option for me. I have no money to live independently. If I do not marry, the money my father left for me will simply sit there, drawing dust and interest in equal measure I imagine. And while admittedly my arrival and welcome were...unorthodox," she supplied lamely, "it is a much warmer welcome than I would receive from my stepmother, had I the courage to step foot on a ship and attempt to sail across the Atlantic. I fear that I would only be fit for an asylum before we even lost sight of land."

He stared at her intently. "Was it so very bad? The accident? I've read the accounts and I know the ship went down very quickly, but I cannot imagine if that would have made the situation easier or more difficult to bear."

"It was a greater horror than I can convey. We were eating dinner, and suddenly there was pandemonium. The stewards and crew were running from aft to stern of the ship, gathering women and children. We were on deck, my father put Muriel and myself in line for the lifeboats, but they couldn't get them launched quickly enough... The ship was in such shallow waters that even when it sank entirely, the rigging and funnel were still above the water. That was where they put us. We perched on those tiny ropes for hours, clinging to them with that black water swirling around us. My father was treading water nearby. I could not see him, but I could hear his voice... and then I couldn't. I don't believe he drowned. I think it was the cold more than anything." Adelaide stopped abruptly, realizing how much she had said. Too much. As a general rule she had elected to not think of the sinking of the Mohegan at all. Of course that did not keep her nightmares at bay. But that was no excuse for making a display of herself and becoming impossibly maudlin in front of him. It had been terrible enough to live through it herself. What sort of person would burden others with such knowledge? "Forgive me. It appears we are both guilty of too much forthrightness this morning."

She was unprepared when he reached out and touched her hand, covering it briefly with his. Staring down at that point of contact, she realized how long it had been since she had been touched with any sort of warmth or

caring. Looking up, she met his dark gaze and saw the wealth of sympathy in his eyes, but she also saw understanding. "You've lost someone too, haven't you?"

"We have all had our share of tragedy in life, I think... but yours has been so very recent and on a scale I cannot fathom. To be surrounded by the loss of so many—You have a remarkable strength of character, Adelaide," he said. Suddenly, as if aware that he was touching her in a fashion that might be too familiar, he withdrew his hand from hers.

She missed it immediately. That surprised her more than anything. But there was a tension in the room now, a tension between them, that she longed to dispel. "Cysgod Lys. Did I say that correctly?"

His lips quirked. "Close enough."

"What does it mean?"

"Shadow Hall," he answered.

It was not at all what she expected him to say. It elicited a shiver from her as she stared at him in horror.

"Not very inviting, is it? I recommend sticking with the Welsh. We'll perfect your pronunciation later. For now, we should discuss the arrangement for our coming nuptials. I think Saturday will suffice, if you are in agreement."

Suddenly shadowy figures were the furthest thing from her mind. Two days hence. Two days until she would no longer be Adelaide Hampton Parke, but Lady Llewellyn, Countess of Montkeith. The reality of that pressed in upon her and she wondered if she might not faint again. Perhaps she was not so iron willed as she had once imagined. Of course, to delay any longer would be beyond scandalous. She was in his home, after all, and without any sort of chaperone. With Mrs. Llewellyn departing that very morning, they could not afford to wait.

"Yes, Saturday will be fine... but—," she stopped unsure what she should say.

"But what?"

"I don't know what to wear. I have a dress that would suffice nicely, but I don't know whether it's appropriate to wear black for my wedding or to throw off black for the wedding as I'm still in mourning for my father. I don't suppose it will matter. There won't be any guests beyond our witnesses... will there?"

SITTING THERE, utterly befuddled by the conundrum she faced of whether to wear black or something prettier on their wedding day, Adelaide looked young. Too young for him to be sure. It was the first time since her arrival that she had done so. The weight of her father's death and the horror that she'd endured in those dark hours in the water awaiting rescue had taken a toll on her. That was quite clear to him. But in that moment, she looked precisely what she was—a pretty girl of eighteen who was far too young and innocent for a man like him and for a place like Cysgod Lys.

He would marry her regardless, of course, assuming she'd agree to the terms. She had little choice in the matter for she had no where else in the world to go. For himself, it was now a matter of honor as to refuse would see her reputation irreparably damaged. He'd be her husband or find her one.

"No. There will be no other guests save for my brother and my solicitor who will act as our witnesses... and you must wear whatever you wish, Adelaide. It's my understanding that every bride wants to feel special and pretty on their day. I think that your father would approve, whatever choice you make, so long as you are happy with it," he said.

"Thank you, Eldren. That's very kind of you to say. I will make a decision later today."

Reaching into his pocket, he produced the small leather box that held the ornate diamond and emerald ring that had belonged to his grandmother. "I had thought to use this as your betrothal ring. It's a family piece. If you'd like something more modern, more suited to your tastes, we can get it for you, though our options will be somewhat limited as the nearest jeweler of note is in Cardiff."

She accepted the box, opened it and then her eyes lit up. He suspected most women were appreciative of shiny, pretty things.

"It's lovely. But are you certain you wish for me to wear something so valuable? It's clearly been in your family for sometime and... well, perhaps Mrs. Llewellyn would—."

"If Frances put that ring on her finger my grandmother would spin like a top in her grave," he replied. "No. If it's to your liking, wear it. If it needs to be altered to fit your hand, there is a jeweler in Chester that should be able to take care of at least that. I'll be heading there tomorrow to check in on a salt mine that my family has operated there for years. It appears to be played out

but I want to be certain of that before I give the order to shut it down."

"And if it is played out? What happens to the people working there?"

"I will attempt to find them other employment in my various enterprises. I will try to keep as many of them on as I can," he stated. "Adelaide, there are other things we must discuss about our upcoming marriage... but there are too many servants with prying eyes and ever listening ears. I have business this morning that cannot be delayed, but this evening, I thought we might go for a walk if the weather permits and we can discuss our expectations of one another."

The simple truth was that he had no notion of how to tell her theirs would never be a real marriage. He would never share her bed. Both of them would be bound to a chaste life because he would not risk the mental infirmities, along with other torments, that plagued his family being passed on to another generation. And he would have to explain to her what must be done should those same infirmities ever come to light in him. He would not live that way and he would not curse her to do the same. But she was a young woman, a woman who through no fault of her own would be denied any chance at love or passion. To ask her to commit to such a thing without allowing her to know the full extent of precisely what she would be tying herself to would make him the worst sort of scoundrel.

"Yes. That would be lovely. It was dark when I arrived and I did not see very much of the estate at all. Are the gardens well tended?" She asked. "We had a small garden in New York, but obviously as cramped for space as we are there—well, they did not provide much in the way of distraction, peace or privacy."

There was no peace or privacy to be had anywhere at Cysgod Lys. But telling her that would only frighten her. Instead, he simply kept his mouth shut, folded his newspaper and rose to depart. "Enjoy your breakfast, Adelaide. I will see you this afternoon."

CHAPTER FIVE

IN NEW YORK, Adelaide had never been idle. Shopping, the library, some new attraction or entertainment, or even the work she had done for the poor had always kept her busy. But hours of nothingness stretched before her and with her own thoughts such a confusion and anxiety inspiring jumble, she desperately needed a task.

With that in mind, she set out in search of Tromley. She found him in the small orangery that was located just beyond a rather grandiose morning room. He was cutting roses, likely for the dining room table. It was typically a task assigned to gardeners, but from the careful way he had and the delicate touch with which he treated those fragile blooms, it was clearly a task he enjoyed.

"Those are lovely," Adelaide said, complimenting a startlingly white blossom. "I don't think I've ever seen such a bright and unadulteratedly white rose before."

The butler smiled, clearly proud. "The gardens are the purveyance of Mr. Erskin. But these lovelies are mine. I have propagated them in just such a manner that they are beyond equal. It is prideful and vain to say so, but I cannot be sorry for it. Was there something you required, Miss Hampton Parke?"

"A task, Tromley. I need something with which to occupy either my hands or my mind. If both remain idle I shall go mad."

His smile faded instantly. "Those are not words that should be spoken in jest, miss. But if it is a task you need, have you no sewing or painting to keep you occupied?"

"I do not. I've never had a knack for drawing or painting. And all of my sewing notions and supplies... well, they are gone, Mr. Tromley, and I didn't think to see them replaced before my journey here." Adelaide took a deep breath and then did something she had never in her life. She apologized to a servant. "I am terribly sorry, Tromley. I spoke thoughtlessly and it was not my intent to offend."

"I am not offended, miss. Only concerned. You have been through an ordeal and this place... this house, can sometimes take even the most rational of minds under some strange and unbreakable spell. If ever you find yourself frightened or if you begin doubt what is real about you, I hope that you will seek me out."

"You... but not his lordship?" Adelaide queried.

"He is a very rational man. He has made himself that way... to hear anything that might sound irrational would be very distressing for him," the butler continued. There was a wealth of meaning in those words, both in what was said and in what remained unsaid. "It is my duty and my pleasure in life to keep this house and his lordship's life, as much as it is my ability to do so, running as smoothly as possible. You will come to me, miss, if you ever need reassurance of what is real and what is not?"

It was quite possibly the strangest conversation Adelaide had ever had with anyone, servant or peer. But she found herself nodding just the same. "I will, Tromley. But I am very rationally minded, as well." *Until shadows pitch and move in my room in the darkest hours of the night*. Regardless, Adelaide had made a decision on that score. Shadows would not harm her, but if she allowed them to terrorize her, it might well drive her to run and in the course come to unintended harm. She would take a page from his lordship's book and ignore it. "I do not think there will be any difficulties there... Is there sewing to be done then?"

His smile returned. "In a house of this size, there is always sewing to be done. But most of it is beneath your dignity and your station, miss."

"I will sew rags together for a beggar's quilt, Tromley, if it will but give me something to do. Please."

He nodded. "Do you wish your task to take place in your chambers or in the morning room? Or perhaps the small sitting room just off from where you broke your fast with Lord Llewellyn?"

"I think the small sitting room. I have not yet had a chance to explore that area of the house and I'd like to soak up some of the sunshine this grand

morning. I'll go there now and await my mending," she replied.

Leaving the butler, Adelaide found her way back to the breakfast room and to the small sitting room just off it. The walls were papered in a soft yellow damask, faded to the color of butter. An aged Aubusson carpet in shades of cream, blue and gold covered the intricately patterned parquet floors, and two walls of the corner room were lined with windows draped in faded blue velvet. The impossibly wide mantle, which extended almost the width of one wall, was lined with figurines of shepherdesses and ormolu vases and a clock. She supposed that in a room with so many windows a large hearth would be a requirement to combat the chill.

The sofas and chairs were a mix of styles from various centuries with each upholstered in the room's very relaxing and very French color palette. But Adelaide didn't seat herself immediately. Instead, she crossed to the wide bank of windows and looked out over the sloping parkland. She could just see the sea beyond. With mountains to the north, the sea to the west and that dreadful moor to the south, Cysgod Lys was surrounded on all sides by wonders of nature, though some were much more pleasant than others.

There must have been some sort of drop off at the water's edge, for she could not see the crashing waves as they met the sandy shore. It was just deceptively still waters as far as the eye could see. The memories enveloped her—people screaming and running as they made for the decks, the terrible disorientation as the ship listed first to one side and then the other, the pandemonium on the decks as they failed to launch all but two of the lifeboats, and the horror as one of them broke apart before it even touched the water.

But it wasn't just the memories of the event itself. There were very tactile sensations like the bitterly cold water creeping in about her ankles first, and then climbing further until she'd been submerged to her waist before that ship came to rest on the razor sharp reef beneath it. The cold had taken her breath and made even her bones ache. The sensation was so real and so sharp in her mind, it was almost as if she was feeling it all over again.

Abruptly, Adelaide turned away from the windows. With the sight of the water gone from her, those sensations faded as well. Moving to one of the heavily upholstered chairs, she sank down upon it and resisted the urge to rub her aching legs. How could a mere memory bring about such physical pain?

A soft knock on the door interrupted her rather distressing thoughts and Adelaide gratefully bade the person enter. It was Dyllis carrying a basket of linens and other garments with a sewing box perched atop it. "Mr. Tromley asked me to bring this to you," she said haltingly. "I don't mind to do the sewing, miss. It doesn't seem right for you, seeing as you'll be lady of the house, to be mending shifts and aprons for servant girls!"

"Thank you, Dyllis, but I asked Mr. Tromley for the task. I am not used to having so little of my time well occupied. I needed something to keep me busy... Tell me, are their children working on the estates? And do they have a school that they attend?"

"There are, miss, but there's no school. Most of them attend the village school until they're old enough to work."

Adelaide shook her head, appalled at what she was hearing. She had been supportive of movements in the states to bring a halt to child labor. "Old enough to work… And how old is that precisely?"

"The stable lads, some of them are about ten, I think. The boys what help in the gardens, they're older. Twelve, I believe... I know that some folks in America have very strange ideas about children working. But his lordship is good to all of us what work for him. And if he didn't employ those boys, heaven knows what sort of trouble they'd get up to trying to help for their mothers and their siblings. Most of them don't have fathers you see. They've been killed, either in the wars or the mines, or they've just taken to the drink and wander off never to return. It's a good thing, miss. I swear it is."

Adelaide felt slightly ashamed of the snap judgement she'd made about Eldren and his employment of children. "You are very loyal to his lordship, Dyllis, and it is a credit to you. I will endeavor to be less judgmental and more open to the ways of doing things here rather than New York... Do you think the boys might like to have some sort of education beyond what they've already learned? So long as it did not interfere with their duties, perhaps I could spend some time in the afternoons teaching them."

Dyllis placed the basket before her. "I think some of them might. But I wouldn't mention it to anyone until you've discussed it with his lordship first. Though he's very fair and always encourages the lot of us to better ourselves if we can."

"Thank you, Dyllis. I'll work on these until his lordship returns. You've been very kind and I do appreciate it."

The girl frowned then. "I don't know why you ought to be appreciating kindness, miss. Seems to me you ought to be expecting it. But I'll leave you to your sewing and ask one of the kitchen girls to bring you some tea to warm

you while you work. I'll be upstairs unpacking the rest of your things. They've arrived just a bit ago."

"There is an ivory velvet promenade gown... I know it might be scandalous, but no more scandalous than a bride in black. I mean to wear it for the ceremony on Saturday."

"Yes, miss. I'll get it pressed for you... and I do believe it will be pretty as a picture."

Adelaide watched her go before inspecting the contents of the pretty little sewing box that had been brought in. Once she was certain she had all she needed, she began carefully mending each garment. The servants clothes were of sturdy fabrics and were well tended, that much was obvious. But it was near the bottom of the basket that she found one garment in particular that made her pause.

It was a nightrail, delicately embroidered and of fine linen trimmed with satin ribbon. It obviously did not belong to a servant. She also couldn't picture the very flamboyant Mrs. Frances Llewellyn wearing anything quite so prim. It also appeared that the garment had been all but shredded, the seams violently rent. It was unlikely, in fact, that the garment could even be saved.

Replacing it with a frown and more curiosity than she cared to admit, Adelaide rose and walked once more to the windows. They went nearly floor to ceiling and swung outward. Experimentally she tried to open one. The latch was stubborn but eventually gave.

Climbing through she came out onto a small terrace that ran the length of several rooms. Walking along it, the brisk air felt good against her skin and while looking at the sea left her feeling utterly terrified, there was something bracing in the air so close to it. At the end of the terrace, Adelaide turned, but as she did so, something caught her eye.

She'd seen the hulking shape of the house on the night of her arrival, but the large tower was something of a surprise. All the windows in it must have been dark then or she would have seen it, surely. A holdover from a time when Cysgod Lys had been a fortified household, perhaps?

As she examined that curious bit of architecture, she saw movement in one of the upper windows. A woman appeared there, her face white and slack with wild hair that formed a dark cloud about her head. There was something strange about her, otherworldly to be sure, but not at all ethereal. In fact, Adelaide found the woman's presence to be utterly terrifying. Had that

horribly torn and shredded nightrail in the basket belonged to her? And then she screamed—that same ghastly sound that Adelaide had heard the night before.

Her heart thundered and she stepped backwards, horrified by what she'd seen and heard. Adelaide's heel caught on one of the flagstones and she came down hard, her hip connecting sharply with a large planter filled with evergreen shrubbery. Her hands came down hard on the edge of the terrace, a sharp protrusion from one of the stones slicing into the flesh of her palm.

With her uninjured hand, she rubbed her aching hip while examining the damage to her other hand. But as a tiny rivulet of blood dripped down her arm and splashed on the stone below, she heard it. That same whispering she'd heard on the moor her first night. It was far more faint, and yet it seemed impossibly near, as if it were happening right next to her ear though there wasn't a soul about. Frightened, Adelaide looked around and that was when she saw it. The woman in the upstairs window was no longer staring blankly ahead. Her face was no longer slack. In fact she radiated tension as she looked directly at Adelaide with such hatred that it chilled her to her very core.

Rising as quickly as her heavily boned corset permitted, Adelaide retreated to the safety of the morning room and wondered at the strange goings on in the home of her husband to be. What manner of mad house had she stumbled into?

CHAPTER SIX

ELDREN HAD SPENT the better part of the morning in his office meeting with his solicitors. They had the signed documents from Hampton Parke's attorneys in relation to Adelaide's marriage settlement. It was generous. Remarkably so. A part of him recoiled at that, for he was not marrying her for money at all.

"You've managed to get yourself quite the dollar princess, Lord Llewellyn, if I may say so," the solicitor said with a greedy gleam in his eyes. He was the youngest member of the firm and was too familiar by far. The older gentleman who accompanied him appeared utterly mortified.

"You may not say. And you may begin drawing up an additional agreement that Miss Hampton Parke and I shall both sign after our marriage takes place where the bulk of this is returned to her. I have no need of it and I will not be accused by you or anyone else of being a fortune hunter," Eldren said, a decided snap to his tone.

"I did not mean to give offense, my lord. I was merely remarking that there is a rash of international marriages of late and Miss Hampton Parke may in fact have many contemporaries living in London should she choose to be part of that social set... once an appropriate time period has passed, of course," the younger man offered in faux apology.

That had not been at all what the solicitor meant, but Eldren felt no need to rehash it. "If our business is concluded, gentlemen, I will bid you good day. I have much to attend to."

"Congratulations, my lord," the older of the two said. "All of the paperwork is in order and the additional contract you requested will be

drafted and sent to you by tomorrow afternoon. You said the bulk of her settlement, but did not specify an amount. I think to keep less than ten percent would be suspect and might cause more harm than good if such an arrangement were to become common knowledge or to be questioned later on."

There was some truth to that. It might be viewed as a breach of good faith with the trustees of her marriage settlement. Were it not for her stepmother, Muriel, and Eldren's gut feeling that she would once more stir turmoil in Adelaide's life, he might have risked it. But Murial was petty and she resented the love and affection Winston had held for his daughter as surely as she resented every last penny settled upon her. "Then I shall keep ten percent and donate it to a charity of Miss Hampton Parke's choosing. Good day, sirs."

When they had gone, Eldren wasted no time in making his own escape. His mind was not on his work regardless. He found himself distracted by the coming conversation with his betrothed and how on earth he was to tell her what the peculiar nature of their marriage was to be and the dark and hideous secrets that would become her burden to share as his wife?

Leaving his office, a simple building in the village where he kept most of his paperwork stored, he had similar buildings throughout Wales, a few in England and one in America, he walked to the livery stables and the coachman that waited there for him. He'd found that he accomplished a great deal more when he did not attempt to work from his home.

The brief ride from the small village to the east of Cysgod Lys, nestled right at the base of the mountain, brought him home far more quickly than he would have liked. He dreaded the coming discussion much like a child dreaded facing a well earned punishment. Would she flee and never return? Would she be angry or, worse still, disappointed in what her future held? Although more accurately, it would be a discussion of precisely what her future would not hold.

All too soon, he was disembarking from the carriage and entering the house. His butler stood impassively in the foyer, as always looking utterly unperturbed. "Where is Miss Hampton Parke, Tromley?"

"I believe she is in the morning room, my lord. She stepped out onto the terrace and had a bit of a fall. Dyllis is tending to her now."

"Was she hurt?" Eldren demanded.

"As Miss Hampton Parke said, only her dignity, my lord. She did receive

a bit of a nasty cut to her hand from the flag stones, however, and that is why Dyllis is with her, to bandage it properly. Otherwise, I believe she is quite well."

Eldren nodded and made his way toward the small morning room. Dyllis exited just as he neared it, bobbed a curtsy and then vanished into one of the many rabbit warren like corridors that allowed servants to move freely throughout the house. Entering the room, he found Adelaide seated on one of the settees, her hand bandaged and her brows furrowed as if she were deep in thought.

"Tromley informed me you fell. You are not harmed more seriously than you let on, I hope."

She glanced up then. Her expression was curiously hard. Intractable even. "No. I'll have a few bruises, I'm sure and a minor scrape or two. Nothing too severe. Shall we go for that walk now?"

"Are you certain you are up to it?" he asked.

Her eyes flashed in response. Anger, confusion, and something else he could not quite name were all there, vying for control. In the end, it was her sense of decorum that prevailed. "There are things you need to discuss with me that you do not wish to be overheard... and now I find that there are questions I must ask you that I also do not wish to be overheard. Whether I am up to it or not, I find that I am unwilling to wait longer for answers."

That was direct enough, he thought. If he had concerns that Adelaide would be too meek or too reserved to voice her opinion and answer him honestly, those fears were now firmly allayed. "Very well. I doubt you'll need a wrap. The air is crisp but the sun is quite warm."

She rose, clearly eager to get on with it, and preceded him out of the room. They passed Tromley as they headed out the front door and over the circular section of the drive and the overly ornate fountain at its center. It was only when they'd cleared it entirely and were walking along the lane that led toward the road that Eldren spoke, "Let us begin with your questions. I imagine in many ways they will relate to the things that I must tell you."

"Who is the woman in the tower?" Adelaide demanded.

Eldren sighed. She'd driven straight to the heart of it without even a qualm or hesitation. "She is my mother. And she is hopelessly mad."

Adelaide drew up short then. "I see. And you keep her locked away in the tower?"

He paused, turned to face her, and as much as he could, implored her to

understand. "That must seem cruel to you... she does have rooms in the family wing and when possible she remains in those familiar surroundings. But she's been more agitated of late and the tower is a more secure location for her, so I had her new nurse and the footmen who attend her move her there this morning before I left for the office. You must understand, Adelaide, that when I say she is mad... she is also given to fits of violence so extreme that she cannot easily be restrained. Only two months ago, she snapped her previous nurse's arm in two. The poor girl may never entirely regain the use of it." The sound would haunt his nightmares forever. The quick break and the wail of pain from that poor girl immediately after had tormented him endlessly. If he'd been quicker, if he'd more accurately gauged his mother's intentions, he might have spared her that.

She was silent for the longest time, studying his face with a fierce expression. To determine whether or not he was lying, Eldren realized. Given that she'd shared a residence with Muriel Hampton Parke, he supposed it was reasonable.

"I see," she said, finally speaking. "And when I asked Tromley for the basket of mending to occupy my morning... the linen nightgown with the satin ribbons that was torn to shreds and stuffed in the bottom of it was hers, wasn't it?"

He dropped his head, letting his chin rest against his chest for a moment. "It was. She had a fit the night you arrived. The screaming you heard was not the wind... it was my mother. Ranting at me because my twin brother, only ten minutes my elder, should have survived and taken the title... She despises me for living. For letting him die. It's been a decade or more since she even acknowledged that I am her son."

He was unprepared for the gentle touch of her hand on his arm, or for the compassion that he saw in her gaze when he dared lift his head to meet it.

"I am sorry for that. But you must not keep such things from me. All families have secrets, and illnesses of this sort! I would not have thought less of you for it. I understand!" Her reply was impassioned and sweetly sincere.

"My mother's madness is not an isolated occurrence, Adelaide, but rather one more in a long line... How the family has not died out entirely is something I cannot fathom. Our father was mad, as well, though in an entirely different way. In fact, it may be his cruelty and abuse that drove my mother to her current state. He enjoyed inflicting pain and degradation, gloried in it. And my elder brother, god help me, was like him. And yet,

despite that, my mother adored him above all of us... and his death was the final straw for her."

"How did he die?" she asked.

Eldren turned away from her, his gaze drifting over the desolate moor. "I killed him... I had no choice. He was in a rage, mad with it. His tempers were well known near and far as he'd often lost control and destroyed the property of others or started brawls. That night, Warren was little more than a boy... not quite sixteen and still growing. He hadn't quite yet shot up to his rather impressive height. Alder had him by the throat and would have killed him had I not intervened," he explained. "There was an inquest, of course, but ultimately, given Alder's history and the evidence of his assault on Warren, the decision was made not to have charges brought."

She was silent then, saying nothing. But she hadn't withdrawn from him. Of course, he had not told her all of it yet.

"For many of the people in my family, they live perfectly normal lives... they marry, they work, they have children. And then suddenly, as they reach their middle years, it's rather as if something inside them snaps. And I very much fear that is the fate that is in store for me," he continued. "And that is why, if we marry as agreed, that our marriage will never be a real one. It will never be consummated, and we will never have children. I will not be responsible for unleashing more madness into this already overburdened world."

Her steps faltered, then stopped entirely. She stood stock still in the center of the lane and stared at him, her expression entirely unreadable and her reaction yet a mystery to him.

"Naturally, you may refuse. You may break the engagement and tell the world whatever you wish so long as it is not the truth."

She nodded, and finally managed to utter a restrained, "I see... And are you certain that is the only reason that you have no wish to see our marriage consummated?"

"What other reason could there be?" He asked.

"I am well aware that I am not a great beauty, Lord Llewellyn. My father never despaired of it because he thought his fortune would suffice to compensate any worthwhile suitors. Naturally, Muriel was less kind in her assessment."

It was his turn to be shocked. Perhaps Adelaide was not beautiful in the traditional sense. But there was something arresting about her, something

compelling in the calmness of her demeanor in the face of even such unusual circumstances. With her delicate features and the softly rounded curves of her figure, she was certainly more than capable of drawing and holding a man's eye. "I assure you, Adelaide, that were I free to do so, if the consequences would not be so great, then things would be very different between us."

She appeared to be considering the statement carefully, weighing it, "Nothing has changed in my situation. If I do not marry you, I will be ruined. I am incapable of making the return trip to America and even if I could... my welcome would be cool at best."

"I have made certain requests of my solicitor. The marriage settlement from your father is a sum that you might find surprising. It exceeds one million dollars in American currency. Upon our marriage most of that will be returned to you. Should you decide that you wish to go to London and partake of society with the other American heiresses who have taken London by storm, I would not interfere. I can be your husband, but not your lover. If, after a suitable amount time, you choose to take one—."

"Is that what you want? For me to have a string of lovers and debase myself for the joy of lurid gossips?" she snapped.

The very idea of it enraged him, sparked a strange feeling of possessiveness inside him that he could ill afford to indulge. He desired her. The more time he spent in her company the more apparent it became to him that despite her tender age, Adelaide was a force to be reckoned with. "It is the furthest thing from what I *want*, I assure you. It seems wrong, however, to damn us both to a celibate life when the weakness of blood is entirely my own."

"I would like to be alone," she said. "I cannot think clearly now and there is much to consider. I never thought that I would marry at all, honestly. Muriel certainly never tired of telling me that I'd be lucky enough to land a rat catcher! But I certainly never imagined that I would be married to a man who encouraged me to have other lovers when he will not even share my bed."

They both recognized that it was not a request. Eldren nodded and then turned away, heading back for the house and leaving her behind to consider all that he'd just imparted to her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ADELAIDE FELT as if she couldn't fully draw breath. If she'd had the strength she would have stripped off her gown and loosened her corset right there. But it wasn't the fault of the garment. Her lungs had tightened painfully with each revelation that he'd made. No real marriage. No children.

The rest of her life would be devoid of love, of intimacy, or anything resembling passion. All those secret dreams and the whispers between herself and her girlhood friends that had resulted in peals of giggles would remain unfulfilled. The fear she'd held for so long, that when she did have her debut and did enter society to find a husband, no one would want her—all of that had simply been an outcropping of the underlying fear of being alone. If she married him, alone was all that she would ever be. Somehow, it seemed worse to be lonely with someone.

Finally, a shuddering breath escaped her. It hadn't been that she couldn't inhale at all, but rather that she'd been so stunned she'd been unable to expel the air from her body. The sudden rush of it left her weak kneed and she sank forward, propping herself up against the small stone fence that bordered the moor. It stung her injured palm and picked at the bandage that Dyllis had applied there.

Looking across the expanse of it, the air of desolation reflected her mood far too accurately. An inexplicable anger filled her. Defiantly, Adelaide rose to her feet again and climbed over that fence, placing her feet firmly on the spongy earth of the forbidden moor.

"Where are you now?" she said aloud. "Where are your insidious whispers and your fearsomeness, now?"

There was no answer, of course. She had not expected there to be. The moor was utterly silent, the brightness of the day mocking her for ever having feared it. Not to be daunted or cowed, Adelaide struck out across the wide expanse of rocky and uneven ground, ignoring the tall grass that tugged at her skirt and the earth that seemed to suck at her booted feet until every step required concerted effort.

It was a challenge to herself and it was blatant defiance of what everyone else seemed to consider normal. She'd heard the servants whispering when they hadn't thought she was near, about her walking across the moor at night, alone and in the dark. She'd heard other things too. The whispers of hauntings, of ghosts and demons, of curses that dogged the Llewellyn family from a time immemorial. But she was not in the mood to concern herself with the Llewellyn family. She was disgusted with the lot of them and Eldren in particular—disgusted, hurt, bewildered and above all, she recognized, disappointed.

She hadn't gotten very far before her bravado began to falter. Because the air itself seemed to change. It grew thicker about her, pressing in on her just as the sea had in the darkness the night the Mohegan had sank. A heavy cloud passed over head, covering that desolate patch of earth with shadow and her along with it. In that prelude to darkness, something stirred.

"I'm not afraid," she whispered. But the deeper she went onto the moor, the more distant the drive and the house became, the less that was true. It wasn't what she heard or saw. It was simply what she felt. There was a charge to the very earth beneath her feet, it seemed, like standing on the platform as the train grew near and feeling the energy and vibration of it coming up through her toes. Her steps halted and she simply stood there for the longest time.

Slowly, it began. A soft hum at first, but it grew louder. For the first time since hearing it, there was an actual voice in it. It wasn't simply the roar of a crowd. Although that was certainly present, there was another voice in the midst of it, distinct and discernible. Closer, she thought, and stronger. A shiver wracked her body.

Regardless of how close it sounded, and how crisp each syllable seemed, as if spoken directly next to her ear, it was gibberish to her. No, she realized. It was Welsh. A language she did not understand. Listening, trying to memorize those sounds and make sense of what strange things were being imparted to her, Adelaide couldn't move. She felt frozen to the spot,

compelled perhaps. But those syllables were nonsensical to her ears, sounds with no context or meaning. And yet they held some sort of strange sway over her, as if she were enthralled like the cobras of India that she'd seen at an exhibition.

The clouds overhead darkened, drawing into a swirling blackened mass. The first rain drop struck her cheek and it was as like being roused from sleep. The pall that had been cast over her was broken, and abruptly, Adelaide turned and fled back toward the safety of the lane. She scrambled over the low stone fence, tearing her stockings and dislodging several of the pins from her hair. But despite looking an utter mess, as soon as her feet were planted firmly on the other side of that rock wall, she felt instantly more at ease. Warily, she dared a single glance over her shoulder and what she saw left her speechless.

Fog shrouded the moor, mist swirling over the ground where before there had been none. It eddied and moved almost as if being directed by unseen hands. It grew thicker and denser, coalescing into a single slender line that inched forward, ever closer to her. It almost seemed as if it was in pursuit.

Her sense of safety abruptly shattered, Adelaide did the only sensible thing she could. She ran. Her legs pumped and her side hitched as she charged up the lane as fast as she could. Only when she was nearer to the house and in sight of others did she slow, but it was a difficult thing for her. Because she still felt *hunted*. And foolish, she thought. Very, very foolish. She'd dared test it and clearly it, *whatever it was*, had won.

The door opened and Tromley looked at her askance. "Are you quite all right, miss?"

"I'm fine. I was running to beat the rain," she lied. "I think I'm going to have a lie down in my room before dinner, Tromley. But I have some letters I need to write, as well, and sadly my writing box was destroyed."

"There are a few lying about the place, miss. I'll have one fetched for you and sent up by Dyllis."

"Thank you, Tromley."



IN THE LIBRARY, Eldren was seated at his desk staring into the swirling amber liquid of a brandy snifter and contemplating how poorly it had all gone. Of

course, he could not blame her. She had every right to refuse him, to toss his pathetic offer of marriage back into his face. If she did refuse him, he would have to assist her. She would need a husband, whether it was him or not, in order to have any access to the funds left for her by her father.

Warren entered the room then, bleary eyed and clearly suffering. His skin had taken on a sallow cast and as he seated himself in the chair opposite, his hands trembled. The servants had been instructed to give him access to only small amounts of liquor during the day, enough to keep the worst of the sickness at bay and wean him slowly from the poison that Frances had been letting him guzzle.

"I hate you," Warren said.

"Hate me as you will... but I'm your brother and I refuse to stand by while you drown yourself in a bottle of brandy, or whiskey, or scotch, or rum, or gin," Eldren said. "And you needn't search because it's all under lock, key and guard."

"I see you're not depriving yourself of it," Warren said accusingly.

"I am not dependent on it as you are. You have no control of yourself when you are in the throes of drink, Warren. We both know that," Eldren replied. "But it was not my intent to be cruel and torment you with it. Had I known you would enter here, I would not have partaken."

Warren didn't reply, but he did look away.

Eldren drained the glass and placed it out of sight. Changing the subject, he asked, "Have you seen mother today?"

"No. I didn't wish to upset her further."

"Not a bad plan. I won't let Frances come back. Mother will be fine for months but as soon as Frances enters the house she starts raving."

"She wants me dead," Warren said.

"Mother?" Eldren asked. She certainly wanted him dead, or more precisely, she wanted him to have never been born.

"No. Frances wants me dead... I'd given it up six months ago. I went over a month without touching the stuff. And then she poured a glass of brandy, sat it in front of me, and told me what a bore I'd become without it," Warren admitted. "I don't know why I ever married her."

"Because she is wealthy and beautiful... because for a time she made an effort to hide the vile monster that lurks beneath her pretty mask," Eldren answered. He was not without sympathy for his brother, but he was only too well aware that sympathy would only nurture Warren's weaknesses.

Warren said nothing to that, just leaned back in his chair and pinched the bridge of his nose as if to ward off a headache. "And your bride? Your American heiress... is she pretty?"

"Yes, she's pretty. But I have doubts as to whether or not she'll be my bride. I've just told her that we will not have children. That I will not have children," Eldren confessed, finding it unaccountably strange to be having a rational conversation with his brother again.

"Are you certain that's the course that you wish to set for yourself and for her? There have been plenty of Llewellyn's who managed to avoid the curse altogether."

"Not those who lived here in this house... all of those who live here, next to that bloody moor, feel the effects of it."

"Then don't live here. There's no law that says you have to remain at the family seat. Build some monstrous manor house in Cardiff or Swansea. Go to London for all that. Get your American and take London society by storm."

Eldren laughed at that. "I don't think my American is very happy with me at the moment... and even if she were, I don't believe society holds much interest for her. But London might. Museums, shops, parks. I think that part of it she would enjoy. Perhaps if she does consent to marry me after all of this I will take her there as a peace offering of sorts... But we both know the truth of it, Warren. This house will always bring us back, whether we wish it or not. It'll never tolerate us being gone for too long."

"This house is cursed... but not by some ancient legend, or by whatever ghastly things inhabit that moor. This house is cursed by the pain we've all endured in it," Warren continued. "Father wasn't mad. He was just a bastard. He was cruel for the sake of it and for his own enjoyment and it was that cruelty that has made mother what she is today. If you stay here, you're choosing to surround yourself with that, to mire yourself in it the same way I mired myself in drink to escape the misery of being married to Frances."

"I can't just leave mother here," he protested.

"I don't think you should," Warren replied evenly. "She belongs in an asylum. Not one of those hellish ones where you pay a few pence to look at the lunatics! But a decent one with real doctors and real care. She might improve. That fellow in Vienna might be able to do something with her."

"This is more than any nervous condition, Warren, and I doubt even Dr. Freud is up to dealing with her. But I have made inquires about any clinics that might take her, there is one that I am considering... I agree that being far

from this place might be better for her. Or it may well kill her. I can't honestly say she wouldn't be better off if it did."

It was a terrible thing to have uttered aloud, more terrible still that they were both in agreement on it. But her life was no life at present. Days on end of just blank stares and then sudden fits of anger and profound rage that had her shrieking down the rafters and assaulting the servants.

Warren nodded and rose to his feet. "I know you're doing what's best for me. But as I could knock you in the head just to get my hands on that glass you were nursing so that I might attempt to find the last vestiges of brandy it held, I'm going back to my room. I don't expect to emerge again until the worst of it has past. Make my apologies to your betrothed."

"You can make them yourself on Saturday, if the wedding goes on as planned. You are to be one of our witnesses."

Warren said nothing, just nodded in acknowledgement and shuffled from the room.

Watching him go, Eldren was more consumed with hatred for Frances than ever before. A half dozen times, at the very least, Warren had come close to giving up drink. He'd gone without a drop of it for almost six months once and then Frances had tormented him with it, wafting it beneath his nose, pouring a glass of it and placing it before him and assuring him that just a little wouldn't hurt. In short, she'd done everything she could to keep him a drunkard.

It was his opinion that Frances was doing her damnedest to make herself a very young widow. For all he knew, she might have lovers already. But then again Frances and a passionate nature were not words one would typically associate with one another. Petty, spiteful, mean, colder than the Atlantic in January—those were descriptors that were more suited to her and far more frequently in use.

Cursing her, he continued his rumination and wondered what sort of decision Adelaide might reach.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ADELAIDE HAD COVERED several sheets of paper with scratches and scribbles. She had tried to recall the words she'd heard whispered to her on the moor as clearly as possible. Even then, she knew that the random syllables she'd managed to jot down were garbled and wrong. But if she could get close enough that perhaps Dyllis might recognize the words and translate them for her.

"Cartraffy drewg o fowen," she read aloud. It made no sense to her. The Welsh language was indecipherable to her.

The dressing gong sounded then and Dyllis arrived within seconds of it. If the maid thought her disheveled appearance odd, she said nothing of it. Instead, she simply grabbed up the hairbrush from the dressing table and began retrieving the regiment of pins lost in the tangled mess of it.

"Dyllis. I heard something today but it was in Welsh. Can you tell me what it means?"

"I might be able to, miss," the maid said. "What did you hear?"

Adelaide repeated the phrase as she'd written it.

Dyllis frowned for a moment as she began twisting Adelaide's long hair back up into the loose knot that she preferred. "Do you mean *cartrefi drwg o fewn*?"

"Yes!" Adelaide said, seizing upon it. "That is what I heard. What does it mean?"

"Were you near the village, miss? Were folks talking about Cysgod Lys and the earl? Ungrateful creatures they are! If it weren't for him and the work he's given to us all, we'd all be beggars by now!"

"It wasn't... I didn't hear it in the village, Dyllis," Adelaide said, seeing how distressed the girl was at the notion that others were speaking ill of her employer. "But I don't wish to tell you where I did hear it. You'll think... that I'm overly imaginative," she finished lamely, not wanting to use the word 'mad' given her current situation.

"It means evil dwells here... or evil dwells within. But who would say such a thing?"

Not a who. A what. Adelaide shivered as that thought occurred to her. And yet, though it made no sense at all, she could not shake the belief that her assessment was entirely accurate. Whatever contacted her on that moor, her first night and again that day, it wasn't human. It might never have been human.

"Tell me about the moor, Dyllis. What really happens there?"

Dyllis' eyes widened and she looked to be on the verge of tears. "No, miss. I won't do it. And if you have me sacked or sent back to the kitchen, I don't care. It's forbidden to talk of that place and I won't be gossiping about it and drawing its evil to me and mine! I won't do it!"

"You don't have to, Dyllis," Adelaide offered. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. And you won't be sacked or sent back to the kitchens. I'm terribly sorry! Really, I am."

The girl sniffed, but still seemed impossibly troubled as she finished pinning Adelaide's hair back into place. When Dyllis had finished with her hair, Adelaide tried to smooth things over with the maid as best she could. "Thank you again, Dyllis. You've done wonders with my hair. I simply don't know how I've ever managed without you."

"Yes, miss, Thank you, miss," Dyllis said.

As Adelaide dressed in a dinner gown of black velvet, Dyllis remained quiet. She would respond to any statements or questions with the barest minimum of words possible without being rude, but nothing more than that. Finally, Adelaide gave up. She opened her jewel box and selected a necklace of simple jet beads which she then fastened at her throat and matching ear bobs. They were inexpensive pieces, purchased when she'd obtained all of her mourning clothes. Muriel would have received the bill by then, but she had not refused to pay it. She'd taken care of the hotel, as well. If it came to it, Adelaide thought, she could go back to New York. Perhaps a doctor would give her enough laudanum to strike her dumb for the duration of the journey and she could beg mercy at her stepmother's door.

Even thinking it made her shudder. As terrified as she found herself at moments, as much as that little doubtful voice at the back of her mind suggested she might actually be going mad, that was preferable than taking Muriel's charity. A loveless and chaste marriage in a house full of secrets and dark things she could not name, or bowing and scraping to Muriel while she was tossed into the path of every aging man with a title or a fortune—at least the former would be her choice and not someone else's.

Somehow, in the midst of Dyllis' sullen and wounded silence, she'd made her decision. She would marry Eldren Llewellyn, Earl of Montkeith. But before she did, he would tell her the truth about the darkness that surrounded Cysgod Lys and why others demanded and guarded its secrets so fiercely.

Determined, Adelaide draped a simple black shawl over her shoulders and exited her room with a softly uttered farewell to Dyllis. As she stepped into the hall, she bumped into a gentleman. Immediately, she knew it was not Eldren. There was something about this gentleman that was very different. He was softer, less certain in his stride. There was something about him that seemed frail, she thought, even though he towered over her.

"Forgive me. I was returning to my room and... what are you doing in my brother's chamber?" the man asked, clearly realizing then which room she'd come from.

"You must be Warren then," Adelaide said. "I'm afraid there was some confusion the night of my arrival and an inappropriate room had been prepared for me. Your brother was kind enough to put me in his chamber instead as I was quite—well, it had been a difficult journey."

His eyes sparkled then and a smile tugged at his lips. There was a similarity between himself and his brother, but it was faint. It had less to do with their actual features, she supposed, than with the expressions they created to convey their feelings.

"Yes, I've heard. All the servants are abuzz with it. No one crosses the moor," he said. "No one. Half of them think you're a saint and the bravest person in Christendom."

"And the other half?"

"Well, sainthood has not been mentioned from that quarter," he teased. "But I must apologize on behalf of my wife, Mrs. Frances Llewellyn. It appears that the difficulties you faced in arriving here were orchestrated by her. I am terribly sorry for that."

"Is she sorry, do you think?" Adelaide asked.

"Not in the least," he replied honestly.

Adelaide liked him. He didn't have the same presence as his brother, the intensity and spark that Eldren possessed was not as evident in the man before her. She wondered if that was something his wife ought to apologize for as well. "Are you joining us for dinner tonight, Mr. Llewellyn?"

"Please call me Warren. And it had not been my intent to do so, but now I find myself reconsidering. If you ask me once more, I shall surely have to say yes. Such delightful company is something I could never deny."

"Mr. Llewellyn, I do believe you are flirting with me," she said, both flattered and concerned by it.

"Harmlessly, I assure you. It's a novel thing for me to be in the company of a woman who doesn't detest the very ground beneath my feet. And I'm quite well aware that my brother has made you an offer... of course, it remains to be seen if you will accept it. Will you, Miss Hampton Parke?"

Adelaide graced him with an arch look. "I believe that is a conversation I should have with your brother first, Warren. And since we are apparently quite familiar with one another, you must call me Adelaide."

"May I escort you down to dinner, Adelaide?"

Adelaide accepted his proffered arm. He was pleasant to speak with and seemed to be far more forthcoming with information than anyone else she had encountered since her arrival. It was an opportunity not to be missed. "I will accept your offer of escort, Warren, if you will answer my questions."

"And what questions are those?"

Adelaide allowed him to steer her toward the stairs. "Tell me about the moor. About the whispers."

He paused, his steps suddenly hesitant as he looked at her with concern. "You've heard them?"

She sighed in relief, letting a breath escape her that she hadn't even realized she held. A part of her had feared it was all simply her own wild imaginings. "Yes. The first night when I was making my way here... and then again this afternoon. Once on the terrace, but very faint, and then after I spoke with your brother, I climbed the fence and walked deeper into the moor and—."

"And what, Adelaide?" He asked with concern.

"I suppose I issued a challenge," she replied.

His affable good nature and any hint of weakness in him disappeared immediately. "We must talk to Eldren... and you must leave here at once!"

All traces of his charming insouciance had vanished. In its stead, she saw real fear. "What is it, Warren?"

"A curse," he answered. "The Llewellyn's have been cursed for ages. But for any who can hear it, the end results are always worse!"

"But I am not a Llewellyn. Not yet."

"Are you certain? Have you traced your family tree back through the ages? Perhaps there is some distant connection of which you are unaware! That was the case with our mother... she was some long removed cousin to our father by several generations. Yet the moment she stepped foot on this land, it called to her," he insisted. "Between those damnable whispers and father it's no wonder she went mad!"

"How can a curse, if such a thing even exists, manifest itself in such a way?" Adelaide couldn't quite fathom it.

"Eldren knows the history of it. He will be resistant and will not want to tell you, but you must insist," Warren said. "I will not join you for dinner after all. He might be more inclined to speak freely if it is only the two of you. Corner him in the library before dinner and make him tell you, Adelaide. It's too dangerous for you to remain in ignorance."

With those cryptic words echoing behind him, Warren turned and vanished down the hall, leaving her at the top of the stairs to simply stare after his departing figure in confusion. Befuddled and feeling entirely out of her depth, Adelaide placed one hand on the banister and slowly descended to the main floor of the house. Tromley waiting for her to kindly point her in the direction of the dining room. She was not so lost in the house that she still needed direction to every room, but it was a generous gesture and she smiled in gratitude. "Is Lord Llewellyn still in his study, Tromley?"

"I believe so, miss. Shall I ask him to join you in the drawing room?"

"No, I'll see him where he is if you could direct me."

"This way, miss," Tromley said and led her past the drawing room and the entrance to the dining room and down a narrow hall that branched off the foyer. Recalling the exterior of the house, she knew that this was one of the newer parts of the house they were entering, a wing added on during the Tudor era.

Tromley knocked on the door, waited to be bade enter, and then announced her presence as if she were a guest at a ball. Afterward, he departed and left her alone in the dark and very masculine enclave of her husband to be.

"Good evening, Adelaide. You wished to speak with me privately, I take it?" he asked.

Electing to simply dive headlong into the matter, Adelaide asked the very question that had plagued her since her walk that afternoon. "What does *cartrefi drwg o fewn* mean?"

His face paled. "Where did you hear that? What have the servants been saying?"

"I didn't hear it from the servants!"

"Well I certainly didn't say it. There's no way you could have heard—Who said that to you, Adelaide?" he demanded, his voice tight and angry.

"I don't think it's a who at all. It's a what... It was the moor. It whispered to me on the first night, and again today. What does it mean, Eldren?" she asked again and this time, her own voice was rising. Not with anger, but with fear.

CHAPTER NINE

ELDREN HAD NOT EXPECTED THAT. Most people were unnerved by the moor, they felt the power of that land and the ancient people who had occupied it. They were unnerved by the house itself and the pall that had been cast over it by the centuries long misery suffered by its inhabitants. But very few people ever reported hearing the whispered words. He had when he was younger. Warren had heard them as well to a smaller degree but had managed to dull the torment with drink. But for his elder brother and his sisters who had all passed, they had not been whispers at all. For them, that voice had shouted and railed, growing louder each day until it drove them as mad as their parents had been.

"I should not have brought you here. I should pack you up and send you straight back to New York," he said. But he knew even that wouldn't be far enough. There was no corner of the earth where it would not follow her, where it would not invade her dreams and torment her in any quiet moment. It would drive her mad, mad to the point where she might even end her own life. She would certainly not be the first Llewellyn bride to do so.

"What is it, Eldren? Can you please not be cryptic and vague now and answer the question!" she implored.

"It's the Llewellyn curse," he replied. "It's followed this family for centuries. One unscrupulous man has wrought centuries worth of misfortune on his descendants."

It was a simple statement, but it was not one she would simply accept. He had the feeling that his bride to be, if in fact she was that, would want every last detail. When she moved to the chair that faced his desk and seated herself

there, folding her hands primly in her lap and staring up at him expectantly, he knew that had been an accurate prediction.

With weariness and resignation, he moved to the bookshelf and retrieved a volume penned by one of his ancestors sometime in the seventeenth century. He placed it before her. "You may read that later if you wish. For now, I'll give you the condensed version of our dark history... Ioan Llewellyn was a soldier of fortune, a mercenary. He fought in any war where he'd be paid the most. He came here to slaughter a small village, but he was taken with the land and with the castle that used to stand on this very spot, its stones now incorporated into the structure that is Cysgod Lys. So he laid siege to the castle first, and when he'd claimed it for his own, he ordered a celebration on that blasted moor, at midsummer's eve. And then he killed them... all of them. He gathered every man, woman and child into the center and had his knights hold them there while he systematically and brutally murdered them. Except for one woman... Igrida. He took her to be his wife, unwillingly one can only presume."

"He killed them all? Her family and then forced her to be his wife?"

Eldren heard the horror in her voice as she recoiled from that. "If that were all he'd done, it would be horrible enough. But there is infinitely more I'm afraid. He was a cruel man, vicious and brutal. He beat her. He raped her. He locked her away and he tormented her in any way he could. And when she gave birth to daughters, he murdered them. He refused to have a girl child because they would require dowries from him. He wanted only sons to inherit his lands and fill his ranks... In short, he drove her mad. The last child she bore was a son and he looked so much like her despised husband, that in her madness, Igrida cursed him and all who would come after him. She cursed him that the voices of the dead, slaughtered by his father, would torment him until he took his own life as would any of his descendants."

She said nothing for a moment. But her hand laid atop the cover of that book, the foul history of all his ancestors, as if it were something feral that might turn and bite her. Her face had paled dramatically and he could see the fear in her eyes. Finally, she asked, "Did he? Did he take his own life?"

"Yes. He did. Eventually, we all do. And that is why we can never have a real marriage, Adelaide, or children. This curse will end with me."

"But it won't," she said. "There are other descendants, there are those who have survived."

It was true enough. The previous generations of the Llewellyn men had

been rather fond of spreading their seed far and wide, as it were. "I imagine that Ioan and his son had many illegitimate children. He had warred and raped his way across the entirety of the British Isles and Alwen, the son Igrida bore him, did much the same. That didn't stop with Igrida's death. When the connection is distant, as it must be in you, it typically only becomes triggered, as it were, by contact with this land. By bringing you here, I have sealed your fate. As to the other matter, the curse cannot be broken simply because I do not have children... but I cannot—I *will* not—be the man who places that burden on an innocent child."

"I see. And because I hear it, because I hear *them*, there must be some distant family connection? That's the only way?"

"Perhaps. I cannot say that definitively. With my twin, with Alden, before his passing—".

"Passing?"

He would not spare her any of the gory details. "Before he walked to the center of that moor and put a pistol in his mouth—."

"You said you killed your brother," she interrupted.

"And I did. Because I stood there, perfectly capable of stopping him, or preventing him from squeezing that trigger and I did nothing, Adelaide. After beating him to a pulp, I stood idle and watched him commit suicide."

She was silent then. Entirely so, not even the sound of breathing escaping her. Eldren continued, "He had a woman come here who claimed to be sensitive to spirits and other such things. She heard them. Have you ever had any experience with such things? Do you see ghosts and spirits, Adelaide?"

"No. I do not. At least I never have before. Is that really all it is? The whispering? It's a nuisance at best. How does that drive you mad enough to take your own life?"

"The whispers are the beginning. The more you hear them, the stronger they become. Eventually, it progresses to the point that it effects your other senses, as well. Alden began to see them, shadows flitting across the moor... and then here in the house."

She swallowed convulsively. "It was a progression then? One thing and then the other? Whispers to voices to shadows?"

"Yes," Eldren agreed. There was something off in her tone. She had grown terribly pale and he could see her hands folded over that book, clutched so tightly together her knuckles were white. "What is it that you've seen or heard here, Adelaide?"

"I've seen things, Eldren. Seen and heard them since coming here, and it's only been a matter of days. I thought I was going mad!"

"What is that you saw?" he demanded, his tone sharp with concern.

"Last night... I saw a dark figure in the corner of your room. But at first I convinced myself it was only a shadow, except it moved... it shifted and undulated and I could no longer lie to myself. I tried to flee, and when I looked back it was gone. Or so I thought. As I stood there, it had somehow reappeared outside your room and was seeping beneath the door and twining itself about my ankles like a snake. I ran back to the bed and stayed awake almost till dawn. I was terrified to try and sleep afterward."

"I've never experienced it to that degree," he said. "I've seen fleeting shadows, but I've learned to simply ignore them."

"Is it real? Or does this house just manage to create some sort of hysteria in all of its inhabitants?" she demanded.

"I don't know if they are real or if they are a product of his madness. What I do know, is that we will be leaving for London immediately after we have wed. And we will be placing my mother in an asylum there... I cannot keep her in this house any longer. If she were to get out of her rooms, Adelaide, I very much fear that she would do you harm."

"I haven't yet said that I will marry you," she replied.

"There is something you need to know about this place, Adelaide... once you've encountered it, or perhaps it would be better to say once it has encountered you, it will not leave you be. It will haunt you forever," he said. "It is cruel and unforgiving."

"Then perhaps it is a good thing that I had already reached a decision... I will marry you, Eldren. And for now, I will abide by your terms."

His head came up and he met her challenging gaze. "For now?"

"Yes," she said. "I've decided something very important today. I will not live in fear—not of the sea, not of that moor, and not of whatever fate you feel is in store for you. I plan to face all of those fears and I mean to conquer them."

He stared at her, at the implacable resolve he could see blazing in her eyes and the fierce determination that was so apparent in the stubborn tilt of her chin. In that moment, he found her remarkable, he found her entrancing, and above all, he found her impossibly tempting. He wanted to believe that they could somehow conquer the ancient curse that plagued his family, to believe that they might have a future together as man and wife in the

conventional sense. But hope was a scarce commodity at Cysgod Lys.

"I am afraid you will be disappointed," he replied.

"Would I be less disappointed if I didn't even attempt to alter my fate? I could have stayed below decks on the Mohegan and drowned. I could have pried my cold, half frozen fingers from the rigging during that long night in the dark and frigid water and simply let it take me," she insisted in an impassioned tone, "But I didn't. Because I wanted to live. And I still want that! Not some half life where I constantly look over my shoulder or where I wait for the other shoe to drop. Isn't that what you want?"

He couldn't answer that. In the entirety of his life, he'd never thought about what he wanted in regard to marriage or family or even love. He'd only thought of all the ways it inevitably went wrong for someone of his accursed blood. "I am afraid to want, Adelaide. You must be cautious. There is evil in this house, in it and surrounding it... It has taken firm hold of my mother. I've accepted that, as horrible as it is. I could not bear it if it took you as well."

"Then help me," she implored. "Help me find a way to change this?"

A sigh escaped him, of resignation and reluctant hope. "I will do what I can."

"We go to London after the ceremony on Saturday?" She asked.

"Yes. We will be there for some time I think, getting mother settled in whatever new facility I can arrange for her and I have some business to attend to. Why?"

"Because there is an old friend of my father's there... Lord Mortimer. He's a kindly man, but a bit otherworldly. He believes in all manner of mysticism and magic. But I cannot imagine that if we wished to discover more about this curse that casts such a long pall over the Llewellyn family that there would be any better place to start."

He'd heard of Lord Mortimer. The man routinely entertained and held wild seances with the leading mystics of the day. "Then I suggest you catch up on your reading," he said, tapping his fingers on the book. "There are details that I haven't shared, simply because they are too gruesome to be spoken aloud. But they are all recorded there."

Adelaide shuddered slightly and he wished to comfort her, but a part of him was grateful for her fear. Fear would create caution and it might well be caution that would save her from all of this, and perhaps, ultimately, one day from him.

"Very well," she said. "Should we go in to dinner? It's no doubt growing cold and sending your cook into quite a furor."

"Yes," he agreed. "And for now, let us agree not to discuss any of this where we might be overheard. The servants are already superstitious and it has taken ages to amass a staff of stern enough constitutions not to be put off by this house and its strange inhabitants."

She nodded her agreement. Eldren walked toward her and offered her his arm. When she placed her hand on his forearm, that touch, tentative as it was, reminded him of how much was at stake. The last thing he wanted to do was to harm her, to be overtaken by the violent urges that seemed to plague all the men of his family. But there was a spark of possessiveness inside him when she touched him, an insidious whisper in the farthest corners of his mind. Mine, it said. Mine.

CHAPTER TEN

DINNER HAD BEEN AN UNEVENTFUL MEAL. They'd eaten and talked of mundane things. In earshot of a handful of servants, it had seemed wise. With the meal done, he was seeing Adelaide to her chamber for the night. At the door, she stopped and looked back at him expectantly.

"I realize it's unorthodox," she said, "And in light of the nature of our coming relationship, perhaps it is unwise, but—."

She'd broken off abruptly. But Eldren knew there was a question buried in Adelaide's rambling. "What is it?"

"Will you stay in the room with me tonight? I spoke courageously earlier, with far more bravado then. Certainly more than I feel now at the prospect of facing this alone. It was easy to be brave then... If that dark shadowy thing returns tonight, I am not certain what I will do."

He should say no. He knew it instantly. Their best hope of maintaining the kind of chaste relationship that was required would be to keep his distance. But in that moment, with fear lurking in her dark gaze and her lower lip trembling like a child's, how could he say no?

"Of course, I will. Go in and change. Once you've done so, I'll return," he said.

"You promise? You won't just say that and not come back?"

Had so few people in her life kept their word to her? "I promise, Adelaide. I won't leave you alone to face the darkness... Change into your nightclothes and I will be back shortly," Eldren promised.

When she'd turned to go, disappearing into the recesses of his bed chamber, Eldren made his way to the other end of the corridor. In his own

borrowed chamber, he stripped off his dinner jacket and tie. But he kept his trousers and his shirt on. There was no need to tempt fate anymore than necessary.

He was thinking of her in her chamber, removing the pins from her hair, unlacing all the many layers of clothing that women wore. It was dangerous and foolhardy. And yet he was helpless to stop those images from flitting through his mind. He wanted her. Whether it was because she was to be his bride and he was having some sort of typically male response because he suddenly possessed the right to do so or if it was just something in her own innocent allure, he could not say. Regardless, he would keep his urges in check. Anything less would dishonor them both.

After a suitable amount of time, he left his temporary bed chamber and paused, knocking at the door to his own suite of rooms. It opened with a soft click. She stood there in the dim light, her hair in a long thick plait that draped over her shoulder and hung nearly to her waist. She wore a nightgown with a high neck, the ruffle heavily embroidered with a design he couldn't quite make out. The brocade dressing gown donned atop it was belted at her waist, highlighting her natural figure rather than the corseted one that utterly befuddled him. Why any woman would wish to alter what was already a perfect form to such degree left him puzzled.

"Come in," she said softly.

Eldren entered the room as she stepped back, then followed her through the small seating area and into the bedchamber proper. He seated himself in the chair before the fireplace, propped his feet on the chair opposite and savored the warmth of the blaze as Adelaide slipped into the bed. His bed.

"Where did you see it?" he asked

She pointed to the corner closest to him, the juncture of the wall that held the large windows and the one with the fireplace. Enough light seeped into from either of those sources that if any unnatural darkness were to appear there, it would be immediately noticeable.

"Sleep, Adelaide. I'll watch over you."

"Who will watch over you?" she asked.

"It won't hurt me. It never has," he said.

"Why is that?"

"Because it is biding its time... It will only come for me when every person or thing that I hold dear in the world is gone from it. That's what it always does to the men who bear the title of Earl of Montkeith." "But I am not dear to you."

"We are strangers still... but I have made a promise to you and you to me. That is near enough," Eldren said. "Go to sleep."

She said nothing further, but turned on her side, facing away from him. It gave him the opportunity to stare at her at length, to imagine what it might have been like had he been the sort of man who could love her, who was free to love her. But that was a kind of happiness neither of them would ever know.

Eldren turned his face away abruptly, staring into the corner where the shadows had appeared to her the night before. He kept his gaze trained upon it, almost daring them to return.



In the darkened tower of Cysgod Lys, Sylvia Llewellyn rocked. Squatting in the corner of her room with her arms locked around her knees, she rocked to and fro. Her still dark hair was wild about her, tangled and tousled. At one point, those lustrous brown locks had been her greatest vanity. Unkempt and disheveled, vanity had been stripped from her entirely.

Mrs. Alberson, the nurse, was in the outer chamber of the room and based on her snores, sound asleep. Sylvia rocked more vigorously. It was always worse when the nurse slept.

Even as that fairly rational thought entered her mind, the dark shadows on the wall began to sway. They peeled themselves away from the faded damask covering the wall and twisted together into a large hulking form. It loomed over her, surrounded her.

Clasping her hands over her ears, Sylvia began to scream. She screamed long and loud, the sounds bizarre and animalistic. It was the only way to drown out the insidious whispering.

Kill them. Kill them all. Kill them and you'll be free.

"No! No! No! No!"

She shouted the word over and over, the litany of it deafening in the confines of that room.

Kill her. Kill the girl. Watch him suffer for all that he's done.

"Leave me be!" Sylvia begged.

You know what you must do. He is the eldest son. The first born. He

cannot be suffered to live.

"He isn't! He isn't! Alden is gone. My precious Alden is gone!" Sylvia wailed.

Alden was never the first born. He was never the true heir. Lies. Lies. Lies. You suffer now because you sought to deny me!

"I never denied you. I never denied you," Sylvia chanted. Over and over, she repeated that phrase.

Eldren was the first born, even if not born to you! And yet you passed your whelp off as the heir. But you've paid. Haven't you, Sylvia? Now they are all gone but one... one and your husband's bastard. Deny him all you wish, pretend he isn't even here, but you know what you did. To his mother. To him. You know what you did! What your husband did!

The whispers had grown louder, swelling into an angry hiss. Outside, the wind whipped at the trees nearest the house. But the waves didn't roar. That wind was restricted to the unholy grounds of Cysgod Lys.

The ancient latch on the windows gave and they blew inward, the glass shattering.

Syliva's gaze latched onto those silvery shards on the floor. Rising to her feet, she scurried across the room and grabbed one of the larger pieces. When she heard the key turning in the lock, she used the glass to cut the backing of the curtains and hid it inside. Her hands were bloody, but she didn't care.

Mrs. Alberson entered, staring in horror at the disarray.

"Back away from that nasty business now, your ladyship," the nurse instructed, "Or you'll hurt yourself. We wouldn't want that now, would we?" The woman's distress was obvious, but so was her fear.

Sylvia slowly stepped away from the damaged windows, retreating into the far corner. She ignored the slivers of glass that penetrated the soles of her feet, ignored the painful cuts on her hands. Oblivious to the blood that seeped from them, she covered her face and shrieked in anger and rage. The girl would die, and Eldren with her. Her husband's bastard son passed off as her own would die. It wasn't what the shadows had asked of her. That was entirely for herself, for vengeance and for justice. It was a reckoning for the role he had played in the death of her beloved son, his 'twin', Alden.

"I'll do it. I'll do it!" Sylvia screamed.

The wind stopped howling. The night grew calm and still. Mrs. Alberson glanced over at her, a shudder coursing through the older woman.

"You'll do what, my lady?" Mrs. Alberson asked, her terror obvious in

her shrill tone and her cautious movements.

They all feared her. They feared her madness, the rage that was fueled by the dark entities that ruled within the walls of her home, of her prison. They tormented her, but for all the pain they visited upon her, they gave her strength in return. Strength to snap a girl's arm, strength to wrest herself from the firm grip of several strong footmen. They thought she was weakening, that the drugs they injected into her body time and again were causing her to grow more and more frail. She'd heard Mrs. Alberson warning Eldren, her husband's bastard, a whelp she'd been forced to call her own son, that the drugs were taking a toll on her. But that was precisely what she wanted them to believe. It would make them careless over time. And all she needed was one chance. She'd take the weapon that had been provided and she would slit the girl's throat right there in her bed for Eldren to find.

"What will you do?" the nurse demanded again.

Syliva said nothing. She retreated into silence, just as the darkness of Cysgod Lys had.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ADELAIDE TOSSED and turned in the bed, trapped in the throes of a nightmare that was terribly familiar to her. She'd had it in some variation or other almost nightly since their ship had gone down and taken so many innocent lives with it. And yet it had altered since her arrival at Cysgod Lys, each incarnation becoming infused with the unsettling events of her arrival and the secrets that surrounded the house and its inhabitants.

She struggled to wake, but the nightmare held her fast in its grip. So fast that she could feel the rushing water that surrounded her, climbing up her legs. It was so bitterly cold that it stung her skin as it drenched the fabric of her evening gown. But more terrifying than the water was the complete and utter blackness. It closed around her as surely as the water did, robbing her of breath, of hope. She felt suffocated by it.

In the distance, her father called her.

"Adelaide, come to me!"

"No," she whispered, her fingers tightening on the rigging. "No."

"The ship will sink and you with it. Swim to me," he urged.

"I can't!" she cried out.

"You can. You must come to me. I cannot save you if you will not come to me," he insisted.

That hadn't happened. Even trapped as she was in the dream, Adelaide knew that. Her father had never urged her to let go of the rigging, to let the dark, murky water claim her as it had so many others. It had been he who had insisted to her that the waters along the coast were so shallow that they would be fine.

"You're not my father," she insisted.

"Come to me, Adelaide," but it wasn't her father's voice any longer. It was that twisted and insidious whisper from the moor. It slithered over her a skin and left a chill in its wake that was far colder even than the icy water of her dream.

"Adelaide, let me help you."

It wasn't her father now. It was Eldren. She wanted to go to him, to follow the sound of that voice but she had no trust in it. Was he really there to help her or was he simply another bit of trickery by whatever evil tormented her? She didn't know and so she clung to that rigging, her fingers twisting in it until they ached from the strain. But in her dream, the ship didn't come to rest on the rocky shelf just beneath the surface. Instead, the ship continued to sink lower and lower until the water closed over her entirely, swamping her as she fought and struggled for air.

At last, Adelaide awoke. Sitting bolt upright in bed with a scream trapped in her throat, her hands were tangled in the bedding in such a way that the sheets had left marks upon her skin. Tremors wracked her as she struggled to separate the fiction of her nightmare from the actual events that had occurred and from the strange happenings at what was to be her new home.

It was Saturday morning, the day of her wedding, and the bright light filtering in through the windows dispelled any shadows in the room. The chairs before the fireplace were still askew. He had kept his word and sat with her through the night. She'd been briefly aware of his departure with the dawn.

Adelaide covered her face with her hands and tried to dispel the disturbing images from the nightmare, images that had woven the past and present into some strange fiction. The dream had felt different, for lack of a better word. Somehow she felt violated by it, as if whatever lurked there at Cysgod Lys had somehow invaded her mind and twisted her memories to serve its own nefarious purposes.

The previous day had been the only uneventful one that she had experienced since her arrival at Cysgod Lys. She had worked on sewing in the morning room again, strolled the grounds, been given a tour of the house by Tromley, and then she and Eldren had dined together again. Nothing untoward had happened, no inexplicable shadows or whispers. That inactivity had made her even more wary.

And Eldren, after their dinner, had escorted her to her chamber, allowed

her to change and then returned. Once more to spend an uncomfortable night in the chairs before the fireplace. She was all bravado until it came time to be alone in her darkened chamber within the cursed walls of Cysgod Lys. The house was a menace.

Cursing it and her stepmother once more, Adelaide rose and crossed to the washstand. A glance in the mirror there showed the truth of her restless sleep. She had great, dark circles beneath her eyes and they were puffy from her hours of tossing and turning. It was her wedding day and she looked terrible, haggard and far older than her years. Is this what the house had done to her?

But in truth, she'd paid little attention to her appearance in recent weeks. Perhaps the sinking of the Mohegan had taken more of a toll than she realized. It was impossible to say beyond acknowledging that her recent struggles showed upon her face.

The door opened and Dyllis slipped quietly inside, obviously thinking that Adelaide would still be abed. When the girl saw her standing there, she let out a startled squeak. "Oh, miss! You frightened me half to death!"

"I awoke early, Dyllis. I'm sorry for startling you."

The maid took the ivory dress that Adelaide had requested to wear for the ceremony and draped it over the foot of the bed. "Do you want breakfast now, miss, or should I bring it up later?"

"No breakfast," Adelaide replied. She didn't think she could eat a bite of it regardless. "Just tea I think."

"Perhaps a piece of toast at least, miss? It wouldn't do for you to faint dead away on your wedding day." The slight admonishment was a reminder of her first evening at Cysgod Lys and implied in the comment.

Could there be a more appropriate time to faint, Adelaide wondered? But recognizing the wisdom of eat least having a bite of something, she nodded her agreement. "That'll be fine, Dyllis. Thank you for being the voice of reason once more."

Dyllis nodded and left quickly. Adelaide seated herself at the small dressing table and began freeing the heavy braid of her hair. When it was done, she brushed the thick, dark mass of it until it shone. Her hair had often been remarked upon as being her best feature. The truth of it was that it was her only striking feature. Everything else about her, while pleasant enough, was terribly ordinary. But her hair was long and thick, with a hint of curl. It was admired by many and even envied by a few. It was also her one vanity.

Of course it wasn't only vanity that prompted her to begin the lengthy process without her maid. They did have a schedule to keep to. At least when Dyllis returned, part of the task would be complete.

She was nervous, but not for the reason most brides were. Eldren had insisted that theirs would not be a real marriage. She did not have to fear the marriage bed and all that was to take place within it. Her life, for better or worse, would continue as it always had except instead of answering to her father she would answer to a man who would be her husband in name only. A chaste and lonely existence awaited her. *A childless one*. There would be no family for her to replace the one that she had lost. But would she want to bring a child to Cysgod Lys? To force them to endure the terrifying presence that had made itself known to her already? No. She would not. Her conscience would not permit it.

Dyllis returned then, bearing a tray laden with a teapot and a small plate filled with toast and little pots of jam and butter. Forcing herself to choke down at least one piece of the bread, Adelaide washed it down with the hot tea and then they resumed her morning ablutions. Her hair had been dressed, pinned atop her head in a loose chignon with tendrils of it coaxed to curl about her face, the style was becoming enough to almost counteract the heavy bags beneath her eyes.

If she thought Dyllis a bit too enthusiastic in the lacing of her corset, Adelaide didn't comment on it. Petticoat, shift, corset and bustle all donned, she allowed the maid to help her into the simple ivory blouse with its froth of lace at the throat. The skirt followed and then the fitted jacket with its large puffed sleeves that tapered into narrow points at her wrists. The heavy embroidery at the collar and cuffs mirrored the ornate pattern embroidered on the overskirt and a bit of lace had been ruched beneath it. It was not exactly a bridal gown, but it would do very nicely.

A hat followed, perched atop the mass of her hair so that it tipped slightly forward over one eye at a rakish angle. Even in her finery, she did not look like a bride. There was none of the hopeful excitement about her that was the hallmark of a woman on her wedding day. Instead, she looked tense and drawn, like a criminal awaiting their sentence.

The ring Eldren had presented to her winked upon her finger. It felt heavy and even a bit uncomfortable but that was likely a product of her awareness of it.

"I believe his lordship is awaiting you below stairs, miss. They still do

things the old ways about here and the wedding must happen before noon. It'll take an hour or better to get to Wrexham by train because it makes so many stopes betwixt here and there," Dyllis said. "Are you alright, miss?"

"Yes, Dyllis. I'm quite fine. Everything will be fine," Adelaide said, assuring herself of it as much as the maid.

It was clear from the maid's expression that she was as skeptical of that as Adelaide herself was. Neither of them believed it. As if to punctuate that moment of doubt, a shrill scream erupted from somewhere within the house. It appeared that Eldren's mother had awakened from whatever medicated stupor she had been in.



ELDREN HEARD the shriek and bit out a curse. Beside him, Warren tensed. Their mother was in the throws of another of her fits. It seemed they always came in spurts. Months could pass with nothing happening and then suddenly she would go for days and days shrieking, screaming, hurling things at the servants. She'd very nearly killed one of the maids only months back and in that same stretch, had broken her nurse's arm. They had not restrained her to that point, but it had become apparent afterward that she was too much of a risk to herself and to others.

Taking in Warren's expression and the misery that he projected, Eldren sighed. It was harder on his brother than him somehow. Perhaps it was because there had always been love between Warren and their mother. Eldren she had only ever tolerated while she had, at least in their earlier childhood, doted on the rest of them.

"I'm going to send her to a hospital in London," Eldren offered.

"An asylum, you mean? A place to lock her away and never see or hear from her again?"

"This was your idea! You suggested it," Eldren protested.

Warren sighed. "I know, but I make decisions and change my mind almost instantly. What can they do for her there that we cannot do for her here? What if it's some hellish place that only makes her worse?"

"No, that will not happen," Eldren denied. "I visited this facility months back and I've wrestled with this decision since that time. She is getting worse here and not better. I believe they can help her there!"

"Madness gets worse, Eldren. That's rather the point of it, isn't it? People in her condition do not get better!"

"No. But if she can be more calm, if she can experience fewer outbursts and rages, isn't it worth the risk?"

"Risk of what?" Warren demanded. "Hospitalization? But we're talking about something else altogether now. Aren't we, brother?"

Eldren hesitated. He'd considered carefully and for many months. But he was no closer to a decision than he had been before. "There is a procedure that might help her."

"Scramble her brain about more like!" Warren snapped. "Do you think I haven't looked into it? I know what a lobotomy does, Eldren. What it is! It's barbaric and despite her treatment of you, I cannot imagine you would be so cruel."

"It's a last resort, Warren," Eldren insisted. "There are other treatments that will be tried first. And nothing will be done that might harm her without first getting our approval. It's simply an option under consideration at the moment."

Warren's gaze narrowed. "Why are you doing this now? Is it Miss Hampton Parke?"

"Indirectly, yes," Eldren answered. "Mother knows she's here. She doesn't know who she is, but she's aware of her presence and has made several statements to the nurse about what she means to do to her."

"She's locked away!"

"And gets out frequently! I don't know if it's the servants or if it's something else—."

"The Llewellyn curse? Do you think the ghosts are hopping in from the moor long enough to let her loose?" Warren said with a laugh.

"Don't do that, Warren. Don't make light of what exists in this house. Not when we both know what it's capable of."

Abashed, Warren held up his hands in supplication. "Fine. I concede that there are forces here we cannot control or understand... but dammit, Eldren, she's our mother. We cannot do this to her!"

"And if there is another way, then we will not... If you wanted to be certain, you could look into the matter while I'm away."

"What? Your servants are remarkably well trained, brother, and loyal to you as they can be. There is not gossip to overhear, so I cannot imagine how you think I would learn anything!"

Eldren cursed under his breath. "I don't know how. But I do know that you are resourceful. And I know that if she were to find Adelaide alone in this house, the consequences would be disastrous for all of us. Not just the fate of that poor girl, which is bad enough, but the scandal that would rain down upon us for it. We have no other choice, Warren, but to consider this is a viable option. I wish that it were different. Truly."

"When are you leaving for London?"

"We'll travel to Chester for the afternoon and on to London tomorrow.I had thought to make the entire journey today, but I think it might be too much. Adelaide is still recovering, after all."

Warren shrugged. "It will be good to spend a night elsewhere. Heaven knows there is no peace to be had here... I will bring mother to London myself. It will be a less difficult journey if you are not a party to it. We both know that."

It stung, but it was certainly the truth. "Then Adelaide and I shall go on ahead after the ceremony and will see you there in a few days. You're certain that you're up to the task?"

Warren nodded. "You think I'm a slave to the liquor... but the truth is, my reasons for craving drink vanish along with my wife. I doubt I'm the only man who has ever felt thusly. May this girl you marry prove to be less of a millstone about your neck than my own bride did."

Eldren didn't reply. The door to the library had opened silently and Adelaide stood there in her wedding finery. It was the first time he'd seen her in something that was not unrelieved black. The pale ivory of her dress was a perfect foil for her dark hair and it seemed to have brought the roses back to her cheeks. For the first time since she'd arrived at Cysgod Lys, she appeared healthy and, if not happy, at least whole.

"Good morning, Adelaide," he said, hoping that she had not overheard too much of what Warren had said. "If you are ready, we will take the carriage into Machynlleth. From there, the train to Wrexham and after the ceremony, on to Chester for the night and London tomorrow."

"Yes. There is much to do and we should start as early as possible."

Eldren noted her posture. She looked rather like someone prepared for battle. He supposed in some ways that she was.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE CHURCH HAD BEEN HUSHED, the service rushed through very quickly. Documents were signed and names were recorded in the church's register. It was all over within minutes. Subdued well wishes were received from the minister, from Warren, and from Eldren's solicitor, then they were bustled to the train station. The noise of it, with the steel wheels screeching on the tracks and whistles blowing loudly to announce arrivals and departures, was jarring.

Her entire life had been altered in the span of minutes, and yet the entire world continued to move as if nothing of importance had occurred. Adelaide clasped her hands in front of her and tried to summon some sort of feeling about it all, but nothing was there.

"Wait here and I'll procure tickets for us," Eldren said.

Adelaide watched the travelers going to and fro. There were sad partings and happy reunions all around. Above all, there was an intensity of emotion that pervaded the very air of the place and made her all too aware of her own numbness. She had just been married, after all. Yet, there was no joy, not even any nervousness or doubt. She was completely and utterly numb to all of it. Turning away from the throng of people, she eyed the dark, hulking shape of the train.

Standing there in her ivory suit and shirtwaist, the black smoke from the engines made her all too aware of the grave error she may very well have made. "I should have worn black, after all," she murmured.

"What was that?" Eldren asked.

"I should have changed into a more suitable traveling costume," Adelaide

replied. "This will be ruined before the train makes it's first stop."

"We won't be on board long. The journey to Chester is fairly short and I have made arrangements to take care of my business there this evening so I would not have to abandon you once we reach London. But Dyllis is already on board with your bags and I've managed to obtain a private car for us. You'll be able to change."

"Well, it seems as if you've thought of everything," she replied. "Have we accommodations in Chester? Accommodations that will allow for the peculiarity of our marriage?" There was a sharp and biting quality to her tone, something dark and ugly swirling inside her. It horrified her that she'd spoken to him so. It wasn't as if she had been taken unawares by the situation. He'd told her the truth of the situation.

"Is there something bothering you, Adelaide? I'm afraid if you're having second thoughts, it might be a bit late to do anything about them... unless you wish to incur a scandal that would ruin us both," Eldren uttered softly. The words, soft-spoken as they were, held a hint of steel, however.

"I am not having second thoughts. Third, fourth, fifth... They may number into the hundreds now, but you are quite right in one regard. They no longer matter in the slightest."

"As to your question," he said, "We will be dining with one of my business associates, Mr. Silas Elam, and his bride, Mrs. Lucille Elam. You may know her. She's an American. From New York, as I understand it. We have a suite of rooms at the Grosvenor Hotel." He looked as if he wished to say something further but the conductor called their boarding and he simply closed his mouth and offered her his arm. Adelaide took it, allowing him to assist her aboard as a porter ushered them along the corridor to their small compartment. Eldren paused at the door, "I will locate Dyllis and have her bring you something more appropriate for traveling."

With that, he was gone and Adelaide was alone in the small car. The shades were already drawn and only the faintest light penetrated the dimness. A moment later, Dyllis entered carrying a black traveling costume over her arm. She was brisk, helping Adelaide out of the ivory suit and into the black one. They didn't bother with her ruffled blouse, but left it. It would likely be ruined, but was easier to replace than the entire suit would have been. A simple black hat was pinned atop the rather elaborate coiffure Dyllis had battled with earlier in the day and when it was all done, the maid disappeared once more without a word.

Alone, once more garbed in black, Adelaide seated herself on one of the well padded banquettes. Opening the shades of the window, she stared out at the platform of the station as the engine began its crescendo. A woman stood near the doors of the ticketing office, her blonde hair piled high in a cascade of pretty curls. But it wasn't that which alarmed Adelaide. It was the cold fury that marked the woman's pretty face as she glared in the direction of their train car. *Frances*.

Though she'd only seen her the one time, a woman that lovely was unmistakeable. What on earth was she doing there?

The door to the compartment opened and Eldren stepped inside.

"Frances was just there... at the station," Adelaide said, gesturing toward the platform. But the woman, if it had indeed been Frances, was gone, vanished into nothingness. "She was there, Eldren. I saw her!"

"I'm certain you saw someone. And it may well have been Frances as obedience is not her strong suit. But it's of little import as she will not be permitted admittance to Cysgod Lys, so there is nothing to fear. And Warren will be joining us in London in a matter of days," he said. "There is nothing to worry about."

But there was. Frances was petty, vindictive and mean. If she'd returned it was for a reason and Adelaide found that much harder to put from her mind than her new husband did apparently. Unsettled, uncertain and filled with doubts about everything from the wisdom of her choice to go through with the wedding to leaving Cysgod Lys for London, Adelaide struggled to find some small measure of peace in her troubled mind.



THEIR JOURNEY HAD BEEN MADE LARGELY in silence. Eldren was aware, of course, that it was not necessarily a joyous day for his bride. Nor was it for him. But he'd had a much longer time to acclimate himself to the notion of a chaste and loveless marriage. At her young age, no doubt Adelaide had held very different hopes for her wedding day.

Staring at her, taking in the soft curve of her cheek and the tilt of her head, he wondered what she would be like with children of her own. Would she be patient and loving as his own mother had never been to him? Or would she deposit her children with a nanny and never be bothered with them?

Realizing that such thoughts, thoughts of things that could never be, were simply unnecessary torment, Eldren elected to shove them far from his mind and focus on something more immediately pressing.

Had it truly been Frances? Would she be so bold? Possibly. Though what she hoped to gain he could not say. He'd left strict orders for the servants that she was not to be admitted to the house and was to be escorted form the grounds. If she showed her face there, she'd be utterly humiliated by being turned out. Of course, he'd long since given up understanding the workings of Frances' mind and the pleasure she took in manipulating others.

As the silence in the small compartment grew thick, he couldn't stop himself from glancing at Adelaide. She had a book with her, a small volume opened in her hands, but the page had not been turned in ages and it was clear to him that reading was simply a guise to avoid conversation. She was as lost in her own thoughts as he was.

Needing to break the silence, to ease the tension that had crept between them, he said, "Your father's friend in London, the one who has the interests in mysticism... do you know him well?"

She closed the book but left it laying in her lap like a weapon at the ready. "Not very well. I had met him several times and we had dinner at his house before we left for Paris. He was very kind to me and he did take great pleasure in regaling us with his stories of encounters with the occult. Obviously, I cannot attest to the veracity of his claims."

"Even after all that you have encountered at Cysgod Lys, you question that such things exist?" he queried.

She considered her answer carefully if the thoughtful expression that schooled her features was any indication. Finally, she said, "No. I am a believer that there are things in this world that we cannot explain, things that defy rational thought and belief... but I also recognize that many people long to believe in such things, to be touched by something extraordinary. Their desires sway their perception of events so that an occurrence or incident which may be normal becomes, in their very eager memories, paranormal."

"And Lord Mortimer is an eager believer? Perhaps overly eager?"

Her shoulders lifted in a gesture of uncertainty. Too subtle to be qualified as a shrug, it still drew his gaze to the prominence of her bosom beneath the many layers of clothing she wore. Such awareness, such temptation, was ill advised and he quickly looked away.

"I cannot say if Lord Mortimer has in fact had any experience with the

occult or if he is just a man who longs for such things to be true. I know he is a widower and that he professes to have loved his late wife very much. Perhaps it is his grief for her loss that prompts him to indulge in such practices. Regardless, I think that he might be the best place to start looking for answers. He may be able to direct us to someone who is more well versed in such things... Assuming you wish to pursue more information about what may be occurring at your ancestral home?"

"I'm not opposed to knowing more. I just have no wish to be fodder for the gossip mill. Can this man be trusted, do you think?" Eldren asked.

"I certainly hope so. I think that Lord Mortimer is far more concerned with learning all that he can about the unexplainable than with whispering behind his hands to others," Adelaide said. "At any rate, we shall call upon him and see. We need not divulge everything at the outset."

"I agree that we should be circumspect... You cannot toss a rock in this country, or any part of the British Isles for that matter, without it landing upon some crumbling pile of rocks that is rumored to be haunted. But what we have, what we are dealing with, is somewhat different, I think."

The conversation lapsed again. They were an hour yet from Chester and had run out of things to say to one another. It did not bode well.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IT WAS NEARLY one o'clock when they arrived in Chester. Eldren hired a carriage to convey them to the hotel and a small cart to bring their bags along afterward. Dyllis and their bags were ushered up to their rooms as soon as they reached the Grosvenor Hotel while Adelaide and Eldren were ushered into the dining room for a light luncheon.

It was still tense between them, still strained. Somehow, getting married had made things worse between them. They'd gotten along well enough before, and now, for reasons Adelaide couldn't quite understand, they could barely stand to be near one another. Permanency, perhaps? For better or for worse, they were now effectively stuck with one another.

They passed their meal as they had much of their journey—in silence. When they'd finished their meal and were being shown to their suite, Adelaide noted how nervous the bellman was. Perhaps he was new, she thought, or perhaps Eldren had stayed there before and been a demanding patron, though given what she knew of him that seemed unlikely. *Or perhaps he sensed the tension between the two of them.* She wasn't certain but the poor man was sweating profusely and every painfully polite word from his mouth was stammered and uncertain. As exhausting as it was to be in his presence, she couldn't imagine what it must be like for the poor boy. When he finally opened the door to the suite and let them pass, she found herself relieved to be alone with Eldren. That in and of itself was rather shocking.

"It's been a long day. I have some business matters to attend to, but you should have a nap if you're tired," he offered.

She wasn't tired, but it would be a reprieve nonetheless, a moment alone

where she didn't have to pretend everything was fine. "I will have a bit of a lie down, thank you."

"We'll be meeting the Elam's at six," he replied smoothly. "Good afternoon, Adelaide."

When the door closed behind him as he fled into the hall, Adelaide breathed a sigh of relief. Would it always be like this for them, she thought? Avoiding one another, doing anything necessary to avoid being alone in one another's company? She found herself missing the congenial conversation and the relative ease they'd had with one another in the first days after she'd reached Cysgod Lys. Not for the first time that day she wondered if she had not made a terrible mistake.

Stripping down to her corset and chemise, Adelaide draped the other garments over the chair. Easing herself onto the bed, she let the weariness she had felt for so long overtake her. She prayed for a reprieve from the nightmares. Perhaps in a new location, free from the terror inducing shrieks of Eldren's mother, she would find some peace.

Her eyes fluttered close and sleep crept in. But it was not the dreamless sleep she had longed for and it was far from a reprieve from Cysgod Lys. Instead, her dream found her in the darkened halls of that house, standing in a single circle of light as long shadows flickered and danced about her, taking on threatening shapes and seeming to writhe like a living thing. The whispers surrounded her. *Come to us. Come to us. Let us in.* She tried to move, to flee, but her feet were rooted to the spot. The shadows drew closer, dark shapes slithering over the patterned carpet to curl around her feet and ankles. The light began to fade until she could see nothing. And then it all transformed. It was no longer shadows tangling about her and holding her down, but water.

The cold blackness of it swamped her, creeping over her body until she was once more submerged to the waist, her fingers trapped in the roughened ropes of the rigging. The whispers were replaced with the screams and sobs of the other women who had managed to survive with her. They were interspersed with the cries for help from those already in the water, waiting for death.

Trapped in her nightmare, half memory and half terror stricken fantasy, the water did not stop at her waist. The ship did not come to rest on the very rocks that it had struck causing it to sink. Instead, the Mohegan shifted in that water, plunging deeper as the cold consumed her. She opened her mouth to scream and the black, icy water invaded it, filling it until she was robbed of

all her air. The feeling of suffocating, the burning in her lungs as she struggled with the most primal desire to preserve life at all costs, finally pulled her from the dream.

She sat up in bed, gasping, her body slicked with a light sheen of sweat. Tremors wracked her and goosebumps has raised on her skin. A glance at the clock on the mantle showed her that it was nearly four. She'd been asleep far longer than she'd anticipated. But that would give her time to bathe and wash away the remnants of the dream before she met Eldren and the Elam's for dinner. There was a sharp pain in her ribs. Either one of the bones in her corset had broken and was stabbing her or it had shifted enough as she tossed and turned in the throes of a nightmare to do damage.

Climbing from the bed, Adelaide padded on her bare feet toward the bathroom. Stepping into the glaringly white room lined with tile, the door banged behind her and the sound echoed so loudly that she jumped. It was only the after effects of the dream, she told herself.

Adelaide turned on the water and waited for it to warm as she pressed her feet more firmly against the floor, savoring how cool and refreshing the tile felt. It helped her feel more firmly rooted in the moment and to dispel any lingering effects of her nightmare.

Rather than call for Dyllis, Adelaide elected to see to her bath alone. She wasn't quite ready to face anyone just yet, not when she still felt so raw from the dream. With the water growing warmer, she placed the stopper in the drain and rose to remove the last of her clothing.

Tugging at the laces of her corset, they tangled and twisted. Even standing near the mirror and looking over her shoulder, she could not free the knot. It felt as if the garment were growing tighter rather than looser. Between that, her exertions and the leftover panic from her nightmare, she was struggling. At the point of desperation, Adelaide was ready to call for Dyllis, after all. But then she spotted the small case which held her tooth powder, soaps and other sundry items, including a small manicure kit with scissors. Desperate to be free of her corset which was pinching her ribs painfully, Adelaide rifled through everything, making a mess of all of it until she found the small scissors.

Reaching behind her, she snipped at the laces until one finally separated entirely. She tugged and pulled until the garment loosened enough for her to remove the thing. When she did, she drew in a deep unimpeded breath and let it out on a sigh. She caught sight of her reflection and noted the dark marks

over her ribs. Just below her last rib, there were scratches across her skin. Long and angry, the three red lines welled with a bit of blood. Adelaide picked up the corset from the floor to examine it. The bones were intact. None had broken. There were no rough seams or anything that would account for the marks on her body. And yet it was stained inside with smears of blood from the cuts on her skin. Despite that, the garment was completely intact but for the laces she'd hacked to bits.

A sick feeling of dread settled over her then. They had left Cysgod Lys, but it had not left them. Had that been the source of their acrimonious interactions through the day? Was it the weight of the house and their absence from it that had caused such a deterioration of harmony? Those were questions only Eldren could answer, but she could not face him just yet. The bath, she decided. When she'd washed the grime of travel from her completely and dressed in fresh clothes, she would speak to him about it before dinner.

For now, she'd ease her aches and pains, as well as her worries, by sinking into a warm bath and ignoring the sense of dread that threatened to overwhelm her.



ELDREN HEARD the pipes thumping in the wall and the faint sound of water running. Adelaide was up, it seemed, and readying herself to meet the Elam's. It had been a difficult day for the both of them. Neither had been of a particularly pleasant mood. There was little reason to doubt that they were both questioning whether or not they'd made the right choice in going through with a wedding when they barely knew one another and the dark history of the Llewellyn clan hanging over them. But it wasn't that which tormented him at the moment. It was the image of her, naked in a tub of warm water. If he closed his eyes, he could see it and it tempted him beyond anything. Had he really thought he could have a chaste union with her? One where they never consummated their marriage? She was seducing him and she wasn't even in the room with him.

Scrubbing his hands over his face, he sat down at the writing desk that inhabited one small corner of his room. There were letters and telegraphs to respond to. But the words swam before his eyes and after a few moments, he

gave up any pretense of trying to work. If he were home, he would go to that small, dark room in the cellar and pound on the heavy leather bag that he'd been using for ages to relieve all of his inner turmoil. His knuckles were callused and scarred from having split open numerous times over the years from such abuse. That pain, a distraction from the other forms of torment he suffered, would be a welcome reprieve.

It was never easy to leave the house. The longer he stayed away from it, the greater his feelings of unease would become. That house consumed every one in it, in one way or another. He didn't think he'd ever be free of it. And now he'd dragged an innocent girl into the mess of it with him. Not a girl. A woman. One who seemed to have little tolerance for foolishness and, when it came to voicing her opinions, a will of iron. She wasn't brash, but she certainly was not lacking bravado. Perhaps it was an American trait.

Lacking the ability to do anything else but think of her, Eldren rose and retrieved his recently discarded coat. He'd have a drink in the hotel bar and hopefully regain some sense of equilibrium and control over his libido.

He'd no more than reached his door when he heard her scream.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ADELAIDE HAD LINGERED TOO LONG in the bath and the water had begun to cool. But the string of sleepless nights and violent nightmares had left her exhausted to the point that her body ached with it. Even the nap she'd taken earlier, disturbed as it had been, had not left her rested. Exhaustion, she feared, would soon become a permanent state.

She was tempted to turn the hot water on again and soak for a bit longer, but she'd never have time to be adequately turned out for dinner if she did so. Leaning back against the roll-edged rim of the cast iron tub, Adelaide closed her eyes. Five more minutes, she thought, and then she would get out and begin the arduous process of dressing for a dinner she had no desire to attend.

The air shifted about her, almost as if a door or a window had been opened, and yet she'd heard no one enter. A shiver raced over her as the temperature seemed to drop, quickly and intensely. More than the temperature change, it was the overwhelming sensation of no longer being alone that made her heart race and her fingers tremble as she gripped the edge of the tub. Warily, she opened her eyes. She could see her breath misting before her. The room had grown *that* cold. The feeling of dread that filled her was an all too familiar one. But they were not at Cysgod Lys. It, whatever it truly was, could not have followed them there. Surely?

As if in answer to her question, she felt something brush her leg beneath the soapy water. It was followed immediately by a burning pain across her shoulder as she was pressed down into the tub by an unbearable weight and pressure. Then she was dragged under the water, pulled down by some unseen force. Adelaide struggled, gripping the edge of the tub and fighting her way back up. She screamed as loud as she could praying Dyllis would hear her, before once more being pulled down into the water. She held her breath, but her lungs burned from the effort. Whatever held there, had a bruising grip. It tightened about her with such force that she thought her bones might simply snap.

Kicking, clawing, she fought to drag herself above the water, but it was useless. Whatever held her did so with far more strength than she possessed. The last vestiges of air were escaping her as she struggled. She could feel herself weakening. But then a pair of strong hands grasped her, pulling her up. It got her out of the water long enough to take a deep gulping breath, she saw Eldren's face and the fear that blazed in his eyes. Then she was sucked under once more.

The struggle seemed to go on forever, but with enough oxygen feeding her brain, Adelaide realized she couldn't drown in a tub that wouldn't hold water. She kicked out with her foot, sliding it beneath the small chain that connected the stopper to the taps and pulled it free. Slowly, the water began to recede, draining out and with it, whatever force had taken hold in that small room receded with it.

She lay there, curled on her side in the bottom of that tub, her body bruised, battered and not even caring for her nakedness. The relief at having simply survived superseded everything else, at least for the moment. Her breath still came in labored gasps when Eldren draped her robe over her and lifted her from the tub, carrying her into the connecting bedchamber.

Adelaide lay on the bed, completely still, the shock of it all having robbed her of even the barest ability to communicate. It felt as if she would never be safe again, as if death and darkness and danger surrounded her at every turn.

Eldren broke the silence, his voice strained with fear and what sounded suspiciously like guilt. *Because he had brought her into the madness of his family and the curse that haunted them.* "What happened, Adelaide? What the devil happened in there?"

"I think it's the house," she whispered. "It doesn't want me to leave and this was my punishment. We won't be going to London, Eldren. I won't survive it."

It sounded like utter madness to even utter such a thing. But he'd seen her in there, he'd seen her struggling to get out of that tub and he himself had been unable to free her from it. They both bore the marks from that struggle.

He settled on the chair beside the bed. "We'll return tomorrow morning." Adelaide nodded. "I need to dress for dinner."

"I'll send word to the Elam's that you've taken ill—."

"No. It's too late for that. Just send for Dyllis so that we can attempt to camouflage as much of the damage as possible," she insisted. "I find that, while I was not looking forward to dinner earlier, the idea of having more people to surround myself with now is strangely appealing. There is such a thing as safety in numbers."

He rose and crossed the room to the small bell pull. It would signal the front desk and they would in turn have Dyllis fetched. It was not exactly an efficient system. But Adelaide was grateful that he was remaining with her until the maid arrived at least. While his back was turned, she struggled to don the robe properly and had just managed to get it pulled completely around her when he turned back.

"Do you need my help?"

"No," she said. "I can manage." While she was still shaken from the events that had transpired, an awareness of everything else that had occurred was now seizing her. He'd seen her entirely without clothes. No one, not even her maid, had seen her in such a state. Modest by nature, Adelaide had always made it a point to at least have her chemise on before Dyllis came to assist her. Her face flamed at the thought of what she must have looked like, but she took solace in the fact that both of them had been so focused on her survival against whatever unseen force had attacked her that the unexpected intimacy might remain unremarked by either of them.

Uncomfortably aware of his presence, but still too frightened to be alone, Adelaide simply remained in silence. Her arms folded about herself for warmth, her hair a tangled mess about her, and the weight of his steady stare a reminder of all the things that were between them and all those that never would.



ELDREN WATCHED HER, noting each shiver and tremor. She looked impossibly small and frail, lost in the vastness of her bed. But he could not and would not think of her as childlike. Despite the gravity of their situation, despite all that had transpired for which he still could not fathom an explanation, he was

only a man. And any man presented with such a perfect and completely naked female form would look upon it, commit the details of it to memory and likely revisit the memory frequently. Or perhaps he simply wished to rationalize his depravity by assuming others would have done the same.

Regardless, the image of her would be forever emblazoned upon his mind and would likely haunt him as surely as whatever forces at Cysgod Lys were haunting them now. It was as if Adelaide's presence had somehow revitalized or reinvigorated the power and essence of that evil. *Feeding it*, he thought. *With her youth, with her beauty. Her innocence*. By taking her as his wife and bringing her into his home, he had sealed her fate. Whatever it was had attached itself to her in a way that she could not possibly be free of it, barring death.

"Forgive me," he said.

"Why?" she replied softly, but she did not meet his gaze and the blush that stained her cheeks told him why.

"This power, this darkness has only ever effected the family before... Had I known that there was any connection to you and the property I would never have brought you there. I should not have risked it regardless. I fear that we have somehow made this entity, or whatever it is, more powerful than ever. And I cannot fathom what might happen now when we return home. But remaining here or in London is clearly impossible... While we are here, write to this Lord Mortimer of your father's acquaintance. Beg his assistance. Have him bring every mystic and medium from every corner of the earth if need be. I would have you free of this curse, Adelaide. I would never have burdened you with this had I known."

"I will write to him and I will beg his assistance... but this is not your fault, Eldren. What man could ever understand the workings of such darkness? There was no way to predict that this might happen."

But there was, he thought. As a boy, his mother had tried to leave often. She'd flee into the night, leaving her children behind. But no more than a day later would return, battered, bruised and defeated. He'd assumed it was his father who had sent for her to be dragged back. Now he wasn't so certain. Perhaps she hadn't been running from her brute of a husband as much as from the dark forces that controlled their home.

The outer door to their suite opened and then there was a soft knock on the bed chamber door. He bade them enter and Dyllis stepped inside carrying a freshly pressed dinner gown. She looked at Adelaide and gasped. "My lady! Whatever has happened?"

"I fell trying to get out of the tub," Adelaide lied smoothly. "Luckily his lordship was in the next room and heard the commotion or I likely would have drowned."

The maid appeared genuinely distressed. "Oh, my lady. I wish you'd have called me. I could have been here to attend you and it never would have happened!"

"It's alright, Dyllis. I'm quite fine," Adelaide insisted.

"I'll be next door," Eldren interjected. "If anything untoward happens, if you begin to feel... unwell, then you must call for me immediately. Say that you will, Adelaide."

"If I feel *unwell*, I will most assuredly let you know," she answered.

Eldren turned and left, pausing in the sitting room that separated their bedchambers. There was a small cart near the secretary holding a selection of spirits. If ever he'd needed such fortifications in his life, that was certainly the moment. With hands that shook, he poured a measure of Scotch into one of the glasses and drank it down quickly, ignoring the burn that followed. Finally, with that bit of liquid courage on board, he retreated to his own chamber to change his clothes as they were wet through.

As he removed his shirt, he noticed the claw marks on his arm. And yet, Adelaide had never let go of the sides of the tub. She'd held so fiercely to the rolled rim of the cast iron monstrosity that her knuckles had turned nearly as white as it. Three long, angry scratches stretched nearly from elbow to wrist with a little blood welling slightly from each one. More than that, small blisters had began to form about them. Not just scratched. Burned. The water had been nearly ice cold and the room itself had been freezing.

Cursing himself, his lineage and the home that was an albatross about his neck, Eldren shed the rest of his clothing and donned a fresh suit for dinner. Somehow, he would find a way to keep her safe. Whatever was required.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ADELAIDE FELT THE WEIGHT OF DYLLIS' suspicions. As she'd dressed for dinner, the maid had stared askance at every mark on her body. Scratches, bruises and scrapes all sustained during the fight for her very life which had taken place in the bathing chamber of their suite had prompted ugly thoughts within the serving girl. But it wasn't her desire to salvage Eldren's name and reputation that prompted her to speak, it was the fact that she felt so terribly alone.

"Dyllis, I need something from you," Adelaide said.

"Whatever it is, miss—my lady—you may have it," the maid replied earnestly.

"I need to tell you things not as my maid or as my employee... I need a friend, Dyllis, much more than I need a maid right now and I need that friend to be you!" Adelaide implored.

"I am your friend, my lady. I'll do whatever you need me to," the girl answered, near tears herself.

"I know you think Eldren did these things to me, but he didn't. I need you to believe what I'm about to tell you, no matter how preposterous it may sound. Can you do that?"

"Yes, ma'am. I can."

Adelaide took a deep steadying breath. "There is something dark at Cysgod Lys, something evil. And I know you are aware of it. You're frightened of it. I've seen that... but it isn't restricted to that house, Dyllis. Whatever it is, it is attached to the family, attached to anyone who bears the Llewellyn name or possesses a drop of the Llewellyn blood. I know that

because it attacked me here. It tried to kill me and if Eldren hadn't heard me screaming for help, I can't bear to think what might have happened."

The maid's eyes widened with both shock and fear. "There's stories, my lady... always have been stories about the house and the family. Until I come to work there, I thought that's all they were. Stories. But I've seen things there in the house. Shadows where there shouldn't be none. Voices in rooms I knew were empty. And it always feels like eyes on my back, someone or something lurking in the corners and watching everything and everyone."

Adelaide took the maid's hands in her own. "That's it precisely. I've only been in that house for a manner of days, Dyllis, and I've experienced all that and more. These scratches," she said, pointing toward her ribs, "They appeared earlier. I was still wearing my corset and chemise and I can't fathom how my skin was hurt without there being any damage to the fabric of either garment! But when I was bathing, something grabbed me Dyllis. It grabbed me and pulled me under the water and held me there! Have you ever heard of this happening to anyone else in the family?"

The other girl looked away. "Not that exactly... but when I first come to work there, his lordship's mother's maid was still there. She told stories about awful things what happened to her. I always thought it was just that, miss-my lady. Just talk."

Adelaide's heart was pounding. Could it be? Was the fate that Eldren's mother suffered her destiny as well? "Is this maid still there?"

"No, m'lady. She died two years back. But cook was there then and Mr. Tromley. I don't know what they would talk about it or not, but it can't hurt to ask them."

"Ask them what?"

Adelaide gasped as Dyllis shrieked to bring down the rafters. Neither of them had heard the door open or heard Eldren enter. "You frightened me half to death!"

"I think we've both had more than enough of that for one day. Don't you? Am I wrong in thinking you were discussing my mother with one of the servants?"

"Dyllis, you may go. I'll ring for you if I need you later," Adelaide said. She wouldn't have the girl berated for an offense that was entirely of her own making.

"No, Dyllis. I'd prefer if you stayed for the moment. Under the circumstances, if there is information that you have that might help us to

better understand whatever it is that is happening than I should be privy to it as well," he said. His voice was firm but not harsh. He didn't appear angry and yet Adelaide was almost certain that he was.

"I weren't saying nothing bad, my lord. Only that when I first come to work at Cysgod Lys, the Dowager's maid was still there. One of the other servants made the comment that she didn't understand why your mother just didn't leave the house before all the bad things happened... before she went mad. And her maid said what she tried. But every time she did something drove her back. I don't know if it's the same thing what happened here today or not... but I think it bears finding out if her ladyship's maid ever told of such things to those servants you'd trust to know. I won't say nothing to anyone. I promise that, my lord."

He stood there quietly for a moment, then gave a nod. "Thank you, Dyllis, for your loyalty and your discretion. We'll ring for you if Lady Montkeith needs you later."

The maid bobbed a curtsy and all but flew from the room. Adelaide sighed. "You're angry."

"No. I thought I might be, but the truth of the matter is that I don't understand any of what's happening here... and if anyone, even your lady's maid, possesses information that might be helpful I won't have it kept from us. I'd reached the same conclusion myself earlier. I recall my mother's attempts to leave my father. When she returned battered and bruised, I thought it had been him. Clearly I was wrong." He stopped then, drawing in a deep breath as he crossed to the window and looked out. "There are too many secrets at Cysgod Lys. There always have been, and I'm just as guilty of propagating that as my ancestors were. Enough of that for now, though. Are you ready for dinner? We can still beg off if you like."

"No," Adelaide insisted. "We need to be out of these rooms. Near others. In full view of witnesses as much as possible until we can return to the house. Even saying such things makes me feel silly, but I think it's true."

"As do I," he agreed, and held out his arm to her. "In that case, let me introduce you to Mr. and Mrs. Elam... they are eccentric, to be sure. But fine people nonetheless."

When Adelaide placed her hand on his arm, he fought the urge to cover that delicate hand with his own. They did need to spend as much time as possible with others, in full view, but it was not only for protection against whatever dark forces now moved against them. It was to help him keep his word to himself and not give in to the temptation that even now whispered in his mind. She was his wife. The laws of both man and the church permitted him to know her in the most intimate of ways. More difficult to ignore still, he didn't think Adelaide herself was opposed to the idea. Quite to the contrary. That in and of itself was temptation enough.

Stepping out into the corridor with her on his arm, they strolled toward the lift and the attendant there in his smart uniform nodded his head and opened the wrought iron cage for them to enter. Once they reached the lower floor and crossed the luxuriously appointed lobby to the gaslit restaurant, the Elams were waiting for them.

Adelaide recognized her immediately. Not only did she know her, but the lovely Mrs. Elam had been a dear friend of her mother's. A wealth of emotion swamped her when she saw that familiar face.

"Oh, my sweet Adelaide!" Lottie Elam cried out. "I couldn't believe it when Silas told me you were to marry Lord Montkeith! Why, I haven't seen you since you were a small girl!"

Adelaide hugged the other woman tightly. "Oh, Aunt Lottie! I had no idea you'd married again."

The woman frowned. "You never got my letters? I wrote you, my dear. After your mother's death and then after your father remarried?"

Adelaide frowned. "I received one letter after you left for England, but nothing since! I couldn't believe that you never wrote when Mama passed away. Now, of course, I have a much better picture of precisely what occurred. I'm afraid Muriel would not have been pleased for me to have a connection to my mother. Even her portraits were banished from the house. I managed to save one by concealing it in my wardrobe."

Lottie Elam's lips curled in distaste. "That woman—your father, God rest him, should have known better!"

"He should have, but I think he was blinded by Muriel's rather stunning beauty," Adelaide admitted. "If there is one thing to be thankful for in his passing, it is that he never knew the heartbreak of seeing her for what she truly is."

"You are much too gracious and forgiving, my dear child!"

As if realizing that both Eldren and Silas Elam were staring at them, both Adelaide and Lottie turned to their respective husbands. "Forgive us, dears," Lottie said. To Eldren she added, "Adelaide's mother was one of my dearest friends. I have often bemoaned to poor Mr. Elam how I worried for this child after her father married that viper of a woman!"

Silas Elam laughed. "It is quite true. I have heard it time and again, my dear. It is so very good to finally meet you. I feel as if I know you already."

Adelaide accepted his hug. It felt strange to her, foreign. Had affection really been so missing from her life that any sign of it from others had become alien?

"Thank you so much, Mr. Elam...but let us go in to dinner and I must hear all about your whirlwind romance with Lottie. I do recall that before she left New York, she told my mother there was no power on earth that could induce her to marry again!" Adelaide exclaimed.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DINNER HAD BEEN A SHOCKINGLY enjoyable affair. Regaled by the tale of Silas Elam's earnest and persistent courtship of her mother's dear friend, Adelaide had laughed in spite of herself. Eldren had as well. They had managed, just slightly, to distance themselves from the horror that had occurred earlier.

Adelaide and Lottie had made their way to a small parlor where they were having sherry. Eldren and Silas, as he'd insisted on being called, had made their way to the bar area to smoke cigars and talk business.

"He's very handsome," Lottie said.

"He is," Adelaide admitted, not bothering to play coy.

"But I sense things are difficult between the two of you."

If it had been anyone else, Adelaide would never have dreamed of saying anything. But it was Lottie. Her mother's closest friend and confidante, a woman who had dried her tears when she was a girl, a woman whom Muriel had cut ruthlessly from her life. "There are things I must say in the strictest confidence, Lottie."

"Of course, my dear."

Adelaide looked about the room, insuring that no one else would be close enough to overhear. "Eldren's mother is mad. And he's determined that we should have a marriage in name only because he's afraid that any madness in his family would be passed on to our children," she whispered.

Lottie's expression was sympathetic. Her response was offered in a low voice, as she clearly understood the need for discretion on such a matter. "My dear, it is a valid fear... but you would like him to be a husband to you in

every way, would you not?"

"I wish I knew. But that's just it! How can I know? Women are denied any knowledge of physical intimacy until marriage, and now I'm being denied that knowledge within my marriage, as well. I'm to live my whole life in ignorance it seems," Adelaide said. "But I never expected this, Lottie. I never expected that I would have the entirety of my life stretching out before me with a husband who will never love me and not even the promise of children for comfort."

Lottie sighed. "Oh, my darling girl... I will speak frankly because that is what you need right now. Muriel will surely face the devil himself one day for what she has done to you and the position you found yourself in immediately after your father's death! There are ways to have a—," she paused, as if searching for the right words. "There are books that I will send you and pamphlets from a woman whose lectures I attended... Now, I do not necessarily agree with her on all of these matters. But Ida Craddock does seem to have some understanding of what intimate relations between a man and woman *can* be."

Adelaide gasped at that name. "Ida Craddock? That woman who claims her lover is a celestial being? I thought she'd been arrested!"

"Her husband, dearest. She insists that they are married," Lottie replied dryly. "Just read what she has written and eliminate any reference to celestial beings. Instead, think of your husband."

"And this woman thinks it is possible to have physical relations with my husband without the possibility of conception?" Adelaide whispered. It was a scandalous conversation and she was blushing to the roots of her hair.

"And she's correct... I will tell you that, at my age, the prospect of having a child, while still possible, is rather terrifying. Not to mention quite dangerous! To that end, Silas and I often indulge our passion for one another in less orthodox methods," Lottie confessed. "Please don't be embarrassed. I feel that, with your mother gone, it's only right that I should be the one to teach you about such things. And I have little doubt that your husband is already aware of these methods, but like so many men, believes well bred young ladies have no interest in them. You only have to let him know that you'd be willing to try *other* things."

As Adelaide had only a very vague understanding of what the regular sort of thing was, the other things Lottie alluded to were a complete mystery. But there was no time to ask questions because Eldren and the apparently quite

adventurous Silas entered the room then.

The gentlemen approached and Silas leaned in to kiss Lottie's cheek. It was an affectionate gesture, but the way his hand lingered on her shoulder, the way Lottie leaned into him when he stood next to her, those were telling gestures and Adelaide felt a moment of envy for them.

"We should go, darling," Silas said. "Don't want to keep these two from their wedding night."

Lottie smiled though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "No, indeed. But do promise that you will visit soon, Adelaide? I want to catch up and hear all about the goings on in New York."

"I will, Lottie. It was so good to see you." Adelaide rose and hugged the woman who'd always been like a favored aunt to her. How strange that in only minutes of reconnecting that relationship had once again become so well established. It was yet one more sin to lay at Muriel's door.

Lottie hugged her in return just as fiercely and whispered close to Adelaide's ear, "Remember what I said, dear. There is always a way."

When the Elam's left, Adelaide accepted Eldren's proffered arm and allowed him to lead her back to their suite. As they traversed the corridor, he asked, "What were you and Mrs. Elam discussing so intently?"

"Acquaintances from New York... and my stepmother. Apparently Lottie has been writing to me since before my mother passed away, but the letters never reached me," Adelaide said. It was true, in part. She was not yet ready to confess the full extent of their conversation to him.

"I see. How would your stepmother have interfered in letters to you prior to your mother's passing?"

Adelaide's steps faltered. "You didn't know that Muriel had been employed as my governess during my mother's illness?"

"No. I did not. I'm sorry," he said, as he unlocked their door. "I know that your father adored your mother. I do not think he would have embarked on a relationship with Muriel before your mother's death."

Adelaide shook her head as she preceded him into their rooms. "I know that he did, Eldren, though I thank you for trying to spare my feelings. Muriel was a master at manipulation and my father, despite his intelligence and wisdom, was not immune to her wiles. Perhaps it was his grief over my mother and his loneliness that made him easy prey for her."

"I'm sorry," he said, closing the door softly. "For what you suffered at Muriel's hands, for what I've unwittingly brought you into, and for the fact

that this union will not be what you want it to—what you deserve."

Adelaide didn't say anything for a moment, but stared silently back at him. Then the words tumbled out, "Will you stay with me tonight?" It was different that it had been before at Cysgod Lys. Something between the two of them was different.

His eyebrows shot up. "Adelaide—."

"I know that we will not have a wedding night... but I'm afraid of what might happen if I'm alone," she admitted. And a part of her hoped that familiarity might lead to temptation.

His hesitation was obvious, but finally, he nodded. "Of course. Go in and ready yourself for bed. I'll ring for Dyllis... I'll join you after she's gone."

Adelaide turned away and made for her bedchamber. It was a victory, but it left her shaking.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IN HIS OWN CHAMBER, Eldren removed his dinner jacket and tie. He stripped down to just his trousers and shirt then splashed cold water on his face. Spending another night with her, in such painfully close proximity to her, close enough to touch and yet forbidden. Of course, she was correct. It was far too dangerous for her to be alone. After the events that had occurred in the bath room earlier, it was glaringly apparent that whatever dark forces were at work against his family had their sights squarely set on Adelaide.

When he heard Dyllis' voice bidding her mistress a good night, he took a deep fortifying breath, and crossed the sitting room that separated their bedchambers. Pausing outside her door, he knocked and waited for her to bid him enter. It was a repeat of the same events that had occurred the night before, with one glaring difference. He now knew precisely what was hidden beneath her prim nightrail.

Her softly uttered response had him opening the door and stepping inside. She was seated on the edge of the bed, her hands folded primly in her lap.

"There are no chairs before the fire place that would accommodate you in here," she said. "But you're welcome to share the bed, of course."

It was hell. Pure unadulterated hell. "Of course," he said. "I'll turn down the lights."

She rose and removed her wrapper, draping it over the end of the bed. There was nothing seductive in her choice of nightwear or in her movements, and yet he was entranced by both. When she had climbed beneath the covers, he turned down the gas lights and made his way to the bed in the dark. He did not climb beneath the covers. He would not be so foolish as to eliminate more

of the remaining barriers between them.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Do not thank me, Adelaide," he said. "It is my duty to protect you from all things... even the danger that I have put you squarely in the middle of."

She was silent for a moment and when she did speak again, her words were hesitant. "You asked what Lottie and I were discussing... I told her about your reluctance to have children though I did not tell her the full extent of your reasons why."

He sighed. "Do you think that was wise?"

"Lottie is like family to me... even though I have not spoken to her in more than seven years, she is the last connection I have to my mother. And I would trust her implicitly. I needed guidance, Eldren, and it is not something you can provide."

He could understand that, even if he didn't like it. She was alone in the world in a way that he could not fathom. "I understand, Adelaide."

"Lottie told me that there are ways a husband and wife might be intimate that would not result in conception... Is that true?"

The breath seized in his lungs even as his blood rushed through his veins. "Adelaide—I don't think you understand what you're asking."

"No," she agreed. "I do not. That's rather the point."

"Sleep, Adelaide, and we will discuss it tomorrow. Your head is buzzing with the wine from dinner and mine with all the brandy Silas Elam plied me with. It is not the time for such momentous decisions," he said, all the while kicking himself for it. Did he really want to dissuade her? No, but he didn't want to frighten her or worse, to have her regret such an agreement later. Lying in a bed with her, while she was only half clothed, he didn't have the strength to simply introduce her to passion without fully consummating their relationship. If they were to attempt any sort of physical intimacy, rules would have to be established first.

"Are you certain that's all it is?" She asked. "It isn't that you—." She'd stopped mid sentence, clearly not wishing to finish what she'd been about to say.

"It isn't that I what?"

"I know that I'm not beautiful like Frances and I certainly don't have the kind of charm that other young women do where conversation is easy and fun and they flirt shamelessly. I'm too somber, too given to deep thinking and direct speech," she said. "Muriel swore I'd never find a husband for those

reasons."

"Muriel was a jealous cat. Not every man wants a flirt or a silly girl who giggles incessantly and hasn't a thought in her head beyond her next pretty dress," he said. "Any hesitation on my part, is not lack of willingness or desire. It's—when it comes to passion, Adelaide, to physical desire, there is always the need for more. What is enough for us today, may not be enough for us tomorrow. I just need for us both to think this through."

"If we could truly end whatever this dark hold is over Cysgod Lys and the Llewellyn family... what would our lives be like, Eldren? Would you still insist on a marriage in name only? Would you still refuse to have children?"

"I don't know," he answered honestly. "I've never let myself consider it." "Will you consider it then? Because I mean to put an end to this. Someway, somehow... I will see us free of it."

Eldren rose on his elbow and looked down at her. In the dim light from the window he could make out the soft lines of her profile. She turned slightly, glancing over her shoulder at him. Never in his life had he wanted to kiss a woman so badly, but he held himself back from it. "Is it so important to you? Do you want children so badly?"

"I don't even know if want is the right word. But that's part of being a woman, I think. It's what our lives are devoted to—caring for our families. If we don't have children, what family is there?"

He lay back down, staring up at the ceiling in the darkness. She eventually drifted off to sleep beside him. But the comfort of sleep eluded him entirely. She was lonely and had every right to be, and he was condemning her to that forever.

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IT HAD BEEN AN UNEVENTFUL NIGHT. Whether it had been the numerous glasses of wine she'd imbibed throughout dinner or whether it had been Eldren's presence beside her, offering some semblance of security, Adelaide had slept peacefully for the first time since the accident.

Dyllis entered the chamber and blushed furiously. Of course, Adelaide knew why. She might have slept soundly, but from the mussed covers it was clear Eldren had not. He'd tossed and turned through the night, leaving the bed a tousled mess. If only Dyllis knew the real reason for such disarray,

Adelaide thought somewhat bitterly.

"His lordship says that we're to return to Cysgod Lys today, my lady," Dyllis said. "I've brushed out your wool traveling costume best as I can."

"That's quite alright, Dyllis."

"Shall I run a bath for you?"

The very thought of getting back into that tub, when she'd very nearly died in the day before left her shaking. "No. Not this morning. I'll bathe when we've returned home. But I will need to wash up and do something with this hair."

The maid nodded, bobbed a curtsy and began seeing to everything. Adelaide retreated to the bathing room, washed her face in the sink and used her toothbrush and toothpowder. The entire time she was in there, she avoided looking at the tub altogether. But as she turned to exit the room, she felt compelled to do so, to face her fear.

Turning slightly and taking a few hesitant steps in that direction, she frowned as something caught her eye. Stooping to pick it up, she found a small yellow flower lying on the floor next to one of the tub's claw feet. *Like those growing on the moor*.

The door connecting to Eldren's chamber opened and he appeared in the doorway. Adelaide looked up and felt her cheeks warming. He wore only his trousers, his shirt having been discarded. His hair was mussed from sleep and dark whiskers shadowed his hard jaw. But it was his bare chest which drew her gaze. She stared for just a moment, cataloguing her impressions of him quickly before forcing herself to turn away.

"I thought you'd gone," he said. "My apologies."

"I had started to leave, but... I found this," she said, holding up the flower. "It's like we're being taunted at this point. Don't you think?"

He stepped deeper into the room, crouching beside her. Adelaide placed the small flower in his outstretched palm. "It's from the moor, isn't it?"

"It's gorse... it grows wild nearly everywhere in Wales, but yes, it's thick on the moor. And while I'm sure it grows here in Chester, I can't imagine how it got in here," he said softly. "In short, yes, Adelaide. I think we're being taunted. For what reason, I cannot imagine."

"Because it can, I suppose." Adelaide replied. "I'll go and dress. We don't want to miss the train." She moved to get up, but he caught her hand, holding her where she was. Adelaide looked at him questioningly. She'd thought he meant to say something further. But then he leaned in and pressed

his lips to hers, kissing her there beside the tub where he'd saved her life only the day before.

She was so stunned at first, she did nothing, just allowed him to kiss her. It was a foreign sensation, his lips moving gently over hers. Foreign, but not at all unpleasant. An answering warmth began to bloom inside her as the kiss became more insistent. Then his hands moved to her hair, threading through the thick mass and angling her head back ever so slightly. When she felt his tongue touch her lips, she gasped softly. Then he parted her lips further, his tongue sweeping inside to deepen the kiss. It was shocking but she didn't want it to stop. There was the portent of something more, the slow building of heat and tension that prompted her to lean into him, to feel the strength and firmness of his body pressed against hers. It was as if she'd been numb before and suddenly her entire body had surged to life. She clung to him, the points of connection between them a lifeline for her.

Then the outer door opened and the sound of Dyllis bustling about in her chamber brought an abrupt halt to their exploration. Eldren drew back and Adelaide opened her eyes slowly, looking up at him.

"Well, that can't be blamed on wine or brandy," she said.

He smiled. "No, it cannot. Go and get dressed, Adelaide, and we'll make our way home."

"You've decided then?"

"It wasn't really a decision," he said, his lips curving in a slight smile as he stroked his fingertips over her cheek. "I've wanted to do that since the first night you stepped inside Cysgod Lys. I've been battling it every moment... and I've decided to admit defeat as graciously as possible."

Adelaide bit back a smile of her own and rose to her feet. "I promise not to gloat... too much." With that, she exited the bathing chamber and went to dress. Despite everything, she found herself eager to return to their home, even if it was only so she might be alone with him again to share another of those drugging kisses.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

They reached Cysgod Lys by mid afternoon. All of the servants had lined up outside to greet them as the carriage approached.

"Is it like this every time you leave and return?" Adelaide asked.

"No. But we did not return after the ceremony yesterday morning. This will be the first time that they are all greeting you as the new Countess of Montkeith... their mistress," Eldren answered.

"Oh," she said. "I hadn't considered that." In truth, she hadn't thought much of her new position at all. Countess. It was strange to her ears and stranger still to her very American sensibilities. But it would be something she would accustom herself to in time, she thought.

The carriage halted and Eldren jumped down, turning back to lift her down beside him. As the servants bowed and curtsied to them as they walked past, the reality of it all began to sink in. A wicked thought bubbled in her mind. How horrified Muriel would be to think that her greed and ultimatums had resulted in having a titled stepdaughter who would never benefit her socially. She didn't laugh, but a smug smile did tug at her lips.

"That's a disquieting expression," Eldren commented. "Rather like that cat who got the cream."

"I was just thinking how infuriated Muriel will be to have a stepdaughter who is now a countess... and whom will never acknowledge her publicly."

He said nothing, but shared her smirk for a moment as they made their way inside. Tromley halted them at the door. "My lord, I am terribly sorry, but we've had an incident."

Adelaide felt her heart sink. What could have happened? Was it Eldren's

mother? Warren?

"What is it, Tromley? Without any dramatic pauses, if you please," Eldren urged.

"Mrs. Llewellyn returned. We denied her admittance but she insisted that she speak to Mr. Llewellyn, and so he joined her outside. When he returned, she accompanied him. It appears that she visited her physician in Bristol and it has been confirmed that she is with child," Tromley explained. "I understand it violates your orders, my lord, and if you wish me to resign, I will do so. But under the circumstances, I did not feel I could send her away nor did I feel it was my place to countermand the wishes of Mr. Llewellyn."

Adelaide could feel the tension in him, the quiet fury that all but crackled beneath his skin as he stood beside her. Was it directed at Tromley or at Frances?

When Eldren spoke again, her question was answered. "Of course not, Tromley. I understand your reasons and if, in fact, Frances is with child and this is not some elaborate scheme of hers, she should be here."

Tromley nodded and then hurried away to see to the retrieval of their bags. Alone with Eldren in the foyer, she glanced at him, noting his tightly clenched jaw and the muscle that ticked there. "Is it true do you think?"

"It's possible. Unlikely, but possible," he acknowledged.

A bitterness settled in Adelaide then. She knew it immediately for what it was. Jealousy. Resentment. If Frances was having a child, a woman never more undeserving, and she would be denied that joy—there was simply no fairness or justice to be found in that. Did Eldren feel the same? Or was it simply anger at having his wishes countermanded through her schemes?

"I'm sorry," he said softly.

"Sorry for what?"

"That you'll be forced to endure her presence. That she may get to have something she does not deserve while it would be denied you."

Adelaide shrugged. "Are you God then, that you control all of these things?"

"Of course not."

"Then it isn't an apology you are required to make, Eldren. Not everything falls to you," she uttered softly. "I'm rather tired. And since the vagaries of this house seem to be less apparent in daytime hours, I think I'll lie down."

Adelaide turned and headed for the stairs, fighting back tears at all of it.

That small moment of victory, of gloating at Muriels' expense, had been ripped from her and she had been put firmly in her place it would seem.



ELDREN STOOD where he was for a moment, torn between wanting to go after her and needing to find Warren and make sense of all that had occurred. In the end, duty won out. He went in search of his brother and found him in the study. He was drinking spirits of low quality, something he'd likely convinced one of the footmen to procure for him.

"Will that help?" Eldren asked softly.

Warren shrugged "It's not about helping or hurting, brother dear. It's about finding that brief and beautiful moment of numbness where not a damn bit of it matters."

"Is she really carrying your child?"

Warren put his bottle down. "Must we discuss this now?"

"Yes. We must. I demanded to have her banned from this house. If the child isn't yours—."

"It's bloody well mine," Warren admitted.

Eldren sighed and settled himself into a chair near the windows. He could see the moor just beyond the gates, taunting him. "Not to be intrusive or indelicate, but it was my understanding that the two of you had not shared a bed in some time."

"We do not, typically... But there was a night two months, or thereabouts, back where we fought bitterly," Warren said.

"And this is the product of reconciliation?"

Warren's gaze never left the floor. "No. The fight became physical. I struck her. I hurt her. And ultimately, that wasn't enough for me in my drunken rage. I wanted to punish her... and so I did."

Eldren had no response to that. It was more than he could take in. Despise Frances as he did, he could not condone the sort of behavior his brother described. It was also impossible to see his brother as someone capable of such detestable violence. "Warren—," he began, and then stopped. What could he say?

"You do not have to castigate me for it, Eldren. I do so myself every day of my life. I despise what I am and what I've done. You worry we cannot escape mother's madness, and I quietly succumbed to father's brand of cruelty instead. I'll see mother to London in a few days and get her settled at the hospital you've chosen, then Frances and I will return to Bristol. You won't have to tolerate our presence any further. Perhaps with mother away and the two of us gone, you and your own bride may find some measure of peace in this crumbling pile of rocks."

"You will see mother to London and then you will return here. You and Frances will stay here for as long as you wish so long as she does not create difficulties for Adelaide. You will stress that to her, Warren. Her welcome here is conditional... And brother, I have loved you all of your life. I love you still. But if you ever harm another woman again, I will not hesitate to see you punished."

With that, Eldren rose and left the library. He couldn't bear to look at Warren any longer. Neither could he bear to face Adelaide with the knowledge his brother had imparted weighing so heavily on his mind. Instead, he retreated to the dark, dank basement and the small room there where he practiced the pugilistic skills that offered him a strange sort of respite from the workings of his mind.

He descended the steps into the dark cavernous spaces beneath the house, hoping to relieve the anger that burned inside him. But it wasn't simply anger. It was the bitterest of disappointment. If Warren, who had never harmed anyone in his life save for himself, could succumb to the rage and madness that dogged the men of their family, what hope did he have of avoiding it?



Frances was closeted in one of the many empty rooms of the house directly across the hall from the locked door that barred the way to the tower. Her mother-in-law's new quarters were as heavily secured as any prison.

Finally, after what seemed to be ages, the door opened and Mrs. Alberson emerged. The portly nurse locked the door behind her, secure in the knowledge that she possessed the only key. And it was true enough that she did. But Frances possessed something else, or perhaps it was better to say that something else possessed her.

From the moment she'd stepped foot on the Llewellyn land, she'd known

that something was different. The dark forces at Cysgod Lys spoke to her as they did to others, but for her it was a gentle whisper, a soft lullaby. It sheltered and cradled her, loved her, and all she had to do in return was its bidding. And now it wanted to torment poor Sylvia a bit more. For her part, Frances didn't mind. She despised Sylvia and her apparent weakness.

When Mrs. Alberson had vanished from sight, Frances opened the door to her borrowed chamber and slipped across the hall. It was easy enough to pick the lock. She'd come prepared.

Easing into the darkened stairwell that led to Sylvia's chambers. The whispering grew louder, more dense, as if dozens of voices clamored for her attention at once. With that, came a surge of power, a feeling so intense that it made her knees weaken and invoked a kind of ecstasy in her that no man's touch ever had. Power. Those whispered voices promised her the one thing that women were so often denied. Power.

At the top of the stairs, another locked door barred her way. Frances placed her hand on the doorknob, and her lips moved, shaping the words of a silent plea. The snick of the lock disengaging was confirmation that her request had been granted.

Entering Sylvia's room, she found the other woman huddled in the corner. Her hair was wild about her, a dark tangled mass that made her look every inch the mad woman she was reputed to be. But Frances knew the truth. Sylvia wasn't mad. She was tortured.

"How far you have fallen," Frances said, her voice dripping with mock sympathy.

"What do you want of me? Have you come to torment me further?"

"I've come to share good news with you," Frances said. "We both know why you despise Eldren."

"I do not know anyone by that name!"

"Bastard, then. Do you know him as your husband's bastard?"

Sylvia's eyes flashed. "I do."

"This house wants one thing and one thing only... an end to the Llewellyn reign over this land. And I carry in my belly the means to see that end."

Sylvia's gaze dropped to Frances' still flat stomach. "You are with child. With Warren's child."

"No. Not Warren's. But I do carry a child... a child that could inherit all of this with not a drop of Llewellyn blood in its veins. All you have to do is

end the bastard usurper and his young bride."

"And what of my son? What of Warren?"

"Warren will slowly drink himself to death, and once he has, then my child, who is not of his blood, will claim the title and all that comes with it. Then the dark spirits here will be appeased, and even you can rest," Frances promised.

Sylvia rose and lunged toward her, but the restraints at her ankles kept her from gaining enough ground to do so. They pulled taut and the woman fell onto the hard stone floor with a broken and pitiful gasp.

"Lies," Sylvia croaked. "All that escapes from your lips are lies. You cannot be trusted and if you trust the promises of the evil within these walls, you are not just a liar but a fool!"

Frances smiled. "I'm not the one who raised another woman's bastard child as my own son, am I? There is only one fool in this room, Sylvia. But you can be free..."

"What must I do?"

"What you've already been told to do. Kill the girl. Kill Eldren. Leave the rest to me."

"I will," Sylvia said, still lying on the floor. Her dark hair spilled over her face, hiding the gleam of hatred in her eyes.

"You have a weapon... concealed in here," Frances said. "I know that you do. You'll do it tonight."

"He has not made her his wife yet... not truly," Sylvia replied. "I know of his vow to bear no children into this dark place."

"They'll be together. Forces are aligning to be certain of that," Frances promised. "Just be ready. I will untie you now and you will return to your corner, remain calm, and conceal the fact that you have been freed, until the time is right."

"How will I know?" Sylvia demanded.

"They will tell you," Frances answered with a laugh. "Just as they always have."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ELDREN SAT in the corner of the small room, body slicked with sweat and knuckles bleeding. He hadn't taken the time to wrap his hands properly and the skin had split in several places. Blood smeared the leather covering of the bag and his own skin as he sat there struggling to catch his breath.

He was still struggling to come to terms with what Warren had confessed. Between that, the idea that he would have to tolerate Frances' presence indefinitely, the worry regarding his decision for his mother and then the house and its strange effect on Adelaide who was coming to mean far more to him than he had ever expected—was it any wonder that his mind was still awhirl with it all?

Outside the small room, he heard a noise. Thinking it was one of the servants going to the wine cellar or root cellar that was also down there, he ignored it. But then the sound came again. The slight scuffling, scratching noise was grating and impossible to ignore. It was also made by something far too large to be a rat or mouse. There was intent behind that noise. Something was making its presence known to him. He recognized that whatever was happening, it was intended to create fear in him.

Rising from the floor, Eldren opened the door and peered out into the corridor. It was dim, the gaslights along the wall failing to penetrate the deepest of the shadows there. A frisson of unease snaked through him, but he ignored it. He would not be cowed. Despite Adelaide's experiences, he'd been in that house his entire life and nothing of the sort had ever happened to him.

Stepping out into the corridor, he called out, "Who's there?"

There was no answer. Just more scuffling.

With a muttered curse, Eldren moved toward the sound. The door to his small sanctuary slammed behind him with enough force that it rattled in the frame. The sound of it echoed in the darkness. There was no wind, no draft, and no one else down there to blame for that occurrence. His unease grew, but so did his determination to confront whatever dark force had decided to torment them.

"Show yourself," he demanded. His heart pounded in his chest and no longer had anything to do with the exertion of his exercise moments earlier. His sweat slicked skin prickled, the hair on his body standing on end with an awareness that he was not alone in that dark corridor. Something *other* was there with him.

The scuffling came again, along with a shifting of shadows at the end of that corridor. They seemed to draw together, to eddy and swirl before finally coming together in one large mass. It appeared as if they were becoming more dense, taking on a solid form in the distance. It was menacing. Terrifying. And it was sentient. It had acted in response to his demand.

It was doing what he'd asked, he realized. It was showing itself. The impetuous challenge was something he now regretted. He wanted to retreat, to run back to the narrow stairs that would take him to the bright lights and milling servants of the upper floor. Yet he was rooted to the spot. Whatever commands his mind relayed to his body, his body was unable to meet them. It wasn't just fear that paralyzed him. It held him in some sort of sway, its power rendering his own will utterly moot.

The shadow thing moved, undulating as it dipped and swirled, growing ever closer to him. And he was helpless to do anything but wait for it.



ADELAIDE AWOKE with a scream trapped in her throat. Scrambling from the bed, she ran toward the door and into the corridor beyond. "Where is his lordship?" The question was shouted at the first servant she passed, a startled footman who blinked at her in alarm.

"I could not say, my lady. I have not seen him since your arrival home. Tromley will know," he replied, looking at her askance, utterly scandalized by her behavior. Adelaide didn't bother thanking him or even acknowledging his statement. Instead, she ran toward the stairs, yanking her skirts up past her ankles as she took them as quickly as she dared. Tromley emerged from one of the many closets tucked here and there in the house that held silver and linens. If he was shocked by her ragged and slightly wild appearance, he said nothing.

"Where is my husband?"

Perhaps it was her urgent tone or the slightly manic air that surrounded her in that moment, but he simply answered her question. "He is in his exercise room in the basements, my lady. He often goes there, especially if he is troubled. I think his earlier conversation with his brother troubled him greatly."

"Show me."

"Is everything quite alright, ladyship?"

Adelaide knew that in that moment she both looked and sounded like a mad woman. "I do not know, Tromley. But I must find him quickly."

Tromley indicated she should follow and then led her to a rough wooden door in the corridor that led down into the kitchens. A feeling of foreboding swept through her, so strong and terrifying that her knees very nearly buckled from it. She pressed her hands to the walls on either side of the corridor in order to remain upright. In front of her, Tromley opened that door and she heard Eldren's shout and then a loud percussive boom, almost as if something had exploded.

"Oh, dear heaven," she whispered in horror, just before she rushed through that open door with Tromley protesting behind her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE FORCE of it had knocked him flat. He could feel the trickle of blood from his nose and from a cut on his cheek. His back was abraded and bruised from being knocked backwards onto the stone floor. Bits of dust and debris still fell from the ceiling and walls, covering him in it. It stuck to his damp skin and hair, coating him in it.

"Eldren!"

Despite the ringing in his ears from the blast, he could hear her. "Stay back, Adelaide! I'm well enough."

"You are not," she said, though her voice was much calmer than it had been before he responded to her. She rounded the corner from the stairs and her eyes widened. "What on earth happened?"

"I don't know yet," he said. "Stay where you are. I'm not certain how sound these chambers are now."

"I heard what sounded like an explosion," she said, her face white with fear.

It had sounded like an explosion. Perhaps it was one. Perhaps some build up of gases had caused him to hallucinate those bizarre sounds and the terrifying image of that blackness forming at the end of the corridor. But he didn't believe that. He believed that the power of whatever inhabited the very brick and mortar of Cysgod Lys was growing stronger, more violent, and more determined. Why? What change had been wrought?

The answer to that question was quite simply the woman who now stood behind him. From the moment of Adelaide's arrival, things had shifted, becoming much more different. She wasn't wicked or evil or contributing to the darkness. Of that he was certain, but she was a catalyst of some sort. Did it fear her? Had her promises to see his family's suffering come to an end challenged that dark entity?

Still reeling from the events and more concerned than ever for the innocent young woman he'd inadvertently drawn into a potentially deadly situation, Eldren turned and fled the darkened chambers. He grasped Adelaide's arm and hurried her up the stairs. "It isn't safe down there," he insisted.

"Was it the gas lines or was it something worse?" she asked softly.

"I don't know. But we need to discuss it privately. I don't want the servants any more unsettled than they already are... so for the sake of everyone else, it was a malfunctioning gas line and from now forward the cellars are off limits."

Adelaide nodded her agreement. "I fear your nose is broken."

"Will it make me so very ugly, then?" he asked, as they emerged into the relative safety of the corridor.

"You know it will not."

Eldren didn't smile. There was still far too much at stake. He turned to Tromley, "There was a problem with the gas lines below. The cellars entirely off limits."

"The wine cellar, my lord?"

"It's likely a loss, but even if it isn't, until everything has been thoroughly inspected I don't want anyone in there... that includes you, Tromley. New wines can be purchased from the wine merchant in town and some alternative to the root cellar must be established. No one goes in or out of that door until I say so."

"Certainly, my lord."

"Tromley, please have supplies and fresh, clean water sent up to his lordship's chambers so that we might tend his wounds," Adelaide instructed.

"Yes, my lady. I will see to everything," the butler promised.

Eldren moved toward the stairs, Adelaide beside him. The aches and pains were beginning to sink in, along with the realization that he had very nearly died. What would have become of Adelaide if he had?

"You are thinking about what might have been, not what actually occurred," she observed.

"Do you know me so well after so short a time?" he asked her.

"I know what it is to face death, to cheat it, and reflect afterward," she

reminded him. "First, with the sinking of the Mohegan and again at the hotel only yesterday. Eldren, it is toying with us. It wants us to fear it."

There was truth to what she said. He conceded, "If it can manipulate water in a hotel more than a hundred miles from here, surely the gas lines in the cellars are not such an impossible feat."

They reached his chambers and he gratefully sank down onto one of the chairs before the fire, mindful to lean forward lest he shed blood on the upholstery. Of course, there were greater concerns. They'd been shown in no uncertain terms that the mantra of his youth, shadows cannot hurt you, was patently untrue. It could cause harm, real and lasting.

Maids entered then, carrying bandages and the god-awful concoctions that the cook insisted were good for every minor ailment or injury.

"Put them there," Adelaide said, gesturing to the table beside him. "Then you may go. I'll tend to him."

When they were alone again, she approached him and knelt before him. Taking a damp cloth, she began to carefully clean the blood from his face.

"You don't have to do this," he said. "I can tend to myself."

She didn't stop her ministrations, but there was a slight hiccup in her movements. When she spoke, her voice was pitched low, and there was a note in it of dread. "Things have changed between us. Haven't they? Isn't that why you kissed me this morning before we left Chester?"

She thought he was rejecting her, he realized, when the truth was that he was offering her the opportunity to reject him. "How can you want that from me when it's my fault that you are even here to deal with this madness?" Eldren demanded.

"Do you know that when I crossed that moor the first night, all I could think of was the many ways in which Murial had undermined me at home?" She stated, her tone bitter. "Servants who'd been with me since I was a child suddenly looked at me suspiciously, like I was some vicious animal who might turn on them... She'd have convinced the entire household and my father that I was mad. And crossing that moor, feeling all those terrible things around me, I wondered if perhaps she hadn't been right after all. Maybe I was mad!"

"You're not mad. You're the least mad person I've ever known... except perhaps when it comes to your bravery which now seems to border on recklessness," he replied. Her hands were smoothing over the planes of his face, each touch economical, graceful, and intended to soothe. But it did not soothe him. It inflamed him.

When she rose, walked to the side of the chair, and her delicate hands began to stroke the skin of his back, cleaning each of the cuts and scrapes there, Eldren closed his eyes. It had been so long since anyone had touched him so. Intoxicated by that feeling, by the rush of his blood and the sharpness of his desire for her, he could not speak.

Leaning into him, so that when she spoke it was the merest whisper of sound next to his ear, Adelaide murmured, "I am not so brave as you think, my lord. If I were, I would not be here. I would have sailed back to New York and taken my chances. But I am thankful for that cowardice, whatever may come of it, because it brought me to you."

"You don't know what you're saying... Adelaide, I fear that Warren has done something unspeakable. Something so heinous he may be beyond redemption. What if the madness of my family is taking root in him and this is the first step? And if I am next? I should have sent you away when I still could... or better still, I should never have brought you here to start!"

"Where else would I go?" She asked. She'd dropped to her knees in front of him, imploring him to understand. "Eldren, we both know that my options are limited if not nonexistent. I'd never have made a decent match in New York, not after all the lies and gossip that my stepmother has whispered about me for years! And here in England, at best, an old man looking for a nurse maid or a fortune hunter who simply wanted a wealthy wife with no care at all for me. Whatever we face here, I'll face it gladly rather than be alone again."

She was lonelier even than he'd been. Cut off from the world, isolated from it not by curses and the threat of insanity, but by the cold and calculating machinations of her stepmother, Adelaide's experiences closely mirrored his own in that regard. Reaching out, he caught a strand of her hair that had escaped its coiffure and rubbed it between his fingers, testing the silky texture of it. "I am sorry for what you have suffered. Sorrier still for the suffering that may yet come. I feel as if I've done you a disservice in bringing you here, in tying you to me when you had no notion of what it would mean."

She cupped his face tenderly. "We are married, Eldren. In the eyes of God and man. I made vows to you and I mean to keep them. I will not abandon you or forsake you simply because things may be difficult. If all the things Muriel said of me over the years, that I was hysterical and overly emotional, that I was a danger to her or to others because I could not control

myself—if those things were true, would you leave me?"

"Of course not," he answered. "I have given you my promises, for what they are worth, and I would care for you as my wife regardless."

"Stop pushing me away. Stop telling me why it's impossible for us to have any future together or a life together. We both know the danger we currently face... does it not make sense then to seize what happiness we may, while we can?"

He wanted to say no, to refuse her. If he thought it possible, he'd send her away from him and from Cysgod Lys forever just to keep her safe. But the events at the hotel had proven that no amount of distance would keep the darkness that cursed his family from afflicting her. But that knowledge, that she was now forever tied to whatever evil had attached itself to the Llewellyn family, for once in his life, gave him precisely what he wanted. She was his now, regardless. He meant to stand by his vow that he would not bring children into the world, but he could show her passion. He could indulge in pleasures with her that had been denied him for so long.

The temptation was too great. Eldren reached for her, tugging her up from the floor until she was sprawled across his thighs. When he kissed her, he did so with one intent. To claim her, to brand her in a way that would leave no doubt as to how much he desired her.



ADELAIDE'S BREATH CAUGHT. Her heart raced, but not from fear. From the moment she'd first realized that he would be her husband, curiosity and desire had sparked within her. His nearness over the past several days, the heroic way he'd saved her, all followed by the searing kiss they'd shared just that morning, had created an eagerness inside her for just this moment. She didn't retreat from his kiss, nor did she allow her inexperience to inhibit her. Instead, she responded with an abandon that shocked them both. She kissed him back as fiercely and possessively as he kissed her. Nipping at his lips, pressing herself firmly against his chest and welcoming the sweet invasion of his tongue as he parted her lips. She met each stroke with one of her own, equally carnal and seductive.

When at last he broke away from her, their labored breathing filling the room, he murmured, "Christ almighty. You will be the death of me."

"Am I doing something wrong?"

"No," he answered. "You are doing everything right. I've never desired a woman as I do you. But when you kiss me that way, Adelaide—I have only so much control and you test it heartily."

His voice was rough, husky with what she now recognized was desire. "Is control so very important?"

"For now it is," he said. "I don't want to frighten you."

"You won't," she insisted.

When he rose with her in his arms and strode toward the bed, Adelaide clung to him. There was a small bit of fear but it was outweighed and then some by curiosity and by need. She longed for his touch, to feel close to him. Holding her arms out to him, she welcomed the weight of him against her, the firm press of his body against hers. And when he kissed her again, she gave herself up to it entirely.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THEY DID NOT GO down to dinner, but elected to have a tray brought up to their room. Lying in their bed, the curtains drawn about them as they shared a simple meal of cold meats and cheese.

Adelaide stretched languorously. He had not made love to her, not fully at any rate. But he had introduced her to the many pleasures that could be had between them without actually consummating their marriage. She blushed just to think of all that had occurred between them, and yet she regretted nothing that had passed, only that which hadn't.

"You blush now, when only moments ago you were utterly shameless," he teased.

"It isn't that I lack shame, husband," she replied smartly, "Only that I was too distracted by other things to pay it any mind."

He kissed her shoulder, his teeth grazing the skin, "And what things might those have been?"

Adelaide reached for a small cut of ham and another bit of bread. "You're not tricking me into saying anything scandalous."

"So long as I can talk you into doing those scandalous things, you may be as circumspect as you choose in your speech," he replied with a grin.

It was the happiest and most carefree she had seen him since they'd met, Adelaide reflected. "I like seeing you this way."

"Utterly satisfied?"

"Happy," she answered. "You seem happy and I don't think I have ever seen you that way since I came here."

He rolled over onto his back. "I haven't been happy. Not in ages. And

this, Adelaide, is only a reprieve. You know that, don't you? That while we may, for a few hours lock out the world and all the darkness in this house, it must be faced again eventually."

She sighed wearily. "I do know that. And since there is no time like the present, what did you mean when you said that Warren had done something heinous?"

It was apparent from his expression that it was not a topic he wished to discuss. But after a slight pause, he admitted, "Warren admitted that the child Frances carries could be his... that the two of them argued and it became physical. He doesn't recall the events in their entirety, but Frances stated that he forced himself upon her and he has reason to believe she is being truthful."

It was horrifying. Adelaide shivered with the dread of it. "I can't imagine—it just seems so very out of character for him! I know that I do not know him well, but Warren seems a rather passive individual."

"He is," Eldren admitted. "Warren has always been passive. He was bullied by Alden. Tormented by him truthfully... and our father, as well. Frances, over the years, has added to his misery, and his drunkenness has been enabled by her from the outset. But her bad behavior does not excuse his."

"No," Adelaide agreed. "It does not. What will you do?"

"The only thing that I can. Frances will have a home here now, as will the child, regardless of what happens," he answered solemnly.

"If there is to be a child in this house, then we need to redouble our efforts to eradicate anything unexplainable that is happening here. I sent a letter off to Lord Mortimer before we left Chester. I asked him to bring his most trusted mystics and any other experts in occult phenomenon to Cysgod Lys."

His face paled. "I fear that will backfire."

"I fear many things, but I'd rather face this head on than to let it slowly drive me mad," Adelaide responded firmly. "We can face anything together, can't we?"



ELDREN'S STOMACH clenched and a knot of tension took up residence there. What if they were only making it worse? Reaching out, he clasped Adelaide's

hand and drew it up to his chest, placing it over his heart and holding it there. "You terrify me. Your boldness—what if this is a thing that cannot be bested, Adelaide?"

"I am not bold or brave. Right now, we are cornered. It's shown us that it will not allow us to simply escape. That leaves fighting it as our only avenue. Whether we best it or not, we cannot simply give in to it."

There was some truth to her words. It would not let them run. That much had been proven at the hotel in Chester. "You are right, of course. It's become much more active since you arrived... and I cannot imagine why. Regardless, we must face it and do our utmost to eliminate this evil from our lives."

"We will. When Lord Mortimer arrives, he will know what to do. We will find a way to stop this torment, Eldren. I believe that firmly."

He wished that he could have her arrogance on that score, but he did not. The darkness at Cysgod Lys was entrenched, clinging between the stones like the very mortar that held it all together. But he would not say that to her. He would not deprive her of hope.

Eldren extricated herself from the bed and their tangle of limbs only long enough to remove the tray that held their supper. He placed it on the table before the fire and then returned to her.

"Tomorrow is soon enough to think about those things," he insisted. "Tonight, I want to hold you. I want to touch you and discover all the wondrous secrets of your body."

"You already did," she offered with a smile.

His own lips curved in response. "That you think so is both a boon to my confidence and a testament to just how little you know. No, Adelaide. We have only scratched the surface of sensual pleasures."

"Then teach me," she replied. "We shall whittle the world down until it consists of only the two of us."

Eldren joined her on the bed, took her in his arms and kissed her with all the pent up loneliness and desire he'd been burdened with through the years. It was a dangerous thing to let himself feel things for her, to care for her. And yet he found himself unable to resist the temptation of her, and perhaps unwilling. She was his respite, his reward for what felt like ages of self denial.

As their passion once more ignited, each touch leading to another, sighs and whispers giving way to moans and cries of pleasure, they were unaware of the gathering darkness. It eddied and swirled in the darkest corners of the house. Waiting, watching, biding its time.



Sylvia sat, still huddled in the same corner she'd occupied when Frances came to her earlier. In the far corner of the room, Mrs. Alberson slumbered. Her snores filled the silence, almost masking the soft whispering sound that began to fill the room.

Silently, the outer door opened, a wedge of light spilling in over the stone floor. Cautiously, Sylvia rose and moved unfettered to the window that was now boarded up. She found the large shard of glass in the folds of the curtains and carefully extricated it from its makeshift hiding place between the layers of cloth.

She turned back to Mrs. Alberson and knew a moment of regret. The nurse was a kind woman, gentler than most had been and certainly gentler than was required of her. But she could not have her sounding the alarm and rousing the entire house before her tasks were complete.

Standing to the left of her, the glass poised at the other woman's throat, Sylvia knew the exact moment Mrs. Alberson awoke. She didn't hesitate, but pressed deep with the glass and drug it sharply over the woman's neck. Blood bubbled and frothed as it spilled from the macabre wound, staining her white skin and disappearing into the black cloth of her drab uniform. But the smell was inescapable. Sylvia stepped back, avoiding the drips of the dark red substance that spattered on the stone floor.

Once Mrs. Alberson stilled entirely, Sylvia grabbed a piece of fabric from the woman's mending basket and used it to wrap the glass in so that it would not cut her hand further. She'd already done enough damage.

Crossing the room to the open door, she eased down the stairs and toward the main floor of the house. Creeping along on bare, silent feet, she made her way to the chamber she'd once been forced to occupy with her husband. The chamber where she'd labored for hours to bring Alden into the world, only to then be presented with a second child, a maid's bastard that she'd have to claim as her own.

Now, that squalling babe that had been placed in her arms was a man grown, with a wife, and he had taken the title that had been her son's by

letting Alden die an ignoble death. For that he would pay... he and the girl he'd dared to bring into their cursed home.

The door opened silently, not a squeak of sound and without any efforts on Sylvia's part. The dark things in that house wanted the girl gone and she'd give them that, so long as it meant also being rid of him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ADELAIDE WASN'T certain what had woken her. But her eyes popped open of their own accord and her heart was pounding in her chest, a feeling of dread so sharp and strong pervading her that she could not catch her breath for it.

It had not been a nightmare, for surely there would be some awareness of it, some trace memory given how abruptly she had woken. But there was nothing. Only the darkness of the bedchamber and the sound of Eldren's not so quiet snores beside her.

She might have been amused by that very undignified sound under other circumstances. But in a state of hyperawareness, she could only wonder where the danger was, what mysterious threat stalked them in the darkness.

Adelaide had almost convinced herself that it was her imagination, that for once within the halls of Cysgod Lys, there truly was no danger. But then a shadowy movement at the bedside caught her eye. It wasn't the dark shadowy mass she'd seen before. This was the movement of a person intent on subterfuge and wickedness.

Whether it was instinct or something else she could not name, Adelaide rolled sharply to her left, falling out of the bed and onto the floor, just as the person's arms came down in a vicious arc and feathers drifted upward into the pale silvery light that filtered in through the windows.

Eldren awoke then, scrambling from the bed and backing away from it in disorientation. Adelaide was scrabbling backwards on her bottom, shoving with her hands and feet to get away as the pale figure turned toward her. Wild haired, wild eyed and obviously mad, there was only one possible explanation. It was the woman from the tower—Eldren's mother.

"Stop!" Eldren shouted.

The woman advanced on Adelaide, heedless of Eldren's order. It wasn't a knife in her hand but a large shard of glass wrapped in fabric and already stained with blood.

Adelaide had reached the small dressing table where Dyllis had unpacked her things earlier. Clawing at the top of it with her hands, she threw items willy nilly at the approaching madwoman. Until her hand seized on something that did not even belong there. It was the letter opener from the writing box Tromley had provided for her.

Clutching it like a knife, Adelaide turned back only to see Eldren diving across the bed, tackling his mother's pale form to the ground.

The woman howled, her screams filling the room. They echoed into the halls and beyond. Doors began to open up and down the hall, the alarmed calls of servants filtered down from the upper floors.

The woman was strong. Stronger than she should have been, Adelaide realized as she watched Eldren grapple with her. He had yet to pry the weapon from her hand and it seemed as if she were gaining the upper hand.

Unwilling to stand by, Adelaide lunged forward and brought the letter opener down with all of her might. The blade sank into the woman's shoulder. The feeling of it left Adelaide queazy and struggling not to vomit. But it provided the distraction needed. Eldren finally managed to overpower her, pinning her to the floor as a bevy of footmen rushed in, some still clad only in nightshirts.

She wailed, screamed, cursed, and no one batted an eye. It was commonplace it seemed. Just as commonplace as her attempts to murder her eldest son and his wife, Adelaide thought bitterly.

After a moment's discussing, two of the footmen stepped forward and managed to seize the dowager's arms in such a way that she would not be able to do harm to anyone else.

Eldren rose from the floor, his head drooping with defeat. "I must go see to Mrs. Alberson. If mother escaped her, armed no less, it is unlikely that she has survived."

"I'll go with you," Adelaide said.

"I don't know what we'll find," Eldren replied.

"Whatever it is we will find it together. Let me get my wrapper."

With her robe draped about her, Adelaide followed him from the room and down the long corridor to a heavy wooden door. There was no need for a key as it stood wide open.

A footman emerged from the shadows with a small lamp which he passed to Eldren. Together, they climbed the rough hewn stone steps into the tower and were greeted by a sight so horrific, Adelaide could do nothing more than cover her mouth with her hand to stifle her scream.

Mrs. Alberson's throat had been slit. The nurse was slumped in her chair, her head against the wall and the macabre gash in her neck highlighted by the crimson stained ruffles of the blouse that she had donned with her simple black suit.

"Send for the magistrate... This is not something we can or should conceal," Eldren said. "Mad or not, she must face the consequences of this, be it an asylum or something far worse."

Adelaide slipped her hand into his, holding fast to him. She knew what it would mean. Scandal. Ruin. Any hope of secrecy or discretion about the nature of his family's ailment was no longer an option. The world would know that his mother was a mad woman, and no doubt information about his father and brother would be disclosed as well. And the world would watch him for any sign that he might succumb to the same fate.

As if on cue, the wails stopped. The entire house fell into silence as they waited. Not even a hint of a whisper, from the living or the dead, could be heard. That in and of itself was telling, Adelaide thought.



IN THE CORNERS of the room shadows settled, laying one atop the other like a nest of snakes. They did not move or writhe, but concealed themselves within the natural world that they were no longer a part of. The efforts to end the Llewellyn's once and for all had failed, and those efforts had carried a steep price. But the war was long from over. Their current detente would not last.

But for now, just as it always had, it offered a reprieve. It allowed the inhabitants of the house to have a calm before the storm. The hotel and the display in the basement had cost it dearly, but it would recover soon. In the meantime, it would watch, wait, and gauge how best to break down and destroy all those within its walls. Except for *her* . She was its promise after all.

To be continued....

THE VICTORIAN GOTHIC COLLECTION is now complete. Books two and three are available on Amazon and are free for Kindle Unlimited Subscribers.

THANK YOU,

THANK YOU...

To everyone who read this book, thank you. I hope you will continue on this journey with me into long form Gothic romance. I could have compiled all of this into one book instead of three, but it would have been a very, very long book. Additionally, there is something to be said for suspense and breaking it up over time. I was very inspired by The Haunting of Hill House on Netflix, Penny Dreadful from Showtime and also by American Horror Story. I don't feel that I left each book on a cliff hanger, as the ultimate story arc is the relationship between Adelaide and Eldren. I left them at a new and better place in their relationship at the end of each book while the strange goings on at Cysgod Lys remained unresolved around them. I hope that you've enjoyed this. It was the first time writing in this manner for me and also the first time I've written a book where the main characters carried over in that same role from book to book. There could be future novellas and novels from this series. I've got ideas percolating for Warren and I can definitely see a series of short stories centered around Madame Leola and Lord Mortimer and their adventures together.

Thank you, Chasity Bowlin

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Additionally, if you'd like to receive Chasity's newsletter to be apprised of new releases and sales, you can sign up here:

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Thank you.

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