



Knight of Swords

By Sara Curran-Ross

For my daughter Emily Jane.

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Knight of Swords

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Knight of Swords

Chapter One

London 1893

Once again I was to be guest witness to a gruesome murder. The monster came to collect me from my dreams just as he always did. He changed their pleasant landscape and replaced them with visions of death that would forever haunt my soul.

Somehow this creature had the terrifying ability to walk through my mind and lead my very consciousness into his own dark-filled world. I would see his cruel murders first hand. His emotions and mine became one and the same, linked by some fateful bond. Only fear and revulsion remained my own. Our senses were entwined. I felt the touch, smell, taste and sound of all that he did. How, I did not know. I did not care to know. I just wanted it to stop.

This night we approached a small, secluded alley in a forgotten, dirty, damp corner of Whitechapel, not far from where one of the notorious Ripper murders had taken place a few years earlier. To my horror, this was somewhere I recognised. The memory flashed strong and vivid in my mind. I had taken Matilda, daughter of the landlord from the nearby drinking establishment, The Candlewick, up against the wall not a few weeks before.

I remembered her innate giggling as I man-handled her fleshy, plump breasts and moved her up and down against the wall as she straddled me, pushing inside her so hard and fast my head spun. I recognised every place the monster took me. They were always the scene of one of my carnal sins. It was all part of the punishment he had so meticulously devised for me.

I heard a muffled sobbing and a dragging sound. I stared at the creature's back and down to the long, bony fingers of his hand. They were coiled tightly around a mass of fiery, titian curls. My lips trembled and my body shook as I looked down at the woman he was dragging along the alley.

She was bound with a length of thin rope and gagged with one of her stockings. Blood trailed from a large gash in her forehead. I ached to help her, to tear her from the monster's grasp, but I could not. Other than to walk dutifully behind him, my body would not move. My will was not my own. He wore the garments of a clergyman, but this man was no true man of the cloth. How could he be?

I never saw his face. It was always obscured by the shadows that seemed to surround him wherever we travelled. He walked with a limp. His unsteady gait made his laboured footsteps heavy upon the cobbled streets. The clumping sound chillingly announced his arrival into my dreams when he came to collect my soul.

His heavy tread mingled with the noise of the woman's body being dragged along the cobbles. Tears sprang into my eyes, begging for release, but I held them back. My sight fixed more closely on the woman. It was . . ., you must excuse my emotion, it was Sophie – another young woman who had been unfortunate to attract my lust. This callous, unforgiving creature took the women I had made love to. Oh God, Sophie, I am so sorry you ever met me.

Sophie would be his fifth killing in the last month. Five innocent souls tormented by his cruelty before their murders. I tried to beg for her life, to connect with any shred of humanity left

in him, but my efforts fell upon deaf ears. I offered my own life in return. When that did not move him, I vowed I would find a way to stop him. Somehow I would kill him. Even if I swung for it, I would kill him. I thundered this intention at him with anger, but he merely laughed at the suggestion, continuing diligently with his task.

We finally reached our destination, a small, black corner of the alley, well hidden from view. It was a cold, damp winter's night. Tendrils of wet mist curled and stretched like smoke through the alley. The man pulled Sophie up to standing. He loosened the bonds around her wrists before fixing them to a rusting, wet drainpipe. The action forced her up onto her tiptoes. Her eyes darted upwards to the source of her new pain, and she began squealing frantically behind the gag, just as a child would. Then her eyes lowered and slowly fixed upon me. They filled with tears that were quickly replaced by disgust and loathing. I tried to speak of my innocence, my intention to help, my fear for her situation, but I was silenced. Sophie struggled wildly, causing her body to swing on the rope. With all of the strength I possessed, I strained to rush to her aid, but it was useless. I could not move unless the creature allowed it. Sophie would die believing I was a partner to her murder. I found that notion hard to live with.

The man started to strip Sophie of her sky blue satin evening gown and undergarments. He slowly exposed every mouth-watering curve of her naked body I had spent many a day and night getting to know in secret, moments stolen from her husband.

When she was fully naked, the creature turned her around to face the wall of the deserted building. Her small frame was rigid with fearful anticipation as he stroked the length of her spine with his fingers. She shivered in reaction to his slithering touch, her pale skin pimpled with goose bumps. Her voice was an incoherent whimper of pleading words behind the gag cruelly forced into her mouth.

The killer was pleased with the choice he had made in selecting Sophie as his next victim, for it was not only me he punished with his vile acts. Sophie bore a very close resemblance to his lost sweetheart, the woman who had rejected his tormented love. This woman, this Juliet, whose name he whispered as he maimed and killed, drove his murders in equal strength to his passion to punish me. Somehow the man had linked our perceived crimes, deeming them both worthy of the same punishment. I could not help but feel as though he believed I had wooed Juliet and taken her from him, as I had done with other women from other men. Yet, I had never met her. I confess I was confused and bewildered by his anger toward me. Jealousy seemed as good a reason for his hostility as any other.

Though I did not know of Juliet or of her life, I was drawn to her through this creature. Every killing was the monster's rehearsal of Juliet's eventual demise and I feared for her life on a continual basis. I felt incredibly protective of her, relieved that, despite all of his efforts, he had not been able to detect her whereabouts.

I winced when the man slit the sharp, dirty, black nail that adorned his index finger into the skin at the top of Sophie's spine. It cut deep. Fresh crimson blood permeated the wound. The

blood felt warm to the killer's touch. Excitement stirred in his loins at the sight of it. The indecent arousal forced to enter my mind disgusted me. I wanted no part of it.

He was hypnotised by the intense scarlet colour contrasted against his captive's naked, pale pink back. The blood trailed seductively in one perfect single line down her quivering spine. I heard his breath deepen with aroused anticipation as the line curved down to the cleft between the plump rise of her buttocks. He smoothed his palm around her fleshy rump in appreciation.

Just before it entered the tight cleft, he bent to lap at the blood. Sophie's helpless body shuddered with the icy caress of his tongue. Her hips bucked against the wall, mimicking the sexual act in a vain effort to reel away from him. Her skin felt soft and downy to the killer as he caressed it once more, but the pleasure he took from it was nothing compared to the pleasure provided by the taste of her blood.

His unclean fingers splayed out across her back. By now I knew what he was going to do next. He was feeling for the most tender part of the woman's back, where the blood was the sweetest. Every muscle in my body tightened once more as I made yet another futile attempt to move and come to Sophie's rescue. Fear and rage swelled feverishly inside me as the man bent his mouth to her back and grazed his sharp teeth along her skin.

Sophie reeled away from him, sobbing behind the gag. He sniffed at her flesh with the curiosity and intensity of an animal. As he inhaled that familiar aroma of soap and jasmine, I experienced its potency along with him. The killer's sense of

smell was far more heightened than my own. The power with which he inhaled her scent left me feeling giddy.

This was the point in the proceedings when his victim appeared to take on Juliet's persona to him. He whispered her name to Sophie as though she had been named Juliet at birth. He spoke of the cruelty of her rejection and the vengeance he would enact upon her. There was no alternative punishment for her crime, she must die for her ungodly treachery. He could wait no longer.

For the final time I begged him to stop, but he merely gave me a soft chuckle. His teeth snaked sharply against Sophie's skin, and then broke it. The incision was almost surgical, delving deep through muscle and sinew. I had never believed in fantastical stories of vampires, but here before me, there appeared to be living proof.

Sophie's screams were a muffled garble against her gag as her essence began to spill from the hole the creature had made in her body. He was quick to take advantage, capturing its flow into his mouth. He had punctured one of her organs, her liver perhaps, I was sure of it. He drew blood from deep inside her with passionate ardour. It saturated his lips and dribbled untidily down his chin, staining his black garb and white collar red. I felt the warm, viscous liquid fill my stomach. My body lurched and convulsed. The blood surged upwards with force through my throat as I made every attempt to reject it. I watched it burst out through my mouth onto the ground in a vivid red torrent. The man had created the terrible hallucination within my mind, and I was powerless to stop it. I fell to my knees vomiting. What disturbed me more than anything was the small part of me that cried out to

hold onto the blood. I vomited again at the revulsion I felt towards my confused thoughts.

Sophie's body was slumping when I wiped my mouth and stood once again. The man spun her around. Her skin was now as white as porcelain. Her eyes were dull, almost lifeless, glazing with the approach of death and burrowed into her face by black rings. Tears smudged and discoloured her complexion. She looked as though she were a broken china doll left out in the rain. The red-golden locks of her hair had fallen loose from the ivory comb at the back of her head. They cascaded over her shoulders, the tips caressing her breasts.

The monster swept the hair away from her chest and began planting bloodied kisses across her throat that turned into vicious bites. Sophie's body resembled a leaking vessel riddled with holes. Tears began flowing down my face as I wept for her.

Blood dripped into her pale cleavage. He scooped up one of her breasts and bit into it softly as if he were taking a bite from a succulent, exotic fruit. More blood sprang forth into his open orifice. It overflowed from the sides of his mouth as he suckled with the fervour of a newborn babe.

After a while, he lifted his head, and I knew it was time for Sophie to finally die. But I also knew that would not be the end of matters for the killer. When the women died, the creature would dismember the cadaver just as The Ripper had done with his own victims. He would open the body and select the choicest organs, wrapping them in a large handkerchief to take away.

He always took the heart, but he would make choices over the other organs. It depended on his peculiar taste for that evening. The way he had earlier admired Sophie's plentiful rump

left me in no doubt he would cut a piece of that juicy mound to accompany whatever organs he took. Nausea rose from my stomach as I contemplated being forced to view this vile act. How could this man masquerade as a servant of the Church whilst committing such acts of abomination? I knew not.

The man planted more, soft, bloody kisses, his mouth approaching the slowing beat of Sophie's pulse, weakly throbbing in her jugular vein. My whole frame tightened. I found myself holding my breath in terror.

I shouted out, vainly. The man's cold, grey eyes stared back at me without pity. The faint trace of a smile across his blood spattered lips, betrayed amusement at my distress. I had, perhaps, given him the reaction he desired in the final act of my latest punishment. He lifted his mouth from Sophie's tender, fragile neck, widening it to reveal his sharp blood stained incisors.

My eyes stretched open in horror as he swept down like a bird of prey onto Sophie's throat. In one fluid motion, he tore it out. Sophie fell dead in his arms instantly. It was over. God forgive me, but I could not help feeling relieved. Sophie would feel no more pain. At least she would not feel the tearing of her flesh as the monster dismembered her. I was grateful for that small mercy.

The man pressed his face into the fateful wound to catch the rich essence that poured from Sophie's broken body. I closed my eyes tight, unable to take the gruesome scene anymore. I struggled to support myself on my shaking legs as Sophie's blood seeped into the cobbles around my feet. I wished I could block out the frantic sucking noises the man made, wished I could remove the taste of blood from my mouth that made me convulse.

A soft feminine cry startled both me and the man. The dreadful sucking noise abruptly ceased. I opened my eyes with a quick sharpness to find the source of the distressed utterance. I heard him whisper her name with reverence, 'Juliet . . . my love, Juliet, you have come at last.'

Chapter Two

My heart was filled with a new terror. The man and I were no longer alone. The beautiful Juliet stood beside me. Though she was not physically present, I could sense through the creature that she too shared the vision of his work. I could smell her intoxicating scent of cedar wood and mandarin, swirl around my consciousness like a breath of fresh air. It wiped away the putrid smell of death and violence from the frozen atmosphere.

The clergyman's twisted love for this woman threatened to overwhelm him. At last he had found her. After vainly trying for months to psychically link with her mind, he had at last become successful. I was more than fearful for her.

I felt an affinity with this woman I had never felt with another. I did not know the reason for it, only the sudden conviction that our destinies were crossed. If I was to allow any harm to befall this beauty, my own life would be in peril. My instinct was fierce. It rose through my ethereal being to scream loudly in my mind as though her presence had provoked it. I would, without fear, protect her with my life. Willingly forsaking both my life and all others for the protection of hers alone. She had, in an instant, unveiled all meaning to my life and its mission. It was madness. I did not have any acquaintance with this woman,

but I knew, I understood, what I had to do. I could not ignore this instinct. It filled me with new found strength and courage.

I could not deny the intensity of the anger I felt when the man reached out to touch Juliet. To my relief she backed away from him, unencumbered. Unlike my own, the vision did not restrain her movement. Her emerald eyes flicked from poor Sophie's naked, dead body hanging from the rope bound around her wrists, back to the dark, blood-soaked figure of the vampire. Her face was contorted with shock and grief. Tears flowed abundantly from her eyes.

'Juliet . . . I have waited for so long. Come to me child.' the man offered.

Her resemblance to Sophie was striking, yet there was an aristocratic bearing to her features that Sophie had not possessed. Her voice was young. I fancied she was barely eighteen years old.

'Who are you? What have you done? It is blasphemy for you to wear the vestments of the Church. How can I see you? I must be dreaming?' Her voice faded as she considered the idea.

The killer's eyes looked at her quizzically. He told her softly, 'You really don't know, do you? You are as innocent as him.' He turned and pointed at me.

Juliet followed the direction he pointed his finger and rested her eyes upon me. She appeared startled and confused at my presence. Her pretty features tightened with further anxiety. Then she frowned, put her hands to her head, and shook it.

'No, this isn't real. This is a dream, a nightmare. I will wake in a moment. Juliet, wake up,' she told herself loudly.

The murderer laughed, making Juliet jump and stare at him. He spoke eloquently, 'I can assure you Juliet, my love . . .'

he gestured at the scene before us. ‘This is all very real. You can see this vision because I am in your mind, just as I am in that of Lord Valancourt’s here. You don’t know who you are or of the great powers of our race. It is almost amusing.’

‘Our race?’ Juliet whispered to herself, her eyes clouded with confusion. She shook her head again and glared at him defiantly. I could not but help admire her courage. ‘I am human, and I have a heart. You, sir, are nothing but a monster . . .’

He cut off her speech with the wave of his hand and the snap of his voice. ‘You try my patience Juliet. I have much planned for our reunion.’

He started to walk towards her, his vile fingers outstretched to take her hand. My heart began to pound with fear for her. I shouted out a fierce warning to him, ‘Do not touch her or so help me I will kill you.’

The man turned to me. His eyes narrowed. ‘You will do nothing to me,’ he hissed.

I could barely contain my anger within my tone, despite the danger involved in provoking the monster. I could not bear it if he touched her. ‘I told you, I will find a way to kill you. That I promise you.’

‘You will try and fail.’

He reached out for Juliet once more. She stared fearfully at his long, blackened fingernails. I called out to her. ‘Juliet, run. Do not let him into your thoughts now he has found you. Do not sleep Juliet. You must not sleep and dream. Guard your thoughts. I will find you and protect you. You have my word. Run, please, run and do not stop, you will wake from this vision.’

She stared wildly at me. Briefly, hesitation got the better of her senses, then she turned and ran as the man sprang forward to catch her. The killer growled as though he was in tormented pain, but he did not follow her. I suddenly felt his hand around my throat.

‘You are becoming tiresome, Lord Valancourt. She may run, but she can never escape.’

For a second I could not breathe as his grip tightened. I desperately willed myself awake. For the first time, I was successful in completing the action without the monster’s permission.

I sat up in bed with a jolt. I blinked and rubbed my eyes, determined to erase the residue of sleep from them. My face was wet with the tears I had shed for Sophie. My breath was short and gasping. I rested my head against the headboard of the four poster bed I lay in and wiped at my face. I combed my trembling fingers through my hair, my mind frantically going over everything I had seen.

It was a cold night, but my body felt hot and clammy. My hands shook. I could not get the image of Sophie’s broken, naked body out of my mind. It was just like all the others. I could not let Juliet befall the same fate.

I lamented not having a customary female bed companion next to me with whom I might have conversed. I would have asked her advice – the female sex always gave the best advice, but I had not dared take a woman to my bed for fear she may become the killer’s next victim. For the foreseeable future, the fairer sex was a forbidden fruit I must not be tempted by.

My close friends, Alexander and Ross had pondered at length the reason for my recent conscience and propriety in my behaviour towards women. They had come up with the rather insane idea that I was in love with a secret woman whom I would not reveal to them. I confess I had encouraged the notion for fear of giving away my real secret. I also found it quite amusing they should believe I would become so ardently attached to one woman, or that I might actually fall in love. I believed myself incapable of forsaking my womanising. Indeed, I had never wished to for fear of becoming boring and, dare I say it, old. Besides, it gave them great delight in teasing me, something I was usually more adept at doing to them. And, I may add, with considerably more skill. Still, maybe they were right in a fashion. At this point, I only had eyes for Juliet.

Alexander, Ross, and my other male friends were taking full advantage of London being a more than usually dangerous place for women of late. They made sure every lone woman in our circle of acquaintances received the offer of their escort and protection. The ladies were only too eager to accept, being rightly fearful for their safety. My friends were able to take advantage with those they desired to impress and seduce most. It was ripe pickings amongst London's elite beauties. I was sullen that I could not indulge myself, but my protection would be worth nought. If anything, I was a danger to all women.

I restlessly debated whether or not I should rouse the police. Maybe they already knew of the murder. I doubted whether they would believe me and not suspect my involvement. That hook-nosed Inspector had hinted as much when he interviewed me about my relationship with a previous victim, the

forty year old heiress, Lady Wilde. No, I couldn't go to them. If they put me behind bars, I would not be able to trace Juliet to save her life. Juliet must come first. My decision was made.

Anxiety for Juliet kept me awake. Where even to begin looking for her? But eventually exhaustion must have taken its toll. I could not remember having fallen asleep, but awakened suddenly. I covered my eyes and groaned at my valet, Baxter, as he opened the drapes, allowing the vicious January morning sunlight to flood into my room. Baxter ignored me just as he always did. He laid my breakfast tray over my lap whilst I sat up in bed.

Juliet entered my thoughts immediately. For one moment I wondered if the events of last night had all been a dream. But I had known after the first murder that all I saw with the clergyman did indeed occur. There was always evidence in the evening newspapers of the previous night's events. Somehow, I had definitely been there. Only this time, so had Juliet.

Breakfast was the last thing I wanted, though it was a hearty one; two eggs, bacon, bread and butter, my usual fare. I had no appetite for it, but the coffee, with its strong bitter taste and pungent rousing odour, was more than welcome.

'Sleeping alone again, my Lord,' Baxter mocked sarcastically.

I eyed him with an equal measure of mock contempt as he handed me *The Times*. I seldom read newspapers. They usually bored me with their dark, tiresome headlines depicting strife and misery in the world. But Baxter still brought *The Times* every morning with my breakfast. I believe he thought it his duty to reform my frivolous life and encourage me to widen my narrow

view of the world, perhaps even care a little more for the poor souls in it. However, I had been taking more note of late since the murders began consuming my waking thoughts and dominating every front page as they did again that morning.

The lead column was still discussing the previous murder of Lady Wilde. It depicted a London that quaked with fear under the spell of the vampire killer. A great amount of discussion had been expended on the gruesome details of the murders and the theory that the killer was indeed a supernatural being. They had also given several suggestions as to who his next victim might be. I felt a stab in my heart when I saw Sophie Wooton's name upon the list. Fear renewed its strength within me. I had to find Juliet.

Baxter returned, his pallor deathly white. His grey whiskers were upright and bristling with agitation. 'Your lordship, you must come quickly. Lord Leggatt has collapsed. I am afraid his illness has taken a turn for the worse. The doctor has been sent for. Lord Leggatt insists he must see you.'

I stared at Baxter. The man I called my uncle, the man who had taken me into his home after the death of my parents, was now dying. I had known it would be soon, but I had banished the morbid thought from my mind. Lord Leggatt was a decorated officer from the Crimean war, a fighter who would live forever. I'd dared not believe he could succumb to the same premature death my mother and father endured. My thoughts were those of a child, perhaps selfish. I would have no family when Lord Leggatt died. I could not bear the pain of loneliness again.

I dressed quickly, making every effort to ensure that my attire was immaculate and formal, worthy of my uncle's reception. My uncle hated sloppy, uneducated dressing and

demanded attention to the finest detail in appearance. I was not about to let him down now. Lord Leggatt had also lost his family at a young age, and his wife had died of tuberculosis not six years ago. I was the only close surrogate kin he had left.

With the assistance of my valet, I dressed in a dark grey, paisley silk vest with a black satin back. I seldom wore vests of bright colours. I did not care for bold reds, greens, or otherwise, finding them garish and vulgar. On occasion, such as for some festivity, my valet could persuade me to wear a vest of cream or light blue, but this morning was no such occasion. My neck tie was also black silk, and I wore it thinly tied, complimenting the formal high collar of my shirt. My latest clothing purchase from my Saville Row tailor, a new double breasted, black frock coat, finished my outfit. You might say my attire was fit for attendance at a funeral. I checked my appearance in the mirror, running my fingers through the dark chestnut hair that sat full and neat to the nape of my neck. My face looked pleasingly smooth from shaving. Just like Lord Leggatt, I would not tolerate an untidy complexion.

I felt a slight tremble in my body as I approached my uncle's door. I did not wish to lose him. It was with a heavy heart that I entered the room. The drapes were closed, blocking out the sunlight and creating a dreary sombre feel to the room, as though the air of impending death was not enough of an oppression. My uncle's lawyer stood by the bed next to his faithful servants. Two old friends, Lord and Lady Briggs, who had been visiting him that morning when he collapsed, were also present. My uncle hoarsely called for me. I dutifully approached the bed as Lady Briggs began to cry. His face was thin and tinged with greyness as he lay

in bed whilst Maud, our housekeeper, administered a drink of brandy to his lips.

His expression was weary, just like the rest of his ailing body. He was nothing of the robust, large-figured man he'd once been. Tears painfully stung the backs of my eyes, but I held them at bay, careful not to show my weakness. He bade me to sit next to him on the bed, and I obeyed without question. He reached for my hand, grasping on to it.

'Nathan, my boy . . . I need you to do something. I haven't got long.' He could hardly summon the breath to speak to me. I leaned in closer to hear his whispered voice.

'Anything, Uncle. I am completely at your command, as I have always been.'

'I need you to bring her here. I need you . . . to care for her Nathan.'

'Who, sir? Who do you wish me to bring?'

'I promised . . . I promised him, Nathan. I said I would care for her. He saved my life in the war.' He took a shallow broken breath before being consumed by a coughing fit. I squeezed his hand and waited patiently for him to compose himself. 'Bring the child here to live with you, Nathan.' He weakly patted my hand. 'I want . . . I want you to be her guardian in my place. It's time for you to take responsibility. She . . . needs you.' Another coughing fit overtook him before he was able to speak again in a hoarse whisper. 'They are hurting her, Nathan. Promise you will go to her . . . promise, Nathan.'

'I promise Uncle. I promise, please don't agitate yourself.'

I wanted more information, but he was out of breath. Mr. Thomas Paine, Lord Leggatt's lawyer, addressed me, 'As you know, Lord Cameron died three weeks ago. He appointed your uncle as guardian of his sister's child, Constance. She is to inherit the bulk of Lord Cameron's fortune and shipping business above his own two sons and daughter. Lord Leggatt is to hold her inheritance in trust until Constance attains the age of twenty-one. Should he . . . die . . . he has the authority to appoint another guardian. His lordship has chosen you.'

Paine finished his short speech by pushing his horn rimmed spectacles up his pointed nose. A sense of wry disbelief echoed in his tone, making me frown in his direction. The man reminded me of a ferret, with his beady, black eyes and small stature. He clearly disapproved of my uncle's choice of new guardian. I couldn't blame him. Even in my own eyes I was unsuitable. I had never before taken any responsibility in my decadent, self-serving life, and by now, I did not believe myself of ever having the stomach for it. I started to make my doubts known to my uncle.

'Uncle, I do not believe I am suited to care for a child. I am flattered, but . . .'

'Nathan, it is time for you . . . to take responsibility. Constance will be the saving of you . . . and she is hardly a child.' He started to cough. Once more he seemed to find it incredibly difficult to breathe. 'Lord Cameron's sis . . . sister-in-law . . . has lived with the children since the death of his wife. She resents Constance. Her love . . . is only for her sister's children. They are angry Constance has inherited and . . . the family are ill using her. I won't allow it.'

Paine spoke up again, elaborating on Lord Leggatt's concern. 'The eldest son has engaged lawyers to contest the will, and he has made Constance a prisoner in the home. I believe he, aided by his brother and sister, is denying Constance food and abusing her. The last time I went to check on her on behalf of Lord Leggatt, I was run off the premises. The eldest son is a violent man and rules the house with a rod of iron. Your uncle had initially thought it prudent to leave Constance at the Cameron family seat in Hertfordshire because of the recent murders of society women in London. However, when I informed him of the state in which I had found his ward, he resolved to act. We arranged to go and retrieve Constance this very day and bring her home to live at Lord Leggatt's residence.'

I had not known that my uncle had been made a guardian or about his plans, but then I hadn't asked. Recently, I was seldom around to make conversation with him. I felt regret and remorse that time was nearly up for such niceties I had taken for granted.

'I need you to go Nathan before . . . before they starve her to death. If she dies the eldest son will inherit. He will squander the money on vice. He will get away with murder.'

Murder. The word conjured up fleeting memories of my terrible visions. My uncle had indeed been wise to insist his ward resided in the countryside. London was a dangerous place for a woman, as I knew only too well. However, it seemed her current situation was just as perilous.

'I will Uncle, but I don't want to leave you . . .'

His voice unexpectedly rose very sharply with strength, making me jump to silence. 'Nathan, do not disobey me.'

I nodded gravely and slowly stood, accepting my duty. ‘Of course, sir. Forgive me, please. I will go at once.’ I leaned forward and bent to kiss his forehead. ‘I will bring the lady to you, and I promise I will take care of her.’ I gave him a plea from my heart, ‘Please, Uncle, wait for me.’

He nodded, but a great coughing fit overwhelmed him, preventing further discourse. I glanced quickly at Mr. Paine and gestured for him to follow me from the room. Baxter, as quick as ever, had gone on ahead of me, instructing one of the maids to retrieve my hat and sending the footman for my uncle’s carriage.

I didn’t even know to where we were headed. Thankfully, as we made our way outside, Paine provided me with all of the details of the arrangements of our journey by train from Euston station into Hertfordshire. Finding Juliet would have to wait until I had fulfilled my duty to my uncle, however much it pained me. Given I had recently made it my mission to avoid women for the sake of their safety, there seemed some irony in the fact that I was now charged with the rescue of both Constance and Juliet.

The sun was vainly attempting to burn off residual morning mist that hung low to the frozen ground between bare winter trees when we disembarked the train at Berkhamsted. The sky was greying with clouds that threatened to vanquish the attempt and deliver snow in its place. A waiting carriage raced us through the heart of the Ashridge estate and out towards Eldridge Hall. Dead, brown leaves glistened with frost on the muddy floor of the surrounding woodland. The wheel ruts on the narrow, winding road were filled with ice, making our short journey a

slippery, hazardous affair. I glanced out as we emerged from the wood and approached the Hall from the west side.

Eldridge Hall was a vast, oversized, grandiose building. It was not unlike my own family home, Keeley Park. I rarely visited home. To do so only caused me heartache. I was the only member of my family left and it brought back memories of happier times in my childhood with my parents that I could never relive. I could hide from my sadness in London more than adequately. An endless string of social engagements, parties, and other leisure pursuits had kept me entertained since leaving university a year and a half earlier. I had no need to work, but I confess I rather wished I did. My social life was becoming tiresome. There was no substance or meaning to my playful, frivolous life, and the people I shared it with were becoming a bore. I longed for something more, but what that something should be, I could not have told you. At least not until I encountered Juliet in the previous night's disturbing vision.

The carriage turned up a long drive that ran through an opening in the high wall surrounding the castle-shaped home. The structure appeared dark and foreboding even in the daylight. Its asylum-like appearance filled me with unease. As we approached, I felt a strange sense of presence I had not expected, as though something about the building was familiar. I was eager for some air and made sure I was the first to step from the carriage when it came to a stop outside the main portico.

The moment I stepped onto the gravel path, I felt Juliet's consciousness wrap around my own. Her intoxicating scent lingered around me. Confused, I whirled around searching her out. Had she simply followed me in a vision? Perhaps she resided

near the house? Either way, I felt elated, comforted that she was close. I could not wait to see her.

Instinctively, I reached out with my mind, calling her name. It felt strange to attempt contact with another in such a fashion, and yet, natural. But I was met with silence, distrust, and fear. I refused to allow it to deter my persistence. My stubbornness proved to be an advantage, for finally, she answered me.

‘Go home. It isn’t safe for you here.’

I smiled to myself as I searched her mind, attempting to find out where she was hiding, marvelling at how I found it so easy a task. I ignored her rebuke and probed the reason for her presence at the house of my ward. A suspicion settled in my mind. I found the answer quickly, and with some startled amusement.

‘You are Constance Gaudain?’

She was indignant. ‘Don’t call me that. My name is Juliet Gaudain. Juliet is my middle name and the one I prefer to be acknowledged.’ I felt her reach into my own mind. I made no attempt to hide my thoughts, especially my resolve to take her from the house. ‘Now go please . . . wait, you are to be my guardian? This can’t be. You don’t know what you are getting in to. Please go . . . I beg you . . .’

‘I have no intention of going anywhere without you,’ I told her firmly, looking up at the windows trying to work out in which room she was being held. I tried to enquire as to her location, but she shrank back, hiding the answer from me. Once more, she begged me to leave before I was hurt.

Before I could continue our silent conversation, the housekeeper came bustling out of the house. Juliet retreated from

my mind. The feeling of loss was immediate and strangely, almost painful. I quickly composed myself after feeling a frown settle across my brow and peered at the housekeeper. She was a fearfully haughty looking old woman. I gave her a courteous but sharp greeting. I had been fully briefed on what to expect from all members of the household, high and low, and wished to quickly convey that I would not tolerate any evasive behaviour. Especially now that I knew my ward was Juliet.

‘Good morning, I wish to see Lady Juliet Gaudain.’

The woman frowned. ‘I am sorry, sir, but Lady Gaudain is not at home today. If you leave your card . . .’

‘Nonsense, I know she is here. I am her new guardian and I insist that she is brought to me now.’ I made my way past the woman as she flustered around me trying to prevent admittance into the house.

‘Please, I have been given strict orders not to . . .’

I removed my hat and gloves and handed them to the footman who had appeared. I folded my hands behind my back. It was a habit when I wished to make a stern point. I’d learnt it from Lord Leggatt as a child.

‘I suggest you bring the master of the house whilst you are fetching Juliet. I wish to speak to him as well,’ I informed her, adopting a superior tone.

‘And what name should I give him, sir?’ the housekeeper asked rudely.

‘Lord Nathan Valancourt. I am here on behalf of Lord Leggatt. Be quick, I detest being kept waiting. I am a man of little patience.’

‘Very good, sir.’ She gestured at the footman, ‘Michael, take Lord Valancourt and Mr. Paine into the drawing room.’

The footman gave her a nod and led us across the wide chequered floor of the reception hall towards the drawing room. I couldn’t help but glance up the long staircase wondering once again which room Juliet was locked in. If they refused to bring her to me, I would go and search for her myself.

As we entered the drawing room, I again called out softly to Juliet in my mind. Once more I received no response. Loud, heavy footsteps diverted my attention, someone was approaching the room. A raised, male voice berated the housekeeper who appeared to be following close behind the voice’s owner.

I turned to face the door and stiffened my composure, ready to deal with the abusive man who was about to enter. Mr. Paine was clearly anxious, having borne the brunt of Lord Cameron’s anger on his last visit. He stood like a coward behind me. I folded my hands behind my back, eagerly awaiting the tyrant’s entrance.

The two oak doors to the room were flung open in a flamboyant display of rage from the master of the house, Lord William Cameron. I could not help but raise my eyebrows with some amusement and fought to suppress the smile that twitched wickedly at my mouth. The man was perhaps master of the house but clearly not of his emotions.

In my mind I heard an agitated gasp of fear from Juliet. Its loudness startled my senses. She spoke to me, ‘Be careful. He means to do you harm if you do not leave. Please go, I will not have anyone hurt on my behalf. He has shown violence to those who have tried to help me . . . I will face my fate alone, sir.’

I felt impatience gnaw me sharply as William Cameron stalked across the room. I told her firmly, ‘Hush, Juliet. I will not leave you in this house. Do not concern yourself with my safety, I can look after myself.’

William Cameron was an unpleasant brute of a man. He had a swollen, ruddy complexion, and a nose that spoke of too many nights spent heavily consuming liquor at leisure. He appeared much older than his twenty-six years as a result of it.

‘What is the meaning of this intrusion, sir?’ the fellow bellowed at me.

‘I am Lady Gaudain’s new guardian, nominated by Lord Leggatt on his death bed. I intend to take her to London. Please have her brought to me.’

‘That young woman is not leaving this house. I am master here. I do not acknowledge my father’s will, sir. My lawyers are contesting it. As far as I am concerned my cousin is staying here . . .’

‘I beg to differ, sir. I am not leaving this house without her.’

‘How dare you, sir.’

William Cameron moved towards me once more until he stood very close to my face. The smell of stale whisky invaded and assaulted my nostrils. No doubt it was liquor that infused his volatile temper. Despite his reputation, I was unafraid. I had fought and won against more threatening looking men than Lord Cameron when I’d frequented the gin shops of London.

‘But I do dare, sir. I have been informed that you are starving and beating my ward. Holding her prisoner so you can

control her inheritance. I will not stand for it. Bring her to me at once, or I will search every room in this house until I find her.’

‘Try, sir, and I will knock you down where you stand.’

I smiled. Well, the man was rather amusing with his inflated ego and sense of personal power. ‘If you wish to fight, Lord Cameron, I would be more than gracious enough to indulge you. I box, sir, do you?’

Compared to my own tall, slim, but muscled stature, William Cameron was a stout man with a heavy swagger. He would have made a formidable opponent, but one I could have handled. I was a good amateur boxer, having won several trophies at school and university. I was ready for anything the bully was able to throw at me. I unfolded my hands as a precaution but remained in my stubborn stance, undeterred by his vulgar closeness.

‘Damn you and your impudence . . .’ Cameron blustered. He raised the back of his hand to strike it down upon my face. I seized my chance, executing a perfect blow to his jaw and then another to his solar plexus when he came back at me in a rage. He fell to the floor clutching his body, the wind knocked from him. I stepped over his prostrate form, quickly making my way out of the room, determined to search the house and waste no further time with William.

Paine followed closely at my heels like a faithful dog. I called to Juliet in my mind once more. But she was silent. I felt her distress like a sharp pain in my temple as I mounted the stairs. As the distance between us closed, our connection became stronger until I could view everything that Juliet saw in front of her. Someone was hurting her – a woman and a man, pulling her

hair, dragging her from the small room in the attic where she had been confined. They were under the direction of an older woman whom I presumed to be my ward's aunt. I could even feel Juliet's pain coursing through me, spurring me on to her assistance. She was fighting back bravely, but her body was weak through lack of food and sleep. Her actions were in vain. She was close to fainting.

It seemed as though a lifetime passed before I reached the attic rooms on the third floor. I was horrified to find the reality of what Juliet had shown me in her mind. She had fallen to her knees with exhaustion from her struggles. A man I presumed to be Edward Cameron was dragging her along the floor by her long titian hair. The scene reminded me of the clergyman.

I felt anger rise and swell like a tidal wave inside me when I beheld Juliet's beautiful, bruised face. I'd never felt the surging force of such anger before. I flew at the man, using my strength to pull him away from her. Succeeding, I slammed Edward against the wall, struggling with him as he tried to strike me. There was a distinct lack of help from Mr. Paine. Edward took aim and managed to push his fist past my defences, making heavy contact with the side of my face. I staggered back, forced to lose my grip of him.

The two women had taken hold of Juliet. As I made my recovery to lunge at Edward once more, I heard Juliet shout loudly in my mind, 'William is coming to help his brother. I am afraid for you. I will help all I can.'

I did not have time to rebuke her. What did she think she could do? I wanted to stop the women pulling her along the passageway, knowing from Juliet's thoughts they intended to

remove her from the house to some secret location. I could not permit it. My fear for her life was acute. If William got a hold of her . . .

My fight with Edward took us to the floor. By a quick twist of fate, he had placed his hand at my throat. He was determined in his strength to crush my windpipe, and I felt myself begin to choke. I heard Juliet cry out loud with a fierce anger. Suddenly the intense pressure on my larynx was lifted. I looked up at Edward confused. He was staring at his hand, poised in mid-air just above me. It shook with the effort he made to move it, but he was unsuccessful. He stared at it fearfully a moment longer, before angrily turning his head to the women.

‘This is the witch’s doing,’ he snapped, his brown eyes burning with intense disgust at Juliet.

I was quick to take advantage of his distraction and jumped to my feet. Juliet

stood between the two women who held her arms in a vice-like grip as they stared in horror at Edward. Juliet’s haunted eyes were fixed on his hand. She was somehow using her mental strength to hold it there. I could feel she was weak, and it was taking tremendous effort. I was astounded by the mental power she possessed.

William appeared on the landing. He stood aghast, a horse whip in his hand. Juliet’s eyes widened with fear. His presence prompted her into action. She flicked her eyes ever so slightly towards the wall, and I could hardly believe what I saw with my own. Edward flew against the wall, apparently pinned there by some invisible force.

The whole scene provoked William to raise his whip to strike her with it. I sprang towards him, catching his arm. Juliet began to struggle with the women as I pushed William backwards. I wondered if I had the same advantage of power as Juliet. For one, mad moment it seemed logical that I would. I had sensed we were kindred spirits. William was struggling ferociously, making it hard to hold him. I focused my eyes on him and felt a surge of energy erupt within my body. In my mind I simply instructed William to retreat and to drop the whip. He fell back hard against the wall, the whip falling from his hand. My wish appeared to be my command.

Violent abuse tripped from William's mouth. I turned to free Juliet from the women, but they had already let go and were backing away, a picture of horrified fear worn on their faces. Without a moment of further hesitation, I caught Juliet's hand and pulled her close to me. I felt intense relief the moment I made physical contact with her – as though a part of me had been missing since birth, and now I was whole. I did not understand, it was unlike any warmth or fleeting love I had felt for any other woman. The intensity was overwhelming.

Realising the urgency with which I must get Juliet out of the house and away to a place of safety, I began to lead her quickly down the stairs. The family were shouting at us, but I gave them none of my attention. As we descended, I felt Juliet lean against me for support. She was exhausted. I swept my arm around her waist and hurriedly continued down the steps.

She whispered urgently to me, 'I can't hold him anymore. My strength is weakening. I'm sorry, but Edward is free.'