

SEEKING REDEMPTION

Curses & Secrets Book Three
A novel by Elisabeth Zguta

Other books by Elisabeth Zguta

BREAKING CURSED BONDS

Curses & Secrets Book One

EXPOSING SECRET SINS

Curses & Secrets Book Two



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CHAPTER ONE

Shadows

Robert de Gourgues stared into the black night, a chorus of frogs and locust drowned out his escaping thoughts. He raked his fingers through his dark wavy hair, tugging at it, inflicting some pain upon himself, which he no doubt deserved. Movement at the far end of the portico caught his attention. He squinted. A stranger stood in the darkness, obscured in the far corner of the long front porch that ran along the facade of the family's Memphis mansion. The glow from his cigarette lent a brief glimpse of his outline—a man, tall, thin, and wearing a fedora. The stranger tossed the butt to the porch floor and snuffed it out with the toe of his shoe. Slow and deliberate, he walked toward Robert, passing the wicker furniture until he stood just a few feet from him, but remained curtained in the shadows.

Robert's pulse quickened, and a shiver slithered down his back. He rubbed his clammy hands against his trouser leg. *Is this retribution? Does this stranger intend to harm me?* Thoughts of the shady things he had done and gotten away with in the past, flashed in his mind—embezzling money from his father's company. Worse, he had poisoned Pierre, his father. Done to make him appear unbalanced, and delude others into thinking that Pierre was unfit to steer the business—so that Robert could gain control of the company. All his plans, the hoaxing and backstabbing, had failed.

Robert stood on the porch, in pitch blackness, waiting for the next catastrophe. Much had happened in the past year, and he'd never be able to atone for the injustice he inflicted on his family. Robert accepted that he deserved to be humiliated in public, sent to prison even. Whatever punishment his family wished upon him was valid. Still, deep inside, he wanted another chance to prove himself. He hoped that there was a path to forgiveness. He wanted to live and prayed that this stranger hadn't been sent to kill him.

Not long ago, Robert would have done anything to gain more money and power. It was like a sickness inside of him, a deep craving for more. Still, no matter how much wealth he managed to accumulate, no matter how many cars and things he acquired, it never filled the emptiness inside. Robert associated with others like himself, wealthy men willing to take advantage of others and he lived on the edge. He conspired with Tom Bennett, his business mentor, and the leader of a powerful secret society. Robert had craved, beyond anything else in this world, to be a member of the elite group—The Black Wolf Society.

Yesterday changed all that. Everything was different now that Tom Bennett was dead. *Is this the revenge?*

Robert swallowed back his fear and prepared for the worst. The man's shadow moved closer. Robert knew that the man was a member of the Black Wolf Society, sent to silence him, and Robert's time on earth would end in seconds. *Would they care that it was self-defense?* No, how could they have known that Tom Bennett had already been a dead man, a monster. No one would believe the story. It was better this way, for him to shoulder all the blame and to keep mention of his family out of the recent events.

A timbre voice with a French accent broke the eerie quiet.

“Mr. de Gourgues, you’ve been through a lot in recent days. As I see it, you could use some assistance. You don’t know us yet, but we can do business together. Take a few days of rest, collect your thoughts, and then, *mon ami*, I will approach you again. I can help you and you me. How you say it, one hand washes the other? *Non*? We’ll be in touch.”

The man disappeared, slipping into the cool darkness. A noise startled Robert, and he turned to his right. A second person had been standing there in the shadows, listening to the brief, one-sided conversation. The mysterious person slinked away unseen. Robert could only hear the trailing sound of footfalls against the crushed stones that lined the path.

The night was still again. Only the rattling of dried leaves sounded, as the cool autumn wind blew across the almost bare trees.

Robert didn’t have enough energy or the courage to follow the strangers. Confused about the proposed business liaison, at the same time he was relieved that no one knew what they had done to Tom Bennett. All that mattered now was his family. He understood why they were furious with his recent shenanigans. His sisters had been traumatized and physically hurt by Bennett, who had gone too far. Of course, they were disappointed in their brother for being friends with the man. *But he wasn’t a man—Bennett was a monster.* Still, after everything Robert had done, Michelle and Emilie remained concerned about him. He was thankful that his sisters were blind to the worst of his actions. They didn’t know how far off the edge of decency he had fallen. Somehow, he had to re-

deem himself, and make it up to them. There was no time to worry about strangers in the dark.

The stranger hadn't actually threatened him, though Robert was sure the man represented the Black Wolf Society. The thing Robert had desired most—to be one of them—was now his worst fear. Following the mysterious visitor would have been another rabbit hole that he'd rather not fall into. He decided at that moment that he didn't care about anything else except how to get his life back on track. No more chasing after money. He vowed to find a way to make it up to his sisters, Emilie and Michelle. And to his new wife, Rachael, as well. His only hope was that it wasn't too late.

Robert turned and went back into the house.



Standing in the foyer, Robert listened to the laughter that drifted from the front parlor. The family appeared to be enjoying themselves. He wasn't needed, they were better off without him. If only he had the courage to end his charade, to leave them and continue on his own, alone. But of course, he couldn't, he wouldn't. He needed them, not the other way around.

He straightened out his disheveled hair, staring at himself in the mirror, which hung above a Louis XVI marble top console table. Touching his face, he gently ran his finger along his new scar, inspecting. He winced, a sore spot. The disfigurement would be a constant reminder of what happened up in Boston, a badge he wished he didn't wear. The raw, pink, jagged scab made him look all the meaner, and stronger paired up with his square jaw. He turned sideways

and approved of his tall, slim figure. He liked staying in shape. His stance was just like father's had been. There had been many occasions when young climbing socialites craving a good catch, told him that he carried himself well. Easy enough when you can wear tailored clothing, he supposed. Otherwise, he didn't look special.

Besides, the joke was on them, because he wanted the same thing, good catch. That's why he married Rachael, convincing her to run off and elope with him. He had loved the chase, the courtship, and appealing to her better sensibilities. Just when he thought it was a hopeless game, Rachael had agreed to marry him, and they eloped. He was still excited about her, but now for reasons other than money.

Just a day ago he and his sisters were tormented by Tom Bennett. Throughout the entire ordeal, all Robert had thought of was getting home to Rachael, for one more chance to hold her in his arms, to kiss her. Her influence over him at times smothered him, at the same time filled him with happiness. Looking at his reflection, he straightened his collar and tie, then practiced his customary confident smile. *Everyone will be scrutinizing my every move.* He might explode at any moment, like a pressure cooker set on high.

"Boom!"

Robert made a crazy face into the mirror, then turned around and stepped into the parlor.

"Robert, there you are. We were wondering what happened to you," Michelle said. She walked to meet him and slipped her skinny arm in his. She wore a black A-line silk dress designed by Marc Jacobs, business dress meets grunge. He appreciated her seamless individualism.

Michelle had always been a friend to him, and he kicked himself for being such an ass to her in return. She gazed up with her big blue eyes, her small face framed with dark hair like his, styled short and sassy. He'd ignored her ever since father's funeral. That was when he found out that he didn't inherit the family business. Truth be told, he *did* resent her for being the person in charge of things. Michelle was the youngest, after all. He assumed that managing the business would have been his role after Pierre died. But he knew it was his own fault that he'd lost that chance. *I wish she didn't remind me of that fact so often.* He quickly chastised himself for that fleeting thought, afraid of reverting back to his old self. He can't allow himself to slip into cynicism, not even for a second. He squeezed her arm.

"I'm fine, Chelle, no need to worry. I just needed some fresh air to calm my nerves for a bit." He grinned, half-heartily.

"Robert, we're in this together," Michelle said. "We all experienced horrific things, and we survived by sticking together."

She batted her dark eyelashes, done as a sign of comfort, and then smiled as if she understood. Michelle was smart, but he hoped with all his heart she didn't know the depth he had fallen. Now that she ran things, she was knowledgeable of some painful truths, like how he had conducted business behind father's back. He hoped she didn't know everything.

There was a rattling sound, and Robert turned his attention to Aunt Victoria, who had put down her bone china teacup. It was the cup with the vibrant blue birds painted on the side, two of them standing on a branch of cherry blos-

soms. It was so delicate. He looked up at Victoria, her whimsical appearance stunned him. She wore a bright ensemble of yesteryear's design which reminded him of fairy tales, except with tall people instead of small pixies. She had soft blonde hair just like their mother used to wear. However, Victoria stood almost a half foot taller than mother had ever been. He never met a more determined woman and thought that maybe Aunt Victoria was a bad influence over Michelle. When they spent time together, their wills turned to solid stone.

"Please don't blame yourself for any of it, Robert." Victoria blurted out. "We understand the wickedness of Tom Bennett and the deep power he used to coerce you. He was evil."

"Please—let's not even mention the name." Robert felt his face heat up.

Victoria nodded and placed her hand on his shoulder. Robert pulled himself tight. She dropped her hand and eyes and then walked away. Victoria sat on the elaborate, gold velvet sofa next to his other sister, Emilie.

Em was the steadiest person he knew, despite the struggle with her clairvoyant gift. She claimed it was a burden, but lately, it had been a life saver for them all. Emilie sat quiet, smiling, looking so calm and relaxed. No one would guess the power she yielded. Her long brown hair fell gently over her shoulders, which were covered with a pink angora sweater. He watched as she pulled a strand of hair back behind her ear; she was nervous about something. Who knew which person's emotions she was experiencing right now, that was her burden to bare. She wore a simple dress without any bling accessories, except for that engagement ring on her left ring finger. The sight of the two of them, Em and Aunt Victo-

ria, sitting together, gave Robert a glimmer of years ago. Mother used to sit there beside Emilie, their heads bent toward each other, contriving stories before bedtime.

Robert turned around and swallowed a lump that had emerged in his throat. He needed a drink to stop his hands from shaking. The others in the room pretended not to watch him, but as he headed to the bar table, their gaze burned his back. All of their empathy and pity directed toward him was too much to swallow right now.

The past few days had been confusing, to say the least. To think that his friend and mentor, Tom Bennett, hadn't even been human. Thank God they had put the monster or whatever he was to rest, permanently.

Robert's soon to be brother-in-law, Jeremy Laughton, was a hero after delivering the final blow. Robert turned and watched Jeremy sitting near Emilie. The man's skin was bronzed from hours in the sun, his body mass firm and strong. His ash hair was combed back in a natural way. It must have taken great pains for this nature loving man to actually kill someone. No, something. Robert behaved badly toward Jeremy, another regret to add to the pile.

Since Jeremy had stepped into Emilie's life, Robert had taunted him, making fun of his English accent, his easy-going nature, and old-fashioned morality. Tonight Robert understood that he owed the man his life. If anything, Robert should feel gratitude, just to be alive. Still, his horror trumped every other emotion he should have felt.

The image of Tom's dead body, lying at his feet, shook him. He remembered the warm spray of blood sticking to his skin, covering him from head to toe. His clothes, soaked after the beheading while standing right in front of him. Rob-

ert shuddered. He sucked in a deep breath and let it out slow. That memory would never be erased, no matter how much he scrubbed himself.

An emotional spike ran through him and in a split moment, everything tumbled together in his brain. His heart began to melt. His sisters, Emilie and Michelle, still wanted to save him from himself, and keep him in their lives. *How could that be?* The protective wall surrounding his heart crumbled a little and cleared a path for his family to enter.

A tear stung the corner of his eye. He wiped it with the back of his hand and poured himself a drink. He didn't dare express his feelings, worried that everything would free-fall over the dam, knocking down all the self-preservation he'd built up over the years.

Things needed to get straightened in his head. Painful memories of his mother's death haunted Robert more than they should after all these years. His father's rejection when growing up still stung, despite recent revelations of his true affection. The worse hurt was knowing that the one man he admired most, and to whom he had given all his faith, had been nothing more than a creature of the dark. When Robert watched Bennett turn from a man into a dark wolfish creature, he thought he had gone mad. And when he had morphed back, and spoke to him in his human voice, appealing for mercy . . . it broke his heart and any sensibility that remained. All he had thought of was Rachael.

He noticed his wife was missing and became uneasy. "Where has Rachael gone? I hope she didn't sneak off to her father's house."

"She was just here a moment ago," Michelle said.

“Here I am, darling.” She sauntered into the room. “I was freshening up.”

She smiled at Robert seductively. A spark throbbed through his body, his pulse rushed. Rachael had curves and knew how to move them. Her hair flowed down her back in an auburn blaze. A memory ignited—the first time he noticed Rachael. It had been at her father’s home, during a business gathering. She stood across the room, the bright lights reflecting off the marble floors, encircling her in a warm glow. He met her gaze. Rachael’s green eyes intoxicated him. She walked toward him as if in slow motion. Her little black dress hugged her hips, and her mouth, slathered with a dark crimson lipstick. He swore she was tempting him, sliding her tongue against her soft lips. Maybe he had imagined it. When she reached him and finally stood close, he whiffed her perfume. A deep sultry Patchouli undertone filled his nose. Then the exotic combination of jasmine and orange flower overtone lingered and roused his primal instincts. Spellbound, he diligently worked to gain her confidence. How lucky he was despite himself.

“Robert, maybe we should share what happened up in Boston with Father Eddie and Rachael?”

He turned abruptly, his thoughts jarred, and realized it was Michelle speaking.

“We need them to know just in case the police or anyone comes snooping around, asking questions.”

“Do they really need to know? I mean, can’t the lawyers handle these things? I want to be honest of course, but I certainly don’t want to scare my wife to death with such an ugly story.”

"Now I'm intrigued. Be honest—tell me what's going on." Rachael nudged Robert in the arm.

"Thanks a lot, Michelle."

Emilie stood and walked to her sister's side. "Michelle's right. Everyone should know the truth. It's better if they understand what you're going through—I mean, what all of us are dealing with—after everything that's happened. We're bound to be off our game for a bit. It's a horrible story, yes, but it wasn't our fault. We only did what we had to do."

"What do you mean? Please—just come out with it." Rachael said.

Victoria cleared her throat. "Tom Bennett has been a thorn in our family's side for years. It started years ago, back in college, when he stalked my sister—I mean, your mother. He ended up harassing both of your parents."

Gasps filled the room.

"What are you talking about?" Robert said. "I wasn't aware of that. You must be mistaken."

Victoria and Father Eddie exchanged knowing glances. Father Eddie, their father's confidant and keeper of secrets. Larger than life, he was dynamic and loved by many. A big man, always dressed in his church garb, dark hair going gray with age, and dark sage eyes. Despite his forceful presence, his voice gave away his true benevolent personality.

"Emilie, did you know about this?" Robert glared at her.

"No, it's news to me, too. It explains a lot though. Aunt Victoria, why didn't we know about this before now?"

Aunt Victoria stepped closer, her long, lean frame almost glided across the room. Her face looked like their mother's, fair skinned, freckled, with blonde hair that framed

it like a soft pillow. "Your parents never wanted you children to know, and I wish you didn't have to know now, but it's relevant to what happened. Just a few days ago, I told Michelle some of the details. She was determined to learn the truth about the vendetta Bennett held against your parents. I owe you the truth as well, it's only right that you all understand what lit up this fiasco."

"For chrissake!" Robert raked his fingers through his hair and pulled at his strands until his roots stung in pain. It felt good to feel real pain instead of just hurt feelings.

Jeremy snapped his fingers. "So that must be why Bennett ended up at the Blackfeet Reservation. He must have been running away from trouble all those years ago."

"I seem to be missing quite a few pieces to this puzzle," Robert said. "I want to know everything else, the entire story. What's this about the Blackfeet Reservation?"

Victoria picked up the story. "Your father's family made sure Bennett was kicked out of Harvard. They've always had political pull, you know. And I personally reported him to the Cambridge police; he was wanted for questioning. That, and being kicked out of school, made him eligible for the draft. Not a good thing back then. So he fled to Montana to hide, like a coward. Your mother and father went on and lived happily ever after, and Bennett . . . well, he chose a life fringed on revenge. He resented them, their life together, and over the years he tried to hurt your parents. But they created a safety net of security, or so they thought."

Victoria hung her head. Michelle stepped closer and placed her hand on their aunt's shoulder. She turned and shot Robert a glance, her eyes harsh.

"Of course that security was sabotaged when Robert became friends with the monster," Michelle said. "As soon as he realized who you were, Bennett used you to weave a plot of revenge against all of us."

"I feel sick." Robert doubled over and sat down in a nearby chair.

"I'm so sorry, Rob," Michelle said. "Oh no, he's turning green. He's going to vomit."

"Please, I'm fine." He raised his hand. After a deep breath, he said, "Continue."

Emilie picked up the story. "Jeremy and I learned that when Bennett fled Boston in 1972, he hid at a reservation in Montana. The chief realized Bennett was troubled, and encouraged him to do a sweat lodge, you know, to clean his spirit. Of course, he never walked away healed. Bennett was filled with so much hate. While searching for his spirit familiar to guide him, he wound up connecting with an evil spirit from the other side of the veil. I know it sounds bizarre, but that's how he became the wolfish creature we all saw. According to Chief Flying Crow, something happened back in '72 that changed Bennett's spirit. He became possessed and turned into a type of creature they call skin walker. I would never have believed it myself if I hadn't seen him and felt the evil inside. Don't you get it—we killed a killer. We did the world a favor," she said.

"Wait a minute. You killed Tom Bennett?" Rachael's voice trailed. "Robert, what have you done?"

Robert noticed a look of panic on Rachael's face. He'd never seen her *afraid* before and regretted they had shared their nightmare with her. It shouldn't have been her burden to bear.

“Rachael, it’s all right. I promise everything will be okay.”

“Wait. It wasn’t Robert. We all took a shot at Bennett, but it wasn’t what you think.” Michelle’s voice was firm and unyielding. “He attacked us and was going to kill us all. It was self-defense. Besides, it wasn’t Robert’s shots that did the monster in—”

“It was me,” Jeremy blurted out. “I killed him in the end.”

Emilie went to Jeremy’s side. She looked at him in a tender way, as if she were embracing his every thought. Robert wished his wife would look at him like that, he needed her support.

“I think that’s enough information for today. Come on, Jeremy. It’s been a long day, let’s go up to bed. We can finish this conversation tomorrow with cooler heads.”

Emilie and Jeremy left the room. Everyone else remained quiet. Robert waited for Rachael to ask more questions, but she never did. He wondered what was going on in her pretty head. He watched her as she sat on the gold velvet sofa, her long auburn hair rested softly against the pillows. Her eyes were wide open, but not another word uttered through those soft lips until she said, “I’m going up as well.”

Robert knew he needed to explain more to her, so she’d understand if she was ever going to trust him again.

CHAPTER TWO

Anxiety

Everyone wandered out of the parlor, leaving only Robert and Father Eddie. Robert swilled down the last of his drink.

“Father, you want a round?”

“Sure, I’d be happy to join you.”

The large framed priest got up from the sofa and joined Robert near the bar table. Robert noticed a bead of sweat on his brow. This man was an enigma.

“Father Eddie, you claim to be a man of faith, yet you went along with my father’s superstitious beliefs, right until the end.”

“Do you have a question, Robert? Something concerning you?” Eddie took the offered drink and went back to sit, this time choosing an armchair.

“Well, Eddie, what’s it all about? Are you after money from the family? I hear you fellows have a quota you need to bring in these days, like ordinary salesmen. My father left the church a bundle when he died, so you must be the number one employee by now.” Robert raised his voice pitch, trying to get a rise from Eddie.

There was a moment of silence. Eddie stared across the room at the fireplace on the opposite side wall.

“Okay, I give up.” Robert raised his hands then sat down in a matching chair beside the priest. “I know you’ve

been good to the family, and after Rachael and I had eloped, you took the time to counsel us. I appreciate your efforts.”

“Thank you for that, Robert.”

Eddie gazed off at nothing. *Is he aware of regrets that Rachael might have?*

“So Eddie, what do you think of all this? I mean this story we told is bizarre, to say the least. I mean, we killed a monster.”

The priest squeezed his eyes. “It’s all very unfortunate.”

“You knew already, didn’t you?”

Father Eddie nodded. “Yes, unfortunately, I knew some of it.”

“Tell me, did you know Tom Bennett was a real monster?”

“No, that’s news to me. I knew the man was evil, knew the harm he had caused your parents, and knew of a rape incident up in Montana. But no, I didn’t know about him being influenced by an evil spirit.” Eddie downed his drink, wiped his mouth, and stood up.

Robert remained seated and stared into the air while clutching his glass.

“Evil spirit my ass! It was horrible. You should have seen it. The man I thought I knew, turned into some kind of wolfish animal, right in front of us. It seems impossible, but yet I know what I saw. He was a shapeshifter, skinwalker, or whatever the Blackfeet want to call it. I heard his bones pop; saw his face morph into some dark creature that drooled. It was horrible.”

Father Eddie paced, stopped a second and leaned on the mantel, then paced again.

“Unfortunately, not only good crosses over. Evil creatures creep over that veil, too,” he said.

“How do you know of such things? Aren’t priests supposed to believe in the goodness of God?”

Father Eddie sat back into the chair and turned to face Robert. “Yes, of course, we do. I do. But there is also hell to consider. Something from that realm slipped into ours. I can’t explain it all, I don’t want to believe anything so heinous could exist—yet you saw it with your own eyes.”

The two men remained quiet for a moment.

Robert drew in a deep breath and exhaled, slow.

“That’s not the part I dreaded the most. Yes, I was hurt to know I had put my faith in a monster. That’s going to be hard to live down, but the harder thing to understand is my sister’s powers.”

“You mean Emilie’s clairvoyant gift?” Father Eddie shifted his weight.

“Yes, but I wouldn’t exactly call *it* a gift. My God, she had light beaming out of her hands, she pushed her power toward the monster. It was like watching some old movie about a fire-breathing dragon, or sorcerer that could zap out magic power. Except this was my sister. I’m afraid for her. What does this all mean?”

Eddie smiled. “It means she has a special gift. Mind you, a gift that saved your life.”

“Yes. Don’t think I’m not grateful.”

Another awkward silence lasted too long for comfort.

“Robert, I need to talk to you. After you left for Boston, in the middle of the night like that, well . . . Rachael came to me. She has more reservations about staying with you.”

“I thought everything was fine—we’re planning the party to announce our marriage to the world.”

“It seems her father isn’t all that accepting of you for his son-in-law. He’s been putting pressure on her. Trying to get her to change her mind. Of course, she claims she hasn’t, but she looks up to her father, so this is causing some discomfort for her.”

“I’ll talk with him. You’ll see, I’ll win him over just like I did Rachael.”

Father Eddie patted him on the back. “That’s a good idea. I think you need to keep at it. Now, go to your wife. Make her feel safe, and let her know you’ll never take off like that again. Trust is the cornerstone of any marriage.”

Robert put down his glass, shook Father Eddie’s hand and headed for the stairway. As he climbed the stairs, he wondered what he should say to Rachael to gain her confidence again. *The truth, you moron, be honest with her.* He wondered if he remembered how to be honest.



Robert tiptoed into the bedroom. It was dark except for a sliver of light coming from the adjoining bathroom. He undressed, went to the bathroom, washed and brushed his teeth. He returned to the dark bedroom and slipped under the covers.

She was sleeping. He watched her chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. He found her beautiful, like a princess in a fairytale. A smile was born, as he realized he loved her. He turned on his side and let her sleep. Closing his eyes, he joined her, feeling at peace for the first time in a long time.

CHAPTER THREE

Decisions

Robert awoke with a start, unnerved by a dream. The early morning sun flowing into the room was warm and cleared away the dark shadows of his bad dreams. He turned and saw Rachael by the window, opening the drapes, wearing only a skimpy nightie.

“Good morning sleepyhead,” she said.

He yawned and stretched his muscles.

“Good morning. How about you come back to bed, and I’ll give you a proper morning kiss.” He patted the mattress beside him.

She smiled and joined him in bed, slipping between the sheets and snuggling up to him.

“When I came to bed last night you were out like a light.”

“Yes, I was exhausted,” she said. “I’ve been so busy making plans for the reception.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t helped more.” Robert closed his eyes and wished he could be a better man for her. Rachael wasn’t only a sensuous woman, but she was also undemanding. That’s a rare quality, hardly ever found in a wealthy woman’s personality. He nuzzled her a little closer and wished he knew how to make her happy to the point of never wanting to go back to her father’s house again.

“Rachael, whatever still needs to be done, I’m your man.”

“You certainly are my man.”

She turned up her head and pressed her mouth against his, with a playful kiss. The plump softness of her lips touched his. Her gentle embrace soon accelerated into a more heated exchange. She pulled Robert on top of her. He didn't remember her ever being aggressive, but he liked it.

He smothered her neck with light kisses. The string straps of her nightie fell off her shoulders. His hand pushed down the silky top as his lips roamed down to her breasts, kissing her skin. His tongue reached out and licked her nipples. She moaned. Slowly he moved one hand down to her nightgown and pulled it away, entirely. He cupped her breast with his left hand, and the other groped her rump and then massaged her supple skin like an artist forming clay.

His actions stirred a response and Rachael doubled his verve. She rolled him over with an urgent roughness. Her fingers traced the contours of his chest muscles then wandered down to his belly, and then further still. Her eager touch thrilled his hardened flesh. The sensation sent shivers throughout Robert's body. She licked her lips. Nothing else mattered to him except Rachael.

It was his turn to moan as she slipped herself onto him. The heat intensified. It was so natural between the two of them, fitted pieces to a puzzle. Together they moved their hips in synchronized rhythm. He looked up into her green eyes, watched as they rolled back into her head, and he hoped that his hardness would last as long as she needed him. He traced a line down her sides with his fingers. She moaned, deeper and deeper. Her moans and the heat between them ignited frenzy within him. Robert arched his body upward and

pushed until he heard her sighs of satisfaction and she succumbed to an orgasm. Then he flipped her off him, took the top position, and continued to push himself into her until his body followed with a climax.

He collapsed, on top of her, satisfied. After a moment, she flung him off and spread out her arms and legs as if to cool.

“Are you all right?” he said.

“Hmm.”

She turned and cuddled next to him. They rested in each other’s arms in silence. He inhaled her perfume which lingered on her. *Jasmine or maybe orange blossom*. He liked that she always smelled of exotic jungle flowers. His finger twirled a strand of her hair. He noticed how the sunbeam escaping between the drape folds made her red hair shine as if each strand was plated with gold.

“Robert, I’ve come to a decision.”

He froze. Her voice sounded determined, and he worried about what she would say. He hoped with all his heart she wasn’t planning on leaving him. After swallowing, he asked. “What about?”

She pulled herself up on the bed and looked down at him with a big smile on her face. He noted a sparkle in her green eyes, not love or playfulness—something else. *The twinkle of a person about to instigate trouble*.

“I decided that I don’t want to wait another half a year for the reception. The lead-time for the hall we rented is too long. I want to announce our wedding right now, without any delays. We’ve been married for six months already, it’s about time we go public. The other day after you left, I was so

angry. Then I was worried when you didn't answer your phone. If anything had happened to you . . ."

He sat up. "I'm so sorry Rachael. I promise that I'll never do that again," he said.

"I believe you. When you finally called, I realized something horrific had happened. I heard it in your voice. I thought about how difficult it would be to live without you around. Robert, more than anything in this world, I want to share our news. I want to announce to the world that we belong to each other, and then begin our legacy."

Robert wrapped his arms around her.

"Yes, of course. I'll find some place that we can use right away."

She pushed herself away, smiling.

"I already have. We'll have the reception at my father's house. It's big enough, and it will feel comfortable being home."

Robert was surprised. It was her home, not his, but then he saw the amusement on her face. "Yes. It will suit us just fine, as long as your father is willing for us to abuse his house."

"You know perfectly well he hosts parties at the mansion all the time. This will be his favorite for sure. After all, it's not every day you publicly announce your daughter's marriage."

"He does realize we're already married. It's too late to run me out."

Rachael nudged his arm. "Behave, rich boy. I know my father is odd at times, but I love him dearly."

"Yes, we all know. He spoils you to death."

“As any good father should.” She kissed his nose and moved off the bed. “Okay, rich boy. Time for breakfast. I need my strength.”

Robert watched Rachael flitter towards the bathroom. Relieved and feeling rather lucky, he figured he could stand her father for her sake. Mr. La France was nothing like his own father. They were both stern businessmen of course, but that’s where similarities ended. When it came to Rachael, Mr. La France was putty in her hands.

After they had eloped, her father refused to speak to him for weeks and treated Robert like a piece of furniture. Maybe having the reception at his house would go far to smooth things out between them. It certainly couldn’t hurt.



Later that morning they drove to the La France mansion. It loomed ahead of them, a colossal fashionable home of the new Mid-south, built of brick with French design, sporting massive rooflines, copper details, beams, shutters and lancet windows pointed at the top like they belonged in a Gothic church. He parked his silver Jaguar under the carport, got out, and opened the door for Rachael.

They stepped into her father’s house—a huge Memphis mansion, tiled with marble, the floors gleaming. A marble staircase, detailed with a wrought iron railing of intricate rosettes and ivy design, protruded into the entry.

“My God this place is a palace. I don’t remember it being so large.”

“That’s because you always saw it filled with people. This will be perfect for the party, enough room for everyone, and I think we’ll have the ceremony in the back yard—in the garden. It will add, you know, ambiance for when we recite of our vows officially for your priest.”

“That sounds romantic.” Robert was about to kiss Rachael, but he heard the heavy office door slam closed. Mr. La France’s office was just off the hallway from the foyer. His father-in-law’s footsteps echoed as he drew closer, the sound building up intensity like in the old movies, waiting for the bad guy to appear.

Mr. La France noticed them and came to stand beside his daughter. He was medium height, not much taller than Rachael. His white hairline receded, his eyes were true blue, deep in color to the point of eeriness. His nose looked pasted on and too large for his face. Dressed in a finely tailored suit, he looked polished and ready to step into a boardroom. Robert thought him stuffy and a bit over the top. Even his own father had dressed more casually when at home.

One thing Robert did admire about her father was his keen business sense. A man who knew how to generate tons of money, he was a King Midas. However, today Robert noticed something else about Mr. La France and wondered why he had never noticed it before—the way his eyes looked right through your body as if you weren’t there. He leaned his body backward, angled away from you as if inspecting every inch of the floor between himself and others. *Creepy.*

A cold sweat chased down Robert’s back, and he suddenly felt clammy. Creepy or not, Robert needed to walk the

thin line drawn. He'd do anything for Rachael, even make small talk with his father-in-law.

"Good morning, Robert. Welcome. I suppose you agreed to have the reception here, in my house, as Rachael wants?"

"Yes sir, if that's agreeable with you. She seems to have her heart set."

"Yes, well it seems that's what she wants." Mr. La France turned his attention toward her. "Whatever you want Rachael, you shall have."

"Thank you, Daddy." She kissed his cheek mechanically.

Despite his misgivings about her father, Robert could never deny her.

"I took the liberty of having my social planner here. He can go over his suggestions with you and take care of getting the invitations out, even at such short notice."

Robert detected a little bit of snark.

"Oh Daddy, I don't want this to be a business thing. I only want close family and friends."

"Of course, whatever you wish." He patted her hand. "All I ask is that you go over his list. He's quite thorough and even checked into the de Gourgues family tree to ensure everyone was included. It was odd; he couldn't locate many living relatives. I hope we haven't missed any extension of the family line."

"Thank you, sir. Unfortunately, we are a small family."

"That will change one day," Rachael said.

She turned and walked toward her father's office. Robert followed wondering what she had meant, *did she want a large family?* They never discussed it before.

Robert stepped into another big room. Bookshelves lined the walls filled with tomes and in between the heavy wood pieces, hung art. Every inch of wall space was covered. One painting caught his interest, it was a dark subject, maybe a Francisco Goya knockoff. A dark horned figure was painted in the foreground, standing in front of a group of grotesque people, their faces mangled and distorted. Robert shivered.

A large, heavy walnut table occupied the center of the room. It was oval, and the center post was carved with a geometric design of old Bavarian influence. Mismatched wooden chairs scattered about, some ladder-back, some Windsor. A tall thread-like man stood beside the table examining swatches and color wheels. His dark hair was cut in a scissored work of art. Dressed vogue as well, his professional attire popped with a pink bow tie accessory.

"Hello, my dear Rachael."

He walked over to them.

"Sergio, this is my husband, Robert. Robert, our designer, Sergio."

"Delighted, sir. Think of me as your wedding planner."

Robert shook the hand extended to him.

They went straight to work. Rachael chose the color scheme and flower choice, both already dreamed up in her head after picking Michelle and Emilie's brains for weeks. Then it came time to review the guest list, which was too long in Robert's opinion. He didn't recognize most of the names on

the list. Rachael looked it over and asked for a few to be scratched out.

“Robert, do you want anyone added?”

He looked over the names again, checking it to ensure his family was there. Aunt Victoria, old school mates from Harvard, even Jackson Bennett made the list. Some of the business people he knew, the top men whom he used to work with; now they dealt with Michelle.

“Dear, do we need so many business associates to attend? I thought we were keeping it close friends.”

“Okay then, who do you want to delete?” she asked.

A trick question. “I guess it’s fine as is. I don’t want to cause any problems with your father.”

“Great! So we’re on. Sergio, how soon can we expect this setup? I want it as soon as possible.”

“My dear Rachael, we could have it this weekend, and I promise, people will come. It is, after all, you and Robert. No one will want to miss this special day.”

“Fine, this weekend it is.”

Robert rubbed the back of his neck, kneading the knots in his muscles. All of a sudden, everything in his life felt so finite and controlled.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Future

Later in the afternoon, Robert stood alone on the back porch, his glass of Highland Park scotch in hand. They had returned home from her father's house, and then Rachael left again. She drove Aunt Victoria to her businesswoman's function. His aunt had promised to speak to the women's club about her book. Emilie and Michelle left for the office to check on things. Robert imagined his sisters wouldn't be home until late, dealing with the many issues after being away.

It seems odd to be alone. Robert took a sip, and looked out, across the back yard. His spirits lifted when he spied Jeremy's tall frame walking up from the woods. His boots were covered with mud. The man must have been inspecting the river and floodplain area behind the tree line of the property, *a true nature boy*. Robert wondered why his sister was so taken with the man. Jeremy was ordinary. Yes tanned and handsome, but no money or prestigious English title. The complete opposite of Robert, Jeremy was laid back about most things and never ruffled. He annoyed Robert with his pleasantness — always smiling and seeing the best in life. Oddly enough, Robert hoped Jeremy was coming to talk with him. For some reason, Robert felt uncomfortable drinking alone. He didn't want to be by himself any longer.

Robert called out, "Have a drink with me."

Jeremy quickened his pace and joined him on the porch.

"What's your poison?"

"Water is fine, for now," Jeremy said. He took the bottle offered and drank half in a gulp. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then smiled.

"How long have you been out there?" Robert asked.

"All afternoon. Even though it's fall, the afternoon sun still drains you."

"So did you hear the news then? We've moved the reception up to this weekend."

"Really? What's the rush? I thought you two planned a huge gala six months from now?"

"Well for some reason it's important to Rachael to have it now. She doesn't want to wait."

"Excuse me for asking, but is Rachael pregnant?" Jeremy asked.

Robert jerked his head back a tic.

"Not that I know of. Is the father usually the last to know?"

"In my experience, he's usually the first, sometimes the father knows even before the mother does."

"Now you're poking fun. How could that be?"

"I'm serious. Men know their wives' bodies. I think if she were expecting, then you would have noticed a change in her."

Robert thought about that a moment, and how he didn't seem to notice much lately. He'd been so blinded by his own twisted need for money, that he missed a lot of things that had been going on around his family, things that should have been evident to him.

"Well, if we are pregnant, then I'm the idiot for not knowing."

There was an awkward silence. Jeremy finished his water and asked for another drink, something stronger this time.

"Glad to have a drinking partner." Robert handed him a glass of scotch. "So Jeremy, how are you doing?"

"Thanks for asking. To tell the truth, not so well. I keep seeing that monster in my head. When I close my eyes, I can feel the blade in my hands, and its weight straining my muscles. I relive the thrust and the feel of the resistance . . ." Jeremy shook his head. "I would have never dreamed in a million years that I could've cut off its head, or done such violence."

"You had no choice. You were protecting my sister. You love Emilie—you had to do it."

Jeremy harrumphed.

"I'm not joking, old sport."

"Not so long ago you accused me of going after Emilie's money."

"Sorry. I wasn't in my right frame of mind. My better judgment was clouded at the time."

"Understandable. I hope you aren't being too hard on yourself."

Robert laughed aloud.

"What's funny?" Jeremy put his drink down.

"You above all people know how horrible I behaved. I regret many things, and on the top of the list, I regret being implicit to the burglary that hurt your uncle. I apologize for

having his book stolen. If I could do things over again, I would."

"I have, to be honest. I'll never be completely over the loss of my uncle. Uncle Thaddeus was my best friend. No, more like a second father figure." Jeremy's face reddened. "Let's try to move on. We need to for everyone's sake."

"You mean for Emilie's sake," Robert said.

"Yes." Jeremy agreed. "The rest of the family's sake, too."

Robert nodded. "You're right of course. I'll take care of Rachael, and you take care of yourself for my sister's peace of mind. Lord knows she has a lot of weird stuff to deal with and she needs you by her side. I don't think there's another person in this entire world who would've stood by her with all that mojo going on."

They looked out across the yard. It was serene. The setting sun cast a pink hue over the horizon. Robert gazed over to the wooded area behind the pond and noticed movement. He leaned his body forward and stared.

"What is it?" Jeremy asked.

"I thought I saw someone in the woods. Did you notice anything odd back there today?"

"Nothing odd. There were some paths with the brush pushed aside, but it could've been from anyone riding the horses. I know your stable kids take the horses back there to keep them exercised."

They both turned around at the sound of the others jabbering away. Rachael and Victoria stepped onto the porch.

“There you are.” Rachael kissed Robert’s cheek. “Your Aunt is divine. Everyone at the luncheon devoured her every word. I never knew your family had so much spunk.”

“Just what exactly did you talk about, Aunt Victoria?”

“Oh, little anecdotes, you know personal stories about this and that, being a woman and having to deal with the ole’ boys club while trying to grow a business. Growing up in Massachusetts, and bargaining with all the Yankee horse traders,” she laughed.

Robert poured the ladies a drink, and they chatted about the plans for the weekend. Rachael glowed. He recalled Jeremy’s words. *Was she pregnant? If so, why not tell him?* He tried to think of the last time they had had sex, before this morning. Was it days, weeks? Could she have been pregnant for a while already? Robert started getting suspicious, then caught himself. *Stop being so cynical!*

“Robert, you are so lucky to have this wonderful woman by your side.”

“Yes, I am, Aunt Victoria.”



A half hour later, they went upstairs to freshen up for dinner. Robert watched Rachael as she changed her clothes. *Did her body look and feel different?* He stepped closer to her and wrapped his arms around her waist. *Skinny as ever.* He breathed in and noticed her smell—jasmine. He buried his face into her neckline and drew in another deep breath while holding her tight from behind. He was the luckiest man in the

world with Rachael by his side, the most beautiful woman alive.

“I’m so happy you’re my wife,” he murmured.

She turned around and smiled, then kissed his forehead. “Prove it, Mr. de Gourgues and have your way with me right now.” She unbuttoned her blouse and slowly pulled it away to expose her black lace demi-bra. Her skin was soft and lily white.

Robert touched her arm, closed his eyes, and let his hand travel up to her shoulder. He opened his eyes and saw her want. He lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bed. “You asked for it,” he said.

Rachael took control. She kissed his body as she pulled his clothes off. Her lips felt hot and wet against his skin, sending waves of delight throughout his body. He went to a corner of his mind where worldly things were forgotten. The two of them were soon lost in the fury of lovemaking. Any thought, other than her, abandoned.

They spent the next hour together. Finally, exhausted they fell into each other’s arms and rested. Robert heard the grandfather clock chime.

“Almost dinner time,” he said, then gently kissed the top of her head.



In the evening hours, the entire family met up in the parlor. As expected, Emilie and Michelle arrived late.

“Tough day at the office?” Robert called out from across the room. “A drink is in order.”

He poured two wines, handed each one a glass, and looked them in the eye. He noticed their fatigue and wondered if it was business trouble or just residual anguish from the experience they all had just endured.

“You know, if you need help with anything, you can ask for my assistance. I don’t mean I’d go to the office, of course, but I’m just a call away if you need advice.”

Michelle scrunched up her nose and darted him *a look*.

“That’s very generous of you Robert. Things are running smoothly. It’s just that we still haven’t really been able to wrap our heads around everything that happened.”

Robert understood that sentiment. He nodded and let the subject die.

Rachael made the announcement. “Robert and I moved the reception date to this weekend. So, clear your calendars.”

Everyone’s disposition changed immediately. The smiles delighted Robert, and he realized this party was going to be the medicine they all needed to get their heads back to some degree of normalcy.

“Family, I want to express my gratitude for your acceptance. It’s important to Rachael and me, and with your support, we’ll live a long and happy life together. Thank you all for being here for us.”

He raised his glass. “To our future.”

“To your future,” they all toasted.

CHAPTER FIVE

Visitor

Two days passed. Thursday morning arrived, and everyone left the house early to go to work or do last minute errands for the big party. Robert sat alone in the kitchen, finishing up the last cup of coffee. He had been spending too much time alone the past couple of days, and what he really needed was a friend.

“Can I get you anythin’ before I takes off?” Nina smiled, but he saw concern in her dark jeweled eyes. He knew the trusted cook and caretaker worried about him even though no wrinkles showed on her plump brown face. Over the years, she had guarded him just as well as any mother would have, though he didn’t deserve the cook’s attentions. He was glib with her and too often mocking.

“I’m fine, thanks, Nina. You go on now, get your shopping done for dinner tonight. I have things I need to do to get ready for my bride.”

“If you need anythin’ just call out to Mr. Evans. He can carry you to the store or whatnot. Seems like he’s gotz nothin’ to do round here since your daddy died. All he does is hangs around, eavesdropping on conversations.”

“I’ll be fine, Nina.”

She nodded, but her eyes never left his face until she was out the door.

“Evans,” he yelled out.

The stiff looking man entered the kitchen. "Can I help you, Robert?"

"Yes. Take the day off. I want to be alone. Now."

The house manager nodded and left without another word. Robert immediately felt better. He hated how the man was always underfoot.

Robert rose from the kitchen chair and walked down the hallway to his father's library. He opened the large double doors and stepped into the room. The air was stuffy after being closed up for weeks, the room smelled of lemon cleaning oils and old books. He crossed the spacious room and pulled open the lengthy heavy Jacquard drapery. Sunlight streamed into space, brightening things a bit. His father's antique desk almost gleamed, the wood mellow with age. Varied book jackets colored the shelves, and the chairs near the hearth looked inviting. He went to the fireplace, opened the flue, struck a match, and lit the fire logs that sat on the iron grate. In minutes, a fire blazed as the dried kiln popped in the heated flames.

Robert turned his attention back to the walls lined with books. His parents had been avid readers, and the volumes on the shelves covered many genres. He walked over to the shelf nearest the French doors and pulled out a random book. He leafed through the pages, stopped at a page and read:

"No! My life was getting impossible. And I couldn't keep the secret of what I had seen. I couldn't go on living like everyone else, with the fear that this sort of thing might begin again at any moment."

He raised his hand to his chest. The words touched upon his fears. Robert turned back the pages to find the name of the author, who knew his own mind so well. The short story was named "Who Knows," written by Guy de Maupassant, one of many included in a book of classic stories of the macabre chosen by the master of horror, H.P. Lovecraft. *Is this what my life has become, the macabre?* Robert continued reading. Immersed in the story about a man going mad, he hadn't noticed when the French door opened until Robert felt a cold draft sweep into the room from the exposed back porch.

"Excuse me."

The unfamiliar voice startled Robert. He slammed the book closed, spun around, and inspected the stranger standing in the doorway. Early thirties, short brown hair slicked back, thin and wearing a cheap suit. The expression worn on his face was as cold as the draft that blew in from outside—a serious man.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Agent Sloan." He flashed a badge and shiny shield, then slid it back into his jacket inner pocket.

"Do you make a habit of breaking into people's homes, Agent Sloan?"

"No, sir. Sorry for the intrusion, but I need to speak with you concerning urgent matters."

"Urgent? Hmm. Well, you can call my attorney, Agent Sloan."

"Mr. de Gourgues, may I call you Robert?" He took a step forward. "Robert, I believe you'd rather speak with me directly. It would be in your best interest."

“It would? And why should I speak with you, especially after you entered into my home through the back door, without an invitation?”

“Robert, I thought that perhaps speaking here at your home in private would be more agreeable. I hoped we might come to terms and avoid any unpleasantness—for example, you being arrested. But, if you prefer, I can get a warrant and drag you to the nearest Federal Bureau—”

“Arrested. What are you talking about?”

Robert worried they had connected him to the death of Tom Bennett. This was just the beginning. The nightmare would never end. He watched as the agent slid his right foot back and forth against the wood floor as if tracing the wood-grain with his toe.

“Well, for starters, you were the last person to see Mr. Pierce alive at the Peabody a few months ago.” The agent waved his hands down to calm anticipated protests. “I know you answered questions and the locals seem pretty sure you have an alibi. But the thing is . . .” Agent Sloan smiled and waited a second. “The truth of the matter is, we had been following Mr. Pierce. You see, he was a man of interest in an open case we’ve been working. So we know, Robert—we know everything.”

A thick silence hung in the air and lasted forever. Robert heard the grandfather clock tick in the hallway, as he digested every word the agent had said. Pierce, that man had been a pariah and still haunted him from the grave. He should have felt guilty about killing the man, even though he was a low life, but instead, he only felt the fear of being caught.

"Then top things off with your involvement with Tom Bennett . . ."

Robert swallowed hard. His heart pounded against his ribs. The room felt a hundred degrees Fahrenheit. *What does this man really know?* He wiped his wet brow, then absently played with his cuffs, while trying to think of some witty retort. He had nothing.

"Now that's something interesting, don't you think? So, Robert, are you ready to have a serious conversation with me yet?"

Robert waved his arm toward the set of chairs near the fireplace. He closed the glass door, turned and walked across the room, seating himself down.

"Just exactly what do you want, Agent Sloan?"

"Here's the thing." The agent walked into the room. "Like I said, there's an ongoing investigation. The FATF have been following the money, so to speak."

"Excuse me, what money are we talking about?"

The agent smiled. "Well, quite a bit of money. What tipped us off about you, Robert, were the funds you funneled from your family's enterprise to Tom Bennett's offshore accounts. Please, let me start over and give you an official introduction. My name is Agent Jeffrey Sloan, and I work for the Bureau of Investigation. Currently, I'm assigned to a special task force with Fin CEN and an FATF task force."

"Am I supposed to know who that is?"

"Robert, I would've thought you heard of them by now. Your accountants have been required to file BSA reports ever since the Bank Security Act in 1990. FATF, the Financial Action Task Force fights financial terrorism. We follow the

money internationally and fight crime by revealing, arresting, and prosecuting money launderers and worse. The FATF operates under the direction of the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, alias Fin CEN, who in turn reports directly to the United States Treasury Department.”

Robert shook his head. “Hold on one minute. There was nothing dirty about the money I invested with Tom Bennett.”

The Agent laughed aloud. “Investment. That’s what you call it?”

“I paid my taxes on that money—it was clean. Not drug money, or anything illegal to get the gains.” Robert said in a huff of indignation.

“Robert, it’s not your money’s origin that’s the problem. It’s where it went and what they’re using it for. I know you’ve heard of the Black Wolf Society. Need I say more?”

Another moment of silence.

The Agent walked closer and sat in the armchair across from Robert.

“Please, let’s discuss things like two reasonable men.”

Robert drew in a deep breath and exhaled. He knew he was backed into a corner, and needed to hear what this agent had to say. “Very well. Continue, Agent Sloan, you have my full attention.”

“The Black Wolf Society is responsible for various terrorist acts all across the world. They use the ill-gotten funds to back crooked government officials, buy warheads and ammunition to fund guerrilla armies and similar activities. Their sole goal is to create chaos in the world so they can manipu-

late governments, businesses, and basically control the markets and money.”

“Sounds like a big conspiracy.” Robert cringed. He had no idea the Black Wolf Society existed worldwide and so entrenched in politics. Hopes of staying away from them shrunk to improbable. Robert had a sinking feeling that he was going to become more involved than ever.

“No, it’s not a conspiracy, it’s a terrorist network, Robert. And we plan to shut them down by following the money. Your help will be invaluable.”

“I don’t believe in such nonsense.” Robert didn’t want to believe. He closed his eyes and wished this man away. Of course, Agent Sloan was still there when he opened his eyes again.

“No, Robert, from what I’ve witnessed of you and your activities, you don’t believe in much, except yourself. This might be your chance to prove me wrong.”

Robert’s face burned. “Just what, exactly, are you holding over me? I want specifics.”

“Well, for starters, the room in which Mr. Pierce lodged was bugged. We heard everything you said when you were in the room. The man’s death was recorded. Next, we have surveillance of you with Tom Bennett the night before he disappeared. There was a live camera recording the four of you arranging to have a warehouse torched, and planting evidence against a political candidate. So that leads us, and by us, I mean the FATF—to the conclusion that Tom Bennett is not only missing, but dead, and that you know something about that. Of course, there was no body found, only lots of blood left behind at the scene. The entire warehouse looked a

mess when we got there. The locals couldn't stomach it—they had no problem letting our task force take control of the crime scene." The agent paused a few moments.

Robert adjusted his weight in the armchair but stopped cold when he noticed the agent's stare on him. He was scrutinizing Robert and his reaction.

"That was some bloody mess the other day, up in that warehouse in Boston. Disgusting really. We questioned Detective Ramsey, but of course, he wasn't able to say much, what with being in intensive care and all. But he did murmur your name, over and over again."

"You plan to extort me as well?"

"No, Robert, nothing like that. That's your game, not ours. We're giving you another chance here, to wipe the slate clean. We'll lose the tapes from Pierce's room and forget about your involvement as an embezzler if you agree to help us with our investigation."

"You mean, you want me to spy for you? Put my life and my family's lives on the line?"

Agent Sloan nodded. "I don't see it quite that way. Robert, I'm giving you a chance to help your country. To right your wrongs. To find some sort of redemption for your past indiscretions. Hell, I'm absolving you, almost like a priest."

"Yeah, you're some saint."

The fire crackled. Robert turned and watched the flames, thinking of everything he had done. Agent Sloan was right about one thing, he needed a way to make up for his jaded past. He had done horrible things: made decisions that hurt people's livelihoods, bullied businesses for a better bottom line, agreed to hurt people and put out contracts . . . those

were the least of his bad deeds. He tormented his father with knowledge of the curse, even slipped a hallucinogenic drug into his coffee. Then Robert stole his family's money, had killed a man even. He saw the truth, if he had kept on the same path with Tom Bennett leading the way, he would have fallen into a dark world of evil—consorting with gruesome murderers and monsters, just like Tom Bennett himself.

“Let me get this straight. If I agree to help you with your investigation, any previous infringement of mine against the law goes away? In writing?”

“That's the deal.” Agent Sloan crossed his heart and smiled.

“So, what exactly do you want from me? What do I have to do to get this special consideration?”

“We need you to infiltrate the Black Wolf Society. We know Tom Bennett had already suggested you as a candidate. We want you to pursue the society as if nothing else had happened. When the time is right, you'll need to go along for the ride, and hopefully, lead us to the main headquarters of the society.”

“Oh, is that all.” Robert gave a disingenuous grin. “What about Sturbridge? If you know about Bennett, you obviously know about the secret hideaway there.”

“That was just a local faction run by Bennett. He reported to a larger syndicate. We're aware that they keep the organization's helm someplace in Belgium, but we don't have an exact location. We need you to lead us there.”

“Belgium.” Humph. “And what do I do, fly over there and just walk around hoping someone will see me and make contact? Should I take out an ad?”

"Robert, don't take the task force for fools. You were already contacted, right here, the other night when you returned home."

"You mean the shadow man in the fedora, out there on the porch. Listen, he didn't leave his name or calling card. I have no way to connect with him again."

"He'll contact you. I believe that's how he left things. The society wants you to join their merry group for some reason. We still haven't figured out what else you could offer them, but you have something they want."

"Good to know."

"Yes, good. So it's a deal?"

"Deal. Don't I have to sign something? I want my surety in writing."

Agent Sloan pulled some paperwork from his inside suit jacket pocket. He unrolled the papers and handed them to Robert. After Robert read the fine print, which clearly stated that in return for his cooperation, he had full immunity from any previous crimes, he signed the agreement. A weight lifted off his shoulders.

"You understand that I have a big wedding reception on Saturday?"

"Yes, and please can you slip an invitation to me? I want to be there, just in case someone contacts you there."

"It's mostly family and business associates, I highly doubt anyone from the Black Wolf Society would be there."

"We suspect that the local representative of the Black Wolf Society, the equivalent to Tom Bennett, is someone involved in your business. Or maybe someone who's privy to your financial information, or at least has access in some way.

We wouldn't be surprised, so be on guard from this point forward."

Robert believed the agent was trying to scare him now, but he went too far.

"Agent Sloan, I had a thorough background check done on all the people I dealt with, before ever associating with them. I can't imagine any of them have the gumption to be involved in such an intensely unscrupulous group. Hell, that's one of the reasons I wanted to join, to be the first. Of course, that was until I learned the truth, and the evil behind them."

"That's the point, Robert. It will be the person you least expect. Someone who passed all your sniff tests with flying colors. A person trusted in your household and at the office. That's how they operate without ever being suspected. They are so ground in, more so than the best Russian spies. Don't underestimate this group. The Black Wolf Society has been around for thousands of years, morphing, changing their name whenever needed to escape detection. That has been our biggest concern. We're afraid that they'll go under and create a new alias, leaving our investigation with a dead end."

"Okay, I'll play along. Just make sure I'm not turned into a dead end."

"We'll watch your back, every step of the way. So give me an invite or two, and we'll get things started."

Agent Sloan handed Robert a simple flip phone.

"You're kidding?" Robert said. "I didn't think these existed anymore. Okay, I get it. No photos or online media."

"After you're contacted by someone from the society, find a private place where you can talk, and call the second

number programmed into that phone. Tell us what happened, then keep the phone hidden but accessible.”

The agent got up from the chair, crossed the room and exited the same way he entered.

Robert followed, but when he reached the door to look out, the man was already out of sight.

A harsh autumn wind rushed across the patio, swirling some dried leaves into the air until they fell into the corner of the house. The brisk coolness sent a shiver up Robert’s back. He knew in his heart that he had just taken on more than he should. He thought of his parents, wishing they were there to show him the way.

He was on his own. No one could help him now.



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