

Gideon
Redoak

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Anne Fraser



*By Light Unseen Media
Pepperell, Massachusetts*

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Anne Fraser
February, 2008

Prologue

The undead do not dream. When we sleep by daylight, it is the sleep of death. Yet, when I awoke to the darkness, I could have sworn I heard an echo of laughter, as if from a nightmare.

Blackness enclosed me against a watchful silence, both so profound I thought I'd been struck blind and deaf. I had to feel my eyelids with my fingers to assure myself that they were open. I raised my arms, pressing against the lid of my coffin. It refused to budge. I strained with all my unnatural strength against the lid, but failed to move it even an inch. A few grains of dirt trickled in through minute cracks.

Dirt, the absolute silence, and the feeling of enormous pressure I could sense bearing in on all sides—these meant my coffin had been buried. The earth had been tightly packed around it so that I couldn't escape.

I sucked in the stale air that remained in my coffin. I turned my head sharply toward a harsh rasping sound, cracking my temple painfully on the side of the box. The sound was my own, of course, my pitiful attempt at breathing through lungs that no longer functioned normally.

I clawed at my throat. Choking, I tried to sit up and only gave my abused skull another painful blow. I forced my hands to be still. I couldn't suffocate, since I didn't breathe. I listened and heard nothing—not the wind, nor the rustle of leaves, the scrape of tree branches, the busy gnawing of rodents and beetles in old walls, the clink of chains, or any of the myriad sounds I was used to. I would die here of madness and starvation—the true death, not the false one I had already endured before my awakening as a vampire. How long would it take before I went insane? How long before I started savaging my own body, gnawing the flesh from my fingers for a drop of blood?

The wages of sin is death. So my father had often preached, usually enforcing his point with a birch rod. Recalling those painful lectures, I started to laugh. Damned if he hadn't been right.



Chapter One

My father had embraced the Puritan religion with fervour, despite being baron of a large and prosperous estate. He saw nothing incongruous between the two, and there were other noble Puritans, although few as fanatic as my parent. Indeed, he went far beyond the actual tenets of the Puritan sect.

I was born in mid-December of 1622, and managed to survive the threats of plague, smallpox, cholera, and a host of other dangers too numerous to list. My sister Prudence was my only sibling to live to adulthood. As the sole male child, I was the heir and expected to take my father's place.

From earliest childhood, I was familiar with every inch of the estate—every tenant, servant, swineherd, wandering tinker and stray bullock. I was there when seeds were planted, when the fields flooded or lay gasping for water in a drought, when the crops were harvested and the grain threshed. A baron did more than rule and gather rent, I learned—he must know how every labourer worked. My father and I toiled right alongside our tenants. I could shoe a horse, help a calf into the world, slaughter a pig, name the diseases of corn, and walk the Redoak lands blindfold by the time I was twelve.

My father was even sterner when it came to my spiritual education. Forced to memorise the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and attend every sermon our tame preacher delivered, I could discuss scripture at length when called upon to do so. A vigorous and immediate application of the rod corrected any faltering of my memory. I still bear the scars made by supple birch on tender young skin.

The preacher was my father's hireling and obediently parroted his rigid views of good and evil. Sermons consisted of dire warnings against straying from the narrow path of righteousness as my father saw it. Lust was the worst of the sins, the preacher would inform his congregation, spittle flying from his lips. Fornication would surely land you in the pits of Hell. Sexual intimacy was only permitted between man and wife, and only for the purposes of procreation. Thus were children born in original sin.

One week, he spoke of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the terrible sin of sodomy. Many of the congregation wept with terror



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at the vivid descriptions of the punishments awaiting the practitioners of this sin. I was badly frightened, all the more so because I didn't know what sodomy was. I somehow summoned the courage, when discussing this sermon with my father, to ask. He struck me across the mouth.

"But how can I avoid this sin if I don't know what it is?" I asked through bloody lips.

My father stared at me, unused to rebellion, even such a feeble one. He sent for the preacher. "The boy wants to know what sodomy is."

We were in his study. I stood near the fireplace, whose flames cast a small reflection of Hell across the wooden floor. My father sat in his black oak chair, and the preacher stood far too close to me for comfort. He smelled of stale sweat.

"Filth! Sin!" More froth appeared on the preacher's lips. "To lust for a woman is a sin. Aye, even if she be your wife. But to lust for another man, that, boy, is sodomy. To take that vile instrument which dangles between your legs and to thrust it into that hole from which filth issues..."

"Yes, I believe that the boy understands now," my father said. "Gideon, retire to your room and pray for guidance."

"Yes, Father. Thank you, Reverend Sir." I fled. In the safety of my room, I prayed not only for guidance, but for understanding.

My sister Prudence, given to our mother's care, fared somewhat better than I did. I seldom saw either Prudence or my mother. I was discouraged from associating with women, even close relatives. My father didn't wish for me to turn to my mother and sister for sympathy and comfort.

I had very few friends. I was seldom permitted to mingle with other noble children. Many of these were Cavaliers and jeered at my short hair and sombre clothing. I longed for bright colours and the gaiety of court life, but dared not disobey my father. My socialising was limited to dull Puritan meetings. Heaven help the boy or girl who fell asleep during one of those interminable sermons!

While I was still a child, my parents arranged my betrothal to a girl of similar background and breeding, a common practice of the day. I never gave the matter much thought, except as yet another future duty to fulfil. My poor sister was promised to one of my father's cronies, cut from the same stern cloth as he. I met my own betrothed, Piety, on several occasions. We got along tolerably well, since there was no point to our being enemies. She was a pretty and agreeable maid, but I felt no attraction to her.



Of course, such attraction would have been a sin, but it was a sin that held little danger for me. By the time I reached fifteen, I understood, more or less, how conception was achieved. I'd seen enough cows, mares and sows put to stud to work out for myself how humans managed it. To me, the process seemed both brutal and messy. How could anyone feel lust under such conditions? Piety awakened no stirring in my loins, nor any desire to disobey all those prohibitions against knowing a woman.

I can't fairly blame this reaction—or lack of one—on my teaching. From time to time, a glance or accidental touch from another evoked a rush of guilty heat in my body. Then I would remember the preacher's definition of sodomy, and my face would flame as my legs tottered.

No woman caused these first awakenings of sexuality. Such longings I might at least have understood. Rather, it was the sight of a man. Men like the brawny blacksmith's son, muscles gleaming with sweat as he pumped the bellows, or the pale, long-locked, seldom-seen son of our Duke. The thresher effortlessly mowing the hay with his scythe held me entranced, as did, most of all, the son of my father's steward and my only true friend, Jamie Carter. Ah, God, the most forbidden form of lust—other men, and the act that was so damnable that it was more than mere sin. How could I, raised by such strict Biblical precepts, possibly be a sodomite? My first confused stirrings were not very explicit in retrospect. The knowledge of how beasts mated and the preacher's definition of sodomy made me uneasy, as well as rather confused, about imagining anything specific along those lines. But I wondered how it would feel to be held in strong arms.

I prayed nightly for guidance, for answers, for relief from the feeling of warm pleasure that swept over me each time Jamie smiled. I prayed until my knees bled, until even my father noticed my haunted eyes and drawn features. Weeping, I begged God not to punish me thus, to show me that He had not abandoned me. God did not answer.

Shortly after my nineteenth birthday, I became the Baron of Redoak.

Travelling in 1641 was a dangerous business. Disease was rampant, the roads were poor and unlit, transportation relied on high-strung horses prone to broken legs, and thieves lay in shadowy ambush. My father avoided his Parliamentary duties as much as possible, but even he could not dismiss a summons from the House of Lords. Leaving me in charge of the estate, my father and two servants took the carriage and our best team to



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London. Horses and carriage were never seen again. Searchers discovered the murdered bodies of my father and the servants and returned them to the Hall on a wagon.

We had no doubt that highwaymen had stopped the carriage. These lawless men, not at all the romanticised figures of fiction, abounded on the roads. My father trusted in the Lord rather than in armed guards. Most likely he had started to preach against the sin of highway robbery and had been shot for his trouble. It was an understandable reaction to one of my father's lectures.

I didn't grieve for him.

Though barely nineteen when I inherited the Redoak title, lands and responsibilities, I had been thoroughly trained for the role. I had become a man at fourteen, putting childhood behind me forever.

Although old enough to assume the governing of the estate, I wouldn't be considered mature enough to marry for some years, for which I felt greatly relieved. God had not miraculously cured me of my desire for other men. Indeed, the closer I approached to full manhood, the stronger the urges. Neither prayer nor meditation eased my lust and confusion one iota. I felt terribly alone, since I didn't dare speak of my sin to anyone.

With my father dead, I found that there was no longer a barrier between me and the women of the household. Although they were almost strangers to me, it didn't take me very long to befriend my sister and learn to love my mother. She knew what I had endured under my father's reign, but had been helpless to interfere.

From Prudence, I quickly learned that I wasn't the only one dreading an arranged marriage. The man to whom she was betrothed, a dour fellow named Simon Paxson, resembled our father far too much for Prudence's liking. She tended to speak her mind, a quality that would stand her in poor stead in Paxson's Biblically strict household.

Prudence feared Paxson and feared for her own well-being if she married him. She loved Jamie Carter, who now held the position of steward to Redoak Manor. Prudence thought that her feelings for Jamie were a secret, but both my mother and I knew of them. I prayed that my own attraction to Jamie was known only to me.

Paxson came to call on me in late spring, less than two months after my father had been buried. With his thick build and eyebrows that bristled out an inch from his forehead, he provoked only revulsion. My father's aging wolfhound, Nimrod, gave



a token growl and slunk out of the study when Paxson entered. I never did like that damned dog, but I agreed with his opinion of my visitor.

When Paxson entered the study, I rose from the carved black oak chair to greet him, and motioned him towards a stool to sit. His eyes narrowed at this deliberate insult. He took the offered seat as though it were a throne.

His words were more courteous than his demeanour. "My lord, I must speak with you on a most urgent matter."

"I have many urgent matters which require my attention. Can yours not wait?"

"The truth, my lord Baron, is that time's arrows fly swiftly. My business can not wait."

I leaned back, a luxury that Paxson's three-legged stool would not allow him, and amused myself by watching his ugly eyebrows. "Very well. What is this urgent matter that brings you calling when my father is scarce cold in his grave?"

"My lord, your father and I had an agreement about his only daughter, your sister Prudence." His phrasing and tone implied that I might be unaware of my only sister's name.

"An agreement?" I repeated slowly, as if puzzled by the concept. An idea formed in my mind and I wanted to give it some time to achieve its full effect.

"Yes." Paxson ground his teeth, a muscle twitching in his cheek. His eyebrows telegraphed his desire to shake me. "He gave his consent."

"To what?"

"To... our... betrothal." Each word exploded from him and he nearly launched himself off the stool. His knuckles whitened as he fought for self-control. "Your father, sir, promised Prudence to me in marriage."

Wide-eyed, I told an untruth. Although I braced myself against it, the wrath of God smote me not. "I knew nothing of this. My father did not see fit to inform me of it, and he said nothing of the matter in his papers. No doubt, had he foreseen his untimely end, he would have recorded any such compact clearly, but—"

"He gave me his word!"

"Of which I know nothing. Whatever word my father may have given died with him."

"You must honour your father's agreement!"

"Sir, had I known of it, I should have been very pleased to honour it. However, it is impossible for me to grant your request for my sister's hand."



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“Impossible!” This time, Paxson did rise.

I remained seated. “Yes. Prudence is already betrothed.”

“To whom?”

“James Carter.”

“Carter? Is he not your steward? A servant? Your sister is a noblewoman!”

I gave him a measuring look. “I am surprised to hear you raise that objection, since the Puritan faith avers the equality of all men before God.” Not to mention that the steward of a large estate had a much higher rank than a mere servant, but I didn’t bother to say so. “My word is given, and the banns will be posted this Sunday. Was there anything else?”

A rainbow of colour changes spread across Paxson’s face while his eyebrows danced in anger. His fingers brushed the hilt of his belt knife, then clenched into a fist. He forced them open as I waited, heart in my throat, to see if he would threaten me. He bowed, cold and stiff, hating me with his eyes. Had his eyebrows been daggers, I would have been dead. “Then, if you will give me leave, Baron, I must return home.”

I stood and returned his bow, my own expression carefully blank. Had he been a trifle more rude, I would have had to call him out. I had never fought a duel. I escorted him out of the Hall, exchanging more bows but no civilities. His anger frightened me, but I didn’t let him see that. When Paxson had ridden out of sight, I sent for Jamie Carter. He came into my study. I didn’t sit down for this interview.

“I’ve put myself in a bad position, Jamie. I’ve told a lie, and I need you to help me make it into truth.”

Jamie’s broad, honest face showed his puzzlement. He was my elder by less than ten years and had inherited the post of steward when his father died. Jamie had filled many of the roles my father couldn’t be bothered with. He’d taught me how to fish and shoot game, put me on my first pony, shown me the pathways of the stars, and been the object of more than a few extremely troubling dreams. Naturally, I had no intention of ever telling him about those. No one save me and God knew of my terrible affliction, my unnatural and sinful lust for men. Jamie certainly must never discover my secret.

“I will aid you in any way I can, my lord.” Jamie’s voice broke my reverie.

With difficulty, I recalled what I wanted to say. “Jamie, you know that my father gave his word to Simon Paxson that he could wed Prudence. In order to spare her from this man, whom



I believe to be a brute, I told him that Prudence was already betrothed. Will you help me to tell this other man that he must marry my sister or make a liar and oath-breaker of me? He is a good man, and will be a better husband. What say you, Jamie?"

Struggling with his own emotions, which I could plainly read, Jamie said, "If you feel this other man would be a good husband for Prudence, sir, I will help you." Bless him.

"Excellent. This man will care for her, I know. I believe that Prudence admires him." At the look of jealousy that crossed his face, I relented. "The man I speak of is you, Jamie."

His smile lit the room. "Thank you, my lord!" He seized my hand and shook it with vigour.

While I was still numb from my reaction to this, Jamie fled the study without waiting for me to dismiss him. No doubt he ran off in search of Prudence, to share the news. At least I had made them happy.

For my own loneliness, the awful isolation, the burden of my terrible secret, I could see no solution. I didn't even know there was a name for my longings, other than sodomy.

The wedding, held that summer of 1642, was stark and simple. The Puritan preacher was not the same one who had defined sodomy for me, but he kept the ceremony stern. He warned the too-happy couple that this was a solemn occasion in the presence of God. In lonely splendour as the Baron, dressed for the first time in my life in noble finery, I gave my sister away and bestowed my worthless sinner's blessing upon her and her new husband.

Jamie and Prudence were so intent upon each other that they barely acknowledged my blessing. Watching them, I knew that I could never experience such joy.

A month after the wedding, my mother died. I had only just begun to know her, and found her a gentle and loving spirit. When we buried her, I wept.

Now that I was alone in Redoak Hall, Piety's parents pressured me to go through with our wedding. I named a date, with no enthusiasm.

Jamie and Prudence moved to a farm that I gave them as her dowry, an hour's ride from the Hall. Jamie still served as my steward until I could find another. One morning he came to me deeply troubled, with the news that one of the peasant women had been found dead. We rode at once for the cottage of the bereaved family. As soon as they heard the horses, all of the neighbours poured forth. The widowed husband prostrated himself in



front of my mare's hooves, so that I was forced to rein in hard. The press of people made my mare dance and twist.

"Stand back!" I said, and the crowd gave me room to dismount. I approached the prostrate husband and commanded him to rise and speak.

"Justice, my lord Baron!" He wept, clinging to my doublet. "My wife has been slain!"

I steeled myself not to pull away from his rank breath. He had nearly twice my years, an advanced age for a peasant. Half his teeth were gone and the rest rotting. I doubted that his deceased wife had been any more attractive, but his grief was piteous to see.

"Where is your lady?" I hoped my voice didn't betray my apprehension. I had no idea what I faced.

Jamie struggled to my side and soon had the crowd dispersed back to their usual tasks, save the new widower. My steward repeated my question.

"She is still in the field where she was found," the Goodman finally said. "None thought it meet to move her until you had seen her, my lord."

More likely, I thought, they had left the corpse to lie where found out of superstitious fear. "Show me," I said. Jamie at my side, I followed the man to the field where the woman's body lay. Her drab-clothed form lay like some weird fungal growth among the glistening wheat. An overturned basket, its contents ransacked by animals, lay nearby. After making my way along the already trampled path to her body, I knelt beside her. I had been expecting something gruesome, and was surprised at how peaceful she looked. Her eyes were closed and her arms were folded across her chest. My nose detected the usual unpleasant aftermath of death, but I saw no signs of violence.

"You said she was slain, Goodman. What caused you to call it thus? She appears to have gone peacefully to God."

"Look at her neck, my lord," the Goodman whispered, crossing himself.

Waving away the hordes of flies, I leaned over the woman's corpse. The sun beat down on the back of my own neck. Birds, unconcerned by death, sang in the distance. A beautiful day, perfect for harvesting, sullied by this odd corpse. I studied her, choking back vomit. There was no blood on the ground or her clothing, but when I examined her neck, I found two small and ugly wounds. I rocked on my boot heels, at a loss to determine



what had caused such marks. They were too precise to be any animal bite I had ever seen.

“It was a demon, my lord,” the widowed farmer said.

“Nonsense,” I said brusquely, standing up. But what had caused those wounds? This was unlike any gypsy trick or witchcraft that I had heard of.

Two more of my tenants died the same way. They were found in plain view, with arms folded across their chests and no wounds save for those two marks on the neck. All of my assurances, and those of the preacher, couldn’t keep the people from muttering about demons.

Jamie and I conferred for long hours in my study. I could call on little in the way of outside help in those days. I could have sent a message to the Duke, or summoned the sheriff out of Shrewsbury. But to do either would be a tacit admission that I was incapable of administering my lands. My tenants looked to me to save them from this terror, and I had only Jamie. We decided that our wisest course was to ride armed and ready around the estate at nightfall to see if we could discover the murderer.

What does one take as a weapon for demon hunting? I took my sword and my flintlock pistol. Jamie had his sword and a musket. I possessed some skill with the sword but none with the pistol, and worried that the thing would blow up in my face.

My sweet little black mare went lame just at this time. I had purchased a young white stallion with the thought of breeding him, but had not yet had him mounted on any mare. I ordered him saddled.

How like a fine young fool I looked, in my new slashed doublet, on my white stallion. How innocent, armed with sword and pistol, hunting demons.

If you hunt for something long enough, it finds you.

Jamie and I separated in order to cover the bounds of the estate. I took the path near the field where the first dead woman had been found. The wheat had been harvested save for the patch where she had lain. The stench of rotting grain rose up from beneath the stallion’s hooves. I sat hunched in the saddle, one hand gripping the reins, the other hovering nervously between sword-hilt and pistol-butt. The sun had just set, and my eyes were still dazzled by the lingering bands of scarlet on the horizon. I would need the lantern that hung from my saddle, but for the moment the sunset and the grey twilight sufficed. No lights at all shone from the nearby cottages. The tenants were all in their beds, or under them, praying.



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The horse whinnied and shied, nearly jerking me out of the saddle. I gripped the reins and peered over his twitching head to see what had caused this behaviour. The dying red light in the west outlined a black figure directly in front of my horse.

There had been no one on the path—had there? Surely I hadn't been so preoccupied that I didn't see this man approach until he was directly in front of the stallion?

"Who are you and what is your business here?" I spoke with all the authority of the Baron of Redoak. My horse continued to act strangely, straining at the bit and pawing the ground.

The intruder, a tall man plainly dressed, spread out his hands to show that he was unarmed. "Be easy, my lord Baron," he said, his voice rich and vibrant on the twilight air. "I seek you on urgent business."

"You have found me." I didn't think it odd that he knew my identity—who else but the lord of the manor would ride the bounds of his estate mounted on a blood stallion? "Give me your name."

"Forgive me, my lord." He bowed. "I am Etienne Corbeau." The name was French, although his accent was barely discernable.

"What is your business with me, sir?"

He had given me no title, but I automatically granted him at least a gentleman's status. His demeanour was not that of a vassal. "This is not a fit place to discuss it, my lord."

I had to agree, and so I invited him to the Hall, although the idea that the house, with its dozens of eavesdropping servants, was more private than a deserted field was amusing. The stranger drew closer, and the stallion went into a fit of frenzy. It reared, frothing around the bit, trying to attack the man with teeth and hooves. Clenching my legs around the horse's midriff, I kept my seat and fought the beast back down under control.

"Perhaps you had best follow me at a safe distance," I said to Corbeau. "I don't know how much longer I can master this animal."

With another fluid bow, the stranger agreed. I cast a glance back at him to try and decipher this new riddle. His clothes were of good quality, and the sword at his side looked unused. His black hair was neither short nor long, and there was a sensuality to his bearing that suggested anything but a pious temperament. I couldn't make out his features clearly in the gathering darkness, and eagerly anticipated the opportunity to see his face. We reached the Hall shortly. I dismounted, and a groom came out to take the stallion.



“He behaved badly tonight. Be sure to look him over thoroughly,” I told the groom, who was having difficulty leading the animal off. My father would have ordered such a horse shot. I was determined to prove my difference.

“Yes, my lord,” the groom said, almost dragging the stallion away.

For the first time, in the light of the torches on the Hall’s front entrance, I found myself face to face with Etienne Corbeau.

He topped me by at least five inches. Years of labouring in the fields and smithy beside the tenants had given me a most unaristocratic breadth of shoulder. But Corbeau’s form achieved noble perfection. His black hair absorbed the wavering torchlight. Dark blue eyes, like a deep mountain lake, gazed at me steadily. With his high cheekbones and exquisite features, he was the most truly beautiful person I had ever seen. I reddened under the intensity of his gaze, certain he saw only an awkward farm boy.

I was very young, and didn’t know that evil could walk abroad in the guise of a handsome man.

“Will you not invite me in, my lord?” he said softly.

Embarrassed at being reminded of my manners, I stammered an invitation even as a tardy footman flung open the doors. The house I had grown up in seemed as strange to me as a building in a dream. Corbeau showed me to my own study rather than the other way around. Nimrod, the wretched wolfhound, rose growling when I entered, but upon sighting my guest, the dog fled yelping, tail between its legs. I gave this behaviour no thought, but sank into the carved black oak chair. Once seated, some small portion of my senses returned to me. I dismissed the footman and confronted my guest.

“What is it that you have to say to me?”

Corbeau smiled. The immediate effect was to make my head spin, my palms perspire, and my legs quiver. Had I not been seated, I might have completely disgraced myself. I wiped my palms on the sides of my breeches and hoped he had noticed nothing untoward.

“My dear Baron,” he said in melodious tones, “I have heard that you are having trouble on your estate.”

That the news had spread beyond my borders didn’t surprise me. “Yes. There have been three peculiar deaths among my tenants.”

Corbeau’s voice echoed oddly in my head. “You were out searching alone. Do you not have a steward?”



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“Jamie Carter is my steward,” I said, although I had the feeling that Corbeau knew everything about Redoak Hall already. “We separated in order to ride the bounds. But he recently wed my sister, and would rather be with her, tending to their farm.”

My hands were beginning to chafe from being rubbed across my breeches. I had no idea why I was being so candid with this stranger. My affairs and those of my family were none of his concern. But such was the power of his voice and those eyes that I would have told him anything he asked.

“I will serve as your steward,” Corbeau said. He softened the boldness by adding, “If you will have me.”

I knew nothing about this man. I opened my mouth to protest, but he forestalled me. “I have experience as a steward. I will serve you well.”

“I...” My mouth closed. I could think of nothing to say.

“You are alone in this house?”

“Yes. I am all alone now.” The Hall had a small army of servants, but servants didn’t count.

“Not any longer, Gideon.”

It was presumptuous for him to use my Christian name, but with those blue eyes gazing into mine, I scarcely noticed. “No. Not any longer.”

“And I will be your steward?” His eyes never left mine.

“Yes, of course.”

He rose. “I must go now, for a brief time. I will return tomorrow evening with my belongings. A small, dark room with heavy window shutters will suit my needs. I am never to be disturbed during the daytime. That is when I must sleep. Is this understood?”

“It is understood.” I rose up and walked over to him, stopping just short of touching him, though the desire to do so nearly overwhelmed me.

He put both his hands on my shoulders, an unforgivably intimate gesture for a stranger to make. A flood of warmth and confusion washed through me at his touch. “Should anyone ask why you came to accept me as your steward, you will tell them that you are well-satisfied with my ability to do the work.”

“Yes, I shall tell them.”

He smiled, and left. With his departure, some of my senses returned. Had I just arranged for a complete stranger to become my steward? Dazed, I walked to the doors and looked out into the night, but Corbeau had vanished. The warmth and trembling desire his touch had awakened in me had not disappeared,



however. I spent the remainder of the night on my knees in prayer, begging for forgiveness for my lustful thoughts. For the first time, these thoughts drifted to physical longing.

The next morning, I directed the servants to prepare a room for the new steward according to the specifications he had dictated. While the shutters were being nailed into place, Jamie sought me out.

"I saw nothing last night," he said, propping his foot up on a stool and looking at his boot with interest. He was fighting against a grin, oddly enough. His mouth kept twitching upwards. "Did you?"

I couldn't imagine what to tell him, but he continued speaking, not noticing my failure to answer.

"Gideon." Jamie had earned the right to use my name when he became my brother-in-law. "I have something to tell you." A smile broke out on his features.

I stared at him, his excitement finally penetrating the mists of my own inward turmoil. "Out with it, then."

Jamie flushed, looked again at his boots, at the floor, at the servants, anywhere but at me. He was smiling again. I wondered what ailed him. He coughed into his hand while I began drumming my fingers on a small table in impatience. My father used to do that, and recalling it, I stopped.

"Prudence is with child," he finally said, his beaming smile threatening to split his face.

Nothing in the way I had been raised prepared me for this event to be greeted with such joy. The birth of a child meant pain and suffering. I summoned up a smile.

"Bless you both," I said, now even more excluded from what my sister and her husband shared.

"Thank you." Jamie looked at his feet again. Something down there seemed to fascinate him. He obviously knew that I felt his joy was misplaced.

I resisted the urge to look down. "And I have news for you. I've found a new steward, and can, with a full heart, bid you tend to Prudence and your farm without depriving me of aid."

Jamie wrung my hand. "But this is excellent news, brother! I'm glad that you have found an able assistant. Truth to tell, Prudence has been worried about leaving you alone in the Hall. She will be relieved to hear there is a stalwart fellow looking out for you. What is his name, and how did you find him?"

"His name is Corbeau, and he found me. He heard of the troubles here, and came to the Hall hoping for an opening." Even

as I said it, it sounded too incredible to be true. "I am satisfied that he will do well."

"If you are satisfied, then I am. Is he a God-fearing Christian?"

I had no idea how to answer. I doubted if the reply could truly be "yes." Jamie laughed at my silence. I rejoiced that he didn't question me too closely. Besides having been the unwitting object of my unnatural longings, Jamie had been my good friend and guardian since I'd been in leading strings. It hurt not to tell him the truth.

Jamie once more grabbed my hand. "I cannot thank you enough. My heart yearns even now to be with Prudence. I am glad that you have found a steward. Can he aid you to find the demon that slays our people?"

I hadn't thought of that. Once I had met Corbeau, all concern about the murders had fled. "Yes," I said, thinking of that liquid voice, those deep eyes. My shoulders still felt the pressure of his fingers. "I believe he can." I believed he could do anything.

Jamie beamed. "Then I can go to Prudence with a clear conscience."

"Go, then." I smiled.

Later that same day, the head groom sought me out. First he stated that he had thoroughly examined the white stallion and found nothing wrong with the beast. It was his opinion that the horse would be better behaved after it was bred to a mare. Once I had given him permission to attempt this, he didn't depart, but stood twisting his cap in his cracked hands.

"Was there something else?"

"Your father's dog is dead," he blurted out.

It took me a moment to realise what he'd said, and another minute for it to sink in that I hadn't seen Nimrod since the night before. "Nimrod?" I asked, rather stupidly. My father had owned no other dogs.

"Yes, my lord. One of my lads found him, my lord, in that copse on the north border." His cap was in danger of being destroyed by his nervous hands.

I knew the copse in question—it was on the very edge of my land, practically in Wales. If one of the stable lads had been in those woods, he had undoubtedly been poaching. I decided to overlook this crime and concentrate on the death of the wolfhound. "Old age, I suppose?"

The head groom trembled. "No, my lord. Killed, my lord. Had his throat tore out."



That certainly warranted my full attention. “Get all your lads, and any other young men or older boys that can be spared. Search that copse, every tree, every bush, and every hole. If there are wolves or wild dogs on my land, I want them found.”

The stable master looked relieved to have clear orders. “Yes, my lord. And the dog’s body?”

“Bury it where it lies.”

He tugged on his forelock, and departed. The respect in his eyes bothered me, for I couldn’t imagine how I’d warranted it. I had not only failed to protect my tenants, I couldn’t even protect a dog. Although Nimrod’s violent death troubled me, I certainly didn’t mourn his passing. The search turned up neither wolf nor stray dog, and no tracks offered a clue as to the identity of Nimrod’s Nemesis.

For an eternal afternoon, I paced the Hall until finally the sun began to sink and Corbeau arrived. In my relief to see him I barely noticed the large box he brought with him. He permitted none save himself to handle this container.

I accompanied him to the room that had been prepared and watched him slide the mysterious box over against a wall. He expressed satisfaction with the arrangements. I flushed with pleasure at this praise, and wished there were something else I could do to earn it. His measuring gaze swept over me.

“Such eyes,” he murmured. “Beautiful.”

“I beg your pardon?” He could not have meant that my eyes were beautiful, surely. I had misunderstood him.

“Perhaps you would not mind giving me a tour of the estate, my lord?”

“Of course.” I felt stupid that I hadn’t thought of it.

The waning day shed soft grey light across the fields. Corbeau blinked painfully and pulled his hat brim over his eyes, but made no complaint. Grooms and footmen hovered nearby, awaiting orders.

“Best not use your white stallion, my lord,” Corbeau said softly, for my ears only. “It is a fine beast, but likes me not.”

I accordingly asked for another horse to be brought. I asked Corbeau if he wished any of my stable for his use, but he replied that he had his own mount with him. The groom fetched the horses, a placid old red nag for me and Corbeau’s tall chestnut gelding.

“Horses don’t like me. I have never known why,” my new steward said. My red mare shied when I mounted.

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“Your own is quiet enough,” I said enviously, giving the mare a sharp flick with my riding crop and finally settling safely in the saddle.

“He is used to me.”

Despite the antics of my mount, the ride with Corbeau proved pleasant. He listened attentively to all that I had to say, and asked intelligent questions. Although he was several years my elder, he treated me with deference and respect.

As the last rays of the sun slanted across the sky, I introduced Corbeau to the tenants. They had turned out in a cluster for inspection, and all of them greeted me with a mixture of familiarity and reverence. None of them seemed to like the new steward, however. They spoke politely, but with no warmth. I took Corbeau to the dower farm, and introduced him to Jamie and Prudence. A certain chill permeated the proceedings. Again, I witnessed politeness but not acceptance. I alone, of everyone on the estate, actually liked my new steward.

Time passed and the new steward settled into his duties despite the reluctance of the tenants to accept him. Some seemed afraid of Corbeau. I caught more than one crossing himself or making the sign against the Evil Eye behind the steward’s back. When I confronted them about this, however, the tenants refused to explain.

All I dreamt about was Corbeau now. No longer did I notice attractive young labourers. No longer did I fantasise about Jamie declaring his love for me. Only Corbeau, with his handsome face and bottomless eyes, drew me. His voice sang in my ears. Fever surely boiled in my veins, for I would flush hot and red whenever he looked at me.

Sins of the flesh! Sodomy! Lust! Driven to prayer and tears, I begged God for guidance. Why did I so long for a touch or even a look from Corbeau? Why did Satan lead me into damnation? Had the Devil himself sent Corbeau to try me? Why was I so weak, so despicable?

Corbeau and I dined together every evening. This was the time to discuss the affairs of the estate, to see how crops, beasts and tenants were faring. He ate sparingly, almost nothing at all. My appetite was usually keen, honed by hard work, making me ashamed of my gluttony. Often his eyes were fixed on me. If I noticed, the blood rushed to my cheeks.

Corbeau knew everything that happened on the estate, despite his inability to function during the daytime. I depended upon his help, relieved to have someone older and stronger to



turn to. He eased the burden of being Baron. When he smiled at me over the lip of his wine cup, I no longer felt alone. He must have known. But if he caught me admiring him, he would say nothing, but only smile.

There was a small room next to my bedroom, what was then termed a closet. Before retiring, I went over the books and accounts there. Late one night, when I couldn't sleep for the tortured thoughts of my confused soul, I went to the closet. I lit the brazier and a few candles and tried to occupy myself with the accounts. The door opened, making the candle flames dance. I looked up, startled, to see Corbeau smiling down at me. He carried a flagon of wine and two goblets. I'd heard no sound of his approach.

"You burn your candles late, young lord. I've brought some refreshment. Perhaps I can aid you with those accounts."

I gestured to the other chair in the small room. My heart began to pound, but my voice sounded steady. "Pray seat yourself. I would be glad of a wiser head at these accounts, and gladder still of the wine. This is thirsty work."

He set his burden on the desk and poured the wine. He passed one goblet to me, his fingers brushing mine. I jerked back at the touch, nearly spilling my wine. He filled his own goblet and raised it.

"To your long life." His eyes met mine.

Warmth flooded me although I hadn't yet tasted the wine. Head reeling, I lifted my cup. "And to yours."

We drank. The wine, dark in the candlelight, was fruity and spicy, with a musky aftertaste that wasn't unpleasant. I had a good head for wine, yet this one sip swirled in my veins like flaming ice. Hastily, I set down the cup. Corbeau's fingers curled over mine, and my whole body tingled at the touch. His fingers felt cool on my burning skin.

"If the wine is not to your liking, young lord," he smiled as his index finger caressed the inside of my wrist, "perhaps I know something that is."

He raised my unresisting hand towards his mouth. His lips touched the pulse point of my wrist. I nearly swooned from the rush of pleasure. Blushing, I tried to break free of his grip but could not. A voice in my head warned me that this was sin, but I no longer listened.

"It's no shame or sin to desire men," Corbeau said, releasing my wrist. "There are many who find pleasure in the company of their own sex."

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“How...” He had read my deepest thoughts.

“I’ve seen you watching me. You are confused and guilty about your feelings, are you not? No need. I return your desire, young lord. You are beautiful.”

“No.” I was not beautiful. An awkward, blushing farm boy, far too muscular and browned from the fields, couldn’t be beautiful.

“Yes. You don’t believe me, but you are. I will teach you the ways of such love, Gideon. Have some more wine.”

I drank, savouring the strange mustiness of the wine, but certain that the little I had consumed wasn’t the source of the heat and giddiness. Corbeau stood up and came around the table. He gently pulled me up from my chair and kissed the taste of the wine from my lips. The soft pressure of his mouth on mine, the lingering flavour of the grape on our tongues, the trembling heat that threatened to melt me, these are what I remember of that first kiss.

“To bed, I think.” He swept me into his arms as if I was a mere babe.

The ceilings and floors whirled before my eyes as he carried me into the bedroom. He set me down on the bed and began undressing me. Although this shocked me, for even my most disturbing dreams had not involved being naked, I didn’t protest. I couldn’t move of my own volition. I lay limp as any rag doll of my sister’s childhood. The surface of the bed beneath me could as easily have been a wooden plank or a cloud.

Soon I lay as naked as Adam when he awoke in Eden. Oh, sin! I trembled in fear and confusion. Corbeau touched me on the head, and then his hand slowly traced the outline of my body. Strange stirrings in my groin surprised me, and when he touched me there, I moaned. I began to understand the words that the preacher had spoken when he defined sodomy.

Corbeau took off his own clothing slowly, letting me accustom myself to the sensations my body was undergoing. I had never seen another man totally naked before, and fear began to nudge under my ribs. My reaction must have been noticeable, for when he was completely undressed, my seducer came once more to my side.

“The first time is always difficult.” He ran his hands over the muscles in my shoulders. “How you have escaped being taken long before now, I don’t know. Look at these beautiful muscles of yours, and that slim waist. Anyone would want you, Gideon.”



Embarrassed, I tried to protest against this unseemly praise. But his lips stopped mine and his body stretched beside me on the bed, pale and smooth, not at all like my rough, sun-browned skin. Unlike me, he had the sculpted form of a true aristocrat.

His tongue touched my right nipple and I gasped. My father's voice began a litany of "Fornication! Sodomy! Sin!" in the back of my mind, but the pleasure cascading through me drowned it out. Corbeau's lips moved lower and kissed me. His body covered mine, and his hands gripped my legs before moving up to cup my buttocks.

"You're so much more attractive without your clothes on. Under those dark Puritan wrappings, I find a treasure."

His words distracted me from what his hands and fingers were doing. I blushed, uncomfortable with such praise. Then a crescendo of pleasure, as he tuned my body like a fine instrument. His lips folded around my manhood, and I cried out. His tongue teased and coaxed, until I shuddered. My first orgasm left me amazed at the power of my body. Corbeau gently turned me over and inserted his fingers, making me gasp. He held me, kissed me, made me tremble, and then he entered. At last I comprehended the full meaning of the word that had so troubled me at twelve years old. If this was sin, so be it.

Trembling despite the sheen of sweat that coated me, I lay in his arms after that first awakening and didn't think of sin at all. The pleasure he had shown me, the places I had gone in my head at the critical moment, these far outweighed the pain and discomfort I had initially felt. Corbeau stroked my damp hair and murmured sweet lies about me into my ear.

"There is one more thing I must show you," he whispered.

Exhausted, but willing, I looked up at him. The things he had shown me thus far had been exquisite. Most of all, I knew I was no longer alone.

"I have a power." Corbeau's lips tickled my ear when he spoke. "I can make you immortal."

The words meant nothing. Half-asleep, I tried to reconcile my actions with my upbringing. Most assuredly, I faced damnation for the sins of sodomy and fornication. This dire knowledge made me want to giggle. Then his sharp teeth found the vein in my neck, and in that crashing instant of realization, I knew I truly was damned.

By drinking my blood, Etienne Corbeau revealed himself as the murderer of those three tenants and the killer of old Nimrod. Here was the demon: my lover. This caused me no alarm. I would

have forgiven him anything by then, offered him my own life. I lay quietly in his arms while he drank, and soon slept.

The servants couldn't wake me until noon the next day. I shivered violently, vomiting, weak and dizzy. Blood and worse stained the bed linens. At the frantic beseeching of my valet, I allowed the physician to be sent for. He could find nothing wrong with me—unsurprising considering the state of “medicine” at the time. I was fortunate that he didn't bleed me.

Word of my illness reached the dower farm, and Jamie came to see me as soon as he could. He came to my bedside and peered down at me, as I lay unconsciously clutching the bedcovers. “What ails you, brother?”

“Just a chill,” I said, glad that the linens had been changed and that my nausea had passed. How could I ever have had “those” feelings for Jamie? He was no Corbeau. His eyes held only honest concern and his hands were as rough as any labourer's.

“Prudence is worried about you, Gideon. As am I.”

“I'm touched by your concern.”

“Something is wrong here,” Jamie said with certainty.

That frightened me. Nothing was wrong, nothing at all. Someone had finally given me the love I yearned for—what could possibly be wrong? The only thing I feared was discovery. “What do you mean?”

Jamie lowered his voice to a whisper. “It is said that your new steward...”

“What of him?”

He shook his head, unable to repeat whatever rumour had reached him. “I fear you have made a mistake in him.”

“Nonsense. He is an excellent man, of great help to me.” Last night's revelation was a bad memory. Corbeau could not be a killer.

Jamie looked dubious, but forbore to argue with me any further. He stayed a little longer and didn't mention Corbeau again. When I fell asleep, he left.

Corbeau came to my room that night. “I regret that you are ill. You have distressed your dear sister. Sleep, and be stronger tomorrow.” He kissed me, then his fingers brushed my forehead and I immediately fell asleep.

The next morning found me able to rise from my bed, though I still felt chilled and tired. By afternoon, I rode my mare over to the dower farm to visit.



“Prudence,” I called out to my surprised sister, who had come out of the farmhouse when she heard my horse approach. “Here I am, well again. No cause for worry.”

She hugged me, and peered at my face. “But you’re so pale!”

“I have a slight chill. But look how round you are after so short a time!”

Prudence laughed, not at all shocked, and cradled her belly. “I shall have an heir long before you marry Piety.”

I frowned. “I would postpone that duty forever, if I could.”

“But why? She’s a lovely girl, suitable to be your Baroness. Do you love another, perhaps?”

What could I say of my secret, of the happiness that surged through me when I thought of Corbeau, of the answers I had finally found in his arms? “No, I don’t love any other woman.”

Jamie came from the fields to greet me, and heard me say this. He looked at me sharply as he bid me come into the house. Prudence insisted that I dine with her and her husband that night. I felt lonely and out of place at their table, missing Corbeau’s company, and I found little enjoyment in the food. My hosts exchanged meaningful glances throughout the meal, full of love and secret communication. The meat stuck in my throat. I was strangling, all alone.

I slept alone that night, but not the next. Corbeau and I had gone riding together. Somehow we found ourselves racing, despite the danger of riding so quickly at night. I clung tightly to the reins, urging my mare forward, reckless with the anticipation of pleasures to follow. My horse clattered into the yard well ahead of his. Flushed with triumph, I laughed, and so did he. How I longed to kiss him then!

When the household had retired for the night, Corbeau joined me in my bedroom. He kissed me, sending that heady array of emotions in whirl again. I fell into his arms, and he carried me to bed. This time, I responded passionately to his caresses, acting more the aggressor than the ravished innocent. The sharp bite on my neck aroused me when I had thought myself truly spent, and he laughed as he bent to drink.

“You will do well as one of us,” he whispered. I didn’t ask him what he meant.

The ceiling whirled. Waves of pleasure crashed over me. His tongue, darting across my bleeding neck, gave me such bliss I cried aloud.

It took me three days to recover my strength. I couldn’t get warm. Servants hovered, murmuring fearfully, and I heard that



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the tenants were uneasy. Jamie visited me, saying that Prudence had wanted to come but her condition wouldn't allow her to travel. The physician muttered and mixed potions and bled me once. When he saw that it only made me worse, he had the sense to desist.

Weakness was not a condition I was accustomed to suffering. I had seldom been ill as a child, in part because I would have been whipped for malingering. On the fourth day of my illness, I staggered from my bed and ate a little solid food, and the estate rejoiced.

By the next day, I tended my neglected duties. The tenants I dealt with looked at me sadly, pressing my hand when I allowed it, and some even wept. None of them would tell me why.

Corbeau returned to my bed that night. I'd never really recovered my strength, and I always felt cold and lethargic. His lovemaking, though, roused me out of my languor, and I willingly bared my neck to his deadly kiss. He drank only a little, then pulled away.

"It's your turn, young lord. The change will not be complete unless you drink."

I didn't question his words, though I didn't understand them. He took a small bodkin from the bedside table and used it to cut himself on the inside of his thigh. I gasped, for I couldn't bear to see that beautiful skin pierced. He stroked my hair to quiet me, then pressed my head against his body so that my lips touched the blood that flowed. The taste of it, hot, metallic and salty, shocked me, but I drank greedily.

"Enough." Corbeau pushed my head away and bent to lick his own blood off my mouth. My lips were numb. I couldn't feel his tongue. "The change is assured now. You will be immortal, young lord." His grip on my arm tightened briefly. "And you will be mine."

Morning brought agony. The servants tiptoed around the house and ensured that not one ray of sunlight entered my rooms, for I screamed myself hoarse if it did. I could keep nothing, food or liquid, down. The physician came again, but was helpless against this unknown malady. I shivered and moaned in my bed while the doctor whispered with Jamie. They shouldn't have tried to spare me. I knew I was dying.

As soon as Prudence heard of this, she damned propriety and came to the Hall. Pregnant ladies were not supposed to travel, but I was her brother. She arrived a little after dusk, to find Corbeau blocking her way to my room.



“Your dear brother is ill, my lady.” I looked up upon hearing his voice so close.

“I know that, sir.” Prudence? Why was she here?

“It would be distressing for you both if you saw him in this state.” Corbeau’s words might have indicated concern, but his tone was pure malice, and confused me. “In your condition, my lady, I don’t think such a thing would be advisable.”

Prudence’s voice stiffened. “My husband, sir, gave me leave to come, and he is lord over me and the babe I bear. My brother is the Baron. In case you have forgotten your place, you are but the steward, and an ill one you have been. Your services are no longer required. Leave this house.”

I heard his footsteps go down the hallway. Prudence’s lighter step came into the room and she soon sat beside my bed. Her face, now slightly swollen with emotion and her pregnancy, showed me all. It was hopeless for me. She reached down and hugged me, but I couldn’t return her embrace. Tears ran freely down her cheeks as she squeezed my hands. “I should have come sooner. You must get well again, dear brother. I shall see to that.”

“Let us not mince words, sister. We both know that I shall die soon. The pain is very bad now, and death will be a release.”

“Do not speak so, Gideon!”

But my mind had already drifted to other things. I didn’t want to die. It saddened me, to think of leaving my sister and brother-in-law, never seeing their babe. “Poor little Piety. Her parents must be enraged that I haven’t married her, to leave her a wealthy widow.”

Prudence still wept. “Hush now. Don’t concern yourself with Piety. Try to sleep.”

I think I did, for when I next opened my eyes, there was a little light showing through the window coverings. I quickly turned my head, since even that trickle hurt terribly. A servant closed the gap, and I managed to look at Prudence.

“Where is Corbeau?” I had forgotten the conversation I had overheard. “He hasn’t been to see me.” I wanted his touch, his kiss.

Prudence held my hand. Hers felt like a fire on my cold palm. “He has left the house. I sent him away.”

“But I want him.” In pain and dying, I didn’t care if I revealed my secret.

“Look, here’s Jamie to see you.”



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Jamie spoke with me for a few moments, then took Prudence aside. My hearing was acute, though, and I heard what they said.

“How is he?” Jamie asked. “He seems quiet.”

“He’s in great pain, and the least light makes him scream. Jamie, he’s asking for Corbeau.”

“We’re well rid of him.” Jamie spat, which would have shocked me had I been capable of feeling anything but pain.

“But what has he done to my poor brother, that makes Gideon ask after him in such a tone?”

“What tone?”

Prudence lowered her voice. “As if there was more than a master’s affection for his steward.”

If anything else was said between them, I didn’t hear it, for I fell asleep again.

I awoke screaming. Jamie and two servants had to hold me down while Prudence poured syrup of poppy into my mouth and convinced me to swallow. She didn’t leave my side save for dire necessity all that day, and I felt at peace knowing she was there. At least I wouldn’t die alone.

I was so exhausted by the struggle that at last I surrendered. I refused any more opium, even though the pain was intense. I sensed that the drug was keeping me tied to life. Prudence wept when I pushed away her administering hand.

“No,” Jamie said, sensing my distress. “Do not weep, or force him to take the syrup. Enough, dear Prudence. There’s a time to let go.”

I couldn’t speak, only nod. Prudence kissed me. Much to my surprise, so did Jamie. Then I closed my eyes against the pain.

