

# **Through His Eyes are the Rivers of Time**

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Cover Art by Peg Halpin

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## **Dedication**

Thanks to all of those friends and family who said I could do this even when I was tearing my hair out in frustration. Special thanks to Peg Halpin for her contributions to the Cover. Kudos for her painting skills and encouragement.

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## Chapter 1

My mother kissed me awake, tucked the covers down at my feet on the carved wooden foot-board of the Jacobean boat she called a bed and tickled me. I rolled over, protesting as cold air invaded the cocoon of warmth under which I burrowed. Flannel sheets; warm, thick and nubby from frequent washing, my coverlets were down because the room in this old house although centrally heated still lacked the warmth of more modern places. Cryllwythe Manor had been corner stoned in 1597, added to and renovated over hundreds of years.

In the sixties, shortly after I had been born, my father had spent a small fortune installing a massive heating system of flues and radiators, furnaces and vents that took up a respectable amount of cellar space but didn't intrude into the wine cellars.

I had played in the cellars and dungeons, considered them my own private playgrounds. I was an only child but not lonely, had plenty of things to play with plus my own active imagination.

My room was no longer the nursery but a small valet's bedchamber off my parents bedroom. They did not conform to the upper crusts dislike of sharing the same room let alone bed but snuggled together in the massive four-poster that I called the boat. Crafted in Elizabethan times, it had a canopy, swans, and griffins, carved on the headboard and up the four posters. Silk curtains bound by gilt cords held the drapes back and the canopy overhead was velvet and embroidered with the Welsh and Cornish Lion. My father traced his family name back to the 15th century, my mother even earlier to Irish royalty.

I was in the Stewards room, small, inner with no windows. Just the bed, a dresser, chair, and child's desk. Painted a creamy yellow, it boasted hardwood floors with a priceless Isfahan rug underfoot.

"Break fast, Silver," Mum cajoled. "Pancakes, sausage, porridge and hot cross buns."

I grumbled, rubbed my eyes, and slid my feet out that didn't reach the floor. Rather than searching for the steps that let me climb up onto the high mattress, my mother helped me down with a hold under my armpits.

I hit the cold floor and shivered, and then raced out into their room. A quick glance showed me that my father was already up and out on his farm rounds so I padded down the long corridor with mum yelling at me to slow down.

The bathroom was huge and modernized. My dad had growled loud and often about cold wear showers and chamber pots. We had a flush commode, two sinks, a walk in shower and a lion's foot tub I had adored at first sight and unlimited hot water.

I was still too young to use the toilet by myself so mum parked me on the seat and helped me scrub my face. By then, Sally the upstairs maid was in and took over, chuckling as

she scrubbed the sleep from my eyes and behind my ears, made me brush my teeth and teased me as she dressed me in jeans and buttoned down shirt.

Breakfast was in what used to be the Solar, a room filled from floor to ceiling with windows, well lit and my favorite room in the mansion.

Breakfast was a meal I rushed through; it was a beautiful warm, sunny day outside, a rarity in this part of Cornwall.

My family owned a goodly portion of the Cornish countryside; growing organic beef, hogs and grain for European markets and being a thrifty and progressive manager, my father head quietly prospered when many of his other friends and peers had become the genteel poor.

Lord Griffon Argent was an Earl, my mother the daughter of one and could claim kinship with Elizabeth. My parents told me that one day; I would make my bow before my liege sovereign and presented at Court when I came of age. It was not something my five-year-old mind found exciting. Not like meeting the new farm bull.

I was out the door and running to the south pasture before either Sally or Roger could catch up to me.

Roger was the farm manager, a dour Cornish man who smiled only when a heifer calved or my face peered around a hay bale. He never minded if I was underfoot or climbing to the loft, only cared that I was safe.

Sally hollered and met up with him at the corner of the bullpen, saw me and scolded. "Aidan Argent, you're supposed to wait until I take you to Mr. Penrose, not go haring off on your own. You know that the lorries are coming today to pick up a load of kine for the markets and you're too wee to be spotted. You'd be flattened like a pancake," she scolded. "Sorry, Mr. P. I can take him back to yon house."

"He's fine, Sally me girl," he grinned, tousling my head of curls. "He's eager to see the new bull, he's coming in today, shipped the entire way from America. Registered Black Angus, he be. Champion breeding bull from the state of Texas."

"Oh, really? I thought his Lordship would be sticking with Texas longhorns."

"Too bony," I said. "Beef's too tough and stringy. No marbling."

She laughed and Mr. P grinned. "His little lordship knows his beefers. Crossbreds do better, are healthier, and mature earlier. Tis a fine crop of steers going out this sennight. Fetch top prices per pound. I'll take him out of your hair this morn. Come along, young Aidan."

I took his hand and we walked through the barn to the calf lot and out to the big pasture where the old bull grazed. I knew what would happen to old Midas and was sad but growing up on a farm brought home the realities of life and death at an early age.

We pattered, checked the fences, found no grass growing under the wooden rails, none

dared to poke their heads through, Penrose had a crew who did nothing but maintain the fence lines.

It was near noon when the cattle trailer pulled in and he made me wait at the stock pen until the big black beast was unloaded and driven into a stall in the barn.

His eye was large, round, white rolling, and his black coat curly and dense. Sweat stained his hide and muscles rippled beneath it.

His head was huge, polled with a shiny wet, black nose; his tongue was black as well.

He snorted, pawed, and tested both the walls and the gate.

‘Aidan, me lad, you are not to go in his stall nor the pasture when he is out. Understand? He is not like Old Midas who knows you.’

‘He will,’ I announced, standing on a bucket so I could peek in and admire his 2000 lbs of black perfection.

‘No, Aidan, not even when I’m around. He’s hurt several people. Promise me. Or you won’t be allowed in the barn.’

‘I promise. Cross my heart and hope to die stick a needle in my eye.’

‘Good. Now, are you coming to help me gather the ducks? The cook wants two for tonight’s dinner.’

‘Not pluck them,’ I protested. I hated the smell of wet feathers.

‘Only if you want to eat them,’ He laughed and I ran out of the barn and down to the lake, some hundred acres of water and ornamental gardens. He followed more slowly and we spent an enjoyable few hours chasing ducks around until we caught two.

## Chapter 2

I spent the evening in front of the telly, watching some silly, inane program that fascinated me. I was explaining it all to my friend Ned who sat near me on the floor in front of the fireplace, my dad was in his favorite armchair reading the Times while my mum knitted.

A log shifted, rolled towards the fire-dogs and hit the screen, I heard him say, and ‘How is Neddie today, Silly?’

I hated that nickname; called that cuz my mum had labeled me Silver at an early age for my light blonde hair. ‘Peachy,’ I replied. ‘Says he’s bored with this show, says it’s not as good as Benny Hill.’

Dad hooted. ‘Moiré, his imaginary friend watches Benny Hill. Fancy that.’

‘Hush, Griff,’ she murmured. ‘Neddie’s as real to him as you are.’

I shook my head at Ned, said, "They don't mean it, Ned. Grownups, you know."

He stuck his tongue out and I sneaked a look at mum but she didn't notice. Sally came in and knocked on the paneled doorjamb, her red curls damp, her uniform was a neat dress of her choice and an apron. She wore sensible trainers. "Good evening, milord, my lady, Aidan," she chirruped. "Time to get ready for bed."

I protested but she ushered me out after a quick kiss from mum, dad, and a goodnight to Ned and me.

Sally had the tub full of bubbles and my own legion of floating goodies. She stripped my dirty clothes, plunked me carefully into the hot water after I toe-tested it, and warned her not to put me on Ned's lap.

"Neddie needs to be washed up, too, Aidan. He must get as dirty as you do. You smell like cow."

"Don't listen to her, Neddie," I said earnestly. "You smell fine to me." He blinked his fine blue eyes and ducked his blonde head of curls under the water, came up laughing as my yellow submarine hung from one ear. He finished at the same time as I did and Sally didn't make him brush his teeth but she tucked him into bed next to me, kissed us both goodnight and left the room, softly closing the door.

Once I was sure, she was gone, he got up, and turned on my night light and we dragged out the big book of the history of the local castles I'd stolen from Dad's extensive library.

Mum's new project was renovating the 16th century knot and rose- gardens; she was replanting several heirloom species of Tudor Roses. I'd helped her pick out some varieties mostly because I liked the names.

We turned the thick vellum pages and he helped me with the names of the castles.

Ipswich. Dunsmuir. Palladium. Snowdonia. Blenheim. Marleybourne Court. And our own, Cryllwythe Castle, called Manor.

"Look, there's a Priest hole. And an ouble---ouble." I couldn't pronounce the word but he knew it.

"Oublette. A good place to stay out of, Aidan," he warned. "They dropped prisoners in there to starve to death. Sometimes, we didn't find them for centuries."

"Daddy says no one's been murdered in our dungeons."

He rolled his eyes. "Of course they have. Why else would the Manor have dungeons? He doesn't want to give you nightmares."

"Not me," I protested.

"It's okay, Aidan. I get them, too. That's why I sleep with you. So we can protect each other. Look, this is Pennyroyal Court. I was born there. Nothing much left of it but four walls. It was a pretty estate until the Crouchback burnt it to the ground. I buried treasure

there.”

“What kind?”

“Special rocks. Toy soldiers. My lady mother’s christening gift. My signet ring. First tooth.”

“Let’s go dig it up,” I said and he agreed. “Oh wait. We can’t go now. It’s too dark and the coaches don’t run this late.” I thought a bit. “We’d have to get into town and I’d have to get some money. How much is in my piggy bank?”

“Ten pounds, four shillings and fifty-seven pence,” he recited. “You could borrow some from the cook and the household account.”

“She’d tell Mum.” I shook my head. “How much does a taxi cost? I could phone one and have the driver pick us up.”

“Would they come out here and wouldn’t everyone see him?”

“I could tell him to wait for us at the gates,” I said doubtfully.

“The gatehouse would call up and ask what and why,” he mused. “Why don’t we wait until Lord Argent takes you to the village on Saturday? We can take the coach to Tregarth and then Colmsby-on-the-Moor.”

“Is it far?” I looked at the map in the book, it was only two inches away from London, and I remembered how long a trip that was. It had taken days to drive up with Dad last year. The three of us had gone to the World’s Trade Fair to enjoy the livestock exhibits and the sales. Coming home, we had brought two new bloodlines of both beefers and horses.

The Argent Stud was almost as famous as the Queen Mother’s was.

“Remember that trip?” I asked and he shook his head, laid back down.

“Nay. I didn’t know you then, Aidan,” his voice was suddenly sleepy and I pulled the covers over us, slipping the heavy volume behind the headboard, had to sit back up to shut off the light only moments before my mum entered the bedroom and peeked in on us.

“You awake, Silver baby?” she asked quietly and came in our room. Her hand hovered over my covered head.

“I love you, baby bunting,” she cooed. “Sleep tight, little Silverbell. Goodnight, Aidan.”

I heard the door close, the rumble of my da’s deep voice and it all faded into dreams I never remembered when I woke.

### Chapter 3

Saturday was one of those typical Cornish days. The sun barely made itself peek through

the lowering clouds and a misty rain came down eventually soaking everything. Dad and Mr. P were glad to see it, they'd both agree that the Kieber acres of wheat needed more moisture before harvest and we'd been unusually dry for a long time.

The town was fairly large, a half hours drive from the farm and I'd slept most of the way in, only waking when Neddie nudged me as the Range Rover dipped onto the bridge and the old street cobblestones.

"Good morning, little Silver," Mr. P grinned. "Ready for the feed dealer? Or do you want to go with his lordship to the Law clerks?"

I snorted. Dry, dusty books and even drier, dusty old men with white wigs. Like I wanted to spend the morning in with them when I could wander the aisles of farm gadgets, smell the sweetness of molasses and pet the nearly feral shop cats who kept down the rats.

My dad dropped us off, we strode into the feed mill, and the smells overwhelmed me. I darted down the aisle where the blacksmithing supplies were, kept my ears out for Mr. P's tones. He told me not to wander too far and I hollered back where I was and was going.

Ned met me at the corner of the alley where 50 gallon drums of seed potatoes were stored next to bins of onion sets. The smell was musty and sweet, reminded me of early spring planting in Mum's small veggie garden.

"You ready?" he asked and I hesitated. "If I just leave, Mr. P will look for us."

"Tell him you're going to meet your dad," he suggested.

"Okay." I went in search of the farm manager and found him talking to the feed dealer ordering a gross ton of sweet feed for the show heifers. Mr. Braithwaite said hi and handed me a sucker from the jar on the counter.

"The wheat's doing well," Mr. P added. "Yield will be double this year with that new hybrid seed."

"Mr. P, I'm going to meet Da at the Bubble and Squeak for lunch," I said and tried not to blush while lying.

"Tired of this place already? Tell his Lordship, I'll be another hour. I have to order more hi-tensile fence."

"Da said he'd buy me an ice cream," I said. "Can I go? It's not far and I know the way." I looked up at him with my eyes wide and my best pleading smile and saw him melt.

"Go on then. Keep to the sidewalks," he warned. "I'll be along presently."

"Ta," I said and ran off. The coach stop was on the corner of Main near the Apothecary, the post office customers were already waiting for the coach, and when I asked when it was due, a matron smiled and told me the express was due in any minute. She asked me if I was off to Holcombe and I nodded.



“You have your sixpence?” she asked, smiling and I dug into my pocket for the shilling I’d set aside.

“Where’s your nanny?”

“Don’t need a nanny,” I said affronted. I was too old for a nursemaid.

“Ooh, a big grown up lad you are to be sure,” she agreed, blue eyes twinkling. “What lovely pansy purple eyes you have.” I heard the hiss of air brakes and a large old coach pulled up to the curb and the doors slid open. I tripped up the steps with her, paid for myself and the driver in his neat uniform and cap assumed was with the lady.

Ned told me to sit in the way back where we could stay unnoticed as the coach lurched and wobbled on the village streets until we reached the main highway. Ned pointed out the signs mounted on great metal poles and painted green and white. Some of the names we puzzled over, especially the ones in Welsh, which I could read, and he couldn’t, being English.

My Mum spoke both Gaelic and Welsh and sang to me in each so I was familiar with them.

“Wish I’d brought some biscuits and tea,” I mourned. “I’m hungry. You got anything?” He shook his head. “Guess we’ll have to wait till we reach Holcombe-on-the-Moor.”

One of the passengers ahead of us turned round; he was short, chubby with rough homespun and smelled of sheep. His eyes were faded blue, his hair under his cap an iron gray and his cheeks were rosy with a button chin and blowzy sideburns.

“Holcombe-on-the-Moor! That’s a long way on this coach, lad. Where’s your mum?”

“I’m meeting her,” I said quickly. “My Da sent me off.”

“On your own? A wee lad like you? How old are you?”

“Nearly six,” I answered proudly.

“Six! What mum would let a six-year-old ride to Holcombe by his own self? Where’s your mum meeting you? At the Coach stop?”

“At Holcombe. Pennyroyal Court.”

“Pennyroyal! Lad, there’s nothing there but a great big hole and some stones. The walls fell in years ago. Even the National Trust don’t want that ruin. Besides, the coach don’t stop there but twelve miles away in town.” He got up, lurched his way forward to the driver, and spoke to him, glancing back at us.

“Uh oh, Ned,” I murmured. “I don’t think they like that we’re on the coach.”

“Well, they can’t throw us off until they stop,” he said. “I think this one goes straight to Truro before it stops.”

“I don’t know. I didn’t check the route on the front,” I said uneasily. “Do you think Dan

will be mad at us?”

The farmer came back down the aisle and sat opposite us, studying me with deliberation and now; several others joined him, a woman who looked like a shopkeeper, the woman we'd sneaked in with and an Anglican reverend.

“What's your name, lad?” the farmer asked. Ned told me to lie and use his name. So I did.

“Ned. Edward Plantagenet.”

He hooted. “Him that's been dead these four hundred years? You can't be one of the Tower Princes, boy. What's your real name? Tell me or we'll call the Bobbies on ye.”

“Ned Pendennis,” I returned using Mr. P's last name. I knew better than to use my own, they'd be on the phone to my Da that next minute.

“You hungry?” he asked and handed me a cloth wrapped parcel, which unfolded to reveal a sandwich of farm cheese and mutton spread with horseradish. I took a bite and chewed. It was delicious and I was very hungry. I offered half to Neddie, he declined, and the farmer smiled.

“What's your friend's name?” he asked.

“Neddie,” I chewed another bite and lost some down my shirtfront.

“Pleased to meetcha, Neddie,” he said and stuck out his hand. Of course, Ned ignored him, his noble sensitivity affronted by his common mien. Ned was a bit of a snob.

“My name is Sam Tregarth; I run a sheep farm on the Dales. On my way to Connemara to pick up a new ram and visit my daughter.”

“Hullo,” I said remembering my manners. “Thank you for the sandwich. Dorset or Shropshire?”

“New Zealand,” he answered. “You know your sheep.”

“Oh, aye. We have a Rambouillet buck.”

“I've heard they double your wool and meat crop.”

“Mr. P says so. Worth X-breeding he says.” I finished the sandwich and looked hopefully for more. He handed me an Anjou pear and it was so sweet and juicy, my first bite ran down my chin and he topped it off with a small bottle of home brew, tart and sweet. I was suddenly sleepy and leaned against the window, rested my head and closed my eyes. The droning of his voice and the tires lulled me into a doze.

## Chapter 4

Neddie and I stood surrounded by coach passengers on the depot strand and the driver had his big hand tucked into my coat so every time I tried to wiggle free, he brought me

up short. No one believed my mum was meeting me and he wouldn't let me run off. I'd tried to stamp his foot as Ned had told me and drew the line at biting him. He handled my twists and turns with an ease that told me he'd done it before. His accent was broad and he dropped his 'he's; he was a Cockney from London and I barely understood him. "Just you sit still, laddie," he barked. "The coppers are coming for you. I can't mess with you, I gets me route to run."

We were in Strathgallant, the first town the driver was able to exit off the highway. He'd left the coach, made a call, and driven to the depot, apologizing to the passengers for the delay. No one grumbled but teased me about our adventure. Ned was whispering all kinds of strategies in my ear.

He marched us both into the station and set me down behind the counter with the ticket master explaining what had occurred and where I'd gotten on. By now, it was late afternoon, almost high teatime and my stomach was loudly complaining. Both of them heard it and laughed. The ticket master was a young lady with white blonde hair, light lavender eyes and freckles across her generous nose. She gave me a wink and a candy bar with a cold soda pop. My eyes grew wide. I wasn't allowed to have soda and it was a rare treat.

"What's your name?" she asked handing it over opened. "Mine's Pansy. I love your pretty purple eyes."

"Aidan," I answered without thinking and Ned groaned. "Shut up," I told him and swallowed. He sulked and wouldn't say anything to me after that.

Pansy's eyes widened. I said, "Sorry. Wasn't talking to you, Pansy."

"O ooh, who then?"

"Neddie. He's a bit of a snob, sometimes," I shrugged and drained half the glass. "Him being a royal Duke and all."

"Royal Duke?"

"You know, Edward Plantagenet, Duke of this and that. He's my friend."

"Well, say hello to his Highness for me," she smiled and I nodded to him but he was still mad at me and wasn't talking.

"What town do you live in?" she asked.

"Penhallow," I stared at the counter where the brochures for the routes were stacked next to her stamps. She had a large radio on the side blaring out the Beatles new hit, 'Yellow Submarine.'

"Oh aye. And what does your Da do?"

"Farmer."

"Sheep? Crops?" she persisted.

“Beef, wheat, barley, sheep, and horses,” I answered, looking for more food. I usually ate High tea and was starving.

“Want a sandwich, scones, too? I forget how little boys eat. What’s your farm name?”

“Cryllwythe Farms.”

“You stay right here and I’ll get you something to eat. And tea. Don’t move, okay?”

“Yes, mum,” I agreed and she got up off the stool to enter the lobby where the vending machines were lined up against the wall. I waited until she was bent over and sneaked out behind Ned to disappear into the trunk room. We found a chute leading out and crawled through into the backyard of the station where old houses lined the streets and rubbish bins overflowed onto the cobblestones.

We hadn’t gone far before I heard her shouting and Ned broke into a run hollering for me to hustle. He knew his way and slipped by the alleys like a shadow.

“Where are we going?” I panted, my shorter legs having trouble keeping up. He paused to let me catch up and sneered at me.

“You are an idiot, Aidan. You told them the farm’s name. You might as well have told them who you were and where you live. Now we have to run all the way to Pennyroyal Court instead of taking the coach.”

“It’s too far!” I protested but he ignored me and I was too afraid of getting lost so I shut up and followed where he led me.

There was nothing but a great hole in front of us with old stones piled inside it. Grass grew thick and rich up to the edges and only a strand of ancient oak trees remained of the original avenue that had lined the drive.

“I used to play under those,” Ned mourned. “My mother’s knot garden was just to the right. There was a lily pond there and a boxwood hedge where we tunneled through to the maze. A sundial marked the center and read VERITAS. Over there,” he swung to my left where there was a footpath to the moors, “Was the kennels and to the right of that was where we buried the dogs.”

“Where did you bury your treasure?” I looked around; saw only a broad expanse of overgrown grass and encroaching moors, the small stand of regal oaks and the rambling path that hikers used on their treks.

“Follow me.” He led me towards the stand of oaks and counted footsteps, turned round and pointed. “Dig here.”

“With what?” I asked and he frowned. I sighed and went in search of a rock, flat enough and pulled one out of the soil near the foundations. Of course, he wouldn’t soil his hands, being royalty and all so the entire task was left to me.

I dug for an hour, over the years the soil had built up enough to raise his remembered depths by a foot or more until finally, I hit the remains of a metal box rusted into pieces. It had been brass at one time and was now green and pitted. The only thing inside still recognizable was his gold signet ring, a heavy gold necklace, gold christening spoon and some coins.

His toy soldiers made of lead were a gray clump minus paint or portrait. I handed them over and he told me to stuff them in my pockets.

“Uh oh,” he said, staring off towards the lane we’d followed to get here. I turned and saw the flashing lights and police cars come barreling down the lane towards us to pull up in a slide that tore the grass into ruts. Doors popped open and Mr. Pa and my dad were the first ones out to snatch me up in their arms, their words tumbling out so intense I could not understand them.

The police were next, demanding to know if someone had taken me or how I’d managed to get some hundred and fifty kilometers away.

“Aidan, are you alright?” Dad asked. “What happened? How did you get out here? Why?”

“Neddie said he used to live here, Dad. He buried treasure so we decided to go look for it,” I explained and he was angry and upset.

“Aidan, Ned is an imaginary friend. He’s not real. You can’t go haring off on his say so,” he snapped, his eyes flashing.

I set my lips and answered hotly, “He is too real, Dad.” I dug into my pockets and pulled out the remains of the box and his treasure. My dad took it from me, his mouth opened, closed and he said slowly, “This is a royal seal on this signet ring. These coins bear the date, 1475, ‘88. Where did you find this, Aidan?”

I pointed to the hole I’d dug and where a smug Ned was seated. “I told you, Dad. Ned showed me where to dig.”

No one said anything, just bundled me off into the police car and drove us home

## Chapter 5

My bedroom never seemed so lonely. My toys were all locked away in the chest, Ned was mad at me and banished from my presence and I was grounded for the whole month of April and May, the best time of the year. It was when all the baby animals hit the ground and I wasn’t allowed to watch or help.

No matter how I explained, no one believed Ned had shown me the way to Pennyroyal Court and his treasure; especially after Mum found the book of Castles in my room with

the thumb marked page.

My punishment was to stay in my room unless Sally was with me and then I could only wander the house. Most of the time, she was busy with chores and didn't have any spare moments to give me attention and I was thoroughly bored. Finally, after whining incessantly, Dad put me down in his study and turned on his brand new color telly and told me to stay there until he, mum or Sally came to get me, or else.

I hated the 'or else.' my fertile imagination conjured up all sorts of horrifying scenarios that were always worse than what he did.

I amused myself by changing the channels not that I had much choice. We got three, BBC being the strongest.

After that, I wandered the line of bookshelves and climbed to the top reading the titles. Mum had started me early; I had been reading since the age of three and chose more adult books than childrens choose. I did like the illustrations, though. I found one that seemed interesting, pulled it from the stacks, and made myself a perch atop one nearly empty shelf where I stretched out on the flat top and read. Hours passed and I was deep into Sir Edmund Hillary's conquest of Everest when the faint sounds of a door opening disturbed my concentration.

"Aidan? Christ in heaven, where is that boy? I told him not to move!" My dad's exasperated tones rose to my ears. My Mum's were quieter, placating.

"Aidan, where are you?"

I popped my head over. "Here, Mummy."

Her shriek startled me and I dropped the book to scramble after it, reaching the carpeted floor in seconds. I picked up the book and the spine had broken. "Sorry, Dad, I'll fix it," I apologized and his eyes went to the stacks soaring two stories above us, the second landing of his study/library with the rafters lost to our sight.

"Aidan," he sighed. "Don't do that again."

"Do what, Dad?" I was puzzled, looked at both of them.

"Climb the shelves without the ladder. In fact, don't climb the ladder. Aidan, you'll be the death of me."

"Da, I'm fine. Climbing's keen. Easy. I'm going to grow up to be a Sir Edmund Hillary."

"Last week you wanted to be a fireman," he sighed. "Come along, it's time for dinner. Sorry, you missed High Tea; I was helping Roger with the new bull."

"No wonder I'm so hungry," I complained and Mum took my hand and walked us all out to the dining room; the informal one that seated only the farm staff and family as we all ate together. I said hullo to Mr. P and he handed me a heavy silver whistle on a lanyard.

"For the new collie," he said. "He comes to it."

“Oh, aye? What color is he? What’s his name?” I climbed up onto the Sheraton chair and hid my dusty hands under the damask tablecloth but Mum saw and sent me to wash. By the time I was back, wet sleeves and all, the food was already going round the table and my plate filled.

Yummy. Filet of beef, home-grown. New potatoes, green beans, rolls and beets, all produced on the farm, even a glazed ham cut, sweet, pink and smoked.

I ate my way through the respectable pile and washed it down with milk, didn’t stop until my plate was nearly licked clean and I let go an enormous burp. “Scuse me,” I gasped as they all laughed.

Dad pointed his fork at me. “You still have room, belly boy? Mrs. C has made strawberry shortcakes with clotted cream.”

Ned said in my ear, “I love shortcakes, strawberries, and clotted cream. Save me a piece.”

“Where have you been?” I snapped.

“Oh, here and there. I’ve been keeping an eye on you.”

“You got me in trouble,” I complained under my breath because my parents were giving me the fish eye. “Go away. I’ll talk to you tonight.”

“Aidan?” my mum said and I smiled, grabbed for another dessert and that distracted them enough so they didn’t comment on Ned’s appearance.

“Sally’s waiting on you in the bathroom, Aidan. Tonight’s bath night.”

“I’m not dirty,” I complained. “I haven’t been outside in the yards or the stables.”

“You’ve been climbing in the stacks, dear boy; you’re full of dust and cobwebs. Ah, Sally, make sure he scrubs and does his teeth. In bed by seven, Aidan. You’re up early tomorrow. We’re off to Lostwithial to pick up roses.”

“Why can’t I stay here?” I whined as she pulled me out of my chair and pushed me down the hallway.

“Because you’d just find something nasty to get into,” Mum returned. “I’ll be in to say goodnight right after your bath. Don’t keep Sally waiting. It’s Friday night and she’s off to Truro for her gentleman caller and a movie.”

“Sally has a date?” I squealed and rushed off to tease her. She was waiting in the cloakroom watching the tub fill with bubbles. “Sally has a date!” I chortled and she sighed as she latched onto my collar and halted me.

“Here now, your lordship,” she said, long suffering. “No lip out of you or I won’t tell you all about the cinema when I come back Monday morn.”

“What’re you going to see?” I shucked my clothes and dove in, hollered as the heat hit my thingie and then ducked under, splashing the floor. Sally mopped up with my clothes, hurried me past drying and dressing. She had me tucked into bed in half the time I usually

took and her last words were to behave or she'd scare me with details from the movie, *The Birds*.

Ned sat at the foot of the bed and mocked me.

## Chapter 6

Mum was kneeling in the soft dirt of the garden patting soil around the roots of the dozen rose bushes we'd unloaded from the Range Rover. My dad was driving the tractor over in the North hay field and we caught occasional glimpses of him as he meandered by the fence line.

The garden was a small square off to the side of the Solarium, bordered by boxwood hedges and yews carved into griffins, lollipop shapes and geometric designs rather than the common everyday animals. An ornate wrought iron fence with spears separated the flowerbeds from the old herb garden.

"Are you hungry, Aidan?" Mum smiled. "You've been helping me for ages."

I was covered with mud from head to toe, filthy and enjoying the sensation of dirt between my toes. My shoes were buried somewhere.

I looked up at the East wing of the house, the part that jutted out over the gardens and had a small veranda off one of the upper rooms; saw Ned up there waving down at me. That part of the roof was copper clad and had sundry chimneys and vents spoiling the outline of the pitch.

I ran inside and Mrs. C was just coming down the marble tiled hallway with a platter of goodies and tea. She was a short, rosy-cheeked lady that made delicious scones and bread and always had an extra goody for me.

"Go into the kitchen and sit down," she said, looked and then ordered me to wash up at the sink. I splashed water on my hands, face half-halfheartedly, and plunked down at the table in front of the platter of tarts, biscuits, eggs, rashers of bacon.

"Where is everybody?" I asked, swallowing my cup of tea in one long gulp.

"Ate earlier, your lordship. Go on up, Sally's waiting to help you change. His Lordship and Lady Mo are taking you out to dinner for being such a big help this week and not getting into any mischief."

I pushed the chair back so hard; it fell over and scrambled up the Grand Stair, scooting around Harold, the butler who'd been with my Da and his Da forever.

"Slow down, young Aidan," he scolded. "Annie just waxed the floor and you'll come a right cropper."

"Gotta go, Harry," I yelled and hit the top of the step on my palms, swung round and down the great hallway lined with ancient family portraits. Ned stood near the double doors to the Grand Salon on the third floor and distracted me as I ran by the bathroom door. It was never open, off limits to me, and represented an irresistible challenge.



I sneaked inside and climbed the short set of steps to the third floor. I heard the door latch behind me but paid it no mind as I delighted in exploring forbidden realms.

Here was where the old suits of armor lay in neat piles next to saddles cracked and medieval, old swords and halberds piled with lances and bows. Piles of furniture so hideously Victorian and bizarre that no one wanted them---hassocks made from elephant legs, chairs of ivory tusks, trunks filled with musty old clothes.

A sarcophagus rested against the wall near the French doors with velvet drapes so moth eaten they looked like lace. I hoped it still had its resident mummy and my hearty shove dislodged the case to fall against the doors and sent them crashing open.

I was able to pull the lid off but the only thing inside were blackened scraps of cloth that smelled dry and dusty, and dead spiders curled into tiny pill bugs. I squeezed past the open doors and saw the roof below me over the wing of the house that jutted out above the gardens. An easy drop and easier climb to one who fancied himself Sir Edmund Hilary so I climbed over the railing with perfect confidence and strode along the ridge and down to the edge of the slates to see my mother on her knees in the dirt, scraping soil around the roots of small seedlings. I heard someone approaching, his footsteps loud on the newly raked gravel.

Mum stood up. "Roger," she greeted the farm manager. "I was expecting Griff."

"He's stuck in the brook. I came to tell you he'll be late, not to wait."

"Alright," she said agreeably. "I was just going in. I'll put in a few more plants, then."

"Where's the imp?"

"I sent him in for tea and to wash up. Sally's after him."

"Sally went to town for Mrs. C," he said.

"I'd better go after him, then," she sighed.

"Oh, you stay. I'll go find him."

I saw him walk off and leaned closer, trying to keep him in sight, and realized if I didn't want to be caught, I'd better sneak back inside. I turned, stood up and Mum looked up at that moment. Her gasp of terror made me jump.

"Aidan!"

I swallowed. "Hi, Mum."

"Aidan, what are you doing? Get down this instant!"

My feet slipped just as Mr. P stuck his head over the railing and shouted at me. I slid towards the edge of the roof unable to stop my knees and palms skating on the mossy slates, hit the eaves, and somersaulted over. I heard the horrified shouts of Mr. P and my mum and something huge and crushing hit my back. The sky whirled, darkened; I opened my eyes wide on the blue sky above me. A crushing sensation filled my chest and I

couldn't breathe. Strange metal spikes grew out of my chest and belly. I held onto them. Mum's face was pale, stark white next to mine. "Aidan, oh my God! Baby! Griffin!" she screamed and hovered.

Blood filled my mouth. "Mum," I managed to say. "Can't breathe. Feel like... crushed." Her hands wept like startled birds. "Oh baby, Griffin! Roger! Help! Somebody help!" Something heavy dropped to the ground near me and I saw Mr. P's agonized face. "Moira, go inside and call the ambulance. Go get Griffin," he ordered. "Aidan, don't move. Look at me." He supported my head.

"Mummy," I breathed, tears coming now. "It hurts. What is it?"

"Moira, go. Now," he said urgently and she ran, screaming my dad's name.

"You fell on the fence spikes, Aidan. Don't move. We have to get the ambulance people to get you off safely."

"Can't breathe, Mr. P." My mouth filled with blood again and I couldn't swallow it. I felt strange. As if I was moving through mud, darkness filled the corners of my eyes; I was cold, sweaty, felt like everything was oozing out of me.

Mum came back with Dad and all the household staff. Together, he and dad lifted me carefully off the posts. I screamed in pain but they ignored me as they set me down on the ground midst the newly turned soil. Blood bubbled out of the holes and mum held me tightly as Dad wadded up his shirt and tucked it against the holes in my front.

"Ambulance is coming, baby," he said, his voice thick. "It'll be here as soon as it can."

"Mum, I can't breathe," I whispered and opened my eyes wide, strained to see them. Their faces were growing blurry, their voices receding. "Feels like the bull sat on my tummy," I mumbled. "Crushing me. Mummy, where are you? Can't see you, Mummy. Mum---"

"Aidan. Baby, please don't die. Oh God, Griffin! Do something, please. Oh God, don't take my baby!" My mother's wails faded as the blackness overtook everything.

I flew down a narrow tunnel and Ned was at my side, his face wore a look of intense sorrow. He told me I had died like him and that both of us could now move on. We held each others hands as the light beckoned us. Warm, glowing full of welcoming voices, we embraced it. I had a moment's sadness that my parents would suffer and then I was falling into the brilliance

## Part 2

### Chapter 7

Voices mumbled over my head and it seemed like days, months before any of it made any sense. Heat filled my skin, then cold. Water dripping, rolling one way and then another. Sunshine and night sky where moonlight bathed me in silver.

Smells of food. Blandness in my mouth. Harsh scrubs against my skin, bodies leaning over me. Women's voices. Here a word that made sense. Some left me puzzled.

*Disposable. Delayed development. Severely retarded. No comprehension.*

*Found wandering the streets of London. Cheapside.*

*No more than...six, maybe seven.*

*Been here nearly five years. No significant change in neurological status.*

*Sweet natured child. Never....tantrums.*

*Always smiling. But sad. Beautiful lavender eyes, pretty boy.*

Sunshine on my face. I opened my eyes in a big room with other children, staring, sitting, rocking on the floor on mats with adults dressed in green pants and tops who moved amongst us in a harried fashion.

Giant windows over heat registers let in a multitude of sunlit rays, big puffy marshmallow clouds adrift in it. I yawned; I was fair knackered, rubbed my eyes and that brought my arm into view. I was wearing what the adults wore only mine were faded as if they had seen many types of washing.

I was seated on the floor with my knees tucked under me, my hands at my side and there was a plastic band on my right wrist. I played with it, rolling it around until the little scratches on it made sense. Aidan. Smyth. Age 10. Cauc. Blood type AB+. DOB UNK. Rel. UNK. DX. Severe mental delayed development.

Some of it I understood and the rest I puzzled over. I knew my name was Aidan but not much else. I remembered a boy named Ned and dying, the light and then nothing but fragments of thoughts.

I stood up and wobbled. My balance was off, as if I had forgotten how to stand or even walk. I cleared my throat, said hullo a few times to make sure my voice was working and approached one of the busy adults. I tugged on his pants leg until he swiveled around, exasperated. His name was Peter Lithgow, R.N.; I saw it on his name-tag.

"Where am I?" I asked and his eyes grew wide and astonished. He grabbed my arms and held me with a grip hard enough to bruise.

"Oww," I complained. "You're hurting me!"

He rolled my wrist and read the tag on it. "You're Aidan Smyth."

"My name is Aidan. I don't remember my last name." I was astonished that my words came out making sense; they had a strange slur to them as if I hadn't spoken in some time.

“Holy bloody King George,” he said and dragged me towards a door with a window in it. Unlocking the knob, we went through to emerge in a long corridor with overhead lights and other doors heading towards the end where there was an office of glass so that whoever was inside could see from four directions into all the rooms. Inside were four people, dressed in white and green scrubs. They saw us coming and met him before we reached their door. A man and a woman stepped forward. “Pete, what’s wrong?” both of them studied me and frowned.

“He looks different, somehow. That’s Aidan Smyth. The boy found abandoned in Cheapside?”

“He is different, Doctor Phillipson,” Peter agreed. I stared. Now, I was frightened and my body trembled with it. I pressed closer to his side, felt his heat.

Said, “I’m scared.” My words created a furor. Both of them dropped to their knees and crowded me, asking a million questions that piled up on me and made me retreat into a dark little room in my mind.

When I finally came back to awareness, I was seated in a chair in an office. It had framed diplomas on the wall and a small fireplace roaring merrily along. The doctor I had seen in the observation room was sitting behind the fancy desk writing notes on a yellow legal pad and the scratchy pen irritated my ears.

His name was on his desk and on the framed certificates, Michael Aaron Phillipson, MD, Doctorate of Psychiatry, Surgeon and a whole host of alphabets after his name. His voice was melodious with an upper crust accent. He greeted me with a smile. “Hullo, young Aidan. I see by your eyes that you are alive again. How do you feel?”

“Can you tell me where I am?”

“In Holbrooke. An orphanage, state home for the developmentally disabled. You’ve lived here for five years. Can you tell me what you remember?”

“I remember my name. Aidan. A boy named Ned who was my friend. We both died. When I was five.”

“Died? Do you remember Ned’s last name? How you died?” He leaned forward and touched my forehead, came around and picked up my wrist. Felt the throb in my arm. “Your pulse is good,” he mused. “Eyes clear. Speech clearly not aphasic. How old are you, Aidan? Do you know your surname?”

“I’m five. No. I don’t know. Where is home? Can I go home?”

“We don’t know where you lived before, Aidan. A police officer found you lying in a rubbish heap in the slums of East London. With two scars on your body. Looks like you fell on something that pierced your chest, lungs and belly. Do you remember that?”

“You’ve obviously suffered some severe trauma and come out of it. We’re going to run some tests on you, place you in another centre as you are definitely not mentally impaired.”

“Do I have a mummy and a dad?”

“I don’t know, Aidan. We advertised for you and the police looked to see if a child like you was missing. We found nothing.

“The matron will set you up to meet some specialists at Bethlehem Hospital. And you look like you’re about ten, Aidan, not five.”

“Will it hurt?” I was filled with trepidation.

“No, Aidan. The tests don’t hurt.” He studied me and said something under his breath and I automatically translated and answered him the same.

“You understand me?” he asked and I nodded. “You speak German?”

“I do?”

He rattled off a few other phrases and I understood all of them. “Spanish, French, Italian,” he said and opened the door to call in several of the other staff who spoke to me in their tongues and I knew them all.

“What year is this?” I questioned, suddenly tired to the point of exhaustion as if using my brain was more exercise than ditch digging.

“1973,” the doctor answered. “Are you tired?”

“I want to sleep,” I admitted and he took my hand. Led me to his couch and settled me onto it. He covered me with a hand crocheted throw and sat with me until my eyes closed in sleep.

## Chapter 8

The new place that accepted me was a group home with six other boys; all around the same age or a few years older but tougher and they decided to make life rough on the new kids. I was one of them; four sets of eyes stared me down and made comments under their breath that the housemother ignored. All of them spoke in the broad accent of London and I had trouble understanding them. They mocked my own soft accent calling me a country git with pretensions of royalty.

I was put in with the other new boy, a small overweight redhead with sallow skin, and a twitch. He jumped at everything and smelled as if he’d pissed his pants.

The room they showed us was barely big enough for one bed and two had been crammed into it. On the foot was a stack of clothes, two pairs of jeans, two t-shirts, and four pairs of briefs, socks, trainers, and a belt. The bed had a thin stubbly coverlet and a flat pillow with not much stuffing. The walls were striped paper in a mustard yellow, one window and it was nailed shut and looked out over a small, postage stamp sized yard of trampled grass and weeds. Kids toys lay scattered about, a few bikes and a sad swing set.

The nurse I'd met first had brought me here and I saw the doubt in his eyes as he inspected the place.

"It's just for a little while, Aidan. Till we find you a permanent home. Too many people have heard about your miraculous recovery. Someone will adopt you. You be good. I'll come by, check on your next Friday."

I told him goodbye and sat on the bed watching him drive off through the window.

The four other boys crowded into the room and went through my meager things; complaining that it was the same as their own, no posh clothes or toys like they expected from my accent.

"Got any cash?" the biggest boy sneered. "Costs to live here. You got to pay me for protection."

"Protection? From what?" I asked innocently and he punched me in the stomach. I lost my breath, fell backward wheezing. Whacked my head on the wall and dented the plaster. Saw stars and my eyes filled with tears. I thought I was dying, remembered it happening before and relaxed in acceptance.

My breathing came back and I was able to lift my ribs. Opened my eyes as five faces stared worriedly down at me.

"Blimey," the big bully said shakily. "I thought you were a deader, you didn't breathe for 5 minutes. Turned blue, you did. And smiled. What's so bloody amusing about dying?"

"Already did it once," I shrugged and bought their attention.

"Naw? Really? Tell us about it," he plunked himself down on the opposite bed and I told them what I remembered about dying; and proved it by lifting my shirt and showing them the holes through my chest and belly.

"Me name is Tom Watson," he said, his fingers lingering on the raised welts of scar tissue the size of a large marble. "This be Harry, Marc and Schnee." the three looked enough alike to be brothers, thin, whippy with narrow dark eyes, watchful mouths and brown hair.

"Schnee?" I asked.

"Schneider. Bloody tart mum named him for the truck his dad drove. Them three are brothers but got each a different dad. Mum was a tart, did heroin. Born addicted they were. Crack babies. Suzy keeps a tight rein on 'em, don't let 'em go wandering the streets looking for dope."

"Suzy?"

"She's the woman runs this house. Fair if you don't piss her off. One of the good ones. I was in one house where the fucking man raped me every night until I bit his pecker off. Won't be dicking no little kids no more. Don't let no gents catch you alone---no matter how nice they act."

“Rape you? What’s that?” I asked naively.

“Some men like to stick their prick in kids arse holes. Hurts like bloody hell, makes you bleed at first. Some of the boys like it after awhile. They’ll pay you to keep quiet.”

I shuddered. “No thanks.” I still hadn’t found any use for mine except to pee through.

“What’s your name?” the oldest brother named Harry asked.

“Aidan. Aidan Smyth. That’s not my real name, they gave it to me. Said they found me in Cheapside, London. Where are we now?”

“Binghamton. Coal producing city not far from the outskirts of London. Suzy takes us to school on weekdays, Saturday and Sunday we do chores and play soccer at the Civic centre downtown. You play?”

“Don’t know. I’ve been kind of gone the last five years,” I admitted.

“Five years! Where?”

“I just woke up seven days ago. They said I was in like a coma or something; they did all kinds of tests on my head to see if I was normal. Told me it was some kind of miracle. I was like, retarded or something.”

“Where did you live before?”

“Place called Swansea Group Home,” I answered and he nodded slowly.

“That’s where they send all the mental defectives. Them that don’t know nothing. Cor, you lived there?”

“For five years, they said. I just woke up one day, looked around and asked where I was? Freaked the nurse out. That’s when they bought me to the shrink.”

“Tell us about your friend, Ned,” He encouraged and I strained my memory trying to remember everything I could about him.

So I embroidered it and had them lapping it up eager for more until the lady’s voice hollered up to tell us dinner was ready. Tom hesitated, stuck his hand out and said, “Sorry, guvnor that I hit you. Won’t do it again. Come on down, Suzy cooks a treat and there’s always plenty to eat.”

All of us trooped down to the kitchen and took our seats at the picnic table where I met the house matron, a stern faced blonde with blue eyes and hoop earrings; a cockney accent and a wooden spoon in one hand, a cigarette in the other.

“I see you’ve introduced yourselves,” she rasped in a smoker’s growl. “I’m Suzy. Eat and then we’ll clean up. Are you unpacked? Good. You’re in bed by 9 pm. We watch telly until 8 and then you wash up; brush your teeth and change. No lights on, no reading in bed, no smoking and no unnecessary noise. You got to pee, get up. I don’t allow no accidents on my sheets. Them’s the rules. Oh and no cussing, spitting or fighting. You’re all too young for tarts in your rooms. Got it?”

I nodded and dug into the casserole of meat, potatoes, and veggies filling my belly until it was happy. I fell asleep long before the curfew and woke up in bed, rolled over and pulled the covers over my head.

## Chapter 9

Seasons came and went. I forgot the doctor's promise that I would be adopted out. Seems like no one wanted an older child who had trouble with everyday ordinary tasks. I tried explaining that I was just learning those skills; I had only been born the day I'd wakened in the day room of the institution and at five years of age.

Tom Watson and his friends kept me from most of the bullies at school and those few that made it past him didn't follow me when I escaped by climbing above them.

I climbed the ropes in the gym to the rafters, on top of the book shelves, onto the roofs, windows and ledges to retreat into a private world of my own.

I never saw Ned again. My need for an imaginary playmate or ghostly friend was pushed away in the need for simple survival. I was an orphan without a past or most memories, had discovered that to be safe, I needed to be invisible.

Suzy got older and moved into London proper, an apartment in government subsidized housing on the edge of the Moors. Traveling by the tube was beginning to become dangerous, kids were disappearing only to be found murdered in abandoned buildings, railroad crossings and lonely cut-offs to the Moors.

Tom and the three brothers had grown old enough to go out on their own and gone into a trade school, two of them had turned into hooligans and ran with the drug trade. Sometimes, I saw them cruising the street on their motor bikes and sporting thick gold chains, wearing sharp clothes and flashing big bankrolls.

They nodded to me but we kept our distance. The red headed boy who'd been my roommate had died that first year from some obscure disease; the doctors had called it leukemia. He'd wasted away to nothing, pale, white, and bruised easily. I stayed alone after that, especially after Suzy moved to the city.

I slept okay, never more than a few hours at a time. Most of my time left was spent in classes or roaming the rooftops of London like a ghost. I made it to the top of the Tower and Big Ben, unseen and untouched.

This particular night I had been awakened by a dark dream where I ran on the moors with someone chasing me. My heart galloped in terror, my breathing was a series of gasps, and I could feel my feet hitting soggy puddles of bog that sucked me down.

Waking was a sudden burst out of my bed to stand in the doorway and try to calm myself. Suzy was up and came to see what was going on.

Her hair was gray now, her eyes paled and her smoker's growl had faded to a whisper.



She had raised hundreds of us, seen us come and go, had used up all her patience and naivete.

“What’s wrong?” she asked me, cigarette dangling from her lip.

“Bad dream,” I answered. I was twelve, ashamed to admit I was still bothered by them.

“Oh yeah? What kind?”

“Something bad was chasing me through the moors.”

“You been reading the Daily Call about the Moor Murders?”

“No,” I shuddered. “Too many horrid things in the paper.”

She studied me as if she’d never seen me before. “You’re a good kid, Aidan. Not like the usual brats I’ve been given. You came from upper class. They never found your family?”

“No, Suzy. All I know is that they found me in Cheapside with a gold and emerald cross on me. The coppers kept it and gave it to the director to keep for me. They thought they could use it to trace my name but nothing ever came of it.”

“What do you want to do with your life?” she asked. “I’ve seen your forms. You’re as smart as any I’ve had, and you know languages like a native. You could go into Foreign Service, work for the government.”

“You mean be a spy like James Bond?” I was young enough to be intrigued. She laughed at that.

“Maybe. Go back to sleep. It’s only 2 a.m. and even Mr. Bond needed his sleep.”

“I’ll try.” I laid down and before too long, was back in the drama of the dream only this time, I was an observer watching someone else stalk a child and murder them.

The child’s face was clear and distinct; I saw a girl with curly brown hair, flat eyebrows, and pretty blue eyes. A dimpled chin, round face above a short, stocky body dressed in a school uniform. She carried a book bag heavy with books and wore a light coat and sensible brogues with white socks folded at the ankle.

The man who stalked her started at the train station as she got off and took the shortcut through the woods towards her house. Bordered on both sides by hedges, it was a lane that locals used to shorten the route from the depot to town.

He was taller than her, lean with good muscles and he easily held her struggling form. The sight of the knife made her faint in his arms and because he had been denied the experience of her terror, he slit her throat quickly, watched the blood spill into the mossy dirt with a thick coppery smell that excited him.

I watched as he cut her clothes neatly off, kneel between her legs and rape her. He spent an hour with the body; doing things to it I had no comprehension of what a human could do to another. When he was done, he stood, pulled up his zipper with satisfaction, and stared at the body. He was covered in blood and didn’t seem worried he might be seen.

Taking a tie out of his pocket, he tied the girl's wrists together and dragged her deeper out into the moor, dropping her into the bog where she slowly sank out of sight.

Within minutes, all that was left of her was the blood stain and drag marks through the grass.

I woke up, screaming. Worse, it happened for the next week until I was afraid to fall asleep and walked around in a daze until both school and Suzy noticed and hauled me to the free clinic. The doctor pursed his lip, which bobbed his wart with a long gray hair, and I was fascinated by it. "He's lost a stone in a week, Miss Mathews. His blood pressure is high, pulse rapid and he looks exhausted."

"He's not sleeping or eating," she rasped. "Nightmares, every night this week. Sometimes, I can't wake him from them." I stared at her; I hadn't known she'd been coming in to check on me.

"Aidan," he addressed me. "What's the problem?"

"What she said. Nightmares. Real," I told him. My eyes were closing in the warm office.

"Tell me."

"Walking on the moor," I mumbled. "Someone's following me. Stalking me. He grabs me, cuts my throat and then he rapes me."

"Rapes you?"

"Well, not me exactly. I'm a girl. With curly hair, blue eyes, in a school uniform. You know, blue and green plaid skirt, green blazer with a red and gold crest on the pocket. With white socks, book bag packed with my school kit.

"He kills me, drags my body into the bog."

"Do you know the name of this girl, Aidan?" His manner was sharp, urgent, penetrated my sleepy lethargy.

"Kitty---Caitlyn something. She wore glasses." I yawned, felt myself spiral down into a sleep so deep that the nightmares couldn't intrude.

## Chapter 10

The train ride cost me 50 pence; I got on at Harrowgate and rode it to Malcombe Moor. The place was crawling with Bobbies and they watched me with narrowed eyes as I wandered the station. Vending machines marched against the back wall and the doors led out a series of steps to the outside and the cut off to the lane I'd seen in my dreams.

"Hey, laddie. Who are you? What are you doing loitering about?"

I didn't answer but hurried into the woods and several of them trailed me until I found my feet on the damp path through moors and mire. Gorse bushes and hidden draws kept

me from sight and none of them wanted to lose their shoes in the slop.

Drawn irresistibly to the pool I'd seen in my dream, her face kept floating just under the surface even though I knew she wasn't there yet. I had the distinct sense she would be the next victim and I couldn't prove it.

I retraced my steps, the coppers were gone, and the locals were standing round talking in small groups. I wandered, popping into shops, asking where the school was and if anyone knew Kitty or Caitlyn. It brought me curious and unwelcome stares, especially from the postmaster who was an older man with hard eyes and strong hands. The way he looked at me made me nervous and I left the village watching behind me all the way to the station.

My nights now were no longer spent sleeping, I rode the trains back and forth enough times that the conductors knew me. Sometimes, I got off at the place where I had seen her alive, other times I rode to the Heath hoping to spot him riding the train home.

The day I saw her, I rubbed my eyes thinking I was asleep and seeing her in my dreams. I was on the Amesbury line, heading out to the Heath, nearly the opposite direction from her murder site. I was afraid to approach her. What could I say, excuse me, I've seen you murdered. Don't go home and take the shortcut? She'd think me mad and call the Bobbies on me. Instead, I pretended not to see her; followed her off the train to the village of Chelmsford where she entered a flea market the size of the village green.

Stalls were set up under trees and the open; people bustled about like shoals of fish. There were antique dealers and rubbish piled high, plants and herbalists, fortune readers and used clothes all for sale in someone's slot. I was fascinated by the sheer volume of items for sale, there were even live animals and a childrens petting zoo.

She headed for an apothecary's shop and because of the crowds; I was able to approach right behind her, listening to her conversation.

She came to get something to make her feel good and the way she asked made me think it was some kind of password question because the shopkeeper said he thought she was a mite young for it but she repeated the question and told him she had the blunt. I saw her hand over a ten pound note and he gave her a piece of paper twisted at both ends. She tucked it carefully inside her shirt. His eyes found me.

"You too?" he asked and I blushed, shook my head and pretended to browse the nearest row of stuff which happened to be feminine products. I was mortified, embarrassed and didn't see her leave until the shopkeeper pushed me out.

I lost her in the crowds; roamed the market for two hours before I gave up and went back to the station. As I arrived, I realized I had no cash left, some thief had picked my pockets and robbed me of every penny I'd had. Luckily, I'd tucked my return ticket into my jean pocket and that was still there.

I crept home in defeat and sneaked in by the rooftop. Instead of going to my room, I sat on the roof with my knees tucked into my chest and watched as the stars rotated over my head.

Morning came in an agonized crawl. I entered the bedroom, mussed the bed so Suze thought I had slept, changed my clothes for ratty t-shirt with the Grateful Dead and black jeans, fresh boxers and socks. Wetting my hair with my fingers, I smoothed it out and stared at my face in the little mirror above the small porcelain sink. Dark shadows smudged my eyes making the purple dark like wine, my mouth turned down in sadness. I looked tired, hopeless. I would have scared the devil out of his skin.

“Aidan?” Suzy’s smokers rasp floated up to me. “Breakfast.”

The thought of food made me nauseous but I descended to the kitchen and picked at the eggs, biscuits until it made a homogeneous mess on the plate. Suzy sighed, took it away, and handed me a glass of milk and a white pill.

“Dr. Elverson gave me these when you can’t sleep or you feel frazzled,” she said. “Don’t take them when you’re going to classes. You’ll sleep through them.”

“I need something for when I’m awake.”

“I told him no. I don’t want you hooked on shit that makes you not care. I saw too many of my kids go that route and never get off that crap.”

“Like Schnee and Marc?”

She snorted. “They’re smart enough not to use it, just sell it to teens. You don’t need that shit.”

“No,” I admitted. “I’ve got enough problems of my own without creating more.”

“What do you think these dreams mean, Aidan? You think you’re psychic?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, Suzy. I just know I can’t sleep or eat until I find out what they mean.”

“I hope it’s soon or there’ll be nothing left to you.”

“Finals are this week,” I sighed. “I haven’t studied at all. I’m afraid I won’t pass my forms.”

She snorted again or maybe she was just trying to draw a deep breath. “You’re tops in your grade, Aidan. You’ll go on in whatever you decide.”

“I’d like to go to L.S.E.,” I said hesitantly. “Is there enough funding for that?”

“We’ll make do. If you do go on, you’ll be the first of my boys to go second form. I’m proud of you, Aidan, either way. You’ve been a joy to raise.”

Impulsively, I hugged her, throat surprisingly tight. “If I had a mum, Suzy, I’d like her to be just like you.”

“Go on, boy,” she grumbled. “You’ll be late for the coach.” I snatched up my lunch chit and ran out the door to the stairs.

## Chapter 11

I never made it to class; I had an overwhelming urge to ride the tube to Malcombe Moor, reaching the town at nine in the morning. It was one of those typical English mornings with lowering gray skies and a dismal rain falling.

The lane between the town and the line was running as if a stream went through it; I kept to the high side, finding a narrow opening between two trees and the hedge where I could squat and hide without becoming very drenched, as I hadn't the wit to bring a mackinaw to stay dry. Nor had my trainers fared any better, they were soaked through all the way to my knees.

I was miserable, cold, wet and yet, I managed to doze the whole day away, woke only when the shadows lengthened into dusk and people started to hurry home off the train and use the short cut.

They came in groups and alone, the postman, matrons with grocery sacks and city workers; all of them with brollies and Wellies, heavy rain coats. They had obviously listened to the weather reports.

School kids slipped past me if they were first formers, even the older ones didn't tarry but hurried along as if they sensed the coming evil. It was near dusk when Kitty appeared, and this time she wasn't in her school uniform, just a pair of jeans and a rain slicker with the hood up, rain covers pulled on over her shoes.

She glanced about, wary as a rabbit and jumped when the postman stepped out behind her. He called his name and she relaxed, smiled as the two of them made their innocuous remarks about the weather.

I slipped off my perch and stood behind them, he had already been down this route from the post office hours ago.

"Kitty," I heard him say, "I've a parcel for you just down the lane. I was bringing it over this afternoon and got hung up on a big delivery to the Jensen's."

"Who from?" she asked, delight on her face with the thought of an unexpected present.

"From me."

"You? Whatever for?"

He grinned and pulled out his knife and I had seen it so many times in my nightmares, I knew it better than he did. I ran up behind her, jerked her out of his grasp, and sent her flying, shoving him to his knees with a rugby tackle.

"Kitty! Run!" I screamed and she did so, scrambling to her feet with an alacrity missing in her everyday motion. She screamed the entire way to the village and I was fast after her.

He was up and on his own feet seconds later, I heard the pounding of his heavy footsteps

and he cut me off, wielding the knife before him.

“You bloody bastard,” he hissed. “I’ve seen you loitering about before. You spoiled my bit of fun. Guess what? I do boys, too and you’re far prettier than that cow. Love your eyes.”

“I told the coppers about you,” I said and bolted to the side and promptly sank into knee-deep mire. The more I struggled, the faster I sank. He grabbed me by my hair and I swatted at him. He hauled off and punched me in the stomach and I stopped breathing. He was able to drag my limp, nonresistant body onto solid ground where he went through my pockets and found my ID. Trussing me with plastic cord, he bound my wrists and ankles and then dragged me off into a copse where we were hidden from casual view.

“Aidan Smyth,” he read. “London. E6. Bit off your turf, Heh?”

I struggled as he pulled down my jeans and boxers, played with my balls and dick; I tried to scream once my lungs started working. Heard the far off shouting of people heading our way. He heard it, too.

“Too bad,” he whispered. “I bet you’ve never had a big cock up your arse.”

He took the knife and slowly slid it into my belly to the right of my belly button, watching my eyes darken as he did it. The pain was an ice-cold burn and then a fiery monster eating my guts. My entire body went into a spasm. He drew the blade up and hot fluid gushed out of my insides to splash down my sides, my guts were like snakes weaving and dancing. I could not speak in the horror of seeing inside me.

His face dissolved. I could feel the knife reach my heart, felt it shiver and skip but the pain had receded; no longer touched me.

“Good bye, Aidan Smyth,” he whispered in my ear and I barely heard him as he stood and ran off.

The last thing I did hear was her voice telling me not to die in her place, the lights of police, and the cold blackness of death.

## **Part 3**

### **Chapter 12**

I woke this time knowing my full name, where I had lived both lifetimes and what had happened to me. I woke in hospital in a bed in a ward with only a nurse in attendance.

“Hullo. Do you know who you are, son?” she asked. I saw a woman near my mum’s age, thirties with coal black hair and blue eyes. She was pretty, wore a white uniform with her name on the pocket.

“What year is this?” I asked and she looked unsettled.

“1999.”

I sighed. I had lost another twenty years. “Can I have a mirror?”

“You weren’t in an accident,” she said. “Nothing’s wrong with your face.”

“How old do I look?”

“How old do you think you are?” she countered.

“Twelve or thirteen?”

“You don’t know?”

“I remember being twelve.”

“You still are. You have some unusual scars. Why don’t you tell me your name?”

“Aidan Argent.” Actually, the right Honorable Aidan Michael Darancourt Griffon Argent. I should have been thirty nine years old by now but was still stuck in a 12-year-old body.

“The Moor Murders?”

“What about them?”

“Did they catch the man who did it?”

“Aye. In fact, he just died in prison. Served twenty years and died of AIDS.”

“Aids?”

She looked at me oddly as if I should know what that was. She explained and I shuddered, wondering if he’d done anything to my body after I had been murdered.

“I read about it. A boy named Aidan was his last victim. He saved the intended victim, a girl named Kitty Coyle. She ran back and got the Bobbies and Scotland Yard but they were too late to save the lad. He’d been disemboweled and cut to his heart. In fact, the murderer took his heart with him. The girl recognized the attacker, the postmaster. He was caught with the boy’s organ, arrested, and sent to Wormwood Scrubs. Why?”

“I knew him. Aidan.”

“How? He died before you were born.”

I couldn’t answer without sounding insane. She asked me where I lived and I couldn’t answer that either. I was sure Suzy was long dead and left me with no place to go. “I have no one,” I whispered.

“Orphan. That’s tough.”

“What happened to me?”

“Police Inspectors found you along the transit line. Unconscious, unresponsive. We thought you were an OD but no drugs were found in your system. You were in shock, no sign of any trauma, just these scars. You’ve been here for a fortnight. Doctor thought you’d never wake up. Are you hungry?”

“Is it tea time?”

“Long past but I can find you something. Be back in a bit.” She left me, returning in a half hour with a Styrofoam cup of lake warm tea and a soggy bacon sandwich I devoured in four bites. I felt as if I hadn’t eaten in ages. I suppose I hadn’t.

After her came the doctor, harried National Health and he checked my eyes, heart, lungs and reflexes, seemed pleased with the results and pronounced me fit. He wanted to know about the scars and asked me if I had been abused. The police came next, took my fingerprints, and were disappointed when they came up unknown.

Social service was last, two snarly people, a man and a woman who treated me as if I were some dirty criminal. They didn’t believe me when I said I had no family, no place to live, no money. They said anyone with my accent must have some wealthy family somewhere. The result was that I was placed in a juvenile facility until I was to turn 18 and then I’d be on my own. I would be tested for my scholastic knowledge and placed in a program appropriate to my abilities, some trade school, she said.

I took their tests. Three times. Mostly because they didn’t believe the results the first time. Nor the second. They accused me of cheating. So they watched me take them the third time and they were convinced I really was that smart and put me in an accelerated class in a preparatory school where I boarded.

It wasn’t bad; it was out in the countryside with fresh air, good food and lots of exercise. I was smaller than the other boys were and somewhat behind in social skills, didn’t participate in the social events. So much had changed since the seventies. Computers, cell phones, closed circuit TV, pay-per-view, world travel, and globalization. And the news programs!

I realized how incredibly foolish and lucky I had been to stalk Kitty’s murderer. No sane teen in this time would dare travel alone at night on the tubes or take a five year old on a coach trip. So many children disappeared today to be found slain or not at all.

The school was called Posthwaite Prep and guaranteed its graduates a place in Eton, Harrow, Yale or any other University of note. I was on the top floor, the fourth in a building of non-distinct character save that it resembled an old cotton mill and I had been told the it had been such; converted into an exclusive boys school in the early seventies right before the recession and petrol wars.

I had been too young to worry about the price of petrol but I sure noticed how everything else had jumped in cost.

A ticket on the tubes used to cost a sixpence and I could ride on it all day. Now, they wanted nearly a pound or rather, a Euro for a station-to-station stop. And taxis! Highway



robbery.

When the first holiday came and I had nowhere to go home to, I decided to ride into London and visit the old neighborhood. I was totally lost; so much had changed in the ensuing years. Urban renewal, areas that had been highly posh was now rundown slums. The high rises were awe-inspiring and I found my nights spent climbing to the tops of them with astonishing ease and learned that no one hid their business from prying eyes when they thought they were on top of the world.

I saw drug deals go down, pay offs to police officials, high-class prostitutes servicing their clients. I knew where they kept their cash and learned how to break in and steal it.

I took only the cash, nothing else and because of my naivete, thought I could just walk into a bank and deposit it. When that didn't work, I tried to find a way to hide it in my room but with random drug searches, I was afraid it would be discovered. So, I took it with me in a backpack, bought an excursion ticket for a two-day trip to Cornwall. I booked a sleeper compartment, bought new clothes, had my hair trimmed, styled and set off with trepidation. The closer I rode to Penharris, the worse I felt. Even the conductor noticed and asked if I was ill. I shook my head and huddled into my jacket, sinking deeper into the seat.

Later, when the carriage went forward for tea, the ticket collector brought me a cup of very hot, very sweet tea with cinnamon buns. I gave him a brief smile, thanks and tried to give him some cash. He sat down opposite me and refused it.

"What's your name, son?" he asked. He was young, about my dad's age---thirty with curly haircut long and spikes in his ears, one through his tongue and his eyebrow. He had wise brown eyes and creases at the corners.

"Aidan."

"You're not a runaway, are you?"

"No, I'm an orphan," I answered and he sighed.

"Sorry, man. That sucks. Where are you headed?"

"Strathgallant. Losthwithial."

"You are going up for the Festival?"

"What festival?"

Now he looked at me strangely. "Oh, just the biggest Medieval Fair and Festival that's been going on for the last five years and half the kingdom runs to see."

"I've been locked away at school," I said.

"Must have been in bloody bumfuck Egypt," he muttered. "You be careful. There are a lot of predators out there, especially for a good looking boy like yourself." he laid his hand on my knee and smiled. I looked at it, back at him and he picked it up." Sorry.

Didn't think it hurt to ask. You're not..."

"No. I'm not." I knew what he meant and now it was my turn to study him. "How did you know you were like...that?"

"You mean queer? I was born knowing it," he admitted. "I prefer older boys, too but you had that air."

"I'm just twelve, mister. Jail-bait."

"I know. The tea's on me, Aidan. I'll see to it you get off at your stop safely. You have somewhere to stay?"

"Maybe. I don't know until I get there."

"The station is another twenty minutes, Aidan. Enjoy your tea." He got up and wandered off down the aisle towards the engineer's car.

I'd meant to ask him if the piercings hurt but his revelations on his sexual preferences had stunned me. More had changed in the years since I'd died than I could fathom.

### **Chapter 13**

The long entrance up to the farm had been beautifully maintained, the fences lining both sides were freshly painted, the trees measurably taller and larger than my five-year-old recollection.

The coach had let me out close to the entrance and not a scheduled stop. The driver had chatted amiably when he heard I wanted off there. He told me all about the local tragedy, how the old lord and lady had lost their only child in a freak accident thirty years back. The little boy of five years had fallen from the roof onto the wrought iron spears of the garden fence; been impaled through the chest and belly and he'd died in his mum's arms. The Earl and his lady had gone crazy, tearing down the fence and the gardens and nearly destroyed the house, too. If it hadn't been for the farm manager and the young maid, no telling what would have happened to the farm.

I had asked how the place was doing presently and he'd said that Cryllwythe Farms was now one of the top producing enterprises of the EU.

"Mr. Pendennis is the manager?"

"In his sixties, he is. Still as hale and hearty as ever. His son helps out, took agriculture management."

So, he'd let me out at the beginning of the drive and I walked stolidly forward.

A crushing sensation attacked me, sat heavily on my chest. The further I walked towards the mansion, the worse it became until I was gasping for enough air to breathe. The minute I turned round and retreated, the easier it was to draw in a lungful. No matter how hard I tried, or how many attempts I made, I could not walk past the halfway point of the

drive; I couldn't even catch a glimpse of my childhood home.

It was the same when I walked back along the side of the lane towards the village. Even though it was a goodly hike of 12 kilometers to town, I could approach no closer than five from the outskirts could. Eventually, I gave up and stuck my thumb out, hitching back onto the A389 towards London. I was hoping I could get someone to take me to the train station and pick up a berth back. I still had the other half of my ticket unused.

The ticket man had been right, now that my attention was diverted from the goal of returning home and my parents; I noticed the unusually large amount of vehicles traveling to Lostwithial. I soon learned not to be standing too close when one of the big lorries passed; they created a suction that nearly snatched me underneath their tires.

I walked for a couple of hours, did some nine or ten kilometers in that time, and took an exit feeder into a small village where I asked directions at a petrol pump to the train depot. The attendant was a pimply faced teen with a pierced tongue, painted white skin and a surly attitude. He told me to buy a map; he wasn't no fucking Rand McNally and went back to his girly sheet.

I asked him if the tongue thing hurt. He went on in graphic detail that it had but he liked pain.

"Doesn't it feel weird hitting your back teeth and the roof of your mouth? It makes you talk funny. What's with the black nails and white paint?"

"Goth, man," he sneered. "Where you been, under a rock? I worship the devil, the Great Master Satan."

"Yeah? I met the other."

"Yeah, right," he snorted and I flushed. "How'd a runt like you attract God?"

"I died. Twice. The first time I was impaled. Died in my mum's arms, went into the light, and saw all the people who'd gone before me. Was brought by my friend, Ned. He was my imaginary friend in childhood or so everyone thought. Ned really was a ghost, stuck with me until we both crossed."

"Ned?"

"Edward. Plantagenet. The Tower Prince."

He laughed and mocked me until I showed him the gold signet ring I wore around my neck on a chain made of common metal. The ring glowed with that particular radiance that only 18K gold possessed and the ornate design of the House of Tudor inscribed on it convinced him further.

By the time his shift ended, he had offered to take me to the depot himself and I agreed, thanking him again as we mounted the motorbike with me holding tight round his waist. He twisted and turned with the bike's motion and I enjoyed the ride. He smelled of sweat and something else, a heavy musk that teased my nose.

He took me downtown into an apartment area where the city had built a complex of standard housing for the less socially advantaged. Housing projects, they called them. Groups of teenagers hung around the parking areas and the entrance ramps, a few waved as we drove by.

“Hey,” I said. “Where’s the depot?”

“Just back of the flats,” he said over his shoulder, pointed with his chin, “Two streets beyond.”

He turned between two buildings and stopped, his feet going out to hold the heavy bike upright. Four more chaps came out from the shadowy niches to stand around us. I let go of his sides as one of them dressed in chains, black clothes and more piercings than I’d ever seen reached for my backpack. He tore it off me, pulling me backwards off the bike to fall on the chipped macadam.

I skinned my elbows and banged the back of my head, leaving me somewhat stunned. They stood over me, talking. “Holy Christ, Zane,” one said. “There’s like 10,000E in here. What did he do, rob a bank?”

The teen named Zane replied, “Dunno. I picked him up at work. Wanted directions to the train station. He’s only twelve, a virgin, an orphan, got no family, and no friends. Perfect present for the ritual. And his eyes. They’re fucking weird. Pale purple.”

“Oh man, I’d given up hope of finding a gift for the Master,” another said. “Too many locals go missing, the coppers get antsy. As it is, the neighborhood’s been noticing all the missing and dead pets.”

“Samhain’s the perfect day. Only a fortnight away. We have time to purify the sacrifice.”

“Where will you stash him?”

“There’s that old hut on the Freeling track near the Heath where they take the horses for gallops. No one’s been there in years.”

“No, too open. They would spot anyone hanging about. Take him to the Beast’s. He has that old house with all those cellars.”

“Give him something to knock him out so he don’t scream.”

“His head’s bleeding. He hit it on the concrete when he fell. I think he knocked himself out. Besides, I gave him a couple of roofies when he drank at the station. He won’t be feeling nothing for hours. Pretty, ain’t he? Got really cool purple eyes. If we didn’t need no virgin, I’d fuck him myself.”

“Is a virgin boy the same as a chick? Does that count?” A voice sneered.

“The vessel must be pure and untouched so the master’s seed can fill the sacrifice and prove a worthy gift to call the Master Belial forth,” he quoted. “If we touch him and the Master finds out we had a perfect sacrifice and defiled it, he’ll kill us. I’d just as soon not be the one hanging by my heels watching my bloody intestines dangling out of my guts.”

Let's get him out of here and hidden."

One of them picked me up and threw me over his shoulder. He had that same punky smell; his hair was dirty and greasy under the black dye job.

"Says his name is Aidan Argent, his address is some posh Prep School in Peacomb. I thought you said he was just an ordinary bloke, no family." He was accusatory as he found my papers.

"That's what he told me. Hey, pretty boy? How come you got such a cushy berth?"

"Scholarship," I murmured my brain with no inhibitions. "No one knows or cares I'm alive."

"He said he died twice. That's why I snagged him," Zane offered. "He's seen that light, he'd be a perfect gift, maybe even the one."

"Satan's balls. If we found the one who could bring Satan onto earth permanently, we could rule this fucking world."

Too late I remembered the queer man's words, don't trust anyone; evil walked in such innocuous masks I would not recognize it until it was too late.

## Chapter XIV

My subconscious didn't want to let me wake, part of me expected to be dead so it was with some surprise when a disembodied hand slapped me awake. Everything round me was dim and gray; I saw the vague outlines of walls that looked lumpy, mottled. It was cool and damp. My feet were hanging over the edge of something and my hands were tied and pulled back over my head. I was horizontal or nearly so. My mouth tasted horrible, dry, parched, and my head pounded. I felt ill, nauseous, puked and it hit someone in the chest.

They jumped back with a curse and some of it fell on me, steaming, stinking and disgusting.

A tall man, heavily built with great whippy muscles stood there; he was dark haired with gray tinted through it and light brown eyes in a high forehead and pinched face. He was no more remarkable in his appearance than the next-door neighbor or grocery manager. I thought he was there to rescue me.

"Help," I said faintly and he smiled.

"Yes," he spoke with a soft Midlands accent. "You've come to help. I see you've been injured several times. Your name is Aidan?" he touched me lightly on the chest and belly, his fingers cold on my bare skin. That's when I realized I was naked. I screamed and the sound echoed through the rooms and mocked me.

"Ah, Zane was right," he crowed. "You're perfect. Upper class, young, untouched. Your

aura is pure gold and scarlet with a crown of blue. I've never seen one like it. Zane says you died twice. Is that true?"

I kept screaming and tried thrashing about but the moment I moved, all my weight was on the manacles about my arms and I slid down the tilted plank. My arms pulled my chest up and it was suddenly difficult to breathe. He let me scream and struggle until my voice became gasping pants but he didn't touch me.

"You must be hungry. Zane overestimated how many roofies to give you and you've been out for two days. I gave you water but I was afraid you'd aspirate if I forced too much. Thirsty? The drug does that to you."

"What are you going to do to me?" My words shook, came out fear filled and tremulous. "Are you going to stick your cock up my arse?"

He laughed. "Among other things, dear boy, but not for a week, yet. We're saving you for the Feast of Samhain's."

"What?"

"We worship Satan," he explained. "Alastair Crowley, the Beast. The end times are near. To hasten it, to bring the Great Master to Earth to rule now and forever, we need a pure, perfect sacrifice to bind him here. I think you might be it."

"You're mad!" I burst out.

"What, you're not going to deny the existence of Satan?"

I shook my head. "He exists. I've seen him in mens eyes too many times now."

"Have you? I never have, only taken him as the truth; only felt him in some dark, deep place in my soul. I believe but like Doubting Thomas, I want to put my fingers in that hole, feel and taste the blood."

"You would not survive the encounter."

"How do you know? By faith? Intuition? Or did you meet him in some esoteric place?"

"You are a fool."

"Who's hanging from a hook waiting to be sacrificed to the Dark Lord? When you're hungry and thirsty, call for your lord to provide. Maybe he'll hear you. Ta, I'm off to work."

"What do you do?"

"Assistant Prosecutor to the Crown, dear boy. Wear the wig and the robe. Criminal Barrister. Have a pleasant day. Scream all you care to, no one can hear you down in these cells. We're next to the Army Proving Grounds. Aircraft and big lorries just ruin the quiet neighborhood. My people think I'm mad to stay here. Ta."

He sauntered out of my sight and I saw he was dressed in a three-piece suit, now stained

with my vomit. I hoped he smelled me all day.

He left the lights on. The room was a cell---no more than eight meters by eight, bare of anything but rocks piled neatly atop each other with little mortar between them. Different colors, mostly bluestone and granite. The floor was packed dirt, no windows, the door wooden with wrought iron bands and hand hammered hardware bolting it together. The lock was one of those big, ancient iron skeleton key types which I had learned to pick at home in my own cells buried beneath the Manor and if I could get out of the manacles.

I couldn't see them but my hands were close enough together that I could feel them. Not modern handcuffs that ratcheted tight, these felt like the broad metal cuffs that were used in the 1800s. I thought, being small boned and slender, I could slide my hands through. I squeezed my thumb into my palm to make my hands smaller and twisted. As soon as I tried to pull them out, something inside clicked and sharp spikes dug into the entire circle of my wrists and held the flesh. To attempt to pull against it would shred my hands to the bone.

Blood flowed, coating them, making them more slippery yet I could not pull them out. I sobbed as it burned and throbbed. After ten minutes of torture, my hands went numb. I tried to take the weight off by sliding my legs to either side of the board and pushing up against the floor but he had calculated my height, the length of chain so that my toes barely reached and after a few minutes, my legs couldn't take the strain; cramping up. I had to let go and hang from my hands again. After two hours, the board tilted by itself and I was lying flat on my back. The relief was enormous and I fell asleep, unable to do anything but be grateful for the respite.

My stomach complained waking me from a deep, troubled sleep. I had no idea what time it was. I was hungry, very thirsty and had to pee. I just let go and what came out was dark, smelly and hit the dirt to puddle on top before it slowly sank in. The smell of piss lingered and I wondered how I was going to crap when I was stuck on the board. I could roll onto my side but I was afraid if I rolled off, I wouldn't be able to get up again. I drifted and the slow hours passed.

## Chapter XV

“Holy effing Christ,” I heard in accents and voices familiar to me; opened my eyes to see a pair of men staring down at me. Dressed all in black leather, they crinkled as they moved and held their bike helmets by the straps against their legs. I knew those narrow, foxy faces, even if they were in their forties.

“Aidan. Aidan Bloody Smyth,” Schnee and his brother Harry unhooked me and held me up.

“Christ, Aidan!” Schnee bleated. “You’re still a kid! We’re old!”

“I died, Harry,” I said faintly. “Again. The Moor Murderer got me.”

“That was you? Suzy looked for you for years. We all did. Never found a trace of you. Tom even put up a reward. Are you hurt, cold?” He pulled off his leather jacket and tucked it round me, careful when he came to my bloody wrists.

“What are you doing here, Harry, Schnee?”

“We run drugs for Tom. We’re delivering some special shit to the wacko that lives here. He’s got some kind of cult going, has orgies and wild parties. Buys lots of ecstasy and shit from us. Told us he had something special in the cellar and we decided to see what it was. Never expected you.”

His brow furrowed. “Aidan, you’re supposed to be like thirty something. How come you look like twelve?”

“I’m fourteen. Dunno, Schnee. I woke up only a few months ago in hospital. I knew my name and everything. Remembered when and where I was born, tried to go home but I couldn’t.”

“Why not?” Schnee asked.

“There was like a...barrier I couldn’t cross the closer I got to home. I couldn’t breathe, walk past it. Or go to town. I turned round and tried to come back. Walked to the next town, asked directions at a petrol station for the depot. The teenager who worked there gave me a ride to his flat and drugged me. I woke up in here. They said they’re going to fuck me up the arse and sacrifice me to the devil.” My voice quivered and Schnee cursed, hoisted me in his arms, and followed his brother up the narrow wooden stairs. I saw the glint of a big black gun in his hand and tucked my head into his neck.

“Bro,” Harry said once we were in the kitchen of an old house. “Find something to cover his bollocks.”

He ripped the tablecloth off and tied it around my waist and we three slipped out the kitchen door into a back lot with a high stockade fence. It was noisy outside, the sound of heavy lorries and planes coming and going. “We’re in Swansea, Aidan. About an hour from the city. We’ll take you to Tom’s. You’ll be safe there. Okay?” I nodded. “Schnee, you stay, take care of this asshole when he gets back?”

His brother jerked his head once, checked his gun, grinned wolfishly and disappeared into the garage.

Harry carried me out the gate, set me on the bike and lifted himself carefully behind me. His breath tickled my neck, lifted the hairs on it. “Okay, Aidan boy?”

“Yes,” I said faintly.

“Hang on then.” He kicked and the bike growled, leaped forward and he tucked me under his chin. We roared through the narrow streets and out of this semi-rural area until he reached the motorway through a roundabout and onto the M390, cranking it up until we were passing everything on the macadam. The motion lulled me, his warmth and muttered questions on my welfare making me feel at ease until I remembered the last



episode. He felt me stiffen and whispered into my ear.

“Relax, Aidan. Suzy would haunt me if I didn’t help you. You’re safe. Tom never forgot you, always tried to look out for you. He’s a good ‘un, even if he’s bad.”

“Bad?”

“He’s the number one drug boss on the East side. Don’t do whores, though. Hates any scumbag that buggers little boys, because of what happened to him. Schnee will cut the bastard’s bollocks off and bring ‘em to Tom. Got quite a collection. Hang on now, sharp turn.”

I felt him lean and we went whipping around the curve onto an exit ramp and down a road bordered by stately old elms and long driveways. He slowed drastically. “Hyde Park’s not far. Tom has a nice Mayfair flat in an old town house. Used to belong to some rich nabob named Lord Paisley. Lost his life in WWI. Family sold it for a million pounds to Tom ten years back. Got him a butler, French chef, house maids and valet. A Personal trainer.”

“Personal trainer?”

“Bloke what keeps him in shape. He can bench press 400 kilograms.” He slowed, turned up a blue graveled drive towards fancy steel gates painted shiny black. They were locked and a guardhouse was just inside with a man in a gray uniform, armed with a huge handgun and a radio. There were cameras mounted at the gate and the man didn’t blink at the sight of me in a white lace tablecloth or black leather.

“Tell Tom I have a surprise for him,” Harry said and drove on. It took five minutes to reach the estate. It was in what he called a gated community and his flat was the top one of the Mayfair mansion.

Harry paused in front and another man came out of the Palladian portico and took the bike from him as he carried me inside.

The hallway was the size of a room with green marble floors, the staircase up was like two graceful wings, but he walked to a lift on the right and stepped inside. The doors opened on the fourth floor and a hallway broad as an avenue, elegant tables, and chairs lined both sides. He headed for the double doors at the end and licked it with his heavy boots. His buckles jingled.

The door opened slowly and a grand butler stood in it, behind him was another man with his hand on a gun. When he saw Harry, he holstered it, turned round, and said, “It’s Harry, Mr. Watson.”

Harry walked into a Salon like the one I remembered from my childhood, beautifully furnished, windows floor to ceiling with wispy curtains, hand waxed floors and priceless antiques. The home of a rich, cultured gentleman.

Before a white marble fireplace that was lit even this early in the fall sat a gentleman in well-tailored tweeds and drinking from a brandy snifter. His head was balding, his eyes

hooded and dark but I knew him instantly.

He stood up, his eyes drawn to me in Harry's arms and when he set me in the nearest chair, he looked astonished, his mouth hanging open in shock. "Aidan?" he asked, unbelieving.

"I found him naked, handcuffed in the Beast's cellar, Tom," Harry said. "They were going to bugger him and kill him in some bloody sacrifice rite."

"Aidan," he repeated helplessly.

"Tom," I managed, holding the jacket around me. He dropped to his knees before me and touched my face. To my horror, I burst into tears and the two grown men hugged and comforted me. When I had bawled myself dry, Tom ordered Harry to get the butler and arrange for a doctor, clothes, and food for me.

An hour later, I was fed, clothed and sedated in bed and guarded by no less than two of my childhood friends.

I slept peacefully, no dreams, no fears. When I woke, Schnee was there and his grin told me I had nothing left to fear from the Queen's barrister.

"Gave Tom his bollocks," he smiled. "And a few other pairs, too. Fellow name of Zane. Go back to sleep, Aidan. Sleep tight. Tom's got your back."

I slept until late next afternoon and Tom was sitting by the bed in the spare bedroom with a beautiful redhead. Her eyes were green and made up with smoky brown shadow, coral lipstick and she had big diamonds in her ears. Her smile was sweet, her teeth white and even.

"Hullo," she greeted. Tom smiled and I saw he still had that crooked eye-tooth that made his smile predatory.

"Hi, Aidan," he grinned. "This is my lady, Cammy. Camilla Mowbray-Watson."

"You're married?"

"Well, yeah. I'm not fourteen like you, Aidan. I grew up. Been married for five years."

"Kids?" I asked my eyes wide. The thought of Tom changing nappies made me goggle.

"No, no kids. Cammy can't have 'em. Are you hungry? You've been out for nearly 16 hours."

"Starving. Fair knackered," I admitted and he yelled behind him and she tutted him, got up and went in search of the butler. She came back with the upstairs maid pushing a lunch cart with covered tureens.

We ate delicate French entrees and gourmet fare until I was finally full. They begged me to tell them what I'd been doing and I spent the next few hours regaling them with my tales of horror.

## Chapter 16

Tom let me loaf at his place, put no demands on me and his wife babied me as if I was her child. I confess, I let her, I liked being fawned over even if I was uncomfortable with their comments about my eyes. Tom told me he'd know me a hundred years from now by my eyes.

I spent the sennight sleeping and eating, gaining back the stone I'd lost. The dark shadows under my eyes and the faint translucence of my skin had faded; I looked like any healthy, messy 14-year-old teenage boy.

I heard Tom and Cammy laughing often at my antics and wandered at the strange looks Harry, Schnee and his servants gave each other.

On the Friday at supper, surrounded by fancy china and gourmet wines and French food, Tom set his hands on either side of his plate and cleared his throat.

"Aidan," he started and I looked up from Petite roulades of lamb with inquiring eyes to see both of them staring at me with soft, fond expressions.

"I called the Farm, Aidan. Talked to the manager, Mr. Pendennis sussed the place out. Doing a landslide business, they are. Wouldn't talk about the tragedy, still fresh to his Lord and Ladyship, he said, even though it was nearly thirty years ago. Only son fell off the roof and was impaled on the fence. Died before help could be found."

"Your Da was instrumental in securing the 999 system. Your ma has set up a scholarship in your name, Aidan. You know, Suzy left her savings to your rescue fund. Never put a ny out for leads on your whereabouts."

"Why don't you apply for it?" I asked.

"Don't need the blunt," he said carelessly. "What do you want to do, Aidan?"

"Go back to school. Finish. Go to college."

"To do what?"

I shrugged. "I wanted to go to L.S.E. when I was at Suzy's. Now, maybe something with languages or travel. Foreign Service."

"Too dangerous," Cammy shook her head. I snorted.

"I've died twice, Cammy. Death doesn't scare me anymore. Been there, done that."

"Cammy and I have discussed it. We would like it if you would let us adopt you as our kid and live here," he looked expectant and her eyes were pleading.

I was astounded, grateful and uncertain. Looked at the both of them. "You deal drugs, Tom. No offense."

"I keep that part out of my home life. Besides, Cammy wants me out of the life and I sort of promised I would."

“What would you do?”

“Computers, finance. I’m good at both, already in those businesses legitimately. Won’t lessen my income noticeably much.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“To make Cammy happy I’d do it. She wants a kid. You’re as close as I can come. Adoption agencies won’t even see me. I don’t want no colored refugee kid. Besides, I know you.”

“I don’t want to offend you, Tom but I have a mum and a dad,” I said.

“I know, Aidan. We don’t want to replace them. I just want to give you a safe place to live for Suzy’s sake and give Cammy a kid to raise.”

“I’m pretty well raised on my own, Tom,” I returned uneasily. “I can’t promise I’ll even be here for long.”

“What do you mean?” he jumped.

“I might have another dream,” I said unhappily.

“So what? Everybody dreams.”

“Someone always dies,” I whispered. “Them. Or me.”

“All the more reason for you to stay here,” he argued but she put her hand on his arm and said something in his ear so softly I couldn’t hear her. His face whitened. He nodded slowly and she smiled at me.

“Aidan, I know you want to spare me the same heartache that your mother and father went through. I understand that. Just tell me one thing, if and when the dreams start, you’ll let us help you.”

“Even if it’s one of you?”

“Yes.”

“You’d let me die to save yourselves?”

“Yes,” both said and I knew they were lying.

“I’ll tell you if I have a dream about either of you,” I said finally. And to myself, but I won’t stay here.

“Oh, by the way, Schnee found your backpack and 10,000 pounds. I take it that was yours?” his eyebrow raised in that quizzical way I remembered from not so long ago. At least in my memory. “Where did you acquire it?”

I grinned. “Robbing high rises,” I said and shocked him. His image of me was that of a twelve-year-old quiet, bookish kid.

“Stealing?”

“There are other things I can do, Tom. You remember how I liked to climb things?” At his nod, I continued. “I still do. Only now, it’s skyscraper and big buildings . When I’m up there, I see things people don’t bother to hide twenty stories up. Safes, cash under their beds, pay-offs.”

“Holy Christ on a crutch,” he said. “You’re him. The Ghost. The Spider Bandit!”

“The what?” Cammy and I both said.

“The cops and the underground are both buzzing about the last two years. Some unseen will-o-the-wisp cat burglar has been ripping off drug dealers, criminals and corrupt politicians and coppers. Always cash, leaves the jewelry, art and hard to fence stuff behind. How’d you get in without breaking windows?”

“I do. Floor below or to the side. I watch to find out where they hide their spare keys, their combinations, their hiding places. No one hides things from twenty stories up in view of their windows. I learned how to pick locks, too.”

“What’s the cash for? You don’t do drugs? Gamble?”

“To live on. I was homeless for a while. You know you can’t open a bank account without ID?” I asked naively.

“I’ll open one for you, Aidan. Is this all of it?”

“I buried the rest. I was taking it home. I told you what happened there.”

“Aidan, we want you to stay as long as you can, want. Just enjoy being a kid. Just tell us when you have to leave. Where we can find you. Promise? For Suzy. For me and Cammy, so we can sleep at night.”

“I promise, Tom.”

## Chapter 17

I stayed with them for six months. Tom wheedled out of me when my birthday was and we celebrated at a kids place, an idea that had come over from the states; pizza parlor, game room and play area. I was still mentally only about seven---I had died the first time at five years old, lived unchanged and unknowing for five more in the group home to emerge as a ten year old but with the mental attitude of that earlier five year old. Since then, my learning had approached that of my peers in the academy but deep down, I was still that scared five year old in a fourteen-year-old body.

“How old were you when I disappeared, Tom?” I asked around a piece of chocolate marble cake with white whipped frosting. Goey sweet.

“Sixteen. You’d been with Suzy only about a year. Small, quiet, runty kid. Told us some great stories. Were they all true?”

“I wonder myself. I know I used to embroider them some, especially about Neddie.”

“He was real, Aidan. I looked him up in the history books.”

“You looked up a book?” I was agape and he cuffed me on the head.

“You daft nit! I can read, you know,” he growled, sounded just like my dad.

I grinned. “The Tom I knew would have thrown the book at me.”

He grumped. “I’ve learned a bit since then, brat. There’s the newest craze from the States. Want to give it a go?” He pointed to a flat wall that rose twenty-five meters high with nubby projections that several kids were attempting to climb. A padded mat was set around its base. “Climbing wall.”

I studied it; saw it had two possible routes that would take you to the top. Any other sequence would leave you hanging until you fell off because the next hand or foot hold was out of reach.

Tom said, “Go for it.”

I was up in a flash and climbed it easily; my fingers and feet knew exactly what to do. Once at the top, I looked down from my flat perch and was disappointed it had been so easy.

“Alright, you monkey. Come down, you made your point.” Tom yelled and I scampered down faster than I’d go up.

“Weren’t you scared, Aidan?” Cammy asked. “I’m afraid of heights. How do you do it?”

I shrugged. “I dunno. It’s like breathing. I just do it without thinking.”

“Well, happy birthday, Aidan. Let’s go back to the table and open your present.”

“My present? You bought me a gift?”

They handed me a small box and I tore it open with all the eagerness of a kid at his first Christmas. Inside, I found a wallet of beautiful leather and silver. Inside that was my own ID in my real name with my DOB, my enhanced passport so I could travel through Europe, a railway pass with unlimited mileage and dates; a bankbook with an ATM card. “I’ve put your ten thousand in there, Aidan. Plus a bit more.”

I didn’t know what to say, in fact, I was speechless. I was going to start bawling but Tom gave me such a stern look I paused.

“Don’t be such a waterspout,” he said gruffly. “I know you think you’re only nine or ten but you’re really older than that. We just celebrated your fourteenth.”

“Technically, I’m 36,” I sniffled. “Hey, does this mean I’m old enough to drink?”

“No,” both of them jumped. “Let’s finish your pizza and go for a movie.”

“Do I get to pick?”

“It is your birthday. No horror flicks, okay? I don’t like those,” Tom shuddered.

“No goey love stories, either,” I came back. “All that kissing is gross.”

They laughed so we settled on the new cop/criminal car chase wonder that was making the rounds from the US.

I ate my weight in popcorn and candy, even after the big pizza and birthday cake. Tom grumbled over my hollow legs. We were home by midnight and his bodyguards followed discretely in their own separate vehicle. Nearly back, we were pulled over by an unmarked police car with a clip on light and two detective inspectors got out and approached the Mercedes limo with the guards in close attendance. Tom sat, his face stoic but I saw the muscle twitching on his eyelid. Cammy laid her hand on his arm not so gently. Her fingers were white.

The two men were tall, well dressed. Both fair-haired with light blue eyes and they leaned in the rear window and studied us. When they spoke, I heard the Midlands and a trace of Dutch. “Good evening, Mr. Watson. Mrs. Watson,” the Dutch one said. “Nice looking boy. Is he yours?”

“What do you want, Van Gilder?” Tom snapped.

“Just to say hullo, Tom. One of your customers just turned up dead in a Surrey maize field. Minus a few parts. Been dead a few months. Name of Jeremy Alistair, called himself the Beast.

“Nasty piece that. Fancied himself some kind of witch, and had sexual orgies. Pervert. Kids were disappearing in his neighborhood.”

“Warlock,” I interrupted and the other one looked at me, too.

“Oh aye? What’s your name, lad?”

“Aidan.”

“Warlock?”

“A witch is always female. A warlock is the male,” I offered.

“And who might you be, young Socrates?”

“No one you need to know about, Peelstone,” Tom said, tight lipped.

“Oh, but we need to know all your acquaintances, Mr. Watson,” he said snidely. “Seeing how you are associated with such sterling characters.

“Still, the Beasts loss was no sad thing. His neighbors noticed the unusual amount of missing and dead animals. Missing kids in the district had gone up, too. Boy name of Zane Grey is missing. Know anything about that?”

His eyes were steady on mine and I blurted out, “Zane Grey was a western writer from the US.”

“Was he now? You read a lot, Aidan?”

“Yes.”

“Leave the boy alone, DI. He’s a bit simple.”

“He’s a pretty boy. Remarkable eyes. Never seen eyes that purple color before. Except for...” He seemed lost in thought, went on. “He was a sexual predator, we found out. A criminal barrister, too. Let all kinds of wankers out on technicalities. Liked little boys, he did. Fact is many parents are glad he’s dead. Are you, Aidan?”

I didn’t say anything and he waited a minute while the silence grew and then slapped the car door.

“Good evening, Om. Mrs. Watson. Aidan. Drive carefully.” They walked back to their car; got in and drove off.

Tom didn’t say anything the ride back but sent me to bed as soon as we arrived.

## Chapter 18

My dreams woke me every morning with a churning stomach and uneasiness, that made me pale, quiet; forcing me into a fake cheerfulness that everyone noticed. I tried to deny it, eating and drinking like normal but the minute I left the table, it was to race to the restroom and throw up.

Trouble was I couldn’t remember what the dreams were about, just that it left me gasping for air and in holy terror.

Tom and Cammy badgered me to tell but in truth, I couldn’t. I didn’t know why or what the dreams were about.

Boxing Day came and went. Snow fell on the ground and bathed the city in white making it look like a fairy tale park. Tom took me into the city to enact some business and watch the parade. We Hadn’t seen or heard from those detective inspectors in quite awhile and he’d told me the rumors of the cat burglar had died down, no new thefts. As I was stuck at his flats and hadn’t gone exploring.

I had lost another stone and he wanted me to see his physician. I’d refused and thrown a tantrum, which amazed both of them.

“He’s acting like a bloody teenage brat,” Tom complained and Cammy laughed.

“You mean he’s acting normal,” she teased. “Be grateful he’s not out joyriding, burning down flats or doing drugs.”

“He should be married, with kids of his own and running Cryllwythe Enterprises Ltd,” he grumbled. We saw the Cornish Red Lion and purple rose of the farm’s logo on products everywhere.



I wandered the grocers aisles absurdly pleased that my dad's enterprises were so successful.

Tom called me, told me he was just nipping into the tobacco shop next door and then the vintners if I wanted to come with but I declined, said I would get something to eat at the fish and chips across the street. He warned me to watch for traffic and I rolled my eyes. He said nothing but watched me with a troubled look as I darted out the door. The bell tinkled behind me.

The chip shop smelled heavenly. There were a few tables inside and all occupied. I ordered a three piece and watched impatiently as they cooked it, dumped it into a paper basket, and handed it to me.

I stood by a table waiting for a seat, picking at the chips one by one when I heard a familiar voice, the blonde DI with the Dutch accent was seated in the corner. "Aidan, right?" he addressed me. I didn't want to look up. "Come sit with me. I don't mind sharing."

I hesitated and he smiled. "I can make it an order," he said. I walked over and sat down. "You're thinner than last time," he commented. "Doesn't Watson feed you?"

"Yes. I throw up." I flushed, wished I hadn't said that.

"Throw up? Why? He doesn't mess with you, does he?"

"NO! Tom hates pedophiles!"

"Does he?"

"Yes. One did it to him as a kid."

"Really. Why aren't you in school?"

I didn't know what to tell him. Tom had never mentioned school and I hadn't pushed the issue.

"You're required by law to attend until third form, Aidan. How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"You look twelve."

"I feel a hundred some days," I sighed, pushing the basket away.

"I want you to come down to my office and look at some photos," he said abruptly.

"Why?"

"To see if you know any of the men who are confederates of Watson. He's a criminal, you know. A drug dealer."

"No, I don't know. He's my friend, had been since he was a kid," I returned hotly and he stared.

“You mean since you were a kid.”

“Yeah,” flustered, I pushed my food at him and stood up. He reached for my shoulder and forced me down. I sat with a thump I felt in my butt bones.

“I’m going to put Watson away for distributing and selling drugs, Mr. Aidan no last name. I don’t care who I take down with him. Understand? I’ll use you to do it if I have to.”

“No, you won’t,” I snarled and struggled out from under him. I yelled for help. “He’s touching me! Pervert! He grabbed my cock! Help!”

Shocked, he let go and I ran for the door as two of the patrons rounded on him. Behind me, I heard Tom yelling to wait but in my panic, I didn’t listen; kept running. In minutes, I was lost deep in the back streets and alleys of downtown. I headed for a stairwell I saw and recognized the name on the sign as a train stop near where Suzy and I had shopped for used books, took a sharp turn and flew down the steps pushing commuters aside with a reckless abandon that no one even commented on.

The station was well lit with placards posted about condoms and AIDS, plays at Covent Gardens and upcoming rock bands.

I leapt over the turnstiles and finally heard someone shouting at em for not paying but I soon outdistanced them when I dove into the crowds. Everyone, tall or short, fat or thin, wore heavy winter coats, hats and mittens. You could see your breath even here in the underground.

I hopped onto the next car and made my way to the end of the line, hiding behind a heavy man with black as midnight skin and deep brown pupils. He was mumbling to himself from the Koran, praying to Allah for assistance. I answered him, out of breath and he stared at me with his jaw hanging. He had bad teeth.

“You speak Arabic?”

I nodded, asked him his name.

“Rashid Ibrahim Darabi.”

“Mine is Aidan Argent.”

“But how is it that you speak my language? Does your father travel, the Foreign Service? Your mother is surely not Arabic, you are too fair. And your eyes are so pure, like amethyst gems.”

“I speak a lot of languages,” I answered. “I have a knack for them.”

The doors closed and we lurched off. I followed him to his stop and got out at the next one, came up the stairs to a dark, quiet street corner near the docks. I could smell the strong odor of the Thames and the sea. Saw the moon and knew the tides would be coming in.

Found myself a doorway between two shops that were shut and huddled on the curb to wait for dawn.

## Chapter 19

Nightmares held me in its grip. I was in a vast bank standing in line with other patrons. They wore heavy wool coats over fine suits. The sun streamed through the windows and lit golden streaks on the marble floor. The floor was large enough to be a dance stage.

Gilt coated ushers led customers forward to the cages or desks. Security guards stood near the doors chatting with both people and patrons.

Giant portraits of the founders on the walls glared down at us. They had unhappily relinquished control of our pounds and shillings only in death.

Men in morning suits and tails wandered in from the Stock Exchange and Lords from Lloyds of London made their appearance. It was a microcosm of English life; I saw tweed countrywomen and high society models. It was first day of business after a three-day holiday and the bank was busy.

Waiting my turn, I was aware when the four men in a group entered. Not because of anything, they did or said or wore but simply felt something wrong. I turned to look and saw that they were four ordinary blokes carrying suitcases and set them down behind the umbrella stand, left them and walked out.

The people in front of me shifted their feet and stepped on me. He turned round to apologize and I saw it was the police officer, Van Gilder and with him were Tom and Cammy.

I shouted. No one moved. Went back to the four cases and opened one. Inside was a mess of circuitry and a timer. Ticking.

Everything blew apart, people screaming, pieces of metal, wood, bodies flying everywhere.

I woke up, a sprawl on the steps, my entire body frozen, stiff and aching. I didn't go back to Tom's. I stayed on the streets, sleeping in cubbies, abandoned buildings, and subways. Each night was the same nightmare trying to find the name of the bank and where it was.

I reasoned that if I left the city, even England, I might be able to prevent the bombing from happening. If I wasn't there, it wouldn't occur or so I told myself. I wasn't someone else in this dream, I was clearly me.

I wasn't eating; my liquids consisted of drinking out of public water fountains and from spigots in the Park. I had worn the same clothes for a week and smelled awful. When I did fall asleep, it was in snatches of thirty minutes on park benches, public restrooms, and bus kiosks.

I had just sunk into a stupor when someone's arm snuggled up under my neck and lifted

me. I woke; groggy and disoriented as I was rolled into the back seat of a car and belted in.

“Seen him this past week, DI. Been wandering about. Sneaks off before I could catch him. You know him?” The voices were over my head and I thought it was a dream, waited patiently to see where it led.

“I know him. He ran off a week ago, and he’s been missing since. His family’s frantic. Poor kid, he looks knackered. Bit of a rough.”

“Who is he?”

“Son of Tom Watson. Adopted.”

“Tom Watson! What’d he run off for? Abuse?”

“No. Watson swears he don’t know why. Kid’s never been in trouble. I couldn’t find any paper on him.”

“You taking him home?”

“No. Watson’s meeting me at the Bailey Building.”

I felt a mild frisson of unease run up my spine and I must have made a noise because one of them touched me on the face. “You awake, Aidan? I thought he said something.”

I closed my eyes and fell into a deep, dreamless void that pulled me under as if someone had grabbed my ankles and heaved.

Sharp voices dragged me back. It seemed as if I’d only been asleep for minutes yet the sky had lightened past dawn; there was a distinct chill in the air. A tall man was leaning over me and shook me awake. A scratchy wool blanket had been tossed around me and snuggled up to my chin. Seat belted, lap belted, I was secure in the back of a police cruiser.

The blonde Detective Inspector was trying to wake me; his blue eyes looked as weary as my own. “You awake, Aidan? Tom and his missus are meeting us here to speak to the Magistrate about you. Why did you run away?”

I looked beyond him and saw the building I’d seen in my dreams and paled. “Please,” I begged. “Don’t make me go in there. Don’t go in. There’s a bomb. Four of them.”

“Bomb! What bomb?” he asked sharply. “How do you know?”

“Is Tom in there now?” I yelled and saw from his face the answer. I unbuckled, pushed him out of the way, ran inside past the gilt coated ushers, the armed security guards, and saw Tom and Cammy standing with a woman from Protective Services. Swiveled and looked for the cases. Not there yet.

Tom saw me and started forward. I growled, yelled at him to run and saw the first of them coming through the doors.

I ran forward snatching the first case and smashed it into his companion's knees taking two more down.

The Detective Inspector had reached the floor searching for me midst the chaos. I was screaming BOMB! at the top of my lungs and people were running willy-nilly for the doors and cover.

I heard gunshots; two of the four had made it to their feet and were hurrying out. The other two had pulled out weapons and were shooting at anything that moved.

I threw the case at the tallest one and he aimed at me, a look of horror on his face as the suitcase hit him in the chest. It didn't go off, thank God but knocked him out.

I was able to grab the last case and run for the door when something smacked me in the back and sent me into a slide. I saw the case go past me into the street, bounce on the curb and down the sewer.

Seconds later, the grate exploded upwards and chunks of macadam just missed me.

I felt curiously light, detached. Heard klaxons from far away, the rumbling of the ground beneath me and people rushed by, dropping to their knees near me.

Someone rolled me over, voices called my name. I opened heavy eyes, tried to speak and found my mouth filled with coppery tasting fluid. Tom, Cammy and the Dutch DI knelt near me. Cammy had my head in her lap; her face was tearing and darkened by soot.

"You promised, Aidan," she sobbed. "You promised. Don't leave us."

"Ambulance is coming, Tom," said the DI. "Roll him over; let me put pressure on it. Aidan, how did you know?"

He rolled me on my side and pulled cloth from Tom's jacket, wadded it and pushed against my shoulder blades. It hurt and I cried out, gurgled as my throat filled.

"Did anyone die?" I choked and felt a chill creeping up my limbs.

"No one, Aidan. You diverted the bombs so only one went off. The guards shot the bombers. You knocked one out. I shot the one who shot you."

"He shot me?" my voice was fading.

"Yes, Aidan. They were Irish extremists bombing the Bailey to protest the new peace talks, confederates of Islamic terrorists. Aidan, can you hear me?"

His voice was fading away. Tom spoke, "Aidan, please don't die. I don't want this, Aidan. Aidan---."

No light this time, no Ned to hold my hand, no sense of peace or warmth just a cold, dark slide into the abyss of time's river. I was drowning and surrendered without a single stroke of protest.

## Part 4

### Chapter 20

Russian. Curses. A foot kicked me in the ankle. I rolled over and fell off a cot in a barracks so cold and drafty I could see snow drifting through the cracks between the boards. An iron stove glowed red-hot and a few men covered in greatcoats and blankets were huddled around it; their rifles stacked near the door. A kettle sat on the hob and was whistling morosely.

“Sevgi, wake up,” the man was a sergeant or its equivalent in the Russian army. He kicked me again onto the floor and I got up slowly. I was dressed in drab green with a woolen overcoat and wore the rank of Captain yet I was no older than sixteen by the faint image in the window beyond the coal stove.

“Get up, Sevgi, you runt Aristocrat bastard,” he said roughly. “It’s your turn to fetch the coal. Go check on the prisoners.”

I didn’t say anything but my body went about the motions without direction. I opened the bare door, staggered out into a blizzard to a coal chute on the side of the guard post/barracks, found a wheelbarrow, and shovel.

It took me twenty minutes to fill the belly of the wheelbarrow in temperatures well below zero and then stagger back inside.

Shoving the others aside roughly, I filled the stove, banked it, slammed the door, and warmed myself by the fire and with a cup of hoary tea minus sugar or milk. When I was finally unfrozen, I went back out to trudge along a faint path until I found a building that was clearly part of a palace complex, entered and headed for a particular suite of rooms.

None was heated and in the one, I saw four young women covered in layers of clothing and coats seated with a young boy of about seven. They all bore a striking resemblance to each other and were instantly recognizable. I was looking at Grand Duchess Anastasia, her sisters and brother, the children of Nicholas and Alexandra, Tsar and Tsarina of Belorussia.

I sighed and wondered if I was there to save all of them or just the one. The next room down housed their parents. Of Rasputin, I saw no sign; he was already murdered and buried.

As I entered the room, the Tsarina saw me and smiled a faint, tremulous smile as if she wasn’t sure it would be received. When I removed my fur hat, it reached her eyes.

“Sevgi,” she breathed and her face, already beautiful, became purely angelic. She rose and took my hands. “Sevgi, how are my children?”

I hesitated. “They’re fine, Tsarina Alex. Forgive me, I am not myself.”

“What is wrong?” I looked at the Tsar and he was lost in a world of dreams, had retreated from reality.

“I’m not sure what I can do, Tsarina. I’m only one man. And not even a full grown one at that.”

“Whatever you can do, Sevgi. We don’t care about ourselves but save my children.”

“I’ll do my best, Tsarina,” I swallowed. “What’s the date?”

She looked at me oddly and told me what I didn’t want to hear. I had less than twelve hours to save what I could of the Russian royal family. In twelve hours, soldiers from Marx would storm into these rooms, gather them all into a smaller room and obliterate them all in a haze of bullets and then spend hours carting off the bodies to hack them to pieces with hatchets and burn what was left before throwing that down an abandoned mine shaft. Only to dig them up and hide them further.

“I have money, jewels,” she offered, tearing at her clothes.

“It’s not that, Tsarina,” I whispered. “I have no time to plan anything. I need confederates, some escape plan.”

“I thought you said you had everything ready?”

“I did? Tell me,” I said and she outlined a plan so outrageous, I knew that whoever I was before I’d dropped into this role, I had not been a sterling character.

“Anastasia trusts you, Sevgi. And Alexei.”

I laughed bitterly. “Did I take money from them, too?”

She looked at me. “You look different, Sevgi. Your eyes. I never noticed their color before. They’re lavender, like gemstones. Do you have English in you?”

“I am English, Tsarina. And my name is not Sevgi but Aidan. Aidan Argent. I’m from Cornwall and in another hundred years, you and I are distant cousins through your cousin Victoria.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’ll do whatever I can. Fate has played me a nasty trick. I must see what I can do to tweak her back. God is with you.” I sneaked back out and returned to the Grand Duchesses and the tsarovitch; they looked up in terror until they saw my face.

“Sevgi,” they cried gladly. “Is it safe now?”

Before I could answer, the door burst open and the soldiers, my comrades entered the room shoving me roughly aside and began beating the girls, paying particular attention to the boy. I saw blood splatter the walls and rage consumed me. I attacked, opened fire on them and heard their cries of outrage and disbelief. A blue haze filled the room, the smell of cordite, blood and faces so strong that I gagged. Only two of us were left standing, the sergeant and I. he held his stomach together from which entrails were hanging. He cursed me.

“I knew you were still too much the spoiled aristocrat, Sevgi and not a loyal comrade. I

hope you rot in hell with the other royal cunts. Your blood isn't blue or theirs."

He collapsed and I looked down at my own torso to see a purple stain grow on my uniform. Weakness made my legs tremble. I was sinking to the floor when I heard a faint groan. It came again and with a sudden burst of strength, I pulled corpses from each other to find a body covered in blood and white lace.

She groaned, her eyelids fluttered and Anastasia pushed her white hands into me. Her face wore a look of horror even as tears fell from my eyes. "I was too late," I whispered. "I'm sorry." I collapsed on top of her sisters, unable to help any of them.

## Chapter 21

Anastasia had managed to dress herself in one of the dead guard's uniform and greatcoat, drag me outside, and put me in the coal barrow. She'd pushed me as far as the woods before she'd collapsed and was huddled near me covered with a snow-crested blanket.

Snow falling on my face had roused me, my belly and side were on fire, and the rest of me was numb. "Anna," I whispered, trying to get my feet on the ground.

"Sevgi. You're alive," she sobbed in relief. "You've lost so much blood."

"Thirsty. Cold," I moaned. "Help me up." Between the little help I gave her and her own considerable aid, I was able to slide out of the cart and onto my feet.

"There's a woodcutter's shed about a quarter kilometers in. I think we can make it," I said. "I need something to pack the holes."

"I did that with my dress and under things," she said frankly without blushing. "You have three holes across your stomach and chest."

"We'd better hurry then. Blood leaves a bright trail in the snow. Are you hurt?"

"Something hit me in the head. I was leaping to protect Alexei when you pushed me aside. Otherwise, these holes would be in me." Her blue eyes were wide, calm, and unafraid. My hand rose to the bullet crease on the top of her head that had seared off her hair and left a narrow furrow.

"You remember your name, Grand Duchess?" I asked as she pulled my arm over her shoulder and we staggered off into the forest.

"Anastasia Romanov, Sevgi." She began to hum a chant she'd heard us marching to and the silly tune let me keep my feet moving when I wanted to lie down and die.

It took us hours to make the quarter kilo trek and only an innate sense of direction got us there. I'd stashed an old motorbike in the shed and to my relief; it was still there along with the cache of rubles I'd accumulated. We rested; she started a fire in the fireplace and set a kettle of snow on to melt. I pulled off my greatcoat, lifted my tunic and slowly eased the wad of blood soaked lawn and lace from my stomach.

Four blue stained purplish holes with puckered edges stared back at us. Two of them had



the bullets visible from under the skin and with my pocketknife heated until it was red, I pried them out. The other two were deeper, past muscle and God knows how far inside me.

My attempts to reach them left a fresh blood flow and fire flaring like angry tigers gnawing on me. She took over, poured melted water and carbolic on the punctures, held me as I shrieked in agony and passed out.

I woke in a princess's arms and her tears bathed my face. "Sevgi."

"Princess, my name is Aidan, not Sevgi," I breathed. "I was born in 1957 in Cornwall. My father is Lord Griffon Argent, the Earl of Bowden and I am the Honorable Aidan Michael Darancourt Griffyn Argent."

Her face above mine was calm, beautiful; strong as her mother's and not lost in fantasy like her father's. She said nothing, just stroked my face as sweat made me feel suddenly soaked.

"Fire's hot," I mumbled. "Warm in here. We can't stay. They know about this place. Look here soon."

"Can you drive that thing?"

"In my sleep," I grinned. "Where's my coat?"

She helped me sit up, stand and pull on the heavy wool greatcoat issued by the Bolshevik Army and in the inside pocket, I pulled out the silver flask given to me by one of my former comrades. Filled with harsh, homemade vodka, I'd dumped it out and replaced it with Napoleon Brandy from the Tsar's own supply.

Three or four nips and the fire in my belly were replaced with another kind, the kind that warms your blood and stiffens your spine, makes you a lion instead of a mouse.

I stood up on the seat, kicked the starter and the beast of a machine grumbled to life in a belch of blue smoke. The Grand Duchess, unrecognizable in ugly soviet uniform and coat climbed behind me, gingerly holding her arms around my waist. One of her tiny, surprisingly strong fingers found one of the bullet holes in the wool and touched me. The warmth was electric, sent a jolt through me that I felt to the top of my head. She felt it too, and thought she had hurt me. "I'm sorry, Sevgi. I mean, Aidan." She switched to English. "I learned my English from a French tutor," her accent was French, light and pleasant.

"Jetu."

"You speak French, too?"

I pushed the bike off and we traveled slowly through the trees until I found a deer trail that eventually became a road out of the woods but was never more than a simple lane graded by animals and sledges. The interstate highway system was a thing of the far future; you made your way cross-country literally by cross-country, making roads as you

went.

“I speak French, English, Russian, Polish, German, whatever we need to speak,” I answered finally. We rode until I couldn’t stand or hold the bike up anymore and she helped me push it into an old barn to hide it. We burrowed into a haymow and slept like the dead. I had no dreams not even of falling into bed with a princess.

She woke me by her soft, subtle crying. I woke, groggy and disoriented, couldn’t remember where I was until I saw her golden head bent over her hands.

“Anna,” I said quietly. “I’m sorry. How long did I sleep?”

She wiped her cheeks; I saw blood on her hands and hoped it wasn’t hers. She saw me looking, smiled faintly, and said, “I checked your stomach. You stopped bleeding except when I pulled the dressing off. You slept for about four hours. Dawn’s coming.”

I could see the first hints of it through the slits in the barn siding. “Anything to eat around here?” I asked, looking round. Scythes hung from the rafters along with harnesses so old and brittle they would disintegrate if you touched them. Logging chains lay coiled on the floor, old wooden hay forks. No animals and any manure I saw was so old it had dried out. The people who had lived on this farm had most certainly eaten their livestock to survive the Russian winter.

I looked in the potato bin and it was bare, too. Even the oats were scraped down to the bottom and mice ate the few grains left. At that point, I would have been happy to eat a mouse. You couldn’t even cook grass, it was buried deep under the snow, and there wasn’t any to be found in a forest. Grass didn’t grow under the trees.

“I saw a pond out back,” she said hesitantly.

“Cattails?” I asked, hopeful and at her nod, I was able to creep out with her help.

It had stopped snowing which meant the temperature had dropped, the sky above the crowns was a pure cold blue, and crimson tipped where the sun rose. It bathed the small pond in molten gold and silver, reflecting off the ice.

I could see cattails around the edges but I wasn’t sure if the ice was thin enough to break and reach the roots. Cattail bulbs were edible, sort of like a starchy potato.

She had found a pick bar and between the pair of us, was able to hack a hole in the edge of the water and dig out four or five tubers.

Twenty minutes later, we were gnawing on the roasted tails if not with enjoyment, at least with grim satisfaction.

We left the deserted farm an hour later, on a road that had seen some travel. The ruts were deeper and more numerous, hand lettered signs pointed the way to Minsk. I wanted to reach the Caspian Sea or the Elbe and take a boat rather than risk travel overland.

## Chapter 22

By the time we crossed the Danube, I was nearly out of my head with fever and infection. The wounds had festered and smelled foul. I wouldn't let her touch them and was afraid to stop until we were out of Russia. How I was still alive was a miracle; clearly, one of the holes in my stomach had punctured my intestines. She managed our food, money and travel, asking me what the next step should be. Sometimes, I made sense. Others, I rambled insanely and she was on her own.

She had booked us a cabin on a steamer that ran upstream on the river towards Munich and I had protested so violently she'd changed it for England. I'd tried to explain that the war had made these countries too treacherous for travel.

I'd managed to stagger on board and to our third class berths before collapsing onto the bed and passed out completely. She went in search of the ship's surgeon and brought him in.

His exclamation of horror and his poking cold hands roused me. He spoke in French, the language of the Russian nobility.

"How long has he been like this?" he demanded harshly.

Anna's voice was soft, "Seven days. He would not let me treat him or stop to let a doctor see."

"He's going to die," he said. "This is a mortal wound. It's terribly infected. He has blood poisoning. See the red streaks? The foul odor? He's gangrenous. I'm amazed he's survived this long. What's his name?"

"Aidan Argent. The Honorable Aidan Argent. His father is the Duke of Bowden."

"He's English?"

"Cornish, actually," I whispered. "Who are you?"

"Ship's surgeon. Marcus Whyte. Look, I can help you with the pain but I'm afraid there's not much else I can do."

I smiled faintly. "I know. I wasn't meant to survive. Thought it'd be quick, though. Will you see Anna safe? Send her to America, not stay in Europe. Too many events will happen here. America is safer."

"Who is she?"

"Anastasia. Russian princess," I mumbled but I wasn't sure he heard or believed me.

"You came... Russia... delirious... drink this... Aidan..."

Darkness. Firelight. The smell of carbolic. Cedar. In my mouth. Mothballs and tepid water.

Hands rolling me. Hot compresses on my belly, pain that ate through me. I prayed to die, cried for my mother. Soft hands that gave me some respite from the pain.

Bitter drafts forced down my throat and brought back the darkness. Rocking motion that lulled me. Smell of food, raw, rank and long past its prime.

I begged for surcease, asked to put me out of this misery, heard a woman sobbing. Sunshine on my skin. Burned worse than fire. Shivers wracked me. All my joints felt frozen stiff like a rusted bolt.

“Aidan,” a girl’s voice, soft with a pretty French accent. “Open your eyes, Aidan.”

A man’s voice. I didn’t know it. “It won’t be long now. His heart rate is dropping, blood pressure falling, skipping. He’s septic. Aidan. I can give him some morphine. It’ll depress his breathing; make him go quicker, easier, in less pain.”

“No! He can’t die!”

I struggled to come back, to open my eyes, to comfort her, the last of her family. “Anna,” I managed.

“Aidan, we brought you to Bonn, a pension near the river. The doctor has been treating you. It’s time to wake up, Aiden. I need you. Without you, I can’t go on. Please, don’t die.”

I felt my heart stutter, slow and that same endless stretching as my essence left this body and went searching through the river of time for another.

I remembered at that moment that Anna would jump into the river and try to kill her only to be rescued by a soldier who would take her to England and she would have suffered a head injury forgetting her name, her language, her journey, and me. She would wind up in America as Anna and only then would claim to be the Grand Duchess.

I wandered in a void, lost in the river of time, found myself watching as my five year old self spent that lonely time in the group home. Neglected, barely cared for, and mostly ignored, I was grateful I had not been aware.

I found myself drawn to the farm and even in this spirit form; I was not allowed to enter the area and spy on my own family.

I could and did follow Suzy. Saw her frantic search after I disappeared, how she wore herself to an early grave mourning for me rather than treating the cancer that ate her lungs.

She died five years after I was murdered, never knowing what happened. She’d approached Tom, Schnee, and Harry to look for me and begged them not to stop until I was found. A deathbed promise they made her.

Tom and Cammy had buried me after a fancy funeral, he did it under my adopted name and with surprising sensitivity, and he placed me in a crypt next to Suzy which he had paid for, too. Both of them came often to the grave site and Tom often spoke to tell me what he was doing.

He died some ten years after my death, in a bomb attack at Heathrow Airport. I wasn’t

there to save him but Cammy lit a candle for both of us, anyway. I drifted an existence not unlike being in the womb. I waited for re-birth.

## Chapter 23

This time, I woke up in bed in a dormitory. I didn't move except to open my eyes and stare around at a long room of beds made up the same with the same covers, same sheets, and same lumps asleep underneath. The only difference I could see was the color of the hair on the heads except where the person had pulled the sheets over themselves.

On the pale blue walls were various posters of rock stars, soccer players and other athletes, and photos of family.

The windows were many and here, too had individual curtains obviously the beds occupant's preference.

"You awake?" the boy next to me asked in a quiet voice. His accent was odd, I identified it as Saudi, and the face I looked at was dark skinned, dark eyed and young. About sixteen.

I lifted my covers and stared; I was in boxers of the British royal flag and grimaced at my choice. No T-shirt and saggy socks. My body was taller and more mature than I remembered; I had definitely gone through puberty. I looked about sixteen this time and I'd wake with an obvious hard on. I blushed, threw the covers aside, and went running down the row of beds to where my subconscious said was the restrooms.

Here were a row of stalls and sinks, mirrors over the porcelain tubs and a long counter. Plush towels and washcloths were stacked neatly in an armoire.

The showers were one room over, another row separated by shower curtains and tiled floors with drains. This boys school was exclusive from the appointments I could see. I rushed into the closest toilet and went with evident relief.

The Saudi boy followed me in and he wore royal purple PJs with gold piping and a crest on the breast pocket. He leaned on the sink and watched me. Slowly, he pushed the stall door closed, his hot eyes made me uneasy.

"Any more dreams, Aidan?" he asked finally and his English sounded very Etonian with Arabic overtones.

"Dreams?" I shook the last drops off and tucked myself back in. coming out; I washed my hands and stared at myself in the mirror over the sinks. I saw an average height teen with fair hair and purple eyes with thick dark lashes, a straight patrician nose, lips on the plump side, dimples, high cheekbones, and porcelain fair skin.

"Too pretty," I muttered and he laughed.

"You say that every time, Aidan. Glenellen tries to bugger you every chance he gets but you've managed to avoid him."

I gave him a look. "Oh, don't worry. I like you but not that way. I prefer girls."

"Khalid, right?" I asked suddenly, his name popped into my head.

"Same as it was last week when you met me."

"Sorry. Bad with names. Where are we again?"

"Somerset. School for the gifted. Your parents sent you here while they're on sabbatical."

"I told you all this?" I was suddenly chilled standing in the drafty bathroom in my underwear.

"No. I hacked into the school files and checked you out. You were mysteriously mum. Chelmsley and his cronies paid me to find out about your particulars."

"And?" I prompted.

"Your DOB is January 6th, 1996. You were born in Cornwall. Your name is Aidan Argent. Your parents are Moira and Michael, both missionaries in Africa for the next three years while you finish Prep School. You have a trust that funds this place. You're paid up until January and then, another 3000 pounds are due. Your school fees are paid with money orders or bank drafts, sometimes-prepaid credit cards that the financial officers think is odd. Your transcripts show excellent grades and exceptional language skills."

"You hacked into my files," I said flatly.

"A few others, too. Chelmsley and Glenellen like to make sure their victims are worthy of their attention. But then, you are so pretty he's made an exception in your case."

"What are you his pimp?" I was adding in my head, another 16 years had gone by since my last life. I'd been 14 in 93 and now, was only 16 in 2012.

I could only imagine the changes in the world in those sixteen years.

"Can you take me to the computer room, Khalid?"

"Why? I've got an I Pod. You want to surf the net?"

His words sent a bubble of unease through me. I made him explain and was in awe at the sheer volume of information out there available to anyone with a computer.

We spent the next several hours surfing the net until had a working knowledge of it. He watched me with a puzzled look before finally asking why I seemed so unused to it.

"Why? Did I seem to know about it before?" I asked him.

"Well, you weren't taking any computer science but your files said you came from Wilson. Wilson has a strong comp program." His eyes were dark and soft looking.

"You're a second son of Sheikh Amani, right?"

"Twenty second, actually," he grinned. "I'll get a good education, a nice place to live

wherever, a cushy job in finance and a fare-thee-well.”

“You’re a nice guy, Khalid.”

“For a pimp?”

“Why do you do it?” I was curious. His face hardened and he looked sad for a minute before he answered.

“Because he did it to me, Aidan. And I’m scared of him. Like everyone else except you. You’re the only one he’s after that hasn’t given in or been coerced.”

“He won’t get me,” I vowed. “And I won’t let him get you again.”

He didn’t say anything and I suspected he didn’t believe me; his eyes had that wounded look I had come to recognize. Like me, he had not found salvation in reporting such abuse but had learned to deal with it in his own way.

## Chapter 24

I dressed slowly, finding jeans and long sleeved shirts in my dresser along with the silliest collection of underwear I’d ever seen. Khalid watched me holding them up as he was making his bed.

“What was I thinking?” I murmured and shook my head. “These are a five year old’s boxers.” I eyed his, silk and hand sewn if I was any judge.

“I think you did it to ward off Glenellen and Chelmsley,” he said. “They laughed till they nearly pissed their own.”

I balled them up, smiled, and looked down the row of beds. Most were now empty and made up. We were obviously late for whatever was next.

“Which one’s his bed?” But from the stack of booty piled near, I picked his out. Threw the lot of kiddie shorts on his mattress and pissed on it.

“Going to declare war,” I grinned at the Saudi prince, “It’s got to be all out warfare and unconditional surrender. Let’s go get breakfast. I’m hungry.”

He led the way to the stairs and we trooped down the two turning flights, emerging on a broad corridor that was painted pale green and funneled everyone towards the dining hall. The buzz from the room was an all-pervasive hum heard all the way past to the first floor to where we stood.

I heard shrieks of laughter, the clatter of trays and adult voices shouting to quiet down.

Behind us, a man cleared his throat and made me jump. “Mr. Argent, Prince El Melek. Breakfast is over in ten minutes. Unless you want to forego food or risk being tardy for first period, I suggest you hurry in.”

I turned and saw a tall man, dressed in a conservative suit and tie, with neatly cut hair grayed at the temples and fair blue eyes.

“Mr. Compton-Baird,” his name was suddenly in my head. “Math and Science teacher.”

He watched me gravely. Khalid answered. “Pay no attention, Mr. C-B. Aidan’s a little---” and he circled his head with one finger.

“I am not nuts,” I defended, punching him. Laughing, he ducked and raced down the hallway. I followed more sedately with the teacher right behind me.

The dining hall was huge, the size and height of a gymnasium with rows of windows along three sides of the perimeter. On the fourth wall were the food cases and cafeteria lines with women dressed in chefs clothes and neat caps over their hair. They served us.

The food was typical British fare, over cooked, bland with little seasoning. Lots of veggies, salad, and desserts. An alarming number of the 300+ occupants were overweight. It was plain that sports were not a big item on the curriculum.

“Pudgy lot,” the teacher muttered. “Spoiled rich blighters, most of them.”

“Which one’s Chelmsley?”

“Big brown haired boy over in the corner. In the Rugby shirt. Bit of a bruiser, likes to pick on the younger boys. Like Prince Khalid.”

“Glenellen?”

“Ginger head near the flag stand.” He was shorter, whip thin and fierce with long arms and strong wrists. He wore designer jeans and an expensive watch, was shoveling food in at an impressive rate of speed.

“Go get something to eat, Aidan,” he said. “Before they shut the line.”

I hurried, ducked in behind Khalid, and apologized to the other boys for doing so. “Thanks for saving my spot, Khalid,” I said to their grumbling complaints. I eyed the selection of food left. Rubbery eggs, cereal or a few bran muffins. Toast or biscuits. Porridge congealed to glue. Dried out kidneys, no more bacon, some kippers. Orange juice, milk or tea. I settled for toast, marmalade, and tea. The chef plunked it down on my tray and I carried it over to a free table with Khalid and three other young lads. Two were fair with ruddy cheeks, the third was dark haired and brown eyed.

“Terence and David Temple,” Khalid introduced. “Eduard Bergeron. This is Aidan. Argent.”

“How do?” they said and watched us eat. “We heard you were admitted months ago. First time we’ve seen you eat in the hall. You generally eat alone in your room.”

“My room?” I looked at Khalid.

“I told you. Man of mystery. You have a room up in the attics where you hang out and hide. Eat there, too. No one can find you. Bit of a maze this place. That’s how you avoid our two resident monsters. We have five minutes to eat and make it to Mrs. Pummelo’s class.”



I shoveled down my toast and tea. “You in my class?”

The Saudi boy shook his head. “Physics. See you for lunch?”

“What’s on the menu?”

“Steak and kidney pie or roast beef with Yorkshire pudding,” the twins offered. “Only decent meal served here. Beef is prime. Cryllwythe Farms Angus.”

I smiled at that, stood up, and deposited my dirty dishes wandering until my instincts kicked in bringing me to my required classroom. Well, that and I followed the twins to it.

## Chapter 25

Mrs. Pummelo was a young woman with a tanned, lithe figure showed to advantage in a tight skirt of pale peach and a severely tailored blouse of bright orange. Her hair was braided into cornrows and she had brilliant hazel eyes that the orange of her shirt made greener. She was tall and of some racial mixture of African and Arabic with mysterious, exotic features. Most of the lads in her class spent the time drooling. She taught languages and English.

“Good morning, Aidan,” she said in Dutch Afrikaans and I answered the same. One of the other boys already seated sneered and whispered ‘suck up’ as I slid past him for an empty seat in the back near the cloakroom.

The classroom was medium sized and held thirty old-fashioned desks with attached chairs. Overhead fluorescent lights made the dim walls brighter and the green chalkboard glaringly shiny. A smaller dry-erase board hung to the side and had conjugated Latin verbs on it. Her desk was in front, covered with only a few papers and a laptop. Every desk had room for a monitor and terminal. I saw no evidence of papers, spiral notebooks or pens and pencils. This class was all digital.

I took my seat in the corner and leaned my back against the wall; cold paneling painted mustard yellow. It smelled like old cigarettes and mud.

“Good morning, class,” she said. “I know you’ve all studied for your test today so let’s sit and go to today’s lesson and review.”

She opened her laptop and everyone did the same. I flipped mine open and stared at the blue screen, perplexed. It asked for a password and user name and my mind drew a blank. She must have seen my face, and asked me what was wrong.

“I forgot this,” I muttered. She came around and studied my screen.

“Your user name is aidanargent,” she told me. “I have your password in my files.”

Her fingers performed some ritual and in five minutes, she told me. I pretended to remember it and the thing came to life and brought me into an advanced lesson on Mandarin. My test was simply to translate it into another language, preferably one she

could read.

Mandarin was notoriously difficult and flowery; it took me nearly an hour to make the correct translation, mostly because of all the errors in the original. For extra credit, she gave me an actual paper with a cryptogram on it and asked me if I could break it. I studied it and was perplexed. "Can I take it to my room and work on it later?"

"I don't expect any of you to solve it now, Aidan, or even today," she said with mysteriously. "Everyone has a puzzle to figure out for extra credit. I expect some kind of result by next Friday. I will tell you this, one is unsolvable and the others are guaranteed to have a solution but only if you're given the key. I do not have the key. However, it is a language and is in English. Those of you who are done with your tests may leave and go to your next class or the study period in the Library."

Half of the class departed, she spoke to me in a dialect of the Bantu of Ethiopia and told me not to go out the door I'd come in by but to leave through the cloakroom.

I nodded and slipped into the small closet and found a door that opened into a maintenance hallway and housed linen carts, mops, brooms and the like leading to a freight lift. I stepped in, closed the inner barred grate and then the outer steel hatch, pushed the button for the top floor and the thing creaked slowly to a rise giving me a narrow view of different floors as I ascended.

The door opened on what was the attic, little cubbyholes and rooms tucked into strange shapes and ells, a warren of passageways. My feet knew the way better than my memory. I found myself in a small room tucked into a dormer with a window that merged onto the roof.

The room was big enough for a bed, dresser, and chair. A small lamp stood on the top next to folded jeans. No pictures on the walls, no photos, no identification or personal items of any kind to make its ownership yet I knew I lived there.

There was no heat up here and the only light was a 40-watt bulb. I punched the mattress, hard with a thick feather comforter so I knew well how cold it must be. I opened the drawers and found only a few pair of pants, underwear---plain white briefs, socks worn thin, t-shirts, and a thin, leather belt. A beautiful emerald covered cross in gold and on a gold chain.

I remembered my mum had given it to me. Raised my shirt and fingered the scars on my chest and belly, remembered falling from the roof onto the fence spikes and dying.

I sat on the bed, the cryptogram forgotten. I mourned Cammy and Tom, wondered how she fared now that he was gone, I wondered how a further sixteen years had treated my mother and father, wondered what had happened to the 10,000 Tom had invested for me, who was paying for my schooling and how.

I knew I had no other classes that day; the rest of the afternoon was mine. I sat at the open window and looked out on the skyline of trees and distant buildings, the steeples of churches and smokestacks. A fairish sized city lay some twenty kilometers away and the

glow it made as night descended could be seen from my perch.

I was just about to close the panes when I spotted the string nailed to the sill and pulled it up.

## Chapter 26

What I pulled up was a nylon backpack and it unzipped easily considering it had been outside in the weather long enough to bleach the black to a dingy gray. The inside held Ziploc plastic bag and inside that were papers and a spare wad of cash. Euros, about forty of them, in denominations of one, ten, and twenty. Some four hundred in all.

I found notes and letters from the Head Master to imaginary parents advising them of my progress and gentle reminders of my school fees, that meals were not included and an additional 500 per term, suggesting if they (my parents) were in financial straits, they could apply for a scholarship. Next terms fees were 3379 or 2995E with a 10% reduction if paid in cash. Due by January 31st.

No bankbook, no bank account numbers, and I couldn't remember wither the name of the bank or the account number of the one Tom had set up for me.

No cell phone, no ID other than a card from school with my name and photo. Two phone exchanges. I recognized the one as being Cornwall, knew instinctively it was the farms. Wondered if Mr. P, Sally, or Mrs. C were still alive. Wanted desperately to see my mother and father, hear their voices before it was too late.

Last was a Euro pass giving me another two months of unlimited travel on the trains and across the Chunnel. I had to research that to find out what it was.

I'd seen it mentioned in the news on the home page and clicked on the blurb; been utterly fascinated by the idea and completion of a tunnel under the Channel.

That was all that was in the bag. No notes to myself, nothing to tell me what to do or to watch for. But then, my other selves, lives had never left me so much as one scribbled word, the only thing that seemed to come with me was the emerald cross.

I picked it up and put it around my neck and the cold metal hated up against my chest.

Waiting on my bed until night darkened the sky and the rooftops; I left the cubby room and found a dormer not far down the narrow hall. In it were stored old trunks from students long past. Most of the dates on them were from the forties and fifties. Here, the windows were the size of the dormer and opened onto a flat roof. I had used it before or someone had. Old footprints marked a path on the soot of the slates and showed my slide marks where the footing was slick. I stepped out and climbed.

This place was huge, roofs, eaves, and hip joints in many directions providing a climbing challenge not because of vertical technicalities but for the sheer number of interruptions in front of your feet. You had to watch or you'd trip over some vent, chimney, and dormer, sky light, ridge, or pipe. There were even left over TV antennas and microwave tower dishes. I felt like I was traveling across an alien landscape. I found, also, a few of

my favorite's perches. From the cleared patches on the slate, it was quite evident I spent a lot of time up here doing whatever it was that captivated me. I did find a bag with a small notebook inside and that was tucked into a plastic lined sack. It started only a few months ago, and the writer's tone was hesitant and unsure.

I woke up in this bed. I don't know anything but my name. Aidan.

I'm so lonely. I know something bad happened. All these faces around me. They said my parents sent me here to recover from a fever. I nearly died. I know I've died before. I remember dying. It hurts so bad but only for a little while.

There are boys here. All boys. Some of them watch me when I'm not looking. I know what those looks mean; I've seen them before, too. Why do people look at my face and think these crazy thoughts, wants? I've got two eyes, a nose, mouth and hair just like everyone else.

That big rugby player, his name is Chelmsley, he's the worst. He tried to corner me in the gym. I climbed the wall to the rafters and sat there until he got tired of taunting me. He tried to climb but he couldn't get more than halfway up the rope, nowhere near the struts on the roof, even with the other boys egging him on.

There's a dark kid here. I think he's a Saudi Arab Prince. I heard that he's Chelmsley's latest pet. I hear him crying in the cloakroom at night.

Last boy he got went to the Head Master and told. He was mysteriously injured after the bleachers fell on him. Fractured skull. Three other lads were hurt, too. Bad enough to go to Hospital. The one who told was brain damaged. No one said whom or could point a finger and prove it.

Head Master called me in. Asked me in a roundabout way of family and family matters. Took me a bit to figure out he was inquiring about money. Told him I left that up to the trustees. Whoever they are. Said my next term fees were due in four months. Wouldn't throw me out or anything but they really needed to speak with my parents or trustees.

Pleaded ignorance and illness. Really, I don't remember much.

Only place I feel safe is up high. On the roof.

Found a backpack today. In it, a bank book and account. Was close to 15,000 in it.

Now I know where the money for this place comes from. Remember Tom Watson, too.

My passport's in the bag. I'll hide it somewhere safe. In case, I need to travel.

Another run in with Chelmsley and his cohort, Glenellen. He scares me. His eyes are dead pools. I see the devil's mark in him. Cornered me. Only got away because Mr. Compton-Baird came around the corner. They are scared of him. He moves like a ghost.

Took my rail pass and went into the city. Found me a place to live, a hide out. Old abandoned movie set. Director's office still has running water, furniture, private cloakroom.

I found a hole through the chain link and explored the lot. No one hangs about, nor any guards patrolling. Been empty for years---like Pinewood this place went bankrupt.

Will write more. Feel a fever coming on. I hope I remember this.

That must have been when I woke up. I patted the rail pass in my pocket and decided I would go searching for my other bolthole this weekend.

## Chapter 27

I rode down on the tubes. Even those had changed immensely in 16 years. These were electric and ran on silent rails, the air was clearer than I remembered and that blue-gray haze that always hung over the city was gone. I wondered if London's famous pea-soup fog was still coming in. It was warmer than I remembered, too.

People seemed the same. Dressed in jeans and t-shirts, wearing expensive coats, watches and carrying cell phones and devices Khalid had told me were called iPads. I wanted one but they cost hundreds of Euros. No one used pounds anymore.

I had 10E in my pocket. I was afraid to risk anymore of my meager funds than that.

I took the station nearest to Tom's flat and got out a goodly distance from his gated avenue. No one bothered me as I trudged up the side lanes marked for bikes. The trees were taller and shaded more of the lane, sixteen years had made quite a difference in their appearance.

It took me an hour to reach the guardhouse and I didn't know the man sitting there reading a dog-eared book; he seemed annoyed when I asked if Mrs. Watson still lived there.

"Who?"

"Tom Watson's wife? Camilla Mowbry Watson?"

He stared at me. "The drug lord got murdered at the Airport? She goes by Cammy Mowbry now. Coppers hounded her for years so she changed it."

"Does she still live here?"

"Nope. Moved about five years ago," he went back to his book.

"Where to?"

"Dunno. Somewhere in London. I look like the 'effing post office? Who are you anyway?"

"Nobody," I turned and retreated the way I'd come, my shoulders slumping in defeat.

The rest of the afternoon, wandered the streets until I found the abandoned lot that had been a movie stage. Covering at least five acres, there were hundreds of buildings all

tucked behind a seven-meter chain link fence. I knew exactly where the hole was in it and found my way to the Quonset hut that was the Director's domain. Forty feet long, the rear quarter had been converted into a studio office with a shower, sauna, and small kitchenette. There was no electricity but the water ran. Cold.

I had a sleeping bag on the floor, Coleman lanterns, and an AGA fueled cook stove. Several extra AGA cans were stacked to the side for use in cooking and heating. Two heavy-duty coolers held cans, drinks, and perishables. Garbage was stacked neatly in rubbish bins lined in plastics.

I searched the cabinets, the closets and under the thin ground mattress. I found nothing. I wasn't secure enough to have left anything in this place as I had at the boy's school.

There were old movie posters on the walls, the last one I recognized was the one Tom, and Cammy had taken me to on my birthday. I sighed. I was still only about ten years old in my mind although my body said otherwise.

Towards teatime, I was ravenously hungry and slipped out by a very different route. This time, I went overhead, climbing the rooftops and dancing lightly across the ridge caps and flat roofs of warehouses until I spotted lights and open signs on a take-out place. I slid easily down the drainpipe to the sidewalk and read the posted menu. It was a MacDonalds, imported from America and the best thing about it were the prices. I could eat there for a week on what would have been one fish and chips meal.

I walked in and studied the overhead menu. The pimply faced teenager behind the counter asked, "What'll it be, mate?" He stared at my face as if he'd never seen a human before.

"Those real?"

"What?" I was puzzled.

"Your eyes. They real or contacts?"

"You mean the color?"

"Yeah, dude. Not colored contact lenses?"

"They're mine."

"Cool. What'd you want?"

"Mac double. Fries. Large coke. Apple pie."

He named a ridiculously low price and I handed over a 10 , received change and my meal on a tray. He told me to have a nice day and come back in a bored tone. I went to a corner table and ate the whole meal. It was almost tasteless except for the fries; they were crisp, hot, and salty. I nearly went back for more.

## Chapter 28

After my meal, I wandered the streets, saw closed circuit TVs on every street corner, traffic pole and building. They had to have an entire police constabulary just watching them. What I didn't find was a phone kiosk and when I asked, I received looks of such profound disbelief you'd have thought I'd asked for someone's liver or first born.

Finally, I walked into a small antique and consignment shop and asked if I could see their directory. I chose that one because of the Cornish Lion in the window. The lady behind the counter was Irish and her accent made me homesick. I muttered something in Gaelic and her eyebrows rose. She nattered away asking my name, my town and my family's lineage and ran on for five minutes before she petered out self-consciously.

"Excuse me," she laughed somewhat chagrined. "I rarely encounter another Irish who speaks Gaelic and I do run on."

"I'm Cornish, actually. I speak both Gaelic and Welsh. My name is Aidan Argent."

"Cornish. I would never have guessed. Are you related to the Argents of Cryllwythe Farms? Oh, but then, I suppose not. Lord Bowden's son died forty-two years ago. Never had another child." I didn't say anything. "What can I do for you, young Aidan?"

"I would like to borrow your directory. I'm looking for a friend. Camilla Mowbry. She used to live in Mayfair. Moved to London proper, I believe."

"I can look it up in the White Pages online."

"You can do that?"

"Of course I can. Where have you been that you don't know that?"

I shrugged. You can't explain to just anyone you've been dead for thirty out of forty some odd years on and off.

"What's her name?"

"Camilla Mowbry, used to be Watson," I answered and she brushed her cherry brown hair behind her ears and turned the monitor around so I could watch.

She smelled pretty, like flowers and sunshine. Her eyes were sky blue and made up to a smoky brown with thick lashes, her lips peachy and plump, shiny as if they were wet. I watched her concentrated rather than watch the computer.

"You're staring," she said, smiling. I swallowed, felt a stirring in my pants and my ears reddened.

She looked up, her eyes serious and they had taken on a shine I'd seen before. Her voice thickened. "How old are you, Aidan?"

"Sixteen," my voice cracked. She took my hand and placed it on her breast. I felt her

nipple harden instantly, stood there, and didn't know what to do.

She pulled me close, tilted my head, and kissed me, her tongue thrusting into my mouth. My dick hardened in my underwear, I shifted, suddenly uncomfortable. My belly quivered as she slipped her hand down in and softly encircled me. Her eyes widened. "Oh my," she breathed into me and waited. I stood there, indecisive. She pushed back. "Aidan?"

"I---I...never...don't," I stuttered, hands in front of my suddenly bulging jeans.

"You've never done it, Aidan?" she asked kindly. I nodded, red-faced. She smiled. Went to the shop door, locked it, and pulled the closed sign. Said, "Miss Cammy Watson can wait another day, Aidan. It's my turn and my treat."

She took me upstairs to her flat and taught me what those boys only dreamed about.

In the morning, she gave me a shower, a good meal, fresh clothes and a farewell kiss. Two pieces of paper with phone numbers. I asked if one was hers and she shook her head fondly. "Not a good idea, Aidan. In the eyes of the law, you're a child even if your eyes say different. Your beautiful eyes have seen more life and death than any one adult's lifetime. I've enjoyed teaching you. I'm proud to be your first but don't come back. I'm afraid I'd lack the fortitude to send you away the second time. You could become addictive.'

She told me her name was Cybele and I told her the Irish blessing in Gaelic before I left with Cammy's address and phone number in my sweaty palm.

## Chapter 29

Cammy's address was 25 Posthwaite Terrace, SE6, London. I asked directions and a kind gentleman, retired from the army actually drew me a map. He'd served in NATO forces and been invalided out, spoke Arabic and Farsi he'd picked up on his billet. He enjoyed chatting with me. Asked me how I'd learned and didn't believe me when I said just by listening. Anyway, I found a quick way via the underground and electric trolleys to a new section along the Thames where skyscrapers had pushed out old mills and warehouses.

She had a penthouse suite on the 25th floor. The uniformed doorman wouldn't let me in and insisted I give my name. I hesitated and said slowly, "Aidan. Aidan Watson."

He called up and spoke into his phone, waited. Seemed surprised and said, "Wait in the lobby. She'll be down."

He pushed a button, buzzed and the door opened to allow me entry into a glassed hallway and thence to a large lobby dominated by lush plants, a sparkling fountain and soaring windows to a skylight stories over my head. What a wonderful place to climb. I admired the view and missed the sight of an exterior lift come billeting down.

An older woman ran towards me, dressed in tailored jeans and fisherman's Aran. She



stopped yards from me and her eyes devoured me. Red hair faded to a pale rose, eyes as bright green but there were wrinkles, her smile as blinding as ever. She was crying. "Oh my God! Aidan!" she hesitated and I rushed forward into her arms and squeezed her gently.

"I'm sorry, Cammy," I whispered. "I would have saved him if I could."

"You did save him, baby. You kept us all from being bombed into pieces. You died with a bullet in your back to save us. Two hundred people lived because of what you did."

"I had to come find you. See how you were," I explained.

"Can you come up? No one's waiting for you? Where are you living? You look thin, worn down." she tugged me to the lift and brought me to her flat. The view from her windows was awesome, looking out over the Thames and the top of the Park. I saw the Houses of Parliament, Big Ben, and the Palace; saw the Royal Flag that denoted the Queen was in residence.

"Sixteen years, Aidan," she marveled. "You're sixteen, now? You've matured into a remarkably handsome young lad. The chicks will be all over you."

I grinned and she smiled gleefully. "Dare I remind you to be careful, dear boy?"

"Cammy, I--" I blinked and looked down at my feet. We were in the kitchen, a room all in blonde wood and stainless steel with all the mod conveniences. She still liked to cook.

"Let me make you something to eat," she suggested.

"Sorry. I ate at MacDonalds."

"Junk food," she returned scathingly.

"Really, Cam. Don't fuss." I hesitated and asked in a rush, "Cammy, where's he buried?"

"Tom? He wanted to be cremated. I had his ashes dumped in Cornwall, as he wanted, Aidan. Near your folks place."

"I want to go home, Cammy."

"Why don't you?" she asked sensibly.

"I tried. Something stopped me; I couldn't breathe, nor make myself go on. Anyway, I live in Somerset now. At an exclusive boy's prep school." My face reddened. I thought that she would think I'd come here for money if I told her my circumstances.

"So you're doing well, then?"

"Just great," I gushed.

"Sure you are. Your hair needs cutting. Your nails are dirty and the cuticles torn. You have on jeans that haven't been washed in ages, your collar is dingy and sweat stained, your cuffs are fringed. Your trainers have holes in them. Your socks don't match. Now, while I realized that teenage lads don't care about their appearance or state of cleanliness,

I do know you, Aidan, and you would never have come to me like this if you had better. Plus, you're thin; your eyes are hollow and flat.

"Are you out of money?"

I sat there, didn't know what to say. Finally, I spoke, "Cammy, I didn't come here to beg for money," I was insulted.

"I know that," she said. "Just as I know you're not doing drugs. Are you living alone, still?"

"No," I thought of all those boys.

"No?"

"Three hundred other chaps share the place with me. Can't call that alone."

"Juvie?"

"No. Cammy!" I was affronted, paused, thought of my next plan and reddened. If I was caught, I would wind up in worse than Juvie. In Jail.

"I came to see how you were faring. It's Holiday at school, I found my rail pass and thought I'd look you up."

"Who did you save this time?"

"Girl. Russian. Sent her to America."

"Anastasia?" Her eyes grew to the size of moons. "How did you die?"

I shuddered. "Painfully."

She lifted my shirt and her hand traced the dimples and scars across my belly that were more like blemishes than actually scars save for the twin matching pair where I had fallen on the fence spikes. Her hand was warm, the nails a bright orange cut square and sent tingles down to my groin.

"You're buff," she said surprised. "Six-pack, too. Do you work out?"

I laughed and her fingers followed the movement of my muscles. My belly quivered. I looked everywhere but at her face. Thought of Tom, how she was like a mother but my newly awakened hunger had no reasoning.

I let her decide. She moved her hand to my chin and raised it. Her eyes were brilliant. "Your body is sixteen, Aidan and ready. Your memories much younger. Your soul is older than I am. I'm old enough to be your mother."

"I don't feel like your son," I whispered. "I came because I need a friend, Cammy. Someone who doesn't want to hurt me, use me or fuck me. Just love me."

She wrapped her arms around me and held me while I cried, waited for me to stop, took me to bed, and stayed with me the rest of the night.

## Chapter 30

Breakfast was a feast. The smell of Earl Grey, rashers of bacon, muffins, coffee and cinnamon woke me. I rolled over in a strange bed and groaned. I was stiff, smelled myself, and threw the covers off to go in search of the restroom.

It had a walk in shower in one corner with glass doors. I couldn't find any knobs to turn on the water and the holes in the wall and ceiling puzzled me.

Cammy knocked and came in. I was still in my clothes, in the act of peeing in the toilet. I tucked myself back in self-consciously.

"How'd you turn the blasted water on?" I asked and the water shot out, hitting the sides of the glass in pulsating jets splashing through the open door.

"Water off!" I shouted and it stopped. I grinned. This was way cool. "Water on!" I played with it for minutes. "What else can it do?"

"Music on. Sirius Classical," she enunciated and the strains of Mozart filled the area. I thought I was in a Symphony Hall.

"Massage, shower, pulsating, heavy," she ticked off her fingers. "Hot, warm, cold. Lights, dim."

"Everything but bubbles," I said happily.

"Big enough for two," she grinned back. I pushed her gently out the door and closed it. Stripped and took a long soak to the strains of Pavane for a Dead Princess and bagpipes. So, I'm a closet Scotophil.

I found a stack of clothes on the sink counter. Fresh slacks in khaki, long sleeved dress shirt, a thin leather belt, briefs still in the cellophane from Masons, socks and lace up shoes. A watch and a smart phone, an iPhone. How she had managed to do all that in the space of time she had amazed me.

I came out of the bath feeling like a kid playing dress up yet I felt good, smelled good, and looked at least my age.

I followed the smells to the kitchen and sat down to an English breakfast. In my opinion, the best meal of the day. Ate my way through it with single-minded determination and no conversation on my part. She let me eat without badgering me.

"Finished? Good. Now tell me all. Where are you living and how?"

"Somerset. Exclusive Boys Prep school. Seems I used Tom's money to set up a trust that funds my stay there."

"But not for meals and clothes."

"Guess not."

“How much is left?”

“Three hundred sixty Euros.”

“After you...died, the account was left untouched. Tom watched it until he was killed. It just kept growing. Until the crash. Three quarters of it was wiped out. I would have replaced it but my own income took a hit, too. It’s just now recovering. This place was paid for and I don’t pay for anything but power and food. I sold all the jewelry and Tom’s flat. It just covered my expenses the last ten years.”

“Cammy, do you need money?”

“No, Aidan. I’m not rich but I get by. I write short stories for travel agencies and magazines. Make a decent dole that way. Pays for the butter.”

I looked at my new clothes. “Don’t worry. I’m a bargain shopper. I spent what I could afford. What are your term fees?”

“3000 .”

“Hmmn. Due in January, I assume,” she mused. “Will you be there that long?”

“I don’t know. I never know. I didn’t even know when I woke this time. I was there before I knew I was there. Some of the boys told me I’d been there for months before I remembered anything. I just woke up in bed.”

“That’s new, different. You know, I researched you on the internet. There are millions of kids lost, missing, but none in the circumstances you’ve lived through. You have made it to the web. Someone took an interest in old murder cases and somehow connected the Moor Murder victim to the bombing victim. Because of your beautiful amethyst eyes. Interviewed that DI, Van Gilder. He still remembers you. He’s retired. I see him sometimes.”

“See him how?”

“Dates.”

“Cammy! He’s a copper!”

“We call them fuzz, pigs or cops, now, Aidan. Bobbies, sometimes. He retired as a Supervisor. Worked at New Scotland Yard. They have something called the Cold Case Squad. He headed it.”

“It should have ended when I died.”

“Peter is tenacious. He wants to meet you.”

“You told him about me?” I was aghast.

“I told him I was thinking about you one day and he asked me what I knew about you. You had died, Aidan, been dead for five years. I didn’t think it could hurt anything. It got him curious. He mentioned you only a few weeks ago. When you showed up, I called

him. I was so excited, I'm sorry."

"No one knows about me, Cammy. What do you think they would do to me if they did?"

"I don't know but I trust him."

"When's he coming?" I was resigned.

"This afternoon. I'd like to take you to town, pick up a few things for you."

"I'm fine, Cammy. I have what I need. I'd better get back to school."

"You're on Holiday. Break's a week long, isn't it?"

"Classes start next Monday. I need to do a few things before then."

"What?"

I looked away, didn't want to tell her I was planning a robbery to replenish my coffers and fund my term fees before they were due. I needed to be gone before the Inspector turned up.

Cammy was disappointed but let me go. Gave me a kiss and made me promise to keep in touch. I wouldn't tell her the name of the school but she knew the area and wouldn't find it too hard to look it up.

I left around mid afternoon, right before tea.

## Chapter 31

Perched on the window ledge of an eight-story brownstone, I sat quietly enjoying the view. Behind me were the Park and the Regent's Hotel. At first, I thought about ripping off tourists staying there but that bothered me. Thousands of miles from home and to lose all your cash in a strange place would be terrifying. Who knew if they could afford it?

From the hotel's rooftop, I had surveyed the skyline, seen the brownstone, one of several just across the Park, and occupied by a variety of businesses from a Chinese take out on the east corner to a whole floor for an import/export firm from China.

The one I was interested in was on the top floor; I'd watched men in suits, casual attire, gangsta bangers, and Goth wear go in, out in a curious stream that showed a deliberate lack of rhythm yet a monotonous frequency. All carrying backpacks, bags, or manila envelopes. When police drove by, their movements ceased.

My curiosity was tweaked and I'd climbed to the roof off another building careful to avoid the CCTVs on the street corners.

I spotted an open window, shimmied in. I was over 6'2" now, but thin, whippy. Cammy had asked me if I worked out and I'd laughed. My workouts consisted of climbing everything I could put my hands on. Lifting your own body weight by your hands alone tended to shape you and keep you that way. As does running along rooftops.

My shoulders had filled out, my arms and legs corded with muscles but you wouldn't know it unless you saw me naked or grabbed me. I let no one do either.

I pulled at the crotch of my jeans. They bound me in climbing and my trainers had a tendency to slip on slate roofs, especially in areas that burned coal and coated the roofs with soot.

Once I had money, I would treat myself to some climbing gear. Rope, leggings, decent slippers. I hoped this place would provide the blunt to do so.

Inside, I moved through a warren of cubby hole offices with computer terminals all flickering and automatic programs running that were taking orders for cheap Chinese made trinkets---the stuff that used to say 'made in Japan.' toys, balls, hats, gadgets, all sold through catalog mail order and flea markets. One floor was a warehouse, stocked with boxes and the few I opened showed the cheap trash that sold for gag gifts and quick turnaround. Frogs that held wax chunks that melted with a light bulb, for God's sake! I shook my head and replaced the lid.

The last floor was a series of large offices with all the latest mod conveniences behind serious locks and an alarm system. Since I was already inside, they didn't register.

The biggest office had a huge flat screen TV on the wall, leather couches, recliners with end tables, a wet bar, refrigerator stocked with high end stouts, ales, Cristal Champagne, and bottled Perrier. Truffles. I popped a few into my mouth and nearly died from delight as the rich chocolate melted on my tongue. Scarfed up more, thought about taking 'em all but they'd just melt in my pockets.

There was a funny looking art sculpture on the wall, flat and looked like a cross between hubcaps and pot lids. I moved it and there was a safe behind, recessed into the wall. A Martini/Weiss.

I can pick locks. I'd started as a kid playing in the cellars of my home in Cornwall, opening the big iron ones on the cell doors. Progressing to the padlocks and door locks on the barns and house. Even cars and trucks didn't deter me. I had never tried a safe before and the dial on this one was not a numbered turn but a digital touch pad. Nine numbers, a million possibilities, more if the combination was more than four numbers.

I pushed 0-0-0-0 and to my utter surprise and satisfaction, the thing opened silently. Inside were stacks of Euros and a ledger. Some of the names I recognized, politicians and media darlings. Ticked by each name was a sum and a date. Contributions. Bribes. Sale of , . I was looking at someone's blackmail and pay off ledger. There was only about 5000 in the stack and the last pay off date and amount equaled that. I pocketed the cash, stuffing it into my jacket and inside my shirt. It wasn't much, no thicker than a deck of playing cards. Nothing else was in the safe and nothing else tempted me. Like I said before, cash didn't ask for provenances or IDs.

I shut the safe, wiped off my fingerprints and went back over everything I might have touched and did the same.

Being dead, no one had kept my prints and I wasn't in any database of Criminal Files. I preferred to keep it that way.

I exited the building the same way I'd climbed in. Spent an hour in an all night coffee house leaving in the morning on the first train back to school.

No one got off at the station; the Holiday wasn't over for another day and it would be crowded with returning students. Some would come by rail, most would be driven back by their families or trustees or bodyguards. Arriving in limos, Mercedes or Range Rovers, the Head Master would be standing at the Grand Entrance to escort the sons of the very wealthy executives; imported Royalty and rock stars in, the teachers would fawn over English peers and the rest.

I would sneak down later for tea.

## Chapter 32

Mr. Compton-Baird was going on about wormholes and time travel and how it was theoretically possible to do so, that the only glitch in it was how to prevent time anomalies. I'd read many books on the subject, like going back and shooting Hitler before he came into power. It was assumed that you could change history but those who won and didn't necessarily tell the real story wrote history. I'd found my own loopholes in the twists I'd performed.

His pale eyes remained on me while we engaged in a heated discussion. But then, I had inside knowledge of the phenomenon. He thought it was impossible even if the theorists said it could be done. He said time was immutable.

"Time is a river," I said. "My eyes have seen it."

"You're a strange young man, Aidan," he answered finally. He went on to tell us about the physics of how light traveled through space time, how the weight of a black hole bent space and time around it and then gave us assignments to read Steven Hawkins, The Theory of Everything. I'd already read it, devoured it in only an hour. Wanted to see him, talk to him. Thought about going down to Cambridge and doing just that.

On the last bell, we all jumped up and rushed for the door to meet the crowd coming from English Lit and heads above the rest, I spotted Chelmsley and his pal, Glenellen. Let someone close by my elbow and saw Khalid.

"Have a good Holiday?" he asked quietly. He wore his neat uniform, blue slacks, starched Oxford, and the school jacket. Mine was second hand, a bit tight and shop-worn.

"Don't make trouble, Aid," he continued. "He's pissed. Broke Daddy's expensive new car, been grounded for two months and he's looking for trouble."

"He's not taking it out on either of us," I grumbled.

Khalid studied me. "Something's different about you, Aid." his eyes widened and he

smiled. "You got laid!" I blushed, confirming his guess. "Tell me?" he begged.

"No. It's private." Chelmsley passed us by with a stare that promised 'later.' I sighed, hoisted my pack over one shoulder, and turned for the dining hall. I actually had enough to splurge on three meals a day for the next term.

Some of the teachers were in line for tea and biscuits. Breakfast was one meal you could always count on to be hot, filling and tasty. It ran from scones to kippers with everything in between. I loaded my tray and carried it over to a table near the window, eating with my back protected and keeping an eye open for attacks. Khalid sat next to me, picking at his tortillas and dates.

"Where did you go on Holiday?"

"London. Saw Big Ben and Parliament. Hyde Park. You?"

"Home to Dubai. Said hello to most of the family."

"That must have taken forever," I commented. He had like, forty brothers and sisters.

"Went swimming, deep sea fishing."

"I noticed your tan," I said and he choked on his tea, laughing.

"What's her name?"

I eyeballed him. "Not saying their names."

"Names? You dog. Is it as wonderful as it seems?" he asked wistfully.

"Khalid, it's the best thing ever happened to me," I smiled remembering the feel of her, the softness of her skin, how her hair swept across my face and tickled me, how the lovely flush colored her whole body and how she moaned into my mouth.

She told me I was gentle and sensitive; would go a long way to treat a lady with respect and not like a tart. Cammy had said other lovely things.

"Aidan, that's a very telling smile on your face," he seemed sad all of a sudden. I wondered if his own experience with Chelmsley had not proven satisfactory.

Asked delicately, "You ever...you know, in the rest room? At home?"

"Jerked off? Yeah, haven't you?"

I mumbled something, embarrassed.

"Chelmsley does it all the time. He'll fuck a melon if it has a hole."

"I'm afraid Chelmsley and Glenellen are going to find their lives seriously compromised," I said and although he badgered me, I wouldn't say anymore, just smiled.



### Chapter 33

The iPhone Cammy had given me came with a charger and I'd taken it up to my lair in the attics and plugged it in. Played with it and surfed the net, found a listing for two old chums from ten years back.

Called and was put off by secretaries with posh accents and smarmy mouths. I left a message with my name and cell number. They called me hours later and I answered, the listing said unknown/blocked.

"Hullo?"

"Who is this?" the rough accented voice snarled.

"Harry, who else would call you?" I returned. "Or is it Schnee?"

"I go by Schneider now, young Aidan," he said suddenly lighter. "How old are you now?"

"Sixteen."

"Where are you?"

"Somerset. School for the gifted. I'm on a scholarship."

"And what can I do for you?" He sounded wary.

"Are you still in the same business, Schnee? I mean, Mr. Schneider?"

"Aidan!" He was shocked. "You're not doing drugs?"

"No," I surprised he thought so. "No, I want the other thing."

There was a pregnant pause. "Like our late friend in the country?"

"The one pushing up daisies."

"No. I don't do that kind of thing anymore. I'm into stock brokering. You need something taken care of?"

"Two budding sexual predators."

"They start young, don't they, Aidan? I can pass the word on," he sounded sad.

"How's Harry?"

"Went to Africa after Tom was killed. Hear from him every few months. He works Security in Capetown, has his own firm." He named a company I'd heard provided security for big name celebrities and rock stars. "Will you tell him I said hullo?"

"I will. You talk to Cammy?"

"I saw her last weekend," I answered. "She's looking well">

"And how are you doing, Aidan?" There was a wealth of unspoken curiosity in his question.

“Fine.”

“I’ll get back to you, soon. This number secure?”

“Cammy gave me the phone. I’m back only a few months, Schnee, Schneider.”

“You can call me Schnee, Aidan. Don’t worry; your problem will go away. Ta,” he hung up; I shut the phone off and went contentedly to sleep.

Screams woke me. Long, wailing sobs of terror that I heard all the way up into my attic garret. I rolled over away from the wall, groped for my shirt and pants, pulled them on and listened. Heard my name called and went searching.

On the main hallway through the east attics, I found Khalid on his hands and knees, bloody and beaten.

“Holy crap! What happened I squatted near him and sat him down so I could check him over. His face was swollen almost unrecognizable, his eyes closed into slits. Three of his fingers on his right hand bent backwards; his shins had been deliberately scraped down the bone so they looked like road rash. There was blood on his underwear and I could smell crap.

“Khalid, what happened? Did Chelmsley do this?”

“Aidan, hide,” he whispered. “He’s coming for you. He heard it was you that pissed his bed. I told him I wasn’t his flunky, his pimp anymore.”

“Did he fuck you, Khalid?”

“He watched while his team took turns,” he said faintly. “I feel like I’m bleeding inside.”

“Can you stand up?” I put my hands under his armpits, helped him to his feet and we hobbled slowly down the main hallway passing medieval armor stacked in corners along with weapons of every kind.

“Where are we going?” he whispered.

“To the freight lift. I’m taking you to casualty. You need medical attention, Khalid. You’re bleeding.”

“He’s waiting for you.”

“I hope he finds me,” I snarled and snagged a blade as we went by.

It took me twenty minutes to walk him the short distance to the lift. Khalid collapsed into a puddle as I closed the gates and pushed the button for the ground floor and the kitchens. I knew a way out that Chelmsley and his cohorts would not.

I hoisted his pale form over my shoulder and carried him to the door where deliveries were brought in and went in search of Mr. C-B. He lived on the school grounds and I knew he would help.

The moon was out and the pathway through the yew hedge. I slipped between the lane and across the lawn towards the cottages and ran into someone's arm. Spun me around and smashed the backs of my knees so that I fell face first into the grass. Another body landed on my back and pressed me into the dirt. I bucked and cursed, struggling, their hands and weight pinning me. I could barely breathe.

"Get off me!"

"Not bloody likely, you cunt," his voice said in my ear. He sat back, one hand on my neck and the other groped for the waistband of my jeans.

I yelled. Shoved to get my hands out from under me. Air hit my ass as he tugged my pants down, pulled my cheeks apart.

"Ellie," he grunted and another boy sat on my head, pushing my face into the grass. I started to suffocate, felt him dig between my legs.

"Holy Christ," he said. "His dick is bigger than mine. His bollocks, too. You bring any petroleum jelly?" His voice faded as blackness filled my head. I heard an intense buzzing. I prayed to die before he stuck his dick in me.

Air rushed into my lungs and the weight came off, hands hoisted me to my feet. I heard the sounds 'chunk', 'thump', a choked off scream and someone was holding me as I puked. I held my pants up.

"You okay, Aidan?" I stared into Mr. Compton-Baird's concerned eyes and that of a dark man dressed in midnight blue. His hair was black, eyes dark brown, his skin a matte black. His teeth were brilliant white in the dark. He wore gloves and I smelled the odor of coppery blood, saw great gouts of it on the grass, two dark bundles next to the edge.

"Careful," the black man said. "He bruised your larynx."

"Are they dead?" I stared. No movement.

"I bloody well hope so," he returned. "Just returning a favor for a friend, mate. I'll take this garbage away when I trot off. Ciao."

He tucked one of each under his arm and disappeared.

"Christ," I whispered, holding my sore throat. "Khalid!" I went on to explain and Mr. C-B called 999. All hell broke loose and both of us wound up going to casualty.

## **Chapter 34**

I opened my eyes after a night fraught with nightmares of strange faces, needles, X-rays and the stink of a hospital.

Khalid and I had both screamed bloody murder when they tried to separate us. Mr. C-B sat with us all night and he'd told me he'd called Khalid's dad.

I looked over at my right and saw another bed in the semi-private room of a private hospital and clearly not one of national health. Khalid was lying quietly on his side

watching me with a liter of blood hanging from a pole. He looked pasty and his face was a mess. My eyes went to his hand and it was in a plaster cast of puke lime green.

“Hey,” I rasped my throat hoarse. “How are you?”

“Alive. Thanks to you.” His eyes were filled with hero worship.

“Not me, Khal.” I shook my head and wished I had not. My neck ached as if a rugby guard had sat on it. Which he had.

“A friend sent a... fixer.”

“He fixed those two good,” he whispered. “Mr. C-B told me what happened. You okay?”

“He didn’t bugger me,” I shuddered. “Christ, Khalid, there was blood, liters of it, everywhere. I think he cut their throats.”

“Mr. C-B said no one’s found their bodies.”

“They won’t.” I knew that Schnee would make sure of that. A nurse walked in, smiled at the sight of us, and helped me to sit up.

“How are you, Aidan? Prince Khalid?”

“Throat’s sore,” I whispered.

“Your larynx was bruised when your assailant sat on you. Your father is here, Prince Khalid. The DI from Somerset wishes to speak to both of you when he’s present.”

A man dressed in a dark Saville Row suit entered after knocking. He was dark skinned with light brown eyes, a neat goatee and I saw the butt of a large gun hanging under his armpit. Khalid looked surprised.

“Rashid.”

He came forward, kissed Khalid on both cheeks, and did the same to me. He smelled of sandalwood. “My eternal thanks, young man, for saving the life of my younger brother.”

I looked at the boy in the bed. “Your brother?”

“One of them,” he smiled, taking Khalid’s unbroken hand. “Rashid el Melek. Number Two.”

“Prince Rashid?”

“Only at home. Here, I am Rashid Melek, bodyguard. Security. Father will be here in ten minutes.”

On the dot, an entourage of Saudi nobles in suits filled our room bringing typical sickroom gifts of fruit, magazines, and fresh clothing for both of us.

I tried to get up and bow; my early training on royal etiquette kicking in but the older gentleman in the sharp suit and headdress pressed on my shoulders and bowed. To me. He was an older version of Rashid, with a devilish twinkle in his eyes and a dimpled

chin.

“My honor and eternal thanks to you, Aidan Argent,” he said in proper English with an Etonian accent.

I said in Arabic, “Your son is my friend, Sheikh. I only wish I could have prevented those sons of a diseased camel from hurting him at all.”

His eyebrows rose and he broke into a delighted babble of Arabic. “You speak my language! Who taught you? Your accent is like my own.”

“I speak many languages. It is my blessing.”

“French?” I nodded.

“Italian, Spanish, German, Dutch, Farsi, Turkish, Armenian, Arabic, Tuareg, Chinese, Hindu. I speak them all.”

“Allah be merciful! How?”

“Woke up one morning and was the Tower of Babel,” I shrugged.

“I’m taking Khalid home. Would you care to accompany him? He tells me you are alone until your parents come back from sabbatical. The Head Master told me he has attempted to contact them and cannot reach them.”

I swallowed. That could be a problem. They were in Cornwall with no idea I was alive.

“Inspector Novelette wishes to speak with you, Master Aidan. About your attackers. And the disappearance of the two boys, Jason Chelmsley and Peter Glenellen.”

“I know nothing about them,” I denied flatly. He didn’t press us but visited with both of us until the Matron shooed them along.

## Chapter 35

Khalid had been raped so many times and with such brutality, that his insides were torn and he’d needed emergency surgery and serious transfusions. His dad stayed at his bedside for the first three days and the nurses fawned over the royal Princes. The Detective Inspector came, asked questions under the Sheik’s steely gaze and it went no further.

Mr. Compton-Baird came to visit us and was admitted only after we vouched for him.

Khalid was fearful of every shadow and stranger. He begged me to come home with him and after an initial bout of indecisiveness, I agreed.

With whirlwind speed, the Sheik had us discharged, on his private jet and on the way to Dubai to his summer palace. In the mountains where it was sunny, cool, surrounded by armed and loyal Tuaregs, his whole family fussed and fawned over both of us. Even though I was totally excited about the flight and the trip, I slept through most of it like

Khalid. I suspect the doctor gave us something to keep us quiet. Khalid needed it; his injuries were more severe than mine were. All I had was a bruised larynx, whip lashed neck and contusions where Chelmsley had punched me. Khalid's spleen was torn, his nose, cheekbones broken, and four fingers fractured, two ribs and his insides torn to hell. The doctor told me he would have hemorrhaged to death if I hadn't gone for help.

The sheikh personally saw us to a wing of the white stone palace. The ceilings were high and light were everywhere. Bright and clean, like the air of mountains.

We slept in regular beds made up with the softest cotton sheets I'd ever felt and lazy fans stirred the air over us. There were silent people moving about, ready to fall on our every whim. It drove me nuts not to have a moment away from someone's attention.

The rooms were white and blue. Lots of blue. Deep dark cerulean, glazed tiles in aqua and navy. Every blue imaginable.

Tile work that rivaled great masters; of chunky little horses with spidery legs and ladies with big almond eyes in brilliant colors that made them seem like jewels.

There were no doors; just archways closed with intricate latticework that Khalid told me was all that separated prying eyes from the interior occupants.

"I thought you people lived in tents," I commented and he hit me.

"Maybe forty years ago. This is one of the most progressive Arabic sultanates running."

"So we don't get to visit a tent?"

He punched me and I yelped, rubbed my arm, and laughed. His smile grew and by now, I could almost tell he was smiling.

Chelmsley and his friends had damaged the nerves in his face amongst the breaks and swelling; his face was just returning to near normal. There were no mirrors in our wing.

"What's on the agenda for today?" I asked. Bored. Too much time, not enough to do.

"You don't have to stay with me, Aid," he said, sitting carefully on a stack of pillows. It still hurt him to put any weight on his bum. "You can go out. My father has a great stable, there's archery, hunting, hawking, swimming. Some great cliffs to climb or, you can watch the latest flicks in his theater. He has a bowling lane, too. Videos and games. Girls."

"Concubines from the harem?" I perked up.

He snorted. "I told you my dad is a progressive modern Arab. He doesn't keep a harem."

I raised both of my eyebrows. "Hullo? Number 22 I think you said?"

"Well, he sort of inherited them. Couldn't turn them out. They live with him in the other Palace and if they want to leave, he divorces them, sets them up financially. A lot of them were betrothed by his dad way back when he was born. Contracts. He honored them."

“So how many wives does he have?”

“Just one,” he said quietly. “My mother, Noori. The love of his life. Would you like to meet her?”

“Yes.”

The process of getting him ready to visit his mum relieved my boredom. Three men came in, helped him into a shower chair, and then into a room done entirely in blue tiles, even the floor. It felt like you were floating in the sky. Water came out of the walls in a gentle stream and he washed himself slowly and carefully. His body was lean, coffee colored where green fading black and blues were. Save for the stitch marks on his belly where they'd opened him up to repair his spleen. It almost matched one of mine.

The servants helped him, didn't see, to mind getting wet. One of them, a young teen said something and made him choke with laughter.

He said, “Aidan speaks Arabic and Tuareg. He asked, Aid, if you were hung like my dad's stud horse.”

I blushed and that set off another round of genuine laughter, which changed their solemn manner to camaraderie. I retreated in a dignified rush.

“Just wait!” he shouted. “It's your turn next!”

I ran for our rooms.

## Chapter 36

Clean, perfumed, dressed in cool cotton pants and shirts, I walked next to Khalid while he rode in splendor in a wheelchair pushed by a youngster he said was a cousin. We went down a series of hallways I said was a maze and he agreed. Said it was that way to the old sheikhs harem and designed that way to protect the women from casual encounters. Of course, if you'd been caught in those rooms, gelding was the least of your problems.

Guards with automatic weapons were everywhere. I learned that it was because these were the Sheikhs apartments.

I expected something out of the Arabian Nights; what I found was a typical English upper class study, living room, and office down to the top of the line computer and big screen plasma TV.

The Sheikh was seated on the couch in robes and he smiled as he saw my face. “I find it more comfortable in the mountains,” he explained. He rose and took my hands, bowed again. “My dear boys, Khalid, how are you? Your doctor said you are healing.”

“I'm okay, dad,” he said and kissed him on both cheeks. A beautiful woman walked in from the doorway in the rear and on her hurried steps, reached Khalid, and hugged him fiercely. She was dark haired with lush, exotic gray eyes, and porcelain skin. Almost as

tall as me, nearly six foot and in her early forties. She turned to me and regarded me openly, staring particularly at my eyes.

“Aidan. Thank you,” she said simply. “Khalid is my life and my joy.”

“He’s my friend,” I shrugged.

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“How old are you?” she persisted.

“I was born in 1956,” I murmured.

“Your eyes are so wise, compassionate and aged well beyond what your face states,” she nodded. “Rashid, this child is truly an old soul. He has been born and died many lifetimes. He is a treasure and we should honor him.”

She bowed with her hands together and kissed my forehead. Khalid watched with his mouth hanging open and I kicked him.

“Would you like something to eat and drink, boys?” she asked. “Please, sit. It is my pleasure to wait on you.”

I blushed. “My Lady, I should be waiting on you. You’re a...Queen.”

She laughed. “Just a minor Sheikhs wife. What would my two boys like to do?”

Khalid looked at me and raised an eyebrow. “Want to sight-see? We can go in the helicopter to the city.”

“I’ve always wanted to see the Bazaar,” I drooled. They laughed.

“More like Neiman Marcus and Saks,” he grinned. “This is the Sultanate of Dubai, not the back alleys of Marrakesh.”

“No camels? No houris with kohl and slanted eyes?” I teased. “No hashish pipes and eunuchs with big curved swords?”

“Only if you want them,” they promised me. “Whatever you want is yours. What is in my house is yours.”

“I’ll settle for a Coke and a sandwich,” I grinned. “And whatever Khalid wants to do is fine with me.”

He opted for a day spent by the pool. It was an Olympic sized beauty with a high dive but he wasn’t allowed on it. He squinted when I scrambled up like a monkey and dove off without a tremor of fear. Why would I? I loved climbing things and one of my new ambitions was to climb the Dubai Needle. I didn’t tell anyone that, I’m not totally crazy.

After an hour of climbing up and jumping off, I dragged myself over to the lounge chair and sank into it, dripping onto Khalid. He threw his ice cubes at me. “Hey,” he



complained. "You're in my sun."

"You think your tan needs work?" I teased, closing my eyes. "Too bad we don't have one of those servants with the palm fronds waving."

"I can get some."

"Naw, I'm good." I paused. "You gonna go back, Khalid? Finish?"

He was still. "What happened to me is not culturally as bad as if I was a girl, Aid. It's something I'll never forget but it won't break me. I had a relationship with a cousin a few years before. Enjoyed it but it proved to me I like girls better.

"You--it would have scarred you forever."

"How do you know that?" I was curious.

"I just do. Something in your eyes. Now, take a nap. I have some serious tanning to do." I shoved him into the water and ran.

## Chapter 37

The following week, his mum (her name was Emeer Noori) took Khalid to the doctor for a check up to ensure everything was healing correctly and to evaluate him for physical therapy. He wanted me to go in with him but his mum gently persuaded him to let me have the afternoon alone. As alone as one could be with a royal escort and guards. I asked if I could see the Tower and she surprised. "It's the tallest building in the world," I explained. "My wish list is to climb the world's top ten."

"He means climb up the top ten," Khalid said with a warning look. He knew of my penchant for climbing.

Driven downtown in a Mercedes limo, I gawked at the modern, clean city with its public health care, free schooling, and incredible racecourse. The sultan of Dubai stud was globally famous.

I had mentioned wanting to see it and a tour was scheduled for next week if Khalid was up to it.

As the limo stopped in front, a valet came out and offered to park it but the Sheikh's driver shook his head and said he was to stay with the vehicle at all times so they valet escorted us inside. Business people watched to see who the celebrity was. Their eyes passed over and dismissed a European, a teenager, settled on one of the Security guards, another of Khalid's cousins and me. A lot of his family was in security. I'd asked if oil was their main source of income and he'd told me it was only a small part, most of it came from real estate, old money, and gold mines.

The lifts were state of the art bullets that flew up the outside faster than I could blink. What was funny was the look on Khalil (a third cousin) face as we rose to the 128th

floor.

“Scared of heights?” I asked him in Arabic and he nearly vomited a litany of words at me.

He closed his eyes, I told him that made it worse, touched him on the arm, and his eyes opened, wide and staring. Spoke to him low enough so that no one else heard and he gaped at me in fascination, nodded once, and relaxed.

His family looked at him, back and me as he lost his fear. He told me his name was Khalil Omar.

He came with me to the top floor of the observation Tower. We couldn't go outside; the wind today was too fierce and the building's security had locked us out but I could walk the entire roof and stare down at the rest of the city.

“You're not afraid of heights, Aidan?” he asked me. “Khalid said you like to climb onto the roof at school and mock the bullies.”

“Yeah. It takes them down a peg or two when you're forty feet up and they can't reach you,” I answered. I couldn't see anything on the ground from up here.

“He told me what happened,” Omar added.

I was surprised. The only one he'd talked to about it personally was his dad and me. “What about?” I asked, cautiously. “About...everything?”

“He told me the two boys were after you. Did you know he tried to stop them from following you that day? That's why they went after him and beat him.”

“I didn't know,” I was silent. He was the one should be honored and feted. “They raped him, all seven guys. I'd called a friend and told him about those two, was going to take care of them. Someone came. While I was looking for our teacher to help us. He...” I hesitated, rushed on, swallowing the nausea. “He cut their throats, got rid of the bodies.”

“That was a kinder fate than what I would have given them. You have nothing to fear from them or the police, Aidan. My father has seen to that. Will there be any repercussions for the two's disappearances? The school is well known for its student roster.”

“You mean will their parents make a big brouhaha? Chelmsley's dad is a Labor party bigwig, Glenellen's father is Lord Somebody-or-other,” I answered.

“And your father?” asked Omar.

“On sabbatical in Africa. Out of touch.”

“In this time of cell and satellite phones, Aidan? Khalid might buy that but I know better.”

“My parents think I'm dead,” I mumbled.

“My uncle, Sheikh Melek tried to find them. All he could look up were Lord and Lady Argent, Earl and Countess of Bowden. They had a son. Forty years ago. He died. Tragically.”

“Painfully,” I didn’t say anything else, just stared out the glass-covered panorama and saw a jet streak by and it seemed close enough to touch.

“Aidan, I saw a picture of their son.”

“Looks like me, does it?” I smiled.

“It is you, Aidan. Even down to the scars on your back, belly, and chest. My aunt and Khalid said you were special. Are you the Angel of Life?” He was serious so I didn’t laugh at him although I wanted to. That was as good a name for me only, I thought more like the Angel of Death.

“I don’t know what I am, Prince Omar,” I sighed.

“I’m not a prince. Khalid is, so is Rashid. The rest of us are just family.”

“There are a lot of you. I’m glad Khalid had your support,” I told him. “It’s getting late. Don’t we need to get back for Khalid?”

“He was having another MRI and CAT scan. He’ll be late, perhaps even stay the night,” he said.

“He’ll want me with him,” I headed for the door to the lifts and he followed.

“Are you and Khalid lovers?”

The question made me stop in my tracks. “No!” I denied vehemently. “He’s not like that! Nor am I.”

“He had an affair, once,” he said calmly and it was my turn to stare at his pleasant face.

“You?” He nodded. “Do you still love him?”

“Yes.”

“He likes girls. He told me that.”

“Did he mention me?”

“Not by name. Said it decided him he liked girls better.”

He was silent. “You?”

“No. Never.”

“It’s your eyes,” he said. “Like jewels that suck you in, make you an irresistible elixir, a drug that is addictive. But then, if you are the Angel of Death, you would be a fatal fascination, wouldn’t you?”

He frightened me and I had no words to give him as we traveled down the lift to the

Lobby and met the driver. We rode back to the hospital annex in an uncomfortable silence.

## Chapter 38

Khalid was visibly upset when I joined him. As soon as he saw me, he relaxed, sighed and went to sleep. He was in a private room in a special wing that was a high security area for VIPs and high-risk patients that required one on one care. The doors were electronically coded for entry and only personnel programmed to enter could get past the Kevlar reinforced doors. The rest of the place resembled a five star hotel.

I held his hand and told him he should relax; that nothing would happen to him, I promised. He smiled in his sleep.

His mum and dad were with him and I looked inquiringly at them. Their faces made my heart sink. "What?" I nearly screamed.

"His intestines are dying. Infection, trauma, they're shutting down section by section. The specialists want to go in and remove the dying parts. He'll wind up with a colostomy bag if it gets bad enough," his mum explained. In this culture that was nearly as unclean as cutting off your right hand.

"At least he'll be alive," I said harshly.

"He's HIV positive, too." That was no longer a death sentence I had learned. I looked at the doctor and made a crazy statement out of the blue, out of the cornucopia of experience my brain had lived through. "Give him some of my blood."

"Why?" the doctor asked and the Queen hushed him, stared at my eyes and nodded.

"Khalil Omar called me the Angel of Life," I said faintly. "I hope that's true. It seems death follows in my footsteps."

They did as I requested and we waited, me in a chair next to Khalid holding his hand. They had taken two pints and wouldn't let me get up because I was feeling faint. Any more, I would be in danger myself.

He slept through the whole thing, didn't wake up even when they pulled blood and did more tests.

My blood turned out to be an unremarkable A+ and to no one's surprise, nothing unique in its quality under a microscope. They took a buccal swab and that made me nervous. No one had my fingerprints or DNA and I wanted to keep it that way.

Khalid woke me from a disturbed sleep. I groaned, as I was stiff from sleeping in the armchair. He looked different, healthier, his skin tanned and glowing with life. He leaned over the bed and poked me. "Hey, you were having a bad dream. Shouting."

I rubbed my eyes and looked around the room. No one was with us, which puzzled me.

“They went for coffee. What were you dreaming?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember.” The feeling of impending doom remained when the details faded.

“Someone’s going to die? Me?”

Horrified, I stared at him. He seemed calm, almost complacent. “No. Not you.” Of that, I was suddenly certain.

“Whom? Where?”

Frustrated, I snapped, “I don’t know!” Leaping out of the chair, I paced. “I don’t know. I never know in the beginning.”

“How many times has it happened?” he asked calmly and it settled me.

“Three.”

“You’ve seen three people die?”

“I’ve saved three from dying,” I returned grimly. “I’m the one that dies. In their place.” I told him the whole story even down to my home in Cornwall where my parents existed unaware I was still alive. He was curious why I hadn’t gone home and nodded when I told him how I’d tried.

“My mother said you gave me a transfusion.”

“An irrational idea but a powerful hunch. I always listen to my hunches. This one says I have to go back, Khalid. Somewhere, I’m supposed to be somewhere in England.” I was suddenly certain of that.

“I’ll tell my dad,” he said. I stared at him.

“You’ll be alright?”

He smiled a smile of great sweetness and I loved him for it. “You made sure of that, Aidan. Go home, that’s where I am. I know you’ll have one, too. That’s my certain conviction.”

He made my trip back happen.

## Chapter 39

As soon as my feet touched English soil, I felt a tremor run through me. My face must have paled because Khalil Omar grabbed my arm and held me. He’d insisted he accompany me home and Khalid had seconded it. The Sheikh and Lady Noori had made me take money but I’d drawn the line at a bank account. I wasn’t sure if I would wake up to remember or use it. Cash was easier not to track, too.

“Are you okay, Aidan?” his concern was embarrassing. I shrugged him off and sat down in the plastic seats of the concourse while he went in search of his luggage. All my worldly possessions were in my backpack. I didn’t have a passport, I’d flown both out and in under the Sheikhs diplomatic immunity.

Omar came back pushing a cart with two large cases and a porter. “Hungry? We can go to the VIP lounge.”

“MacDonalds,” I said and nearly laughed at his incredulous look. “Less chance of someone noticing us. And it’s cheaper.”

“I have never;” he drew himself up tall, “Eaten at a MacDonalds.”

“I’ve never been to Dubai or flown on a Lear jet,” I came back. “So, we’re even. Both of us have new experiences.”

We walked the concourse until we found the golden arches and I stood in line to order. They were serving breakfast. I ordered tea, a big breakfast and a McGriddle. He said he’d have the same and paid with an American Express card. He was stunned when it came to less than ten Euros.

We ate at the tables and I spent my time watching the caliber of people in and out of the airport.

“I want to take you home to the school, Aidan. I’m not just dropping you off somewhere.”

“I know my way home. You can leave me at the tubes on Harrowsgate.”

“No. My uncle gave me direct orders to return you to Mr. Compton-Baird and Dean Posthwaite personally.”

“I’m not going back to school, Omar,” I insisted.

“Please don’t make me fail in my duties to both a Sheikh Rashid and Khalid, Aidan,” he said quietly with great force.

“I love Khalid, Omar. He’s one of my few real friends. I don’t have many because of my life.

“Keep him safe. I think he’ll be fine, I don’t have dreams about him, and if I did, they are not the kind that worries me. Nor did my dreams mark any of your family. I did dream of something bad happening here and it will haunt me until I figure out what and where it is. I told your aunt that time is a river and my eyes could see it. More than that, I am an unwilling passenger on its tides and must ride it wherever it goes. You must allow me to go my own way. Angel of Life. Angel of Death. I have been both.”

I got up, stared at him with my darkened violet eyes and disappeared into the crowds.

I didn’t look back but I could feel the weight of his gaze long after he was gone.

I took the shuttle to the tubes and was encased in a bubble of frost that no one neared or

approached. It didn't dissolve until I reached my hammock in the movie studio and climbed in, closing my eyes. I waited for the dreams.

Nightmares. In the morning, I knew why.

**The End.**