

Forevermore

Rohn Federbush

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Publications:

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The Legitimate Way, May 2014, Romantic Suspense
The Appropriate Way, June 2014, Romantic Suspense
The Recorder's Way, June 2014, Romantic Suspense
Bonds of Affection, July 2014, Romantic Suspense
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Separation Anxiety, September 2015, Romantic Suspense
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St. Joan's Architect, September 2016, Paranormal Romance

Chapter One

Friday, November 15th

Holme Pierrepont Hall, Nottinghamshire, England

The dirt road out to Pierrepont Hall was longer than Teresea had remembered as a teenager and her knees were getting chilled. She tugged her camel-hair skirt under her knee. Her cousin Norman would appreciate the coordinated, tan country outfit – boots and all, even *if* Stewart had no clue as to its fashion appropriateness.

Stewart consulted his cell phone for directions. “There should be a sign at a fork in the road. How long have we been driving?”

She turned from the steering wheel to send a smile his way. “Are we there yet?”

Blue eyes twinkling, her fiancé’s sweet round face registered the joke. Norman might not find Stewart’s teddy-bear girth appealing, but Teresea’s heart warmed. The clean scent of Stewart’s curly, brown hair wafted her way as he took off his University of Michigan stocking cap.

“Before we get there,” Stewart said with his hands in his curls, hinting his thoughts were too serious for her pleasant mood. “I should tell you what happened at work yesterday.”

“You got fired.” Her laughter stopped when she realized he wasn’t laughing.

Stewart’s head dropped. “My boss wanted me to place an order on an insider tip.”

Silence reigned as Teresea made the right-hand turn to follow the sign pointing to Holme Pierrepont Hall. In the rising wind, tall trees on either side of the sign nodded their paucity of fall leaves at each other as if stretching to bring their bared branches together.

“Do you still want to marry me tomorrow?” Stewart asked in a defeated tone she’d never heard before.

“I love you, Bunny,” Teresea said. “Of course, we’re going to marry – *for richer or for poorer*, right?”

“Right.” He patted her thigh. He might have brushed away a tear from his cheek. “Tedler said I’d hadn’t heard the last from him.”

A line of spiked pines and ancient oaks rose above the peaks of Pierrepont Hall.

“Threatening you, was he?” Teresea’s ire rose. Her wedding day was *not* going to be ruined by Tedler’s greedy reprisals. “Never you mind, Stewart. Norman will find a good lawyer for us here in England. He’s a gladiator when it comes to defending family. My father’s firm in Ann Arbor will look into it, too. I’ll talk to both of them *after* the wedding.”

The road widened as the grassy lawn on each side expanded to the sun-drenched horizon where the familiar block-long, yellow brick castle of Pierrepont Hall stretched out its wings. Behind the west side of the sprawling buildings, the steeple of St. Edmonds appeared gray in the misty distance. As they approached the Hall, enormous sculptured evergreens with their juniper-smelling skirts swept the lawn, resembling headless bridal gowns closing in on the road.

In front of the mansion a perfect circle of white gravel allowed Teresea to park directly in front of the stately entrance. She checked the mirror and quickly powdered her nose. Norman’s opinion mattered.

* * *

Stewart welcomed the short distance needed to haul in Teresea's trousseau baggage. However a line of four bellboys swept out of the entrance and divested him of every piece of luggage. Too bad they couldn't relieve him of all his worries, too.

Teresea laughed at his surprise and pulled him through the doorway into the domed foyer. Despite the wintery weather, summery smells wafted throughout the entranceway from the flower arrangements set in tall alabaster vases along the circular walls.

Their host Norman Henderson was taller than Stewart had hoped. Even with her high-heeled boots, Teresea had to stand on tiptoes to kiss her cousin's cheek. Norman picked her up and twirled her around the entryway -- much to the chagrin of his shorter partner. He released a tipsy Teresea to introduce them. "My wife, Teresea Henderson."

A tall black and white terrier, sitting beside the woman barked at them.

Norman dipped his head. "Sorry, and her loyal mascot, Mikey."

Mikey's ears pricked up and he actually seemed to smile at them with his huge, bright eyes.

The second Teresea smirked in contrast to his Teresea's open smile. Her hair color was similar to his intended's lush tangle of blonde ringlets, but Stewart suspected chemicals were involved in the other woman's thin hair. Her dark eyes lacked the intelligent blue sparkle of Teresea's.

"Well," Stewart said without checking with his Teresea. "This will be confusing."

Norman rescued them. "She loves to be called 'Tess', don't you dear?"

Tess frowned without enthusiasm about her apparently new nickname. "Let's get you settled into your rooms." Tess regarded the luggage held by the four bellboys. "How long do you intend to vacation on the continent?"

Teresea ignored the question and Stewart shrugged his shoulders. Their plans were up in the air now that he'd lost his job. Well quit his job. Had Teresea surmised the worst?

Teresea hadn't let go of Norman's elbow after she'd regained her footing. She pulled him aside, but didn't bother to whisper. "I need to speak with you privately, cousin."

"Secrets." Norman grinned at Tess and without waiting for permission from Stewart whisked Teresea across the huge hall to a room and closed the door.

"His study," Tess explained. "Probably family business."

Stewart shook his head thinking he'd considered himself family since Teresea agreed to marry him. Now the hall's overwhelming flower smells reminded him of funeral displays.

Tess gestured toward the stairs. "Charles II's Grand Staircase will direct the guests to the wedding reception."

He followed Mikey, Tess and the burdened staff up the carpeted flight of circular steps to the next landing then along an endless hall of closed doors. Mikey looked back to see if he was continuing to trail along up another less-grand set of stairs and down a narrow hall to what seemed to be the very last room.

"I think you'll be comfortable here," Tess said. "Teresea will be staying in the guest bedroom below. This was Norman's childhood room. I suspect he was a noisy child."

"I only need those two bags." Stewart pointed to his belongings. He stepped inside the room followed by his bags.

Tess shut the door.

Stewart re-opened it. "Tess, do you have just a minute?"

Tess gave a few instructions to the valets about Teresea's luggage before nodding and stepping into the room with her dog, Mikey.

Stewart noticed she made sure the door stayed open. "I just wanted to tell you I sympathize."

Tess took a step back out into the hall, but Stewart gently held her wrist and moved her back into the room.

Mikey didn't growl but his ears were down.

Stewart concentrated on his friendly tone for the dog's benefit. "I don't mean to embarrass you, but I wanted to tell you. In one of my very first memories of childhood, I defended a farm girl who the city gals were picking on. She was dressed in hand-me-downs probably rummaged from a Salvation Army store."

Tess stiffened. Mikey let out a questioning yelp. Tess touched her dog's head. "My wardrobe?"

"No it isn't that." Stewart had released her wrist and tugged on his curls. "The cousins have a bond that excludes the two of us, don't you think?"

"Norman has always spoken well of Teresea. When he hired me as his secretary in London, he said my name was a factor in his decision."

"I love my Teresea, but I'm not that fond of their closeness."

"I'm sure you'll become accustomed to your wife's family." Tess smiled and patted his shoulder before closing the door on him.

He was alone to survey his temporary digs. Not bad, even if the stale odor of moldy lilacs testified to the room's disuse. A large bed dominated the small room, which was further burdened with a mahogany chiffonier, one dark green upholstered chair, and a writing desk with its accompanying straight chair. The wallpaper sported a maroon background for faded, stylized fleur de lis. A bath, no doubt, existed through the door on the right.

To the left side of the small room, Stewart's interest was drawn to the view from the tall latticed windows of a walled courtyard lined with decorated and lit Christmas trees. A large banner waving above an abandoned booth explained, "Christmas Fair." November was rather early for Christmas shopping, but Stewart assumed the wedding preparations hadn't interfered with the commercial venue.

Chilled by the view or the lack of heat in the room, he traded his unpacking duties to ramble back downstairs, hoping to find a bellboy to direct him to a cup of coffee somewhere on the premise. Maybe he should ask for a portable heater for his accommodations.

On the floor beneath his bedroom one of the closed doors marked as the Long Gallery opened to a room made bigger by a mirrored wall. Yellow embossed wallpaper cheered the low room filled with round tables draped in damask cloths. The chairs wore white covers too. Crystal glasses, white china, and peaked white napkins were already set for tomorrow's expected guests. Portraits of the Henderson clan's ancestors glared at Stewart from the remaining walls.

He wondered who was expected to fill all the places at the tables. As far as he knew, the combined number of family attending their wedding in England totaled five. No coffee seemed immediately available on the sideboard, so he descended the stairs to the ground floor, longing for even a whiff of caffeine.

The Ballroom doors were wide open. Recently oiled, wood floors shone white from a rounded bank of French windows opening out into the courtyard of Christmas trees he'd seen from his bedroom window. He read the abandoned sign leaning against the inside wall advertising the various vendors of the Christmas Fair from the previous day. The cities of Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire, Suffolk, Wiltshire, Northampton shire, Cambridgeshire, Northern Ireland, Surrey, Hertfordshire, Devon and even London were well represented.

Stewart didn't envy the work involved in selling or even making the various, but now absent, craft items available to the Fair's customers. He wondered if their receipts were worth the effort. Perhaps the claim of 'showing' at Pierrepont Hall earned sufficient goodwill for businesses to get involved.

A small drawing room next door to the Ballroom offered a lounging area for exhausted dancers. The blue upholstery matched the lamps, fireplace tiles and even the painted clothing of two ancestors hanging on either side of the fireplace. The place of honor above the mantelpiece sported a white-laced chap unhappy about the world or maybe the starch in his neck ruffles.

Giving up on his quest for caffeine, Stewart thought of knocking on Norman's study door. Surely that fleet of bellboys could order some liquid refreshment. Norman would know how to alert them. Besides, he felt a bridegroom's need to see Teresea's smiling face.

* * *

When Tess shook her fist at Stewart's closed door she'd made sure no one could witness her annoyance. *A farm girl?* The pompous, fat slop. She didn't need defending by anyone. If he knew what she was capable of, all that she'd accomplished since she left her father's smelly farm, he would have selected his disdainful message more carefully. Norman loved her, even if he had become more combative since his series of cancer diagnoses. Who wouldn't be upset?

Tess didn't mind her new nickname. Her father had always called her Tess. 'What do you think, Mikey, is Tess a good enough name for me?'

Mikey licked her wrist then trotted ahead to her office door.

She unlocked the door and set to work, arranging the computerized mailing of invitations for next week's wedding party. With any luck the new revenues would cover some of the costs of the North's wedding. Norman had refused to charge Teresea's family for any of the room rents, food, or even the flowers. With Norman's cancer infusion treatments' costing over \$10,000 each, income had become a crucial issue in the last year.

Stewart was right; Norman did constantly mention his cousin, Teresea, more so since the wedding was planned for the Hall. Of course, they were close. They shared the same gene structure. Their laughter held the same carefree release, which Tess could never mimic in a thousand years. Every day for Tess was a struggle to maintain what ... superiority, survival?

Mikey was looking soulfully into her eyes. Had she made sure he had been fed? She had, but the dog continued to watch her not blinking until she reached out to pet his soft fur. "I love you, too," she said.

Without any reservations Mikey accepted her, not like Norman's unknown criteria for affection. Was a possible Creator as understanding of her flaws as Mikey was? Mikey's eyes were rimmed in black fur and his sweet ears were peaked as if to catch any sigh of hers.

Norman's knew his estate was a factor in her affection for him, but his perfect honed body before the onslaught of disease had been her main pleasure in life. She loved him, couldn't wait to have his undivided attention in bed, even if they had ceased the more common sexual practices. The touch of his body thrilled her. His touch stilled her teaming brain. He was the reason she existed.

* * *

Teresea Henderson hugged her cousin inside the study. "You feel so good to me." She pushed away after breathing in his familiar smell of Old Spice shaving cream. "Stewart's the jealous type, I'm afraid."

"Of me, you wholesome cousin?" Norman laughed his ornery laugh.

Teresea had missed Norman's familiar comfort since she was a teenager, more of a child really at thirteen when they'd last been together alone. "I knew you were romantic, but it never occurred to me you'd turn your home into a wedding banquet hall." She toured the walls lined with books and shucked her coat to climb the ladder to the second tier of books. "Are the guests allowed in here?"

"Nope, off limits." Norman waved a glass of sherry at her. "You're old enough for a spot of sherry, right?"

She descended quickly, promising to return as she swept her hands against the back of leather-bound books. Clinking his glass, she said, "Here's to your continued success."

"And to your happy marriage."

"Better be," Teresea said sipping the potent sweetness. "How's yours?"

"Predatory." Norman said, pouring himself another glass. "She was such a help as my secretary. It never occurred to me a woman bearing your name possessed less than affectionate motives. I've taken care of the matter with my lawyer."

"Your lawyer?" She moved closer to Norman, realizing the Old Spice smell vied with another odor, as if he'd been rubbing cream sherry into his blond curls.

Norman kissed her forehead. "I hope you don't mind. I invited him to your wedding. Name's Robert Koelz. Love's books, you'll see." Norman pointed to the uppermost books.

Teresea backed away to survey the shelves along the balcony, which were separated by three tall windows. "Good man, then?"

"Best." Norman said. "He's coming to your rehearsal dinner tonight, too. Have some papers for me to sign. I know you'll be taken with him." Norman touched her shoulder to regain her attention away from the beckoning books. "Does Stewart love books? By the love letters you sent me *from him*, I know he's well educated. But sometimes school is such a chore people hate to read from then on. It's the only way I can explain a home without even the scent of books."

"We'll never get him to St. Edmunds on time for the wedding if he finds this place first." Teresea played with her empty glass but declined a refill. "Are you planning to divorce Tess? How long have you been married, shy of five years isn't it?"

"Marriage is forevermore, Teresea, remember that." Norman straightened his silk tie, and then poured himself another glass of sherry. "I'm praying the Lord will give me the patience to be a good influence on my spouse."

Teresea rounded the table between them and touched Norman's face. "From your lips to His ears. I wanted to have a sister cousin, but now I won't know how to act around Tess."

"Keep your heart open," Norman said, corking the crystal sherry container. "That's all I ask of myself."

Behind them someone opened the study's door.

* * *

"Nice," Stewart said, surveying the room. Teresea took a step toward him smiling. "This isn't a study," he said, pleased by her welcome. "It's a complete library. How many volumes do you have? Is there a card index, or are you computerized? Where is the nature section? The trees around here are fascinating. Old English money takes better care of landscapes than our American showoffs. May I have a look around?" He was already up the ladder.

"With my blessings." Norman laughed.

Stewart cocked his head at Teresea to explain.

"You've passed the only test my cousin has for people," Teresea said. "You're a booklover. I didn't tell you yet, Norman. Stewart and I serve on Ann Arbor's green spaces committee and we run a small-loan venture for bicycle companies in Uganda."

"I don't suppose I could request coffee? My room at the end of the third floor is a bit chilly." Stewart could smell the sweetness of cream sherry. Had Teresea spent her time with her cousin explaining his employment situation? Had she implied that it was a necessary to layout their charitable endeavors to gain favor?

Norman pulled a dark red embroidered sash near the doorway. Within a minute James, the butler, appeared. Coffee was promised and quickly delivered on a fully appointed teacart, cakes abounding.

No hint of disapproval showed in Norman's hearty welcome. "James, Tess has seen fit to put Stewart in my old room. Could you find a heater to combat that drafts?"

"Why would...?" James frowned for a minute. "Of course, consider it done. The ghost will need to change her thermostat." James exited the room.

Teresea had probably *not* told Norman about his present financial status.

"Ghost?" Teresea asked.

"Grandma sees fit to bedevil me when I take refuge up there," Norman shook off an imagined chill.

Not interested in the invented reason for his room's lack of heat, Stewart enjoyed a second cup of coffee and one small iced cake. Then he headed back up the library's wooden ladder to the beckoning books on the wrap around balcony.

Norman and Teresea continued to discuss family members he'd never met, trading stories about Grandmother Henderson, apparently somewhat of a German strict but loving matriarch.

“Did you do your own laundry when you visited her?” Norman asked.

“I thought that was because I was a girl.”

Norman shook his head. “She taught me how to iron my own shirts.”

“Bake any bread?” Teresea lifted her arm reaching out to claim a whiff of remembered baking bread.

“I watched her make long egg noodles, does that count?”

“Her voice ...” Teresea began and Norman finished her statement, “You could hear her Hungarian brogue for a week after going home.”

Stewart noticed the syncopation and tones off their voices and especially their laughter was almost identical. He wondered how they would show up on an electronic scanner. Nice bloodline, he thought, thankful his and Teresea’s children would carry the same kindly genetic traits. He added a blessing for both their long lives.

Teresea looked up at him as if she’d felt the warmth of his love reach her, but she turned back to question her cousin. “Why wasn’t I allowed to visit you after I began high school?”

Nursing another glass of sherry, Norman sat down in the leather wing backed chair next to the gaslight fireplace. “Grandma misunderstood our relationship.”

Stewart’s ears pricked up.

“How?” Teresea moved closer to Norman as if to shield him from Stewart’s line of vision.

Norman made a gesture Stewart couldn’t mistake.

“Nonsense,” Teresea said, stepping back as if struck.

“She wanted to protect you,” Norman said. “Apparently, her brothers in the old country were not as pure minded.”

“Are you sure?” Teresea’s tone remained unconvinced. “Was there anything else?”

"She was sick," Norman said. "She didn't accuse me. She left that to father. According to his explanation, she caught me looking at you in a salacious manner. I was probably just appreciating your beauty. Cancer took her from us in a year. The bed scenes were not serene. I was glad you weren't here. I think she knows the truth now that she's in heaven. You and I love each other as close cousins do."

Teresea leaned down and hugged Norman, holding her kiss on his cheek longer than Stewart thought was absolutely necessary.

"Does she haunt you?" Stewart hoped to lighten the mood.

But Norman jumped out of his chair. He regained his composure by holding onto the fireplace mantle. "Actually, I do hear her voice at times and smell her lilac perfume."

"For heavens sake, Norman, you don't see her do you?" Teresea shook an accusing finger in Stewart's direction on the library balcony.

"When Tess is too much for me to stomach, I often sleep in my old bedroom on the third floor." Norman sat back down.

Stewart climbed down the stairs, leaving the book he was glancing through face down on the wide lip of the balcony banister. "Since I'm in your old room, is there anything you want me to ask your Grandmother if she shows up? I did smell lilacs, but thought it was an odor from the upholstery."

"Ask her if I'm on the right course," Norman said in a serious tone, reseating himself.

"Of course you are," Teresea interjected. "Grandma loved you to pieces. That's why you were willed the castle."

Norman surveyed his handsome hands. "She tells me to keep things peaceful or I will lose Pierrepont Hall."

Stewart boldly cuffed Norman's shoulder. "It's not as if the place could disappear."

Teresea smiled and stepped into Stewart's embrace.

"Norman, you couldn't misplace this castle if you tried."

The study door eased open and a nifty dressed gentleman with curly gray hair and a small moustache, he constantly touched, entered and threw his briefcase on the table.

"Koelz." Norman rose as if released and slapped the smaller man on the back. "Sherry?"

"Didn't know the room was scheduled to be so busy," Koelz said. "I am *that* thirsty."

Norman swiftly poured a glass of sherry, Robert downed it. Norman filled a second glass for him while introducing his lawyer. "Robert Koelz, this is one of my many cousins, but the only one I trust, Teresea Henderson. And her fiancé, Stewart North. They're to marry here in the morning."

"What's he been doing with your books?" Koelz got rid of his emptied glass and climbed the ladder to rescue the tree dictionary Stewart had left on the banister.

"I'm trying to find names for all the trees I'm not familiar with here." Stewart followed him up the ladder and closed the heavy tome with a snap. "I don't think there are any law books up here."

"Law, why would there be? Norman's not the lawyer." Koelz leaned against the iron railing adjusting his paisley silk cravat, whose colors coordinated with his blue shirt, pinstriped vest and suit. His ensemble brought out the faded color of his blue eyes. A strong smell of whiskey permeated his clothing. "I am."

"Come down, you two." Norman shook the ladder. "Koelz, did you bring the papers I asked to sign?"

Norman followed Koelz' descent.

The lawyer opened his briefcase. "Sign three. Will Mr. North act as a witness?"

"Absolutely," Teresea said. She whispered to Stewart after he'd regained the library's main floor. "Norman's changing his will."

When Norman handed his pen to Teresea, Koelz reclaimed it. "Best call in James. Your cousin's signature might seem prejudicial to the court."

Stewart didn't want to doubt the man's word, and perhaps English law contained provisional quirks he wasn't aware of. He dutifully signed the bottoms of three last pages, as did James when he arrived.

"I noticed the Long Gallery is filled with tables." Stewart accepted a glass of sherry from Norman, as did Koelz after he'd locked his briefcase. "Tess mentioned the reception will be held up there, but only our immediate families are planning to attend the wedding."

Norman laughed heartily and his butler joined in. Not until Tess arrived, disapproving frown in place, did the two of them regain their composure.

James nearly knocked Stewart's glass out of his hand in his hurry to vacate the study.

Mikey growled as if to hasten the butler's departure and then sat down at the library's door.

Norman explained, "Every wedding couple is invited to the next wedding reception. Tess devised a perfect way to advertise the Hall."

"They pay to attend." Tess moved the tray containing the sherry decanter and glasses from the central marble table to a drop-leaf desk built into a bank of bookshelves near the door.

Koelz followed her and poured himself another glass.

When she turned her back, he quickly swallowed the glass' contents and filled it again. Tess must have heard him swallow.

When she faced him, Koelz lifted his filled glass.

"Had enough, yet?" she asked.

"Never," Koelz said. "Life is too full of surprises."

Stewart agreed but the fact didn't make him that thirsty.

"Dinner is at seven. We dress," Tess, said as she left, without bothering to acknowledge her husband's presence.

* * *

James Bedlam, the butler, kicked the nearest pillar. He hadn't had time to read the will, signing the hateful thing as directed. He suspected Norman was coldly disinheriting his own wife.

He wiped his forehead, hoping he hadn't dropped his defenses in front of anyone. Even Tess, as Norman called her because his uppity cousin had arrived, didn't know James had made plans for them. His prospects at Pierrepont Hall, after Norman's demise from cancer, heralded pleasures unbounded in the arms of the widowed Tess.

He and his family, the Bedlams, had been subservient for enough generations of Hendersons. James' passion for Tess wiped out the long-standing loyalty he'd been born into. Love was a freeing sensation, giving him all the courage he needed for his future with Tess. Since Norman's diagnosis three years ago, James had spent hours planning the widow's life.

Mikey might need to find another home, but all else would remain the same, except that he, James Bedlam, would take up residence in the master bedroom. Tess would be lonely and he could easily persuade her of his loving concern. In order not to alert Norman though, James intended to maintain his uncooperative stance toward his beloved. He'd explain all the hard feelings away later, after the North wedding party had departed and after Norman Henderson followed them into non-existence.

* * *

Tess wished she'd arrived in the library earlier. Something untoward was definitely going on. Koelz had brought his briefcase. Everyone seemed in on the joke. James and Norman's shared hilarity boded ill, too. She headed for the kitchen to make sure dinner would be perfect, checking her watch.

Mikey kept pace with her.

After reviewing the cook's preparations, she just had time to dress. Perhaps Norman would be more forthcoming when he changed for dinner? If she was careful she could squeeze in another hour after dinner to finish the mailing of invitations for the morning's mail. Tomorrow's schedule would be inundated with chores for the North's wedding.

She greeted Norman wearing her newest black frock trimmed in ribboned pink but he didn't comment.

Norman closed his dressing room door.

Mikey gave a little whine, perceiving her discontent.

So much for learning more about what had happened in the library.

Guests were present and she needed to appear unruffled to Koelz and Norman's cousin and family. This was her home and she was determined they would leave for Ann Arbor with a good opinion of English hospitality.

* * *

Stewart had climbed the stairs up to the second floor holding onto Teresea's hand. "Tess acts as if Norman doesn't exist."

"I don't think they love each other anymore." Teresea clasped his hand tighter. "You'll wear your black coat, right?"

Stewart dusted off his favorite blue cardigan and retucked his plaid shirt. "Probably even change my shirt." He kissed her before he mounted the second flight of steps to reach his third-floor room, where a heater had been dutifully installed.

Before he'd completed buttoning his white dress shirt, a knock called him to the door. "Father."

They embraced. "Lovely digs." His father pushed his shoulder. "I see you are dressing for dinner. The butler pointed out the dining room."

"Where is it exactly?" Stewart glanced at his suited self in the mirror on the chifffonier and straightened his blue tie.

"Across from a library, which I'm interested to explore after dinner. It is getting close to seven. Shall we go in together?"

"Not sure that's proper." Stewart laughed. "So happy to see you. I feel out of place, of course."

"I don't see why." Father touched his back. "We have brick barns in the States."

"The North's farm in Illinois can't really compare to these grounds?"

Father crossed his arms. "Shawnee land bargained away to start our entire clan is a respectful enough beginning for any man."

The dining room was a low room. Stewart expected cathedral ceilings at least, because of the height of the library and entrance. He wondered what was above him. Probably not fodder for cattle. The Chihuly chandelier was showy enough and the table could seat twenty. More flowers were strewn casually along the runner on the table adding their sweetness to the food odors.

Teresea and her parents arrived as Stewart pulled out a chair at the foot of the table for his father. Teresea wore her emerald satin dress. It was short but the bodice was laced and elegant. Mrs. Henderson wore a light blue, almost gray, suit with a brighter blue blouse. Her eyes were a faded version of Teresea's blue eyes. Stewart wondered if Tess would approve Mr. Henderson's dinner jacket, which matched his wife's suit.

Tess and Mikey followed them in. "Have you found your place cards?"

Norman came in and waved his arm. "Sit anywhere you please. Tess, this is family."

So Stewart sat to the left of his father and Mrs. Henderson sat across from Stewart, on Father's right. Teresea motioned for her father to sit alongside her, leaving her flanked by her parents. For a second Stewart felt the loss of his own mother, but quickly put aside his recollections to attend to the present.

Norman folded himself into the chair at the head of the table. Tess sat on his right next to Stewart. An empty place setting separated them. Stewart wondered if Father's hearing aid would be sufficient for the size of the room because of the length conversations needed to travel down the table.

Robert Koelz, decked out in a white cravat, shirt, and white wool suit arrived, nodded to Tess and filled the empty place prepared between Tess and Stewart. "Strange seating arrangements, Tess."

"Norman insisted," she said, reaching behind her to feed Mikey a scrap of bread.

The dinner served was delicious: asparagus soup, a salmon main dish, then a green salad with raw mushrooms and a desert tray of cheese and fruit after. Mostly grapes, sliced apples and oranges. Stewart wished his water glass and wine glasses could turn into coffee cups, but his magic couldn't change the crystal held liquids into caffeine.

Father summoned enough nerve. "May I ask for coffee?"

Tess acted ruffled, slapping her napkin onto the table. "After dinner we'll retire."

Norman asked one of the servers to bring coffee. "I'd love a cup, too. We can talk for a while, Tess."

"You'll have to excuse me," Tess rose, as did Mikey.

Norman stood until they left the room. "She's very busy with the wedding venues."

Looking toward the closed door, Koelz added, "She's always busy, Norman."

"The nature of this beast," Norman swung his arms out to include the castle. "I'm glad you could all come to Teresea's wedding -- except for Stewart."

Everyone laughed, but Stewart watched Norman's eyes. The statement had held more truth than the speaker or the hearer wanted to admit. Stewart sipped his coffee enjoying the view of his wife-to-be. *Nevermind*, he told himself. *I'm here and she's all mine tomorrow, Norman.*

* * *

Teresea squirmed at the table. When could they retire? Tomorrow was going to be a longer day than today had been.

Father was rolling out the years, telling his life story before he met Mother and ending with a statement meant to shock. "I had enough sense to marry into money."

Koelz stood first. "With that loving statement, I think I shall retire to count my androgynous blessings."

Teresea left the dining room too after pecking Norman on the cheek.

Her parents seemed glued to their chairs. Mother had thrown a grape at Father, who'd popped it in his mouth.

Stewart followed her out. "May I walk you home?"

She laughed, relieved Father hadn't embarrassed him. "My Prince." She embraced him at her door of the guest room on the second floor. "Are you as exhausted as I am?"

Stewart kept his arms around her. "I admit any ghost in my room will need to wake the dead to get my attention."

Teresea laughed again as he released her. "Grandma was always a quiet woman."

But shortly after Teresea let her head hit the lavender smelling pillow, there was an enormous racket in the hall outside her door.

She found Stewart banging on her door.

"I'm glad you're still up." He slipped inside, switched on the light and shut the door.

"What happened?" Teresea moved into his urgent hug. "I was asleep."

"Your grandmother." Stewart dropped his arms.

"You're joking." But the look on Stewart's face was not entertaining.

"I'm sleeping in here. Not to be a tattletale, but Grandma's ghost pulled my hair, threw my blankets on the floor and pounded me with my own pillow. No wonder Bible fundamentalists believe ghosts are devilish."

Teresea was still muddled with sleep. "Grandma was always kindness itself."

"She did me no harm." Stewart kissed Teresea's cheek. He dropped his bathrobe on the nearest chair and headed toward her rumpled bed. "I agree. Family ghosts should be exempt from harsh labels."

Teresea turned off the light and joined him, snuggling under the still warm blankets. She was almost asleep before she remembered to ask. "Did you hear her voice?"

"She says we need to save Norman."

"Norman can take care of himself," Teresea said, wondering why Grandma didn't realize that from Heaven's realm. "But she wouldn't rouse you out of your bed into mine without some worry."

"Sleeping with his wife, can't be hazardous to Norman's health."

Moving closer to his embrace, Teresea agreed she felt not a sliver of animosity toward her prospective groom. "This is what I think I will always like best about sex, hugging."

"I'll ask you again after we're married." Stewart cuddled closer to her.

* * *

Tess rubbed Norman's back hoping he would turn over to realize she'd not worn a nightgown.

He sighed as if exasperated. "I need to get enough sleep tonight."

She placed his hand on her warm stomach and he responded on cue. After he rolled back to his side of the bed she told him, "I'll always love you, Norman. You are everything I ever wanted in life."

She wanted to talk but his snores ruled out any conversation. Nevertheless, they were still lovers. His illness hadn't progressed far enough to rule out infrequent lovemaking, even if his passion for her had cooled. She laid awake tears rolling into her ears as she mulled over the reasons for his detachment. Was it her workload, his illness, or his glorious cousin?

Tess wiped her wet face with her scented pillow. They'd all be gone soon. She would close the door behind them and have Norman all to herself again.

* * *

Saturday, November 16th

After Stewart vacated Teresea's bed in the second floor guest bedroom, the morning's sunshine promised a perfect wedding day.

Mother pulled the mirrored bathroom doors open to provide three angled views of Teresea's wedding-gown fit. "You are exactly the size I was when I married your father."

Teresea beamed at herself. Mother's old-fashioned dress was lovely. The veil arrangement was a little silly by today's standards, but hurting Mother's feelings was beyond her ability on this special day. She bent her head to examine the flow of her skirt and the headdress of white roses and ribbons dipped over one eye.

"Hold your head up," Mother instructed. "Brides should walk proudly down the aisle to the future of their making."

Teresea righted her fragrant crown and wondered if Stewart's finances and employment were as easy to affix.

Mother fussed with the short train of the dress. "I snuck into the church last night to check on the decorations. Norman's wife has gone overboard to remind everyone we're from Ann Arbor."

"What do you mean?" Teresea couldn't imagine why that would be a problem.

"I'm glad we arranged for your bouquet instead of allowing her to be involved." Mother sniffed the way she did when disapproval threatened. "That's all I'll say. But why in the world did Norman marry a girl with your name?"

"He thought she would be someone he could trust." Teresea waited while Mother brushed imaginary lint from her shoulders. "Apparently, after only five years he's changed his mind. But he did say marriage was forevermore. So we should keep are hearts open." She touched Mother's face to get her attention away from the historic wedding dress. "Okay?"

"Might as well," Mother said in an unconvinced tone. "Are you sure Norman will let you return to the States with your husband. You two have always been too close in my opinion."

"Don't all cousins share a common bond, like Norman and I share?" Teresea frowned at her mirrored image. "You've always told me blood was thicker than water."

"Yes, but marriage is the tie that binds, not relatives in another country."

* * *

St. Edmund's Church in Nottinghamshire

Teresea and Norman had played in the church as children, holding hands as they walked solemnly down the aisle, promising always to love each other on the altar steps. They'd kissed each other's cheeks to seal the vow. Was Norman reminiscing, too?

Today Teresea's indestructible, grown cousin stood at the altar alongside her much shorter groom. Her stomach cramped, but she remembered Grandma Henderson saying fear never came from the Lord.

Mother was right to complain about Tess, who had planned and arranged all the ghastly decorations. The maize-and-blue velvet ribbons on each pew did remind Teresea her home was in Ann Arbor, not here near the turrets of Pierrepont Hall. Yellow mums, with some sprayed a brilliant blue, filled the altar space.

A plump Miss Sentence, or was it Paragraph, moved two flower pots up a step in order to stand nearest the communion railing. Jostling for space next to the Rushcliffe-Nottinghamshire registrar, Reverend Canon John Bedlam, the Anglican priest, resembled his twin, Norman's butler, James.

Teresea clutched her bouquet of white roses, thankful Tess had agreed with Mother's selection. Ivy and lilies-of-the-valley cascaded from the spray of sweet-smelling white roses. Soft satin at her throat reminded Teresea to hold her head high to *not* allow her crown of roses, lace and ribbons to slide askew.

She concentrated on Mother's beautiful smile near the front of the nearly empty church. Mother had walked down this aisle to marry a Henderson man in the same dress. Even though Father was a Henderson, her mother's family fortune outweighed his.

Today the tables were somewhat flipped. Teresea was the Henderson but her husband's gainful employment appeared in jeopardy.

Chapter Two

In front of the communion railing, Stewart wiped his dry brow with a shaking hand. He'd entered a dream world. An elegant angel in white glided down the aisle toward him.

Her tall father glowered down at Stewart as he joined their hands. "Care," was all he threatened.

Teresea shook his hand to get his attention back to the vows he needed to recite. She was his for the rest of his life. Looking into her blue eyes, he felt he was floating towards the ceiling but all he succeeded in doing was knocking her scented bouquet out of her hands and then stepping on it before they'd exchanged rings.

Norman had rescued the crushed flowers handing them to Tess before the ceremony concluded with the butler's blessing, or a man looking very much like James. Maybe he *was* dyslexic and all English men with Roman noses resembled each other.

Teresea giggled in his ear, "It's Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee," before Stewart kissed her too long.

Norman coughed and Teresea actually blushed before saying as she pulled away, "Forevermore, Stewart."

* * *

After the Reception Dinner
In the first floor Ball Room

Watching Teresea dance with her father, Stewart envied Mr. Henderson's height, which nearly matched Norman's. He glanced back at his own father, whose happiness spread a glow across their table. Nearly moved to tears, Stewart couldn't remember the last time his father had smiled. Losing Mother had jolted both of them. She'd kept her misery and cancer doctor appointments to herself, as if illness was unladylike.

They'd both had only minutes to say goodbye, before she smiled for the final time and closed her eyes. Nearly two years had passed, but Stewart missed the steadfastness of her love. He knew he could count on Teresea's strong affection as much as he had relied on Mother's.

Stewart moved his chair closer to Father and tried to whisper over the dance music, "I quit my job."

"What?" Father asked cupping his hand around his good ear.

"Boss wanted me to make an insider trade."

Father nodded his head, suddenly grim again.

Stewart patted his back. "I told Teresea before the wedding."

A tentative smile returned to his father's face. "She reminds me of Jane."

Stewart noticed Tess had been standing way too close, straightening the flower arrangement on the table behind them. Stewart worried she'd heard everything. Teresea always said fear didn't come from the Lord, so Stewart turned his attention back to the dance floor where Norman had taken Teresea's father's place.

Teresea's loveliness was breath taking.

Tess' frown deepened with every dance turn the couple made.

The crowd of unknown guests couldn't help themselves from clapping as Norman professionally waltzed Teresea around the floor.

Stewart asked Tess to dance, but she appeared to be holding back tears and declined.

As Stewart approached the cousins, Teresea stopped. She slipped out of her high-heel shoes and swept up her long train before moving into his arms.

Norman moved toward Tess for a dance, but Tess drew him into the corridor.

"Have you told Norman about my job's complications?" Stewart whispered into Teresea's ear.

"Not yet." Teresea kissed him and Stewart forgot why anything but her perfumed closeness was important in his life.

* * *

Tess had overheard Stewart's confession about being without employment. She stepped out into the corridor where the butler patiently stood as if expecting to be needed.

"Ma'am?" he asked in his usual manner of reluctant servitude.

So she asked him, "What would Norman think of his cousin's chance for a happy marriage if her groom was out of work?"

James dropped his head. "Unfortunately you didn't know in time to stop the wedding."

Tess wished she'd been friendlier to Stewart in his room the day before. He might have confided the news. "There's still time for an annulment."

James opened the door back into the reception hall, whispering as he bent close enough for her to take in a hint of furniture or shoe polish, "Norman needs to be told."

When Norman approached Tess for a dance she whispered to him, "I need just a minute away from all this noise."

Norman had taken her hand and followed her pull into the outer hall. "Business getting you down?"

James had disappeared. Mikey stood in his place.

"No," Tess fluffed her hair hoping her perfume would remind her husband whom he was talking to. "Teresea just married a loser."

Norman turned to revisit the reception. "I understand your jealousy, but you needn't malign the poor guy."

"He doesn't have a job." Tess tried to keep her voice low.

Norman turned to her and shook her. "That's not true."

Mikey's growl was low.

"I heard him tell his father just a moment ago." Tess stepped toward him but he pulled away.

"You must have gotten it wrong." For a heartbeat Norman stared at her and then rushed into the ballroom.

* * *

The world slipped away for Teresea as she moved into Stewart's hug. Her stocking feet kept time to the music but her mind was far away from any words in the lyrics. Here was her life-mate holding her as if they could mesh into each other's souls forevermore.

Teresea's parents interrupted Stewart's dancing embrace.

"When will you cut the cake, dear?" Mother said.

Father glared down at Stewart. "The camera crew is getting antsy."

Norman drew Teresea aside before she had time to slip into her shoes. She held onto the train of her dress not wanting it to sweep the floor.

"We have to cut the cake." She tried to explain reaching out an arm for Stewart to rescue her from her insistent cousin.

Stewart picked up Teresea's shoes by their back straps.

Putting one hand on Teresea's neck, Norman leaned down to say in a stage whisper, "Stewart doesn't have a job."

"What?" Father had heard. He turned his fury in Stewart's direction. "What's this?"

"Nevermind, Father." Teresea reclaimed Stewart's left hand that didn't hold her shoes. "I knew before we married."

Mother's mouth hung a bit open, before she nearly shouted, "You both have been lying to all of us!"

Stewart laughed when Teresea dropped his hand. His eyes snapping like a madman's, he whirled Teresea's shoes over his head and slammed them into the wedding cake. "Short people have feelings, too," he said.

"Stewart!" was all Teresea could manage to say. When had her teddy bear turned into an idiot grizzly?

Norman let out his frustration by punching Stewart in the jaw, who then fell into Mr. North's arms and they both tumbled into the wedding cake table.

The wedding photographer was happily filming the incident.

Teresea motioned to Father to rid the man of his camera. She stared at Stewart who suddenly seemed a stranger to her. Why was he acting so rudely to her family? Was he taking offense at their closeness?

She tiptoed un-shod to the lounge next door away from the gawking wedding reception crowd of unknown faces.

Stewart and his father had already taken advantage of the sanctuary. Both had discarded their ruined coats.

"Are you injured?" she asked.

"Just our pride," Mr. North said. "Not much other collateral damage."

"Norman's always been a hothead." Teresea spread the skirt of her wedding dress across the couch to uninvite anyone to sit next to her. "I should have told him earlier, but I didn't see it as a big deal."

"That's a good thing," Mr. North said to Stewart.

"I knew I could count on you." Stewart knelt beside the arm of the couch. "I'm sorry about your shoes and the cake. Tess heard me tell Father about Tedler. She must have put a negative slant on the news when she told Norman."

Teresea laughed. "Anything to discredit me in front of Norman would do."

Both men shook their heads.

"Impossible to do," Mr. North said.

"You are more beautiful. Your intelligence shines four times as bright, and your height alone ..." Stewart laughed nervously as he got up. "Tess must be under a lot of pressure to measure up to you in Norman's eyes."

"Norman doesn't trust her," Teresea said.

"Another good thing," Mr. North said.

Norman knocked before slipping into the room. He locked the door behind him. "Please forgive me," he said. "My wife loves to stir things up."

"All our nerves have been strung a bit tight," Mr. North said.

"I understand," Stewart said rubbing his chin. "I'll make sure I'm out of range next time you feel the need to vent. I think Tess's jealousy of Teresea motivated her."

Norman laughed. He turned toward the door for a second and then swept Teresea's dress to the side and sat down beside her. "Tess is probably grinding her teeth out there."

"Or terrifying my parents," Teresea said, nearly rising.

Stewart placed his hands on her shoulders from behind the couch. "Let them stew. They decided to get angry easily enough. They can get it over it the same way. Teresea, tell Norman about your grandmother."

"She tossed Stewart out of bed last night."

"Into yours?" Norman's skepticism filled the room.

Teresea ignored the implication. "She said we were to save you. From whom?"

"Tess is meanness incarnate - at times." Norman pulled on his nose. "At others, like last night she can be quite winsome."

Mr. North rumbled his thinning hair. "A divorced friend of mine said his last night with his wife, before he left her for a younger woman, he spent kissing his toys goodbye. Stewart always played most with his oldest toys right before Christmas."

"Tess isn't going anywhere." Norman stood and paced between the door and the couch. "She has everything she wants here. Or, so she said last night."

"Did you tell her about changing your will?" Teresea asked.

"She'll find out soon enough," Norman said. "After I'm gone."

"I would tell her, Norman." Teresea motioned for Stewart to sit down next to her. "Then she'll be very careful of your health."

Norman laughed. "I think Grandma would agree with you. Now about your job, Stewart. You do have redress, if they fired you because of your integrity. The legal doors are wide open for compensation."

"No witness to his directions," Stewart said.

"Not good," Mr. North said.

"Let's not jump to the wrong conclusions." Norman smiled, "Not apply what has happened in the past to what's happening in the present. This is your wedding night after all."

Unhappy to slant the conversation in a negative direction, Stewart hesitated before asking, "Why did you marry a woman with my wife's name?"

"Superstitious, I guess." Norman walked to the fireplace and stared up at his unhappy relative. "I hoped for the best...to death us do part."

"Even then," Father said. "Sorry. The wedding has brought Jane into my thoughts again. She seems to pull me to her side of existence."

"She's been gone for two years," Stewart explained.

"Still," Father said. "I can see why partners die like black swans from broken hearts within twenty-four hours. Jane does seem to want me with her."

"We need you here, Mr. North," Teresea said. "Perhaps your wife is enjoying our disaster."

“Or all these flower arrangements have conjured up Mother’s funeral,” Stewart got up and hugged his father. “Let’s celebrate today.”

* * *

In the guest bedroom, Teresea’s satin nightgown wasn’t warm enough, so she reluctantly pulled up the white comforter. Had she applied too much perfume? She lifted her blonde hair high onto the pillowcase to keep it from getting in the way of Stewart’s lovemaking. She hoped it caught the shimmering light from the candles.

Candelabras were lit on the two dressers and over the warming gas fireplace. On the bedside tables, red-shaded electrical lamps resembled 19th century fixtures.

Stewart was taking a long time for an expectant groom. She had rushed her shower to be first in bed, planning to awe him with her supine beauty. Her fingertips pulsed with anticipation. Of course they’d played around a bit, but his Christian upbringing didn’t allow much sexual freedom.

Maybe he was having trouble with the condom, or maybe it had broken. Surely he’d packed spares. They hadn’t planned to have children immediately. She didn’t hear a sound in his bathroom.

Finally, she called his name. Was he waiting for her to signal she was ready? She pushed aside the blanket. “Stewart, is everything all right?”

“No,” she heard him say softly. Then he opened the door a crack. “I’m too nervous.”

“Well come to bed, dear. We can snuggle again tonight, can’t we?”

A gust of relief burst from him. He hopped into bed and covered them both with the comforter.

Teresea moved to his side.

Norman held her in his arms, kissing her with grateful passion. "Before Tedler approached me," he said, kissing her cleavage, "I leased an apartment with a view of the Huron River, you know close to Gallup Park and the VA hospital."

"We'll be able to manage it. Are you worried about our income?"

"The only thing I'm *not* worried about is your love. Everything else seems up for grabs." He rolled on his back and put the arm that wasn't around her over his head, pulling on the curls she loved to touch.

"If you don't stop pulling on your hair," Teresea stifled a laugh. "You'll be bald before you're a father."

"But what's to be done?"

"Lawyers will figure it out." Teresea felt suddenly tired, too exhausted to think about tomorrow. Action would have kept her awake but Stewart's voice always relaxed her.

"It will be my word against his" Stewart was yanking at his curls again. "We should go back to call the Securities and Exchange Commission." Stewart nudged her shoulder. "Before he accuses me."

That woke her up. Teresea was out of bed. "You call the airlines. I'll pack. We need to clear your name."

"Will your cousin understand why we need to leave?"

"Norman is on our side, remember." She wondered if Norman would mind being disturbed in the middle of the night. "I'll write him an explanation."

The note Teresea slipped under Norman's bedroom door read, "Gone back to the States to clear Stewart's name with the SEC. I'll call as soon as we arrive in New York. All my love that isn't given to my husband, the original Teresea."

* * *

Sunday, November 17th

Sunday morning, Tess had jumped out of bed as soon as her eyes opened. It was still dark outside. When she turned on the lights Teresea's white note jammed under the door caught her attention. "Gone back to the States to clear Stewart's name with the SEC. I'll call as soon as we arrive in New York. All my love that isn't given to my husband, the original Teresea."

Tess struggled not to tear up the note. It was true Tess had fabricated her own name after she'd heard Norman's previous secretary complain about hearing the name Teresea everyday. Tess needed the job and assuming the unusual name seemed to make sense at the time. It wasn't that different from her own.

At least the Norths would be out of the Hall. After donning her robe, she went around to Norman's side of the bed to show him the note.

A pink and bubbly residue of drool had ruined the silk pillowcase.

When she touched his shoulder to scold him, she realized he was gone.

She sat down hard on the floor and stuffed Teresea's note under the bed. They'd be back now. The Norths would need to attend Norman's funeral.

Anger flowed through her limbs and she stood.

James needed to help.

When the butler arrived, standing at the door as if reluctant to be of any service, as usual, Tess could only point at Norman's body.

James went crazy after he tried to find Norman's pulse. He tried to pull the damaged pillowcase off the pillow, as if cleaning up the bed would change anything. He stopped, turned to her and yelled, "When did he die?"

Tess slid down the door. She'd always known the butler avoided her, but not the extent of his hatred. "Call the police," she said. "They will tell you I couldn't hurt Norman."

James came toward her as if confused. He stopped whatever he was going to say and left the room.

She'd dressed by the time the police arrived, wondering if jeans and a black sweater was the correct attire for a widow. Her black silk suit would do for the funeral, but she'd never experienced being questioned by the police.

Should she tell them Norman had caught her stealing from a wedding party earlier in the year? He'd threatened to call the police. The money meant for the couple had been left by the dithering mother of the bride on the buffet table, while the couple went upstairs to dress for the honeymoon trip. Of course, she gave it back and refused to admit she'd meant to keep it. They were so rich and she -- had never really been anything but impoverished, except when Norman married her. Now he was gone?

A skinny policewoman, Miss Smrt, came up to the bedroom. "Detective Burress is waiting downstairs."

Mikey had followed the woman into the room. His ears were down as if he knew trouble was brewing for his mistress.

'I'll be right down. Do I look all right?'

Miss Smrt frowned and held the door open for her. "Mr. Robert Koelz is your lawyer?"

"Norman's," Tess said. "Do I need a lawyer?"

Miss Smrt didn't answer so Tess followed her down the stairs, lightly touching Mikey's head. James was nowhere in sight.

In Norman's library the tall detective didn't offer his hand when he introduced himself. "Detective Burress, ma'am. Mr. Koelz tells us your husband signed a new will last night."

Koelz was standing near his friend, the sherry decanter. He nodded in agreement. "Did Norman tell you?" he asked, licking his moustache.

"I knew you were up to something, but he didn't tell me," Tess said. "How did he change it?"

Koelz poured himself a glass before answering. He looked her straight in the face as if to gauge her reaction. "His cousin, Teresea Henderson North, has been given ownership of the Pierrepont Hall."

"Nonsense," Tess said. She curled up on the couch wondering if grabbing the comforter would be too dramatic. "I run the business."

Mikey laid his paw on her knee, tipping his head as if he was trying to understand what was happening.

Detective Burress shook his head. "If you don't mind, we'd like to take you down to the station to interview?"

"Why not here," Tess asked.

"No recording equipment," Miss Smrt volunteered.

Mikey growled when James appeared with Tess' coat.

"James," Tess said. "Make sure the stack of envelopes on my desk are mailed this morning."

"I doubt a wedding will be held here next week," he said, stubborn as ever. "Don't you think Norman's funeral should take precedence?"

Tess bowed her head. Apparently her distress wasn't letting her think straight.

In the back seat of the police car she looked back at Pierrepont Hall where Mikey stood with his tail drooping. She didn't own it anymore? How could Norman have been that cruel? Free-floating anger claimed her soul. She should have killed Norman before his precious Teresea ever arrived.

James was standing at the open door, too. He moved his right arm as if to stop them or wave, but he let it drop to his side.

Tess watched as the butler fished in his pocket for a dog treat, but Mikey ran after the police car.

Chapter Three

Sunday, November 17th

Delta Flight out of Heathrow

On the delayed flight out of London, Stewart held Teresea's hand after he'd fastened his seatbelt. Tonight they would stay at his apartment. In the morning they'd call a lawyer and the Securities Exchange Commission. His eyelids felt heavy.

When was it he'd heard airlines often lowered the oxygen levels so passengers would fall asleep during take off?

Teresea withdrew her hand.

Stewart opened his eyes at a commotion at the front of the plane. Two uniformed English Bobbies marched down the aisle towards them.

The older of the two barked, "Mr. and Mrs. Stewart North?"

"Yes?" Teresea answered.

Stewart unbuckled his seat belt. "How can we help you, officers?"

"Please come with us," the youngest said. "Do you have carry-on luggage?"

Teresea followed the first officer and Stewart marched behind her after helping pull down their luggage.

"We've off-loaded your other suitcases," the policeman behind him said.

They were taken to an inner room at Heathrow airport without windows and told to wait. Teresea sat down immediately, but Stewart couldn't seem to bend his body. He kept his worries to himself. Were they being arrested in England for insider trading in the States? Why had they included Teresea in the arrest? Did they - who were they - think she was involved. He wanted to shout, "We're innocent," but no one was in the room and Teresea seemed stricken.

"It's Norman," she said.

"Norman had us pulled off the plane?"

Teresea shook her head.

Stewart thought she might cry at any moment, so he sat down beside her and began patting her knee. "Tess might have drummed up something. I would think she'd be thrilled to have us out of Pierrepont Hall."

"Why?" Teresea asked. Her lashes were wet with tears.

"Nothing, nothing." Stewart wished he'd kept his thoughts to himself. "You and Norman are so close, it's hard to come between you two."

"But Stewart..." Teresea was interrupted.

A man and woman, both wearing suits and ties, entered the room. Stewart thought he heard the woman say, "Sorry for your loss," under her breath.

The man glared at his partner before he introduced himself. "Detective Burress." He nodded towards the woman, "Miss Smrt. We have unfortunate news."

Stewart felt one of Teresea's tears drop on his hand.

"It's Norman, my cousin."

"How did you know?" Miss Smrt asked in a cold, suspicious tone.

"They are cousins." Stewart hoped the blood relationship was answer enough. Had Teresea remembered her grandmother's warning? "What happened?"

"An investigation is underway," Detective Burress said.

"Will he recover?" Stewart asked. Norman was such a giant of a man, surely no significant harm had come to him."

"No," Teresea said. "He's dead."

Miss Smrt made a knowing smirk in Detective Burress' direction, but he ignored her. "Unfortunately, his wife reported him dead when she awoke this morning."

"Why have we been detained?" Stewart pulled his coat collar closer to his neck. The room had developed a draft, but the door was shut. He thought he smelled Old Spice shaving cream...maybe from Burress.

Teresea turned a shocked expression his way. "Why, to attend the funeral."

"Yes," Detective Burress said. "However on our initial inquiry, a Mr. Robert Koelz, his lawyer, informed us Mr. Henderson signed a new will last evening, which you also signed, Mr. North?"

"Yes," Stewart said. "Neither the butler or I had time to read the will."

"Your wife, Mr. North, has been named the new owner of Pierrepont Hall." Miss Smrt's tone implied the news was reason enough to arrest both of them.

* * *

Pierrepont Hall

In the back of the unmarked police car, Teresea held onto both of Stewart's hands. "Norman thought he could persuade Tess. Love her until she loved herself enough to create humanity out of the stuff of greed."

"Never having enough is a sin by itself.' Stewart withdrew his hand from her grasp and put his arm around Teresea's shoulder. "Did you and Norman know Tess as a child?"

Teresea envisioned children dashing between the giant evergreens on Pierrrepoint's lawn, but none of them resembled Tess. "I don't. The Bedlam twins played with us. Norman and I corresponded faithfully for years, He never mentioned meeting Tess. She worked for him in London. Service indicates a giving personality, doesn't it?"

"Certainly no hint of a grasping, jealous nature." Stewart sighed. "I thought if you knew her as a child she might have had a history of bullying or hurting small animals."

"Do you remember anyone pulling the wings off butterflies, or the like?"

"On the farm my older sister turned turtles on their backs to watch them struggle to flip back over. And the neighbor boys cut the whiskers off our cats."

"Any resulting criminal acts?"

Stewart chuckled. "I told you, Mary divorced three men and broke dozens of hearts. I haven't told her I planned to marry you."

"Did the neighbors form a gang?"

"Nope." Stewart began yanking on his hair. "They did leave the farm to become investment bankers."

"Robbers all the same. Norman was always such a fine little chap, generous to a fault. He always included James, the butler, and his brother, John, in our games; even though they weren't family." Teresea couldn't hide her tears. "He knew Tess was rapacious but said marriage was forevermore. He thought he could influence her by his good example."

"We should have listened to your grandmother's warning."

"Who knew his own wife might put him in any danger. I wish Grandmother would tell us what happened."

"Or Norman." Stewart said.

When Pierrepont Hall came into view, Teresea compared the dingy gray stones of the building to the bright yellows on their arrival. The absence of sunlight was the culprit. The castle's wet stones reflected the dull grays of the low hanging clouds. With Norman gone the place held no attraction to her. Her stomach hurt as if she'd swallowed too many aspirin. Who would help Stewart now with his legal difficulties? What was she going to do with this gift of a worn out castle? She couldn't very well run a bridal hotel in England and spend time to clear Stewart's name back in the States. How long could she keep her own advertising job at L'Oreal while she was detained in England?

More importantly, even with her new husband by her side, who would fill the void of Norman's personality. No one. He had been her life-long friend, someone to go to when the world was too cold or too demanding. He had been her buffer against all else. She hung her head and prayed earnestly. *Forgive me, Lord, you are always with me – even now.*

The peace that no one understands filled her soul and she lifted her chin. With God all things were possible – even weathering this terrible loss of Norman.

"We have each other," she said to Stewart, who let go of his hair.

"And the Lord's strength in adversity," Stewart quoted. "We certainly have been set upon."

* * *

Stewart grinned when the detectives appeared as shocked as he had been when the bellboys rushed out of the house and gathered up their entire luggage. Their actions steadied Stewart as if all was right in his world. Repetition held value.

Tess's dog, Mikey, followed them into the Hall whimpering

"Where is Mrs. Henderson?" Teresea asked one of the young valets as she petted the dog.

"Oh, we have her at the station," The boney Miss Smrt said.

Stewart turned to Detective Burress for a fuller explanation.

"She's a material witness," he said. "She'll be detained until the autopsy report is completed."

Teresea shook her head. "Stewart, won't Mr. Koelz post bail for her?"

Robert Koelz rushed to them from Norman's library. "How did they find you?"

Stewart looked at Teresea, who was busy trying to soothe Tess's dog. "Teresea left Norman a note."

Detective Burress said, "As soon as we found you were both out of the house, I alerted the airlines."

Koelz straightened his cravat. "I don't understand why they needed to delay your return to the States."

Teresea interrupted his musings, "Go with them to see that Tess is released into your custody. We can't defame Norman's memory by leaving his widow in jail."

"After all she's done?" Robert asked.

"We don't know anything," Teresea said. "Did Tess even know about the new will?"

The police seemed to agree with her and Robert Koelz went with them to have Tess released. Why would Tess have killed Norman if it meant she might lose possession of her home?

"James," Teresea called.

Mikey growled.

The butler appeared immediately as if he'd been lurking behind one of the entryway pillars. "How may I help?"

"Could you inform your brother we need to start funeral arrangements for Norman."

"Yes, ma'am. But we will need to know when they plan to release Mr. Henderson's remains."

Stewart caught Teresea's elbow as she sagged against him. "A chair, James." Teresea still needed him even though her stamina at the news of Norman's death surprised him. She did know before she was told. Miss. Smrt had caught that too.

One of the bellboys dropped his load of bags to push a chair under Teresea.

"It comes in waves," Teresea explained white-faced. "The awareness that Norman is gone."

Mikey lay down next to Teresea's chair.

"My brother and I will take care of all the arrangements," James said. "I've had a lunch prepared for you and your parents in the downstairs dining room. Glenn, here will see to your needs."

Glenn took off his red bellboy hat in respect for the dead and directed them to the dining room opposite the library. Stewart had forgotten Teresea's parents were still in the residence. He didn't relish meeting with them again. "Has my father, Mr. North, left for the airport?"

"No." James' face cracked into a tentative smile. "He's already in the dining room."

Stewart felt his tight chest expand with relief. He needed to vent his opinions of Tess's innocence to someone not directly related to Norman. As a non-believer she took refuge in material things, but he'd seen evidence that she loved her husband.

* * *

For Teresea Sunday mornings buffet's food choices all smelled bad and tasted like sawdust. She drank three glasses of water trying to swallow something, anything. Her legs felt wobbly and she wanted to regain strength by eating but nothing would go down without an avalanche of water.

Sitting as close to her hip as he could, Mikey benefitted from her lack of appetite with the scraps of toast she fed him.

Teresea recognized the stages of grief, denial, anger, acceptance, and sadness. In which part of the schedule were the bereaved unable to eat? Probably anger. She did feel like throwing dishes against the wall and screaming for all she was worth. Why had Norman died? Had someone not seen his generous soul?

Only Tess came to mind. How long had Tess despised Norman? How did a person find the audacity to plan another human being's murder? Surely the changing of the will couldn't have infuriated her enough to do him any harm. Unless there was a deep-seated hatred in her past of men, of rich men? Maybe Norman's drinking had stopped his heart. In the meantime, the Lord, had asked his followers not to judge others less they be judged themselves.

Teresea looked at her plate. Was Tess capable of poisoning them all? How long would she have been incarcerated and was bringing her back a good idea? What could she gain from killing Norman? At least, she must have known Norman would never divorce her."

Father's appetite held no qualms about poisoning. Mr. North's competition for the last of the bacon strips and Mother's dainty consumption of her third cinnamon rolls bore witness to Teresea's irrational fears.

Mr. North noticed Mother's empty plate and refilled it from the buffet, patting her shoulder as he sat back down next to her.

Father scowled. "Does he need to touch my wife? We had to cancel our return flights, too. How long does an autopsy take?"

Stewart blushed, bless him. "I'm unfamiliar with the procedure."

Mother seemed to sympathize. "This is a first for all of us. Teresea, James says you own the castle now."

Teresea gulped down the grief threatening to explode at them. "Norman's loss will never be replaced...." She couldn't continue.

"These cold stones hold no value when you compare them to the cousins' bond." Stewart folded his napkin. "Father, would you go for a walk with me when you're finished."

"Certainly." Mr. North rose immediately. "We won't be long."

Teresea felt the loss as Stewart and his father left the room.

Mikey bumped her knee with his nose. She stroked the abandoned dog's head, believing Mikey understood her grief.

What could she say to these people, her parents? Father seemed less loving than when she'd lived with him. He was never an effusive person. Mother's confusion mirrored Teresea's. What was her next right step? "I need to unpack. Mother. Tomorrow we'll need to shop for black suits or dresses."

Mother's voice turned cheery. "Could James arrange a car to take us into town?"

Father stood and then sat back down. "Do you mind if I come along? I've nothing to do here."

"There is the library." Teresea said, not willing to have him direct their purchases.

"I'll keep my mouth shut," Father winked at her. "I don't want to be alone with your husband and his father. And I'm not comfortable using Norman's library, yet."

Teresea resigned herself to his company for the shopping diversion. She looked around the room. Was she supposed to realize she owned this monstrosity of a house? Would Tess be able to keep the marriage-ceremony business running? How would they get along, now that Norman had changed everything?

She wished Stewart had stayed with her. He was her future. These walls only threatened their plans to free him from Tedler's mess. Stewart alone helped her hang onto the brightness in her heart against the dead weight of Norman's death.

At the head of the table in Norman's customary chair Teresea saw a fleeting shadow move. Now she was losing her mind as well as her appetite.

Mikey's ears were up and his tail rigid, pointing to the unseen thing.

* * *

Stewart's father's strides around the edges of the Pierrepont grounds kept pace with Stewart's. Were his father's thoughts as meandering and redundant as his own? How could Teresea and he be in two places at the same time? He needed to stay with her in England, but he meant to clear up the insider trading threat hanging over their heads in the States.

"You need a couple of good lawyers," Father said. "Shouldn't Koelz have gone with Tess when they took her to the police station?"

"He was probably happy to see her arrested. Sorry detained. Koelz was cheerful enough when he witnessed the new will that disinherited her."

"Why didn't you read the will?"

"I was in a trusting mood and thought Teresea knew what I was signing. But she had no idea the house would be hers."

"Perhaps Koelz can suggest a lawyer in Michigan."

"Remember Teresea's father is a partner in his law firm in Ann Arbor."

"I'd rather you found someone without a vested interest. You want a comprehensive view of the situation. And, Mr. Henderson will probably want to stay here with his daughter until things settle down."

"Just imagine. As Teresea's husband I own half of all this." Stewart pointed to the castle that resembled a low gray factory with ostentatious towers randomly tacked on.

"And a lot of good it will do you." Father laughed. "Sorry, I laugh inappropriately when I'm confused with life's changes."

Stewart hugged his father's shoulders. "I'm at a loss, too. As I told you, the night before the wedding, Norman and Teresea's grandmother had a great time trying to scare me to death."

"In Norman's old room?"

"She told me we needed to save Norman. So I went down to Teresea's bed."

"Why didn't you wake up Norman?"

"Norman was all right at the wedding. Remember in the lounge when we told him about his grandmother, he made light of it. We had cautioned him to explain to Tess about the new will, too. If he did tell her, why would she hurt him? She's homeless now."

"I still believe it was good advise." Father turned back toward the Hall. "Let's get back before this drizzle turns into a downpour.."

* * *

Monday, November 18th

Teresea stood at the door when the police returned Tess to Pierrepont Hall. "I'm glad you're home, Tess."

Mikey jumped on his mistress, paws on her shoulders, licking her face with joy.

"He thought I'd left for good," Tess said. But Tess hung her head when James offered to take her wet coat. She flashed an angry look in Teresea's direction. "I find it difficult to believe you are glad to see me.'

"We need to talk," Teresea said. "James, would you bring some refreshments into the library. Mr. Koelz, would you find my father and Stewart and have them join us. We need your advice."

After James closed the library door on them, Tess tucked her feet under her as she sat on the stuffed leather chair before the fireplace. "It's cold for this time of year."

Mikey sat down on the rug next to Tess, watching Teresea's movements as if she might threaten Tess.

Teresea offered a blanket from the couch. Tess declined. Not knowing how to start the business conversation, Teresea attempted small talk, "I don't know how long the rain is scheduled to last."

"Did you arrange for the funeral at St. Edmund's?" Tess asked.

"We don't know when they'll release Norman's body." Teresea sank unto the couch. "I'm sorry for your loss, Tess."

"And you yours." Tess wiped at her dry eyes. "He's irreplaceable."

Mikey placed his nose on Tess' knee.

"Tess, will you help me take care of the Pierrepont Hall business?" Teresea found her handkerchief and blotted her wet face.

"Under what arrangements?" Mr. Koelz had joined them.

"Would a salary or commission be appropriate?" Teresea asked.

"I'd need a basic salary and a commission rate to keep me motivated."

Koelz nodded to Teresea.

"Good," Teresea said. She turned towards Koelz, who was pouring himself a glass of sherry. "How long will the transition take?"

Tess answered. "A week or two after the funeral should be enough time, don't you think, Koelz?"

"Yes, yes," Koelz said. "Unless there are added impediments."

"Such as?" Tess asked.

Mikey growled in reaction to her changed tone.

"Well," Koelz swallowed the contents of his glass. "We don't know what the police need for remedy in the case."

Teresea's father and Stewart entered the library. Stewart sat down next to Teresea.

Father positioned himself so that they could all see his disapproving frown. "What's to be done now?"

"Tess will run Pierrepont Hall for me." Teresea said.

Stewart nodded his head, but Father shouted. "From jail?"

Mikey barked and Tess stood. "I'm tired," she said, tapping Mikey's head to reassure him. "I'll join you for dinner, if you'll excuse me."

Mikey followed her out.

Teresea shook her head at her father. "That wasn't necessary. No criminal charges have been brought against Tess. I need her to help out here so that Stewart and I can go to the States to clear his name."

Peace reigned as James wheeled in a tea cart loaded with sandwiches and cakes. He poured Teresea a cup before offering Stewart, and her father cups. Stewart loaded his plate with sandwiches and cake. Father took three of the small cakes.

Stewart sipped at his tea before rising to his feet. "Mr. Henderson, I need a lawyer in Ann Arbor to start proceedings against Tedler."

"I'll call my firm for you," Father said. "They'll phone you tomorrow morning for details."

Stewart coughed. "I may need someone outside of your firm."

"Of course," Father said. He sat down in the chair Tess had vacated. "Koelz, will Teresea need any legal help here?"

“Not so far,” Koelz said, heading back to the desktop that held the sherry decanters. “We’ll wait on the police to see if they have enough unanswered questions to prosecute anyone.”

“Not Teresea?” Stewart asked.

“No, no,” Koelz said, keeping his eyes on the floor as he sipped his sherry.

“Who will run the business if Tess is implicated?” Father asked.

Teresea threw up her arms. “I can only act on the information I have.”

“Certainly,” Stewart said reclaiming his seat next to her.

Father’s frown deepened. “If you need funds for the legal fees, this castle might be mortgage free.”

“It is,” Koelz said, raising his glass toward the door. “Tess is a great income generating dynamo.”

* * *

Just outside the library’s closed door, James heard Koelz’s sarcastic remark. After watching Tess haltingly climb the stairs to her office, he’d lingered behind to find out what the new owners had in mind. Poor Tess he wanted to reassure her with his plans for their future.

Mikey sat at the bottom of the steps, looking up at his mistress’ closed office door and back at James.

James fished in his pocket for the dog treats to seduce Mikey’s loyalty. He held them out to Mikey, who trotted over, sniffed and declined to take any from his hand. James dropped the treats. Mikey snapped them up and then bounded up the steps to lie down in front of Tess’ office door.

If he couldn’t tame Mikey, how could he enlighten Tess about his schemes without disclosing everything he’d already accomplished? Unfortunately, Mikey would need to be dispatched it seemed.

How did some people have all the luck? If the Norths didn't leave or Tess was incarcerated, his future spent as master to the brick expanse of Pierrepont hall was in jeopardy. No wonder some people took to praying.

Chapter Four

Monday, November 18th
Nottinghamshire Police Station

The smells of coffee combined with wet coats and dirty boots scarcely welcomed Teresea to the town's peacekeeping premise. Detective Burress had shed his suit coat and tie. His blue dress shirt showed perspiration stains under his arms. Miss Smrt still wore her black suit coat but she'd taken off her tie and opened the throat of her blouse down far enough to show a slim hint of cleavage. Probably the reason for the overheated detective, since the rooms were damp and chilly.

Teresea pulled on the fur collar of her coat to relish her Arpeage perfume.

Stewart banged a chair into the metal table before successfully pulling out one for her and Robert Koelz.

Robert declined to sit. "We won't be here long."

Miss Smrt sat down opposite Stewart.

Burress pulled a chair away from the wall for Koelz to join them at the head of the table, before sitting down in front of Teresea. He smiled half-heartedly. "It's true this shouldn't take long. We have the results back from London's lab. Norman Henderson was poisoned when he drank a glass of sherry.

Robert nearly collapsed into the awaiting chair. "I drank from the same decanter."

"Are you absolutely sure?" Miss Smrt patted Robert's hand.

He quickly placed his hand in his lap. "Teresea you were there. Didn't Norman pour me a glass from the same bottle?"

Teresea tried to recall. She bowed her head and let her hair fall over her shoulders, tenting her view of the room. "Stewart declined a glass before he went up the ladder to the balcony. I had a glass, but refused a second. Robert, you came in and Norman offered you a glass. Didn't he fill another for you immediately? And then Tess came in and moved the tray and glasses over to the desk."

"I poured myself two after she moved the tray." Robert wiped his brow.

Burress asked. "Were there two decanters on the tray?"

Robert answered, "No just one, half-filled by the time Tess arrived. Have you tested the sherry?"

Miss Smrt got up to attend to the business.

Teresea turned to Stewart. "What do you remember?"

"I was talking with Koelz on the book balcony and then Norman had us sign the will."

"Didn't you three drink another glass of sherry after the signing," Teresea asked still unable to fully reconstruct the scene.

Burress flipped a switch on the recording device on the wall behind him. "Let's start over. Mrs. North had Norman been drinking before he offered you a glass of sherry?"

"He had two while I sipped at my first," Teresea said. "No three."

Robert chuckled. "Couldn't have been the sherry then."

"I drank coffee," Stewart said, "Two cups before Robert arrived."

"Was there coffee in the room when you entered?" Burress asked.

"No," Stewart said, "James Bedlam, the butler, brought it in with a tea cart."

"The poison didn't take affect immediately?" Teresea was thinking out loud. "Norman, attended the rehearsal dinner, the wedding and the reception yesterday before succumbing during the night?"

Burrress agreed. "The sherry in the library didn't poison him. He must have had some before retiring. We'll need to question Mrs. Henderson again."

"Could you come to the house, instead of dragging Tess here?" Teresea asked. She hoped she hadn't wrinkled her nose to show her dislike of the police station.

Burrress nodded. "I understand. We'll need to search the premises, too."

* * *

Pierrepoint Hall

James was waiting at the open door for them to return. "Sorry, Mrs. North, the staff has asked me to speak to you, as the new owner."

Teresea followed him into the study after touching Stewart's shoulder. No doubt some castle business threatened the butler's normal calm.

James stood with his back to the door, facing the unlit fireplace.

Teresea tried to shut the heavy door quietly, but he turned to face her. "The entire staff has demanded Mrs. Henderson be removed from Pierrepoint Hall or they will desert us." He stretched a bit taller in his shoes. "And I agree with them."

"What am I to do with her?" She had thought the staff would appreciate her aim to keep Norman's name out of the press. "She's under Robert Koelz's guardianship, while she isn't incarcerated - as a material witness, that is."

James interrupted, "There is Cozy Cottage in Nottinghamshire. It's a bed-and-breakfast, quite expensive. Perhaps Koelz could put her up there?"

"Should I try to convince the staff otherwise?"

"I'm afraid they don't feel safe in the same house with a suspicioned killer."

"Nothing has been determined," Teresea stalled for time. How was she going to run the place without Tess? "The police are coming here to question her further."

"Good," James said heading for the door. "Perhaps they'll take her back with them."

Teresea collapsed onto the couch. "Norman," she called aloud. "What a mess you've left me with."

Blessed Stewart opened the library door. "Can I help?"

"I'm afraid so," Teresea rose and hugged him as if her life depended on his presence and perhaps it did. "The staff wants to leave unless Tess is removed."

Stewart nodded. "I understand."

"Could you take her to the bed-and-breakfast in town? James will give you the address. I'll go up and help her pack. I'm going to tell her she'll be able to come back as soon as the police figure this out."

"That might take a while," Stewart said. "Tell her we'll bring her whatever she needs during her stay."

Upstairs Tess seemed too docile about her need to leave the house. She kept her head down as she packed a few things in a small, roller bag.

However, when they exited her bedroom, James held out his hand for her bag.

Mikey seemed overly excited, jumping onto the suitcase and knocking it out of Tess' hand.

Tess left the bag in the hall and walked past James to the room next door.

Teresea hadn't been in Tess's office before. The room was bright with sunshine. Colorful file folders littered the floor. Wooden file cabinets lined the walls with requisite philodendron crowning each.

"I'll just be a minute," Tess said, trying to shut the door on them after Mikey slipped into the room..

James held the door open for Teresea to enter. "You're not planning to take your laptop?"

Teresea thought she might defend Tess's need to stay connected to the business, but James was insistent.

"We don't need you deleting future business contacts," he said.

Teresea tried to touch Tess's arm to apologize for the necessity, but Tess pulled away and stomped out of the room and down the steps with Mikey shadowing her.

"Thank you, James," Teresea said. "Of course, we need to defend Norman's business."

James ducked his head a bit. "Looking out for my job," he said.

* * *

Tess wondered if she should ask for an anger management class. If she'd had a gun she would have tried to shoot both James and Teresea.

James acted as if she'd already been tried and convicted. He'd always encouraged the staff to second-guess her decisions and directions. Now he had the upper hand and it was payback time.

As far as Tess was concerned, Teresea needn't occupy space on earth, much less Pierrepont Hall. What was Norman thinking? Teresea didn't love the Hall. She wanted to get back to her fancy job in Ann Arbor where she probably only had to show up to get a paycheck.

Pierrepont Hall would go downhill quickly without Tess' know-how and daily chutzpah.

Tess was willing to play along with their combined wrong decisions of where she was to live until the stupid police figured out what had happened to Norman. Did anyone even care that he was dead, besides his wife? Sooner or later Pierrepoint Hall's future belonged to her.

* * *

Nottinghamshire Bed and Breakfast

Stewart's nerves were on edge. Tess seemed unruffled by her temporary ejection from her home.

Mikey had jumped into the back seat and Stewart hadn't had the heart to dissuade him.

Driving on the wrong side of the road didn't help Stewart's composure. "Do you know the way to the cottage?" he asked with a harsh tone he didn't recognize in his voice.

Mikey growled in response.

Tess stared at him for a minute or two before answering. "You're going in the right direction. There will be a sign for Cozy Cottage a street before the house. You can't miss it. So you think I killed my husband, too."

"Why would you say that?" Stewart thought he'd been overly polite, opening the passenger door for her, something Teresea rarely waited for him to attempt.

"Your tone says it all," Tess said. "You don't talk to your wife like that."

Stewart looked for a second in her direction. Was she using the same Arpege perfume Teresea used? An oncoming car beeped for him to get back into his lane.

"You noticed my perfume?"

"How did you know?"

"Your nostrils expanded. There's a saying back in Chicago about a man's nose opening."

“Was that a gangster threat to cut someone’s nose?”

“Not at all,” Tess’s voice seemed to purr. “It’s when a man finds a woman interesting.”

“Your perfume is the same as Teresea’s. How did you manage that?”

“By reading her letters and matching their fragrance at the perfume counter.”

“Why would you go to all the bother?”

“To keep my husband interested in me.”

“By mimicking my wife?” Then a cold feeling entered Stewart’s stomach. “You read my wife’s letters to Norman?”

“And yours,” Tess snickered.

“Mine?”

“Didn’t you know? Your loyal wife sent all your love letters to her cousin to check you out.”

“Never happened,” Stewart said, but his stomach was hurting now.

“Ask her, Bunny.” Tess was enjoying herself.

Bunny was the name Stewart signed all his letters to Teresea, because that was the name she used in private, affectionately.

To keep a cool head, he concentrated on Nottinghamshire’s extraordinary architecture. “Do you know the history of the town?”

“I’m in the tourist business, remember.” Tess began explaining the buildings they passed. “These are the Fothergill Buildings. The Mortimer House, the row of shops and offices, was built in 1883 for Mr. Tate. You’ll notice the roofline is extremely varied and complex as the building runs down the slope between Hounds Gate and around the corner into castle gate. The square tower dominates the top end, while a rounded turret caps the lower end.”

The matter-of-fact tone of Tess's voice persuaded Stewart Tess was incapable of any wrongdoing in Norman's demise. "You would have made a great teacher."

"I don't think I'm cut out to remain a middle-class citizen, but thanks for the compliment." Tess smiled and Stewart felt its cold falseness. Teresea's soul shone when she smiled. He missed her carefree ways and wondered how long grief would stifle her spirit.

Tess continued her descriptions of the town, "The style is less Gothic and more Old English vernacular, or even a touch northern European. Fothergill was greatly influenced by Continental architecture, particularly the buildings of Germany. These are the Fothergill Offices, 15-17 George Street. In 1893 Fothergill had to vacate his Clinton Street, Nottingham offices as the railway was being extended into the heart of Nottingham and the land was needed for the approach to the new Victoria Station. He built his new offices nearby in George Street in a confident, flamboyant Gothic style. Just below the first floor windows are four terra-cotta panels showing the building of classical, medieval and Elizabethan buildings – the last one possibly depicts the construction of Wollaton Hall. The ground floor was designed to be a self-contained shops which Fothergill sub-let, providing an income to pay for his own offices on the upper two floors. Robert Koelz owns the building now and lives upstairs. Actually that's where I first came up with the idea of generating income for the Hall with wedding parties."

"How did you learn all this, from Norman?" Stewart asked.

Tess hissed in disgust. "Norman only interest was family. Anything outside of Piereppont Hall was too distant for him to notice. I knocked on doors; stayed late at the library and read back pages of local newspapers on microfiche. I wanted to give the wedding families a wider view of the area."

They did find the bed-and-breakfast without incident. The two-story architectural nightmare had rounded turrets at every opportunity for a window. The purple and pink painting scheme didn't add to its attractiveness.

Stewart waited for Tess to get out, but she wasn't moving.

"I'll need help with my luggage."

"Of course," he said. After all this woman might keep running Pierrepont Hall long enough for them to return to the States.

On the staircase up to her room, Tess brushed past him, making sure she pressed against him. "Sorry," she said smiling way too close to his face. "I thought I had sufficient room to get by you, but you are a big man, too."

Stewart set her suitcase down just inside the door. "I'll come back with Burress and Smrt. They have a few questions for you."

"Could you lift my bag to the bed?" She patted a place at the bed's foot as she propped her self up against the pillows. "I think I'll sleep better here than at the Hall."

Mikey misunderstood and jumped on the bed.

Stewart was amazed at the sexual implications Tess had created by her suggestive posture, smile, and tone. He'd stayed too long. As he turned away, he wondered if Teresea needed to know the insinuations Tess had offered. Maybe the police should be told, too.

* * *

Nottinghamshire Bed and Breakfast

Tess petted Mikey as he lay next to her on the bed. If there was a God, he'd made dogs better than he'd made men. Her anger at being turned out of her home eased away. Maybe she shouldn't have taken her frustrations out on poor Stewart. She wondered if he'd keep quiet or tell his righteous wife. If she was going to be treated as the villain, she might as well act the part.

Mikey whined.

"Nevermind," she said. "Mikey's a good boy - even if no one thinks I am."

Mikey licked her face.

A wave of sorrow nearly made her weep; but she let her anger burn away the urge to give into self-pity.

Chapter Five

Pierrepoint Hall

Teresea stormed around their bedroom. "James was right not to trust her. Tess tried to take her laptop with her. I can't believe she'd have the audacity to come onto you."

"While you're in this heated state, we probably shouldn't discuss the fact that she read all my love letters to you." Stewart threw his coat on the bed.

"She's lying."

"Somebody is. She knew the letters were signed, Bunny."

"Norman would never have shared your letters."

"But you did?"

"You don't understand. Norman and I were that close. I always discussed every major decision in my life with Norman. He was more sensible than I. Norman approved our marriage, didn't he? He was your best man."

"Apparently yours not mine." Stewart's anger started to heat his poor stomach that was already raging away from contact with Tess. "His decision to marry Tess wasn't very wise."

"But he liked you, Bunny." Teresea took a step toward him.

Stewart couldn't resist. He held out his arms. "Nevermind. We're together now."

"We are." Teresea said then added, "I need to speak with his witch."

* * *

Nottinghamshire Bed and Breakfast.

Made more embarrassed by her anger, Teresea had to admit she was seething by the time Stewart finished describing what went on at the bed-and-breakfast. Stewart didn't lift a hand to discourage her. She threw her coat on, grabbed her purse, flew down the stairs and drove like a mad woman into town.

Her own husband, Stewart, the soul of integrity, had been accosted by this greedy – was Tess unconscionable enough to have harmed Norman?

Without speaking to the woman who ran the hotel, Teresea ran up the stairs and pounded on the only closed door. "Tess!"

Tess opened the door but backed up quickly when she saw Teresea's expression. Mikey retreated too.

"I should kill you!" Teresea's shout surprised her. All the hatred she directed at this phony excuse of a woman contained her anger for Norman's loss. That the fool should attempt seduction of Stewart went beyond any need for civilized behavior.

Tess withdrew next to the bed and her open suitcase. She glanced out the window and smiled slightly. "Well that was loud enough for the landlady to hear." Then she purposely leaned over the bedside dresser, smiled at Teresea again, and banged her head on the corner of the wooden surface. A gash and plenty of blood appeared right below her eye.

"Help, help," Tess screamed. "Someone help!"

Mikey started barking, but didn't advance on Teresea.

Teresea was transfixed at the door. She heard footsteps running up the stairs. Then she was pushed aside by Burress.

Miss Smrt glared at her. "Violence begets violence."

Teresea tried to explain what she was doing in the madwoman's bedroom. "She tried to seduce my husband!"

The landlady stood in the doorway shaking her head.

Stewart's face was beet red as he tried to reach Teresea's side. "What did you hit her with?"

"She banged her head on the table when she saw you coming up the walk." Teresea turned right and left but even Stewart seemed to doubt her by shifting his attention from her to Tess, who was using the bedspread to stop the bleeding on her face.

Mikey continued to bark.

"Do you want to press charges?" Miss Smrt asked Tess.

Burress was busy looking at Tess's self-inflicted wound, and then he examined the bedside table's corner.

The landlady scooted into the crowded room and hurried into the attached bath. She came out and handed Burress a wet towel and gathered up the ruined coverlet, pulling it out from under Tess' suitcase.

"Do I need stitches?" Tess asked in a normal person's voice, "before I go down to the station to fill out a restraining order."

Mikey had stopped barking.

Miss Smrt pulled Teresea's arms behind her and cuffed her.

Burress shook his head. "I don't believe those are necessary." He showed them his handkerchief that displayed the remains of fresh blood left on the bedside table.

Miss Smrt undid the cuffs but attempted to push Teresea out the door. "You'll need to leave with us."

Teresea saw Norman's ghost come out of the bathroom shaking his head at her. Her stomach lurched and she vomited a watery mess onto Miss Smrt's shoes.

Stewart put one arm around her and held her forehead as she retched up more water. "A chair!" he demanded.

Teresea recovered after Norman's presence disappeared. "Call Robert and tell him what happened." She wished with all her heart that Norman was still alive to fight the good fight for her.

The perfidious woman in the room behind her was the cause of all her troubles, even if she hadn't hurt Norman. Teresea felt a sea of guilt swamping her. How had she abandoned an honorable life to succumb to rage? *Lord, she prayed, forgive me for letting go of your comfort and giving into the temptation of righteous hatred.*

* * *

Nottinghamshire Police Station

At the police station in Nottinghamshire, Stewart attempted to phone Robert Koelz, however Teresea's father answered Pierrepont Hall's phone. "Is James there?" Stewart asked, unwilling to detail the circumstances.

"Of course," Mr. Henderson answered. "Can I help?"

"I need to speak with Koelz."

"Make up your mind. I've already rung for James."

The butler came on the line. "How may I be of assistance?"

"Please send Koelz down to the city jail. Teresea has gotten herself in trouble with Tess."

"Shall I explain to Mr. Henderson for you?"

"Exactly, James. Thank you for understanding."

As Stewart hung up the phone, he could hear Mr. Henderson roar, "Explain what!"

Until that moment Stewart had been uncomfortable around James, thinking a butler was an un-necessary addition to any household. Now he appreciated the buffer James provided against his father-in-law's pompous attitude.

He closed the door to the phone booth and returned to Teresea's side in the investigation room down the hall. The gray walls reflected his mood exactly. First he'd showed up at his wedding without a job and now he had propelled his wife into this untenable situation. No wonder Mr. Henderson was irate. Stewart agreed with the man's evaluation of his failures.

Before he opened the glass windowed door, Teresea's slumped position telegraphed her assessment of her plight. When she heard him open the door she straightened and smiled.

"Here's another fine mess I've gotten us into."

"Where do you find the stamina to joke?" Stewart went around the table, pulled a chair near her and hugged her.

"The Lord is even here," she said. "I'd be crying if I couldn't see how ridiculous I look."

"I should have kept my mouth shut. Tess used me to get you in trouble." Stewart let go of Teresea. "I'm not just in trouble at work. I quit. We are going to have problems paying for the apartment I leased near Gallup Park. Unless I clear my name, I'll never get another Wall Street job. The SEC will see to that."

"Norman was in the bathroom at Tess's place." Teresea sipped from a can of diet soda the police must have given her to settle her stomach.

"Is that why you vomited?"

"What would you have done, if a loved one who just happens to be dead assured you he'd witnessed that scene?"

"Mother was decent enough to stay buried," Stewart said, trying to lift their spirits.

"I can't figure out what he's trying to tell me." Teresea leveled her confused gaze at Stewart.

"Ask him, next time," was all Stewart could think to say. "I'm no expert on communicating with the other side."

Burress and Smrt entered the room, coats and ties in place. Burress spoke first, "Tess's wound is superficial."

"You don't believe I struck her, do you?" Teresea asked.

"You weren't anywhere near her," Stewart said.

"And, you did *not* have a weapon," Miss Smrt said.

"I'm releasing you into your husband's care," Burress stood. "As you saw, I did find traces of Tess blood on the bedside table. Of course, we don't expect you to visit Mrs. Henderson again. She told us you accused her of seducing your husband." Burress shook his head. "Where do people come up with all this craziness?"

"Greed," Stewart answered. They didn't wait for Koelz to arrive.

"Why does she hate us so much?" Teresea touched his shoulder once they were back in the car. Had she processed his news about not having a job or was her mind on overload because of Tess's violence?

"Could she be acting out her anger about losing her husband?" Stewart didn't want to defend the daft woman, but no one else seemed inclined to offer innocence to the widow.

* * *

Pierrepont Hall

Tuesday, November 19th

Teresea stretched out under the warm covers. This was how wives felt. Ever fiber and nerve ending was satiated. Stewart's distress at Tess's misbehavior had instigated his passion for Teresea. Teresea suppressed a giggle. Maybe she should return to the bed-and-breakfast to thank Tess. Her husband's lovemaking couldn't have been more tender or perfect.

She could hear him dressing in his bathroom to the right of the bed. The windows at the foot of the bed promised a sunny day for the end of November. She hopped out of bed to start her morning preparations just as Stewart came back into the room.

"Wait," he said. "Wife, I need a hug before I go down for breakfast."

Teresea thought he might undress again when he kissed her with renewed interest.

"You wait," she said, "until tonight. We have a lot to accomplish today."

"True," he said caressing her bottom. "I'll see you downstairs. Nothing bad can happen on a holiday weekend, right?" At the door he turned as if already missing her. "Hurry." he said. The warmth in his voice touched her.

She smiled at her reflection in the mirror. All the work and trouble awaiting the day seemed far away. This man loved her and the Lord was taking care of the rest of her life. *Thank you, Lord, she prayed. Let Your presence be known to me throughout today.*

When she raised her head to brush her hair, Norman's image appeared behind her in the mirror. She turned to face the bathroom door. She didn't look behind the shower curtain but as she examined the mirror again, there he was.

"What?" she asked of the apparition. "Am I loosing my mind now?"

Norman shook his head and smiled. He reached out to touch her hair and she felt the pressure and comfort.

"What shall I do, Norman?"

His ghost only smiled.

"Did Tess hate you that much?"

Norman shook his head. "Everything will be all right," he said or she heard his familiar tones.

"I miss you."

"I'll never be far away," Norman's ghost promised.

Teresea didn't want to leave his presence, but the smiling image faded away. Nevertheless, some of her confusion vanished. Her anger had lessened, too. Everything would be all right: her job, Stewart's job, the castle's continuing business, Norman's wife exonerated?

James waited for her at the foot of the staircase. "Mrs. Henderson, none of the boys will deliver Tess's clothes to the bed and breakfast. What should I do?"

"My father could attend to it," Teresea said.

James coughed. "Perfect," he said. "My brother John, Reverend Bedlam, is in the study. He's brought over plans for you to approve for Mr. Henderson's funeral."

Teresea's throat went dry and she licked her lips before she was able to respond to the latest taste of reality. "Thank you, James. Ask Koelz to join us."

In the library Reverend Bedlam passed a file of papers to Robert Koelz. "Would you review these for Mrs. North?"

Teresea opened the folder after Koelz's review. One piece of paper listed the agenda, the scripture verses, the music to be played, the sermon scheduled and the time for relatives and family to make their comments. She handed the folder back to Koelz. "Thank you Reverend, for your time and excellent work."

The Reverend gathered up his business and left.

Teresea said, "Stay a minute, Robert."

He hadn't moved from his chair, but he was eyeing the decanter of sherry on the desk near the door.

"Robert, Norman's ghost visited me this morning."

Koelz laughed. "I thought I had too much to drink. He seemed happy, didn't he?"

"You saw him, too."

Koelz acted injured. "We were friends."

"Of course. Did he give you any message?"

"Only that everything was going to be all right. You?"

"Same deal. I guess we're doing what he wants us to accomplish. But does all right mean I'll keep my job in the States and Stewart won't have to go to court? Or does it mean Tess is innocent and the Hall will keep running?"

Koelz headed for the sherry. "I'm glad he visited."

"Me, too. You didn't ask him if Tess harmed him?"

"Did you?"

"Sort of. He shook his head no, but didn't tell me what had happened."

When she and Koelz returned to the dining room, everyone was already seated.

Stewart stood when he saw her. "Sit here, Teresea, I'll fill your plate."

Father nudged her mother. "All's well in one department."

Teresea felt an unwanted blush in response. "Father, James needs you to visit Tess this morning to take her more of her clothes. Mother and I will be shopping." She addressed everyone at the table. "The funeral is on Thanksgiving day."

Mr. North, Stewart's father, coughed. "I'll be leaving after the service, Teresea."

"We'll see you as soon as we get back to the States," Teresea said. "I'm not sure when we'll be able to manage that."

"Do you really need to stay here?" Mother asked.

Teresea tried to swallow one more bite of scrambled eggs. She wondered if she needed to hire a new cook because the eggs tasted like grains of sand in her dry mouth.

"Will the widow attend?" Father asked.

Teresea shook her head. "Koelz could you call Burress and ask what arrangements can be made?"

* * *

Stewart sat down next to his wife and claimed her shaking hand. "The lawyer your father's firm recommended called me this morning. He's taking steps to inform the Securities and Exchange Commission."

"We won't need to return?" Teresea asked.

"Not until we're notified, if or when there is any prosecution of Tedler. Surely nothing bad will happen with the Holiday weekend approaching." Stewart was thankful he had something tangible for Teresea to hold onto. Norman's death had thrown their life up into the air and some of the balloons had already popped -- like his secure job. "The lawyer's name is Joe Wilcox. He says Tedler might settle for a sizable amount."

"Bribery to keep silent?"

"Recompense for my needing to quit, I think. It might help to finance the Hall."

James entered the dining room with Detectives Burress and Smrt close behind him. "Mrs. North, these gentleman want to speak to all of you."

Burress spoke as he unbuttoned his suitcoat revealing his blue tie. "Evidence against Mrs. Henderson is sufficient for a trial. We have collected her from her hotel. I doubt she will be returning to the Hall."

James let out a noticeably loud sigh.

Stewart reached around Teresea's neck and pulled her close enough to kiss soundly. "All's right in the world now."

Teresea sighed. "I still don't know how I'll manage to be in two places at the same time."

"Do you need to return permanently to the States?" Koelz asked.

"Of course," Stewart replied. "It's our home. The Lord will provide for us."

"James," Teresea said. "Could you direct the staff to decorate the Hall for Christmas, even though the funeral reception will be held here. Fresh greenery and flickering electric candles would be appropriate, I think."

"Sounds elegant," James said. "I'll see to it directly."

* * *

Fresh from her kiss of her husband, Teresea's mind refused to consider *not* returning home, too. "England isn't home." But she remembered the Bible's direction that the Lord helps those who help themselves. "We still have a lot to accomplish here before we return."

She excused herself from her unfinished breakfast. "James, could you bring a pot of coffee up to Tess's office. Stewart, will you come with me?"

"What about shopping?" Mother asked.

"I think I'll get hold of everything by lunch," Teresea said. The sea of unknowns awaiting her in Tess's office seemed unquantifiable.

Stewart walked up the stairs to Tess's office with her.

She reached out for his hand. "Thank the Lord you are here with me, husband."

"I wish I knew what we need to do?" He opened the office door.

James set a tray with a coffee pot on the cluttered desk. "There isn't a clean space anywhere."

"Lift it up," Stewart said. He swept the file folders together to make room for the coffee.

"Can I be of further help," James asked.

"Yes, please," Teresea said. "Where shall I start?"

"The computer has a schedule of events coming up," James said. "I believe invitation address labels are stored somewhere, too. There is a stack of un-opened mail over here. I think the checks need to be recorded and banked as soon as possible."

"Thank you." Teresea turned on the computer and started searching the worksheet files. "Stewart, will you go through the file drawers to see what supplies we have or need."

James left hurriedly, but between the two of them Teresea and Stewart found the invitations and copied off a set of labels from the computer.

"Maybe the butler could assign a staff member to help stamp these." Stewart headed for the door.

"Pull the cord by the door," Teresea said. "Funny how they have old and new technologies in the same room." She spied the un-opened mail. "Before you call him, let me record these deposits and then we can send him to the bank."

"I'll go," Stewart said. "They'll probably have signature cards for you to sign."

"Better take Koelz with you to prove you're legitimate."

Stewart kissed the back of her neck just as she found the accounting pages.

"I won't be able to concentrate." She wished she could chuck all this work for a real honeymoon around Europe.

"We can find someone trust-worthy to do all this paperwork."

Stewart was right; they could hire someone once she figured out if the business was a viable enterprise.

"We'll have to wait on our honeymoon trip."

Stewart rubbed her shoulders. "But not our honeymoon. Do you think my new lawyer can get us out of the Gallup Park apartment lease?"

"Possibly. These are extenuating circumstances. Even an act of God."

When Stewart left for the bank, Teresea flirted with the idea of staying at Pierrepont Hall. Maybe Norman's ghost would re-appear. She could keep the castle, Norman and Stewart. But she might have to prove Tess was innocent to keep the business running. *That's the trouble with ghosts, Lord. They're never around when you need them.*

* * *

When James Bedlam stepped out of the office, he wondered if the chaos around him would send him to an institution for the insane. Perhaps his name had determined his destiny. Pierrepont Hall's wedding venue business would continue apparently, even if his beloved wasn't within reach. The Norths had *not* made future arrangements to leave the premises or rebook their flight home to the States.

Maybe he should visit the Bed and Breakfast and explain his actions to Tess. No she would be in the jail now. Would she turn him in to clear herself? She had no reason to trust him. Maybe a plea of insanity would allow for leniency in the case.

Could Tess ever love him, if he admitted what he'd done to free the house of her husband? The thought had never entered his mind before. No wonder people prayed for miracles. He needed one.

Maybe his twin would help. James used the telephone in his ground-floor bedroom behind the kitchen to call St. Edmunds' rectory. "Hey, John, is Bedlam a name we can count on?"

His brother's voice remained patient. "What do you need, James?"

"Will you pray for a non-believer?"

"I do everyday, James. Is there anything specific?"

"Could one twin go insane if the other has never had an irrational thought?"

"Walk over and let's talk," John said.

James didn't think he could face his brother. He certainly couldn't explain to a man of God why he'd taken matters into his own hands. "Just pray," he said without hanging up.

"What makes you think you're in trouble, now?" Rev. Bedlam asked.

James couldn't answer because his throat was constricted with emotion. He gently hung up the phone, hoping his twin would pray instead of rushing over to confront him.

* * *

Stewart gathered up Koelz from the library and explained their mission to the bank.

"I wish you could stay in England," Koelz said. "Teresea is very much like Norman." He dug out a snowy white handkerchief from his inside jacket pocket, sniffed into it and replaced it. "He was irreplaceable. I can't believe Tess had that much anger in her to actually kill the man."

"Do you know much about her background?"

"I don't. Norman brought her back to Pierrepont Hall after a very rushed marriage in London. He was always efficient, but I think he knew he'd immediately made a mistake. He gave me instructions for a new will six months ago. But his wife never knew."

"Wouldn't divorce have been safer?"

"I don't think he thought he was in any physical jeopardy. He constantly talked about the importance of the marriage contract. Forevermore and all that."

"Were you ever married?"

"Once, but I was divorced for non-support. Many years ago. My wife had a perfectly good job and I loved to read."

Stewart tried not to laugh. "Surely there was more involved."

"Another man? Of course, younger, stronger and married besides, but the judge saw fit to grant the divorce anyway."

"Sorry," Stewart said.

"Don't be. I've managed quite well financially and with the use of Norman's library my reading habits haven't suffered. I've replaced humans with paper substitutes."

Stewart shook his head. Teresea was far too real and passionate to ever be replaced by his own love of reading.

Chapter Six

Thursday, November 21st

St. Edmund's Church in Nottinghamshire

Stewart agreed to walk with Teresea to St. Edmunds. The staff and their families would follow in a half-hour.

"Thanksgiving Day is an odd day for a funeral," Stewart said.

"You're confused, Stewart," Teresea answered. "We're not in America. England doesn't celebrate the holiday Abraham Lincoln started. That's why St. Edmunds is free for the noon service. I wanted to arrive first to make sure the arrangements are perfect. "Tess is coming," Teresea told Stewart with her hair hiding her face. "Miss Smrt left a message with James."

"Did she ask to be there?" Stewart couldn't imagine how you could attend the funeral of someone you were accused of poisoning.

"She claims she's innocent. She's probably coming to show everyone that she couldn't possibly have harmed Norman."

"Do you think she's capable of murder? I'm not. Once someone has consummated their marriage with a mate, it seems impossible for hatred to grow. I was remembering the first time we kissed in Ann Arbor. Do you?"

"I liked last night better."

He pulled her close, pushed her hair away from her face and kissed her anew. "You're not saying this is our last, are you?" Stewart kissed her again. "What do you think?"

"I think I don't care where we live as long as I'm with you. Stewart. I agree a bonded married couple could not be so at odds that one would kill the other. We think alike."

“Koelz told me Tess couldn’t know Norman was thinking of changing the will. Maybe she was so threatened by you she did worry about the possibility he would leave the castle to you. I have to admit I love these open spaces. Nothing like it in Ann Arbor.”

“But I’m not sure we could live on the income from the Hall’s business.”

Stewart suppressed a laugh. They were, after all, walking to a funeral. “At least we wouldn’t need to pay rent.”

“But the staff, the food costs...” Teresea hung her head. “I don’t even know when the taxes are due.”

“We can find last year’s records, right?”

“I wish this was last year,” Teresea said.

“I don’t.” Stewart stood in front of her. “I know Norman would still be alive but I wouldn’t have a loving wife in my bed.”

Teresea kissed him as if she meant never to let him go. “I love you. My job in Ann Arbor is just a job, but I can’t see never returning to the States. Would we vote here? See what I mean.”

“Let’s agree to stay Americans,” Stewart stepped aside. “Can we agree on that?”

“We can,” Teresea said. “But right now I need to see if the church is set up for Norman’s service.”

* * *

Teresea walked down the aisle she had tread less than a week earlier as a happy bride. Now she wore a black suit with a white silk blouse. Instead of comparing the size of Stewart to her cousin, she slowed as she approached Norman’s casket draped in white roses. The smell of roses reminded her of her bridal bouquet, before Stewart stepped on it.

The world had turned upside down. She wished she was still walking the crowded sidewalks of Ann Arbor. Of course she savored her marriage, but all else had crumbled to dust. The steady one in her life was gone. Stewart was new his loyalty untested. Norman had been there for her as long as she could remember. Norman's ghost said he would remain close but she couldn't very well reach out and touch him.

She stuttered to a stop at the last pew before the altar. Tess was seated between the detectives Burress and Smrt. At least, she thought irreverently, the detectives didn't need to buy new black suits for the funeral.

Tess turned in her direction but didn't attempt to smile. A small bandage was visible on her forehead.

Teresea looked around half-expecting Norman's ghost to appear at his own funeral.

Stewart touched her elbow and directed her to the pew across the aisle from the detectives and their charge. The church filled quickly. Teresea recognized some of the wedding guests but was content to think they were from Nottinghamshire and knew Norman, personally.

No one approached Tess.

Stewart tapped her knee. "I'm not going to remember any of their names."

"Nevermind," Teresea said. "They'll introduce themselves and tell us how they knew Norman."

The schedule Reverend Bedlam had shown her went exactly as planned.

Nevertheless, the hymn with the lyrics, "Here I am, Lord," ended Teresea's resolve not to break down.

She sobbed uncontrollably and seeing Tess smirk as she was led from the church didn't help. The church was empty by the time Stewart's steadiness and the Lord's sympathy let her breath normally enough to go home.

* * *

James waited at St. Edmonds' church door for his brother. Rev. Bedlam reached for his hand. "Do you have time to talk?"

"Could you ask the detectives to let us have a minute alone with Tess?" James had no idea what he would say, but he knew he wanted to be near Tess without the detectives around.

Rev. Bedlam nodded and approached the police car, where Tess was already sitting.

Burress immediately opened the door for Tess. He spoke briefly to her and let her accompany Rev. Bedlam back into the empty church. They could hear the heated dispute between the two detectives.

James followed them down the aisle to the first pew. He touched Tess' shoulder.

She jumped as if struck. "What?" she asked.

"I wanted to tell you Mrs. North is carrying on the business." James felt his knees give way and he pitched himself into the pew behind her.

His brother noticed. "What is it, James? Are you feeling faint?"

"I'm okay. Tess..." he began and couldn't continue. He wept more for himself than for her. "I'm so sorry."

Tess eyed him suspiciously. "I know you will miss Norman."

"I will, but I need to apologize,"

"Oh, now you want to say you're sorry for the way you have always treated me at the Hall. Well it's too late." She rose as if to leave.

"I need you to forgive me..." he gulped and looked at his preacher twin for help. "For everything I've done. Aren't Christians supposed to forgive?"

“What makes you think I’m a believer?” Tess sneered at them both. “I’ve taken care of myself since I was ten. No one ever gave me anything. You’re the one who refused to help in the smallest way at the Hall. What have you ever done for me? I’m not about to let you off the hook!”

Rev. Bedlam whipped into action, taking Tess’ hand. “Sit, Tess, sit.”

“I’m not a dog,” she said as she resumed her seat in the first row next to him.

“In order to approach the Lord in this house, which I think you both agree is what we are doing, forgiveness is a prerequisite. No one is asking anyone to forget their suspicions or omissions of assistance, either of you made. We have all been told to love each other, even our enemies, Tess, heap coals of kindness on James’ head and tell him you forgive him.

Tess looked over her shoulder for a second at James who still couldn’t control his tears. “What else can you do to me? You were laughing after you signed the will to disinherit me; you demanded I not live at the Hall anymore. It’s a wonder you didn’t kill Mikey.”

At the last statement of his crimes and intentions, James felt his ribcage explode in pain. He grasped his chest and wiped the sweat from his brow. “I did worse...” he said, gasping for air.

Tess jumped to her feet. “Call 911!” she screamed at Detective Burress who was standing at the church door. “He’s having a heart attack.”

Reverend Bedlam held James upright in the pew. “I’ll pray for you both,” he said quietly.

“No lay him down,” Tess shouted. “My father died from a heart attack.”

“She’s right,” Burress said. “Get some aspirin and water down him.”

* * *

Pierrepont Hall

The reception for Norman's funeral was filled with people. Nottinghamshire and the surrounding areas were taking advantage of Teresea's cousin's death to tour the famous castle.

Stewart heard repeated exclamations about the abundance of Christmas adornments gracing the staircases and chandeliers. The smells of juniper and pine freshened the air. Instead of the alabaster vases along the circular walls, six gigantic Christmas trees with only flitting candles for decoration enhanced the dignified setting.

James had gone missing so the four footmen were kept busy restocking the buffet tables in both the entrance hall and the ballroom. Stewart thought the day's outlay of food might bankrupt the estate by the time they could shut the doors. He rambled around taking empty plates out of guests hands, hoping they would *not* return to the feeding trough. Maybe the nearness of death increased everyone's appetite for life.

Teresea was sitting in a high-backed chair near the front door with her parents in identical chairs on either side of her.

The middle-aged, plump woman, Miss Sentence, who officiated at their wedding sidled up to Stewart. "I'm dyslexic and don't remember faces. The well-dressed woman seated at the door is Norman's cousin, right?"

Stewart beamed. "I'm dyslexic too. I really got confused at the wedding when I met Reverend Bedlam. His twin brother is my wife's butler. The beautiful woman you're referring to is my wife, Teresea. I think her confidence is based on her sense of style."

"Where does she buy her clothes?" Miss Sentence seemed as enthralled as he was.

"In Ann Arbor, but she purchased her mourning suit here in Nottinghamshire. She's assistant manager of public relations for the American division of L'Oreal, the French cosmetics company. She graduated from Washington and Lee University."

"How is she related to the Henderson's?" Miss Sentence asked.

Stewart remembered Teresea referred to this inquisitive woman as Miss Paragraph because of her girth. "Teresea is the daughter of Roberta Bartow Stiles and Paul A. Henderson. She's a first cousin to the deceased. Her father is law partner at Heflin Alvarez Minor & Henderson, and vice-chairman of Michigan Historical Society. Roberta is also a lawyer and part-time director of gift planning at Mott's Children's Hospital in Ann Arbor. She helps donors with estate planning."

"Good people then?"

"I think so." He couldn't help but ask. "Do you know Norman's wife, Tess?"

"Only what I read of her advertisements for Pierrepont Hall in the newspapers. Reverend Bedlam says she no longer owns the Hall. Your wife has been willed the estate?"

"Apparently," Stewart said. "She is looking for a new manager, now that Tess is, shall we say, indisposed."

"What do you do for a living?" Miss Sentence reclaimed her plate from Stewart. "Couldn't you manage the place for her?"

"I was employed at Worldwide, a firm that sells software enabling consumer payments on the Web for financial trades on Wall Street. I graduated from the University of the South. My father is speaking with my wife now. He's N. Felton North Jr. an independent real estate developer in Detroit. My mother was the late Jane McGeorge North.

"Did you say you *were* employed?" Miss Sentence asked.

“Another long story,” Stewart said. “Pierrepoint Hall’s open spaces have won me over. I would rather live here than Ann Arbor, which isn’t a big city. If you excuse me, my wife’s mother motioned for me to join them. My father must be saying his goodbyes.”

Miss Sentence quickly switched her plate to her left hand and then touched Stewart’s arm with her right. “Tell Mrs. North I’d be interested in interviewing for the position as manager.”

“Really?” Stewart turned back to take stock of his interviewer. “I certainly will.”

* * *

Teresea’s stomach remained calm until she saw Norman’s ghost following Stewart and Miss Paragraph around the room. She touched her mother’s shoulder to make her aware of her condition. “Mother, I’ve never been afraid of the dark, but...”

Teresea felt herself slipping from the chair as if her entire body was made of Jell-O. The blackness enveloped her senses.

* * *

Stewart helped Mr. Henderson carry an unconscious Teresea through the gawking crowd upstairs to their bedroom.

Miss Smrt suddenly appeared next to Stewart. “Detective Burress sent me. Your butler has been hospitalized with a heart attack. We took him to the hospital straight from the funeral. I picked up Mikey from the Bed and Breakfast. He’s in the car.”

A Doctor Hanson, attending the funeral banquet, followed them up the stairs. “I need to speak to the police about Mrs. Henderson,” he said to Miss Smrt.

In the bedroom Teresea’s father sought to enlighten him. “This is Mrs. North,” he said as he covered his daughter with the bed’s comforter.

"Yes, yes, I know." Doctor Hanson said. He dismissed Miss Smrt. "I'll come down to the station as soon as I'm finished here."

"Leave Mikey downstairs," Stewart said, wondering why a dog couldn't go to jail with his mistress.

Doctor Hanson felt Teresea's pulse. "I take it Teresea hasn't been given any sedatives to weather her grief?"

"None," Stewart said. "She's been vomiting water and can't eat."

"Has she lost a considerable amount of weight?"

"She's as light as a feather." Mr. Henderson glared at Stewart. "I told you to take *care* of her, remember?"

"Who knew she would need to face death?" Stewart touched his wife's forehead. "She has a fever?"

"I'm afraid so," Doctor Hanson said. "Malnutrition is nothing to ignore."

"Does she need to be hospitalized?" Stewart berated himself, agreeing with Teresea's father about failing to care for her. Why hadn't he seen how ill she was? He remembered walking her to the funeral, their kiss and their plans. "She was fine this morning."

"Grief knows no bounds," Doctor Hanson said. "I'll arrange for a nurse to hydrate her here. That should help. When she gains consciousness ask her to force herself to eat: soup, pastries, anything. This is serious. I'll drop by tomorrow, but the nurse will arrive within the hour."

Stewart's father came into the room. "Remember I warned you when Norman was still alive?"

"About what?" Mr. Henderson scowled at both of them.

"My wife died two years ago," Father said. "We were very close and she didn't want to be alone. I felt a strong pull to join her."

"Are you saying my daughter may die because Norman is pulling her into his realm." Mr. Henderson swore and rushed out of the room calling his wife, "Roberta, come up here. Now"

Stewart straightened the comforter on Teresea's bed.

"Father, she's just been having too many shocks. She says she sees Norman's ghost." He prayed for her health's return. *Thank you, Lord, for my lovely bride. Restore her strength and deliver her in her time of need.*

Father moved a chair closer to the bed for Stewart. "I will wait to return to Ann Arbor until Teresea recovers, if that's all right with you."

"I appreciate your staying." Stewart declined the chair.

"I'm sure Teresea will be up and about tomorrow."

Mrs. Henderson burst into the room with Mikey trailing on her heels. "Teresea, stop this nonsense. Wake up, you have guests to attend."

Mikey barked and then lay down at the foot of the bed as if disheartened by all the changes around him.

Stewart's father waltzed Mrs. Henderson gently out of the bedroom only to be yelled at by Mr. Henderson in the hall. "Stop touching my wife!"

Mikey didn't react to the yelling.

* * *

Pierrepoint Hall

Sunday, November 24th

However, three days after the funeral, Teresea was still floating in and out of a fevered consciousness. Stewart listened to her talk to her cousin's ghost with her eyes wide open.

Teresea would raise her arms and try to sit up. "I can't come, Norman. You need to find your own way. Stewart needs my help." Sometimes she would cry uncontrollably. "But why did you marry her? Didn't you love her at all?"

Mikey's whimpers added to death's knell.

Stewart didn't know which was worse, watching Teresea hallucinate or wondering when she would open her eyes again. He was getting so stressed trying to relieve her rantings that he would follow her gaze and try to encounter the spirit in person. He felt several cold drafts and almost convinced himself Norman's eyes were resting on the back of his neck when he sat next to Teresea's bed. Stewart shook off the flights into irrationality trying to keep one person in their marriage sane. His prayers to the Lord for intercession were continuous.

Teresea's parents were of no help. They constantly harangued Stewart about even agreeing to be married at St. Edmund's.

"They always were too attached from my viewpoint," Mr. Henderson offered.

Mrs. Henderson was just as unreasonable. "You should have known when you arrived and met his wife with the same name. Trouble was brewing."

His own father was a source of further worry. "Norman's trying to let her die so that he doesn't have to face the other world alone."

Mikey stayed in room when he wasn't being fed or walked. Apparently, any mistress of the Hall claimed his loyalty.

Stewart prayed for the Lord's will to be done. He hoped Teresea's mind wouldn't suffer permanent damage from the high fever. She was being given nourishment through her veins but she looked as close to death as he'd ever seen a person. His mother's quick demise strengthened his fear of losing his wife.

He called Miss Sentence to help with the office work, which now included postponing the plans of a wedding couple's reception.

* * *

Monday, November 25th

On the morning of the fourth day of Teresea's illness, Doctor Hanson brought Reverend Bedlam, Detectives Burress and Smrt with him to talk to the family. "We need to discuss this in front of Teresea," he said.

"I'm afraid she doesn't understand much of what's going on around her," Mrs. Henderson said.

All eight of them filed upstairs into what had been Stewart and Teresea's honeymoon suite.

Doctor Hanson stood with his back to the fireplace facing Teresea. "Let me keep a clear view of the patient."

Stewart held Teresea's hand. He absently twisted her wedding band. It had loosened by her weight loss due to her inability to eat since Norman had died, an entire week ago.

Father stood behind him, which Stewart appreciated because he needn't watch his father's worried features.

Mikey had his nose on the bed's comforter.

Mr. and Mrs. Henderson occupied the other side of the bed with Mrs. Henderson sitting in the only other chair in the room.

Detectives Burress and Smrt stayed near the door, as did Reverend Bedlam. Burress had his notebook out.

Stewart addressed the minister, "How is your brother?"

"Better," he said, patting the Bible in his hands. "The Lord's ways are difficult to understand. James was very near death, but they've put a stint in his heart. He's anxious to be up and about. He's asked the Lord to forgive his sins."

"So have we all," Stewart said, feeling his father rub his shoulders.

Doctor Hanson coughed to get their attention before he began. "Norman was not well. In fact we didn't think he'd last for more than five harrowing years. He had lymphoma stage four and myeloma was taking its toll. His alcohol consumption exasperated the dizziness and the kidney pain."

Stewart tried to process the information but not until his father touched his shoulder again did the news really sink in. "You mean Norman had reason to take his own life?"

Teresea stirred. "Norman's angry now!"

Mikey barked as they watched in awe as Teresea's comforter was flung to the floor and her pillows spun around the room, first striking Stewart, then his Father and finally landing at the doctor's feet.

"Let the cat out of the bag, did I?" Doctor Hanson remained unfazed.

Reverend Bedlam crossed himself and prayed aloud. "Lord, thank you for this gathering of your faithful. Restore your servant, Teresea, to good health, banish those not at rest who persecute her."

Mikey calmed and sat down just outside the door.

Burress hung his head. "We'll need more evidence than Norman's illness to determine how he might have administered his own poison."

Miss Smrt seemed to agree as she stepped over Mikey to leave. "But Tess needs to be released again?"

Mikey's ears perked up. He followed Miss Smrt a step down the hall, but when Reverend Bedlam coughed, Miss Smrt and Mikey recrossed the bedroom's threshold.

The minister explained his interruption to Stewart. "Mr. North, I suspect the staff will need proof. James told me they never really took to the young Mrs. Henderson's cold-hearted efficiencies."

The family stayed at odds, too.

The Hendersons were sure Norman would never take his own life.

Father said, "I might have quit the suffering path myself."

Stewart was lost in his own thoughts. Witnessing Mother's last days of pain in spite of the drugs influenced his opinion. Doctor Hanson could be right.

Doctor Hanson apologized. "I thought you all should know with the inquest coming up. I don't know if suicide affects the will. Check with his lawyer on that score. But Tess may be as innocent as she claims."

* * *

Nottinghamshire Police Station

The local goal where Tess had been held for four days possessed a few amenities. The combined toilet and shower room was a closet attachment to her cell. Meals were edible and the Pierrepont staff provided her with the list of books she'd requested from Norman's library. She wasn't required to wear a uniform either.

Her appointed lawyer showed up the first afternoon. Younger by half than she, Tess expected to see pimples emerge on George Pierce's beardless reddish face at any minute.

"Let your mind retrace the last few days at the Hall," he advised. "Write down everything that might have been a factor in your husband's poisoned death."

Tess shook her head. "I'm innocent, you know."

"Guilty persons are rarely convicted." George scratched the back of his neck. "But do not speak to Detectives Burress or Smrt unless I'm present."

"Could you ask them to let Mikey join me?" She missed her one friend in the world.

George made a note, but shook his head. "Highly unlikely."

After he left, Tess sat with pencil and one of his legal pads. She didn't even remember Norman drinking in their room the night he died. But she had been focused on her own sexual needs. He could have bobbed for apples before bed. She wouldn't have noticed.

She wrote down James Bedlam's name. In her heart she suspected the butler of murdering her husband without being able to assign a motive other than her own dislike and his mutual animosity of her. Maybe he did secretly hate Norman.

Four days later, when Burress and Smrt appeared outside her cell, she wondered how she could implicate James enough to be believed.

Miss Smrt was a curt as usual. "Gather up your things. You're released into your own custody."

"Until the trial?" Tess efficiently began folding her clothing into her suitcase.

"There might be an inquest," Miss Smrt offered. "But not a trial."

Tess stacked her books. "Will you return these to Norman's library for me?"

Detective Burress held the metal door open. "Might as well take them with you to the bed and breakfast. Your husband's doctor suspects he committed suicide."

Tess sat down on her bunk. "He did not." Had Norman been that unhappy?

"Doctor Hanson says he was terminally ill." Miss Smrt couldn't shed her hostile manner. "Didn't you know that?"

"Of course I knew. Robert Koelz was privy to the information, too...and the butler." Tess couldn't yet stand from the shock. She didn't share her surprise with the detectives. Norman must have already poisoned himself before they made love the last night, the last time. How could he have been so heartless? "Of course," Tess said, standing against their opinion. "I'm the one considered cold-hearted. And, The Norths won't let me go home?"

"Until the will is set aside," Burress politely hung his head. "Pierrepont Hall belongs to them."

"And their butler, says I'm not welcome?"

“Exactly,” Miss Smrt said. “We’ll drive you to the B and B. We have Mikey outside in the car.”

Tess touched Detective Burress’s forearm. He patted her hand for a second before Miss Smrt’s caught him. “Did you search the butler’s room?”

“The butler is not always the murderer,” Miss Smrt enjoyed her joke.

* * *

Rosemarie Sentence climbed the stairs to the Pierrepont Hall office. A bellboy in the hall said Mr. North was waiting for her. When he called, Stewart mentioned his wife was very ill and he needed all the temporary assistance she could offer. Besides stuffing envelopes, Rosemarie wasn’t sure how much of her spattering of computer knowledge would apply to a high-functioning wedding-reception business, but she was willing to get involved. Her job as a registrar for the district was less than challenging and weddings promised a hint of romance.

Stewart was hunched over in front of two computer screens. His fingers were nowhere near the keys. Instead he was busy tugging on his curls. She coughed to get his attention. “Miss Para...Sentence, thank you for coming. Should I ring for a cup of coffee?”

“No I finished my morning’s tea.” She hung her coat on the door’s hook and came around Stewart’s desk to peer at the computer screens. “A calendar of events?”

“I think so,” Stewart moved from the chair and invited her to sit down in front of the computer. “Mrs. Henderson has scheduled every weekend through October of next year. I have no idea how she manages to book so many receptions. I was trying to find an opening, to re-book the two wedding events we cancelled.”

Rosemary could see the problem. "If the house staff can manage the extra work, I think a Wednesday wedding would please each couple - rather than delaying their marriages for eleven months or more."

"Could you ask them?" Stewart pointed to a pile of invitations. "Those need to be reprinted if they agree. Let's wait until a December Wednesday. Hopefully, my wife's nursing staff will be relieved by then."

"Yes," Rosemarie agreed. "Sick rooms do not need a house full of strangers traipsing through the Hall."

"The mail pile on the desk under the window are payments needing to be posted. I'll take them to the bank after you've filled out the deposit slips. Have you had accounting experience?"

"Only my personal banking." Marie noticed the second computer screen held a worksheet of amounts received. "We should mention salary?"

"Of course," Stewart said. "Write yourself a check. The checkbook is in the drawer under the payments' stack of mail. I'll sign it when I pick up the deposit slips. Be generous. A weekly amount should double your registrar's salary. Agreed."

"Yes, thank you," Rosemarie said. If she convinced them she was a diligent worker, perhaps this temporary position could become permanent. She stood as Stewart left the office, closing the door behind him.

* * *

Tuesday, November 26th

Robert Koelz ushered Stewart, his father, and the Hendersons into the library. "Easier to drink in here. I'm glad you called me, Stewart. Is Teresea still seeing Norman? Have you thought of taking here out of here even to the Bed and Breakfast in Nottingham."

Stewart collapsed into the wingback chair in front of the fireplace. "Teresea vomited all over Detective Smrt's shoes when Norman came out of the bathroom there."

"Did you see him too?" Father asked.

"No but if we stay here much longer, I expect to converse intimately with him."

"Well, I for one, appreciate Norman staying away from my place." Koelz drank two glasses of sherry before offering the decanter half-heartedly to anyone else.

"What about the will?" Mr. Henderson grabbed the sherry container out of Koelz's hand. "Are you an alcoholic, too?"

"Who else is?" Koelz asked.

"Apparently, my nephew," Mrs. Henderson said. "Did you know how sick Norman was?"

"I did. That's why we hurried the will." Koelz refilled his glass. "Of course, Norman was sure he didn't want Tess to own the Hall. He trusted Teresea with his life and the Hall which he probably loved more than anyone."

Mr. North walked over to Koelz and claimed his empty glass. "The will?"

"I understand your concern. But you all are confusing insurance policies with a final will and testament." Koelz reclaimed his glass, filled it and drank it down. "You seem to forget I lost my best friend, too." Koelz produced an immaculate white handkerchief from his jacket's inside pocket. He was still dressed in the black, shirt and cravat; he'd worn to the funeral. "Norman wanted Teresea to own Pierrepont Hall," He replaced his handkerchief. "His wishes will stand any test in court fights."

"Now all we need to do is prove Tess had no part in Norman's death," Stewart said. "Then she can run the Hall and we can get Teresea out of here and away from Norman's ghost."

* * *

As Koelz was leaving Pierrepont Hall a special delivery packaged arrived at the front entrance?

Back on duty in the late afternoon, the butler, James, handed the package to Koelz. "It's addressed to you from Mr. Henderson."

Koelz headed back to the library.

"More liquid refreshment in that direction," Mr. Henderson grumbled.

"James, "Stewart stopped the butler's departure. "Could we have tea served in the library?"

"Of course, Sir." James smiled. "I'll be along directly."

Stewart understood James' curiosity about the package would speed the delivery of the tea service.

Koelz sat his emptied glass next to the package. "Would you ring for James? We need Burress and Smrt and Dr. Hanson as witnesses to the validity of the contents."

Tea was served, eaten and removed. Koelz had time to nearly empty the sherry container before everyone assembled.

Father excused himself to stay with Teresea while the rest of the family attended the package opening.

Miss Smrt elbowed Mrs. Henderson as they surrounded the central marble table.

"I beg your pardon, dear." Mrs. Henderson said. "I'm as interested as you are."

Detective Burress frowned successfully at Miss Smrt who gave way at the table.

"Roberta," Mr. Henderson said, "is the deceased's aunt, you know."

"Ready?" Koelz flourished the pair of scissors James had provided.

Inside the plainly wrapped package was a business envelope. Koelz read the enclosed letter, "I plan to visit the Hall after I die. Doctor Hanson had my permission to discuss my untenable physical condition with all of you. Of course, anyone accused of offing me should be released since I plan to swallow enough drugs to end my stay."

James coughed loudly before falling into the tea cart. "Sorry, sorry. Just a dizzy spell."

"Do you have your nitro glycerin tablets?" Koelz asked as Stewart helped his butler to the wing-backed chair.

Koelz offered a glass of sherry, but Mrs. Henderson insisted James swallow a cup of tea.

"The Lord's wonders leave me breathless," James said.

When a semblance of order returned, Koelz continued to read Norman's letter, "My cousin, Teresea, needs to occupy the Pierrepont Hall to retain possession. I'm not sure Koelz added that stipulation in the last codicil, but I hope this letter will suffice, legally. I'll continue to haunt the Hall in some guise as long as possible. Sincerely, and give all my love to Teresea, Norman Henderson."

James spoke first. "The staff and I will need to apologize to Mr. Henderson's widow."

"So shall we all," Mr. Burress walked toward the door, motioning for Miss Smrt to follow. "We'll bring her back in the morning."

Stewart intervened. "I think the bed and breakfast arrangement is the best accommodation for Tess until my wife recovers."

James rose slowly. "If you'll excuse me, I need to speak with my brother. I'll go along with the detectives to clarify Mrs. North's debility."

"I'll explain to your father," Mrs. Henderson said. "And I'll send him down from the sick room so you can bring him up-to-date."

“Thank you.” Stewart filled Koelz’s empty glass, noticing the act had stopped Mr. Henderson’s departure from the library. “What measure of relief does Teresea have from staying here?”

“I think vacations and overseeing the Pierrepont Hall’s business will be enough to establish legal occupation.” Koelz only sipped at his glass. “I always feel peaceful around you, Stewart. How do you explain that?”

“The Lord is my shepherd,” Stewart quoted. ‘I shall not want; He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, and leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me, Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me. Thou prepareth a table before mine enemies. You annointeth my head with oil, my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever and ever.’”

Koelz saluted Stewart with the nearly full glass in his hand. “That explains it. The hole in my gut might benefit by repeating the 23rd Psalm; although, I think you mixed up some of the verses.”

Mr. Henderson had remained in the doorway, still holding onto his wife’s arm. His voice turned unusually soft. “Don’t forget the Serenity Prayer, ‘Lord give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.’”

Koelz set his glass down. “In Norman’s memory, I plan to turn my thirst over to my Creator. He may have other plans for me now.”

Stewart hugged him. “You’re always welcome at Pierrepont Hall. Norman’s friends deserve to remain part of the Henderson-North family.”

Mr. Henderson spoke softly to his wife and then approached Koelz. "I know where there's an AA meeting in town. It's on George Street. Care to join me?"

"Might need all the help I can get," Koelz said. "I live on George Street."

Chapter Seven

Tuesday, November 26th

Nottinghamshire Bed and Breakfast.

Tess rubbed Mikey's ears as she sat at the bedroom's window gazing out at the freshly fallen snow. The sidewalk hadn't been swept and the streets of white presented a wide expanse of purity. *Oh my soul*, she startled herself by remembering her father's frequent prayer.

Mikey turned his loving eyes as if sensing the turn of her thoughts.

"You love me, don't you?" she asked, watching his tail wag as he licked her hand. "Would I be struck by lightning if I prayed for my future, do you think?"

Unperplexed, Mikey continued to watch her.

The verses her father often repeated came unbidden to her mind and she repeated them, "I call God for a record upon my soul..." Tess couldn't remember anymore. She continued to watch the falling snow.

As if summoned to her side, Reverend Bedlam and his brother, James, walked around the corner and proceeded up the unshoveled walk. What did they want of her, now?

Mikey followed her down the stairs to the entrance hall.

Tess opened the door for them. "Have you come to burden me further?"

James hung his head so Reverend Bedlam answered, "Burdened is a Biblical word. Have you been reading a Gideon Bible in your room?"

"No," Tess said. "I told you I'm not a believer."

“Could we talk in the parlor?” James led them into the front room.

The chairs were upholstered in bright yellow and green floral prints belying the wintry season outside. Even the pink tiled fireplace presented fake blue hydrangeas. Scented candles on the mantle gave off the scent of lilies-of-the-valley.

Tess joined Reverend Bedlam on the couch. “I’m sorry I can’t offer you any tea.”

“We wanted to see if you needed anything,” the minister said as he petted Mikey’s head.

James coughed and slipped a pill under his tongue before adding, “I need to tell you what I did.”

“Oh, forgiveness is the topic you chose.” Tess didn’t bother to hide her sarcasm. She asked Reverend Bedlam. “My father’s favorite Bible verse is stuck in my brain. I was wondering if you could find it for me.”

“I might know it, if it’s a common one.” Reverend Bedlam produced a pocket New Testament.

“I can only remember part,” Tess said. “It is, ‘I call God for a record upon my soul...’”

“Sounds like Corinthians.” Reverend Bedlam paged through his Bible. “Here it is. It’s at the end of 2 Corinthians first chapter. Shall I read a few verses?”

Tess nodded her head. She hugged Mikey to her as if to protect her against unwanted censure.

“Paul is speaking about Salvation. ‘For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us. Now he that stablisheth us with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, is God; Who hath also sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts. Moreover I call God for a record upon my soul, that to spare you I came not as yet unto Corinth. Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy: for by faith ye stand.’”

"Complicated verses," James said, reaching for his twin's Bible.

Tess shuddered. "That's probably enough for one day."

James ignored and read, "In John 3:16, Jesus said, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life'."

Tess stood, leading her visitors to the door, she hoped. "Thank you, Reverend Bedlam. I'm not sure father's verse ended with those words. Maybe it was part of a hymn?"

Reverend Bedlam remained seated. "Tess, James has news that might relieve some of your anguish."

"What could that be?" Tess noticed Mikey hadn't moved from the minister's side so she went back and sat next to him again.

James stood. "Norman wrote a note before he died. It was delivered to Koelz. Norman confessed to taking pills to end his life." He sat down as if speaking had exhausted him. "I thought I had killed him."

"You!" Tess was on her feet and Mikey barked. "What did you do?"

"That's what I was trying to tell you at the church, before we received Norman's note. I laced the bottle of sherry in Norman's dressing room with rat poison from the gardeners supplies."

Tess broke down. Here she'd been named as a suspect to killing her own husband, experienced four nights in jail, thrown out of her home and subjected to the staff's ridicule when all along the butler had known he might have killed Norman. Between sobs she yelled, "You could have told them - - you coward."

James offered his handkerchief, which she needed to wipe her face and eyes.

She threw it back at him. "So now that you're off the hook, you've decided to clear me, too?"

Reverend Bedlam spoke, "Tess, my brother attempted to tell you after the funeral. The suicide note hadn't been delivered to Koelz until after James suffered a heart attack."

Tess wished her own heart would stop beating. "Life is too hard." She wept again out of self-pity. This time Reverend Bedlam slipped her his handkerchief.

Mikey whined at her feet. In pity for her dog, Tess stopped weeping. "What am I to do?"

Reverend Bedlam spoke softly. "James and I prayed to the Lord to help him out of his morass. Look what happened. My brother thought he was a murderer and prayed. The Lord revealed the truth. James will still be charged with attempted murder. He's not going to be a free man for a long time. But his soul is safe. Is yours?"

Tess quieted. "Maybe that's why father's old verses came to my mind."

"I know the Lord loves you, Tess," Reverend Bedlam said.

James nodded as if speaking were too difficult.

"But, James?" Tess asked. "Why did you try to kill my husband? I thought you two were friends."

James didn't look at her. "When I heard about the cancer, a door to a new life seemed to open for me. I could see myself in your arms."

"But you hated me."

"No, I didn't. I always thought you were lovely; but I had to hide my feelings around Norman."

"Even when we were alone you spoke harshly to me."

"I couldn't let on. I'd made plans but if you knew of my love when Norman was still alive you would have had me sacked. I thought if I waited until he was gone, you might need me. Thoughts of you in my arms increased every day. I knew he planned to give the Hall to his cousin and I laced the sherry hoping he'd perish before the will was signed. My timing was off. The whole plan of your needing me was a crazy sinful plan."

"That you love me is harder to believe than that you tried to kill Norman." Tess felt her mind fill with confusion. "Reverend Bedlam, how shall we pray for me?"

Reverend Bedlam knelt. Tess remained seated, but James knelt down, too. Mikey put his nose in Tess' lap watching quietly.

"Lord," Reverend Bedlam started, "Thank you for bringing truth to this suffering widow who is searching for your love to wash away her fears for the future with your salvation."

Tess folded her hands. "Thank you."

But the minister wasn't finished. "Tess, will you accept your Savior's deep love for you?"

Tess looked towards the doorway, wondering how she might escape; but a great sadness enveloped her. "I'm not worthy."

"We are not saved by works," Reverend Bedlam said. "None can know peace except through the Lord's salvation. Will you accept him as your Savior?"

Tess remembered a Bible story about Jesus' friend Peter denying him three times. *Not me*, she thought. *I'll not deny Jesus calling three times*. "Yes," she said. "I accept the Lord as Savior for my life."

The whiteness of the snow outside seemed to invade her mind with a softness reaching to the ends of the universe. Nothing mattered except a feeling of great inner beauty and peace. "This is the Lord's love?" she asked.

Reverend Bedlam stood up and took her hand. "Yes the oceanic oneness of love has reached you."

* * *

Wednesday, November 26th
Heathrow Airport

After Stewart's lawyer called from Ann Arbor, Mr. North had insisted Stewart accompany him to Michigan. "Your wife has plenty of people to watch over her. Your future in the markets needs to be secured even if the castle's possession remains with Teresea."

According to the lawyer, Tedler, his old boss, blamed Stewart for the insider trading. Stewart needed to present evidence other than he said, he said.

Once aboard the Delta flight to Amsterdam, Stewart buckled his seat belt. At the sound of the metal click, his mind switched to the day his boss asked him to make the illegal trade.

Tedler had his back to the wall of windows in Stewart's office, so his expressions were difficult to read, but his voice stayed a pitch higher from his greedy excitement, "I kept a copy of the president of Zonac's speech. You'll see their expansion plans are very specific for Detroit and Ann Arbor. Buy up all the stock available."

Stewart remembered being handed the twenty-page speech before he had time to argue the point about not trading on insider tips. He also recalled taking the document home in his briefcase even though he knew he wouldn't buy the stock. The business papers were still in his apartment locked in the briefcase awaiting the return from his honeymoon.

“Father.” Stewart shook his father shoulder. “I can prove Tedler’s actions.”

“How’s that?” Father divested himself of the earphones he’d been trying to adjust.

Before he spoke Stewart asked the Lord for help. “Tedler will claim he had no intention of placing a buy order even though he knew the stock would rise. He showed me the speech the company’s new president intended for the board. They were about to launch their newest product line.”

“How does that help you,” Father asked.

“I have the speech! In my old apartment. It’s still in my briefcase.”

Father clapped his hands together. “So you can prove Tedler told you to place a buy order?”

Stewart yanked at his curls. “No. But if he denies the insider knowledge, I have his fingerprints on the document.”

* * *

Thursday, November 27th

Stewart’s Apartment

At Mr. North’s suggestion, Stewart’s lawyer requested the District Attorney secure Stewart’s apartment until they arrived. So they had stayed the previous night at Metro airport’s hotel. Stewart called Teresea’s L’Oreal boss, explaining the family complications. Teresea was still expected back to work after the Christmas break.

Later that evening in Stewart’s apartment, Stewart made a legal deposition of the facts surrounding the case for his lawyer. He was relieved to hear the District Attorney say the case against him would be dismissed but his boss would face the SEC charges. However, Stewart was left without employment. His father remained in the States while Stewart found a flight to return home the next day.

* * *

Pierrepont Hall

Friday, November 29th

Teresea had slowly recovered her senses. Norman's withdrew his presence as if Stewart's departure alleviated the ghost's need to claim Teresea's attention. Waking to find no hint of a ghostly visitor encouraged her to seek more hours of consciousness.

Within a couple days, Doctor Hanson said the feeding apparatus could be removed.

Teresea ate her first bit of broth wondering if Norman's ghost would resurface, but her mental balance helped her squeamish stomach.

Mother explained Stewart's absence. "He and his father solved the SEC problem. Your husband will return tonight. Do you feel well enough to shower and dress for dinner?"

The nurse, Mrs. Mac, encouraged her to get out of bed, too. "I'll be right here, if you need me."

Teresea's wobbly legs required holding onto the shower's handicap braces, but she managed to shampoo her hair before wrapping herself in towels and being helped to bed.

Mother combed out her tangled curls and patted them dry with a towel. "We'll get you up and dressed for dinner."

"I miss him," Teresea said.

"The ghost?" Mrs. Mac asked.

"No, Stewart." Teresea smiled. "Did you hear me talk to the shade, too?"

"I did. Gave me the shivers. It did."

"Let's forget about Norman," Mother said. "We have enough to do without bothering that slacker."

"Slacker?" Teresea buckled her bra and pushed it into place nearly exhausting her dressing stamina. "He avoided needless suffering."

"He caused more harm than he evaded," Mother pulled a turtleneck sweater over Teresea's head, freeing her curls from its neck.

Teresea wondered if she'd ever be able to dress herself again after struggling to push her arms through the long sleeves. "Have I been in bed for months?"

"Over a week," Mrs. Mac said. "According to Doctor Hanson, you're lucky your heart didn't give out from dehydration."

"So Mr. North was right," Teresea said. "I heard him warn Stewart. Norman was trying to pull me into the realm of death."

"Nevermind, now," Mother said. "We're through with all that, right?"

"Certainly hope so." Teresea tried to balance as she slipped into her slacks, but had to sit down to pull them up partially. "Eating has more advantages than I ever guessed."

Mother wrung her hands. "Tess hasn't returned, but a Miss Sentence is filling in for her."

"Miss Paragraph?" Teresea laughed. "I must really be feeling better. I know. Miss Sentence. She was at our wedding."

"She applied at the funeral reception. Stewart didn't have much time to train her before he left for the States to clear his name."

"It's fine, Mother," Teresea said, hoping the wedding reception business hadn't suffered too much.

"They rescheduled two weddings for midweek in December." Mother sighed. "I'm relieved you agree with the arrangements. We did the best we could."

"I knew you would." Teresea reached out her arms and her Mother embraced her. "Thank you."

"I'll go get Glenn to help you down the stairs," Mrs. Mac said. "No sense falling now."

Mother followed her out. "Just wait here, dear. I need to change for dinner."

No sooner were they out of the room, than Norman poked his nose through the ether. "Up and about, as Stewart would say?"

"You're not helping, Norman." Teresea pulled the comforter up and slid back against the pillows. "Why do you insist on visiting me?"

"I can tell you goodbye." His ghost sat on the end of the bed. "You really want me to go?"

"I do," Teresea said. Her stomach was starting to roll as if the ship of the room was buffeted by a heavy sea. "I'll miss you but I need to start my life with Stewart."

"You are both staying here at Pierrepont Hall, right?" Norman stood.

"We will if you go."

"That's not even fair."

"Fair?" Teresea didn't want to demonstrate the anger developing in her soul. Well yelling at Tess wasn't exactly a peaceful conversation. How long ago was that? "I thought marrying Stewart near you would bring a blessing of perfection to our wedding day. Instead..."

"Your cousin died of cancer," Norman hung his head. "By his own hand?"

"I don't want to live here, Norman. It's too horrible."

"You won't retain ownership of Pierrepont Hall, if you leave."

Teresea started to weep. "Norman, my mind needs to recover. Can't you go away, at least for a while?"

Norman's spirit refused to fade. "I need you to talk to Tess for me."

"She's not living here anymore." Teresea remembered Tess' cruelties. "Why don't you bother her instead of me?"

"She's shut off from me." Norman's voice lost its arrogant tone. "Could you ask her to visit you? You could be my voice."

"Will you promise to leave, then?"

"I don't know when I can leave," he said. "But I know Tess has something to do with my lingering - so to speak."

"I promise, I'll ask her to come," Teresea said, feeling a renewal of spirit. When would she *ever* need to be frightened or at least muddled out of her wits again by being revisited by Norman? Probably never."

"I heard that," Norman's voice rang from the other side. "Remember you promised."

Chapter Eight

Robert Koelz's Rooms
Wollaton Hall, Nottinghamshire

Robert opened his eyes to his fourth day of sobriety. Normally he would have reached for the bottle of Drambuie under his bed to greet the day, but he'd poured all the alcohol in the house down the kitchen drain the night before. After four days of Alcoholic Anonymous meetings, even the fumes tempted him, but he persisted by hanging onto hope.

Following the guidelines of the program he'd listed the people he resented and made a decision to make amends to them all. For Norman's wife, who loomed at the top of his list, he drafted a new will, leaving his apartment to her. The poor woman had been divested of her home by Norman's will, which Robert had drawn up. The deed to Robert's building seemed fitting for recompense.

He'd slept uninterrupted throughout the night for the first time in a very long time. Maybe life would be easier. His Creator's personal interest presented a compelling future.

Robert prayed the third-step prayer, hoping he'd memorized it correctly. *Lord, I offer you my heart and my soul to do with me and to build with me whatever Thou wilt. Deliver me from my difficulties so that I may witness to those I'm trying to help of Thy power and love. Help me trust you more,* he prayed, before swinging his legs over the side of the bed.

Wrapping his violet velour robe closer by tugging on the ties, he descended to the first floor to crank up the furnace and punch the coffee maker's button.

Friday's schedule was free. Thank goodness his AA meeting was just around the corner from George Street. Apparently more than one drunk lived within the city. They understood him and attempted to explain the path ahead.

Maybe a flock of new alcoholic friends would visit him in these swank environs. Fothergill antiques, left from the previous life-long tenants, filled the apartment's first floor. The violet upholstery matched his robe, but he couldn't remember which came first – the robe or the slipcovers. Perhaps his new friends would appreciate the nautical prints he'd chosen to lighten up the gray walls. He lit a few vanilla fragrance candles to freshen the stale air.

His loneliness nearly choked him as he finished the second cup of coffee. *Help me, Lord, to not be sarcastic when I greet these fellow alcoholics.* Was he getting humble in his old age?

Robert squared his shoulders and marched back upstairs past the latticed windows gracing each landing. A fine bright day it was outside. At least he knew how to wow strangers with his fashion sense.

So close to the Holiday season, he chose emerald green as his color of the day. His pinstriped suit, shirt, socks and yes green shoes coordinated to show off the gleaming white hairs in his mustache. He added a ruby ring as a further Christmas decoration.

"Not bad," Norman's voice echoed in his brain.

Robert checked his full-length mirror to adjust his cravat, which hid the wrinkles at his throat.

Norman's image greeted him. "Morning, Koelz."

Robert turned toward the door instinctively thinking Norman stood behind him.

"Just in the mirror, Koelz," Norman's ghost responded.
"Give you a fright, did I?"

"I thought I'd be through with seeing you when I stopped drinking." Robert gritted his teeth, longing for a taste of something too strong for recovery.

"Afraid I don't have a glass to hand you." Norman laughed the ornery laugh Robert knew too well.

"I do you miss you, friend," Robert said.

"That's why I'm here." Norman frowned. "Teresea's asked me to leave her alone."

"I can understand," Robert said without thinking ahead.

"What!" Norman boomed. "After all we've been through together, I'm not welcome here either?"

"You can stay," Robert felt a tightening in his head and chest. "I'm headed for a ten o'clock meeting around the corner for drunks like me."

Norman's ghost popped out of the mirror. "I'll just tag along, if you don't mind. Teresea promised to help me talk to Tess, unless you want to intervene?"

Refusing to answer, Robert wasn't in the mood to stay his friend's presence. "Alcoholics might not take kindly to my first visit if you tag along."

The room was too warm. Perhaps he'd made a mistake when he moved the thermostat. Something that regularly happened when he'd been drinking.

"Not sober enough for me?" Norman laughed.

Robert found he'd already changed in one respect. He wasn't enjoying Norman's hilarity nor felt any need to join the laughter.

Norman noticed. "I'll wait here then."

"Thank you," Robert said, fleeing down the steps and out of the house.

On wobbly legs, he drew the alpaca fur of his coat collar closer to his ringing ears. *Should have taken those steps slower*, he told himself. His hair felt iced from the sweat he'd produced from seeing Norman.

As he rounded George Street's corner he slammed into a group of uniformed boys running to school. He slipped and knocked the back of his head hard as he sprawled on his back. The boys stood around staring down at him as he grasped inside his coat to loosen his tie. "Better call for help, lads," he got out before blackness enveloped his senses.

Norman stood before him. "I know, you asked me to wait at home."

Robert stood up but he did notice his body stayed prone. "What's this?"

A bundled up crowd had gathered around the children and sirens could be heard approaching.

"Death." Norman laughed.

Robert turned away toward a lightened sky. "Come with me."

"Unfinished business," Norman no longer sounded jovial.

The sun itself seemed to call him. "Bye, Norman," Robert called. "I'm not staying."

The Lord reached for Robert's hand as eternal peace engulfed his soul.

* * *

Pierrepoint Hall
Later the Same Day

As Stewart opened Pierrepoint Hall's front door, Norman's voice greeted him, "The last person I expected to see at my door was you, Stewart."

"Husband of the new owner, remember." Stewart refused to be bullied by a phantom. "Where's Teresea?"

"In the dining room. Her parents are still here, too."
Norman's voice quivered. "Up and about as you say."

"Why doesn't that please you?" Stewart expected James to appear to take his coat. Instead he laid it on a chair in the entrance hall and headed for the dining room.

"She doesn't want to stay."

Stewart stopped in mid-stride. "She loves the Hall."

"Not with me in it." Norman's voice broke.

An unreasonable sympathy overwhelmed Stewart. "Poor guy," he said without thinking.

"Poor!" A gust of wind or anger stopped Stewart's advance to the dining room. "I've never been poor a day in my life!"

Stewart stood a bit taller. "You are out of life, not in it. And you've alienated a cousin who loved you without measure, because your ego refuses to let her live. That makes you pretty destitute in my eyes."

"An hour ago Robert Koelz died in the street near his apartment." Norman sighed.

"I hadn't heard," Stewart said. "How do you know?"

"I was there, because Teresea asked me to leave."

Stewart shook his head. "Your friend."

"Yes. He didn't stay. God called him home it seems."

Norman's voice shook with anger, "You can't even see me, with your eyes." Norman growled. "Teresea promised to summon me when Tess visits."

"There's glory for you." Stewart felt a peace surround him. "I love the Hall and the grounds. I assure you, we'll be here more than you can stand. Does that help?"

"It does," Norman said. "Tell Teresea not to forget her promise of help with Tess."

"Have a peaceful evening." Stewart opened the dining room door and rushed to Teresea's side. He knelt down beside her nearly afraid to touch her. "You're well?"

"I'm eating," she smiled and grasped his shoulders, laying her head in his curls. "I missed you. Don't let's part again."

"Forevermore, remember."

"I do," Teresea said presenting a tear-drenched face for him to kiss.

* * *

Saturday, November 30th

Tess stood before Pierrepont Hall's imposing entrance. It wasn't as if she feared seeing James. He was sitting in the Nottinghamshire goal, awaiting sentencing for attempted murder, and still claiming passion for her as his motive. Neither would Norman's face be seen again in the Hall. Why had he been so unhappy to end his own life? She'd failed as his wife. Her love wasn't enough for him to endure his suffering from cancer. Unable to raise her hand to knock she prayed for strength, *Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted in me? Hope thou in the Lord for I shall yet praise him, for the help of Jesus' countenance.*"

The young valet, Glenn, opened the door as soon as she tentatively knocked. "Mrs. Henderson, I was just going out. Mrs. North asked me to fetch you from Cozy Cottage. She needs to speak with you." He put his hands on the back of her shoulders as she unbuttoned her coat. "We're so sorry for your loss, Mrs. Henderson."

Tess tried to smile but her face felt frozen.

"Mr. Bedlam wrote letters to each of us." Glenn folded her coat over his arm but then reached out for her hand. "He explained your innocence was proven."

"Thank you, Glenn. Is Mrs. North in the library?"

Glenn released her hand and stepped back. "Yes ma'am. Shall I serve tea for you all?"

"Let's wait on Mrs. North," Tess said, wondering at her own practiced graciousness. "Time enough for tea."

His relieved smile quieted something deep within her. *Forgiven*, came to mind.

Tess opened the library door to find it filled with people. Stewart North and Mr. Henderson, Norman's uncle, were on the upper balcony with their heads together over a large dictionary. On the couch, Norman's aunt and Teresea looked up from a family album spread across their laps.

Teresea stood, calling her husband down to the main floor. "Stewart, I need to speak with Tess. Could you ask Miss Sentence to join us?" She walked slowly towards Tess.

When she reached out to pull the servant sash, Tess stepped back as if expecting to be struck. "Sorry."

Teresea apologized. "No, I didn't mean to startle you. You haven't had tea yet this afternoon, have you?"

"I came to pick up more of my belongings." Tess said, taking her seat in the wingback chair as directed by her hostess. "Glenn said you wanted to speak to me."

"We need to talk over many issues." Teresea held the door open for her parents to exit. "So much has happened. Have you heard about Koelz?"

"Robert?"

"He fell on the ice in front of his place, hitting his head too hard."

Tess stood. "Is he in intensive care?"

Teresea moved slowly to the couch. "I'm afraid he perished on the street. Stewart closed up his apartment for now. His will has left you his estate."

"He never liked me." Tess sat back down. "Why would he do such a thing?"

"My father had been taking him to AA meetings. Apparently there is an amends requirement in the program to stay sober. The will was dated on Friday, the day he passed."

"His wonders to perform," Tess said.

"Norman didn't tell me. You are a believer, too?"

"It's new." Tess welcomed the arrival of Miss Sentence and the tea cart.

After introductions and the polite conversation over tea, Miss Sentence excused herself. "I'll be in your office, if you have time before you leave."

"Yes, thank you," Tess said feeling awkward again. "James..."

"I understand we won't be seeing him at the Hall."

Tess wondered at her change of attitude. A burden had been lifted from her shoulders. She felt almost at ease with Teresea. "The man I loved couldn't feel my affection, some one I thought hated me cared passionately, and another enemy now gives me his home."

"Norman loved you, Tess," Teresea said. "I know you think I asked you here about business and Robert's funeral bequest; but Norman asked me to talk with you."

"Norman?"

* * *

Teresea could understand Tess' surprise. "The reason I collapsed was because Norman's ghost has been haunting me."

"Why not me?"

Norman's hand fell on Teresea's shoulder. She stood and walked toward Tess's chair. "He's here now."

Tess shook her head, looking at her folded hands. "Teresea, you needn't do this. Now that I have experienced the Lord's love, I don't need to be falsely reassured about my husband's affections. He did will you the Hall."

Teresea turned to Norman. "Why did you disinherit Tess? You told me marriage was forevermore."

Norman sat on the couch. "I'm ashamed to say I thought she loved me for my money."

"Did you hear him?" Teresea asked.

Tess stood, walking toward the door. "Please stop. I don't need make-believe lies."

Teresea barred her exit. "He said he was wrong. He thought you loved him for his money."

"Ever try to hold hands with a dollar bill?"

Teresea turned back to Norman's shade. "You were wrong."

"She doesn't believe I'm here," Norman said.

"How can I convince you, Tess? He's sitting on the couch."

"Ask him what I wore the night before he died."

"Nothing," Norman stood. "She'll believe you now."

"You were nude," Teresea answered Tess.

Tess dropped her hand from the doorknob. She looked at the couch and returned to the wingback chair. "Why can't I see him?"

Teresea shook her head. "I don't know. We were always close, on the same wavelength. Hadn't you noticed?"

Tess laughed nervously. "I could never mimic your laugh or the syncopation of your words. You two were sympatico. Why is he still here?"

"I can't go until you forgive me." Norman had risen and knelt next to Tess. He reached for her cheek.

"He needs you to forgive him before he can. His hand is on your cheek. He's kneeling next to your chair."

"I can smell him." Tess brushed at her cheek. "Is he going to make amends like Robert did?"

"I can't change my will from here." Teresea saw a slight smile flit across the semblance of Norman.

"We can't change his will," Teresea said. "But if you want to live here instead of Robert's place, you're welcome. Stewart and I need to return to the States...for my job. We live there. It might be more convenient for you to run Pierrepont Hall from here."

"You haven't changed your mind?"

"No. You've made this old barn into a profit entertainment venue for new couples, wishing to see their dreams come to reality. Why would I change my mind?"

"I've always loved George Street," Tess confessed.

"Will she forgive me?" Norman asked.

"Norman is still here," Teresea said.

"What am I supposed to forgive him for?"

"That I was so blind to her love."

"He didn't know you loved him and he's sorry."

"Oh," Tess said, weeping softly. "Did he love me?"

"I did, until my wires got crossed. I do now and forevermore."

Teresea wept at their lost tenderness. "He's sorry, Tess. He says he'll love you forevermore."

Tess stood. "Where is he now?"

Teresea watched as Norman folded Tess in his arms then passed through her into the brightness surrounding them.

When he was gone, Teresea asked. "You know where he is?"

"Yes," Tess said. "He's waiting for me to join the Lord's realm, when it's my time."

The End