

Chapter I

The invitation had been cordial without being particularly hospitable yet I had been curious enough to accept as my fiancée's family had always been somewhat of a mystery. She had steadfastly refused to talk about them and always seemed to hastily change the subject whenever I had raised it in conversation. Such behaviour had only served to fuel my intense curiosity about them. Surely they could not be so terrible. Yet as we travelled by coach from Heidelberg through the narrow dirt tracks slicing through the dense black forest like a network of dry veins I must admit to my apprehensions.

We had been travelling for much of the day. The passage had not been particularly comfortable. The family had dispatched their own private carriage to collect and convey us to my fiancée's ancestral home secreted within the heart of The Black Forest. It had been a tedious journey, travelling in silence for much of the way as Gretchen appeared unwilling to even acknowledge my presence. True I made the unforgivable mistake of contacting her family without her knowledge and when they replied to my letter and invited us to visit I was forced to confess to my presumptions. I had never seen Gretchen so furious, so incensed. Her eyes blazed with a ferocity I would not have expected in one so delicate. It had been well over a week since my indiscretion and still she had not forgiven me. We sat in silence, my attempts at casual conversation deflected and I wondered at the history existing between Gretchen and her family which would precipitate such animosity. Was she afraid of them or perhaps she was ashamed of me. Her family were wealthy to be sure and I was little more than a humble clerk in a small undistinguished Law firm. Was she perhaps fearful that her well-to-do family would not approve of her choice?

Such fearful conjecture filled my thoughts as the carriage carried us higher into the mountains, the light rapidly dwindling as a heavy oppressive twilight began to descend, making the surrounding forest appear eerie and unsettling. The deeper we travelled the stranger our surroundings became. The trees gradually became stripped of their leaves, the spindly branches stretching outward like reaching skeletal arms, the trunks blackened as if subjected to a raging inferno. A carpet of low lying mist began to seep in across the landscape, rolling between the trees and seeming to creep tentatively toward us as if curious as to our presence. At intervals I fancied I could perceive limp, ragged figures hanging from the gnarled, crooked branches of the dead trees like condemned men hanging from a gallows. Ravenous crows swooping around the hanging figures, skewering soft eyeballs out of withered sockets with cruel sharp beaks, feasting upon trailing entrails, drooping out of savagely torn bellies like old rope. Then the horrendous images were gone obscured by the

cloying, rolling mist which snaked through the forest, ethereal tendrils reaching for the passing coach like spectral, wispy hands.

I tore myself away from the window, ill at ease wondering if the unsettling apparitions were real or simply a product of an over-zealous imagination. I looked across at Gretchen but she continued to ignore me and I found myself wondering if perhaps she was already so familiar with the disturbing nature of our surroundings that such things no-longer registered with her. I turned back to the window, the carriage winding its way along the lonely forest path and I fancied that I could now see movement between the trees. Hooded figures, drifting through the billowing mist like phantoms, then like the hanged men they were gone, swallowed by the rolling vapour. I found it difficult to remain silent and I turned to Gretchen, my mouth already open and poised to inundate her with a myriad questions but she appeared unwilling to even meet my gaze and I thought better of approaching her and returned my attention to the strange surroundings once more.

The carriage climbed higher into the mountains, the forest thinning and the landscape becoming more barren. The trees began to look more skeletal as we gradually left the density of the forest behind us and I began to wonder if perhaps the spectral apparitions had been just the product of an over-active imagination.

As we vacated the forest we alighted onto a wide mountain path, before us stood a mountainous rise and perched atop of it stood a towering grey structure, which looked as if it had been forged out of the living rock. Tall grey towers with slitted windows and fortified walls, the battlements crumbling away to ruin, imposing its towering presence over the dark landscape as if the castle was a living, breathing entity. I stuck my head out of the carriage window, staring up at the castle as we drew closer, looming menacingly above us like a malevolent ogre. Turning away from the wide mountain road, we took a narrow climbing path and began to ascend the mountainous rise toward the castle.

At times the building became obscured by the high rock wall, reappearing at intervals like a child, playing a disturbing game of hide and seek with the carriage. Those cold dark windows embedded in the grey stone structure, staring down at us like empty soulless eye sockets, staring out of the denuded skull of a long dead corpse. I shuddered inwardly and I am certain my reaction did not go unnoticed by my cold and distant fiancée. She glanced at me with hooded eyes and turned away in the same instant. I returned my attention to the towering castle struck by the icy detachment shared between the structure and my intended and I wondered if this was perhaps indicative of a mysterious symbiosis shared between the castle and those who had been raised within its dark imposing walls.

Mounting the rise, the narrow winding path levelling out, the carriage rolled toward the castle gates, the towering building standing before us, as malevolent and uninviting as a prison. The carriage trundled across a rickety, dilapidated bridge, which groaned and buckled disturbingly beneath the weight of our carriage and passed beneath the pointed iron teeth of the raised portcullis. Passing through a long tunnel entrance, the horses hooves and the rolling of the carriage wheels reverberating in hollow echoes around the cathedral like arch of the walls we exited into a large medieval courtyard. The coach came around in a semi-circle halting before a short flight of steps, leading up toward an imposing double door, a structure composed of heavy beams of black wood held together and adorned by black iron.

We remained in the carriage, the coachman did not appear to assist us with our luggage and I was about to stand and open the coach door when I noticed the heavy doors at the crest of the steps begin to move. They swung open slowly and deliberately as if the person on the other side was struggling with the weight of the things. The rusted, aged hinges didn't so much creak and groan as scream out in agonised protest. I watched mesmerised by the slowly widening gap in the doors, mounting, tingling curiosity as to the nature of the person who would eventually appear on the other side of that forbidding obstruction. The crack continued to widen and I could see into the interior. A flight of wide stone steps, bordered on either side by tall statues, each statue supported upon a tall plinth of various heights, climbed toward a high arched entrance way but the person opening the heavy doors remained hidden from view. It was as if the doors were being drawn apart by invisible hands.

I watched fascinated as the doors continued to swing wide and I was certain that I witnessed a figure materialise, descending the wide staircase. It appeared like a whisper of insubstantial fabric, almost transparent. I feared my eyes were playing tricks as the figure seemed to become more solid, continuing to descend the staircase, gliding through the opening doors and descending from the entrance into the courtyard. It moved so silently it seemed to float above the ground as it drifted toward the side door of the carriage.

The apparition was a curious sight to behold. It was small, no bigger than a child and draped in what appeared to be a ragged, dishevelled bridal gown, the fabric was grey and heavily stained, the lace torn and crumpled. It looked as if the gown had been buried then dug up again. A thick, tattered veil hung down from the crown of the head to obscure the facial features. One was given the impression of a small child playing dress up in some old clothes she had discovered lying discarded in an attic. That is until the figure reached up to grasp the handle of the carriage door. I could see that the hand was old, the fingers gnarled

with, yellowing and blackened nails, grown long and crooked with neglect. The hands were arthritic, the clawed fingers curled into talons. The poor creature was forced to use both of its deformed hands to unlatch the door. I reached through the window to assist and the small figure took a faltering couple of steps backward as I opened the carriage door from the inside and allowed it to swing open onto the courtyard.

At this point the coachman finally appeared with our luggage, stooped down and dropped the carriage steps into place. Climbing down I reached up to assist Gretchen but she refused my hand and made her own way down to the courtyard. She looked down at the small figure in the dishevelled bridal gown and nodded, her mouth, creasing into a reluctant but courteous smile. The diminutive creature turned away from us and to my surprise proceeded to limp up the steps toward the front entrance, quite unlike when I first beheld the apparition and it seemed to glide gracefully toward us. Gretchen and I followed the small figure through the wide open double doors, crossing the threshold of the castle, the coachman trailing behind with our luggage.

We allowed the small person to guide us, watching it climb up the wide flight of stairs with some difficulty. I felt compelled to offer my assistance but Gretchen held me back without explanation. She grasped my arm as I stepped forward and forbade me with that cold steel-like glare which I had come to recognise all too well in these recent weeks. Looking about me, I took in my surroundings as we ascended the stairs. The statues erected on either side of us looked like unfinished husks of misshapen stone as if the sculptor had attempted to create a magnificent representation of the human form before abandoning his efforts in despair. The statues also looked as if they hadn't been dusted in years. Thick silken cobwebs hung strung almost decoratively between each of the deformed husks of stone.

The climb up the staircase was arduous. It was long and steep and we finally alighted before an arched doorway cordoned off with a heavy crimson drape as dusty as the statues and as dishevelled and unkempt as the bridal gown worn by our diminutive guide. The small figure reached up a trembling, crooked hand, slowly pulling back the heavy curtain and dislodging a cascade of dust. It stepped aside allowing us to pass through and finding ourselves standing before a long arched corridor. The dwarfish figure brushed by me and I became aware of a musty smell of decay issuing from it as if it had been wearing that same soiled clothing for some time. I held my breath whenever my proximity to the character was too close to feel truly comfortable and at times I noticed the figure half-turning toward me as if vaguely aware of my distaste.

As we progressed down the long corridor I took in my surroundings and fixated with some interest upon the paintings adorning the walls on either side of the passage. They were mostly portraits, possibly of family members or ancestors but they were old and uncared for, the remnants of the oil paints peeling in large flakes. The pictures themselves were dark as if they had been painted in darkened rooms with little or no light filtering in to cast even the most subdued illumination yet that wasn't the most disturbing thing about these strange pictures. All of them seemed incomplete as if the artist could not or would not finish his work. The portraits were bereft of faces. Where the face should have been the paint was either faded badly, completely obscuring the features or the countenance was little more than a sketched outline without detail, the faded brown canvas still visible beneath.

We continued to follow the dwarfish figure down the seemingly endless corridor eventually turning left into another passage, this one adorned with rusted suits of armour and positioned at various intervals more of those misshapen statues. Halfway along the passage we halted before a heavy wooden door, our small guide reaching for the handle with its gnarled arthritic hand and applying the slightest pressure, the handle appearing to bend downward of its own accord.

The door swung slowly inward and opened onto a spacious not unpleasant sitting room. A fire roared in the hearth, framed inside a monumental fireplace. High backed easy chairs supported with red velvet cushioning encircled the warm glow emanating from the fire. The rest of the chamber was adorned with all of the expected furnishings of a comfortable family room. A drinks cabinet, narrow bookcase and small tables for the resting of drinks glasses or tea cups. The small figure in the bridal gown escorted us into the room. The coachman had disappeared with our luggage at some point but I don't actually recall noticing him leave us.

Stepping over the threshold into the warming comfort of the sitting room I stood upon the carpet eager to step over and warm myself by the raging fire, spitting and crackling away in the hearth but I held back, remembering my manners and waited for my bride-to-be to make the formal introductions. Gretchen stepped over toward the circle of high-backed easy chairs and leaned over the backrest of the nearest seat. She appeared to be whispering something to someone sitting there. I could determine a strong male hand resting lightly upon the armrest. Gretchen backed away slightly from the back of the chair and I waited patiently. Slowly, a rather distinguished face emerged around the backrest.

The forehead was high, the iron grey hair retreating back onto the crown of the skull, the face itself, long and aristocratic. An elegant Roman nose drooped over a thick but neatly trimmed moustache, which covered the top lip of a thin slit of a mouth. The gentleman

scrutinised me from beneath bushy grey eyebrows. The eyes the coldest blue, penetrated like sharp slivers of ice. I felt strangely naked and vulnerable beneath his intense penetrating gaze. It was as if I was mesmerised and completely unable to move as if from the moment he fixed me with his intense stare my will was no longer my own. I remained standing transfixed until the thin mouth steadily creased into an unexpectedly warm smile. The gentleman beckoned me over and I relaxed slightly although I walked very stiffly across the carpet toward him. He held out his hand and I took it. The handshake was unsettlingly limp, the skin dry like gripping dead leaves and the flesh as cold as marble in spite of the warming effects of the raging fire in the hearth. He released me to my relief and I backed away uncertainly.

“So you are Gretchen's young man?” The gentleman began the conversation, relieving me of the burden of doing so.

“Not so young any more I fear, Sir.” I answered honestly. The gentleman smiled.

“None of us are. I am Gretchen's Uncle, Baron Schekkler and these...”

He gestured toward the other occupied seats and I turned to acknowledge a rather crusty old woman embalmed, (for that is the only way I could possibly describe her) embalmed from head to toe in thick black lace as if she had spun it around herself like a cocoon. The other chair was occupied by a thin older version of the Baron except without the moustache. He slumped into his seat as if all of the air had been ejected from his skeletal frame and his bones had simply collapsed in on themselves.

“...Are Gretchen's Aunt, the, The Baroness Meingraff.” The Baron continued. “And my sibling Felix.”

I nodded with courtesy toward my hosts my friendly gesture received with stiff courtly nods of acknowledgement but little more. The Baron then gestured behind him toward the dwarfish figure concealed within the soiled bridal gown.

“I almost forgot.” He added. “I doubt she would have introduced herself but this is Yetta. Gretchen's other Aunt.”

I turned toward the diminutive figure and nodded, smiling uncertainly and I admit insincerely. Aunt Yetta was unresponsive, standing by the door, gnarled hands clasped in front of her, staring at the floor.

“That will be all Yetta. You may return to your room.” Commanded the Baron dismissively.

I turned back toward the small figure but she was already gone, the sitting room door slowly closing as if buffeted by a gentle breeze.

“You have had a long and tiring journey no doubt.” The Baron's voice broke through the heavy silence. “You must be tired, both of you but perhaps before retiring you might like to join us for a nightcap.”

I agreed enthusiastically and Gretchen volunteered to prepare the drinks ensuring that none of her aged relatives were disturbed from their comfort. She retired to the drinks cabinet, took out two glasses and a decanter of dark brown liquid. She poured two drinks and glided forward handing me one of the glasses.

“Your health.” I toasted my hosts and took a sip from my glass. The rich cognac slipped over my tongue and down my throat like thick syrup, filling my chest with fire and instantly warmed my stomach. I was grateful for the comforting sensation, the journey to the castle having become disquieting to me. I began to notice Gretchen's family and even Gretchen herself regarding me with almost predatory eyes and I immediately took another drink, gulping the fiery liquid down and draining the glass self-consciously.

“Another?” Gretchen asked, obviously amused at my discomfort and I nodded and handed her back the glass. The three relatives smiled at each other in an almost conspiratorial manner, the sight of those wizened faces, grinning sheepishly like mischievous children was to say the least, unsettling. I was invited to sit down and I took a seat next to the Baron as Gretchen came to my side and handed me my second drink of the evening.

“Well, why don't you tell us all about yourself, my boy?” Suggested the Baron. “I believe you are involved in the legal profession.”

“Only in a junior capacity at the moment Herr Baron. I am little more than a clerk in a small law firm but I hope to aspire to greater things. The position is affording me the opportunity to pay my way through law school.”

“And where do you study?”

“Heidelberg Sir.”

The Baron appeared pleased at my choice of university. The Aunt and two Uncles beaming at me and nodding their approval.

“I know it well.” He said.

“You were perhaps a student there, Herr Baron?” I enquired.

“Alas, no. The aristocracy have little need to aspire toward a profession. We are stagnant I fear. I indulged in other pursuits in my younger days. What knowledge we acquired of the outside world came from books and private tutors. Our family is old, ancient, one might even say medieval. We have been living in this old, draughty castle for a very long time, set in our ways, immovable and inflexible. I for one envy the freedom of youth. So many experiences ahead of you, so many choices to make.”

“I am certain you have enjoyed an eventful life Herr Baron, even if it was never to be a life of academia. There are few avenues closed to those who possess wealth and influence.”

I feared the cognac had loosened my tongue and I instantly regretted giving voice to my thoughts, desperately hoping my simple observation had not sounded too much like an accusation. I looked about the room, four pairs of eyes focused intently upon me and I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, uncertain of whether or not I had inadvertently caused offence.

“Tis true enough.” Said the Baron, sighing a little as he spoke. “Privilege does indeed have its privileges.” I watched disconcerted as Gretchen's Aunt and her Uncle Felix sniggered like naughty school children, curious as to whether they found the slight play on words amusing or if it was some obscure hidden meaning in the Baron's words which they found so delightful. I cleared my throat and took another gulp from my glass, forgetting myself and draining it for the second time.

“We do seem to be getting through the cognac this evening don't we?” The Baron observed. “Would you like another? Perhaps it would be best if we handed you the decanter, then you can help yourself.”

I declined, realising that the Baron was making sport of me and any further intake of alcohol would only serve to loosen my tongue more and completely dull my senses to the point of complete insensitivity. Gretchen was already displeased with me and I feared any further indiscretion on my part or the causing of any embarrassment in front of her family would alienate her from me totally.

“Forgive me young man. I merely jest at your expense. You are our honoured guest and I have little desire to make you feel uncomfortable and I fear it is I who is being inconsiderate to your needs. You have undertaken an arduous journey to be sure and I'm

certain that you and my niece would like to freshen up. You must be tired and hungry. Gretchen can show you to your rooms. I'm sure you remember the way my dear."

My betrothed stood up walked to my chair and took my glass. I stood up rather stiffly and allowed her to lead me to the sitting room door. I fear my initial interview with the senior members of the family had not gone well and I felt ill-at-ease and confused. Gulping down two glasses of cognac in rapid succession could not have helped matters and I thought it better if I retire before I inadvertently forsake what little remained of my dignity and made a complete ass of myself.

"We shall see you both at dinner." Said the Baron in final parting, turning away and settling back into his high backed chair almost dismissively, the other Aunt and Uncle also choosing not to acknowledge or entertain us any further. "We dine late. I hope you won't find that an inconvenience." The Baron announced without turning around and Gretchen bowed her head slightly toward her relations as she ushered me out of the room.

We stood outside in the cold corridor, the icy chill sweeping through the passage in no way comparable to the frosty atmosphere of the sitting room. I opened my mouth to speak as Gretchen closed the sitting room door behind us, halted before I had even uttered the first syllable by my fiancée placing a single finger to her lips. She led me away down the corridor, turning a corner into another passage and leading me beneath a wide arch and up a wide flight of stairs onto the next landing. We alighted onto a balcony which encircled what appeared to be an elaborate ballroom situated far below us. Above us hung two large and dusty chandeliers, cobwebs dripping over the crystal adorning like a dusting of light Christmas snow. The cobwebs billowed and the heavy light fittings swung from side to side as if buffeted by a soft ghostly breeze. I looked over the balcony at the ballroom floor far below us. Even from this lofty distance, I could tell that it appeared cracked and stained with thick grime. The room looked as if it hadn't been used in years.

Gretchen placed her hand gently upon my shoulder and I followed her along the balcony to an alcove and a stairwell leading both up toward the next level and down in the direction of the ballroom. We took the ascending stairwell and climbed two further levels before exiting onto a strangely featureless corridor, featureless except for the many doors adorning either side of the passage. I was amazed at the expansive size of the castle interior and the seemingly endless number of rooms and I expressed as much to Gretchen. She didn't respond to my sense of awe and proceeded to lead me down the corridor, coming to a halt by one of the doors, opening it and escorting me into the room beyond. Closing the door behind her, she removed her bonnet, discarding it carelessly onto the bed and stared at

me with those penetrating eyes as if she was attempting to determine whether or not she was perhaps in the presence of a fool.

“So what do you think?” She asked finally.

“Think?” I responded, not entirely certain as to what she was referring.

“My family, my Uncles and Aunts, what do you think?”

“I don’t know. I’m not too sure. I suppose the question should be what do you suppose they think of me?”

“They probably think you’re an idiot.”

“Really” I responded, a little despondent.

“I don’t know. How should I know what they think of you. Right now I think you’re an idiot.”

“I think you’ve always believed me to be an idiot but you remain with me nevertheless.”

“Then maybe I’m an idiot.” She paused for a moment, pouting. “We never should have come here.”

“Why? True, my initial overtures to your family were less than successful. They made me feel very nervous.”

“They have that effect on people.”

“But I’m sure the worst of it is over. How could it possibly get any worse?”

Gretchen stared at me as if I had just uttered something unbelievably foolish and I looked away, convinced of the inherent stupidity in my own blind optimism.

“I’m going to my room.” Gretchen finally announced.

“You’re not staying here?”

Gretchen’s eyes became wide, her mouth dropping in mock surprise and indignity.

“My goodness, sir. What are you suggesting?” She said playfully. “Such behaviour would not be seemly in a well to do lady from a respectable family.”

“It’s never bothered you before.”

“We, it bothers me now. I'll see you at dinner, you rascal.”

She grinned picking up her bonnet from the bed and turned toward the door. I strode over to her as she turned the door handle, resting my hand on her own.

“Just out of curiosity, where is your room? I may need to seek comfort should I become afraid in the night.”

Gretchen smirked as she answered.

“Why don't you try and find it.” Snatching her hand away from my own, she opened the door and stepped out into the corridor, poking her head back into the room for a moment. “Good luck.” She added, her final smile almost the issue of a challenge as she disappeared back out into the corridor and was gone. A big stupid grin creased my features. She appeared to have forgiven me my foolish impulse to contact her family without her knowledge.

Looking about the spacious bedchamber I noticed my luggage had been deposited upon the floor and I wondered how the coachman had known that this would be the room that I would be bequeathed. I shrugged indifferently and flopped down upon the ornate four poster bed. It had been a long and tiring journey and within seconds, the veil of sleep descended over me. Perhaps it was the disturbing nature of the castle and its unsettling adornments. The misshapen sculptures, the portraits with unfinished faces. Possibly it could have been Gretchen's unnerving family. Old and wizened yet somewhat child-like in their behaviour. The mysterious Aunt Yetta, diminutive in stature, bedecked within a soiled bridal gown, the features concealed by a thick veil. It could have been the images I thought I witnessed in the forest as we approached the castle or possibly a combination of all of these things. Whatever the catalyst, as I fell through the portals of sleep into the imagination beyond I began to dream and what frightening, disturbing dreams they were. A haunting journey into insanity and cloying, grasping horror. I feared that I would never wake from the nightmare and perhaps I never would.