

The Old House

An Everlasting Love Story

Chapter 3 - The Old House

The limousine arrived at Ray's home at nine o'clock Tuesday morning. Ray had driven to work at seven o'clock as usual. Then he had called his son to let him know the limo was coming to take him and his uncles to the office. Simon was not sure he liked the idea of that. He had driven himself to his father's office many times. He had only known his uncles for a few days and they had every reason not to like him. In two years, he was to become their boss, taking his father's place at the helm of the family business, which he has also only known about for two days. As he moved down the walkway toward the curb, a man in a black suit got out of the driver's seat and hurried over and opened the back door for him. When he approached, Simon offered his hand. "Mr. Carter, I'm Dan Thompson. I'll be driving you today, sir."

"Hi, Dan, it's nice to meet you. Please just call me Simon."

"Thanks, Simon. By the way, we're supposed to pick up your uncles at the U.S. Grant in fifteen minutes, so please climb in and help yourself to some juice if you like."

"Dan, if it's okay, I'd prefer to sit up front, at least until we get to their hotel."

The chauffeur closed the rear door and opened the front door. "Whatever you like, Simon." After driving away, Dan continued, "If you don't mind me saying so, you remind me of your father, Simon."

"Thank you. Why do you say that?"

"My main job is security at the office downtown. I only act as chauffeur when there are VIPs from out of town. The only exception was always your grandfather Frank. Your father always drove him personally. Plus, your father always drives himself. That makes the two of you very different from your uncles."

"Tell me about it," Simon agreed. After a couple of minutes, he said, "Did you ever meet my great-grandfather?"

Dan chuckled and replied, "I didn't think I looked that old, Simon. I'm sorry, and I don't mean to offend, but I'm afraid he was a bit before my time."

"It was a stupid question now that I think of it. He passed away before I was born. Do you know anything about the old house, the one in Golden Hill?"

"Yes, I know that place pretty well actually," Dan replied. "When I first started with the company, I spent a couple of years on guard duty over there. Why do you ask?"

"I'm told that I need to live there for two years as part of my initiation into the company."

"Whew! That definitely does not seem like a fun assignment. I never had to work night shifts there, but some of the guys who did claim to have seen all kinds of crazy shit going on there."

"Like what?"

The limo pulled up to the hotel entrance. Dan said, "Faces in windows, strange noises, you know, typical haunted house kinds of things." He opened his door and continued, "I'll go get your uncles."

"Okay, and I'll get in the back. Thanks again, Dan."

Minutes later, Simon was sitting opposite his uncles while Dan headed toward the office. “Well, I guess this is it, Simon,” Walt said.

“How do you mean, Uncle Walt?”

“Listen to us, Nephew,” Alex began. “We all know these wills are full of crap and can’t stand up in court. Walt and I have nothing against you personally. We both know you’ve been thrown into this shit stream and told to swim for shore. It doesn’t have to come to this. We can help.”

“How do you mean?”

Walt pressed a button and the screen between the driver’s seat and the back rose. “This is just between us men, okay? You can’t say any of this to your father, got it?” Simon nodded.

“I’m afraid that’s not good enough for me,” Alex noted. “I want you to swear to us right here and now that you’ll keep this from him.”

“Okay. Uncle Walt and Uncle Alex, I swear I won’t tell my dad or anyone else what you’re about to tell me,” Simon agreed, although not certain he really meant it.

Walt looked his nephew for a full minute before he replied. “Honestly Simon, I don’t believe you, but really, it doesn’t matter. My attorneys tell us we have a good shot at invalidating our grandfather’s will because he was mentally unbalanced. When we succeed at that, it will be easy to void the wills of our father and yours since they were just doing what he asked them to do. All this bullshit about your being his namesake can be put to rest along with his bones. Simon my boy, all you have to do is not live in the old house. Stay there a few days and then tell your dad it was haunted or horrible or whatever you want to tell him. Do that and the legal action is unnecessary. The business will be split among the surviving grandchildren of Simon Peter Carter. That’s your dad and the two of us. Don’t you see? We’re not trying to screw you or your family. You all get your share. Then we siblings will be equal partners. Do this, and Alex and I will give you fifty million dollars of our money, so even if your dad is pissed at you, you will be taken care of.” He looked at his brother and smiled, and then looked back at Simon. “It’s a win-win actually.”

Dan’s voice came over the intercom, saying, “Gentlemen, I’m pulling up to the curb in thirty seconds.”

The meeting in the home office had not gone well. Now, Simon, his father and uncles were headed to Golden Hill and the old house. Ray was still fuming and therefore was sitting up front with Dan. Simon sat in back in awkward silence with his uncles. He wanted to break the silence but each time he looked up, Walt and Alex were avoiding eye contact. After too many painful minutes of silence, the limousine pulled up to the curb and stopped. Walt opened the door and climbed out before Dan could reach it. Alex smirked at his nephew and climbed out as well. Simon was beginning to understand a lot more about Carter family politics by watching those two over the course of the day. He got out of the car and stretched his back and then froze when he saw the house. It was a large Victorian home, almost a mansion, that sat beyond a tall iron spiked fence and a good sized front yard. There was something very familiar about this place even though he could not remember ever having been here before. A man was standing on the porch wearing a black suit and dark glasses, and Simon assumed he was the guard stationed here to protect the vacant property. As Ray joined the others, the guard headed toward them. When he arrived at the gate, he pulled out a key and unlocked the gate and opened it for the men. “Good morning, Ray, we’ve been expecting you.”

“Thank you, Blake. These gentlemen are my brothers Alex and Walt, and this is my son, Simon.” The guard shook their hands. “I think we’ll go in now.” Blake nodded and moved aside so the others could enter the gate. There were four concrete steps to reach the level of the lawn, and then the walk had a slight incline as it approached the six steps onto the wrap-around porch. The house was two-stories with an attic with three dormer windows. The walls were painted in a dark green and the roof appeared to be shingled with red tiles. All the windows were closed and drapes blocked the view inside, except for a single upstairs window that seemed to be covered with a thick coat of grime. Patches of annual flowers lined the walkway, separating it from the lawn. There was one tree in the center of each half of the lawn.

After they climbed up the steps and onto the porch, Blake asked, “Would you like me to unlock the door, Ray?”

Ray pulled a single key out of his pocket and handed it to Simon, saying, “Let’s have Simon open the door. This is his house now, after all. I think that’s all we need right now, Blake.” The guard smiled and walked back down the steps and headed over to Dan who was leaning on the side of the limo. Simon unlocked the door and pushed it open. It creaked noisily on old hinges. Before he could go in, his uncles pushed past him and went inside. Simon looked annoyed by their disrespect, so his father patted him on the shoulder, smiled and walked inside. Simon followed him and closed the door.

The entryway was such a shock that Simon blinked twice before his mind caught up with his eyes. The outside of the house was quite large, but this room was the same height and only slightly wider than the double doors. It seemed as though someone had built a room within the room. The walls and ceiling were papered in random sheets of wallpaper. To the right, there seemed to be a narrow stairway leading upstairs. Upon closer inspection, it looked more like a large and ornate staircase that had been narrowed by another poorly constructed wall. The stairway curved and he could not see the top from the bottom. Only a single bare lightbulb glowed halfway up the stairs. A second bulb hung over his head in the entryway. To his left, there was another narrow hallway constructed in a similar fashion. He could hear his father and uncles in that direction, so he followed it.

At the end of the hall was another sloppily constructed room. This one was ten feet wide and fifteen long. There was a threadbare couch against the far wall. A small table and two wooden chairs sat against the wall nearest him. On the far wall to his right was a single bed with no covers and a heavily worn mattress. The three other men were looking down at the bed as he approached. Walt said, “And you put your faith in the will of the man who died here. Ray, you are a fool if you think we’ll let this stand.”

“Dad, what’s going on here? I don’t understand.”

“Let me break the bad news to you, Simon,” Walt interjected. “We all loved our grandfather as much as your father. But look at this place! Does this look like something a sane man would do? Like it or not, the man you are named after had lost touch with reality by the time he wrote his will. I remember visiting this house dozens of times as a young boy. Let me tell you the original house was freaking amazing.”

“Dad, is that true?” Ray only half nodded his head and avoided eye contact. “Uncle Walt, I thought you stayed in the Midwest after my great-grandfather moved to California. How did you see this place as a child?”

Alex answered, “Because the old man moved this house stick by stick from Iowa.”

“Really?” Simon gasped.

Ray sighed and said, "Sy, there is a lot I have to tell you, but we don't have the time for that right now. Suffice it to say that my grandfather bought this house in France right after World War II, and had it moved to the land where the ranch is now. When he and my grandmother separated, he built the ranch for her and took this house with him."

"It's just a house, Dad. Why would he go to all that trouble?"

"It was for Cassandra," Walt interrupted. "He cheated on our grandmother with that whore in France. When the German army shot her dead, he bought the house and moved it in her memory. Frankly, I'm surprised that Grandma didn't burn it to the fucking ground. I can tell you she was thrilled when he took this old bunch of kindling away along with himself."

"I don't know what to say," Simon moaned.

"Okay, let's not jump to any conclusions yet," Ray replied. "Let's go have lunch. Then Walt and Alex can fly back home. When I get home from work, you and I will come back here and talk some more. I'll also have a couple new beds brought in here later. I think you and I should sleep here tonight, Son."

Walt chuckled and said, "I'm ready for lunch. I'll need to wash my hands twice after being in this rat-infested hovel." He looked around at the miserable room and continued, "Nice house, Simon. I hope you enjoy living here." He laughed and then he and Alex walked back toward the front door.

When he heard the front door close behind them, Simon said, "Dad, this is not good news. This place makes my great-granddad look like a real nut."

"Sy, please, let's just take this one step at a time. I know it looks really bad right now, but believe me that I knew my father and grandfather and we have to trust that they knew what they were doing."

Simon looked around at the room one more time and said, "That's hard to believe, but I trust you Dad. And I'm really glad you'll stay here with me tonight. This place is really creeping me out."

"One last thing before we join your uncles. If you come back here this afternoon before I can get here, promise me you won't go upstairs."

"What's upstairs, Dad?"

Ray sighed heavily and replied, "Please, just promise me you won't go upstairs when you're here alone; at least not the first time, okay?" Simon was even more confused and concerned, but he forced a nod and a smile and the two walked out.

Lunch was miserable. The food was good, but there was absolute silence at the table. The three Carter brothers had nothing further to say to one another. The awkward silence was followed by stilted goodbyes, and then Ray went back to the office. After lunch, Simon rode with his uncles to the airport and then Dan drove him back to the old house. It was around three o'clock in the afternoon when they arrived. A truck was parked out front and two workmen were carrying twin beds inside and then hauled away the old one. When they left, Blake locked the front door and sat on a chair on the porch. Simon walked up the steps onto the porch and waved. Blake motioned toward a small couch on the porch and Simon sat down. "So, you're the lucky guy who gets to live here, huh?"

"That's what they tell me, Blake. By the way, do you ever see or hear unusual things around here?"

"Well, some of the neighbors are busybodies, but I think you mean from inside the house, right?" Simon nodded. "No, not really, but I've only been working at the house for a couple of

months.” He looked up as though lost in thought for a second and then continued, “Come to think of it, I did spend some time with another guy from the office who started working here when your great-grandfather was still alive. His name is Stewart Higgins. I think he retired a few years ago. The story I heard is that the old man retired about five years before he died. Stu told me that Frank Carter, your grandfather I guess, assigned him to help the old man around this house. Frankly, some of the tales he told me were very strange, and even made it seem like the old man had gone insane. But Stu always said he was completely sane and just troubled by his past and all the mistakes he had made and especially what happened during the war. It was Stu and the old man who built all those walls inside. It was his way of closing off the past so he didn’t have to relive it again and again.”

“What do you think is on the other side of those walls?”

“I’d have to imagine the rest of the house with all the old furniture and stuff right where he left them twenty-five years ago.” He sighed and said, “It’s really sad when you think about it. He tried to bury the past by building walls around himself. He thought he could escape what had happened by living in that new room with his memories locked safely behind drywall. But you know, you can never truly be free from your past. It’s you too, after all.”

Another car pulled up in front of the house and a woman in a black suit and dark glasses exited and headed in their direction. “Blake, do you know how to get in touch with Stu? I’d love to hear more about all of this from him.”

Blake stood to greet the newcomer and Simon followed suit. Blake shook her hand and said, “Hannah Stowe, this is Simon Carter. He’s going to live here now.”

Hannah removed her glasses, shook Simon’s hand and said, “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Carter. I’m taking over for Blake for the next eight hours.”

“Please call me Simon or Sy if you prefer.” He noticed that she had beautiful crystal clear green eyes and blond hair.

“And I’m just Hannah. I don’t mean to offend you, but you really intend to live here? I mean it needs a lot of work. And have you been upstairs yet?”

“No offense taken, Hannah, but interestingly enough, my dad asked me not to go upstairs alone. What’s up there anyway?”

“Okay, you two, I guess I’m on my way home now,” Blake interrupted. “Have a good evening and I’ll see you tomorrow morning, Simon.” They shook hands. “And I’ll see if I can get Stu’s contact information for you, okay?” He turned and headed down the steps and toward the street.

“Blake’s a great guy,” Hannah noted. “Come on, let me take you upstairs and you can find out for yourself.” They entered the house and made their way to the stairs. “Whenever I see these stairs, I feel a bit claustrophobic. It’s barely wide enough for one at a time, so I’ll go first.”

He followed her up the stairs. “I’d hate to have to do this without the light on.”

“You get used to it, Sy. That is part of my job, and generally the lights are off after nightfall. Let me tell you that I usually have a death-grip on the handrail as I go up or down in the dark. When you’re alone here, there’s no one to help you if you fall.”

“Don’t worry, Hannah, I’ve got your back.”

She giggled and turned her head to smile at him. “Thanks.” Then she continued up.

Simon glanced behind and noticed the entryway was no longer visible due to the curvature of the staircase. He turned back to the front and saw Hannah standing on the landing waiting for him. He hurried to the top and joined her in yet another wallpapered narrow hallway. There was no light here other than from far down the stairs and her flashlight. She walked ahead ten feet

and pulled the string on a bare bulb fixture over her head. “Spooky, right?” He smiled at her and she turned and continued down the hall, which turned sharply to the left and stopped at a single door. “Your great-grandfather must have owned a wallboard factory.”

“And a wallpaper one as well,” he countered and she giggled.

She turned the doorknob and the door creakily opened into a room with a single window. There was no drape, curtain or curtain rod, and the glass was coated with dirt on both sides. She walked over to the window and looked outside. The room was a bedroom. There was a double bed brass frame, but no mattress. A chest of some kind sat at the foot of the bed. There was a single chair on the opposite wall which was also a poorly constructed false wall. Other than that, the room was empty. He walked over to her and looked out the window at the front of the house. He felt as though he was looking through dense fog or smog more likely. “You know, this is the only room in the house visible from the outside. The rest are covered with those fake walls or closed drapes.”

“So, this is it? There is just this one room with a window. I guess that isn’t spooky then.”

She smiled at him and said, “That’s where you’re wrong, Simon. Come up here at night sometime and you’ll find out.”

Simon noticed his father’s car had pulled up in front and he was approaching the front door. “Just tell me what you saw?”

“Nothing, honestly, but it’s not about seeing; it’s more about the experience. It’s not as bad as it sounds, but it is definitely different. We’d better go say hello to your dad.”

Having heard their footsteps upstairs, Ray waited at the bottom of the staircase for their arrival. When Hannah appeared around the bend in the stairs, he said, “Hello, Hannah, it’s great to see you again. I see you got stuck with guard duty.”

“Yep, this is what they think of me in the home office. Young grist for the mill, I suppose.”

“Hi, Dad, I’m glad you’re here.”

“Hey, Sy, it’s good to be here without your uncles.”

“Ray, I’ll go back to my duty station now,” Hannah noted.

“I brought some Chinese takeout, and it’s still in my car. There’s plenty for you too if you like.”

“I’ll go get it, but I’m not really hungry right now. If there are any leftovers, I might take you up on it later,” she smiled and walked out of the door, closing it behind her.

“Dad, we just ate a couple hours ago,” Simon replied. “I’m not hungry now either.”

“I know, me neither. But there is so much to tell you, Son. I had the guys bring a microwave for the kitchen so we can heat it up later.”

“Wow, I just realized that I haven’t seen either a kitchen or bathroom. I wonder why I didn’t notice that before.”

Hannah opened the door and gave the two bags of food to Ray and then went back onto the porch. “Let’s go to the other room where there is more space.” They walked single file down the narrow passageway and entered the larger room. Not only had the two new beds been set up, but the small couch and table had been replaced. A table lamp was now on the single side table at one end of the couch. Ray set the bags down on the table and the two sat on the couch. “Did you notice that other small hallway leading away from here?” he asked while pointing toward it.

“Yea, I remember seeing that now. That must be to the bathroom and kitchen.”

Ray smiled and said, “Sort of. Why don’t you go look? I asked the guys to put some beers in the fridge and ice in the freezer. We should have a cold one to celebrate this day.”

Simon shrugged his shoulders and then headed toward this yet unseen part of his new home. The hallway was more than fifteen feet long and ended in a wall. There were openings at the end on both sides. The kitchen was to his left; but it was more closet than kitchen. Another false wall was at the edge of the doorway to the right. Another wall closed off the rest of the room, leaving about six feet of countertop to the left. There was a small refrigerator under the counter. The microwave sat above it on the counter. Just past that was a small stretch of countertop and then the sink. There were two cabinets above the counter. He shook his head and left the kitchen to explore the bathroom. It was almost exactly the same size. There was no door, only a threadbare curtain to separate it from the hallway. A toilet sat just inside the entryway. Then there was a small shower stall. "This place is freaking nuts!"

His father's voice shouted, "Don't jump to conclusions!" Simon laughed and went back to the kitchen and withdrew two Stone IPAs from the refrigerator, opened them and headed back to the meager living/bedroom. Simon handed a beer to his dad who then tapped his to the other and said, "Cheers!" Simon sipped the drink and then sat down.

"I bet there's no TV or Wi-Fi either."

"That's no bet, Son. You have to remember that your poppy was born in 1915, so computers would not have been his strong suit. Also, this place is exactly the way he left it, except for this new furniture. His will expressly said you had to start your adventure in the house the way he left it."

"Adventure? Frankly, this doesn't seem like much of an adventure."

"This house was so different when your mother and I moved here. I hope one day you will return it to its original state. This is your house, and you can add all the electronic bells and whistles you want, but not in this hole. You have to remodel and I will help you, okay?"

"Dad, you know you could just send in professionals and they could knock this out in a few weeks. Neither you nor I are carpenters or electricians. Poppy really wanted you and me to do all this ourselves?"

"Actually, he wanted you to do most of it, especially the part about removing the walls. He was very clear on that. But as the walls come down, I can help and once a room is restored, we can bring in contractors to upgrade the wiring or whatever."

"Okay, let's say that I do all of this. The question is why?"

"Please don't interrupt me until I get through this. I know it is going to sound crazy, but this is what drove your poppy throughout his life. It is also why our family has money." He sighed heavily and smiled at his son and then continued, "Poppy believed in reincarnation. He told my dad and me how he had lived many lives throughout human history, and in many of the lives he could remember, he was Simon and she was Cassandra. They were destined to be together for all time. She promised him that if he loved her always, his family would prosper and they would be deliriously happy." Simon had lowered his head and held it in his hands. "He was twenty-seven when he joined the Army and went to fight the Nazis. That was when he met Cassandra again. He and Nana were engaged, but when he found Cassandra, he was ready to give up everything and marry her in France. Then there was the assault and the Germans killed her. He prayed to be killed that day as well so they could start a new adventure, but it was not to be. He took the most dangerous assignments he could find, hoping to end his life now that she was gone, but before he knew it, his enlistment was over and he was sent back home. Shortly after the war ended, he went back to France and bought her family home, took it apart bit by bit and shipped it over. He bought a beautiful home in Paris for her family. He told Nana this house was a wedding gift, and

never told her the rest of the story. He figured why bother when Cassandra was already dead. Now, this is the difficult part.”

“I think the first bit was difficult enough, Dad.”

Ray put his hand on Simon’s knee, making him look up. “Please understand that this is what your Poppy believed. I’m not saying it’s true or not true. You get to make your own decision about that. Poppy was convinced that you would be his next reincarnation. That is why you were given his name and why the house is now yours. It was his sincere hope that you would find Cassandra again. He thought that by you fixing the house, it would bring back memories and those memories would bring you back to Cassandra. So what do you think?”

“What if he was wrong?”

Ray smiled and replied, “That’s a distinct possibility, Son. His will was very specific. If you live here two years, you get the house and are the new heir to Carter Global Enterprises. That remains true whether you decide you are him or not. But there’s more than that!”

“What could be more?”

“G.C.E. is just the family business. Poppy had private investment accounts as well. The last time I looked at the ones I know about, they were worth ninety-eight billion dollars.”

“What? That has to be a mistake!” His father shook his head while smiling. “What did you mean about the ones you know about?”

“For the sake of argument, let’s say you are the same Simon Peter Carter who was my grandfather. If he really lived hundreds of lifetimes across the millennia, who can say what other assets may be out there? If you are him, you may find out if they exist and where they are. If not, I’m afraid you have to settle for the ninety-eight billion and the company.”

“I think I can survive on that.”

The revelations of the day had been too much of Simon. Ray invited Hannah to join them for dinner at six o’clock. Ray and Hannah enjoyed each other’s company greatly, which was fortunate as Simon was in no mood for conversation. He sat watching them and thought about how long it had been since his parents had separated. Perhaps his father could have a relationship with this woman, even though she was closer to his age than his father’s. He noticed that Hannah was staring at him and he blushed. “You two enjoy your chat. I need to do some thinking, if that’s okay.” He rose and went over to the couch and sat down, closing his eyes. In seconds, he forgot anyone else was there and thought about his great-grandfather. The table conversation was a gentle buzz in the background. Why had this man he never met given him everything? He was about to become one of the richest people on Earth. He could not even imagine ninety-eight billion dollars. “Why me, Poppy?” he said to himself. “Why me?” There was a knock on the front door and Hannah hurried out of the room to find out who had arrived. He looked up and saw his father smiling at him. “Dad, this is really happening, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir, and it only gets better from here on.”

Simon was about to respond when his sister returned with Hannah. They were whispering back and forth as they entered the small room. “Hey, Bro! Nice digs!”

Simon rose and hugged his sister tightly. “It’s a dump, Sis, and you know it. How do you know Hannah, by the way?” He noticed Hannah blushing and regretted asking the question.

“Don’t you remember anything, Sy? Hannah and I were roommates in college! You came to visit us once, or have you forgotten?”

Now Simon was the one blushing. “Don’t be shy, Simon,” Hannah replied. “I thought you were the sweetest guy ever.” Her phone sounded and she turned and headed back up the hallway.

Rachel put her arm around Simon's shoulders and said, "So Romeo, you forgot already. You hardly met her and I found the two of you making out on her bed when I came back from the restroom. Does that ring any bells?" She laughed and went over to table and started eating food out of the open containers. "Man, I'm starved. You guys don't mind, do you?" Her father laughed and Simon turned around to avoid her stare. Rachel sat down, opened a packet of chopsticks and began to eat ravenously.

Hannah returned and said, "Ray, I just heard the John is out sick today, so I'll be staying here until 3:00 AM." She walked over to Simon and smiled sweetly at him. "It's okay, Sy. Your sister is a real bitch for making you feel bad. That was a long time ago, and I know that I've changed a lot." She cupped his face in her hands. "You are a wonderful person, and I know that you deserve the most wonderful woman in the world." She smiled and left the room to return to her post.

"Dad, is there room for one more tonight?" Rachel asked.

"She can have my bed, Dad," Simon replied.

"Well, it's up to you, Rachel, but there is no privacy. The bathroom door is a semi-transparent curtain."

"That's okay. I'm not worried about either of you two. Plus it's not every day that a girl sleeps in the same room as the world's richest man." She laughed and returned to the food.

The Carters went to bed early that evening. Simon was lying on the couch, unable to sleep with the idea that he was yet another incarnation of his great-grandfather. He wondered how he would ever find Cassandra again, or if perhaps she was waiting and looking for him as well. He picked up his phone from the table and noticed it was just after midnight. He wondered if he should go talk to Hannah, but quickly decided that would be a mistake. He decided that enough was enough and pushed all thoughts from his mind. Minutes later, he was fast asleep. In his dream, he was sitting at a small table, not unlike the table that had been in the room hours ago before it had been replaced. Outside the picture windows was a large open lawn. Three children played in the yard while two nannies watched over them. A woman came up and set a cup of tea in front of him. She sat next to him and put her hand on his. "Simon, thank you for our life."

"Cassandra, it is me who should thank you," he replied. "It was your brother, Louis Bourbon, who provided this estate and my title."

"Do you remember the last time we were together, my love?"

"How do you mean, darling?"

"Charlemagne, my father rescued you from the barbarians and made you his favorite. I was a plain woman with no chance of marriage. He insisted that you marry me in exchange for the Bourgogne, or have you forgotten, my love?"

"That seems like another life."

"And so it was, dearest."

Strange noises from upstairs woke him up. He remained motionless for a few seconds, trying to understand his dream when the noise reached his ears again. He thought he heard the sounds of a struggle upstairs. He jumped up from the couch and checked around him. His sister and father were sleeping soundly. He knew it was Hannah up there and wondered what had happened. He thought he heard her muffled voice and sprinted down the hallway and up the stairs. Halfway up he stumbled and fell down, striking his knees and chin on the hard steps. He groaned in pain but jumped back up and reached the top of the stairs in an instant and sprinted down the hall. As he turned the final corner, he could see her wrestling with someone on the

floor. The man was clearly stronger than her and he rushed forward to help. Hannah managed to push the man away and he stood over her smiling an evil grin. Just as he was about to attack her again, Simon threw his body at the man, slamming into the wall and collapsed onto the floor. His face ached where his chin hit the step and now the wall. His whole body was racked with pain. Now, Hannah was straddling him and looking about wildly. "Where the fuck did he go?" she shouted.

He looked about and could see only her. He could feel the warmth of her body pressed against him. "What was that thing?"

Now she was on her feet with her pistol in her hand and scanning the room with her flashlight. "That son of a bitch was here one second ago. Where did he go, Simon?"

"I don't know. I threw myself at him and must have missed or something, because I slammed into the wall and fell here. Who was it? How did I miss him?"

Ray and Rachel rushed into the room. "What's going on up here?" Ray shouted.

Hannah started crying and Rachel held and comforted her. "I don't know, Ray. I heard a noise and came up here to investigate. Someone attacked me, but I never saw his face. Then Simon attacked him and he was just gone!"

"Dad, do you think we're all going crazy?" Simon asked as he sat up.

"I don't know, but I think we all should stay away from this floor after dark from now on."

Hannah pulled herself away from Rachel and knelt next to Simon and put her arms around him. She put her mouth next to his ear and said, "Thank you, Sy. I think you just saved my life."