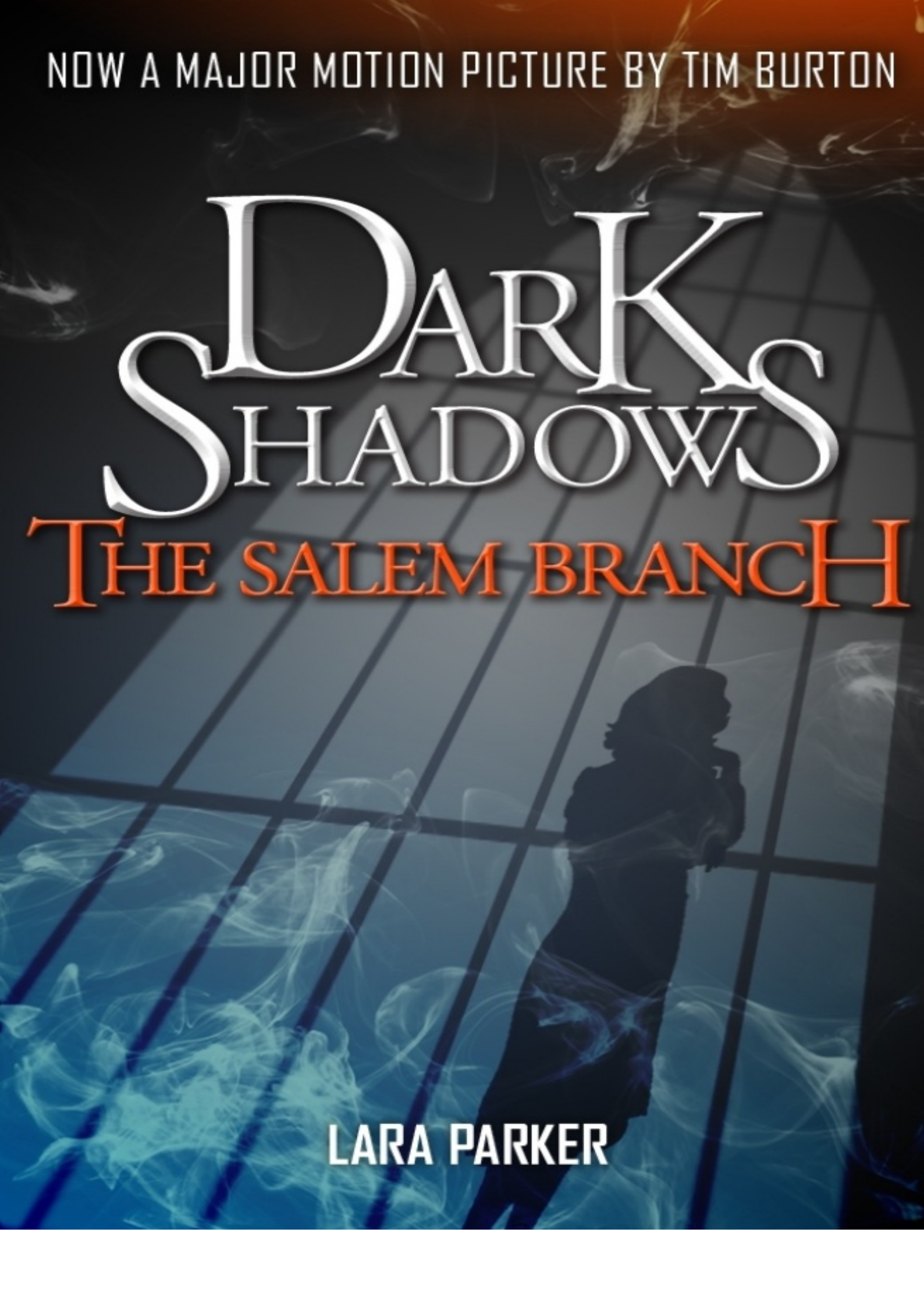


NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE BY TIM BURTON

DARK SHADOWS

THE SALEM BRANCH

LARA PARKER



LARA PARKER, whose real name is Lamar Rickey Hawkins, played the role of Angelique on *Da
Shadows*. She grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, attended Vassar College, majored in drama at the
University of Iowa, and received her MFA in creative writing from Antioch University at Los
Angeles. She lives in Topanga Canyon, California, with her husband and daughter.

Titles by Lara Parker

Dark Shadows books

Angelique's Descent

The Salem Branch

Wolf Moon Rising

DARK SHADOWS

The Salem Branch

LARA PARKER



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FOR MY FAMILY,

Tim, Rick, Miranda, Andy, Celia, and Caiti

WITH LOVE

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*I met a lady in the meads
Full beautiful—a faery’s child;
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.*

*I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
She look’d at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan.*

*She found me roots if relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew;
And sure in language strange she said,
“I love thee true.”*

*She took me to her elfin grot,
And there she gaz’d and sighed deep,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes—
So kiss’d to sleep.*

*And there we slumber’d on the moss,
And there I dream’d—Ah! woe betide!
The latest dream] ever dream’d
On the cold hill side.*

*I saw pale kings, and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
Who cry’d— ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci
Hath thee in thrall!’*

*I saw their starv’d lips in the gloam,
With horrid warning gaped Wide,
And I awoke, and found me here
On the cold hill side.*

FROM “LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI”
by JOHN KEATS

“ . . . if you take away my life, God will give you blood to drink.”

SARAH GOOD, FROM THE SCAFFOLD,
Salem, Massachusetts Colony,
JULY 19, 1692

DARK SHADOWS

PROLOGUE

Salem Village—1692

THAT AUTUMN, as she rode in the wagon toward Gallows Hill, Miranda du Val was not thinking of the babe in her arms they had given her to suckle one last time, nor was she thinking of Andre Merriweather, whom they had already broken and banished to the forest, nor of Judah Zachery, whose head was far from his body. She was thinking of her bright farm aflame with the Devil's torches, the fiery maple trees against the sky, and the ribbon of stream that beavers had backed into a pond. She had let them have it, finally, when she had decided a pond was as good a thing to have as a wood lot.

She had no fear of what was to come. It would be only an instant, then darkness. Hanging was little more than humiliation. Burning witches, as they had done for centuries, was the only way to rid the land, and even that not always successful. Fire would have been something to remember: the faggots at her feet, heat rising, smoke swirling into breath, as the trees she loved returned her to her beginnings. Hanging was child's play. But these townspeople were children, their reason as primitive and as spiteful as a child's.

The wagon shifted in the ruts of the road and she fell against the rail. She could feel the life in the new pine at her back. She could ask it to pull itself loose from the nails, collapse over the wheels, and even burst into flame. But she was bound to the boards by her chains, chains she had been obliged to purchase—along with the hangman's fee—with the meager sum they had offered for her land. She was weary of them all, this town of Salem with its hypocrisy and its hardheartedness. Better to go elsewhere now.

Besides, she would have her moment of revenge. All the preaching from all the pulpits in New England would not hold a candle to the sermon she would deliver from the scaffold. There were many things to empower a curse, but the blood of a child was the spellcaster's delight.

Collinsport—1971

THE BENTLEY THROBBED down the dark road through a long corridor of overhanging trees. Wet with late evening rain, the pavement mirrored the headlights and sucked the speeding vehicle into a whirlwind of new-fallen leaves. Barnabas Collins loved the feel of this car, the muscle of it, the singing hum of the engine. It was one of the few things in his life that gave him pleasure. Since he had learned to drive, he had found solace in the hardened shine of black enamel folded like wings about him, enclosing him like a carapace—or a coffin.

“You ain’t gonna believe it, Barnabas. It don’t make sense. I mean when you think about it.” Willie sat in the passenger seat, leaning back against the leather, staring out the window. His hay fever had returned with the goldenrod, and his breathing was a shallow wheeze. Barnabas glanced over at Willie’s hands clutching the corners of his jacket, nails bitten to the quick.

“I can only assume she found an original set of plans.”

“No, that’s not it. It’s not just the same rooms and the same stairway. It’s really old; it’s hundreds of years old. Where are the plans for that?”

“That’s the purpose of a restoration, Willie. To produce as authentic a replica as possible.”

“Yeah, well, you ain’t seen it.” Willie extracted a filthy handkerchief from the pocket of his jacket and blew his nose.

“What were you doing wandering around the Old House anyway?”

“Roger sent me to check on them hippies living in the woods back behind the cemetery. He wanted to get them out.”

“Hippies?”

“Down . . . down by the stream, living in tents. She lets them live there. She even sleeps out there with them.”

“It’s her property.”

“Roger thinks they’re smoking, you know, heroin or something.”

“I advised him against selling her the wreckage.”

“Yeah, I can see why you don’t like her, Barnabas.” Willie blurted a noisy sneeze into his handkerchief.

“I did not say that. I never said I didn’t like her.”

“She looks an awful lot like that painting of Angelique.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

Barnabas gripped the wheel, and his arms tingled with a peculiar pain as if they had fallen asleep. Although he had not spoken with the woman who had bought the Old House, had intentionally avoided her since that morning when Roger had introduced them in the study, she had nevertheless become so close to him as the rhythm of his breathing, the ebb and flow of her presence fixed deep in his brain.

She did not only resemble Angelique; he was convinced his old tormentor had returned.

“They got a camp,” Willie was saying. ~~“The whole thing’s set up. Hammocks between the trees, fire ring, a big pickle barrel for water.”~~

“You mean these people are actually living . . . in the woods?”

“Swimming in the river. Naked. I saw them.”

“Amusing . . .”

“I came back along the bluff and saw the Old House. All the scaffolding was down and there wasn’t nobody around so I—”

“So you decided to have a look.”

“Even before I opened the door I was feeling funny. And when I saw the inside . . . it was like something was crawling around on my scalp.”

Barnabas stepped on the gas and the car exploded into the gloom. Hulks of trees flew past and heavy branches reached down with leafy fingers, as torrents of leaves lifted by the force of the moving vehicle tumbled in its wake.

“The thing is . . . I got no idea how she did it so fast.”

He braked as they came over the bridge. Off to the right, in the headlights, the columns of the Old House glowed a sickly yellow. Barnabas pulled the car into the circular drive, cut the engine, and sat listening to Willie’s panting, aware now of his odor—what was it?—oil, wood smoke, damp unwashed corduroys. After a long moment, during which he tried to calm his nerves, he forced himself to turn and look up at the mansion where he had lived out his sentence. It had been six months since it burned to the ground. Yet, here it was: the enormous columns, the parapets, the thick moldings. Catching sight of the chained globe hanging above the door, he felt a chill. Where had she found such a perfect replacement?

He turned to Willie. “Now what?”

“Just come on. You got to see this.”

The night was still and completely black; clouds obscured even the stars, and, feeling the October cold, Barnabas pulled up the collar of his cape. Willie had brought a large club-shaped flashlight, and its beam splayed and jerked across the lawn and up to the knoll where the house sat waiting. The ground was carpeted in spongy leaves and drifts had blown up on the long porch. Once again he had the sense of being weightless, of flying, as he had in the Bentley, as though the earth were far beneath him. And yet he heard the sound of his own footsteps like old newspaper crumpled in a box. He smiled at the foolishness of his fancy. Remembrance of flight was not enough to spirit his mortal body away from this despised place.

The light flickered over the three rounded steps, a layer of leaves obscured all but a glimmer of the crumbling brick. Moss crawled across the chipped masonry like spilt blood. Barnabas hesitated, reluctant to go further, not because he believed Willie’s warnings, but because he thought he heard human cry, deep within the house.

“Does it occur to you that we are trespassing?”

“Nah, nobody’s around this time of night.”

It was the squeak of a baby owl perhaps, or the mouse its mother had found for food. Barnabas rested a hand upon one of the thirty-two massive pillars which surrounded the exterior. These had remained standing after the fire. She could never have found trees with trunks so broad and tall, the supports of a mansion that had been over two hundred years old when it burned. Willie’s light revealed the peeling paint, the cracks in the round footings; then he cast the beam up to the pediment which was new and now intact. The wedding cake cornice was perfectly restored, held aloft by the

Doric columns and crowned with the intricate filigree of the parapets framing the roof. Barnabas was suddenly wary of what lay within.

As it is with ancient doors whose wood has swelled with age and which now sag on rusting hinges, the heavy portal was difficult to open. It dug into the hardwood floor, and the light illuminated a curved scar in the oak, which Barnabas remembered had always been there. Pinpricks of muscle spasms began in the back of his neck and spread across his shoulders.

The shadowed vestibule opened to the staircase, and the flashlight flickered across the wallpaper and moved on. Barnabas seized Willie's arm and returned the light to the wall in front of them. The green hand-blocked pattern, with its stylized irises and running band of leaves, was identical to the one he had admired hundreds of times in the past.

"I told you," Willie whispered.

When he entered the drawing room and saw the huge fireplace of chocolate marble—Rosina Francia marble from Italy—and the swell of the Empire mantel, a sense of the familiar came flooding forth. He remembered kneeling on the hearth less than a year ago and, with trembling fingers, lighting the first match of the conflagration that was to follow, Angelique's laughter echoing in his brain.

Placing one hand on the graceful swirl of the stone to steady himself, he studied the carpet on the floor, the louvered doorway into the study, the crimson damask at the window. His thoughts reeled and he had a sudden sense of deceitful remembrances invented by his unconscious. As he gazed around the drawing room in amazement, he recognized the same leaded windows, the parquet floor bronzed with aging varnish, the tall arched hallway door, and the stairs rising from the foyer up to the landing. He had a feeling of overwhelming bewilderment. What trick was this? Had the house never burned? Had it all been a vision of desperate rancor, the phantom flames against the sky a mirage? He stood as it always had: heavy, maimed, thick with ghosts.

"What did I tell you, Barnabas? Spooky, ain't it?"

He reached for Willie's torch and cast it over the sconces on the wall—already laden with dripping candles, up to the heavy chandelier, along the crown molding. His mind was playing tricks with him now, teasing him to seek further examples of a stunning replication that seemed to border on the macabre. The only item out of place could be the carpet. He remembered the old Tabriz well, an antique treasure the color of blood. Focusing the flashlight on the ruby nap and the creamy fringe at his feet, he was reassured to see that it was actually a new rug. So, he thought with grim satisfaction, Antoinette has not achieved perfection.

Now he was intrigued, eager to discover other variations. A portrait in a gilded frame hung in the gloom above the mantel. In a faithful restoration of the Old House, the portrait would be that of his beloved Josette. Where would the new owner have found a duplicate? And if she had, would she have made the decision, obviously one that would inflame her pride, to hang it there? He hesitated before shining the light behind the delicate French clock—which, he had to admit, was a faultless rendition of the one that had ticked away his time—and he anticipated the joy he would feel at the sight of Josette's gentle eyes. But, just as he had suspected, it was not Josette. It was instead, a portrait of Antoinette in a scarlet gown; or, to be more precise, it was Angelique, smiling down at him with those same knowing eyes.

A nagging suspicion had been hovering just below his level of awareness, but resisting its import, he had pushed it back into the depths of uncertainty. He turned to Willie.

"Have you been downstairs?"

"No, Barnabas. I got as far as the stairway and I couldn't take any more. That's when I came to find you, to tell you about all this."

“Well, let’s have a look.”

“You sure you want to do that?”

“We must see, at the very least, what lies in the basement.”

If it were there, then it would be proof undeniable. In the basement, in the room where he had slept, if his casket was there, then he would know that not only had she come for him, she had made preparations. All this she had done to rip away any shred of sanity he had gleaned from ten months of normalcy. Why else would she have recreated this pageant of their life together? How, in fact, could she have known how to do it at all?

At that he felt light-headed, as if sleepwalking. After all, he had been lying to himself since he had first seen her, denying suspicions huddled in the corners of his mind. Of course she had come back. All this time, when he could have been finding a way to challenge her, to resist her, instead, like a fool, he had left her to her plans, and she had almost completed them.

Opening the basement door, he whipped the light across the fire-blackened stone of the foundation and the old brick that supported the chimney. As his foot fell upon the stair, Barnabas heard the familiar clink of a loose brick, the same that had betrayed his step hundreds of times when he had returned, each daybreak, satiated from his nightly forays. He thrust the beam into the blackness, and it washed across the masonry arches. Cobwebs clung to the heavy joists that supported the floor above. They hung in tattered remnants, as if time itself had shriveled into a sticky tangle of gauze. Yes. There it lay, covered in dust, as though undisturbed for months. His coffin.

He handed the flashlight back to Willie, who held it nervously, the light playing across the carved mahogany.

“Let’s see if I am here.”

“Jeeze, Barnabas. It’s gotta be empty. That ain’t your coffin anymore.”

His fingers left glossy smears in the dust as he lifted the lid. How many times had he performed this weary gesture when the moment had come to escape the dawn? The squeak of the hinges was the music he remembered, inviting him to sleep. He pushed back, and Willie cast the light into the interior.

It was empty. The blue satin of his inner sanctum bore not even a faint silhouette of his slumbering form.

“What’s that?” Willie whipped the beam around. “You hear that?”

At first Barnabas thought it must be the sound of the sea, just beyond the cliff where the wide lawn tumbled to the rocks. He had often heard the rushing of the waves and the churning of the surf echoing through the chambers beneath the house, lulling him in his daylight dreams. But there it was again, nearer, within the room, a gasp and then a gurgling moan. Barnabas breathed in. There was the smell of newly sanded wood, paint and lacquer, but beneath it two familiar odors intermingled: the reek of predator and the stench of prey.

“Barnabas . . .” Willie sounded panicked. “Someone’s coming”

“No. He is already here.”

“Where?”

“Just . . . under those tarps.”

A pile of painters’ cloths, stiff and dried, gave evidence that construction had taken place in the house. Barnabas approached the cans of paint and paint thinner, rolls of wallpaper, and hardened brushes cluttering the floor. Reaching down, he pulled back the canvas.

The man was still alive. He stared up with the helpless gaze of a dog struck by a car in the street, crushed inside but still breathing. From his heavy work boots he looked to be one of the laborers, le

to clean up perhaps, after the others had gone home. He was jowly and unshaven and wore overalls and a flannel shirt which was soaked with blood. He sighed, and soft, sweet bubbles formed on his lips. It was a messy kill, careless and cruel. Wasted blood pooled on the floor beneath the man's head.

The ripped flesh laid bone and sinew bare, exposing the faint flutter of an artery, and Barnabas resisted an old urge as he lifted the man's head, and gazed into his terrified eyes. He leaned close, breathing in the scent of blood and saliva.

"Who did this to you?"

The man tried to speak but could only manage a wheezing, "Sh-h-h . . ."

Was the man warning him to be silent? Was the attacker still close by? A chill crept between his shoulder blades as he looked around slowly. But he heard only his own breathing, and Willie's asthmatic pant, and the rasp of the dying man who shuddered now as his eyes glazed over.

Willie tugged at his sleeve. "Barnabas . . ."

"Help me lift him . . . roll this tarp around him." He pushed the body on its side.

"You crazy? What for?"

"He must be moved. The last thing we want is for the authorities to come snooping around here and suspect something."

"But we got nothing to do with it."

Barnabas suppressed the impulse to strike Willie. Always his dimwitted servant opposed the simplest instruction, the most obvious choice of action. He was ruled by cowardice. But Barnabas had no one else he could trust, no one who knew of his past and still remained loyal. He strove for patience. "As you have shown me, Willie, the house is now perfectly restored, and this basement room was—"

"Okay, Barnabas, okay, we'll take him to the cliff and—"

"No, Willie, better the woods. We'll bury him in the woods."

The corpse was light, like a sack of paper rubbish. Willie wrapped the body in the drop cloth and tied it with a length of rope. Then he and Barnabas carried it out to the Bentley.

The clouds had passed and faint starlight shone down. A new wind lifted the branches of the great oaks, and flurries floated to the ground, swirling around the two men. Leaves brushed by their heads and scraped their faces, and Barnabas tasted dust and debris.

It was first necessary to empty the trunk of the two carpets Barnabas had recently purchased to add to his collection. They had arrived that morning and he had not yet taken them to the shop. Rolled and tied with taut string, they were bundled like the dead man, but heavier, bulkier, and Barnabas dragged them across the gravel and struggled with their weight as he shoved them into the back seat. The corpse fell easily into the boot, and one arm tumbled out of the wrapping and over the bumper. Barnabas picked it up gently and placed it against the body. The bones of the wrist were still pliable and he felt for the faintest pulse, but there was none; it was death, final and forever. Another unfortunate had perished that a beast might live to hunt again.

After searching for a deserted area close to the river, Barnabas turned off the road and drove through jarring lunges through sparse undergrowth in among the trees. There they found a place. Even though Willie had brought a shovel and a pick, he was incapable of digging the grave alone, and the two of them hacked the unyielding earth for the better part of an hour. The leaves were the problem—leaves that lay in knee-high drifts, concealing rocks the shovel struck with a harsh ring—dry leaves that once raked away, blew back into the grave as though utterly depraved, a whirlwind of leaves, filling the hole up again with insidious purpose, as though they would make the tomb their own. In the end, Barnabas and Willie dragged the body into the shallow excavation and covered it over with rotting compost.

Most difficult to bury were the worn, paint-spattered boots, protruding out of the mulch.

As Barnabas walked back to the car, the residue of physical effort triggered a surge of nausea. At first he thought he was going to faint, or be sick to his stomach. These, he remembered, were the first signs of the unpleasant symptoms he had been experiencing since his cure. New blood, manufactured within his own bones, rushed through his arteries and ricocheted into the ventricles of his heart like a flashflood tumbling into a dry gulch. The vampire's silver stream and the cool, tensile strength in his limbs were gone forever. In their place were spasms that doubled him up in pain. Throbbing began at his temples as though his heart was burdened with blood too thick for his veins. Dizziness ensued and he began to pant for breath.

Willie looked over. "What's the matter, Barnabas? You okay?"

"It's the cure again," he muttered. "At times, it's unbearable." As he spoke he felt his legs grow numb and crumple beneath him. His hands were charged with an electrical tingling, as if they had been asleep, and blood was flowing back into them with a slow dull ache. Heat rose out of his core. He wondered whether diabetics or epileptics also learned the signs of convulsions coming on, and waited for them to begin, knowing nothing could stop them. He reached for Willie and gripped his shoulder.

"Barnabas?"

The blood heat began and grew steadily. A volcano stirred, bubbled, expanded; his breath came in gasps, until his whole body pulsed like coals fanned in a grate. A mist settled over his skin, and in seconds he was bathed in clammy sweat and reeking of his new human smell. Breathless and exhausted, he began to shiver—always the inevitable aftermath of the reaction—and he drew his cap about him. He looked over at Willie's face, which was shadowed with concern. "I'm fine," he whispered. "Let's forget all about this place."

"Yeah, right, Barnabas. Tonight never happened."

LATER THAT NIGHT Barnabas sat by the fire in the drawing room at Collinwood. His arms ached from digging, his hands were cramped, and blisters reddened his palms. Now he remained deep in thought. Had Antoinette placed his casket in the secret room? Had she known about the body? Was she aware of a vampire on the loose? There must be some connection. Perhaps she herself . . . no, but still, if she were actually Angelique, nothing was beneath her.

If she had returned, if this so-called Antoinette were truly she, then she was a living connection to his past. He felt a sudden twinge in his throat. He despised her. But he had been certain she had died by his hand, forever, lost to him but for the memory of her insatiable love.

And if that were not sufficient torment, he now faced a new and even more formidable opponent. Just as he had relinquished all supremacy, another vampire had entered his domain.

Salem Village—1692

THE MADNESS HAD BEGUN early in the year, but it was only a matter of weeks since Miranda du Val had first begun to suspect she herself was in danger. That spring day she had been on her way to her farm, the walk being over an hour along the forest path, and she had warned herself to stay fast to the ground. Never let them see her in the trees, never give them cause. They had hanged a woman in Topsfield for reading books not the Bible, and another in Marblehead for giving birth to a deformed child. The day would come when they would saw off Judah's head in Bedford, and bury it far from his body, that he might not ride the night. Little did they know.

She remembered that she must use the utmost care, never let them see her fly, nor give them any reason to imagine she was peculiar. Two were in prison in Salem Village waiting trial: one an old hanger-on who deserved to die, vile and dishonest; another a sharp-tongued woman with a questionable reputation. Neither of them witches.

They had drowned a girl in Whethersfield, proving that she was not a witch, which Miranda could have told them, even though the girl was first stripped and searched for marks. The pure water never released its grasp on her struggling body, and she died to defy their sentence. What beasts they were! Loathing women. Desiring women. Ashamed, resentful, full of hate.

She had watched them as they moved out of the meetinghouse that morning in their tall hats and black waistcoats, their faces grim above starched lace, their eyes darting, judgmental, fearful. She had listened to the sermon: "*The Devil hath been raised among us and his Rage is vehement and terrible, and when he shall be silenced, only God knows. We must cast out the impure. Let no aberration exist among us.*" And she had read their inner thoughts: *And mine own un-Godly covetings, I must repress.*

That sunny morning, as she struggled through the tasseled grasses towards the forest, her heart ached to be at her farm again, though she knew it would be sadly overgrown, and to see the wood lot and the broadsided house built by her father, with its faded red paint, the tint of blood. It had been several weeks since she had seen it. Careful she must be that they not take it from her.

As the forest grew darker, and she moved across the dappled shadows into the caves of green, she thought of the many nights she had spent in these woods as a child, living with the Wampanoags before the Reverend Collins found her and took her back to Salem Village. Often she had slept high in the trees, rocked by the wind. Moths sometimes clung to her eyes, and one dawn a spider spun its web across her mouth. Another morning she woke to a sparrow building a nest in her hair. She was so at home in the trees her fingers were often stuck together with sap, and the bottoms of her feet grew rough as bark. She flew easily through the branches and across the canopy. *Sooleawa*, the Wampanoags called her. *Sisika*. "Tree Flying Girl."

When small birds began to follow her, she knew her farm was near, just beyond the rise. A woodchuck whistled in the leaves, and when she saw the snake her heart lifted, the pattern on his skin

more intricate than clock springs. She followed his path through wild strawberry, and his design blended with the old leaf shapes, crimson and pale yellow and deep, brackish brown. The whispering sound he made, though faint, gave way to another, a broken twig, and then a silence came more quiet than a duck's swimming, as birdsong ceased. She broke a vine across her path, and in the ruffled green she saw the doe's eyes. With her was a strong fawn, out of spots, mossy antlers newly sprouted. Her farm was shining through the shadows of the last trees pouring gold and green across the hills.

The men of Salem Village would take her land if they could; they despised a woman owning land held fast to their resentments. All the recitations of the commandments could never cleanse the hearts of coveting. It was the meat of their thoughts. Old Bartholomew Gedney, that schemer, for certain had an eye on her farm, and her benefactor, Benajah Collins, would stop at nothing had he any inkling of her true nature. But her father had cleared the fields and built the house. It was in her name a wood lot newly grown, a fast flowing stream, a meadow with bog, and the great forest all around. She would marry Andrew Merriweather in the spring, and they would farm this land together. Somehow she would hide from the world her secret wickedness. Andrew loved her and suspected nothing. He was a simple, kindly man.

She was crossing the field of flax, thick now with young weeds, when she felt water seep into her shoes. She looked down and saw the field was flooded all the way to the stream. The beavers had been at their work again. She half-waded, half leapt through the marsh, flies buzzing in her eyes, and when she reached the waters she saw at once the damage they had done. The dam was already two feet high, a tangled mass of sticks and larger limbs piled in a messy heap that backed the flow of the water into her best wood lot, turning it to swamp. The small trees were dying, and others had been downed by the beavers and already wedged into the dam.

Flinging off her shawl and wading waist deep into the cold water, she began to tug at the branches and to tear away weeks of the beavers' toil. The sticks clung to one another; mud and leaf mulch held them fast. A large, rust-colored rodent rose to the surface of the pond and wagged his slick head at her before he turned and slapped the water with his tail. The beavers had woven a hillock of trunks and branches, cleverly interlocked and glued together, firm enough to stop the water from flowing. She labored for over an hour, tugging and dragging the branches to the side of the stream. And the irritated beaver came more than once to the surface to chatter at her and swim back into his marshy kingdom.

She did not see them before she smelled them, a man's pungent odor along with his horse's drifting over the water. She was hauling a branch up the bank when she saw them on the opposite side, two townsmen from Collins port she recognized, Deodat Larson on his Morgan, and her master Reverend Benajah Collins, on his sickly mare. Behind them was Judah Zachery, the schoolteacher from nearby Bedford, riding his mule. She felt a sour taste rise in her mouth when she saw Judah because she knew at once that it was he who had brought them and, of the three, he was the one she feared.

"Good day, my child," said the Reverend. "What brings you out on the Sabbath?"

"I was to meeting, sir, and, this being my free day, I have come to tend my farm."

"Have you no work to do at home for Goodwife Collins?"

"She has stayed this day in the town, sir, and given me leave."

"Would it not be better to spend the day in prayer and thanksgiving for all of God's manifold bounties, or in the quiet contemplation of the scripture?"

"God's beauty and His bounty are here, sir, and this woodland is as holy as any church."

Reverend Collins's horse pulled at her bit as he held her too firmly. When he spoke again, his manner was one of warning-hesitant, but not unkind. "Aye, Miranda du Val, we were just admiring

your farm, as you do so call it yours, although it sorely wants care.”

“I will care for it, sir, as soon as I can,” she answered.

“Oh, we are certain of that eventuality, my child, but your indenture is not up.”

“Within the year.”

“But now is the time to plant. And what of debts promised by you for board and clothing? You must sign on for another year, must you not? Meanwhile this good land languishes and turns to marsh.”

“I was clearing out the stream, sir, when you arrived.” She thought of telling them about Andrew who would have a hand in her release, but at that moment decided to hold her tongue except to say “What calls you this way, sir, so far from the town?” They wanted something, and it was best to hear them out.

“We have rode out to see this property for Sir Isaac Collins,” said Deodat Larson, smiling down from his saddle. “You must know he is a wealthy merchant in the shipping trade, and he wishes to make you a respectable offer.”

She shivered from her damp clothes and turned to the Reverend. “Sir Isaac Collins? And would that be your kinsman, sir?”

Benajah jerked his horse’s head away from the grass. “He is my brother, and has plans to be . . . an absentee landlord—”

“You may tell him the land is not for sale, sir, and that is the end of it.”

“And when will it be planted?”

“Soon.”

The schoolteacher’s voice was hard. “But what of your lessons, Miranda?” His legs hung low over his mule.

“Indeed they are all well mastered, sir. Would you think otherwise?” The hint of defiance in her response was not lost on him; she could tell by the cast of his eye, but he spoke to her in another tone more intimate, that made her throat tighten and her teeth go numb.

“This is rude toil for such a tender girl. Need you not a man to help you?”

“Nay, Judah Zachery.” And then she added, if only to spite him, “And my days at the schoolhouse are numbered. I have learned all I care to know from you.”

“But have you mastered your commandments, Miranda?” The Reverend spoke. “And the Lord’s Prayer. Can you recite it by heart?”

“Of course. I am not a child. And many verses of scripture have I set to my memory.”

He paused. “Then you must know it bodes evil to speak with a sharp tongue.”

“I did not mean to do so, sir. I only meant that I have learned all Judah Zachery has to teach me.”

The men looked down on her as she stood in the water, her dress clinging to her body, her hair loose from her cap. Judah Zachery looked the longest. Then they turned to one another and muttered among themselves. She felt the fool, shivering beside a beaver dam with her apron floating on the still water, and so she gathered her skirts and moved back up the bank as though to take her leave of them. But even as she climbed she heard a splashing sound. She turned to see the water bubble through the place she had cleared of debris, and the stream tumbled out, silver and murmuring. They all were amazed that she had managed it alone, and stared a long time at the clearing ripples, thinking the evil, suspicious thoughts.

Then Deodat Larson called to her. “Take care how you conduct yourself, my child. There is witchcraft afoot and many are suspect.”

“I have naught to do with witchcraft, sir.”

Once more they looked at the stream she had released, and they turned their horses to go.

~~Miranda stood on the bank and watched the water flow, as the shallow pond sank slowly, and the tips of reeds and wilted grasses began to emerge into the air. When she saw the disgruntled beaver waddle into the trees, she wondered whether she had been wrong to destroy his home. Walking back through the forest, she began her search for roots and herbs; and she thought again of her time as a child with the Wampanoags when enchanted mists hung among the dark trunks, and mysterious winds whispered in the branches of trees as friendly to her as the bear, the raccoon, and the skunk.~~

Metacomet, who was called King Phillip by the English, had kept her in the wigwam with his other children. When she asked what had happened to her family, he told her that her father left a dead cow bloated and reeking with larvae, across the stream above the Wampanoag camp, and it poisoned the water. Many took sick and died. Later he admitted the deaths might have come from blankets the settlers brought and traded for beaver pelts. He never spoke of the two years of war, of the land stolen from his people, and the Puritan attacks that killed his own sons. He should have known she had not been too young to remember.

She woke one morning when she still lived in Salem Village, and she was barely three years of age. Hearing loud cries, she looked from her attic window and saw several barns ablaze. When she first saw the Indians, she did not think they were people at all but animals without fur. She saw her uncle run from the house only to be shot down by a group of redskins lying on a hill behind Willard's barn. Her mother fled up the stairs, gathered her up in her quilt and, running, thrust her into the hayloft and told her to bury herself and lie still. But the screams and moans drew her to the dovecote, and from her hiding place she saw her mother's brother struck on the head, then dragged out into the yard where the howling savages stripped him of his clothes and split open his belly. She saw a leaping red beast with only her aunt's long golden hair in one hand, a bloody knife in the other. The naked men danced around with torches, set fire to the buildings, and she heard bullets spray against the door like stones. She crept to the top of the ladder and looked down into the barn where the Indians were stealing the family cows, and saw her father trying to stop them with a great hay fork. An Indian shouted gibberish and stove him through with a spear. Then they set fire to the barn, and the flames came up through the floor and caught the hay on fire, and her quilt began to burn. She jumped, and tumbled into the manure pile, where she was scooped up by her mother just as another wailing Indian covered with feathers and paint grabbed them both and pulled them on his horse. Her mother held on to her so tightly she could not breathe. And that way they were carried off, but not before she had time to look back and see her father stagger out the door, the spear still in his breast. Another Indian knocked him down with a club, lifted his head by the hair, and cracked his skull against a rock.

Miranda shook the memory from her mind. The visit from the townsmen had disturbed her, and she knew the time had come to bind Andrew to her forever. She had only to make him lie with her, and his goodness was such that he would never forsake her. She tried not to think of his silent ways, how he would go dumb when spoken to, and remember only his strong arms and solid back.

She looked over at the forest trees, flowering now in the season before the heat, magnificent clouds of pale green and emerald and gold. Metacomet once told her that in the time before the snow when the trees turned scarlet, the Great Bear in the sky was wounded by the Hunter, and his blood dripped down on the leaves. But another time he told her the trees drew the blood from some other kingdom beneath the earth. As she tugged on the snowapple root, she smiled as she thought of the great sachem. Metacomet was wise because he could admit he did not know all things. He made long talks at council and all others were silent when he spoke. Often he said one thing as it pleased him and then at another time another, but he was greatly respected. He once told her that he regretted the

killing of her family, but that the Wampanoags suffered much because of the settlers. He said that he had stolen her for ransom, or to make her a slave, but when he saw that she could fly, he let her stay and kept her as one of his own. His hope was that she would become a great Medicine Woman one day.

She pictured him now, with his russet skin and deeply lined face, telling the children the story of the beaver. The largest beaver pond he had ever seen lay across the great valley, and he had journeyed three days there to set traps. He spoke of a lake that could swallow the moon, a great water that stretched from rock outcropping to marsh meadow, and the dam as long as a morning's walk and taller than two men.

The little beaver pond she knew from her childhood was near the Wampanoag camp, and always held the sky in its surface; fleecy clouds flew across it like flocks of white birds. Metacomet told the children who sat with him by the fire and listened to his tale that many things came to them because of the beaver's work: the moose and her calf to feed, the duck with the bright green head, the darting fish, and all the reeds and berries. Then he laughed because he said the beaver made a home for all these things not because it was generous, but because it could not bear the sound of rushing water.

Miranda searched through rotted mulch and new green sprouts for what she needed, nightshade for virility and lavender for courage, yarrow to banish negativity and wild rose to bind the spell. Soon she would have Andrew in her power. She remembered it had been sport for the children to swim through the underwater tunnel to the beaver's home. Those who reached the hidden sanctuary had dancing eyes when they spoke of it. The first time Miranda dove into the murky water, down through leafy branches at the surface, she saw roots imbedded in an underwater forest floor, and the trunks of saplings stored for food; but she came up, sputtering and laughing, and certain she would never find the secret passage. The beavers hid their tunnels deeper than she could dive.

Then one bright morning a young beaver splashed, and she followed his paddling feet and the flick of his tail waving in the gloom. She was sucked into a burrow of branches that slid their long fingers along her body and scraped her arms and legs, but urged her on with tender nudges. When the beaver disappeared, and she saw the ruby light glowing in the distance, she doubled her efforts. She pushed through the tangled sticks and slime, poked her head through the narrow hole, and gasped for air.

She was inside the hut. A dome of twisted limbs and twigs above her head was woven like a huge basket, and the floor was dry and strewn with shavings made by the never-ceasing teeth. All was glowing with the rosy light of sun slivers piercing the canopy, and the odor was fresh as cut bark. She saw the beaver children huddled in the corner, five of them, with twitching noses, rounded ears, and dark and frightened eyes. She waited, still as the water, until the small rodents forgot she was there and began to groom themselves, dragging their long claws over their heads and through their fur. Miranda thought that finding the beaver's den was like being born.

It was growing dark and she still had a long walk home. It was too risky to fly, even in the night, and Miranda trudged through the woods. How to make Andrew long for her? Several times when they had been alone together, she had laid her hand on his, or moved her body close to his warmth, but he had always gone mute and pulled away and shyly returned to his work. It must happen soon, for she needed a champion.

THREE

Collinsport—1971

THE NEXT MORNING Barnabas rose, dressed hurriedly, and stole down into the kitchen before the rest of the house awoke. The keys to the Bentley were on a hook within a key safe by the door, along with keys to the locked rooms in the basement, outdoor sheds, Rose Cottage, even keys to the Old House, useless now and gathering dust. She would have her own locks soon. His hands were trembling, and he hesitated, remembering Julia's admonition to eat more often. But after decades of dining on blood alone, his craving for food was minimal. He drew a sweet roll out of the bread box and forced himself to take a bite of the sugary icing. His stomach heaved, and he threw the rest in the trash.

He paused at the front door and glanced to the wall on his right at a magnificent portrait in a gilded frame. Everyone in the present family assumed it to be the likeness of his ancestor, the first Barnabas Collins, said to have left Collinwood for England in 1795. Often Elizabeth or David would comment on its uncanny resemblance to the Barnabas who now resided with them. The high cheekbones and deep hollows enhanced a face handsome as a Roman emperor's, with dark eyes gazing out from beneath a curling fringe. The ringed hand rested on the silver wolfhead of the cane he no longer carried, for he had put it away when he ceased to walk the night. The sight of his likeness gave him a sense of bemused reassurance; it always comforted him to know that his years as an immortal had left him unaltered and, since as a vampire he could not see his own reflection, it had served as his looking glass. Abruptly curious, he turned back for the first time to the small mirror beside the tall torchiere at the foot of the stairs.

He was shocked at the change. It was as though a stranger looked back at him. The youthful vigor and arrogance he had come to expect had vanished. Instead the skin was drawn, the hair dull, and the dark circles under his eyes had swollen into bags. His ivory complexion was soiled by a blotchy ruddiness. As he stared at his image, he had a fleeting thought that this was the type of victim he would have once pursued. In only a few months, years had taken their toll.

He hurried to the garage. He was obliged to meet with a traveling rug dealer that morning, and he was not looking forward to the appointment, this particular breed of human being the one he despised the most. It was lamentable that they dealt in the most beautiful handmade objects on earth. As he backed the sedan out of the driveway and headed down the road, he felt his pulse quicken. He was determined to see the Old House again in the daylight and reexamine what he was certain was a factory-made carpet. He realized he was risking an encounter with the new owner of his old estate, but he was willing, eager even, to chance it. It was ludicrous that the woman now called herself Antoinette Harpignies, since, aside from the style of her hair and wardrobe, she resembled Angelique in every way.

His fingers clenched as he imagined them digging into her shoulders, grasping her neck, and he shuddered to think how strong was his desire to destroy her. If she threatened him, he might lose h

temper, his feelings being so close to the surface. Consequently, he had decided it would be judicious for their first meeting to be early in the day, with no one else about, perhaps in the drawing room of the Old House where he would feel in control, and where he could demand from her an explanation why she had returned.

As he drew near the Old House, Barnabas noticed several battered pickup trucks parked in the drive. The workmen had arrived, and Barnabas, who had expected to see no one, stopped the Bentley and watched the activity for some moments: the unloading of tools and lumber, light fixtures, and cabinets for the upper rooms. Two young men greeted a third with good-natured banter, hooting at some rude remark, and their raucous voices and harsh laughter floated over the lawn. He wondered whether they had missed their murdered coworker, since they gave no outward signs of alarm.

As Barnabas watched them tussle with a large box of wallpaper and heard their sounds of jovial camaraderie, a wave of despondency weakened his resolve. This energetic scene only served to deepen his sense of loneliness. His life, in comparison, was without purpose—buying and selling Oriental rugs being a shabby substitute for his past adventures. He thought of the dead man who only a day earlier had worked with these tradesmen, exchanging a joke over the ladders and paints, sharing a beer after work, returning in the evening to his family. Now, for the first time in over a hundred years, he, Barnabas, was facing death, inevitable, and all the more terrifying in the wake of a fruitless life, a life without accomplishment or merit of any kind. He felt unable to meet the workers, but instantly rejected this attitude as cowardly. He got out of the car and strode across the lawn towards the steps, nodding to the crew in a businesslike manner, as though he had every right to be there.

Once inside the foyer, Barnabas experienced the same eerie sense of the past metamorphoses. Beams of sunlight sliced the somber interior of the drawing room, sun motes spinning lazily in the air. Once more he was struck by the perfection of the restoration, the precise selection of furnishings: a Baroque statue of a rearing horse, a decanter of sherry and crystal glasses on a tray, a crocheted antimacassar with a small tear few would have noticed on the back of a chair. But he had not been mistaken about the rug. The garish colors of metallic dyes betrayed its cheap pretense. It was stiff and thick in pile, and he turned back a corner to see the weave, which was, as he expected it to be, tight and uniform, woven on a factory loom. Nothing about the fold of the carpet characterized the supposed artistry of a handmade rug.

Back again in the Bentley, he remembered that he had forgotten to go to Julia's room for his injection. His early departure had swept it from his mind. Lately he had begun to muse on the small and irritating changes which being human had brought. Forgetfulness was not the least of his annoyances. While a vampire, his mind had resembled a set of surgeon's tools in a case, precisely finely tuned, and designed for the task. Over the years he had become accustomed to clarity and forethought, a photographic memory, and absolute confidence in his perceptions. Now, with his brain addled by conflicting sensations, he found that stern focus eluded him and the simplest tasks required a supreme effort at concentration. He drove the road with care. The Bentley glided over a carpet of autumn leaves which formed a tapestry on the pavement. The bright colors glittered in shades of ruby, emerald, amber, citrine, and bronze, like a thousand jeweled eyes.

WHEN DR. JULIA HOFFMAN opened the door to her room back at Collinwood, Barnabas could see she was upset. She had been waiting for him. She was dressed for the office in a rust-colored suit, one that he had admired since it complemented her fine brown eyes. But she was paler these days, thin and drawn. The gloss had leaked out of her copper hair, and her bright eyes, the most attractive thing about her, had

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