

THE BAD DEATH

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PH Press
New Dryden, CT

CHAPTER ONE

The woman's scream brought him up short.

Julian Mouret reined a hard right and rode in the direction of that piercing cry. Reaching a myrtle hedge, he spurred his horse through a narrow entry shorn into its dense leafy wall. He dismounted quickly, gray-green eyes searching for the endangered female. He saw nothing at first but stone angels and marble crosses, endowed by his family's new wealth, beneath the shade of ancient oaks. An ornate structure rose behind the live oak and palmetto trees common to coastal South Carolina; his father's final civic project before becoming its first inhabitant. To Julian's amazement, the crypt door was slightly ajar and he saw movement in the darkness within. The heavy door trembled. Grunts of desperate effort emanated from behind it. Julian ran forward just as the door swung open.

A young black woman rushed out and into his arms.

He could not mistake her look of relief mixed with lingering terror. Then her golden eyes lit on his face and she gasped, "Julian?"

He'd never seen her before. How did she know him? She glanced around at the sun-dappled cemetery. Her lush

lips, the color of ripe plums, widened to a dazzling white grin.

"It's daylight!" she said and threw her arms about his neck, pressing rapturous kisses along his evasive jawline.

"What is this?" he demanded in surprise. The words disintegrated on his shaky breath when her lips touched his.

"She saved me ..." Her words slipped into his mouth in the undertone of a shared secret, "...she saved us!"

Julian found himself chuckling against her parted lips before tasting the plum sweetness of her mouth again. He did not know who she was, but they were on his land and she looked far from threatening. In fact, she seemed damned happy to know him.

Without realizing it, he had embraced her so that not an inch of space survived between them. She was tall. The legs tangling with his were long and sleek. Her breasts pressed against his chest as she strained against him. His heart leapt out of rhythm to match her heart's thundering pace. When she wound her arms possessively about him, Julian leaned over to deepen the kiss. The gentle clash of their teeth and the intimate dance of her tongue thrilled him. His hands moved restlessly over her narrow back and slim waist. To his surprise, she moved one of his hands down over her high, rounded derriere. The shocking boldness of this move sluiced reason into his fevered brain, reminding him that she had simply appeared out of nowhere.

Not out of nowhere, out of the crypt of all places.

Julian opened his eyes to look beyond her to the open door of the crypt. With the curve of her buttocks warming his hand, Julian found it difficult to care about unrelated details. His eyes closed as, with a sigh, he turned his head to kiss her again.

But the stranger pulled away—her nearness blurred a trail of brilliant gold and shadow black in Julian's vision.

She raked her fingers through the shaggy layers of his dark brown hair and pressed her thumbs along his cheekbones. "You're so warm!" Her smile faltered, her gaze shifting to her fingers. Julian took her hand but she recoiled from him.

"What joke is this?" Julian asked, watching her stretch her fingers as if testing the fit of new gloves.

She looked down at her faded clothes, swatting the worn fabric before shoving her sleeves up to stare at her arms. She turned her hands over to examine the calluses coating her pink palms in thick yellow. Her narrowed gaze slowly slanted his way. She assessed his boots, breeches, waistcoat, and caped greatcoat, pausing on the high collar and cravat her eager fingers had disarranged.

"What year is it?" she demanded.

Julian answered automatically before he realized the audacity of such directness, "1788."

A shaky hand flew to her mouth. She turned her face up to the sky. "Oh, God ..." she said through her fingers. She blinked wide eyes at the blue expanse above. "Oh ...wow."

Wow? Julian searched his mental catalog of African words and could not find *wow*.

Wariness glittered in the brilliant depths of her eyes. Julian wondered why her entire demeanor toward him had changed in the span of seconds. The face she'd kissed was no different from the face she glared at now. It was a face prematurely aged by the weight of his responsibilities so that he appeared a decade older than his twenty-seven years. It was a lean and prominently boned face, his skin pale white with an olive undertone owing to his French heritage. It seemed from the moment she'd examined her own color, she'd taken a disliking to his.

Julian looked at her—from the scuffed boots to the kerchief hiding masses of long, thick hair, while missing nothing of the coltish legs, narrow waist, and pert breasts camouflaged by her shapeless clothes. She could be no

more than twenty-five years and possibly as young as seventeen. Barely more than a girl, really. "Who are you?"

"I don't know!"

"That's no answer!" Julian glanced away with a grimace of frustration. His eyes drifted again to the open crypt door and the inscrutable darkness behind it. It was, he realized, a brilliant hiding place for a runaway slave. His stomach pitched queasily. "To whom do you belong?"

"Maybe you!"

"Oh, I'd remember you," he said.

"I know who you belong to," a male voice called out.

Julian turned to the cemetery's hedgerow entry. A well-dressed old black man was reining in a bay gelding that pranced to a halt while dogs fled its diving hooves. The man drew a bead on the woman with his fowler musket.

"Prince ..." Julian said, not liking this at all. Julian's spirited stallion had outpaced his valet's more sedate gelding until they'd lost sight of each other. Prince wouldn't have expected his master to visit the hedge-walled cemetery. Having to catch up to Julian was one thing; having to search for him another. The beautiful yet shabby intruder bore the brunt of his wrath.

Prince gestured toward the crypt with the fowler's long barrel, telling the woman, "Gwon' bek down there where the dead been missin' you."

"I'm not going back down there," she replied defiantly. "I'd rather die up here."

Prince's gaze was patient as it was grim. He was accustomed to things going his way, and aside from Julian Mouret, no one defied him indefinitely. He was dressed neatly in clothes that were similar to and actually cleaner than Julian's, due to his master's peculiar fondness for physical labor. The old manservant coolly lifted the fowler's safety and took aim at the girl's heart.

"Muskets make inaccurate shots," Julian advised. "He's aimed at your heart but could hit your belly. You'll writhe in agony for days before the good Lord calls you home."

She fixed Julian with a stiff-faced, wide-eyed stare. "Would you really let him shoot me?" she asked huskily.

"I shall be glad to take you back to the plantation you quitted," Julian replied. "It's a kinder outcome than a gut-shot and more comfortable than the crypt."

"Mass', don't speak to it. This one ain't from a plantation." Prince swung out of the saddle with practiced ease and advanced on foot, lifting the fowler to peer down the sights. "It done bewitch you and ain't got nothin' for you but lies."

Julian didn't argue hoping fear would force the woman's cooperation. "You needn't kill her," he told Prince.

"She come out the deadhouse." Prince edged the woman toward the crypt. "Let the dead have they own."

"I disagree," Julian countered good-naturedly. "By faith, I think my father's ghost would be much affronted by such company."

She glanced over her shoulder to the yawning darkness of the open crypt. "I'm not going down there!"

Prince jabbed with the musket. "Git bek where you come from."

"I couldn't if I wanted to!" She eyed the muzzle end pointed at her chest. "At least, I don't think so."

"You have but to tell us a name," Julian counseled, "the name of the place from whence you ran."

"You wouldn't believe it if I told you," she said.

"For true, that," the old manservant agreed. Without taking his eye off the woman, he suggested to Julian, "Mass', gwon for home. I come after you directly."

Julian ignored that. He believed most people responded more favorably to reason than threats, even someone as young as this girl-woman. "Tell me now and no

one need be the wiser," he told her. "I shall leave you at the boundary of the place and say no more about it."

The woman snorted.

Her scorn burned away his sympathy.

Apparently, Prince had also had enough. He fired, but a second after the woman knocked the barrel aside. The musket ball sheared a chunk from a stone angel's cheek before piercing the hedgerow.

"Jesus Christ Almighty!" Julian swiped the musket from his valet's unresisting fingers. "I shall have it, if you please!" He wheeled around in a fit of irritation. "Where the hell has my horse gone?" He never thought the old man would actually shoot. Prince had gone mad. He might kill the woman or she him; devil take them both. Julian had just finished a long day in the fields. He wanted supper and a bath, some brandy, and a little peace.

If it wasn't too much to ask.

"Our horses ran off," Julian remarked, stepping through the hedgerow exit and looking around at the barren splendor of the unkempt portion of his property. "Deuced dogs left, as well. Disloyal mutts."

On his way home, pine trees gave way to wet, semi-wild gardens of green azalea, wisteria vines and palmettos. Julian's horse had likely run straight to the stables. Prince's horse hadn't gotten far and they'd managed to catch it, while keeping the woman always in sight. Prince kept his eye on her now as he rode with one hand on the reins and the other on the fowler. The gelding acted uncharacteristically skittish, shying when spurred too near the woman. If she was a runaway, Julian had a social obligation, if not a legal one, to keep her with him until her owner was found. When he'd taken her hand, she'd curled her fingers around his as naturally as if it were their habit to walk hand in hand. Then she'd stiffened and sought to withdraw it but he'd tightened his grip.

When their eyes met, Julian could see she understood her situation but had only just realized the breadth of its implications. Julian was confused. Why had she accepted his hand so readily? The automatic but misguided trust in that gesture had struck him as sweet. And now she was shocked by his power to detain her. How could a power sanctioned by every aspect of their lives surprise her now?

Driven by unease, Julian had set off briskly but the woman kept up easily. At any pace, their arms hung loosely, their hands clasped like those of sweethearts. They walked together out of wilderness and through an orchard. Presently, they trudged through formally designed gardens under the blind gaze of statues sculpted in imitation of Roman antiquities. The bank of clouds that had threatened rain all day released it suddenly. Julian would not leisurely walk beneath such an onslaught. He longed to keep pace with his spaniels, animals with the sense to enjoy the sudden turn in weather. They ran joyfully ahead of him, their spotted pelts saturated, their tongues lolling from panting mouths, their tails tucked tightly between legs. When he and the woman caught up to them the dogs jolted away from her, nipping defensively and snarling. They weren't joyful at all, Julian realized. They ran from her.

He would have to keep her with him while enquiries as to her ownership were made by Walter Chatham, who was the Mourets' Factor in Charleston, as well as his brother-in-law. It might be important to relate that she was hated by dogs. And possibly horses. And definitely valets. Julian glanced back at the scowling Prince.

As Julian sprinted after the dogs with the woman by his side, he ran down a list of identifying details. She was tall. Comely figure. Bitter chocolate skin. Bright gold eyes, really mesmerizing eyes. Educated speech, although her worn dress and her callused hands classed her for the fields. Julian nearly tripped over the frenzied spaniels when it suddenly struck him she spoke English.

Lowcountry slaves found unity in common culture and a language that combined English with the languages of their diverse African tribes. Known collectively as *Gullah*, this culture and language distinguished them from slaves outside the region. That this lovely stranger did not speak Gullah lessened the likelihood of her being a local runaway. Also her English was educated, if a bit eccentric. He would include this identifying feature in his description of her to Walter.

Julian and the woman took the shallow steps two at a time from one formal garden to another. Dogs flowed up the steps ahead in a black and brown spotted tide. At the next formal garden, Julian tugged her hand. They climbed one of the twin stone stairways that curved around a leafy grotto, leaving the dogs to ascend the other. Finally, they arrived on the final plain of his estate.

It seemed they'd climbed to the top of the world to find Lion's Court, the house of Julian's birth, holding it down. The house was a solid three stories of brick, banded with ornately carved, weathered white sandstone. All the windows, doors and pillars were evenly numbered. Sunlight flashed across its many windows. The effect was momentarily blinding. Julian ducked his head and renewed his steady trek toward home. Having given his gelding to a groom, Prince fell in step. Sounds of activity grew stronger as they neared the house.

Work noises, cook fire smoke and singing came out of open doors. Gullah men sat together amidst piles of dried sweetgrass and pine straw, weaving baskets of every conceivable size and shape from a catalog of designs they stored in their creative minds. A stableman ran by, pulling Julian's renegade horse by its bridle. Children ran underfoot and the dogs gave chase. The children shrieked excitedly and ran with the spaniels in crazy circles. People yelled at the children and dogs to—*Shoo! Go on!*—and hurried by without breaking stride, save for a quick

greeting and a bow of the head to Julian. A woman fought with an angry hen as she tried to wrestle it under one arm. Julian stopped just out of reach of the battle, not wishing the creature to fly at him if it managed a panicked escape. The woman disappeared with the hen down the steps to the subterranean storehouses that comprised the ground floor of Lion's Court. Up the steps, other workers ascended. From beneath the house, slaves came and went like ants from a busy hill, while the upper stories seemed inviolate.

Julian felt his captive pull away from him. He allowed her to draw out the length of their arms but he kept her hand. He watched her stare at the house. He could nearly see her pulse beating at her throat. Her bosom moved as if she had trouble breathing. She suddenly glanced all around, a kind of horrified curiosity in her expression, as if she'd never seen a working plantation.

With a sudden flash in her eyes, the whole of his world seemed to dawn on her. Comprehension settled in her features.

'Yes,' he felt like saying in response to her expression. 'They are my property. They work for me. I belong to them, too. Don't you see?' A gulf, larger than mere physical space, expanded between them. 'Why do I feel this way?' Julian wondered, 'as if she passed judgment on me?'

Julian dropped her hand and turned away from her, knowing she couldn't run now that she was surrounded by people who fulfilled his every command. He passed the side of the house, beneath twelve windows of identical size, to arrive at the front. He and Prince and the dogs ascended one of the stairways to a portico supported by columns of Portland stone imported from England. Julian glanced over his shoulder. Now the woman stood at the base of the stairs, gazing solemnly up at the roofline of his house.

She picked up her rain-soaked skirt and ran up the steps, past Julian into the open doorway. Julian gaped at her audacity. Who was this woman?

Prince grabbed her arm. "Git out!" he bellowed.

"It was a gift shop," she said, pointing at the east drawing room.

Prince shoved her outside so hard she would have stumbled, but she unfolded her arms and spun on the tip-toe of her heavy boot. Landing softly on both feet, she curved her arms around her body. She held the attitude an instant longer. Even in repose, she seemed poised to leap across the veranda in a dancer's *jetés*.

A clanging noise at the foot of the stairs distracted Julian, followed by the soft cursing of two men who labored under the burden of the copper tub they'd dropped against the stair rail. Three women holding earthen jars atop their heads ascended nimbly. They startled when meeting the woman's eyes, nearly dropping their jars.

Soaking wet from the rain, Julian stood with her in the entryway, dripping water onto the heart-of-pine floor while Portia, the head housekeeper, directed servants moving furniture from east rooms to west in pursuit of the evening sun. This ritual survived from a time when Lowcountry planters had needed to conserve what few candles they had. The woman shivered inside her sodden clothes. She jumped at the hiss of spilled water hitting fire in the west parlor hearth.

He placed his fingers on the small of her back. "Let us go." The bath entourage clashed with the furniture-moving entourage in their efforts to avoid her. The dogs ran underfoot to get away from her, yelping when stepped on. Prince shooed the servants out after the dogs, slamming the west parlor door in their curious faces.

Prince helped Julian out of his muddy, grass-stained clothes. The woman watched openly. Julian didn't mind.

Having his every move attended to by servants prevented modesty. But he was curious about her reaction. Julian had learned the telltale signs of feminine interest in his youth. Desire burned in her golden eyes, but her lips thinned in self-denial. Julian smiled. "Care to help?"

"Don't flatter yourself."

Prince balled up Julian's dirty clothes and threw them at her. "Put them outside," he ordered.

She opened the door to a crowd of eavesdropping servants. They shrank from her. She threw his clothes at them wordlessly and slammed the door. Julian laughed.

Then he stepped into the great copper tub and sank gratefully into steaming water. He closed his eyes and drifted into a doze while Prince wrapped sodden, hot muslins over his prickly scalp. Julian raised heavy eyelids to find himself lost in the woman's sorrowful eyes.

"Your troubles are many, I'll warrant," he told her. "Why gaze upon me as if I had caused them?"

"You did cause them."

"I?" Julian laughed, while Prince unwrapped his head. "Pray, tell me how I injured you?" he demanded while lazily soaping his arms. Flexing his biceps beneath the sleek suds; he teased, "Did I embrace you too fervently?" Holding up his large hands, he asked, "Were my caresses too rough?" Dark color rose in her dark cheeks, a flush of the same plum tint that stained her lips. Julian's levity faded. "I see turmoil in your face, as if you had long known me, but you do not know me."

"I thought I did." The words escaped her lips so softly, Julian almost didn't hear them.

"Speak your meaning clear," he demanded with renewed frustration. She started to answer, but a deluge of hot water poured over his head drowned out her words. Julian scrubbed his ears and eyes free of water, sputtering at Prince, "I wish to converse with this ...*ssppphewww* ...person, by your leave!"

Prince gave him an oblique look. "You needed a rinse ...suh."

"And a scalding too, I suppose." Julian returned his attention to the woman. "You may well accuse Prince. He tried to kill you."

"So did you," she said.

Julian gaped. He glanced at Prince, who said, "She lies. The devil's chil'ren always do."

Julian's eyes danced. "Let the Devil's lies entertain me and your prayers redeem me."

The woman sighed, raised her eyes to the ceiling and shook her head.

Julian soaked with an arm flung over the tub while Prince scrubbed under his fingernails with a soft-bristled brush. Legs bent, Julian's knees dried in the air. Water ran down his chest in paths carved by his pectorals. "Well, go on ..."

"God, where do I begin?"

"At the beginning?"

"At the beginning I had no idea what you really were."

Julian leaned forward with interest.

Prince spoke urgently into his ear, "You don't know what she is—"

"He's right." She stood abruptly, looking down at her wet, bedraggled clothes. "You don't know what I am. I'm not what I was, that's for sure."

"And what was I to you?" Julian asked, amused. "That you would let me near enough to attempt your life?"

"Don't let her tell you nothin'!" Prince hissed.

Julian withdrew his hand sharply before giving his manservant the other.

"Never mind," she said, pacing in circles within a tight self-embrace. Standing gave her a bird's eye view into the tub that, despite its size, barely accommodated Julian's tall frame and thick musculature. Hot gold flickered beneath her lashes in frequent glances.

Julian tilted his head to catch her gaze. "You forgive me, I think."

"You couldn't help it, really ..."

The taut planes of his abdomen unclenched as he relaxed against the back of the tub. "My calf cramps," Julian told her, extending a leg toward her over the edge of the tub. He wanted to unnerve her, she of the cryptic accusations and the berry-stained lips. Stretching, he might just catch her skirt with his toes and pull her. The woman's bright eyes roved up his shin, past his knee to the shifting contours of his thigh above the murky water. "I beg you end my torment," he murmured. "Come closer." As if snake charmed, she did. "I don't bite."

Her chin shot up. Rage flared in her eyes.

Prince leapt up with a fire poker, touched the point to her throat.

Alarm jolted through Julian's body. He'd forgotten his manservant. They both had; she a runaway slave and he, her obstacle to freedom. Even now, the woman gave Prince no attention at all. Her eyes blazed.

Prince pressed the point into the tender spot beneath her chin. "Don't touch him." His dark eyes flicked to Julian. "I told you." Before Julian could respond, his manservant returned his attention to the woman. "Have a care. It ain't you killin' *her* ..."

"Has everyone gone mad?" Julian asked in a bored tone that he hoped would diffuse the tension in the room. He placed hands on either side of the tub and hauled himself up. Water rushed down the ridges and planes of his body in a silvery tide. He snatched a muslin towel from a nearby chair. "Let us hope Cassandra retains her wits. I should hate supper disrupted, as well."

CHAPTER TWO

Beneath candlelit chandeliers, the dining table gleamed. Sparkling crystal, polished silver, and china dishes containing Julian's supper filled the entire length of it. The first course was generally seafood fished that day from nearby inlets and coastal waters. Tonight there was she-crab soup and okra soup with shrimp served over rice from Mouret fields, roasted oysters, and poached redfish. To this Cassandra added hoppin' John, a savory mix of black-eyed peas and rice, as well as benne wafers for a touch of mild sweetness. As was always the case this time of year, Julian dined alone.

Three serving girls moved around the table, filling plates for him. Julian enjoyed this time of day, when he could sip wine, close his eyes, and breathe in the warm aromas of excellent cooking. Best of all, he liked the silence broken only by the ringing of silver against china. Except tonight the ringing was more of a clashing and crashing. He even heard sloshing and spilling. With an annoyed grimace, Julian opened his eyes.

The girls scooped up food without looking at it, missing his plate. They bumped into one another, jostling

elbows. Distracted by the stranger. They couldn't take their eyes off her, which was how sauce now dotted their aprons.

"Confound it!"

The girls froze.

Julian rose.

Even now they couldn't resist darting glances at her. This meant turning their heads away from him, because she stood at the opposite wall beside a cherry wood sideboard laden with still more silver and lit candelabra. "Never seen a petticoat before?" he asked. "Eh? Nor a chemise?"

His gaze shifted to the source of his servants' fascination. He supposed they'd never seen a woman clad only in underwear standing in a dining room at supper.

The rain had soaked her clothes, and he'd had to find her something. It had been difficult to find even that. The rooms his mother used were devoid of furniture, all of it right down to the last shirtpress and lowboy loaded onto boats last May—with their contents of shifts and chemises and whatnot—and sailed away to Pawleys Island. They would not return, nor would the lady herself, until the first frost broke the miasmatic, fever-producing humidity of Lowcountry summer.

His mother was tall, so her petticoat's hemline fell just short of the woman's ankles. Delicately turned and strongly muscled, her ankles were pretty even if her feet were ugly and awkwardly turned out, heel to heel. She rose onto her toes, a slight movement Julian found hypnotizing. He made himself look up. The chemise strained across her breasts and Julian made himself look away from this also.

He caught his reflection in the gilt-framed mirror above the sideboard. The woman's state of undress emphasized his abundance of dress: his powdered, stiffly curled wig; lace at his neck and wrists; white-gold satin waistcoat beneath a contrasting gray-green velvet coat

embellished with silver embroidery and buttons. Only in extreme conditions did a civilized man fail to dress for dinner. In Julian's experience only ambushing Redcoats in the swamps classified as extreme. A stranger wearing borrowed underwear in the presence only of servants was not extreme. With Julian's attention diverted from them, everyone stared openly at the woman.

By now they would have heard she ran past Julian and into the house through the front door. They must know Prince laid hands on her and literally threw her back outside. They would know Julian had allowed her to bathe in his tub, while Prince shaved and dressed him. 'What's known cannot be unknown,' Julian thought with an inward sigh. How quickly the appearance of this woman had turned everything upside down.

"I have all I require," he stated.

The serving girls looked to him, confused.

Prince stood just inside the door, looking disgusted with everyone.

"Leave me," Julian ordered the girls.

They started toward him with dishes half filled and sloppily filled, at that. Julian ground his teeth. "Leave them right where they are."

"Shoo!" Prince stepped forward and flapped his arms at them.

The serving girls scurried to the door and almost collided with each other because they were looking at the woman instead of where they were going. They fled to the kitchen house, no doubt to relay all they'd seen and heard.

He might dine in peace now. The candlelight combined with the walls' muted shade of gold to create an atmosphere of serenity and warmth. Prince spooned hoppin' John onto Julian's plate. "Let her do that." His valet returned to his post just inside the door.

The woman stepped forward but hesitated with the spoon in hand. "How much do you want?" she asked him.

Julian and Prince locked eyes with raised brows.

"It is sufficient," Julian told her.

The woman looked around at all the dishes. "Well, what would you like?"

Julian shot another raised-eyebrow glance at Prince. "She's no house servant."

"Too dark, anyway," said Prince, who was himself as dark as a macadamia shell.

"A house servant knows to fill the plate with a little from each dish, that I might taste all," Julian told her. "Step lively, or the second course will arrive before I've had the first. Don't heap it on the plate! I'd like appetite for the pheasant I shot this morning."

When she bent to place the china plates before him, the chemise fell forward. Julian's gaze faltered on the upper swell of her breasts. His gaze roved lingeringly over the smooth expanse of bitter chocolate skin. He frowned. "What's that?" he demanded in tones of distaste.

Her slender fingers played with the small leather pouch that hung from a string around her neck. "I don't know," she said. "It was just around the neck."

But Julian knew the pouch was a *uonga*, a charm. All slaves wore them, even Prince. Secretly, he thought the crucifix his sister wore was just another sort of uonga; only the sciences offered possible deliverance from man's ills. He'd only seized on the woman's uonga as an opportunity to complain, needing a distraction from the effect of her nearness. "*The neck?*" he jibed to Prince. "I should like to know *whose* neck it is if not hers."

Prince had come around to her side of the table, eyes fixed on the placement of her hand. Julian saw its close proximity to the sharp knife beside his plate. He placed his hand over it and saw Prince relax.

The woman's stomach rumbled.

"Did you not have a meal before hiding in the crypt?"

She shook her head. "I haven't eaten since I checked into the hotel last night."

"A hotel?" Julian grinned at Prince, who didn't smile. He turned back to the woman, gray-green eyes glinting silver. "And where might this ..." Julian could hardly speak the word, so amusing was this new detail in the ongoing lunacy of her tale. "...hotel be?"

"Near Bamberg." She grabbed a fork. Prince ran forward. She stabbed into an oyster and brought it to her mouth. "They won't know me there," she spoke around her chewing.

Prince stood stiffly beside her, eyeing the fork.

"That okra soup looks good."

"By all means, eat something that requires a spoon," Julian said.

She put the fork down. Prince took it.

She reached for the bowl of soup. Julian put his hand over it. He remarked, "'Tis a long way, surely, from Bamberg to my family's mausoleum."

"They chased me through tunnels."

Julian looked at Prince with a smile quivering on his lips. The manservant shook his head in warning. "Lies," he reminded Julian. "Mass', you know where she belong."

She spooned rice into the soup, which brought it level with the bowl's brim.

"Who chased you?" Julian demanded as she picked the bowl up with both hands. "What tunnels?"

They waited while she sipped the soup from the bowl's rim. "I don't know their names ..." She picked up the spoon and backed away with her soup as if they would snatch it from her. "There were a lot of them." She spooned shrimp and rice into her mouth.

"Patrollers chased you through tunnels?" Julian prompted.

Her eyebrows rose at the word 'patrollers', but then she shrugged and nodded, spooning more soup into her mouth.

"That still does not explain how you came to hide in my crypt."

"The tunnels lead there," she replied.

He chuckled. "They certainly do not." He picked up his fork and tucked into the redfish, which had grown cold.

"They do, Julian," she said. She walked back to the table, spooning up the last of soup-soaked rice. "They run right under the house ..."

The minx paused long enough to pick up his wine glass and quaff it. Julian gaped at her audacity.

"...and lead to the crypt."

"No, madam, they do not," Julian replied. "Prince, more wine."

"Please don't fuck with me!" she cried.

Slapped speechless by her use of vulgarity, Julian felt pinned by her desperate gaze.

"Because as great as it is to see you in your ...um, human ...state, I don't want to be a slave."

Prince pushed the replenished wineglass into Julian's nerveless fingers. Julian stared at the woman, whose eyes had begun to fill with tears.

"I would never have hurt him," she told Prince. "I need him." She appealed to Julian. "I need you to lead me back through those tunnels, protect me from them until I'm out on the other side and ...safe."

Julian's mouth had fallen open. He stared. Her tears brimmed over and spilled down her cheeks. Julian found his voice, "As much as I would prefer us relieved of our mutual dilemma, nevertheless, I must repeat: there are no tunnels under this house. Nor any underground that lead to the crypt."

The hall echoed with quick footsteps. A moment later, serving girls burst into the room to clear the first course as

more girls poured in behind them bearing the second course in covered trays. During the diversion created by this controlled chaos, the woman turned on her heel, ran to a panel in the dining room wall, and pulled it open.

Julian leapt up and rushed to the open panel. He ran into Prince, who'd beat him to it.

"I'll go," Julian said, detaining him with an outstretched arm. But Prince had the woman by the fabric of her chemise and appeared to be struggling with her just inside the dark passageway. The old man raised his leg and dealt her a savage kick. Julian heard her falling down the steep, tight spiral, all the better for the sudden quiet in the dining room behind him. He pushed past Prince and disappeared down the stairs after her.

The narrow portal gave way to vast storerooms. They had been swept and cleaned hours ago, dry foods long ago stoppered up in jars, every lamp and candle extinguished. It was so dark that for a moment, Julian's only active sense was smell. He smelled cured hams hanging overhead. He smelled onions, root vegetables, and flour. He listened for her breathing. When he didn't hear it, he yelled, "Where are you?"

He willed his eyes to adjust to the darkness. He was afraid to move, lest he step on her. "Answer me!" He'd been looking near the foot of the stairs, but a noise far away made him peer into the depths. His eyes adjusted to the darkness just enough to see her form against a far wall. The sound came again. She was slapping her palms against the bare brick.

He made it to the back without tripping over anything. "Are you hurt?"

"Training took over," she said. "I know how to fall without getting hurt." She walked farther down, slapping the wall.

"How did you know that panel opened to the service stairs?" Julian asked.

"The same way I know you had a gift shop ...or *will* have a gift shop." She leaned against the white washed brick as if trying to force it back.

"What folly is this?"

"There are cellars beyond this," she said.

"No."

"This wall moves."

"No," he said. "There are caves here and there, throughout the county, to be sure. Some natural tunnels lead far underground, but none lead to the crypt."

"The tunnels lead from here." She beat the wall with her fist.

"No," he said calmly, as if addressing a lunatic. "There is no tunnel here."

"Not now!"

"Nor ever has been," he said steadily. "This fantasy injures you. Best to release it," he advised. "No tunnels run under these grounds. I would know. And no tunnels connecting to the cemetery, most certainly not."

"But I was there! At the bottom of it!" She turned more fully toward him, looking him squarely in the face. "And I did not enter above ground."

Through with it all, he demanded point blank, "Why did you run?"

"To escape."

"...Ah." Julian nodded perfunctorily. There it was: her confession, surrendered so simply and unexpectedly that Julian didn't know what to do with it. He drew abreast of her. She rested her forehead against the cold brick. At least she'd given up her wild fabrications. "Do you feel lighter?" he asked. "That is your conscience, eased of its burden. It is always best to tell the truth."

"You don't know the half of it," she said.

At last, all servants went to the kitchen house to dine on everything Julian hadn't eaten, to have a smoke, and to attend their own business. The dogs had all gone off to hearths to doze or had followed diners to tables where a scrap might fall into their jaws. Julian savored these few hours when he was the mansion's sole inhabitant, all the more so because this was only true in summer. Julian spent most evenings in the library upstairs, writing about the daily progress of various hybrid or experimental crops he had planted and poring over the latest books and journals on botany, medicine, and science. Tonight he watched from the library as the runaway paced the gallery-wide hallway. He wrote his description of her in a letter for Walter.

Feeling restless, he went to the music room. The pianoforte was his sister's instrument, and sitting down to it alone made him lonesome. The music room's walls were covered from floor to ceiling with slim panels of mirror, designed to give players the illusion they performed in a crowded hall when in fact there was barely standing room for ten people. Tonight it gave him multiple views of his solitude. That is, until a white cipher flitted across the multi-paned mirrors, catching Julian's eye. Belatedly, he realized this cipher was the woman, mirrors reflecting her movement in countless facets.

Julian looked straight through the open door and saw her pirouetting barefoot down the hallways gleaming expanse. She whirled back and then slowed to a stop. She kept the pose and studied herself in one of the music room mirrors. Completely absorbed in her reflection, she made minute corrections to her position.

The woman swept one angled foot in front of the other, swept it sideways, and pointed her toes until her calf jutted in a hard little muscle. She stood on tiptoe, bent forward and extended her leg behind her as she swept her

long arms fore and aft. Her eyes flicked up and down her reflection, assessing.

From memory, Julian began to play Bach's Suite No. 1 in D minor. The woman spun on her toe before improvising several steps in perfect time to the suite's notes. The hallway had been built wide enough to serve as a ballroom. The woman made full use of its expanse to perform a ballet to Julian's music. His loneliness vanished. She spun out the double doors onto the veranda. Though Bach's Suite was no dance number, her choreography fit its pensive mood perfectly. A dark figure against the dark sky, her white underclothes appeared as empty sails tossed in errant breezes. With a slight hop to sit on the balcony rail, she swung her legs up and stood on it in one fluid motion. Julian rose abruptly.

She landed neatly with no struggle for balance. She continued her dance in silence, for Julian could not play with every tense inch of his body attuned to the perilous turn her improvisation had taken. The balcony rail was her new stage, its width no more than two inches wide. She danced as if a full orchestra played below the balcony. In reality there was nothing but stone stairs that would shatter her bones if she fell. Lest he distract her and cause her demise, Julian crept carefully, silently nearer the veranda.

Her undergarments no longer flared but clung transparently, alerting Julian that it had begun to rain again. The railing would be wet and slick. Without looking down, the woman executed a series of swift pirouettes. She reached the other end of the railing and stopped. The wet hemline slid like sleet down the sleek contours of her legs.

She stood on the railing, one hand on the veranda column. She hadn't noticed his approach, not even when he stopped right behind her. She was looking to a far horizon. He followed her gaze to the distant slave streets, the tiny cabins. The lively music he was used to hearing from that

quarter had gone silent. Perhaps she'd distracted them from it. Her absorption in the view made him wary. When he saw her toes flex on the railing, he darted forward. She heard him, spun around with a look of surprise, lost her footing, and fell.

Julian caught her around the waist with one arm. She dangled from that one arm. Gravity gave her weight. Julian bent over the rail, straining to catch her with his other arm. Succeeding at last, he leveraged against the railing to bring her back over. She threw her arms around his neck and clung. They fell together onto the veranda. Julian clutched her as if she were still falling. Her panicked breath pulsed against his ear. Chest to chest, their hearts hammered against each other as if to shatter the last barrier to union.

Beneath her, Julian demanded, "What the devil do you mean, attempting your life from my veranda?"

"You startled me!" she accused.

"You leapt from my rail!" he exclaimed.

"Why would I do a thing like that?"

"How would I know!" he shot back in frustration. "I don't know you!"

She gazed into his eyes and sighed. From her vantage point above him, she examined his face. Her perusal stopped at his hairline. She slid her fingers under the edges of the wig and pushed it off his head. She raked through his dark hair, an invigorating, soft scratch over his scalp that made Julian want to purr.

"Now you look more like yourself," she told him.

He almost repeated that he did not know her, but the words locked in his throat. Was it possible this stranger knew him from somewhere? She certainly seemed comfortable lying on top of him within the circle of his arms. Julian slid his fingers under the edge of her headscarf and pushed it off her head. A multitude of long, black

braids cascaded around his face. "What's your name?" he wanted to know.

"Why didn't you ask before?"

"It did not signify before."

"I forget my name."

Thinking this a joke, he laughed. She didn't. "How does one forget one's own name?"

"It just disappeared, like the tunnels I ran through to get here."

They were back to that again. The damp from her rain-soaked garments had started to seep through Julian's clothes. Chill bumps studded her bare arms. He thought of rising to go in search of something dry, but was loathe to part with her. "Let us review what you do remember."

"I think more clearly when I dance." Her gaze slid thoughtfully into the distance. "I thought I'd remember if I danced, and I did get some of it back," she said. "I remember dance classes. I remember touring with the company. I remember why I ran from you and I remember crazy stuff—books I read, like *Interview with a Vampire*—" Her gaze slid back. "Reading that should have prepared me for you."

"I'm afraid I don't—"

"...and movies that came out when I was a kid ..."

"Moves?" he asked, not sure if he'd heard her correctly.

"Why would my brain hold on to *The Phantom Menace*?" The woman shook her head with a mirthless chuckle.

"This phantom ..." he began, trying to establish order to the torrent of information.

"But I didn't remember my name," she said, sounding lost. Julian read fear in her expression, such as he'd seen old people exhibit when they first realize they're losing their mental capacity. He touched her face.

"I already forget where I live."

"To be sure, it is not worth remembering," he murmured, stroking the long curve of her neck.

"I forget what my apartment looks like," she said thinly.

"Of what importance is such a thing? You ran away."

"I haven't forgotten you, Julian." She propped herself on one elbow, stroking his perplexed brow before sweeping a tender hand down to the square angle of his jaw. She traced her thumb over his lower lip.

"I don't know you," his words muffled against her fingertips, which tested the edge of his even teeth.

"But I know you," she said huskily, her eyes meeting his. "I know everything about you."

Julian felt submerged in the shining jet at the center of her eyes, where she saw the ugliest and weakest in his nature unflinchingly because she saw the best commingled with it. 'I become fanciful,' Julian thought, trying to drag his thoughts together. 'A stranger could not know the best and worst in me, when I don't even know it.' He pulled himself up from the depths of her pupils only to find himself blazing in her golden irises as if caught in the inferno of twin suns. Her body was unfamiliar, but her eyes were not. Something behind that bright wall seized Julian, its intelligence shining into him with all the awareness of Eden's serpent. Her hands smoothed over his shoulders and down his back. He sucked air into his lungs, shivering.

"I want to make love," she whispered urgently, eliciting a bitten groan from him in response, "...before I forget you, too ..."

Julian raised his head, seeking her lush mouth as he pulled her closer. Standing with her in his arms, his desire thickened to a throbbing ache as he made his half-blind way to his bedroom.

A complete selection of Naima's work is available on her Amazon books page — <http://amzn.to/GzHQf2>.