

Prologue

This wasn't good. Carmen clapped a hand over the squalling mouth of the baby she held. Its hot scream steamed on her palm and she looked around nervously. Why was the baby crying now when it was so important to be quiet? Maybe it was the heat. Thick and humid. Carmen licked her upper lip, tasting the sweat. Not the taste of normal sweat. More sour. Acrid. Tinged with fear. She looked at the baby girl again. Probably just scared of being pulled from her crib in the middle of the night, that's what had her crying. Scared of what was happening to her. She kissed the baby's forehead. Just like I'm scared of what's going to happen to me, she thought, then whispered, "Shhh, quiet little one."

She muffled another cry from the baby in her arms and looked around, squinting to see better in the dark. At least she was in the shadows, that was good. Dropping to a crouch, she rested her back against a tall brick wall bordering the old flagstone courtyard. The whole courtyard was encircled by the wall, except for a staircase that ran up and away to the huge pasture bordering this place, this awful place. Tilting her head back, she looked up over the edge of the wall and wished the light of day were coming down. Night and its darkness didn't feel good - *they* liked the dark. *They* were at home in the dark. But, at least it gave her the cover she needed to try to take the babies. She clenched her eyes shut, wishing she were already up the staircase leading out of this courtyard. Up the stairs and out into the forest beyond the pasture. If she got that far, she knew she'd be home free.

She took a big breath. Held it. Exhaled through her mouth. It was time. She stood up and gazed across the courtyard - a splashing fountain with shadows of Japanese Koi finning under the lily pads, wrought-iron benches placed strategically to enjoy the views of the many exotic plant and flower beds - this place had the feel and look of a city park, meant for long meditations and quiet rest. She brushed a lock of long black hair from her face. Things weren't always the way they appeared.

Looking back at the castle she'd just slipped out of, something caught her attention. There, inside the large, two-story window set in the castle's gray stoneworked exterior. A glittering chandelier blocked some of her view, but there was movement from upstairs. Someone rushing down the sweeping spiral staircase. Her eyes narrowed. It was the doctor, taking the steps two at a time as he rushed from the direction of the nursery. Rushing from where the twins

had been kept. She flattened against the courtyard wall, letting the night's shadows fall over her. Another railing scream from the baby vibrated against her palm, half muffled, but still loud enough to draw attention. The doctor rushed by the french doors that opened onto the courtyard. Thank God those doors were closed, she thought, holding her breath.

She watched the doctor look wildly around the castle's interior, rushing about here and there. Her anger burned, her jaw set tight. The babies belong to me. Not to you. Not to the town. And especially not to their father.

She saw his mouth open and heard his muffled yell. *Carrrmenn... Caaarmennn...*

CARMEN!

Turning her attention back to the little baby girl, she kissed her silky forehead. The baby's little chest jumped as she sucked for air to replace her last scream. No time to worry about the baby's screams anymore, they were coming. Maybe even the father was coming, and that would be worst of all. Smoothing a hand over the baby's downy hair, her hand began to tremble, then shake. Clenching it into a fist, she closed her eyes and mouthed a silent prayer before opening her eyes. She tilted her head back and looked into the sky, hoping for protection from above, then said, "Time to go little one. Let's get your brother."

Taking a deep breath, she ran into the light of the courtyard, her tan legs scissoring in a sprint. In her dark nylon running shorts and white cotton muscle shirt, she had a flash of memory. An image of herself as the young co-ed she had once been, taking in a late night run. But it was different now, yes sir it was, she thought. Now her heart pounded with more than just exertion after each push of her long, muscled legs. And she saw through different eyes now, eyes that darted and searched the darkness with animal intensity as she leapt to the brick staircase. They couldn't catch her. He couldn't catch her. Her mind raced anxiously. The days of being a young co-ed with nothing to worry about but her next date were a million years ago, never to return.

Up the stone staircase, taking the steps two at a time, she paid for each set of steps with a bright stab of pain between her legs, still swollen and tender from childbirth. She bit her lip and kept going. Nothing but black night ahead as she reached the top of the stairs and stopped, letting her eyes adjust to the dark. The pain between her legs throbbed, bringing her eyes to a squint as she breathed through clenched teeth.

Finally, her vision sharpened. She could see the wooden platform that was built at the top of these stairs. Kind of like a little stage. That was it. A stage, with entertainment that Edgar Allen Poe would've been proud of. Walking toward it, she reached one hand out, getting a grip on a corner support, then bent down and ducked under the platform.

The night air was even hotter under the platform. Dust choking her. The heat pressing in on her. She coughed as she tried to catch her breath. Breathing was tough under here. She swallowed hard, cleared her throat, spat on the ground, and then started walking bent over, trying to avoid hitting her head on the support timbers that held the platform up. The baby girl she held against her chest put a terrific strain on her lower back, hunched over as she was, but she kept going, ignoring the aching muscles. The baby began to wail again, kicking in her arms. Dropping her gaze to the baby for a moment she felt a sudden jolt. White stars swam in her eyes and she rubbed a hand over the thundering spot of pain on her scalp where her head knocked into a support timber. Damn it, no time to cry, she thought, biting her lip. Look. Just keep looking for the other one. Get the boy and get out of here.

Scanning the ground, Carmen started to feel the first little electric shocks of panic. Where was her baby boy? The baby girl she held screamed, jangling her nerves even further. They'd be out here any second, the doctor and the rest of them, scouring the grounds looking for her and the babies. What they'd do if they caught her... she didn't even want to think of it. Her throat tightened. Had to hurry. Looking around frantically she felt her heart begin to gallop. Eyes stinging with sweat, she wiped them with the back of her hand. That only made it worse, rubbing dirt in with the sweat.

Blinking back the stinging in her eyes, she scanned the ground in front of her again. He was here. Had to be. It couldn't have been more than five minutes ago that she had put him here. Where was he? Her mind began to betray the control and calm she always held so strongly, rushing sly whispers through her head. *They knew you planned this all along. They've taken the boy and are right now waiting for you to come out. They have your boy on the platform where you can watch what they do to him. And then, when they're done with him, they'll have time for YOU.*

Squeezing her eyes shut, she willed the thoughts from her mind. Heart beating like a flushed bird, she struggled to quiet her breathing, listening intently. Something rustled behind

her. Turning quickly, careful to keep her head low, she looked down. A football-sized bundle squirmed there with two huge white eyes glowing in the darkness. Relief washed over her.

"Come here. It's okay," she said, scooping him up and snuggling him in against her chest next to his sister.

She held the two babies. Her babies, no one else's. Hers from now on.

"CARMEN!"

That was his voice. The father. She spun her head around, looking from under the platform back toward the castle. The shakes came back, up through her hands and arms, reaching her neck until her whole head shook. HE was coming. She bent low, scurrying under the length of the platform, away from the castle. At one point, somewhere under the middle of the platform, she felt her feet kind of stick. She slowed for a moment. It smelled coppery - sickly sweet. She stepped back, looked up and could barely make out the dark stain that had seeped through from the platform above. It occurred to her what had caused the stain. Above, on the platform, that was where she pushed the twins out into the world. She hurried around the spot, careful not to step in it.

Exiting out from under the platform she began running through the pasture toward the dense woods. Her feet flew over the grass, making swishing sounds, every stride hurtling her and her babies farther away. The hot night suddenly felt cool, rushing by on her face as she ran. They would be free - the twins and her. No one could catch them. She turned to look back as she ran. It was a dark night, but the light of the castle outlined the figure that climbed onto the platform far behind her.

"CARMEN!"

The black silhouette of a man in a hat. A flat, wide brimmed hat from another time when his followers were hunted and burned alive.

"*CARMEN!*"

She looked away from him, straining to see the edge of the forest that grew around the pasture, pushing herself to run faster, to get to it and get lost in it before he caught her on open ground. A spot tightened on her back, right below her neck and between her shoulder blades. He had seen her. She knew it. She could feel it. The hair on her neck stood up as she imagined him behind her, running after her with his impossibly long legs, gaining ground with every ragged breath she took.

She pulled both babies up on her chest as she ran, bringing them closer. With arms and shoulders aching, her chest about to burst, she narrowed her eyes and pushed herself to run even faster. He wouldn't take them. She wouldn't let him. Her determination brought a strange feeling of peace tingling over her. Even the babies must have felt it, she thought, legs pumping over the soft grass. They had both been screaming from the jostling of the run. Now they were silent. Warm against her. Warmth spread all through her, radiating out from... *where was it coming from?* She looked down at the babies. From them. It was coming from one of them. In the crook of her right arm, it was that one. The little baby girl, her eyes wide, a little dimple between her brows.

Carmen ran on, her teeth clenched in a smile even as her lungs burned for oxygen. That little look from her baby girl, like she was concentrating on something really important, that would bring a smile to anyone's face. But Carmen couldn't hold the smile. Took too much strength, what with her heart punching in her chest. She opened her mouth, huffing and struggling to get her wind. This wasn't a time to quit. She drove herself into a sprint and her legs reacted like tireless, strong pistons, never faltering. That warmth coming from her little girl somehow seemed to help matters. It made her ignore the pain and concentrate. Just put one foot in front of the other. Again. Again. Again. Faster. Faster. Faster.

Pushing herself, her running became fluid, reaching another level of speed. All weight drained away. There was nothing but the warmth coming from her baby girl and the will to escape propelling her forward. Her baby girl's warmth infused her. Made her light as a feather, floating over the grass with each step, the strength of a bull quivering through her legs. The forest was rearing up out of the horizon in front of her with each swishing sound of her bare feet through the grass. Only a matter of time before she was in that forest - then let them try to find her, she thought. But the thought of him running after her was overwhelming. She had to look back. Just once.

One quick look back. It was him, not far behind, the black shadow of his hat bouncing in the night sky toward her. Then the ground dropped from under her feet. She lurched as one foot then the other dumped into a depression in the ground. Her balance was lost. She snapped her head around and muscled her legs in front of her, one after the other, trying to catch up with her own momentum. Her mind spun. If she fell, he would have her and the babies. And he would do things. Terrible things.

Everything slowed down for Carmen. Each labored movement of her legs, trying to keep up with her hurtling body, too little too late as she began to tip forward to the point of no return. Her stomach became lead as she realized she was done. Fall she would. And he was right behind. Damn it!

She tightened her grip on the babies as she fell. The trees loomed up out of the night sky, giants of safety that could only watch, too far away to help her. She couldn't escape. He had her.

A grunt punched out of her lungs as she turned her shoulder, letting it take the brunt of her fall. The speed of her running combined with the extra weight of the two babies in her arms threw her down with devastating force. A searing pain ripped through her shoulder. She held in a scream, white stars of agony shooting through her brain, and began to tumble. Rolled head over heel, balling up to protect the babies. The world became a frenzy of spinning pain. Then it stopped. Her head ringing. Shoulder screaming. She opened her eyes, expecting to see him standing over her, reaching down to wrap his cold fingers around each of the babies, then finally around her neck.

The sound of his heavy footsteps vibrated the ground beneath her. She balled up into the fetal position, holding her babies tight. Their warm, sour milk breath puffed against her neck. Please don't see me. Please don't see me. His hat outlined black against the sky. Coming closer. Slowing to a walk. Moving straight for her. In the dark she couldn't tell where he was looking. He was nothing but a black outline of a man. Huge. Towering as he came within a few strides. And stopped.

Her lungs ached, demanding air. She bit her lower lip, trying to hush the sound of her breathing. Her blood roared in her ears. The tickle of babies' breath on her neck. Don't make a sound little ones. He took another step forward, moving like a shadow, his head turning and searching for her. The only thing that kept her steady was the warmth of her baby girl. That warmth had the power of two strong hands, holding her steady, letting her know that she was safe. His voice rose up in a deep wash of sound that vibrated through her.

"You're close Carmen. I know it. Bring her to me child, just the girl, and I'll let you and the boy go."

She stiffened, feeling his voice reach into her. Grab her. Hold her. How did he do that? So soothing. She wanted to shake her head to get his voice out of there. But she couldn't. Couldn't move at all. He'd *see*. But that voice. It curled up in her, all warm and cozy. A nice, soft

cuddly thing that loved her like nothing ever had before. Even better than the warmth coming from her baby girl. She looked up to him, seeing the soft glow of the moon and stars frame him as he looked one way, then another, then finally turned away, looking back in the direction he'd just come from.

"You can come back too," he yelled. "You can come back Carmen. I want you to. You just have to give the girl back to us. Then you can give yourself back to me."

The pain in her shoulder was fading away. Just the sound of his voice did that. Like a lover comforting her. Rocking her in the bosom of a great warm love. Her heartbeat slowed. Her eyelids lowered. Her face softened in a smile. It could be like it was when she first was brought here to Kirtland Falls. Just him. And her. All she had to do was get up and walk over to him. Something warm and wet touched her hand, but she brushed it aside. He was what was important. His presence made her ache deep inside. She licked her lips, wanting to get up and go back to him. Let things be the way they once were. Nothing could compare to that. She began to raise her head. The warm wet touch on her hand closed over a finger and began sucking powerfully, as only the mouth of a baby could do. Her eyes opened wide.

"I'm not angry now Carmen, but I can be if you don't come to me. Tell me where you are. We'll carry the little ones back together and then you can come to my bed. We'll spend the night together, just you and me."

She looked down, still groggy with the power of his voice, watching the little one, it was the boy, sucking her finger. Her breasts leaked warm milk. And his voice left her, like a veil being lifted. The boy sucked harder on her finger. She lowered her head back to the grass. So close. He almost had her.

"CARMEN!"

His scream rang in her head. She could see his hands clenched in fists as he turned and walked away, disappearing to search through the shadows of the night.

Sitting up, careful to keep quiet, she took a breast from under her shirt and fed the boy. Damn her shoulder hurt. Getting to her feet, she took one look in the direction he had gone and began walking with a limp, the trees of the forest gathering around her. The boy suckled. The girl's head lay on Carmen's aching shoulder. And Carmen thought. These babies were *different*. The girl *was* the first of her kind. She shook her head. It didn't matter. They were hers now. Her twins, forever hers. She kissed their heads. So soft and defenseless. The two of them snuggled

against one another, one sleeping, the other suckling, and she touched them, running her fingertips over their faces. It would never stop now. They would never stop searching for them. He would never stop searching for them. It was time to hide. Put the babies somewhere safe even if that meant giving them up. She kissed them both and forced herself into a jog, ignoring the stones and sticks on the forest floor that cut into her bare feet.

Alone, walking in the dark, a bag of groceries in her arms, Carmen couldn't help but look behind her. How many months had it been? Six? Seven? Still, time didn't help. She knew they were somewhere out there, searching for her. She stopped and scanned the street behind her. Empty, except for the pair of young drug dealers that were always on this particular corner, waiting to hawk their wares. They shot her hooded glances and she started walking again.

At the door to her apartment building she wrestled her grocery bag into the crook of one arm and fished a set of keys out of her jeans, unlocking the door and pushing it open. She edged past a drunk sleeping in the hall and shut the door, locking the deadbolt. The drunk mumbled in his sleep as she stepped over him. Living on the run was terrible. Couldn't get a normal job - never. She sighed and began walking up the two flights of stairs toward her cold water flat. Normal jobs required personal information - name, social security number, address. Sooner or later someone would come across that information. Someone who served him. Grinding it out, working in the underbelly of the city as a dishwasher, housecleaner, and even working on the fringes of the porn industry - setting up "screen tests" for new girls - it all paid cash and kept her hidden. That porn stuff though, she had to stop that. Even now a hole opened up in her heart thinking about all those runaway girls being eaten up by those empty-eyed men. They were the kind of people that didn't care if a person lived or died, as long as they got theirs. It worried her that she didn't care as much as she thought she should.

Once in her apartment she walked across the room to set her bag down on the bed. There was a squeak behind her and she turned to see the door to her room swinging open.

"Damn thing never stays closed," she muttered, making her way over to it. Grabbing the knob a dark shape stepped in front of her. Her heart jumped in her chest.

"You have something for an old vet?"

"Oh my God. Oh my God," Carmen said breathlessly, nearly giggling from the scare the bum had given her. She took a deep breath, shaking her head at him. "You scared me. I thought you were someone else." Smiling in spite of the fact that this disheveled street person was at her door, holding out his hand, his brown skinned fingers poking through the ends of his gloves, she waved at him. "Wait here, I'll get you something."

Rustling through the bag of groceries, she had a strange thought. Hadn't the bum downstairs been white? That couldn't be right. The one at her door was an old gray-haired black man. But he was wearing the same clothes as the man she'd seen downstairs - green army jacket, black knit cap, blue jeans. Two bums in the building wearing the same clothes, but different skin? She didn't think so. Her memory must be playing tricks. This had to be the same guy. She closed her hand over a pack of cigarettes at the bottom of the bag and pulled them out. Still, she could've sworn the man downstairs was white. An urge to get this guy out of here as fast as possible overtook her. Smokes were like gold on the street. She turned, prepared to hand them over and send him on his way even though she had a definite craving for one right now.

"I don't want those."

Carmen took a step back. His face was inches from hers. How had he gotten so close? She hadn't heard a thing. Another step back and her legs were against the edge of her bed.

"You know what I want."

A tightness closed over her heart, creeping up her neck until it was rigid. From the shape of an old Negro bum came the figure of a tall man, dressed in black, a wide-brimmed hat on his head. Dark bearded, eyes half mast with amusement, the man reached out and pushed her shoulder. She fell back onto the bed, staring up at him, her pulse booming in her ears. For a bare moment she thought of screaming, bringing someone to help her.

"No, no. Be good now," said Nathaniel, wagging his finger. Those eyes of his, black and deep, bore into her. As he leaned over her, placing his hands on either side of her shoulders, his handsome dark face drawing close to her, she heard the door to her room slam shut.

"Now we can talk my love," he said. "Where is my daughter?"

"I don't have her."

"That's not what I asked. Answer me child."

A tugging at something inside her began. Nice feeling. Like being asleep with her eyes open. She bit down on her lip, drawing blood. No. She didn't want to feel good. She didn't want

anything from this world anymore. Nothing he could offer made a difference. He couldn't control her with good feelings and lies anymore. The girl and the boy, her babies - she'd never tell him where she'd left them. They'd be free of him and the monsters that followed him. And she saw in his eyes that he knew this. That made her smile.

"Who do you think you are? Smiling at me."

His fingers clutched her mouth, digging in painfully, forcing the smile away. She didn't resist. Let it hurt. He had nothing for her. Money, clothes, jewels, sex, food, power... none of it mattered any more.

"All these things I give to you if you but kneel down before me."

She remembered his words when she was first brought to him and how she'd bought in to it. His face now inches from hers, his eyes blazing in anger - she saw the complete emptiness inside him for the first time. And it made her proud of herself to finally see him for what he was.

"You think you can keep her from me?"

His fingers slipped from her mouth and grabbed at the waist of her pants. She closed her eyes as he unbuttoned them. There would be fear if she saw him. With her eyes closed it didn't matter.

"You'll be happy to know that instead of pain, I've decided to give you pleasure."

He took his time, tugging her pants and underwear off while he hummed to himself. There was a sensation of ice cold on her bare leg. She flinched at the touch of his finger trailing up her inner thigh. So cold it burned. His breath on the side of her neck smelled of sulphur.

"In all the centuries I've walked this earth, you were the only one who gave me children. But I only want the girl - you can keep the boy. Is that too much to ask for?"

Her eyes squeezed shut. Don't answer. Don't give him a chance to trick you. The icy touch on her leg stopped as it reached her pelvis. God help me.

"Mmmm, hmmm. Cat got your tongue? Well, let's forget about the girl for now."

His weight moved onto her, prying her knees apart. Don't let me be scared God. Please let me be brave.

"If you made one girl for me, maybe you can make another. Let's give it a try, shall we?"

She started to scream and stopped. Opened her eyes. There was nothing to see. Nothing. A blackness filled her from where he entered into her. No pain. No sensation at all. Just a sense of being pushed to the edge of an abyss. She teetered in another world, looking down into a pit of

unending despair, knowing she could fall into it for eternity. Her lips moved for the last time in her life, sounding out a bare whisper.

"You'll never find my babies."

From somewhere outside herself she heard his roar. Then something broke inside her. Pain blinded her to everything. Her spirit was on fire, the black pit looming below, her mind spinning. Is anything worth this much pain? Why do I have to suffer like this? Then her pain fell away. Somehow... it simply stopped. It was as if a great unseen hand grasped her and pulled her away from the blackness. She looked down, seeing Nathaniel scream, the black pits of his eyes lit with endless rage. And she knew he could never touch her again. With a final wish that her son and daughter would never be found by him she released herself, taking one last look at her dead body under Nathaniel, seeing how he had filled her eyes with blackness. But she was filled with light now. And she saw an even greater light. She sped toward it. It was a light that burned like the sun. No blackness could follow and she lifted and melded with it, the very concept of black gone now and forever.