

BENEATH THE BRIDAL VEIL

By Jane Barrett



ILLUSTRATED BY CHAS

AN 'ADULT TV' NOVEL

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BENEATH THE BRIDAL VEIL.

By Jane Barrett.

Chapter One

An Unexpected Call

“I’m afraid there's no mistake. This telegram from your mother says you're to leave today and join her in London.” The Proctor waved the telegram at him as though it would legitimize his statement.

“Sir, surely there must be some mistake. I had a letter only a week ago from Mother in Vienna; she was terribly keen that I went on with my work here. After all, the finals are the main concern.”

“Well, Bryce-Hamilton, something must have changed. Here, you'd better read it.” As Richard rapidly scanned the letter, the Christ College Proctor continued. “Your father was with the Foreign Office. Wasn't he the Charge de Affair?” Richard had completed reading the letter. “Yes Master, for Carpathia.”

“We were very sorry to hear of his death. It must have been a great shock for your mother.”

“Yes it was, Master. She went to see my sister at her finishing school. That's why I'm surprised to receive the letter. For some reason they have come home.”

“Well Richard, it must be important, though it's a damn nuisance, with your exams coming up and all.”

“I know it is, Sir, but I'm sure there is something wrong. May I have permission to telephone her, Master?”

“I already tried directory inquiry. Waste of time, there is no telephone connected. Chin up, Bryce-Hamilton. I'm afraid I can't do anything, we must accept their letter as an instruction. Suggest you hurry there, clear up the matter and come back. Then there would still be enough time for the finals. All I can do is wish you the best for the future. You've done well during these first few months. Oxford can be rather difficult but, apart from that first small problem, you've come through with flying colors.”

He came from behind the desk holding out his hand. “I've told Matron about your leaving. She will have you all packed and ready. Now cut along now and she will see you off.”

As they shook hands, Richard could feel his eyes beginning to fill with tears. Unexpected changes always seemed to cause this and he wanted to leave the room as quickly as possible, so Mr. Broughton would not see him in such a distressed state. He managed to choke the tears back as he walked across the quadrangle to his Spartan room.

Mrs. Middlemarsh was full of sympathy. "I'm very sorry, Richard. I didn't expect you to be leaving, otherwise I'd have made up a basket of tea for you"

"That's all right, Mrs. Middlemarsh, I'll be fine," he said tremulously. "I'm sure something has happened. That letter was from Mother, but it was not the way she normally writes to me. It's so sudden it just doesn't make sense."

Mrs. Middlemarsh had been like a second mother to Richard. He had made few friends, due to his natural shyness, and had kept the inheritance of his Knighthood from his natural father very quiet. The Proctor and Mrs. Middlemarsh knew of his royal background and they had taken care to ensure this information remained confidential. The very last thing Richard wanted was to bring attention to himself; attending tutorials and lectures as Sir Richard Bryce-Hamilton would do the very opposite.

He had spent a long spell in the College Hospital shortly after arriving in Oxford. This had resulted in a close friendship with Matron. Mrs. Middlemarsh took him under her wing, protected him, and persuaded Richard to join the dramatic group.

She had been responsible for stopping a number of unwelcome advances from men who had tried to take advantage of his feminine good looks. Now there was little time; the message had stressed urgency and there were only minutes left to catch the London train. It was a tearful farewell as he put his meager baggage aboard the ancient Renault that served as the local taxicab.

"Here's the tickets, Richard," said Mrs. Middlemarsh, "a Mr. Geltzman will meet you at the platform gates at Victoria."

The constant clicking of the wheels over the ties had almost lulled him into sleep when the carriage door opened and a tall distinguished man entered. He paused alongside Richard.

"Sir Richard Bryce-Hamilton"? His English was impeccable with no sign of a regional accent. Richard was sure he was not English. He had a small, tightly clipped mustache.

"Yes, I'm Bryce-Hamilton. How can I help you, Sir?"

"No need to call me sir, Sir Richard. I'm Mr. Geltzman. There has been a change in the travel plans. We'll be leaving the train at the next stop. May I collect your luggage?"

Richard could see they were still some way out of London, "I thought we were supposed to meet in London, Mr. Geltzman. Why the change?"

"Just more convenient, Sir Richard. Now please come along, we have little time," Geltzman said, taking the single suitcase from the rack.

Waiting alongside the entrance was a magnificent dark blue Bentley limousine. The chauffeur started the engine. Mr. Geltzman refused to answer any further questions on their destination, and joined the chauffeur in the front. It was clear to Richard that they were not headed to London as the car headed into the countryside and turned northeast, skirting the city. The quiet thrumming of the motor, the darkness and trauma of the day was enough for him and shortly he dropped into an uneasy sleep.

"Sir Richard, we are here, sir." With a start, Richard found himself awake. Geltzman was leaning over him. Lights were shining into the car from a high stone portico.

Richard had the impression of an immense mansion deep in the countryside. It appeared isolated for, apart from the house lights, it was surrounded by darkness.

"Please follow me inside. No, don't worry about your luggage. It will be brought in later". He lead Richard into the library, where, standing next to a blazing fire, was a tall, slender woman.

She was dressed in a tailored black velvet evening suit. Beneath the loose jacket was a white silk blouse with a cowl neck. Her bearing was erect, almost military. She turned with a look of disdain on her face. She was obviously a woman used to commands and being obeyed.

"You are Sir Richard Bryce-Hamilton? Come closer, child. Let me look at you."

Richard stopped, annoyed at the patronizing tone and at being addressed as a child. "I beg your pardon. I don't know you. I'm expecting my mother."

He heard Geltzman's sharp intake of breath behind him. At the same instant, fingers dug heavily into his shoulder. The grip was tight, drawing a gasp of pain.

"Let him go, Geltzman."

Before she could continue, Geltzman broke in. Directing himself to Richard, he said, "This is the Countess of Linzberg. You address the countess as Lady Amelia." Only then did Geltzman's hand leave his shoulder.

Richard blushed and stammered, "I'm sorry, Lady Amelia. I had no idea."

"That's perfectly all right, Sir Richard and quite understandable. You've had a very difficult journey and you must be very tired." As she spoke, Lady Amelia stepped forward. Gently taking his chin in her hand, she examined his face. Looking closely into eyes, she touched his hair. "It's remarkable, Geltzman. You were right. They are identical."

Richard was startled. What was he doing here? There appeared to be no concern at the reason for his arrival.

"Excuse me, Lady Amelia. When will my mother and sister be here?"

"Your mother and sister, they are supposed to be here?"

"Yes, Lady Amelia. I received a telegram and the train ticket at the college. The note said it was important that I come directly to London. I know nothing of the circumstances, only that I would be met. Mother and Penelope are all right, aren't they?"

For a moment the Countess looked flustered but quickly recovered. "I'm sorry, Sir Richard. How really thoughtless of me," said the Countess in her faintly accented English. "Of course you are worried, but you are not to be concerned. They are all in good health. Now, what I'm about to tell you must be held in the strictest confidence. You are to tell no one."

"Of course, but I don't understand why aren't they here."

"Sir Richard, the situation is very complicated. Before we go further, you should read this letter from your father."

"It can't be from my father, he is dead."

“Your stepfather died. This letter is from your *real* father, Prince Charles.

“Now, please read this and try to understand how important your cooperation will be. Then I'll try and answer your questions. Geltzman, please give Richard the letter.”

This couldn't be happening to him. It was bizarre, his father was long dead. “Just tell me, Milady, why they are not here.”

“As I explained, Sir Richard, the matter is not simple. It is so important that the future peace in Europe may very well depend on the outcome. You, Richard, may be the key to this. You are going to be asked to carry out a great sacrifice.” Lady Amelia could see the question forming on Richard's lips and before he could begin, she took his hand and said, “Before you ask any further questions, read this.”

Richard took the thick wax-sealed letter. Before he could open it, Lady Amelia said, “No, please open it later. I hope you will join us for dinner.” She caught his look of embarrassed dismay. “Of course, you are worried about a dinner suit. Richard, I understand how difficult it is to be an undergraduate and that your wardrobe is rather sparse. Geltzman will find something suitable for this evening.” She reached for the bell pull.

“I hope you will join us for dinner in an hour. There will only be a small group, including my daughter, Lady Karla. It is important that you read the letter carefully and understand its contents. So much depends on your collaboration. Your family has become part of a wider theater and their very existence may be in jeopardy.”

No matter that she was smiling as she spoke, there was little persuasion and a great deal of threat in her words. Before he could more, Lady Amelia turned her back and strode imperiously from the room. He stood with his mouth open, not knowing what to do. Mr. Geltzman walked to the door, held it open and said, “Sir Richard...”

As he followed the Major Domo up the wide sweeping staircase, his thoughts were no longer bewilderment but a grave sense of foreboding. When he had entered the house it had been to decide whether he was amongst friends or enemies. Following Lady Amelia's words it was clear that he was not amongst friends.

It was difficult to assess how large the Manor House was in the dark. The wide sweeping staircase continued up at least another floor, and there seemed no end to the corridor. The impression was of great size.

“Your bedroom is on the first floor, Sir Richard. I must ask you not to go out into the grounds alone under any circumstances. Recently we have had a number of burglaries, so there are guard-dogs loose during the night, and grills have also been fitted to the ground and first floor windows. So, if it seems like a prison, at least you now know the reason. This is your room, Sir Richard. I do hope it is suitable”?

They entered a high, spacious room. A wide bed stood in a deep alcove formed by bay windows. The wall panels of gray and silver silk were echoed in a silk bed coverlet. A deep-piled gray and pink carpet covered the floor, the color again reflected in the velvet drapes that covered the wide bay window. There were Chippendale chairs, dark and sleekly polished with the patina of age. Through the double doors was a marble bathroom. Richard seated himself on one of the wide velvet sofas as Geltzman began running a bath.

Chapter Two

Two Letters

He opened the letter, recognizing the heavy dark ink and sprawling scroll he had seen before addressed to his mother. She had never discussed them with him, though he remembered the one she had received two months before he went to Oxford. She had paled when he had handed it to her, and as she scanned the contents, her face lost all her color. Yet no matter how much he pressed her, she would offer no explanation. She merely made an attempt at a smile, that was really more of a grimace. "Darling, it's just something from the past. Nothing to concern you."

7th August 1936.

My Dear Richard,

This letter will be a surprise, your mother tells me you know nothing of me. A full explanation I will leave till we meet, suffice it to say I'm your father.

I am sorry to have taken you away from Oxford, as I have learned from my agents how much the college means to you. However, the events that govern both our lives are larger than our individual needs or rights. Fate, through a dreadful tragedy, has brought our lives together again. I will not try to justify my actions which have kept us apart these long years, except to say I believe destiny chose me to carry out a task that will make the world a better place for all humanity. I will not try to explain the reasons to you but instead will leave that to Lady Amelia, whom by now you no doubt have met. Please cooperate with Lady Amelia and Doctor Moreau whose acquaintance you will make shortly.

Throughout the long years we have been separated, I have known despair. This is now in the past as I realize we stand at the dawning of a new age. Reichchancellor Hitler, Reichleiter Borman and Herr Goering: these men, my dear Richard, are about to return to Europe the great ideals and culture that she once had. They will save us from the barbarians who are about to assail us from the East. It is time for England to join with these remarkable men of destiny.

Britain can no longer lay claim to being Great. Over the years, I have tried to convince our leaders that we must join the National Socialists and the British New Order. Only then will they be able to reverse the sorry state our government has lead us into. Unlike Sir Leonard Mosely, they failed to heed my advice and so it is necessary to take the next step. You, Richard, are poised to be part of that new beginning.

My only other child, your twin, has had a terrible accident and made the ultimate sacrifice. Now it is your sacred duty, my dear son, to take Richelle's place and bring about this great change. I will leave it to the Countess Amelia to explain the great sacrifice you must make. What must take place saddens me, but it is for the greater good of the Aryan race. God, fate, and destiny have lead you to this point. It is this sacrifice on your part which will allow our family to again take its rightful place amongst the rulers of Europe.

Your mother and Penelope are staying at the Falcon-Strosse They were not initially in agreement with my aims but as you will see from the enclosed letter your mother does want you to cooperate fully and follow our plans. I wanted to be with you to tell you of our purpose and what it will mean to the whole world. Unfortunately my work will not let me leave Carpathia so the Countess Amelia must do it in my stead.

My love to you, my son, and we will meet again soon.

Your loving Father,

Charles von Hoffenberg

Richard's mind was in a turmoil; after eighteen years his father had risen from the dead with a letter to him. All those years ago he had vanished, leaving Richard's mother to raise him. He had only limited success in piecing together some picture of his father, as no one seemed to want to talk about him. Even if he was not dead, his mother and all her friends treated him as though they wished he were. It caused his mother great pain even to hear his name so her parents and friends never spoke of him or the events of the past. Despite this, Richard had managed to piece together a small picture of his father.

He had been Prince Charles Von Hoffenberg, and his father was Prince Wilhelm, the former Grand Duke of the Kingdom of Carpathia. Prince Wilhelm had been deposed by revolution, just before the beginning of the century when Carpathia divided into the Principalities of Enna and Aron. He and the Princess fled to England and settled there with a fortune stolen from Carpathia. Once there, they anglicized their name to Holborne. Prince Wilhelm had never given up his claim to Carpathia. A year later, Richard's father was born and the claim continued although the family now lived comfortably as English gentry.

Ten years later, shortly after Charles married Richard's mother, they all returned to Carpathia. They lived in Nosila, the capital of Enna, until war broke out in Europe following the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand. The war had had little effect in Carpathia; the countries neutrality was respected until the Russian Empire collapsed just as Richard was born. Then, only two weeks after the birth, his father disappeared. His mother awoke one morning to find herself alone except for two servants; she was forced to flee the advancing German army. With the newly-born Richard along, the trip was a nightmare. When she finally arrived in England, she found her In-laws the Holbornes had also mysteriously disappeared. A trust fund had been established, allowing her to buy a home and provide for Richard. Two years later, she married Sir James Bryce-Hamilton and the marriage produced Richard's only sibling, his half-sister Penelope.

There seemed little sense to Richard's mother staying with his father and agreeing with his plans. There must be something quite wrong. He knew she absolutely detested him, and would not even talk about anything to do with the marriage. It was absurd to think she reconsidered and was prepared to agree with his plans, whatever they were. This in mind, it was with a great sense of foreboding that he began reading the second letter enclosed in the envelope.

Somewhere in Carpathia

5th August 1936.

My Darling Richard,

By now the Countess Linzburg will have lured you to Broughton Hall and may have explained some of the conditions to you. Our captors are under the control of Prince Charles Von Hoffenberg, as he now terms himself. By now I am sure you know he is your natural father. We were lured to Switzerland, then kidnapped, and will remain here until your father's plan is complete.

Our captors have shown themselves to be completely ruthless. After I finish this letter, I am to undergo a further session of interrogation. I have to tell you that they have threatened us with death by torture unless you agree to cooperate with them in every way. Some of what may befall us was demonstrated using some poor souls who are incarcerated with us. They were literally torn apart, bit by bit. Dear God, it was so horrible that the nightmares have not allowed me any sleep for the last week. Penelope just sits and trembles if I move away from her. If it was only myself, I would tell them to go to Hades, but with Penelope in their hands as well, I cannot, my dearest.

I hesitate to make this request, my dearest son, but I can think of no other way out of our current situation. You must cooperate with their plan, no matter how strange it may seem to you. I ask not for myself, but for your sister, Penelope. For her to be released from captivity, your total acquiescence is necessary. I trust that you will do the right thing. Until we meet again, my son, I remain,

Your loving Mother

What could he do?

What did they want?

Who *were* they and what was the Countess' role in this?

“Think first, then act,” had always been his family's unofficial motto, and he'd follow that course of action.

“Your bath is ready, Sir Richard.”

He looked blankly at Geltzman, his mind still involved with the horror he held in his hands.

“Your bath, Sir Richard,” Geltzman repeated.

Without acknowledging the now-bristling Major Domo's presence, Richard undressed and climbed into the bathtub. Lying back in the steaming water, he reread the letter. He was so upset by the contents that he took little notice of Geltzman. Richard was only dimly aware of his servant's actions as a dressing gown and towel were laid alongside him. “Your clothes will be on the bed. I'll help you dress when you're ready.”

The warm water relaxed him slightly-but the message of terror in the letter continued to fill his mind." Captors. Torture. Torn apart bit-by-bit. God knows what people or savages these people were to prey on his mother and sister!

"It's time to dress, Sir Richard." He started at Geltzman's voice. "I'm sorry, Sir, I didn't mean to frighten you."

"Don't worry, it wasn't your fault. I'll be there, just leave me for a moment."

He dried himself on a cashmere towel. Then he picked up the only garment in sight. It was a dressing robe of the finest blue silk, so fine and light there was almost no weight to it at all. Belting it to his waist, he had the eerie feeling he was wearing nothing at all. Geltzman was laying out on the bed the clothing he'd be wearing that night.

He held out the two letters. "Herr Geltzman, do you know anything of these?"

"I beg your pardon, Sir Richard, what are they?"

"A letter from my mother and one from my father."

"I'm sorry, Sir Richard. Presumably they came from the Countess. I'm afraid I know nothing of the contents, Sir. I work as the Master Domo for the Countess. My role is to serve, not to inquire. Now, may I help you dress, sir?"

He paused as a look of annoyance clouded Richard's face. "I know it's been a long journey but it is almost time for dinner and Lady Amelia detests being kept waiting."

Richard felt like telling the Countess that, as far as he was concerned, she could wait the whole night. He realized, though, that it would do no good; in the end, it would be he and his family who would be the losers.

"Yes, thank you, Mister Geltzman. I'd appreciate your help." As Richard released the robe's tie belt, he realized that he was appearing undressed in front of another man. It was an action he had managed to avoid for the past year, ever since the teasing about his body during his last year at Winchester. His hairless body, tiny waist and curvaceous hips were just too feminine. As the robe slid from his shoulders, he took the proffered garment. They were blue silk underpants cut like short bloomers.

Geltzman noticed his hesitation. "Something is wrong, Sir Richard?"

"These are more like women's than men's. Have you others I could wear?"

"I'm sorry, Sir Richard. These are not women's clothing. I borrowed them from Baron Holstein's wardrobe. He was the only person your size. Fortunately, he is overseas at the moment. Your arrival was on very short notice. I'm sure we'll be able to do better tomorrow. "

Uncomfortable with the way the evening was going, Richard continued. Possibly it was an overreaction, but since the problems he had had with the older boys at Winchester and their attempted sexual assaults, he had shunned anything that even hinted at the feminine. His horror was not over, though, as Geltzman fitted an elastic waist suspender belt, before rolling long black silk stockings up his legs.

The outer clothing was worse than the underwear: a shimmering white satin shirt replete with wide collar and pearl buttons. Black velvet trousers trimmed up the side of each leg with satin braid were matched to a jacket with wide satin lapels. Geltzman

was then ready to fit the shoes, velvet with two-inch Louis XIV heels. Although he had grudgingly accepted the feminine suit and underwear, this final indignity was too much for Richard!

“No, Geltzman, I'm not wearing those!”

“I'm sorry, Sir Richard, but you must. They are the only ones suitable.”

“I'll never be able to walk in them. Now please return my own, if there are no others.”

“I'm sorry Sir, but we can't. When I asked her Ladyship about the shoes, she assured me you would have no trouble. You did, after all, play the 'leading lady' for three years in the school plays at Winchester.”

Richard's mouth almost fell open in surprise. How did they know so much about him? It was frightening. For the moment, there seemed no other recourse than to accept these demands. Whatever was going to happen seemed to have been planned for sometime. Geltzman completed a brushing of his hair and he was ready.

Chapter Three

A Difficult Dinner

Lady Amelia was standing next to the fireplace, holding a glass of sherry. She had changed for dinner into a gown of burgundy-colored velvet. Sleeveless, it flowed from the narrow shoulder straps to a slim skirt where a narrow slit to mid-calf exposed a shapely leg and slender ankle. A diaphanous chiffon cape covered her shoulders, exposing a creamy décolletage through the red mist of the fabric. It was impossible for Richard to determine her age. She appeared to be in her early thirties, but he sensed the Countess must be older than that. She looked very regal as she turned to face him on his entry. Her smile was automatic; there was little warmth in it.

“Ah, there you are, Sir Richard. Come, let me look at you.”

To his puzzlement, he was asked to turn about several times before coming to stand close to Lady Amelia. “Yes, you are perfect. I understand these are Baron Holstein's clothes?”

“Yes, my Lady. I believe they are,” replied Richard.

“Well darling, what do you think?” said Lady Amelia, directing her gaze to Richard's right. He turned in the direction.

“I think she's perfect, Mummy!” The voice belonged to a slim blonde woman of about twenty, classically beautiful with wide-set blue eyes above prominent cheekbones. At first glance, she was breathtakingly lovely; a closer look revealed the sulky pout to her mouth, the coldness in her eyes and the arrogant bearing. Richard had the immediate impression that she would always want her own way, and that if she didn't get it, she would be extremely dangerous.

“Sir Richard, this is Lady Karla, my daughter.”

Richard gave a small bow in her direction and was completely mystified when she giggled and said, "We'll, we'll soon have you curtsying to me instead of bowing, little one."

The Countess noticed his puzzlement.

"Take no notice, Sir Richard. Karla has a strange sense of humor." Turning to her daughter, she said, "Be quiet, Karla. We don't want our guest upset."

Karla stood up and Richard realized she was at least three inches taller than he. She wore a slender gown of green silk, the neckline just covering her generous high breasts before dipping into a cowl at the rear, leaving her back almost bare. In the front, its hem line was three to four inches below her knees and swept downwards to ankle-length at the rear.

"You are really too pretty to be a *boy*. Come closer!" Karla said, placing one arm around his shoulder. With the other, she took his hand as she moved to the large velvet settee. "Come Richard, sit beside me. We're going to know one another quite well, so let's start right now!"

Richard didn't know what to do. The evening was not as he'd expected. Naively, he had thought that he'd be more in control and able to bargain for his mother and sister. Karla had already taken the upper hand and he looked nervously towards Lady Amelia, almost seeking her help.

"Don't look so nervous. There's no need to worry, Sir Richard. Karla won't hurt you. Be careful, though. She *can* bite." Then she addressed her daughter. "Karla, be nice. Richard's had a long day full of surprises and we've a such lot to explain to him this evening."

"Ah, Major you're just in time to meet our newest member of the family. Sir Richard, Major Rhinehart. The Major is responsible for our security."

Richard stood, glad to find an excuse to leave his seat beside Karla. Major Rhinehart was tall, with typical Aryan features, stern yet handsome. He had piercing blue eyes beneath the cropped blonde hair, and a dueling scar marred his left cheek. He stood very erect, balanced on the balls of his feet. He was alert, seemingly ready to spring, a man of action.

He reached for Richard's hand, clicking his heels as he grasped it lightly but firmly. "Ahh, they are so alike, milady. I did not expect it to be quite so. Now I am sure we must succeed." He bowed lower, still holding Richard's hand. "I am so delighted to meet you."

As Richard met his eyes, he was horrified by the look, there was no mistake as to his intention. It was a look that Richard had faced before at Winchester, a look that undressed him and was filled with naked desire! Flushing red and totally embarrassed, Richard turned away. In so doing, he received a look of pure hatred from Lady Karla. Although a fixed smile was in place, there was nothing to disguise the fury that turned her blue eyes into chips of ice. Surely, he thought, she can't be jealous; no sane person would find anything unusual in the Major's attention. The thought echoed in his mind: no sane person would take it wrong!! That look in her eyes remained in his memory and his blood chilled at the thought of what could happen to him if he was

left in her power. In the meantime, Lady Amelia had moved to a two-seat settee. Now she beckoned to Richard to join her. Lady Amelia used the bell pull. Moments later, a butler entered.

“Klepner, serve drinks! Sir Richard, a martini?”

He was only too willing to accept anything that might deaden the sense of panic now coursing through his body. “Now, Sir Richard,” continued Lady Amelia, “what do you know of your parents?”

“Only what was contained in the letter, Lady Amelia.”

“No, I don't mean that, Sir Richard. I mean their history and your early childhood?”

“Please, Countess, can't you just tell me what's happened to them? What does the letter mean?”

“All in good time, Richard. Before I do so, I need to know some more detail.”

“I'm sorry, Lady Amelia. I think I know them as well as any other son might. I spent very little time with my stepfather. I was at school in England since the age of ten and since then, I've been with them only during the holidays. My father—stepfather, rather—wanted me to have an English schooling. With him being abroad because of his diplomatic work, it was impossible for me to be with them. Until an hour ago, I thought my father was dead. I've always regarded Sir James to be my father. I was very upset with his death last year. Now, please, Lady Amelia, tell me what's happened to Mother and Penelope.”

“Very well, Sir Richard, but please give me a moment more. What we must have is your complete cooperation; you must do and accept everything that is asked of you. Do you understand what I'm saying and what you must do? It's very important that you do.”

Richard was becoming more and more concerned with the way the evening was proceeding, with the questions and the strange dress he was forced to wear, with Lady Karla and Major Rhinehart. Now to cap it all, the Countess' interminable questions and demands. He was about to demand an explanation when Klepner returned, informing Lady Amelia that dinner was ready to be served.

They formed a small group at the top of the table, Lady Amelia at the head and Karla and Richard on either side. As the meal was served, Lady Amelia began to explain.

“Your father is the Regent of Enna, one of two principalities that make up Carpathia.” Noting his evident surprise, she continued. “You didn't know that, Richard?”

“No, Lady Amelia, I had no idea, none at all.”

“What do you know of Carpathia?”

“I'm sure, Countess, that you know we moved there following the war when my father—well stepfather—Sir James was Ambassador to Aron for ten years, before I was sent to school in England.”

Richard remembered the tiny kingdom well. Sandwiched between Austria, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, it nestled in the foothills of the mountains from which it took its

name. The high, steep mountains had provided a natural barrier to social change and harsh weather. They formed a buffer to the bitter winds that swept northern Europe. During the summer, the same mountains lofted high the moist air to drop just the right amount of rain onto the fertile plains. Because of the terrain, the tiny country had respited from the parching droughts that periodically plagued its neighbors.

The same mountains formed a natural barrier, making Carpathia a backwater in the political and trade highway of central Europe. It had little strategic value and the armies of occupation that had continually swept Hungary and Poland in their battles for the heart of Europe bypassed the tiny Kingdom. The majority of the two million inhabitants were neither rich nor poor but managed to stay comfortable.

The Kingdom was divided into the two Principalities of Enna and Aron. Although separate, they shared similar principals of government. Both remained feudal, though elements of change had begun in Aron. In Enna, peasant farmers constituted more than three-quarters of the population; few owned the land they worked. This right was retained by the titled families who had been the most ardent defenders of the monarchy. This included his father. They remained resistant to any change and quite insular. Nosila, the capital, retained a small standing army to maintain the feudal system.

They regarded their sister state with growing suspicion. Aron was far more democratic; its population owned more of the property and many were traders and crafts people who lived in the capital Azil, or the smaller towns that nestled on the sweeping green plains. The Enna aristocracy wanted no truck with the creeping socialism they saw engulfing Aron. Richard felt a touch of fear. If his father was Regent, that meant he was heir to part of Carpathia. He wondered why his mother kept this such a secret. Was the kidnapping and holding of them as hostages against the possibility he would not cooperate?

"I'm afraid I still don't understand, Lady Amelia. If my father was Prince Regent, why was I never told?"

"So you could remain alive, Richard. What do you think happens when two are born to inherit one throne? Your twin was selected to rule as your Grandparents decided that you and your mother were to become victims of the German army. Your father had no knowledge of this and was most upset when he discovered that his parents had tried to kill you. He refused to go further until he had an assurance that you and your mother would not be harmed in any way. He was deeply in love, when he married her.

When you both escaped to England, your father believed it was in your mother's interest to keep everything confidential. A generous trust was established for your education and your mother's well being. In the end, all the plotting by your Grandfather came to nothing. He was a weak monarch. very moody and suspected of being insane. He should never have returned because the forces against Bergen were never strong enough to overthrow them. He and the Grand Duchess were murdered by the Bergen nobles and your father.

Richard could not say anything for several moments. "My sister? I don't understand. You said we were almost identical twins. A girl! But how am I going to take her place?"

It was a moment of time that seemed to last forever. He already knew the answer, the reason for the strange clothing, the fear that he felt through his body. "Oh God! No, they can't be asking for this. It isn't possible; he *must* be mistaken." He didn't want to ask the question.

Lady Amelia brought the matter to a head. "Richard, you will be a beautiful woman. You will have breasts, your hair growth will accelerate. The operation is difficult but I have a lot of experience and you should have no fear that anything will go awry. We did not go to all this trouble to have something go wrong. For a time, there will be pain, but this cannot be avoided. It will not be unbearable and we will give you drugs to help. Besides, it will only be for a short time."

By rights, you should have died at birth, killed for inheriting Carpathia. Each principality alternates in providing a successor, and each successor must alternate in sex. If a Prince is Aron, and takes the throne of Carpathia, then the next to succeed in Carpathia is the first Princess born in Enna. Five years before your birth, Prince Rudolf de Veer was born in Aron. By custom, you should have been killed at childbirth, but your father listened to your mother's entreaties and allowed you to escape with her. Now we are calling in a debt. With your sister's death, *you* must take her place."

"This is crazy! What you are asking is both impossible and absurd. How *dare* you bring me here? I can't understand what your role in this. Even though the whole proposal is utterly ridiculous, I would have expected that my father or the Carpathian Ambassador would have been here to ask me."

Major Rhinehart paused in his eating, the fork halfway between his mouth and plate. The Countess was first to recover.

"Of course Sir Richard, your father was to be here but the political situation in Azil at the moment is keeping him very busy."

"Well, why isn't the Ambassador here, Lady Amelia?"

"I'm afraid that would be impossible, Sir Richard. There is nothing sinister in this,"replied Lady Amelia."

"Lady Amelia, I'm not sure what you want me to do."

The Countess looked around the dining table. "The political situation in Carpathia became very difficult and the two principalities were about to unite. Your twin was to marry the ruler of Aron. We are to prepare you to become the ruler of Carpathia. That is why we brought you here, Richard."

"I repeat, Countess, this is impossible and I want nothing further to do with it. I'm the wrong sex, I know very little about Carpathia and nothing at all about ruling people. Could you please return my clothing and take to London?" As soon as he finished, he could the Countess had lost patience. Her eyes narrowed, the smile was no longer present and a harshness had entered her voice.

"You are telling us very little that was not expected, Richard; you've said nothing that we had not foreseen. Unfortunately, we have very little time to put into operation what has to be done, so there's no argument you can put forward that will be of any help. In time, you'll come to know just how much is at stake and how far we're pre-

pared to go to achieve a new world. One foolish, selfish boy is not going to stop us. To be honest, you are very important in our plans, so we're prepared to gain your cooperation in any way we can.

"You've read the letter from your family, but I don't think you believe it. But here's a warning: from now on, it's up to you. Every time you fail to do what we wish, they will suffer. We are not cruel and take no pleasure from what has to be done, but there is too much at stake to allow compassion to guide us. All the instructions will come from Karla, Mr. Geltzman or your maid Erna who you will meet in the morning. They are to be obeyed implicitly and without question, otherwise..." She left the sentence unfinished but the meaning was clear.

Richard had at first gone numb with fear, but now he felt anger. How *dare* they threaten him like this! After all, this was England and there were laws that to protect him.

"Lady Amelia, you can't be serious, I've been bought here on a ridiculous pretense. I demand that you let my family go, otherwise I'm going to the nearest police station and tell them you've been threatening me!" He had expected some reaction but no one seemed perturbed.

With complete calm, Lady Amelia said, "It's time you retired, Richard. We'll discuss this in the morning. Think over what we want. It's most important that you realize just how serious we are." With that, Lady Amelia rang the bell. Geltzman must have been just outside the door. The bed had been turned down and neatly folded on the pillow was a long silk nightdress. He looked at Geltzman; from the Major Domo's attitude, he knew he would lose if he didn't wear the feminine garment. His head pounded; it was too difficult to fight. He allowed the servant to undress him and slip the garment over his head.

Settled in the four-poster bed, sleep eluded him and he lay awake, staring into the darkness. A pounding headache made Richard aware of his isolation and impotence. He was aware, too, of the quick pulse of his heart and the wave of hysteria that threatened to overwhelm him. "Stop it!" he said to himself. Panicking at this stage would solve nothing. Wait 'til morning. Maybe it would turn out to be a terrible nightmare and everything would return to normal.

Chapter Four

The Conspiracy

Sunlight flooding the bedroom awoke him. He opened his eyes momentarily disoriented, before the events of yesterday caught up with him in a rush. He had difficulty disentangling himself from the silk sheets and manipulating the long white silk nightdress. Finally, gathering the skirt in one hand, he stepped out onto the carpet and moved to the window with the gown fluttered against his body. The bedroom was on the second floor of the mansion. A thick carpet of ivy clothed the building, relentlessly intruding on the deep-set mullion windows with the leaded glass. The tendrils reached toward the bay windows jutting from the front of the house. Crowning its ivied surface was a steeply pitched roof, broken at regular intervals by elegant dormers that hinted

at a third story and rooms that may have been inhabited by a large domestic staff. It was not an antique building, he thought. It was constructed in a Georgian style far too comfortable to be really old. It seemed to be centered in the large estate.

From the wide bow window, the rolling park land lay spread like an enormous picture postcard. Nearby, a small thicket of trees surrounded a large pond almost the size of a small lake. Further on, at least a mile away, a high brick and stone wall severed the park land from the remainder of the countryside. It looked as though it surrounded the whole estate. It was quite forbidding, an alien obstacle in the otherwise peaceful countryside, twisting like a dead serpent as it followed the hills and valleys.

Sunlight flashed off the top of the wall. Looking closer, Richard could make out the broken glass and barbed wire that topped the wall. As the only use for boundary fences of this type were for keeping poachers and strangers out, the wall appeared extreme, the type you would use to surround a prison. In the light ground mist, the estate's employees were already abroad in the grounds. Like the wall, they were obvious aliens in the English countryside. They wore uniforms of dark gray or brown; those in gray were armed with rifles or shotguns and held leashes restraining large Alsatians. It was not a sight he'd expected to find in the peaceful country side. Any plans of escape would require careful planning.

He looked closely at his own surroundings and realized that the window's ornamental grillwork was decorative but also functioned as security bars. It was clear that the Countess was taking no chances. Suddenly, the door opened behind him. A tall, well-built woman entered; her dark blonde hair was pulled into a bun at the back of her neck. She had heavy dark blue eyes and a face that was attractive rather than pretty. He guessed that her age was about thirty. She wore a black silk maid's uniform beneath a snowy white lace apron.

Her voice was a low husky contralto with a slight German accent.

"Excuse me, Sir Richard. My name is Erna. I'm to be your maid."

"Good morning; Erna. Is that how you pronounce your name?"

"Yes, Sir Richard, that's correct. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes I did, Erna! Under the circumstances, surprisingly well. Now, can you tell me what is going on and how long I'll be here?"

"No, I'm sorry, Sir Richard. I only follow the instructions of Mr. Geltzman and the Countess."

The answer was no more than he'd expected but he had wanted this to be confirmed, to be reassured that this was not just a bad dream.

"Well, Erna, would you fetch some clothing for me, then? I'd like to see the Countess immediately."

"The Countess asked you to bathe and remain in your nightclothes. Doctor Moreau will be along immediately to give you an examination and Milady said you were not to eat beforehand. You are to drink this." Erna handed him a glass filled with a milky substance. Richard tasted it. It was slightly bitter but at the same time, quite refreshing. He swallowed it quickly. The liquid helped to remove the dryness from his throat.

“What do you mean ‘examined’? What for?”

“I’m sorry, Sir Richard. I don’t know why. Like the rest of the staff here, I just follow instructions.” There was a hint of weariness in her voice. “Now, if you will excuse me, I’ll prepare your bath.”

In the breakfast room, another earnest conversation was taking place. Doctor Ernest Moreau was middle-aged, balding and walked with a slight stoop; he was not the type the New Order liked to depict as leaders. No one else had his knowledge of sexual behavior modification, though, and that overcame any objection concerning his appearance. The fact of his personal involvement showed just how important this project was.

“Very well, Ernest. Is this going to work?” said the Countess.

“Will it work, Amelia? Such a strange question to come from *you*. Failure is not tolerated in the New Order. Didn’t you make that our policy?”

“I know, I know, but sometimes one can have doubts about the means, Maybe it’s just a result of the continual apathy in this stupid country.”

“I never thought I’d hear this from the ”Ice Maiden“. I hope that cracks are not developing in the iceberg, my dear.”

“No, Ernest, there is no need to worry. It’s just that, at times, I wonder whether it’s necessary to be so firm.”

“You mean our young friend?”

She nodded.

“Now, Amelia, you must stop asking yourself so many questions. Fear will be needed, believe me! There will come a time when he must obey without question. I’ve completed some studies in the camps, and I’ve found we can control people most effec-



tively by making them fear the loss of the things they sense and feel with. The most vulnerable are the eyes, then the sex organs, then fingers and hands. This was confirmed with Diana and what happened to his father. That picture will stay in his mind for a long time. We're not monsters, but sometimes it's necessary to do something unpleasant if the goal is large enough. What do the English say—you can't make omelets without opening the eggs.”

“*Breaking* eggs!”

“I'm sorry Amelia, I don't understand.”

“They say you can't make omelets without *breaking* eggs.”

“Ah, my English is not perfect, it is the idioms I have trouble with.”

“Quite, Ernest, now back to business. What is going to happen to Richard? Have you a program?”

“Of course, I prepared it in Berlin before leaving last night. First, the examination, then the operation. This must be as soon as possible to give as much time as needed to complete the reeducation I'm sure that will be the most difficult and take a lot of time.”

There was a quizzical look on Lady Amelia's face. “Reeducation? Surely you don't mean into the New Order?”

“No, of course not. That will come later; the education is for his new role. Richard was strictly heterosexual at Winchester and Oxford and that must change. The physical side is rather mechanical and, providing the Surgeon is capable, the breasts and genitals are simple. It is the mind that is much more difficult.”

“I thought this was going to be simple, Ernest. There is not a lot of time,” said Lady Amelia, a touch of impatience in her voice.

“Quite, Amelia.” Doctor Moreau was not used to having his methods questioned. “We'll speed this up with the use of some drugs. These will provide the base for the change. However, more important is a feeling of love, trust, sympathy and dependence that must be built up. To do that, he must first be disoriented, he must feel unable to trust his own judgment and become suspended for a time between fantasy and reality.”

In the room above, Richard's mind was still in a whirl, trying to work out the latest blow fate had just dealt him, when two people entered his room. One was Erna; the second, rather nondescript, figure must be the Doctor. The pudgy man was certainly quite unlike the tall arrogant German who had overseen him during the previous two days.

“Good morning, Sir Richard. I'm Doctor Moreau. Has Erna explained about the examination this morning?”

“Yes, Doctor,” was all Richard could reply, bewildered by the gentle approach of the Doctor. This was something he had not received over the last two days.

The doctor reached forward and took his hand. Holding his fingers lightly, he said, “You're trembling, Richard. You're not frightened of me, are you?”