

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

S.M. Taylor

Fortuna: The Coupling

S.M. Taylor

Copyright © 2014 S.M. Taylor

All Rights Reserved. This book may not be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission from the author. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. All characters and storylines are the property of the author and your support and respect is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction. The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Book formatted by Theresa Wegand

Cover designed by Jane Dixon-Smith

night-mare (nī't'mâr')

n.

- 1. A dream arousing feelings of intense fear, horror, and distress.*
- 2. An event or experience that is intensely distressing.*
- 3. A female demon or spirit once thought to plague sleepers.*

Table of Contents

1. The Vision
 2. The Awakening
 3. The Fugue
 4. The Homecoming
 5. The Banquet
 6. The Wake
 7. The Funeral
 8. The Ride
 9. The Tower
 10. The Wedding
 11. The Legacy
 12. The Cycle
- Acknowledgements
- Author

1. THE VISION

The cantata of *Carmina Burana* held him transfixed at the wheel. It was a potent spell cast by the medieval chorus reverberating its tale of the Goddess Fortuna.

The full beam of the racing car's headlights penetrated the blackness of the night and animated the ancient woodland enclosing the winding road. Amidst the trees, a nocturnal creature tracked the journey of the speeding predator through the dark dominion. Flashing golden eyes reflected the dazzling lights of the silver E-Type Jaguar as it screeched round the bends and roared into the straights.

Every turn of the wheel, the veiled beauty of fortune shadowed him—serpentine and capricious in nature, bestowing pleasure or pain at whim, and enslaving mankind to her fancy.

He tore his eyes from the road ahead to glance at the dashboard clock; it was a quarter to twelve.

The *Médecins Sans Frontières* fundraiser at The Savoy in London would be drawing to a close for carriages. There, he had time only to consume a single flute of champagne and a caviar canapé before he was summoned away as a matter of grave urgency by a message from Chaplain Belby.

The heir apparent was now about to cross the border into Saxton Town and would arrive at Saxton Manor by midnight.

He inhaled deeply through the nostrils and exhaled slowly through the mouth in an effort to maintain his

composure for what was about to come. This homecoming had bided its time for a decade: restless and gnawing at his subconscious.

He was tired, so very tired, but he could not give in to the threat of sleep.

He had barely moved an inch from the rigid driving position throughout the four-hour motorway journey, and now his tall, lean, muscular physique was craving release from its confinement in the metal cage of the sports car. With a deft movement of his tan leather-gloved hand, he unfurled the black bow tie and unbuttoned the starched white collar. He massaged his stiff neck, tense shoulders and aching back against the cream leather seat and stretched out his numbed arms against the steering wheel.

He put his foot down, hard. The V12 engine immediately responded to his demand for more power with a breathtaking burst of speed, which cut through the sheet of rain like a bullet.

A roll of thunder and a fork of lightning interjected his private thoughts. He was driving into a storm.

The windscreen wipers laboured like a pair of frenzied metronomes to clear his vision for what lay ahead of him, but this landscape was indelibly marked on his psyche. He could readily anticipate its twists and turns and trickeries, for he had charted this dénouement in his dreams.

He changed gear down to second to take the irregular bend, slipped through third, then opened her up to top gear and thundered into the open stretch.

And there before him—caught in the headlights and descending from the night—he saw the spectre.

Like a great black bird of prey flying at the windscreen, cloaked and hooded with fiery eyes and burnished mane, its bloodied lips stretched wide in a shrill, piercing cry.

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

In an instant, he slammed on the brakes. The windscreen shattered. Blackness engulfed him.

May Day 2013, Midnight

The intoxicating scent of lily-of-the-valley seeped into his senses: a sickly-sweet smelling salts luring him back to life.

Through blurred vision, he beheld the black figure upon him—its blood dripping onto his face and the hooded cloak shrouding all but the blazing eyes burning into his. The beguiling amber eyes . . .

‘Lily,’ he whispered.

Waves of copper-red hair tumbled over lily-white skin and framed the face, the neck and the breasts in a portrait of haunting beauty. He devoured the image before him: the translucent flashing eyes mirroring his own, the glossy cupid bow beseeching his kiss, and the graceful contours of the neck and shoulders that led his gaze down to the fulsome orbs and inflamed buds of the breasts.

‘I felt the surge,’ she uttered in a voice hoarse with arousal. ‘I’ve come for you.’

Overcome with the need to touch her, to feel that she was real, he reached out into the darkness. He stroked her silken hair and caressed her downy skin. He covered her rosebud lips with his and kissed her, first tenderly then ravenously, capturing her tongue in his, drawing her in to him.

Their desire was visceral; it flashed in their eyes, flamed their cheeks and scorched their throats.

Confirming her to be in the flesh and not another apparition, his heart raced and his spirit soared. He broke away to feast his eyes on her once again. ‘I dream of you

day and night,' he confessed to her. 'You're my madness.'

Her sweet lips parted to bare her creamy-white fangs, and she smiled at him with the same expression of hunger in her eyes as in his; her eyes locked with his.

'Mind, body and spirit,' she said.

He placed his strong hands around her slender neck, wantonly and possessively gripping her and pulling her to him, holding her at his pounding chest.

She nuzzled into his throat, her lips caressing his skin, her nostrils and tongue savouring his masculine animal scent, and her incisors grazing his flesh.

'I want you!' he demanded. 'I need you.'

The sensual assault of soft mouth and sharp fangs sucking and biting him sent shock waves coursing through his body, searing his flesh and jolting his bones. Pressing her blood-red lips to his, she nourished his parched mouth with a taste of the crimson elixir. He felt the life-blood surging through his limbs and erupting in his loins. He could feel the draw, the marked flesh, and the bite of love. He groaned. His eyes rolled.

Astride his muscular thighs, she tossed her mane and arched her back. She cried out to the night: 'Forlorn so long—waiting for you, listening for you, searching for you.'

Her glistening golden eyes were fixed upon his face as he unhooked the silver clasp at her neck and dropped the black velvet cloak from her shoulders to reveal a white gossamer gown. Ripping the silk bodice from nape to navel to expose her bounteous breasts, he then cupped the mounds and sucked the tender flesh into his mouth: imbibing on the rosy nipples, feeding on her raw beauty.

Blood-red talons clawed at his white shirt and slashed at his black trousers, scoring the skin of his chest and thighs with the mark of her desire. With his hands

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

encircling her hips, and her sex positioned at his, together they plunged into the forbidden.

She yielded to the penetration with a scream of pleasurable pain that echoed through the woodland. Riding the bucking stallion between her legs, she held on tightly with her talons embedded in his neck and shoulders. With each and every rampant thrust that forced his sex deeper and deeper within hers, she tore into his flesh.

The rain poured, the thunder roared, and the lightning struck the motorcar over and over again, illuminating the wet, naked, writhing flesh inside. The coupling was fierce: a carnal revelry of thrashing bodies and shrieking voices piercing the night like wild beasts in fight.

Finally, his head thrown back, mouth agape, he cried out her name as he lost all control and relinquished his life force to her; and she drained him of every last drop of his potent offering. The seed was sown.

They collapsed into each other—spent, bathed in perspiration and desperately panting for air.

‘I can’t let you go,’ he professed. ‘I love you.’

She shook her head. ‘It cannot be.’ A tear fell down her flushed cheek. ‘It shall destroy us.’

‘On my life, I swear to love and protect you,’ he vowed. ‘Please, don’t leave me, Lily. Stay with me, *always*.’

Limp and bloodied, they sealed their lips together to steal the last breath of a kiss before the blackness engulfed them once again.

2. THE AWAKENING

White light enveloped him.

He battled against the firm grip dragging him away from her, restraining and stifling him. He was emerging from the clasp of the nightmare seduction.

‘Wake up! Open your eyes,’ a woman’s voice called out to him. A hand slapped his face to bring him to. ‘It’s over. Come on. Come back.’

He tried to open his eyes but the lids were so heavy the effort exhausted him. He could just make out the ghostly forms in blue and white hovering over him, one to his left and one to his right, surrounding him.

The room was too bright and too loud. It seemed that the thunder and lightning were trapped inside the building with him, banging doors and breaking glass. Physically, he felt as if he had been beaten about the head with a hammer and thrown down the stairs. But his immediate need was not medical; it was to be left alone to sleep, to dream, and to have her again.

He swallowed, and then he flicked his tongue over his parched lips. He could taste the metallic tinge of blood. He could feel the sting of the torn skin and the ache of the bruised flesh spreading over his body. And, above all else, he could smell the sickly-sweet scent of her lingering in his nostrils.

‘Can you hear me?’

‘Mhm,’ he murmured.

‘I’m Matron Armitage. You’re at Mortshire Infirmary.’

He groaned at the revelation of his predicament. A silent film of images of Mortshire Infirmary played in his mind: the provincial red brick edifice with its interior of brown glazed tile, long echoing corridors, heavy swinging doors, linoleum flooring and metal-framed beds. It was an establishment in which disinfectant, tapioca pudding, and enemas prevailed. Although it had been built and bequeathed to Mortshire over a century ago by Saxton charity, it was not the type of institution in which he would choose to be incapacitated.

He opened his eyes to the blurry yet familiar round face of a starched vintage nurse topped off with a stiff white cap pinned over her neat and tidy greying bun. Leaning over him with a dour expression; a stethoscope was hanging from her ears, and she was listening intently to his chest. On the other side of the bed, a young nurse with a blonde bob and a sweet smile stood holding a clipboard, diligently taking notes as dictated by the senior nurse.

Matron Armitage removed the headset from her ears and made a pendant necklace of the stethoscope. ‘What’s your name?’ she asked the patient.

‘Edward,’ he mumbled. ‘Edward Saxton.’

‘Good.’ She nodded.

‘I’m a doctor,’ he added.

‘Very good, Doctor Saxton.’ She smiled.

Edward Saxton flinched as Matron Armitage shone a penlight into his left eye; he flinched again as she repeated the procedure at his right eye. The appearance and pupil dilation response was abnormal, as she expected. She turned away from the malformed eyes, but the striking image remained with her: the ice-blue iris scarred by the black keyhole-shaped pupil eating into it. In a hushed voice, the senior nurse shared her knowledge with the junior nurse. ‘The patient has an eye condition—a coloboma of the iris—which is bilateral.

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

I'll explain in more detail later, but for now, that's spelt c-o-l-o-b-o-m-a, Nurse Holmes.'

'C-o-l-o-b-o-m-a, Matron,' Nurse Holmes replied, carefully writing the eye details in the patient's notes, alongside the other particulars of Edward Saxton—thirty years of age, six foot three inches in height, ash blond hair—as described by Matron Armitage, a stickler for registrar detail.

The senior nurse omitted to declare the superfluous observations that came to mind in assessing this particular patient: words such as *handsome* and *chiselled* and *elegant*, even with the cuts and bruises marking his strapping physique. She mentally chided herself for even considering such things at her age with her matronly curves straining at the girdle. Nevertheless, she did allow herself a wry smile at the alluring sight of the naked body and the quality of endowment of the man lying before her, only partially covered by the crisp white bed sheet.

It had been well over twenty years since Matron Armitage had last set eyes on the Saxton boy, as the townsfolk still referred to him, and she was pleased to see that he had grown up to be a fine figure of a man, and a doctor too. Of course, splendour and status were the birthright of the Saxton lineage: his father the High Court Judge, his grandfather the British Army General, his great-grandfather the Viceroy, and so on, for generations. At the stroke of midnight and old Lord Saxton's demise, this patient of hers had inherited the title, manor and rights of the estate; and overnight he had become Lord Saxton, an extremely rich and powerful man indeed. Though in all honesty, Matron Armitage wondered whether it was a blessing or a curse to inherit the Saxton legacy, its history being one of misery, madness, and murder even, according to folklore. But Matron Armitage was also mindful that it was the

coffers of the Saxton legacy that had built and bequeathed Mortshire Infirmary, and she was thankful for that and her place in it.

‘Do you know why you’re here, Edward?’ she asked him.

‘Storm, crash,’ he answered groggily.

‘And what date is this, Edward?’

‘May first, two thousand thirteen.’

‘How old are you?’

‘Thirty.’

‘Where are you from?’

‘Saxton Manor.’

Clapping her hands, Matron Armitage announced with a broad grin: ‘Welcome back, Edward Saxton of Saxton Manor.’

The patient coughed painfully, his throat dry, his ribs sore. ‘So we meet again, Armitage,’ he responded through gritted teeth.

‘It’s *Matron* Armitage now, if you please, *Lord* Saxton,’ she retorted in her best telephone voice and with a sly wink.

‘Welcome home, Milord,’ Nurse Holmes said in a broad Mortshire accent. She was blushing and smiling shyly, and trying not to stare at his mesmerising blue-black eyes.

‘All in all, you’ve the luck of the devil, Lord Saxton,’ Matron Armitage said as she proffered a glass of water.

‘Cheers!’ the patient replied. He emptied the glass in a couple of swallows.

‘Not too much too soon,’ Matron Armitage ordered. ‘You can have another in a little while.’

‘Mortshire Temperance Society, indeed.’ Edward Saxton muttered the comment that caused the senior nurse to raise her eyebrows at him.

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

The junior nurse placed the empty glass next to the pitcher of water within his reach on the bedside cabinet. ‘Your bag’s here, Milord.’ She pointed to the vintage Globe-Trotter portmanteau with the initials *ES* embossed in the oxblood leather, sitting at the side of the bedside cabinet.

He noticed that its hide was watermarked but the lock was still in place. He mentally listed its contents: wallet, passport, iPad, set of clothing, toiletry bag, aviator glasses, blue contact lenses, medication, and the Glock 17 pistol.

His eyes travelled up to the sealed plastic bag, which held the broken pieces of his iPhone, atop the bedside cabinet. His wristwatch sat beside this. It was the irreplaceable Daniels London chronometer tourbillon wristwatch in eighteen-carat gold. He registered its disfigured face and the time that had stopped at midnight.

Matron Armitage continued with the medical checks, shaking a glass thermometer and gesturing for Edward Saxton to open his mouth. Popping the mercury-in-glass bulb under his tongue, she instructed: ‘Hold still, three minutes,’ and timed this by her silver fob watch. Precisely three minutes later, she extracted the thermometer, and Nurse Holmes added the result to the patient notes. Matron Armitage then wrapped the blood pressure cuff around his left upper arm and pumped the rubber bulb to inflate it while she monitored the blood pressure gauge, and Nurse Holmes duly noted that result too.

‘And exactly how long have I been in this state-of-the-art medical facility with all of this cutting-edge technology?’ Edward Saxton asked with a provocative smile.

Matron Armitage tutted. ‘Impertinence!’

The junior nurse tried but failed to suppress a girlish giggle.

The senior nurse frowned, and then she answered his question in her more usual manner, formally and concisely. 'You were found on the Saxton Estate at a quarter past midnight, unconscious in your motorcar, crashed in the storm. The ambulance brought you here at one thirty-seven a.m. precisely. You have been in our care for approximately one hour.'

Edward Saxton saw that the electric clock on the wall opposite his bed had stopped at 01:37.

His attention was diverted by the entrance of an orderly wearing a rubber apron and latex gloves. In a medical waste sack, she carried the remnants of a gossamer-silk white gown, and a black velvet cloak lined in blood-red silk bearing the faded nametag of *Lily T. Ward*. Edward Saxton watched the orderly collect his ripped and bloodied dinner suit from a bin, and she placed this too in the plastic sack. As she did so, a roar of thunder set the surgical steel instruments rattling on a nearby metal trolley, and a bolt of lightning clawed at the windowpane. Startled, the orderly dropped the sack on the floor.

Nurse Holmes instinctively grabbed hold of Matron Armitage's hand for security.

The senior nurse rolled her eyes and removed the junior nurse's hand from hers. 'Pull yourselves together, ladies,' she warned them. 'It's thunder and lightning, not the work of the devil.'

'Sorry, Matron,' the nurse and the orderly responded in unison.

'Now, Edward, do you have any of the following symptoms?' Matron Armitage read carefully from a list and paused between each word to allow for a response from the patient. 'Nausea? Headache? Dizziness?

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

Drowsiness? Double vision? Slurred speech? Weakness or numbness in your arms or legs?’

Edward Saxton shook his head in the negative throughout, keeping to himself the symptoms he was actually experiencing as listed by the senior nurse. His immediate concern was above and beyond his transient physical state. He stared through the nurses, beyond the confinement space, and into a world outside the four walls of the room, searching for her in his mind’s eye.

The overhead lights flickered, went out for a few seconds, and then came back on again. A monitor in the room flashed its lights and beeped a red alert.

Matron Armitage shook her head and sighed. ‘That’s the emergency generator playing up now. Would you believe it?’ She looked to the heavens above in a silent prayer for both strength and mercy.

A fire alarm wailed danger in the corridor outside.

With a gasp of exasperation, the senior nurse turned to the orderly. ‘Fire safety checks, please. Clinic and wards, Dawson. The caretaker covers the rest of the building. Report back to me.’

‘Aye, Matron,’ the orderly replied, and then she left the room with the sack of contaminated clothing.

Matron Armitage walked over to the monitor and pressed a series of buttons on the machine, but the flashing and beeping continued. ‘For goodness’ sake!’ she yelled, hitting the top of it with the flat of her hand. She unplugged the machine from the socket, but the flashing and beeping continued nonetheless.

‘The equipment’s gone haywire, and that bloody fire alarm is driving me up the wall.’ She held her head in her hands in frustration. ‘I can’t even hear myself think!’

Nurse Holmes retreated at Matron Armitage’s outburst. Anxious and tense, her eyes darted about her.

She was nervously anticipating the next assault of thunder and lightning.

Matron Armitage put her hands to her forehead, massaging her temples, thinking aloud, and praying for divine intervention. 'We're a skeleton staff on the graveyard shift in the middle of nowhere trying to contend with the worst storm in living memory, *so help me God.*'

The lights went out again.

Through gritted teeth, the senior nurse counted aloud: 'One blackout, two blackout, three blackout—'

The lights came on again.

'Other than the switch to the emergency generator, which we've already done, we don't actually have an official policy for dealing with a power outage on this scale.' At a loss to know what else to do, the senior nurse threw up her hands in resignation and finally made the announcement: 'We'll have to transfer to another hospital.'

Nurse Holmes gasped.

The patient was now sitting up in bed, alert and watchful and heedful of every word and gesture.

'Yes, that includes you, Lord Saxton,' Matron Armitage confirmed.

She quickly counted patient numbers on her fingers. 'We have nine patients—three on the men's ward, four on the women's, and the two here in the clinic.'

Nurse Holmes nodded ever more rapidly at Matron Armitage's words while wincing at the lightning stabbing through the chinks in the window blinds.

'Staff-wise, we have our good selves, along with the orderly, the caretaker and the chaplain,' Matron Armitage stated, as the mental cogs whirred to put together a plan of action. 'Is Detective Ellis still here?'

'His car's outside,' Nurse Holmes replied quickly.

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

Matron Armitage allowed herself a smile at that factor. 'Good. The more the merrier. We'll need all hands on deck if we're to evacuate Mortshire Infirmary tonight.'

Edward Saxton bristled at the mention of the final name on her register.

The lights went out, came back on, went out, and came back on again, as if there were an invisible hand manipulating the power switch.

'We need to carry out immediate checks on all patients, and any electronic equipment in use,' Matron Armitage reasoned, with an emphatic gesture to the nurse. 'You make a start on the women's ward. I'll join you shortly.'

A clap of thunder rattled the window's metal frame, prompting the nurse to scurry from the room. The senior nurse tutted and followed after her. She could be heard reprimanding the junior nurse in the corridor, having to raise her voice above the drone of the fire alarm. 'Walk, don't run, Nurse Holmes. This is an infirmary, not a playground. I expect you to behave in a professional manner at all times, and especially so in a state of emergency.'

'Aye, Matron. Sorry, Matron,' Nurse Holmes answered, fast-walking along the corridor.

Matron Armitage returned to the room, shaking her head in dismay. 'Now, Lord Saxton, where were we before the end of the world interrupted?' Picking up the clipboard of notes from the bottom of the bed, she continued the consultation with her patient. 'I'm told the car's a write-off, but I'm pleased to say that you're in much better shape. Lacerations and bruising to the upper and lower torso, we can patch up. At least that's what a preliminary examination has revealed thus far, but I'm sure you'll let us know if we've missed anything.'

The patient acknowledged her comments, but his attention was focussed elsewhere, as the nursing sister had deduced from the moment he had first opened his deviant eyes.

Matron Armitage's demeanour and tone suddenly changed, and she spoke softly and carefully. 'Lord Saxton, may I call you Edward?'

He nodded indifferently.

'Lily is in the room next door, Edward.'

Edward Saxton's eyes darted from Matron Armitage to the door and back to Matron Armitage.

'She's in a stable condition, but she has suffered a head injury.'

'Lily?' he repeated.

'Yes. You've been calling out for her.'

'Lily,' he whispered.

Matron Armitage paused to check her notes. 'She has a distinctive burn mark on her neck—forked—as if she's been struck by lightning.'

Lost in thought, Edward Saxton shook his head in disbelief, unresponsive to the questioning tone of the senior nurse.

'Well, you'll be able to see her soon enough, but for now you have to rest, if you can.' She groaned, referring to the onslaught of the violent storm and the screeching alarms.

'Thank you, Matron,' he murmured absently.

'Would you like something for the pain, Edward?'

'No.'

'A sedative, perhaps?'

'No, thank you.'

'Do you need medication for anything else, Edward?' she asked cautiously, her eyes buried in the notes but not reading them.

'I said *no*, thank you, Matron. I have it all under control,' he replied curtly. An uncomfortable silence

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

passed between them. 'I don't expect it to be mentioned again,' he added.

Matron Armitage was taken aback at the sting in the tone of his voice. 'Right, well, I'll leave you for now then,' she said, poised at the door. 'Oh, but Chaplain Belby's waiting to see you,' she remembered. 'Should I send him in now?'

'Yes, do, Matron.' Edward Saxton nodded. He was fully aware of the news that would be forthcoming but he recognised the need to follow protocol nonetheless. He shifted awkwardly in the bed and grimaced. His ribs cried out for morphine, but he needed to keep a clear head to keep his wits about him.

Chaplain Belby was seated at reception, his head lolling on his chest, a spindly pair of wire-framed spectacles hanging precariously at the end of his nose, and snoring, despite the blaring company of the fire alarm.

Matron Armitage called out to him: 'Chaplain!' She paused to wait for signs of life, and then she called out again, even louder and with more authority: 'Chaplain Belby!' When that failed, she ripped a sheet of paper from her clipboard, balled it up, threw it at him, and caught a glancing blow at his head.

The result of which was that the chaplain awoke from his stupor with such a start and in such confusion that he drew his walking cane and swung it about as if it were a sword fending off an assailant. Then, spotting Matron Armitage beckoning him come to the room, Chaplain Belby made an effort to compose himself: smoothing down his sparse white hair and dusting off his black frockcoat. Shakily, he bent down to the floor to retrieve his fallen biblical property, and then he set off for an audience with the latest Lord Saxton.

As she held the door ajar for the chaplain, Matron Armitage considered the pallor of Edward Saxton. 'If

you need anything at all, you just pull on the red alert cord at the headboard, and a nurse will come,' she told him.

The booming echo of a roar of thunder caused such panic in Chaplain Belby that he dispensed with his cane and increased his speed so swiftly that it appeared as if he were being blown along the corridor by a bomb blast.

Matron Armitage rolled her eyes. 'Failing that, scream blue murder.'

'The clock's stopped,' Edward Saxton said. 'What time is it?'

His nurse lifted the silver fob watch at her bosom. 'It's just shy of three o'clock.'

When Chaplain Belby finally reached the door, he was leaning heavily on his walking cane, his breathing was laboured, and he was mopping at his brow and mouth with a rumpled handkerchief. Matron Armitage caught a whiff of alcohol on his breath and the unsteadiness on his feet as she guided him in. She was well aware of his regular worship at the hipflask and she had addressed his deteriorating condition in a recent administrative meeting. His severance from Mortshire Infirmary Chaplaincy was imminent, but he was there that night in his role as Chaplain of Saxton Manor Chapel, and that was beyond her jurisdiction.

Chaplain Belby was a figure dressed head to toe in black but for the white dog collar of office. A tall and thin man in stature, now frail and stooped in deportment; he was eternally grave in manner. He stood at Edward Saxton's bedside, wearing a mask of piety and pity. 'Tis a miracle, indeed,' Chaplain Belby declared in his best sermon voice. 'Merciful Heavens, you are spared, my dear boy.' He performed an inept sign of the cross over the hospital bed.

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

‘Father is dead, I presume,’ Edward Saxton stated, matter-of-factly. He was in no mood for pleasantries, formalities or prayers.

‘The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away,’ Chaplain Belby proclaimed. He kissed the Whitby jet cross at his neck. ‘Your dearly departed father was taken from us at midnight. The trumpets sound in Heaven now.’ He performed another inept sign of the cross and recited: ‘In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.’

‘Did he have any last words?’

Chaplain Belby noisily cleared his throat of phlegm, and then he answered in a solemn manner. ‘Your father asked for forgiveness for his sins, and for those of his forefathers.’ Furtively, the chaplain moved in closer to Edward Saxton in the bed, and his top lip quivered as he added: ‘And for the sins of his only son and heir—especially the sins of the flesh.’

The old man’s stale breath caused Edward Saxton to avert his face. ‘Very considerate of him,’ he replied disingenuously. ‘Anything else?’

‘No,’ Chaplain Belby confirmed. He then quickly corrected himself: ‘No, Milord,’ and he lowered his gaze reverentially.

‘Then that will be all, Belby,’ the latest Lord Saxton said. ‘I’m sure you have an epic eulogy to prepare for the funeral, so I won’t keep you. I’ll be returning to Saxton Manor at dawn today, and later, in the afternoon, we’ll make the appropriate arrangements for the funeral service.’

‘As you wish, Milord, and may God bless you.’ Chaplain Belby bowed and departed with as much haste as his wobbly legs could muster, for it deeply disturbed him to look into yet another pair of demon eyes. As his tremors worsened, he had an urgent need to seek sanctuary in Mortshire Infirmary Chapel, in which to

take some blessed relief in the medicinal spirit. He craved the company of the bottle to help ease his torment, for Chaplain Belby had sold his soul to the devil, as had his father before him, and so on, for generations. He carried the great body of guilt in his heart and mind as if he were carrying his own corpse in his withered arms.

And with a final genuflection at the door, the hoary crow, as the Saxton boy had named him, was gone in a flurry of moth-eaten black cloth and a sprinkling of dead skin.

In the blink of an eye, Edward Saxton had come to terms with his father's demise and consequently his newly acquired title and role. The past would soon be buried, and the family fortune would be his: the money, the misery, and the madness, all wrapped up in the title to Saxton Manor.

Finally alone, Edward Saxton—now Lord Saxton—closed his eyes, and in the darkness of his mind, he called out the name of his beauty of the night: *Lily*. The thought of having her was all-consuming. His desperate dreams had come true, but he would have to draw on all his mental and physical reserves to preclude the recurring nightmare of the Saxton legacy.

He spoke his thoughts to make them real: 'Lily is in the flesh, in my world. I shall claim her, and keep her with me, *always*.'

The storm raged on—within him and without him—thundering through the grounds and battering the edifice.

The lightning attacked the lead flashing of the roof, sending sparks flying like exploding fireworks in the night sky. The rain penetrated the vulnerable fabric of the walls and windows, bleeding in through the cracks in the masonry, metalwork and woodwork to drip and pool on the floor. And the wind forced entry via the

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

ventilation shafts, howling its plaintive cry down the deserted corridors, gusting open doors and searching from room to room in cold draughts.

‘Lily,’ Edward Saxton mouthed, and then he licked his parched lips.

3. THE FUGUE

In the room next door to the male patient, the female was covered in a shroud of crisp white linen, which made all the more stark the golden amber eyes and the burnished copper flame of hair tumbling over the pillowcase like fire emerging from snow.

She kept vigil of the door separating her from him. She could feel his forceful presence exuding through the bricks and mortar. The close proximity aroused her and unnerved her in equal measures.

His name was Edward Saxton. She repeated it constantly, savouring the consonants on her tongue and to her ear, and marvelling at the magnitude of his name in her psyche.

In the hours since she had come to consciousness and throughout the din of what sounded like the midst of a battleground, ghostly figures had been slipping in and out of the room, whispering snippets of a surreal tale to her. They told her that her name was Lily Ward and that she had been in a car crash in a storm; and though her body was intact, her memory was fractured.

She could not remember a car crash or a storm. She could not even remember her own name. There was no memory of anything of her before waking up there in the hospital bed. Her past was locked away and she could not open the door to it. She had lost the key to herself. She was trapped in the here and now.

It seemed that her only earthly connection was with the man in the room next door: the man they called

Edward Saxton. Lily, if that were her name, reasoned that he must be the one who held the key to her past and, therefore, her future. She must not lose Edward Saxton; she was clear of that at least. And though she had been injected with a powerful sedative, Lily remained alert and watchful and heedful, in readiness for him.

She closed her eyes—waiting for him, listening for him, and searching for him in the darkness. She could feel his energy like a magnet to which she was powerless to resist and utterly compelled to submit. It was a spine-tingling draw to the man whose mind she was haunting. This was the epicentre of the storm.

At the observation panel of the door to her room, there was a flash of silver of the badge of the Mortshire Constabulary, borne by the peaked helmet of Detective Ellis.

Stealthily entering the room, at pains not to disturb the victim, he stood at the far side of the bed and silently regarded the sleeping beauty. The police officer immediately noted that the usual infirmary odour of disinfectant was masked in this room by the sickly-sweet scent of lily-of-the-valley hanging in the air like incense.

He studied the hauntingly beautiful face framed by the veil of red hair, and then his gaze travelled to the voluptuous curves of the body of Lily Ward in the white hospital gown. When his attention returned to the gash at her hairline, her lush eyelashes parted to reveal beguiling amber eyes staring directly into his probing brown eyes.

Detective Ellis flinched as the overhead lightbulb sparked wildly then blew out above him, showering his helmet with splinters of glass.

Lily Ward sat bolt upright in bed. She knew immediately that this tall, dark stranger in the room with

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

her was not Edward Saxton. Like an exhausted wild animal caught in a trap, Lily was still and silent but for the rapid breathing perceptible at her bosom and the flashing of her golden eyes.

In the darkness, a voice of Estuary English called out: 'You ain't to worry, Miss Ward. It's just a power surge. I'm here to help. I'm Detective Ellis with Mortshire Constabulary.' He made a concerted effort to talk proper and not drop his aitches.

The police officer swiftly produced a flashlight and illuminated the room once again, and then he set it upright on a medical trolley to act as a lamp. He carefully removed his helmet, and with his black leather-gloved hand, he swept off the fragments of glass into a fire bucket by the door.

The tension in Lily's body eased a little, and her breathing steadied, but her guard remained up.

Detective Ellis brushed himself down as he explained the emergency situation. 'The storm's knocked out the power here so we're transferring patients to another hospital as soon as possible.'

Lily nodded her understanding.

'Matron Armitage tells me you've a head injury—no memory of anything before waking up here in Mortshire Infirmary.'

Lily shook her head, unable to lift the pall of desolation that smothered her. She closed her eyes in an effort to hold back the tears threatening to spill over. A lone tear fell down her wan cheek.

The police officer seated himself on the edge of the bed. Lily saw that his dark blue serge uniform was accessorised with silver handcuffs and a black baton that bulked through his jacket at the waist. His steady gaze offered comfort, as did the touch of his steady hands—one brushing back the tendril of hair that had fallen across her head wound, and one steadying her trembling

hands that clasped the bed sheet, which was the only thing she had to hold onto.

Detective Ellis smiled down at her, his chestnut-brown eyes radiating warmth. 'You *will* remember, Miss Ward; all in good time,' he reassured her.

A fiery talon of lightning slashed at the windowpane.

From the doorway, a carefully controlled and precisely measured voice ordered: 'Take your hands off her, Ellis.'

Lily Ward was transfixed at the arresting manifestation of Edward Saxton. And Edward Saxton regarded Lily Ward as a beast regards its prey: with hunger.

Detective Christopher Ellis automatically stood at attention and was met by the rigid and aloof aristocratic bearing of Lord Edward Saxton. He was instantly recognisable as a Saxton with his *accursed eyes*, as the townsfolk referred to the Saxton male's most distinctive and disturbing physical feature.

Detective Ellis held his ground. *I'm a public servant not a Saxton serf*, he reminded himself.

'It's *Detective* Ellis, actually, *Lord* Saxton,' he responded. 'And what exactly is your relationship with Miss Ward here?'

'We're to be married,' Edward Saxton replied brusquely.

At that piece of information, Detective Ellis directed his query to Lily Ward rather than to Edward Saxton: 'How long have the two of you been an item?' he asked her, and noted her ringless finger.

Edward Saxton interjected. 'That's none of your business, Officer Ellis. My fiancée needs privacy and rest, not an inquisition. I suggest you take your leave now.'

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

Edward Saxton's Received Pronunciation was in sharp contrast to the Estuary English of the police officer.

'I'm here to carry out my duty as an officer of the law. An incident occurred tonight that has to be investigated. There's questions to be answered, and to do that, I need to take statements from you both,' Detective Ellis countered.

'Then listen carefully; I'll make this as simple as possible for an officer of the constabulary to understand. The incident was an accident on my private land. No crime has been reported. The fact of the matter is that the car crashed due to the storm. So, there you have our joint statement.'

Detective Ellis raised an eyebrow. 'I would've expected your full cooperation, Lord Saxton. After all, the young lady here's suffered a serious head injury.'

This man was too intrusive, and too close to Lily for Edward Saxton to bear a moment longer. He could see the naked outline of Lily's shapely figure through the fine cotton gown, and he knew that Christopher Ellis could see it too. This man had taken liberties with her that were not his to take. His hand had been upon her flesh in a predatory manner. Behind the controlled façade, a tidal wave of rage was surging deep within the dark depths of Edward Saxton's mind, body and spirit. *Time to mark territory and repel the invader*, he decided in a flash. His athletic physique clearly defined in the black cashmere pullover and faded jeans, Edward Saxton reached the bedside in just a couple of strides. The police officer braced himself for the hostile advance and he had his hand at his truncheon, when Edward Saxton came to a sudden halt. Only the bed separated them and a few inches height on Edward Saxton's side. They stood face to face, eyes deadlocked, the tension palpable.

Edward Saxton was military trained in unarmed combat, but he had no need to resort to physical violence; he knew that his choice of words would be far more bruising to the ego of his opponent.

‘As a doctor, I’m of the opinion that you’re harassing a sick patient, Officer Ellis—causing her distress and negatively impacting her medical care. I strongly advise that you leave immediately, or I’ll have no option but to make a formal complaint about your conduct, direct to the police commissioner,’ Edward Saxton stated. ‘And in the light of your recent demotion from The Met to this secondment with Mortshire Constabulary, I believe there might well be grounds for your dismissal.’

Those final words cut through the armour of Christopher Ellis, reopening an old family wound that had been inflicted on his great-grandfather. His namesake had been an itinerant farm worker in Mortshire who had dared to answer back to the all-powerful Lord Saxton of his day. A man’s good name and years of honest work on the land were obliterated in an instant, for no one dared defy Lord Saxton to employ him again in Mortshire. His great-grandfather never again breathed the fresh air of the Mortshire countryside; he died labouring in the *Satanic Mills* of a far-flung city, leaving his young family with nothing but destitution as the legacy from their father.

Christopher Ellis had a crude two-word retort on the tip of his tongue, but he swallowed it back. The domineering and manipulative traits displayed by Edward Saxton were breed standard for the Saxton pedigree, just as Christopher Ellis’s father had warned him, as had his father before him, and so on, for generations. That had been his immediate impression of the old lord, Edmund Saxton, and now he felt certain that the Saxton legacy was alive and thriving in the

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

hands of Edward Saxton. The aristocratic arrogance of wealth and power was well and truly in the blood.

Detective Ellis decided that the best course of action in the circumstances would be to direct his attention wholly to the victim. ‘Miss Ward, I’m here now to help with the evacuation of Mortshire Infirmary. I’ll return to the investigation of the car crash later. When *you* feel you’re ready, we’ll talk more about the circumstances then.’

Edward Saxton shook his head in the negative. ‘I’m afraid that isn’t possible, Officer Ellis. Clearly, Mortshire Infirmary isn’t in a fit state to provide medical care, and this patient isn’t in a fit state to endure the further trauma of a long and uncomfortable journey to a hospital outside Mortshire. Miss Ward will be returning to Saxton Manor with me, where she’ll receive my undivided attention as her personal physician, and a large staff on twenty-four-hour duty to attend to her every possible need.’

In a state of wonderment, Lily Ward gazed intently at the striking vision of the man with the aberrant eyes who had just informed her that he was her husband-to-be and that he intended to take her home with him. Her heart and mind raced.

She had recognised him in an instant—his blue-black eyes, flaxen hair, sculpted cheekbones, aquiline nose and chiselled jaw. This face was imprinted on her psyche, but his role in her life was lost in her memory.

The ice-blue of Edward Saxton’s eyes sparkled enticingly like diamond; however, the black keyhole pupils held another expression entirely.

‘You can’t just take it upon yourself to remove a patient from hospital care,’ Detective Ellis protested. ‘There’s official procedures to be followed, and—’

‘I think that you’ll find that I can and I shall, Officer,’ Edward Saxton spoke over him. ‘She’s coming

with me. We're leaving within the hour. The arrangements are in hand.'

In the battleground of the storm in the room, the two men engaged in a mental and verbal duel. The landed gentry and the public servant competed for the body of the young female in the bed. Lily Ward was caught between the rivals; each man was dominant in stature and status, and each man had laid a claim to her. Her glowing amber eyes darted from the aristocratic command of the lord of the manor to the uniformed authority of the district police officer.

Straining to overhear the heated exchange from her vantage point in the corridor, Matron Armitage made her entrance into the frame to diffuse the situation, bustling in with a broad smile on her face and the halo of the penlight in her hand. Each in turn, the men stepped back to allow her sufficient room to tend to the patient. In her proficient bedside manner, she plumped up the pillows and rearranged the bedding while she talked to the anxious patient in her customary calm and collected mode.

'Lily, we're evacuating Mortshire Infirmary within the next hour or so due to the power cut caused by the storm. So, we need to prepare you for an ambulance journey to another hospital. It's important that you're taken care of in a medical facility by trained professionals who can monitor your condition. With concussion and amnesia, it's only natural you're going to be confused and anxious. You'll need expert guidance and support to help you through this.' She held Lily's hand in a motherly gesture. 'It's for the best that you stay with us, my dear.'

Shaking her head and covering her ears with her hands, Lily Ward spoke for the first time. 'Please, enough!' she appealed to them, in a whispered voice that they had to strain to hear. And then a little louder, she

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

declared to the room: ‘My head hurts. I just want peace and quiet—to rest, to think, to remember.’

Detective Ellis’s acute hearing recorded Edward Saxton’s sharp intake of breath at the sound of Lily Ward’s voice. It was a momentary loss of control on the part of Lord Saxton, which was noted by the police officer. He also noted Lily’s Standard English dialect and neutral accent. There was no clue to her origins there, other than educated English.

‘Why, of course you do, my dear. And that’s exactly what you’ll get here in our care—peace and quiet to rest and recuperate,’ Matron Armitage promised her anxious patient. ‘We have your best interests at heart, Lily.’

‘It’s our legal obligation, Miss Ward. It’s a professional duty of care to your treatment and welfare,’ Detective Ellis added.

‘She said *enough*,’ Edward Saxton warned through gritted teeth. ‘This is an infirmary not a prison. You can’t keep her here against her will.’ Then, with his eyes set on Lily, he directed his words to her: ‘She’s legally entitled to leave at any time. Lily needs to convalesce in a safe and secure environment. I’m leaving and she’s coming with me.’ He directed his final words at Detective Ellis. ‘Whether you like it or not,’ he snarled.

With a panic spreading through her veins, Lily Ward knew that she had to act in the drama unfolding about her. She looked about the room, from Lord Saxton to Detective Ellis to Matron Armitage and back again to Lord Saxton. She was sure of only one thing; she could not let him leave without her. She needed him in order to find herself. Without him, she had no one, nothing.

Concealing her trembling hands beneath the sheets, she spoke in a voice that sounded far more confident than she felt. ‘Yes, I would like to leave with Lord Saxton, to go to Saxton Manor,’ she said.

‘Edward,’ Lord Saxton quietly corrected her.

‘Edward,’ Lily repeated, a flush rising over her face and neck.

Detective Ellis shared a look of apprehension with Matron Armitage.

‘I really don’t think that’s a good idea, Lily. Please, take some time to think it over. There’s no need to make a hasty decision that you might well come to regret,’ the senior nurse argued. She was not used to her authority being undermined these days—not by patient, doctor, officer or lord.

‘With all due respect, I’m not asking for your permission, Matron, or anyone else’s for that matter. The decision has been made,’ Edward Saxton concluded. ‘Indeed, Officer Ellis here was just leaving. He’ll find a listing for Saxton Manor in the telephone directory.’

Detective Ellis was obliged to concede defeat on this occasion, but in a final intervention, he deposited his business card on the bedside cabinet. ‘I’ll be in touch, Miss Ward. But if you need to contact me for anything, *anything* at all,’ he stressed, ‘this is my direct number, and don’t hesitate to call, day or night.’

In an air of unease, and with a half-smile to Lily Ward and a knowing nod to Matron Armitage, Detective Ellis exited the room. He was forced to take a detour around the immovable presence of Lord Saxton as he did so.

With a peeved expression but trying to remain even-tempered, Matron Armitage addressed her female patient. ‘There are some forms for you to sign to the effect that you’re discharging yourself against medical advice—against Mortshire Infirmary medical advice, that is,’ she corrected herself.

Lily Ward’s eyes were fixed on Edward Saxton’s as she nodded vaguely at the nursing sister’s final words of warning.

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

‘We’ll leave Lily to rest now, shall we, Lord Saxton?’ Matron Armitage requested politely but firmly at the door.

Edward Saxton paused to savour the beauty of the young woman he had claimed as his. His mesmerising blue-black eyes met her beguiling amber eyes. The allure was as dazzling as the headlights of the speeding machine that strikes the transfixed nocturnal creature.

Witness to this intense exchange of power unfolding before her, Matron Armitage contemplated the striking profile of the captivating figure of Edward Saxton. The powerful Saxton man was in stark contrast to her recollection of the pathetic Saxton boy—the sad and silent child whose mother had been taken from him in such tragic circumstances, and whose father had so cruelly sent him away to boarding school thereafter. As overbearing as Edward Saxton undoubtedly was, Matron Armitage had a soft spot for the boyish charm that he had also demonstrated that night. Indeed, as concerned as she was for the well-being of Lily Ward, she actually feared for the well-being of Edward Saxton, for he now bore the title of Lord Saxton, which was a relic haunted by the nightmare of its past.

With a final look of concern to the redhead beauty, Matron Armitage shut the door behind them, leaving Lily alone with the probing beam of light emanating from the police-issue flashlight.

Shortly afterward, Matron Armitage sat at her office desk sorting through the registrar files. Detective Ellis sat opposite, writing in his notebook. Dawson, the orderly, was opening a large tin of biscuits at a tea trolley by the door.

The sound of the storm had become like the white noise of a radio not properly tuned in but left to play on in a corner of the room.

The police officer glanced at his wristwatch, and let out a great yawn. 'It's half past four in the morning, and I'm officially knackered,' he declared. 'How about you, Matron?'

Matron Armitage set down the patient discharge papers on her desk as the orderly presented her with a cup and saucer. 'Dead on my feet, if the truth be told, but nothing a cup of tea won't cure,' she replied. 'Care to join me, Detective Ellis?'

'I'd kill for a cuppa, thanks,' he replied. The orderly poured another cup of tea. 'Milk, two sugars, please,' he added.

'Here's to tea: the great British cure-all.' Matron Harriet Armitage lifted her teacup in a toast.

They clinked cups and sipped in unison.

The orderly set down a plate of biscuits between the two of them. Matron Armitage selected a custard cream biscuit, dipped it in her tea, and then she slipped the moist biscuit into her mouth. She closed her eyes as she savoured the comforting vanilla sweetness melting over her tongue. Smiling all the while, Detective Ellis watched her indulge in her customary tea break pleasure. Only when she had let out a moan of satisfaction, did he take a fig roll biscuit from the plate, and pop it whole in his mouth; in one munch, it was gone.

'Thank you, Dawson,' the senior nurse said to the orderly as she selected another custard cream biscuit. 'Now, take the tea trolley around the wards; ladies first, of course, and be generous with the biscuits. It'll be a welcome distraction in all of this hullabaloo.'

'Aye, Matron,' the orderly replied.

In the few months that Detective Christopher Ellis had been in secondment with the Mortshire

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

Constabulary, he had learnt that Matron Harriet Armitage was someone he could rely on. She was a local lass who had worked her way up the ranks from orderly to senior nurse through hard graft and dedication over a twenty-five year period at Mortshire Infirmary. The community respected her; she was one of them, and they trusted her. This made her a prime confidante for tittle-tattle and secrets, Detective Ellis deduced; unlike him: the Essex boy. He was an outsider, so not to be trusted; and he was far too big for his police-issue boots for the liking of the natives. But aside from all that, Christopher Ellis genuinely enjoyed the company of Hattie Armitage, with her robust bedside manner and wry humour.

When the tea trolley could no longer be heard rattling down the corridor, Detective Ellis asked, ‘So, what can you tell me about Lily Ward, the damsel in distress?’

‘Of the lovely but forgetful Lily Ward, I know nothing. I’ve neither seen nor heard of her until she arrived with the storm tonight. She’s been conjured up from the ether like a woodland nymph,’ Matron Armitage replied, with the last of a custard cream biscuit still melting in her mouth.

‘Well, what can you tell me about Edward Saxton, Lord and Master of Mortshire, then?’

‘Ah! It just so happens that you can read all about the Lord and Master of Mortshire in the latest copy of *Mortshire Life*.’

Matron Armitage opened the top drawer of her desk and retrieved a glossy magazine with an image of Edward Saxton on the cover. Donning her horn-rimmed reading spectacles, she leafed through the pages to the centre spread, which she had avidly read only the previous day.

Clearing her throat, wiping her mouth of biscuit crumbs, and skimming through the article, Matron Armitage relayed the crux of it to Detective Ellis.

‘According to this special feature on Mortshire’s most eligible bachelor—the charismatic and enigmatic aristocrat, Edward Saxton—he is indeed the stuff that a damsel’s dreams are made of. This very private man—he never gives interviews and rarely attends society events—turns thirty years of age on the first of May.’

Matron Armitage paused, raised her eyebrows, and then she looked to Detective Ellis. ‘It’s his birthday,’ she said. ‘Well, it was up until midnight.’

‘Did birthday boy have a glass of fizz too many, do you think?’

She shook her head. ‘He wasn’t intoxicated, Christopher; I’ll bet my well-worn girdle on it.’

‘I trust your professional judgment, Hattie Armitage,’ the police officer said, ‘as much as you trust the staying power of that girdle.’

She smiled coquettishly, and continued reading. ‘He’s heir to the title of Lord Saxton, the stately home of Saxton Manor, and the vast fortune of the Saxton estate, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. He was educated at Eton College, studied medicine at Cambridge University, and trained as an officer in the Royal Army Medical Corps as a specialist in battlefield surgery. He’s recently returned from a war zone in Africa, working with *Médecins Sans Frontières*—that’s the charity, *Doctors without Borders*, to the likes of you and me.’

‘I know that, Hattie,’ Detective Ellis retorted. ‘I’m comprehensively educated, ain’t I?’

‘He also happens to be a world-class modern pentathlete—whatever that is—and just for the heck of it, he’s an accomplished pianist, Le Cordon Bleu trained chef, and an expert in antique arms, armour and militaria. Blah, blah, blah.’ She flicked over to the next

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

page, back again, and then she lowered the magazine. 'Interesting there's no mention of the fact that Edward Saxton hasn't set foot in Mortshire for over a decade,' Matron Armitage finished.

'Interesting there's no mention of a fiancée either,' Detective Ellis noted.

Matron Armitage passed the magazine to him so that he could see for himself the accompanying collection of photographs of Edward Saxton, chronicling his photogenic development from boy to man.

'So there it is, in black-and-white and in colour, Detective. Edward Saxton is not only an officer and a gentleman but a doctor and a humanitarian to boot. He's a driven man, indeed.' Matron Armitage removed her reading spectacles and dangled them by the arm. 'Wouldn't you agree, Christopher?'

The police officer shook his head. 'He's driven by the privilege and power of his class.'

'Is there a touch of envy there, Chris?' she teased.

'I don't envy him, Hattie; I don't trust him,' Detective Ellis stated tersely, irked at the very suggestion that she could think he was intimidated by the likes of Lord Saxton. 'I'm a detective: it's my job to be suspicious.' He tossed the magazine down on the table. 'And there's a young lady's safety to consider.'

'Oh, come on! Edward Saxton might well be an arrogant so-and-so, but he's no mad axeman.'

'Whatever he is, there's no denying he wants her—like a dog wants a bone.'

'A dog and a bone? That's not a very romantic image, Chris.'

'How would you describe it then?'

Harriet Armitage considered her reply while she sipped her tea. 'Gothic: dark, all-consuming passion,' she detailed suggestively, her emerald-green eyes twinkling mischievously. 'Bodice-ripping.'

‘And that appeals to you, does it, Hattie?’ Christopher Ellis asked. He fumbled with the teacup, which was far too dainty for his large, masculine hands. ‘A bodice-ripping romance?’

‘Me? I burst out of my bodice a long time ago.’ She laughed, her bosom heaving, as she reached for a chocolate finger biscuit. ‘I’m made of sturdier stuff, Chris, but I still like to read about it in a book at bedtime.’

Detective Ellis put down his cup and saucer on the desk, slowly and deliberately. He leant forward and looked at her straight in the eye. ‘Seriously, Hattie, my gut-feeling is that the Lord and Master of Mortshire’s hiding something.’

Harriet Armitage met his steady gaze and closed her mouth around half a chocolate finger. ‘Hiding something? Hiding what?’ she asked with a crunch. ‘An old family recipe for ravishing fair maidens?’ she suggested, talking with her mouth full.

Detective Ellis shook his head. ‘I’m deadly serious, Hattie. Just look at the events that occurred here tonight. As the clock strikes midnight: we’ve the sudden death of one of the richest men in the country, the long-lost heir races home to claim the family fortune, a car crash in the middle of nowhere, the worst storm in living memory, and a beautiful young amnesiac appears out of thin air. That’s a hell of a night by anyone’s reckoning, especially a night in Mortshire. It ain’t normal, Hattie. Things just don’t add up, and I’ve a bad feeling about it all.’

‘Detective Ellis,’ Matron Armitage said while massaging her temples to try to dispel her headache, ‘I do understand your concern, and, of course, you need to investigate; that’s your job after all. But please, tread carefully. The Saxton name wields a lot of power around here. There are a lot of people in his service. It’s always

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

been that way and it always will be; and woe betide anyone who tries to interfere, especially an outsider.’ Her voice took on a tremor of emotion. ‘There are some things that are better left dead and buried, Detective.’

Matron Armitage stood up and smoothed down her uniform. She picked up the folder of discharge papers and headed to the door. It was a signal that it was time for them both to return to duty.

Detective Ellis took a gentle hold of her arm as she passed him. ‘Hattie, once she’s inside the Saxton Estate, she’s cut off from the outside world. You know the place is a fortress, literally. She’ll be completely under his control.’

Matron Armitage shook her head wearily. ‘Lily Ward has confirmed that she wants to leave with Edward Saxton. Of course, I agree with you, Christopher, she should stay here for observation until her memory returns, but that could take days, weeks or months, and I can’t force her to stay here another hour even. You know she has the right to refuse consent to treatment, examination or advice. All it takes is her signature on a waiver stating that she’s leaving of her own free will and she’s aware that what she’s doing is against medical advice. Edward Saxton’s right: Lily Ward is not a prisoner here; she’s a patient who’s lost her memory not her liberty. We can’t keep her here against her will, and that’s that. Anyway, Edward Saxton is a doctor, so Lily will be in capable hands, medically, at least.’

‘And what if it ain’t of her free will? What if it’s his will?’ Detective Ellis questioned her, his voice rising with his agitation. ‘What if she’s lost her memory *and* her liberty to him?’

‘And what if your interest in Lily Ward isn’t purely professional? What if it’s personal?’ Matron Armitage questioned him, her voice ominously quiet. ‘What if

you've been bewitched by a beautiful young damsel in distress?'

The nursing sister shrugged off his hand and opened the door. The police officer reached over her shoulder and shut the door. The flat of his hand blocked her exit route.

'You underestimate me, Hattie. It ain't nothing like that. It's my duty to investigate.' He frowned. 'Now, *please*, is there anything you can tell me that might help in some way, about him or her; anything at all?'

She paused for a moment, and then she let out a deep exhalation of resignation. 'There is one thing, but it's strictly off the record, you understand?'

'Absolutely,' Detective Ellis responded immediately. 'You have my word, as an officer *and* a gentleman,' he added with a cheeky smile.

She lowered her voice conspiratorially: 'I think Edward Saxton's a parasomniac.'

'Parasomniac?' he repeated, ignorant of the word. 'Sounds painful.'

'Parasomnia is a sleep disorder, Detective Ellis,' Matron Armitage explained. 'A parasomniac experiences abnormal behaviour during the sleep state: seizures, sleep walking, night terrors, unconscious actions, that sort of thing.'

'You said you *think* he's a parasomniac; it's in his medical records, ain't it?'

Matron Armitage shook her head. 'The Saxtons don't have medical records like the rest of us; they have a personal physician who's paid very well for a very discreet service.'

'So what makes you *think* that Edward Saxton's a parasomniac?'

'To cut a long story short,' Matron Armitage began, 'my mother was a nursemaid in service at Saxton Manor, as was her mother before her, and so on, for generations.'

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

Well, my mother told me there are things that go *bump in the night* at Saxton Manor. You see, a nursemaid is on duty when the rest of the household sleeps; she sees and hears things that haunt the house at night: a Saxton lord's night terrors, for example. There's a secret history of it in the Saxton line.'

'How serious is it?' he pressed her. 'Is it dangerous?'

'I really don't know,' she replied, shaking her head.

'I mean, is a parasomniac *potentially* dangerous, Matron Armitage?' he probed, choosing his words carefully.

'Dangerous?'

'Hattie, I'm asking if you think Edward Saxton's a dangerous man.'

'A mad, bad and dangerous-to-know type of man, you mean?'

'Yeah, along those lines.'

'Potentially, aren't you all, Detective?' Matron Armitage replied, exasperated.

There was a noise outside in the corridor that caused them both to stop and listen. It was the distinctive voice of Edward Saxton engaged in a conversation on the public telephone in the clinic reception.

Bent at the waist, with her ear to the keyhole, Matron Armitage surreptitiously listened in to Edward Saxton's telephone call. Detective Ellis stood close behind her, leaning over her broad rump and straining to hear while making shorthand notes in his pocket notebook.

'Yes, Royd,' Edward Saxton said, 'I'm at Mortshire Infirmary. There's a young lady here with me also. She'll need a warm coat; a fur will do nicely. Have Carter set off immediately. It's imperative that we're back at Saxton Manor before dawn. Have Mrs Rastrick prepare the Master and Mistress Chambers for our

return. I expect my father is laid out now, is he? Has the physician signed the death certificate? A seizure, indeed. Yes, that will be all, Royd. The wake begins.'

As he replaced the telephone receiver, Edward Saxton turned and looked straight at the keyhole of the door of the office of Matron Armitage. 'Do make yourself more comfortable, Matron,' he called out.

Harriet Armitage took this as her cue and quickly righted and revealed herself, somewhat flushed and breathless. 'Ah! Lord Saxton,' she exclaimed. She held the door ajar, shielding Detective Ellis with her matronly frame filling the doorway. 'I was just on my way with these discharge papers.'

'I trust you heard all the details of my private telephone call, Matron Armitage? Officer Ellis also?' Edward Saxton added with a sardonic smile.

'You'll be abducting Lily Ward,' Detective Ellis muttered from behind the door.

As she reached back for the door handle to pull the door shut, Matron Armitage made a final appeal to Edward Saxton. 'I don't suppose there's anything that I can do or say to change your mind?'

'Nothing whatsoever,' he confirmed.

'And what if your driver can't get here in the storm?' she queried, holding the folder of discharge papers protectively to her bosom.

'In thirty-five years of service, Carter has never *not* been on time, Matron. He could drive that Rolls Royce in a blindfold and handcuffs.'

'Right, well, I'll take your word for it.' Matron Armitage chuckled. 'And I'd better get a move on; I wouldn't want to be the one to keep you waiting, Lord Saxton.'

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

The beaming headlights of the armoured carriage illuminated the blackness of the grounds as it advanced along the driveway to Mortshire Infirmary. The charcoal-grey vintage motorcar came to a dazzling halt at the stone portico whence it would transport Edward Saxton and Lily Ward to Saxton Manor.

Huddled together, Detective Ellis and Matron Armitage stood in the foyer watching the exodus of the strange and handsome couple.

‘Now that beauty over there, that’s the Rolls Royce Phantom IV,’ the police officer declared in unbridled awe. ‘One hell of a motor, ain’t it?’

The nursing sister sniffed, and wiped her nose. ‘There’s a look of a hearse about it.’

Windswept and dampened, the newly discharged patients were poised—one in the firm grasp of the other—for a swift exit from Mortshire Infirmary. Carrying Lily Ward like a sick child in his arms, Edward Saxton shielded her from the blinding glare of the headlights of the carriage.

The scene before her reminded Harriet Armitage of a Pre-Raphaelite painting: Lily’s long red hair was a molten copper veil over her face, and her lily-white arms trailed limply in surrender.

Wielding a storm umbrella, Carter, the grey-capped chauffeur, struggled against the hostile elements to provide cover to the latest Lord Saxton as he deposited his bride-to-be into the hidden depths of the Phantom. There, she was laid out across the expansive rear seats by the firm hand and strong arm of the man who had claimed her as his. Her quivering body was lavishly cloaked in ermine fur.

‘What will become of her, only time will tell,’ Harriet Armitage thought aloud.

The chauffeur shut the rear door of the motorcar, and nothing more could be seen of Lily Ward or Edward Saxton.

‘In those Gothic romance novels you ladies read, what happens in the end?’ the police officer asked the nursing sister.

‘It’s the classic fairy tale ending, really. The damsel falls in love with the knight in dark armour. She tames the beast in him. And they all live happily ever after,’ Harriet Armitage explained, gesticulating. ‘The end.’

He shook his head. ‘In that case, this ain’t no Gothic romance.’

‘What is it, then?’

‘It’s a Gothic horror.’

‘I wouldn’t know about that, Detective. Horror’s not my cup of tea. You’ll have to educate me,’ she said.

A vision of Lily Ward flashed into Christopher Ellis’s mind’s eye. She was stripped naked, hog-tied and spit-roasted; a dagger-wielding man was feasting upon her tender young flesh.

‘There ain’t no happily ever after, Matron. The beast kills the damsel in an orgy of sex and violence,’ Christopher Ellis stated, poker-faced. ‘The end.’

Harriet Armitage grimaced and groaned. ‘As I said, horror’s not my cup of tea. I’ll stick with the romance, thank you very much.’

‘One man’s meat is another man’s poison.’

‘The same can be said of woman too.’

As The Spirit of Ecstasy turned to carry away the supine body of Lily Ward from the sanctuary of Mortshire Infirmary to the fortress of Saxton Manor, the drone of the fire alarm ceased, the wall lanterns illuminated the forecourt, and the fluorescent lamps in the building flickered back to life. The mains power had been restored. The wind and the rain died away. The night retreated as dawn advanced.

FORTUNA: THE COUPLING

‘Thank the Lord!’ Harriet Armitage cried, clapping her hands. ‘The storm’s passed. The nightmare’s over.’

As the vintage Rolls Royce disappeared from view, Christopher Ellis muttered: ‘I wouldn’t bet on it, sweetheart.’

Lurking in the shadows behind them, and slumped against the wall, Chaplain Belby—the hoary crow—was draining the last drops of the bottle of surgical spirit he had pilfered from the clinic. Desolately, he shook his pounding head and prayed: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us, miserable sinners,’ he repeated, over and over again until he passed out into the solace of oblivion.

