

Little Angel

By Kevin McFarlane

“You paid eighteen thousand dollars for that ugly thing?”

“Eighteen thousand and five hundred dollars,” Esmeralda Middy proudly announced as she stepped back to give William a better view. “And I would have paid twice as much if they’d asked.”

“Then what they’re saying about you in town is true. You really have gone mad.”

“You’d be well advised to watch your tongue, William McCuddy,” Emma scolded, but looking down at her precious possession her heart softened and she couldn’t stay mad. “You know how long I’ve waited and those busy nitties would only have me spend the money on insufferable afternoon gatherings on the front lawn. Nothing more than hogwash, that’s what it is, and Mrs. Hottington and her little swarm won’t see a penny of my money.”

“But eighteen thousand for a doll, Emma? You know the General wouldn’t have approved?”

No, he never would have allowed such an extravagant expense. In all honesty, she would have expected much the same reaction, only with his shock boiling over into anger instead of William’s grudging curiosity. Luckily, she no longer had to concern herself what the General might think. A year in the grave, he no longer commanded her life and Esmeralda had more than earned the right to spend the money whatever way she chose.

William reached out as if he were planning on poking it to see if it might do some sort of trick. “I just don’t see what all the fuss is about. It certainly is a homely looking creature.”

“Don’t you dare lay those dirty fingers on her, I swear if I find a smudge I’ll chop them off.”

William pulled his hand back in time to save the need for emergency surgery. “These are the hands of a hard working man and they’ve done a good enough job taking care of you over the years.”

“Ha. If that’s what you think.”

“I haven’t heard any complaints.”

“Only because your head is too thick,” Esmeralda said. “At least you haven’t burned the place down and left me homeless. I will give you that.”

“If only you were as careful with your money as you are with your compliments.”

“Is that what’s stuck in your head, William? Maybe old Emma won’t be around to spend the General’s fortune and she’ll leave you a little bit when she’s gone? Is that why you’re still around?”

“I suspect a stubborn old hag such as yourself will be around long enough,” William said, carefully putting a safe distance between them. “And if I were simply after the money I would have conked the General over the head and stole off with his treasure long ago.”

Esmeralda couldn’t help the malicious laugh that escaped her. “You, dear William?”

She didn’t intend for it to sound so cruel but Emma could tell from the sudden slump of his shoulders as soon as it was out of her mouth that she’d hurt his feelings. William remained loyal to the General, even in death, and wouldn’t allow anyone, not even himself, to jeopardize the great leader’s legacy. To think William might actually consider double-crossing the General was like betting on a snowfall in mid-July.

“Don’t think I didn’t consider it.” William’s face bunched up in an attempted scowl. His doughy features couldn’t find the needed hard lines and the best he could manage was a wrinkly

pout. "You think me so innocent but it might surprise you to learn a thing or two."

"And what exactly do you think you are hiding?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"There are better things to occupy my time than worrying over what trouble you're getting yourself into."

"Like globe-trotting around the world to squander your fortune on an ugly plaything."

Emma went to smack him but William had wisely snuck out of her reach. "Take it back. She's absolutely perfect."

"If you say so."

"I do. And I think after the weekend showing we shall move the display to one of the private rooms."

"But, Emma, I thought this was to be your featured exhibit. Your pride and joy to show off to all your friends."

She hadn't spent all these years patiently waiting until the doll could finally be hers only to lock it away but after the showing at the party, Emma didn't see the need to parade it under everyone's noses.

"Those I wish to see it will be here this weekend. As for Mrs. Hottington and the rest of her busy bodies, they can chew on the rumours and gossip."

"You are one stubborn woman," William said from the safety of the hallway. "Without a clue as to what's best for you." And with that, he disappeared past the archway, heading for the kitchen to prepare the evening meal.

Bah! Esmeralda would not allow her social standing to dictate her obligations and would be damned before feeling guilty over not including them. She reached out to stroke the soft fabric of the doll's cheek. This would be a special gathering, shared with only with her closest friends. Those who would appreciate the magnificently detailed doll and not ruin it for her with their petty jealousy and high-browed judgement.

Like a fine wine, her little angel deserved to be savoured. Powder blue eyes staring so innocently from beneath a perfectly fitted bonnet, the heart-shaped dimples, the button nose, such a small hand reaching out in search of its mother.

Apparently William wasn't as keen to get caught up in the excitement, he returned with a sour face, carrying a tray with her evening brandy. Beside the glass, two blue pills on a white napkin so she couldn't miss them.

"You know I don't need those anymore," Esmeralda said, taking the brandy but ignoring the pills.

"We wouldn't want anything to happen so close to the party."

"I haven't had a spell in over a month and feel fine. I really do wish you'd stop fussing over me as though I were a child."

"The doctor said you should finish the prescription but there is still half a bottle left."

"So I'll have the medication on hand should anything happen."

"Stubborn," William said under his breath as he went to fetch her meal.

"I'll take supper by the television. After that I think I'll retire for the evening."

"As you wish."

Poor, dear William. Cursed with the care of a stubborn and impulsive woman, he spent far too much time worrying over the things he couldn't control. The fainting spells had passed, for good she was sure, and had been nothing more than the direct result of her own foolishness. An overload of emotions, the mixture of grief and relief after the General's death and not really

having the proper time to sort it out when the excitement of finding the doll interrupted. Six months of living on the fly in negotiating the sale, she had been exhausted, both mentally and physically, and her body had simply revolted. Now, back in the comfort of her home and knowing she was finally in possession of her treasured doll, Esmeralda felt content and was certain she would not black out again.

She reached down to tuck the blankets under the doll's chin. With a quick check over her shoulder to make sure William was still busy in the kitchen, Esmeralda gently touched her fingers to her lips and then pressed them against the doll's nose.

"Sleep tight, my little angel."

Whether a trick of her eyes or simply a shadow shifting against the light, Esmeralda thought she saw the baby smile when she took her hand away.

* * *

Supper was served to her in front of the t.v. although she barely noticed William set down her food. Automatically, her hands picked up her fork and knife and cut off a piece. She chewed without tasting, William could have served a heated rubber tire and she wouldn't have noticed.

The food, the evening news warning of bad weather, William sulking at the dining table behind her with an annoyed clink-clink of silverware against his plate, all of these barely registering to her shocked mind.

Plastered against the screen of her mind's eye, the innocent doll smiling up from her bed.

But seriously, it was just a doll! No matter what it might mean to her, the doll hadn't been designed to change facial expressions.

With dusk's approach, the lighting in the house must have shifted, casting a shadow to trick her eyes. She'd been too excited to notice, too caught up with William, but the doll had not smiled.

"I better go out and make sure everything is locked up," William said, suddenly at her side. "If you're finished, I'll take your plate before I go."

She hadn't even heard his approach and she jumped a little in her seat. "You're leaving?"

"I better get home before the storm blows in. You know how Maggie worries."

"How that woman puts up with you," Esmeralda said, regaining some of her wits. "What storm?"

"Weren't you listening? I swear I don't understand why you bothered buying that dumb box, you never actually watch it."

Another luxury the General hadn't allowed.

"The weatherman said Donfeld is getting freezing rain and wind gusts and it's headed this way."

"But I need you here tomorrow to help prepare for the party."

"Don't worry, I'll find my way out."

"Why don't you just call Mag and tell her you're spending the night."

"Wouldn't that give her something to think about?" William laughed as he took the tray. "I'm afraid I'll have to decline the invitation."

"Then you'll want to make sure to get an early start in the morning."

"I'll be here in time to serve breakfast. I promise."

Before she could argue, he was down the hall and out of earshot without a thought for her tea. Huffing her disapproval, she crawled from her chair and went to make it herself.

While waiting for the water to boil, Esmeralda stood at the window and watched William

check the tool shed and back door before securing the gate behind himself. He headed off down the lane as the first drops splattered against the concrete terrace running along most of back portion of the house.

The rain would chase him all the way home. William refused to drive despite the General giving him a car some years ago. William didn't possess a license and instead relied on Maggie to transport him to and from work so as not to offend the General. After the General's death, William had returned to relying on his feet and the car only left the garage on the weekly grocery run. Even in bad weather, it seemed William preferred the security of his own mobility over trusting to the mechanical beast.

And he'd the nerve to insist she was the stubborn one.

Whistling a warning, the kettle began to steam just as a baby's cry sounded from the showroom. At the far end of the hall, with eight rooms on one side and another six plus the living room on the other, but still she was sure this was where the cry came from.

Her tea forgotten, Esmeralda hurried down the hall. The unhappy whine seemed to fill each room as she passed it, coming from all sides until she was surrounded.

Of course, there was no baby to cause such a commotion and she wondered if the spells had indeed passed for good or if she were simply the fool to some cruel prank left behind by William.

Whichever the case, the high-pitched wail cut off just as she came through the door. The sudden silence sent a spindly shiver down her spine and her mind reeled against the abrupt stillness. She was already across the room and pulling back the blanket before she realized the cradle was empty.

The doll was gone.

From somewhere on the second floor, the baby's cry shattered the sudden calm.

* * *

Soaked to the skin, with a chill running deeper into his bones, William arrived home to find Mag stocking the fire of their pot-bellied stove.

"Leave that, love. I'll get it in a minute," he said as he peeled off his wet jacket and shirt. He stood, shivering and dripping while Mag ran to fetch him a towel.

"You're mistress called to say she misses you already. You're to call her when you get in."

William took the towel and ruffled it through his hair, sending chunks of ice clattering to the floor. "Be serious, woman. I just got in the door."

"I am being serious. She sounded upset."

"She better not think I'm going back out there in this weather. The temperature must have dropped ten degrees while I was walking home." He'd made it halfway back before the chilling drops had turned hard. His face already raw from the wind and cold, the ice pellets rained down like a swarm of bees to sting at his tender flesh.

Mag sat down with her book beside the stove without even so much as an offer of something to eat. If she expected him to fix dinner after the day he'd had...

"She probably just found a rip under the doll's boot or something," William grumped, deciding to return the call before making himself a sandwich.

"She found it then?" Mag asked, setting the book in her lap.

"Ugly looking troll of a thing, if you ask me. You wouldn't believe what she paid for it."

"Entirely too much, I'm sure. But it's her money, William. Why not let her spend it as she sees

fit?”

“And leave us all in the poor house? You know as well as I that she can’t be responsible for so much money. I still can’t figure out what the General was thinking.”

“He knew enough to keep you on,” Mag reminded him and then went back to her book.

Emma answered the phone on the third ring.

“Where did you put her?” she screamed at the sound of his voice. “What have you done with her, you cruel old bastard?”

William didn’t understand, then heard the howling in the background. “Company arrived in this weather?”

“Don’t toy with me, William. How do I make it stop?”

“I haven’t the faintest clue as to what you’re blabbering about. Try to calm down and then explain what’s happened.”

“What’s happened?” Emma shrieked loud enough to cause William to jerk the phone from his ear. “What’s happened? I’ve discovered your little practical joke and I’m not finding it very funny.”

“What joke, Emma? For christ’s sake, make some sense.”

Mag peeked around the corner to see what had him so upset. William waved her away with an impatient sweep of his arm.

“Tell me where you put her and it might just save your job,” Emma said.

He could barely hear her over the wailing in the background. The high-pitched and unhappy sound seemed to roll in on waves, one stronger than the next until the sandy shoreline of Emma’s voice was almost completely washed away.

“What is that noise?” William asked, covering his other ear. Around him, the house was silent but he strained so hard to hear Emma that it caused a high-pitched hum to add to his confusion.

“I don’t know how you rigged this up without my finding out but you make it stop right now, William McCuddy, or I swear Mag will have to turn you in for a new husband because the one she’s got will be ruined.”

He almost wished he was responsible for whatever had her so upset. Emma sounded peeved and annoyed, but she also sounded frightened. If he could fix it, he would have in that instant, if only so she would make sense again.

“If you’d only tell me what’s going on!”

“The doll was moved,” Emma said, breaking into tears.

“Moved where?”

“If I knew I wouldn’t have bothered to call.”

“But what’s the racket, Em?”

“”The baby. She won’t stop crying.”

“What baby?”

Mag peeked around the corner, her curiosity replaced with concern. With a frustrated jerk, William glared her away. He couldn’t concentrate with her poking out every few seconds and lords knew he would need all his wits to figure out what Emma was going on about. It was hard enough trying to understand her over the infernally unhappy wail in the background.

“Someone is calling for me, William. I think I know where she is.”

“Who? Who’s there?”

But he wasn’t to get an answer. Emma hung up, leaving him shivering in his hallway with the dead line buzzing in his ear, even though he no longer felt cold.

* * *

“Esmeralda, where are you hiding?”

No louder than a whisper but with a sharp-edged anger behind it. A command issued from far away, but Esmeralda was certain someone had called for her.

The heartbreaking howl of the infant continued to fill the house, to fill her head until it felt as though the sound came from within, and she almost missed the faint call.

With a heavy tread, she went to the stairs and started the long climb to the second balcony. Nearly three months had passed since last she'd been upstairs, with her hectic travels there hadn't been time or need, and the truth was the upper chambers had belonged to the General during his life and she had little use for the second and third floors.

At the second landing, she stopped a moment to catch her breath. The floor contained the General's study, plus four bedrooms, two bathrooms, a reading room, and of course the very special room having such a hold over Esmeralda's heart.

It was in here she was sure she would find the crying infant, who was really nothing more than a doll.

“Esmeralda, you better quiet that child down before I come and do it for you. Do you hear me, woman?”

Only one man would dare speak to her in such a tone and a painful shiver ran down her back all the way to her ankles when she realized who had called for her.

It couldn't be!

But Esmeralda had seen something in that doll, something that had sparked the painful memories and stirred the General from his resting place.

“Yes, sir. I'm on my way now,” she replied through a thick curtain of confusion.

“And I need some clean glasses when you're finished. It's almost time for my brandy.”

Automatically, routine took hold. It seemed Esmeralda floated down the hallway, past the General's study, past the other bedrooms, a bathroom, without thinking about it at all, she was suddenly at the end of the hall, standing in front of a room she hadn't been in for nearly twenty years.

You don't have to go in there. He's not really here. He can't make her stop this time.

But the baby was in there. Crying, frightened, only wanting her mother. Esmeralda had to take care of her before she drew the General from his lair.

A shaking hand reached for the knob.

Surely, it wasn't hers, she knew very well there was no baby on the other side of the door, that the General wasn't up on the third floor. Esmeralda was alone in the house with only her memories.

To her horror, she realized it was indeed her hand. She felt the cold metal under her palm, the stiffness of the knob as she tried to turn it. She was really going to go through with it, she was about to admit it was all too real.

The door swung open without her even having to push it, revealing an untouched baby's room. Light pink roses bloomed across the walls. Stuffed teddies and zebras and giraffes filled every corner. From the ceiling, an intricately wound web of hanging stars and moons glittered under the moonlight.

In the middle of the room, a crib. Esmeralda's hand went to her lips and she let out a little whimper when she saw it.

Everything was exactly as she remembered. Right down to the crying baby in the cradle

reaching up for her mother.

Breaking Emma's heart all over again. The painful memories flooded in, choking her off and sweeping her back to a terrible time she'd long ago promised to forget.

It wasn't real! The baby was just a remarkable replica, a doll she'd spent more time chasing than she should have. This was nothing more than a twisted gag spun up by the wicked William to remind her that the General's influence still held her in its bounds.

Her shocked mind didn't seem to understand this because she crossed the room and bent down over the crib, reached in and took a delicate hand in hers.

"Shh, little angel. It's okay now. Momma's here."

The baby took no comfort in her soothing. Esmeralda cringed when her touch caused the miserable sound to increase in intensity.

"Please, honey. You must quiet down. Daddy is upstairs working."

Emma jumped when she felt a hand squeeze her shoulder.

"Not anymore he's not. And don't you dare call me that thing's daddy. You're a fool if you think I'll take responsibility for that noise box."

"Of course, sir. I didn't mean..."

"And I thought I told you to shut her up. What's all the racket about?"

"I'm not sure," Emma said, protectively huddling by the side of the crib. "I was just going to see if she needs changing."

"I warned you that if you aren't going to take care of that bastard child then I will."

"No! Please!" It was just a dream, a twisted delusion brought on by her wearing travels and the excitement of planning for the party. Another one of her fits. She hadn't seen it coming because she'd been too caught up in having everything just perfect for when she introduced her friend's to her little angel.

Oh, why hadn't she listened to William and taken her medication?

If only she had, she wouldn't be standing here now with a couple of ghosts, terrified to paralysis as she watched her dead husband reach into the cradle to silence her baby.

As he had so many years ago.

* * *

"Emma! Emma, are you here?"

William hurried down the corridor, quickly poking his head into each room he passed. When he didn't find her, he rushed into the backyard without even a thought of checking the other floors. Before the General's death, she'd rarely ventured beyond the rooms on the first floor, letting him have the rest of the house to himself.

William couldn't really see her coming outside in such nasty weather but with his mind racing over the possibilities of what could have happened to her, his body simply had to act.

Emma wasn't in the tool shed, nor the garage. He went as far as the garden, calling her name incessantly over the rickety-tick-tick of the freezing rain, but still saw no sign of her.

It was then that he noticed the light from the second story window. Vague and dim from behind the blind and against the rain, but he had no doubt that he saw it and knew Emma must be up there.

A careful, sure-footed tread carried him back across the lawn and up the slippery steps of the terrace. Through the door, dripping a path down the hall, leaving wet footprints on every second stair, running past the other bedrooms and to the final door...

He stopped, a terrible scream from the other side halting him in his tracks. An awful clawing ripped his insides when he heard Emma's desperate words.

"You rotten son of a bitch. You'll kill her."

Had he not been standing in that exact spot all those years ago, William might have been confused by the chilling accusation. But he understood. Perfectly.

He knew why Emma had spent all those years chasing after what had seemed such a silly item. The money spent was of little importance, financial matters had always been the General's obsession and no concern of hers. He'd made and lost millions, running his enterprise as he had his army and as he had his marriage, balls to the walls with no regret. Competition was steam-rolled, the opposition ruthlessly wiped out.

Poor Emma had suffered through it all, spending the years playing the dutiful wife. And when the General had passed, she was finally free to reclaim the life he had stolen from her when he'd take her as his own P.O.W.

Only, she hadn't always been so dutiful, and whether from boredom or sheer spite, Emma's eyes had wondered for the briefest of affairs.

Of course, the General found out and put a quick stop to it but not before the damage was done. For nine months the two barely spoke, and when they did it was to fire a sarcastic insult from the distance, a convenient situation for Emma to hide her pregnancy from her husband. It wasn't until she was already at the hospital that the General learned of his impending fatherhood.

William clearly remembered the fight just after their return from the hospital. Emma begging the General to just accept the newborn girl, in tears trying to convince him she could give it the proper care.

Surprisingly, the General relented and allowed the child to stay. He even opened a special account for the baby, allowing Emma to set up a nursery from its funds.

Meanwhile, he completely withdrew to spend hours and even days on the third floor. Until that time, William wasn't allowed into the office and would leave the master's request on the second floor to be retrieved at his convenience but after the baby's arrival William was finally allowed into the inner sanctum. Here, the General confided to William all that had happened and his suspicion the baby wasn't actually his. He hadn't learned who the real father was but wouldn't tolerate raising one that wasn't of his blood.

"I won't let you get away with it this time," Emma yelled, her voice poisoned with hate. "You'll fry for taking my baby, you bastard."

William grabbed the knob and butted his shoulder against the wood, hoping to surprise whoever was in the room with Emma. Instead, he bounced off, a painful snap coming not from splintered wood but breaking bone. William collapsed to the floor, gripping his shoulder and grimacing against the searing agony.

The door was locked against his entry and William thought he understood why. He'd been so young back then, fresh out of military school and still under the General's spell.

That was no excuse. He'd known what the General was planning and done nothing to stop him. Hadn't even tried to talk him out of it or warn Emma. Instead, he'd stood guard outside the door to make sure the gardener or cook didn't happen along at the wrong moment.

In reality, William was as much to blame as the General.

* * *

Emma tried to stop him but he was just too big and strong. The General had spent his entire life

defending against attacks and he easily disposed of her, snatching one of the hanging stars and binding her with the string.

He hadn't tried that the first time, hadn't needed to because she didn't realize what he was planning until it was too late. He'd been so gentle, taken such care, his eyes actually softening into what she'd mistaken for love.

The crying had stopped as he'd stared down at the innocent infant and Esmeralda had so hoped he was finally ready to accept his fatherly role that she hadn't even suspected until after he'd finished. By then, her little angel had already been stolen from her.

This time there was no tenderness in the way the General reached into the cradle, no blossoming hope in her chest when the cry suddenly cut off. No, this time she realized his cruel intentions and understood his dark desire to rid himself of the wretched inconvenience. She knew the terrible truth and felt the fear her little angel could not.

So helpless. So innocent. Her only crime; being born to a mother who had let her loyalties wander. The baby couldn't possibly comprehend how lonely Emma had been, how the General's cold indifference had pushed her into another man's arms. She was simply the product of the affair, a constant reminder thrown in the General's face. For this, the poor, innocent thing would suffer the ultimate price.

"Don't hurt her," Emma sobbed. A not so soft teddy-bear nose stuck into her back, she was squished in between a couple oversized lions. "Please, not again. She'll keep quiet. I promise I'll keep her quiet."

The General wasn't to be stopped. Emma couldn't fight him.

If only she had seen the danger to her little angel and tried to stop him all those years ago. If only she hadn't been so hardened toward him that she didn't recognize the murderous hate until it was too late.

If only...

Emma screamed when he picked the baby from the crib by the neck and held her out for her mother to see. Callused, powerful hands closed around the baby's windpipe, cutting off the cry.

"See? All she needed was to be held. Isn't this the right way to hold a baby?"

Little feet kicked the empty air. Unblemished pink skin deepened into a sickly purple.

All the while, those precious blue eyes remained locked on Emma's. Despite the frantic struggle there was a knowing calm to the eyes watching her. They didn't accuse, didn't hold her responsible for what had happened. There was only love. A peaceful yet overwhelming outpouring of emotion that filled Emma with a renewed strength and the courage she had lacked on that horrible night. Her harrowing scream sank a full octave, down into a deep animalistic growl.

"You let her go," Emma hissed. She kicked out with her feet and was actually surprised when she found solid bone. The blow connected against the murderous bastard's shin and while it didn't seem to hurt him, it did catch him by surprise and knocked him off balance. Emma snatched the baby from his hands when he pitched forward and stuffed it into the pile behind her.

"You bitch," the General roared when she wrapped her arms around his head.

Using the string binding her hands together, Emma got him around the neck and fell back into the puffy pile of stuffed animals, leaning back and pulling with everything she had.

The General couldn't find a firm hold, couldn't get a good grip on her because each time he reached back, she would push herself further into the furry animals. She had the advantage and wasn't about to let up until the final twitch from his cold dead body.

And just when she thought she had him, just when she was certain he was finally beginning to

weaken, she felt him begin to jiggle atop her and then she heard his dry chuckling.

“Such a stubborn woman.” The General’s body relaxed above her and he stopped struggling. “Did you really think I would allow that abomination back into my house?”

Emma couldn’t hope to stop him. She couldn’t kill that which was already dead. He was simply torturing her, allowing a sliver of hope that she could finally right the wrong she had been so helpless to prevent, before gobbling it up with the petty disdain he had shown so many of her meals.

“Really, woman, you should have known better. Give it up now and we’ll get rid of it properly.” The General freed himself, rising up above her.

“You can’t have her,” Emma said, knowing full well she was powerless to keep the doll from him. She huddled protectively over the stuffed animals, desperate tears of defeat soaking fur and yarn.

Cold, harsh fingers stroked her cheek. “There’s no more fight left in you, Emma. I can smell your fear. Its sweet fragrance fills my heart.” He bent in close for a good sniff, the stale stench of death making her gag.

If only she could burrow in with the stuffed dolls, to be lost with her little angel. But she needed to face him, couldn’t hide any longer.

Emma tried to push him off but he was a boulder against her, too heavy to be moved. Instead he grabbed her wrists, painfully wrenching them before using her to search out the pile.

The safe haven she’d hoped for didn’t exist amongst the stuffed bears and unicorns. Instead Emma felt herself being suffocated, her face stuffed in so hard she couldn’t catch her breath. The General viciously whipped her back and forth to burrow further in, his own personal ragdoll to be tossed away when he finally found his prize.

Emma, like her daughter, was to die at the hands of the vicious madman she had foolishly devoted her life to.

At least she’d had the brief time of happiness when she’d actually thought she was rid of him. The pure joy of being re-united with the doll that meant so much to her. Soon she would be joined with her little angel again and these thoughts comforted Emma as she sank down into the darkness.

She was almost unconscious when the muffled sound of shattering glass came from somewhere above. And then, the General started howling.

* * *

Unable to budge the door, William decided he needed to find another way into the room.

Racing back downstairs, along the long hall, and out the back door, William skidded out onto the stone terrace. Everything was covered with an icy sheen. The stinging freezing rain pelted his exposed face but William bent his head and slid down the steps, where he twice almost lost his footing and tumbled backwards, finally to the backyard where he could see the light shining from the second floor bedroom window.

The house was made entirely of flat slabs of stone and would be impossible to scale. Besides, William was getting a little too long in the tooth to be pulling off that kind of stunt. Instead, he opted for a ladder stored in the toolshed and extended it up under the windowsill.

William took one of the rocks used to border the garden behind him, giving a good yank to get it free from the frozen ground, then started up the ladder. As his weight pressed the first rung, the base of the ladder slid out against the icy ground. Barely moving an inch, but it was still enough

to throw him off balance and he almost dropped the stone.

“Easy now, Willie-boy. Slow and steady wins the race.” But he knew he had to hurry, that it could already be too late.

Up one rung. Up two.

The ladder held.

With only one hand free to pull himself up, William had to be extra careful. Almost immediately, the metal became slick against the pouring rain, keeping his balance an incredible task. Slowly, one unsteady step at a time, William steadily climbed higher, until he reached the top.

The intruder was bent over Emma and violently whipping her back and forth so William was saved seeing his face.

He reacted instantly, his arm cocked back and threw the stone with all his might. Glass shattered and the attacker looked up just in time to eat a face full of cutting shards. The rock hit him square between the eyes, knocking his head back with a sickening crunch and he fell off Emma, his hands clutching his face and howling like a wounded banshee.

William jumped through the window, landing beside Emma in the cushion of stuffed animals. She looked up at him in bewilderment, and after catching her breath, decided thanking him for his timely arrival simply wouldn't do.

“Be careful, you big oaf. You landed right on top of her.”

“Of who, Emma? What the hell is going on?”

There wasn't time for an answer. The General had recovered, and after picking out the larger shards impaled in his face, he pulled William from the pile and with a jerk sent him flying across the room. William hit the far wall and felt something snap inside his chest. An incredible flare of pain consumed him as he crumpled to the floor.

* * *

“I always suspected you had eyes for my wife, William, but I convinced myself your loyalty would keep her safe. Imagine my disappointment at finding out I couldn't have been more wrong.” The General's tone took a grudging respect when he said, “I never would have guessed just how far you would go for her. You actually surprised me, William, and it had been far too long since the last time someone caught me off guard. For that, I'm almost tempted to spare you.”

“Don't do me any favours,” William wheezed.

Emma couldn't see him, he'd been tossed in behind the dressing table but it was obvious from the strain in his voice he was badly hurt.

The General's scornful chuckle was as cold as the dirt where his was buried. “Me do you a favour? My dear boy, you owe all of your best years to my continued generosity.”

“I'm not your boy,” William managed to grit out.

The General ignored the comment. “Your house, the car, even your lovely wife, Mag. All of it gained because of my influence. But she wasn't enough, was she? All of these things I made possible for you but it was never enough. You wanted more, didn't you William? You wanted her.” The General shoved a gnarled finger in Emma's direction. “You wanted her so badly you turned your back on me, the man who gave you everything. And now you expect me to allow that wretched doll under my roof? Do you?”

William managed to get himself propped up against the wall. He clutched at his mid-section,

his face so white he might have already met the General in the afterworld. Emma felt herself trapped, her confusion preventing her from action, from grabbing the doll and finding safety through the broken window.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” William said. “You gave me a job, nothing more. I suspect I’d have managed without you, might even have made a name for myself and been worthy of her.”

“Ha! You, William? You were barely fit to shine my boots. And yet, I must admit we did manage, suffering through my retirement together and making a decent fortune along the way. Only to have it stolen away from me too early.”

“I was protecting her,” William said. A red-tipped drop of spit formed at the corner of his mouth and slowly drooped down into his lap.

“There’s no need for excuses, William. What’s done is done. But what you don’t seem to understand is that we can’t turn back time. We can always revisit the past in our memories, but we can never actually go back. This is something you would be well advised to take to heart.”

“Then you’ve come back for me.”

“For?” The General seemed to take great pleasure in the idea. “I should have let you have her and been done with the whole wretched mess. We would have been better off in the end, eh William?”

“By then it was already too late. Our fates were decided.”

“And I was destined to lose the most important battle I ever faced.”

“She needed to be protected,” William said, with a familiar whine that had disappeared after the General’s death.

“And protect her you did.”

“I had to,” William blubbered, his mouth a foaming froth of red. “You stole our life and when that didn’t satisfy your destructive hunger, you started feeding on her innocence. Such a vibrant creature she was. Ground down by a monster.”

“A monster to be slain by the valiant soul who would set her free. Too bad this fairy tale won’t have such a story book ending. In fact, I don’t think you’ll appreciate how this story ends at all.” The General picked the crib up above his head, readying for the final blow.

From the pile, something latched onto Emma’s finger. Pulling her hand out, the doll clutching tightly to her.

Her little angel. So precious. So fragile. A gift of kindness and love. From William.

Just as the General started his swing, Emma tossed the doll for his head.

“Take it,” she screamed, watching the doll fly through the air, crazily cartwheeling, feet spinning over and over before smacking against the General’s shoulder.

But instead of bouncing off, the doll latched on to his uniform, grabbing the collar and then pulling herself up toward his neck. The General dropped the crib, letting out a triumphant roar when his hands closed on the baby. His victorious yell become a surprised yelp when the baby clamped down hard on his finger.

“You wicked brat.” The General shoved the baby to the floor.

Despite the hard landing, the baby was on its hands and knees instantly and crawling back for his ankles. A kick missed the mark and her little angel managed to get a good chomp at his shin, sending the General collapsing to the floor with a pained holler.

Quickly he rolled to his feet, only to find the baby clinging to his leg. The General yelped, high-stepping across the floor as he tried to kick her off, through the door, and was gone, with the baby still holding tightly.

Emma helped William to the bathroom as the General’s last cries echoed from downstairs. It

was followed out the door by the joyful gurgle of Emma's little angel, who had found herself a new playmate.

William refused a trip to the hospital, promising instead to visit the doctor in the morning. After cleaning up the blood, she took him to her bed and with great care tucked him in. Placing a kiss on his forehead, she promised to call Mag.

At the door, he called to her, his voice sad and weak. "I'm sorry I let him take her from us again."

"You didn't, dear one. I finally gave her up to see the truth."