

## EXODUS

The decision was clear. It must be today. Julianne screamed. The sound reached no one. Muted by duty and fear, her voice simply slipped away. She swallowed the bitter response. Darkness encroached. The weight of shadows invaded her head, fingertips, the longing cadence of each heartbeat. Everyday rendered her spirit stark and stunted like a weed wilted in cracked stone. Julianne had to leave this place

Breaking through a diaphanous flow of lace curtains, sunlight inspired, illuminated her. Julianne's body flinched with anticipation. Still, the specter of loss pressed precious breath from her body. Julianne dreamed of escape. She longed for release, to embrace a dream of peace. Love lost, dreams deferred are wretched traveling companions. The dread of darkness marred her. The decline exhausted. Julianne's broken spirit could no longer survive, not in this place of regret and memory.

Julianne's journey to the end began. She rose from her bed and walked to the window. Through the frosted glass, she marveled at the snow-covered branches bending beneath shards of ice. Clinging spikes, crystalline parasites, dripped in the soft glow of the rising sun. The beautiful display of strength and fragility prompted Julianne to pause and ponder. When the rays of the noon sun come, these shapes shift and change. This is life, she thought, fleeting images passing through liquid time.

Pressing her cheek against the pane. The surreal scene haunted Julianne. The

contrast of the covered meadow, a blanket of white peppered with large black birds, taunted her. She examined the sky, searching for signs of another snowfall. These fluffy specks of angel tears reminded her of innocence. In the icy air, nothing fell.

Agile and quiet, Julianne slipped past the attention of the house servants to exit through the kitchen door. She walked behind the drive and beyond the carriage house to cross the frozen meadow. The old farmhouse, where Julianne's mother died, disappeared behind her. The moss-covered ruins of the stone church, destroyed years ago fire, faded from sight. A few yards farther, Julianne strolled with her head high through the back gate of the estate. The sun disappeared. The sapphire sky began to darken.

In the distance of that strange morning, the horn of a locomotive blared. Her remedy raced across the horizon. The morning train was early. Julianne gasped. Her pace quickened. Soon, she was running, desperately tracking the train as it crossed the countryside. Far beyond her reach, it traveled quickly. She was too late.

To her dismay, a wretched sight stunned Julianne when she approached the ticket window of the train depot. Standing behind the metal bars and glass shield was a man whom she despised since childhood, Reverend Mercule Ditherling. A curmudgeon and gossip, his nonsense and destructive hearsay had blemished the names and reputations of many. Where was George, his kind-hearted brother, the warm smile that usually greeted travelers? Julianne did not want to deal with the crusty, ghastly reverend. Suddenly unsure, Julianne humbled herself and approached.

“Pardon me, Mr. Ditherling, will your brother return soon? I would like to purchase a

ticket.” Julianne spoke nervously.

“That’s Reverend Ditherling!” he growled, continuing to read the leather-bound Bible.

“I am truly sorry, Reverend Ditherling, I meant no disrespect,” Julianne apologized.

Reverend Ditherling slammed the Bible shut. Julianne jumped. His bugged, charcoal eyes bulged from sunken sockets. His pale face frowned. Bony hands flailed, abruptly brushing back gray bangs. He removed his wire spectacles. Reverend Ditherling leaned forward.

“I’m sure that you did not, but it was disrespect just the same.”

“Again, I must humbly…” Julianne began.

“Never mind that, what do you want?” he interrupted.

“I want to purchase a train ticket,” she repeated.

“I sincerely doubt that you can afford a ticket without Mr. Alden. Did he provide written permission for you to travel. Does he know that you’re leaving? If so, he certainly did not inform me, which is odd considering that he came to me for counsel last night.”

“I…No…I was unaware that it was required. I’ll just wait for George,” she mumbled.

“Speak up, woman! It most certainly is required. Mr. George Ditherling will not be in. He is ill. As this was our father’s station, I am the agent that you will have to go through until he recovers. I respect Mr. Alden. He has done much to improve our community, especially the church. I will not fall victim to the wrath of our most influential citizen. If he has forbidden travel, I will have no part of this.”

“Forbid? I don’t understand.” Julianne asked as she clutched the collar of her coat.

“This is a respectable business. George may operate without concern. Lord knows, It seems that I must always question his judgment or clean up an unnecessary mess. When I am on the premises, this station will operate free of scandal. I will not be part of your shenanigans. If you wish to travel, I’ll need Mr. Alden’s permission. That’s all.”

“Please. I beg you. I must leave on the next train. I’ve already missed the first one.” Julianne implored. “Here, take this, it’s worth hundreds of tickets.” She placed a ring on the counter.

“Really, Mrs. Corinth Alden!” Reverend Ditherling yelled. “This is not a trading post. Backyard bartering is beneath the Alden name.”

“I must leave today. I must.”

“My position is clear. I will not be moved,” he said. Reverend Ditherling retrieved the Bible and sat down. He refused to touch the ring.

Julianne felt desperate, adrift and worn. Tears streamed down her cheeks. It began to snow. In minutes, the light falling evolved to become a swirling flurry of icy flakes. Julianne searched her purse for a handkerchief. Her hand brushed against a familiar, soothing object. Eyes closed, she caressed it and pulled out the baby rattle with the initials JA. Clutching the precious piece, she wiped her eyes. Licking cracked lips, Julianne tasted the salty drops of her tears and swallowed. This loss was always with her.

Shrieks of breaking branches echoed in the whirling air. The wind wolves howled; violent voices carried in the spirit seas. Their soulful songs of atonement seduced her. Julianne moved forward. A burst of wind lifted her hat. It sailed into the air before

tumbling down the tracks. A powder blue scarf whipped around Julianne's neck. With a surreal sweep, the wind swayed her long locks. Julianne removed a glove to feel the silver rattle between her fingers.

An approaching train roared towards the platform. In a flurry of churning wheels and wind, the express to Sebot zoomed closer. The express never stopped here; not in this ponderous place. A whistle blared. A scream echoed through her. This was a dream passing through, no more. Julianne walked to the edge. Snow dust spiraled above the tracks. The black metal phantom emerged from a cloud of smoke. In a single thrust forward, Julianne jumped.