

## Gothic love by Aisha Elizabeth

All around me is a bleak smothering silence. The heavy air crushes into my body with invisible fists and hands squeezing and stretching. All around me darkness crawls and creeps and slithers. The howling moor is so fresh and beautiful, with its gently curving body and its tender, sweet smell. But when the night invades, a new beast plays with my mind. Desperation takes a grasp, the cold moves into; my skin, my flesh, my bones, painful cold. I must find a shelter or it won't be just me but my unborn child who suffers. He is what keeps my eyes searching the horizon, my hands and feet scrabbling around in the sharp rocks and thistles.

I fear to look back because something's coming! I can feel its eyes on my skin, crawling over me like a ghostly insect. Stumbling forwards my eyes squint ahead into the bright blackness and mist, can I see a light? Or is my mind intent on deceiving me? I move onwards, quickening the pace. The silhouette of a tall building emerges from the background, from a painting to a reality. Its features are handsome and tall, as only a Manor house could be but there was something foreboding about its grey, looming exterior. A narrow path slithers towards the door, snaking its way through the (I suppose I should call it a garden though that does not match the description of dismal patch of grass and tangled weeds that occupied the front of the building) and biting smoothly into the house in front. The dark, brown, lifeless moors stretch outwards in every direction. Bedevilling my desperation, a solitary owl swoops overhead. Its freedom and agility dishearten me, it seemed to be distastefully flaunting its flight to accentuate how trapped I am below with my only escape being the crumbling building ahead.

As I approach the deep, blood red, mahogany door I feel the spike of a million eyes piercing my flesh and head. All reason in me is screaming for me to knock but my gut wants to stumble back desperately into the open moor. Then before I had time to think, the door creaked open.

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It was the twelfth hour of the day and he was still searching desperately for his beloved Christiana, on the endless Scottish moors. Edmund was a handsome man, his hair golden brown, and the colour of candlelight. This cascade of hair swept heavily over his deep, thoughtful eyes. As he strode, wearily across the moor, wearing a green tweed jacket and cream trousers (knee high with thick, red mud) you could see him intensely examining the horizon in all directions each time more tears eked from his eyes. Now and then he would stop in his track, put his hands to his mouth and call "Christiana!" at the top of his lungs. No reply. He knew if he did not find her soon she would perish. It is well known there is no shelter on the moors, and certainly not a building around for her to take refuge. None except the legendary, Dinford Manor. The very thought sent fear into his heart, for as a boy he was told tales of the horrors the unfolded silently in Dinford Manor.

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Behind the door a shadow emerged, then a face so pale and beautiful that it could be death himself. His hair was as black as ink and his eyes screamed out from his skull, blue like sapphires. "My dear, won't you come inside? You look half dead! Are you lost? Please, I have a warm bed and hot food. Don't fret, it would be my absolute pleasure!" his voice was deep and resonating with a hint of a Hungarian accent.

I whispered feebly "Yes... lost... Thank you!" and moved through the door into a grand and intricately decorated hall, a smouldering fire flickered in the corner with two worn, leather arm chairs facing it. A long thin table was set artistically in the middle of the room, with an immense, ornate chandelier hanging above like a guillotine. Candles huddle together sending out their weak light about the room like forlorn stars. I couldn't help but wonder why this dark individual was so excepting of me upon our first meeting; I have heard tales of the young women who fall prey to such men but everything about him seemed sincere. Besides, inevitable death on the harsh moors seemed a less than enticing option when there was a warm bed and food being offered.

He took me down a long corridor to the right of the table; the door was covered with an expensive looking, wine red drape, that he peeled back with his long, clever fingers; he turned and flashed a quick but gentle smile. The corridor wound round into a spiral staircase, lit by gold candleholders in the shape of wild bore heads with huge ivory tusks. As we ascended the stairs I filled my heart with courage and asked him "you have not yet told me your name! It is improper for a man, such as yourself, to invite a woman into your home without proper introductions!"

"My name is Dinford, Count Gavril Bernat Dinford of Dinford Manor at your...command, my lady" then he gently lifts my hand and kisses it.

"Please, I beg pardon; I did not mean to offend by seeming ungrateful for your kindness!" I stammered, as I was not sure how to respond. Something intriguing caught my attention about his disposition that seemed disparate to the "compos mentis", orthodox man. But I suppose living on his own, as it seemed, would contribute to him not conforming to the standard graces of modern society.

"Please, are you the only soul in this building?"

"On the top floor resides my half sister, Beatrice, but she rarely descends the steps due to illness. And my aunt, Matild, has a room just down the corridor. Then there are the kitchen staff who reside in the outhouse and my man servant, Togeir"

"Beg pardon, but it is quiet for a house so full of inhabitants" But he seemed not to hear.

"This is your room; I will order some soup for you. I trust everything is to your satisfaction?" he hurried as he showed me into the large room, catering a huge four-poster bed with the same wine red drapes that covered the door down stairs. It was impeccably beautiful in the candlelight but as I turned to thank my host, he had already gone. So I settled myself into the rich, silk sheets and fell into a deep, peaceful sleep.

When I awoke, I came to notice a maidservant tying the creamy, heavy curtains back by the window in my room. Her long hair was jet black like the masters but when I called out she started so suddenly that she almost knocked over an ornate vase on a small wooden table on the right hand side of the window.

“Sorry, Miss” she stuttered quickly, then scuttled out of the room her head held low so as not to look me in the eye.

Slowly I got out of bed and crossed the room to the window. It was snowing outside but at a squint I could see huge drifts of snow, smothering the landscape in a thick, blanket of sleep that only the sun could awaken. I knew it would be impossible to leave the house for several weeks, and I despaired! I feared this place and wished to be with my beloved Edmund. “He must think me dead” I sobbed into my pillow. After several minutes, I gathered my emotions and dressed in the clean frock layer out for me, presumably by the maid, and ventured down the spiral stair to seek Count Gavril. As I came into grand hall I saw that at the head of the table sat the Count.

“My dear, how did you sleep?” he projected theatrically.

“Very well, thank you for your kindness”, my thanks sounded ridged and prepared, but the Count accepted them with a lordly bow.

“Please, come, sit by my side, and tell me how you ended up in such a predicament” Something in those eyes drew me inescapably to the masters bidding.

“I am Christiana Black, of Dersshore...”

I was interrupted by a scream, the scream of an old woman in agony and severe distress. I got up with a start.” What was that? Please sir, who let out such a cry?”

“Do not startle yourself,” he continued, almost completely unaffected by the bloodcurdling howl. “‘Tis my aunt, remember I told you of her, she is plagued by invisible demons that tear at her when no one is around.” His voice showed little concern for the poor woman and I began to feel uneasy. I needed a reason to leave his company.

“Should I go to her, I could nurse and comfort her at the very least, the poor dear!” My face gave away my intention to leave his side so I changed my expression to one of deep pity for the poor woman my eyes facing the door through to the room were she dwelled. He waved me to go with his hand, and then returned to the thick blood red wine that he had been content to drink until my arrival. I could smell its sweet, spice sent and my mouth watered. An abnormal drink for so early after the sun had risen but he was an abnormal man though I thought it discourteous for me to think so. I left with a bow and fled down the dark corridor to the sound of the moaning coming from behind a plain, worn door with the words “insane” scratched into a board as a sort of warning. My hand stroked the door then slowly pushed it open, but at that moment with one step and one breath a dizzying tangle of smoke chocks my lungs and blackness smothers me.

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My eyes squint in the non-existent light and my hands move up slowly weighed down by sleep and touch wetness upon my forehead. Blood? “What happened?”

I cried out weekly, though not sensing anyone around me it would seem a waste of precious energy. I heard a match strike then a pale yellow face in the darkness came slowly towards me. Without speaking a word he put a finger to my lips, then moving away slowly towards an oil lantern lighting it slowly. I wanted to call out but I was weak and my head throbbed with remorseless pain, so I had to stay, silent and helpless like an insect crushed into a matchbox and forgotten by a naughty child. His silhouetted frame moved to my bedside (for it was a bed, I gathered by my raised head and my the silky sheets that I was encapsulated in, but from the features of the room it was not the one given to me to sleep in, the decoration seemed more masculine, the furnishings darker wood and brown leather) he stroked my damp hair with a sensual hand. I tried to fight but my extortion withheld my struggle. I was in his power and I knew not what to do. The cord of my dress was unfastened, the cotton dress strewn on the floor like an injured child. I was numb with panic but something within me wanted to draw to his power and let these terrible acts unfold. His eyes became wild with passion as he kisses my pale white skin, taking hold of my corset he ripped it off, I could feel him kissing my face the world was a blur and I could hardly breath. My breath quickened and as he clamped a hand tightly over my mouth. My head screamed. The world grew dark.

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“God, please keep Christiana safe. Guide her in the darkest night. Do not punish her for she has done no wrong and has been faithful to you, oh mighty God please! I beg of you pardon her and deliver her home, and if she is dead grant her a place in heaven and may she rest in peace” Edwards hands were clasped tightly like a child’s and as he prayed his eyes filled with salty tears. He placed his head gracefully onto the silk and duck feather pillows and cried himself into a cruel restless sleep.

A furious knocking came from the door, he snorted and woke with a stir, pulling on a tartan gown and running down two flights of stairs to open the door with a confused, tired scowl.

“What do you mean calling upon me at this hour, do you have no sense, I mean...” his words drained away as he saw the wet girl shivering at the door. “good gracious, girl, come inside, quickly now and tell me what brings you here.” She had long, coal black hair (rather like the gypsy girls he sees in town selling pans and jewellery) she was bonny, rosy-cheeked lass with delicate features and thick black eyebrows to frame her dewy soft eyes.

“Please, Sir, tis your misses, she...I dare`nt say it for fear of punishing, Sir. You shall not shoot the messenger, sir, shall you?”

“No, mist, you are quite safe, what news of my beloved, oh tell me quick. Have you seen her dear girl, tell me?”

“Please sir, she has being staying at the house were I am employed, I shall not yet speak the name for you shall call me I liar, but I implore you to believe me when I tell you I am none such and speak none but the truth” she seemed frantic and worried.

“But I insist, tell me quick, what of my Christiana?” he was almost bursting now, hardly shore whether to strangle his guest or embrace her. She gathered herself.

“She is held within the walls of Dinford Manor, I am a servant to master Gavril, a cruel and heinous master. If he knew of my where about then I am sure he would silence my tongue forever, I came secret like, t` was my duty to protect ye as their was none to protect me from his cruelty and lust of flesh throughout my life and childhood. For Count Gavril of dinford is my uncle and I have been subjected to his tainted charm and lust for my body since I was just thirteen.” Her story turned into a sob and Edward, tears of anger and hate filling his eyes, comforted her with an arm.

“ You must remain here. Help yourself to food and drink and start a fire. I will be back before morning. Thank you and take care.”

Edward, lurched through the door onto the cobbled street, he barely felt the heart stopping cold as he slid onto the silky, smooth stallions back. Thwack went his boot against the firm, muscular stomach of the girl’s horse. With a frantic wind moving through and around him as the horse sped to the moors. He did not no the way but his heart was drawn to his love. Something like a ghost drew his mind, along with his body towards Dinford Manor.

The same door that haunted Christiana’s mind as she approached the house in such desperation appeared to Edward as the barrier between him and his love. The key to her cage was a large metal bar near the window on the far side of the manor. He heaved this across to the door with all his strength, smashed it into the beautiful, ancient door, over and over and over until he could see the speckled light of the candles and the blood red, mahogany door shattered and strewn on the floor like flesh from a broken body.

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I heard a thud from the front of the building; my head rode from the floor that felt so cold to my cheek. Then another thud. Edward! It must be, strength filled my limp body, I pulled myself to my feet, my hand clasped a poker from the fire, the protection I was sure was essential in my current predicament. What if the master returns to find me away from the room that he has confined me too? A threat of death and a cruel smile not locks or bars were what kept me closed in my room. Nevertheless, now I had the protection, the love of Edward. Moreover, I felt safe. I ran down the corridor, bewildered by the labyrinth like affect and the opium he made me smoke had cushioned my senses and made the world spin, twist and contort in a unpleasant, intrusive fashion that seemed to tern the world into a contradicting, mellow hell. As I came round into what I knew to be the main dining hall I could see to figures, swords crossed lunging at each other, turning in the air. Now and then one would burst into a series of techno-colour cylinders and their faces would contort into animals with crawls and teeth, then it would move back into characteristics that are more human. However, the whole experience I could tell was not that of a sane mind. My teeth chattered and I suddenly felt like I was floating on soft, white clouds, nothing mattered anymore.

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Edward and Gavril fought furiously, but as Christiana fell violently to the floor and a trail of blood eked from her head onto the Persian rug Edwards’s eyes darted to the spot. He ran towards her, completely forgetting Gavril. “My love” he cried under his breath “What has he done to you?” he caught her up in his arms, her

beautiful, red hair fell wet and heavy on his arm as he pulled her onto his lap, supporting her head with a strong arm. She opened her eyes but the pupils were too wide for the light, the blackness consumed the white. As he stared at her and held her close the sword that lay by his side was gently picked up by a long, slender white hand, and then plunged over Edwards shoulder into Christiana's chest, a bubbling fountain of blood escaped from bosom and spilt onto Edwards trembling hands. Edward, blind with rage, with his dead lover clutched in his blood soaked hands, drew the poker from his sweethearts lifeless grey hands and plunged it deep into the masters heart and chest. He could feel the intimacy of the layers of his flesh. First the soft, stretchy skin, then fatty tissue, then muscle, it ground of a rib then finally reached his stony heart. Extortion grasped Edward and he could barley make it back to village. He carried Christiana's body on the back of the horse and his tears of agony built in his eyes. A blur of misfortune and death, love and hate. "Oh god how could this happen?" he screamed to god his hands upheld, he fell onto the ground, shrivelled into a ball, like a caterpillar when moved from a leaf. Christiana's body fell on top of him. The force of her skull hitting his knocked him unconscious. Silence filled the dusky, black air.

A face, pale and beautiful, stumbled over the cobbled street searching the snow. She saw the horse and recognised it as her own. A shout called people too the scene, she cradled him as he cradled his love, with the warm blood trickling through her fingers. "Warmth?" she thought "Life! He's alive!" His eyes cracked open gently as a newborn baby does; he starred above into her dewy eyes wet with tears. Little did he know that those dewy eyes would shape his future and would grow old with him, and help him too recover from the terrible loss.

-Three years later-

A man crouched over the grave, a dark haired woman by his side, they weep. Red roses place lovingly on the grave, a kiss on the ground were the remains on Christiana lie, a kiss on the lips of his new wife, a memory, a hate and forever a burn of the mind. Forever a love of Christiana black.