Claudia Incarnata...Part V

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Claudia finds out more of the mystery that surrounds her beautiful home, Tintamare

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Being greatly stirred,
I turn to where I heard
That whisper in the night;
And there a breath of light
Shines like a silver star.

- **Urbiciani, *Canzonetta* c. 1250 AD**

Claudia beamed a smile of satisfaction as she took her seat in the courtyard of the Accademia di Santa Cecilia. Moments before, an usher had guided her to the middle of the third row; a prime position which gave her an excellent view of the concert stage. The night was warm and still and fragrant with the scents of the countless flowers that she had admired on her previous visit. But chief of all these varied floral aromas was the rich scent of Gardenia. She shut her eyes and breathed it in as though it were a rare and costly Parisian perfume.

Low in the cloudless sky, a luminous full moon glowed. To Claudia, its melancholy visage always hinted at some unknown sorrow and on this night she was reminded of lines from the Rubaiyat:

Moon of my delight who know'st no wane,
…How oft hereafter rising shall she look
Through this same garden after me – in vain!

Claudia glanced around at the sea of varied faces. The concert seemed to be sold out as every seat within view was taken; every seat that is, except the one next to her on the right. She thought of Carlo for a moment but swiftly dismissed him; musically he was more rap than rondeau and probably would have found the whole performance a huge bore. She now looked around her at what some of the younger women were wearing. A sea of patterns, textures, cuts and colours greeted her. She had a critical eye and quickly discounted most of what she saw, taking note of only one or two outfits, faces

and figures. Claudia herself wore a knee length, black sequined dress, cut and patterned to resemble one of the creations of 1970s designer Rudi Gernreich. She had this custom made for her three years ago and it was by far her favourite outfit – her *little black dress.*

The musicians had now begun to gather behind the stage. She could see Barricelli amongst them; dressed rather informally in jacket and cravat but looking every inch the *maestro di cappella*. The professor was busy giving last minute instructions and his enthusiasm, his easy charm and fatherly authority over his students were all obvious. Claudia smiled as he made several rapid hand gestures which the students found amusing.

She now became aware that someone had just sat down beside her. She straightened her body and glanced down to see a woman's legs. Rather than ignore the stranger she turned to her and smiled,

"Buonasera."

The woman turned her head slowly, as though she was quite used to being greeted by total strangers.

"Buonasera," she smiled back.

She was about the same age as Claudia; in her mid-twenties, German or Scandinavian; with cascades of shimmering blonde hair and a dazzling smile. Her features were sophisticated and beautiful, her eyes bright blue and soft. But as she glanced at them, Claudia caught a fleeting glimpse of something remote in those eyes, something a little troubling. She dismissed this off hand and turned her attention to her program. She saw Barricelli's picture and the portraits of some of the leading students. The performance was to begin with one of Alessandro Scarlatti's concerti grossi then one of his chamber cantatas entitled *Olimpia.* Appropriately, Scarlatti was a native Sicilian and a great name in the 17 th century. His works were followed by two of Vivaldi's opera overtures, Vivaldi being always a favourite, then by Bach's Brandenburg Concerto number three. The concert concluded with an orchestral suite by another 18 th century German, Georg Philip Telemann. As Claudia scanned the various movements of this particular work the title of one caught her eye – *Tintamare.*

"Ah," she thought, "This is surely a coincidence or it's Barricelli's idea of a joke or is he trying to flatter me? Probably the latter I'd say."

The performers now took their positions on the stage and an expectant hush began to settle over what Claudia considered a particularly garrulous audience, then she remembered that she was in Italy. Barricelli finally appeared looking elegantly aristocratic in a white summer suite with royal blue cravat. He beamed and the spring in his step as he took his position at the conductor's podium spoke volumes; he was firmly in his element. A swell of applause and quite a few cheers greeted him as he turned to the audience and bowed. Claudia turned her head to glance at her companion in the next seat. The woman clapped briefly then reached for her cell phone and switched it off. Further cheers followed as two of the soloists and the first violin took their positions. The atmosphere in the courtyard

of the Accademia was at its convivial best and Claudia could sense that this was an event that the locals genuinely loved. The applause died down once Barricelli turned to his orchestra and lifted his hands. He was the very image of the magus; creating wonders out of the ether with every stroke of his hand.

Claudia quickly found herself relaxing and being transported by the music. Every bar, every line, every note, spoke to her of a vanished world of elegance, a world of optimism and discovery, a world of terror and beauty; lost for centuries and now brought back in an instant of time to flourish again as it had done at the moment of its original creation. Its creators were men long dead but through the ingenuity of their invention they too lived again. She found the entire program beautiful and diverting but one piece in particular delighted her and caught her imagination. This was Alessandro Scarlatti's *Olimpia.*

According to the program, the cantata, for female soprano and orchestra was to be sung by one of the Accademia's star pupils, nineteen year old Gianina Strozzi. Claudia's attention was instantly captured by the flaming red hair, the poise, elegance and dignified stage presence of this most beautiful girl. She wore a flowing, sea-green silk dress with a long loose piece of the same cloth that wrapped around her back then fell between her arms and reached to the floor. Her composure was appropriate to the gravitas of the piece and she sang with dignity and pathos. Her opening aria was beautiful and she was accompanied perfectly by the Accademia's strings and continuo. For this piece Barricelli himself sat at the harpsichord where Claudia could see the obvious emotion in his face as he played. Indeed, through some of the more stirring passages of the cantata, she thought she could see tears glistening in his eyes. She too was moved.

After a short recitative Strozzi sang the cantata's concluding aria, Claudia loved its triumphant, martial air and infectiously buoyant rhythms. As Strozzi repeated the aria's lines *da capo*, Claudia found her fingers tapping the notes and silently singing the words. The aria was a musical gem; a tiny, finely cut cameo of the 17 th century and it perfectly captured the exultant mood of the evening. As the last notes of Strozzi's pure soprano voice died away, Claudia's neighbor turned to her and said,

"Bravissimo. We must congratulate her later."

The woman spoke English with only a trace of an Italian accent and Claudia was only mildly surprised to hear her do so. After Carlo's largely comic attempts at bilingualism, anyone else's English sounded practiced and refined.

"Indeed we must," she replied enthusiastically; glad that she would have the opportunity to meet Strozzi.

The Accademia played on into the night; with dexterity and élan; its dotted rhythms and astringent textures made on sparkling strings, complimented by the stately woodwinds and triumphal brass. It was a credit to Barricelli's skill that all the various elements; vocal and instrumental, coalesced so effortlessly into an organic whole. His hands moved like the hands of a master magician; creating music as though he were conjuring beauty out of the air.

When she applauded, Claudia applauded from her heart and this night she felt herself a tiny but integral part of the great swell of appreciation. Barricelli took his bow and the applause went on. He honoured each section of the orchestra and took the podium once more for an encore. The orchestra played the concluding allegro from Vivaldi's *Winter* concerto; three minutes and forty seconds of poignant beauty and the concert was over.

Now Barricelli beamed exultantly as he took one final bow and left the stage. He seemed very pleased and Claudia was glad. She got up after the applause was over and glanced at the woman next to her. The woman had left her seat and was walking away so Claudia followed her to the aisle. She was met by a smiling Julia Barricelli,

"Claudia, did you enjoy the concert?"

"Enjoy it? It was wonderful, I especially loved the cantata."

"Good, well, there is a small reception and a few drinks with antipasto in the main hall. Would you like to join us?"

"I'd love to."

Claudia looked around her but could not see the blond woman. She followed Julia to the main hall and as soon as they entered she saw the woman in a loose group gathered around Barricelli and Gianina Strozzi. There were ten or twelve other people but at the core of the gathering were the professor and his star pupil.

The contrast between the tall, willowy Strozzi and her short, rather portly teacher was distinctly comic; mainly due to the fact that Strozzi seemed to hang on the Barricelli's every word. She was constantly dipping her head and opening her eyes wide to catch his every breath and nuance over the noise of the gathering. Claudia found Strozzi friendly, unpretentious and charming; instantly warming to her when she insisted that Claudia call her Gianina. She seemed impressed by the mention of the name Incarnata when they were introduced but said nothing. Instead she smiled, kissed and shook hands formally as though Claudia was some visiting dignitary. Claudia hated formality so she did her best to look relaxed, unassuming and casual.

The woman who had sat beside her during the concert was introduced by Barricelli as Sabina Da Gioia. Sabina smiled and kissed Claudia on both cheeks. She wore a honey scented perfume; a delicious scent which contrasted a little incongruously with her imperious Nordic features. She wore a dress which Claudia had seen before but she struggled to remember exactly where. Sabina spoke little after having offered her congratulations to Barricelli and Strozzi. There was a barely hidden air of melancholy in her eyes that Claudia did not fail to notice and she found herself strangely drawn to Sabina as the evening progressed. She waited until Sabina was alone and approached her, gesturing with an elegant sweep of her hand,

“Karl Lagerfeld?”

She caught Sabina momentarily off guard,

“Er…yes, yes it is.”

“Lovely design, it looks just beautiful on you.”

“Thank you, you are very kind Claudia.”

“Are you from around here, local?”

“Yes, forgive me. I live near Montaperto, inland, north of here and I do not see much of the coast regrettably. It is nice to come to the Accademia’s concerts. The *professore* was my late husband’s teacher. Alessandro played violin in this same courtyard.”

“Oh, I’m sorry…”

“No, it’s all right. There are many good memories for me here.”

Suddenly she turned and almost whispered,

“Would you like another drink?”

“Er, yes.”

She took Claudia’s empty champagne flute and headed towards the drinks table. On the way she turned casually and glanced back at Claudia with a faint smile; raising the empty glass to her lips in order to consume Claudia’s uneaten strawberry. Claudia once again found something strange in her manner but she appreciated the friendliness of the gesture. She watched Sabina pad away; particularly noticing the sway of her hips and imagining her long golden legs beneath the designer dress. She exchanged a few quiet words with Barricelli who nodded discreetly before returning to his discussion on the relative merits of *opera seria* and *opera buffa.* When Sabina returned there was a hint of mischief in her eyes.

“Come, let me show you something.”

She turned and led Claudia towards an inner door. Beyond it was a small atrium and a tall stair. Claudia hesitated momentarily feeling that she was trespassing but Sabina reassured her and urged her on. At the top of the stairs a narrow landing led them out onto a grand balcony. They could see the entire courtyard below, glowing serenely in the bright moonlight.

“It’s a beautiful old building. It must be great studying here.”

“Alessandro loved it; he was here for three years before we were married. I don’t play or sing myself but if I did I should love to do it here.”

Claudia rested her champagne flute on the balcony rail and looked up at the sky. The northern panoply of stars were there; not quite as many as she usually saw from her own balcony at Tintamare but a multitude still and as wondrous and beautiful as ever. She took a deep breath; made aromatic by sweet gardenia from the flower beds below and by Sabina’s honey scented perfume. She turned to find the Nordic woman standing right next to her. Their shoulders touched; making Claudia’s skin tingle. She then met Sabina’s glacial blue eyes and a wave of desire swept over her. She drew her face closer but she need not have made too great an effort. Sabina’s hands grasped her hips and soon their lips locked in a sweet, lingering kiss, flavoured by champagne and strawberries.

They kissed for many long minutes as each found much to enjoy in the other and, as they had just met; the process of becoming acquainted was a slow one. As they moved against the balcony rail, tussling to and fro, Claudia knocked her empty champagne flute and it began its fateful transit down to the courtyard. It would surely have met its end with an annoying noise on the stones below; ruining the moment and doubtless causing Claudia some embarrassment. But it did not. For an unseen hand, deft and dexterous, caught it in mid flight and set it down on the edge of one of the flower beds where the scent of gardenia was strongest.

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Tintamare by moonlight was at its most beautiful and its beauty was never lost on Claudia. She lay back on luxurious silken sheets and gazed out of the open window; the moon’s silvery fingers had crept into the room while the gentle sea breeze stirred the curtains and the starry sky provided a glorious backdrop. Notes from the Scarlatti cantata entered her mind and she hummed a few lines.

“Did you say something?” asked a low voice.

Claudia turned from the widow to see Sabina’s svelte figure emerging from the bathroom. She smiled and replied,

“No but don’t be surprised if you hear strange noises in the night. This is an unusual old house… to say the least.”

Sabina shook her head dismissively and stepped closer to the bed. She was totally nude. Claudia sat up and admired the beauty before her. Sabina had a slim waist and long toned legs, her breasts hung heavily and diverged, her arms were slender and her shoulders tanned. But Claudia’s attention was drawn to several elaborate abstract tattoos; one of which wrapped itself around the Nordic woman’s side, down her abdomen and onto her thigh. Amongst the linear designs were lines of text written in what Claudia took to be Latin. This was totally unexpected as Sabina had struck Claudia as being rather conservative.

“Wow, those are some awesome tattoos.”

“Yes, black is my favourite shade. Do you like them?”

“Mmmm, yes. You’ll have to show me them tomorrow in better light.”

“I’d love to.”

Just then the sea breeze picked up and tossed Sabina’s hair back from her shoulders. She closed her eyes and moaned sensually; enjoying the coolness. The effect on Claudia was altogether different. She grasped Sabina’s hand and pulled her onto the bed then straddled her so that her pussy lips touched the skin just below Sabina’s navel. Claudia looked down at her with growing desire,

“Don’t be afraid of me. I wanted you from the moment I saw you. You’re so beautiful….so hot.”

Sabina smiled, “I’m not afraid; although I have never been with a woman… and…I think you’re beautiful too.”

She said this so shyly that Claudia was touched and moved gently towards her lips. They kissed tenderly; exploring each others mouths; running supple fingers through each others hair and rubbing firm shoulders. Claudia found great delight in tasting Sabina’s sweet lips; made sweeter by the wonderful perfume that she wore. Now passion seized her and she let her hands explore smooth silky skin and shapely arms, firm breasts with hard nipples, sleek sides and a tender, tactile pair of ass-cheeks. Soon Claudia found that she could not get enough of her new found friend and Sabina too found herself relaxing and enjoying the sensual wonder that was Claudia’s body. She loved the fact that Claudia was toned yet tender with an athleticism that she demonstrated as she flipped Sabina to and fro across the bed.

Sabina savoured the feel of Claudia’s tongue upon her skin as she nibbled Sabina’s neck then slowly licked her way down until she was nestled between her thighs. Here she began to massage Sabina’s skin with her tongue and hands until she reached the threshold of her pussy. Stopping to admire it in the moonlight proved difficult so she proceeded to lick Sabina’s lips with strong broad strokes. Sabina reacted instantly; moaning with delight and sighing as Claudia’s tongue flicked and circled her labia. She would concentrate on one side at a time; taking long minutes to part Sabina’s lips with her tongue and tickle the sensitive skin within. Soon Claudia could taste the Nordic woman’s pussy moistening and she stopped; moving back up and letting her fingers do the work instead. Sabina spread her legs and Claudia gently slipped one then two fingers into her pussy. Its warmth and smoothness were very inviting and soon she was exploring Sabina’s velvety depths causing Sabina to buck and grind against her hand. Claudia was pleased that her efforts were having so obvious an effect on her new-found lover. They continued to kiss tenderly and Claudia would have been quite content to spend the rest of the night thus but now Sabina stopped and sat up. Claudia looked at her; momentarily fearing that she had gone too far,

“Let me eat you now,” whispered Sabina and Claudia smiled. She said nothing but simply spread her legs. Sabina’s tongue; though obviously inexperienced, soon found her clit and lapped at it for a long

while. Claudia could feel Sabina's enthusiasm for the task so she encouraged her by stroking her flaxen hair and pressing her head down gently. She was soon wet and reached down to spread her pussy lips. Sabina understood instantly and slipped two fingers into Claudia's slit. This was pure heaven and Claudia shivered with the undiluted delight of having her clit licked and her pussy fingered. After a while Sabina instinctively increased the pressure of her tongue upon Claudia's pulsating clit and brought it closer to her mouth by pressing up with the fingers that lay buried in Claudia's pussy. The change was just enough to make Claudia come. She bucked and shuddered and dug her nails into the silken sheets; she sighed and uttered several sweet profanities. Wave after wave of intense sensation washed over her body then gradually subsided like a storm in the midst of the sea.

Sabina hesitated; unsure if she had done well but Claudia swiftly put an end to her fears when she whispered,

"Wow, that was wonderful."

Blonde hair blended with black, as the women tumbled and played upon the silky expanse of bed; beautiful breasts caressed each other like long lost friends and the sheer sensuality of skin against bare skin was like the meeting of sky and sea – two elements in perfect harmony. Claudia loved Sabina's giggles and her voice was as sweet as ripe honey dew. Sabina delighted in her friend's strength and stamina; she was a lusty mare eager for the chase whose passions, once unleashed, could not be bound up again. What is more, she found in Claudia someone generous with their affections and exceedingly giving. Her beauty and her desire equaled each other like the heat and dazzling splendour of the sun. Sabina had met no one like her. At length they paused to relax in a cozy embrace and Claudia whispered,

"Nice huh?"

"Oh yes, lovely and it's so beautiful here. The place was made for making love."

"Yeah but I bet you're missing some cock, right?"

"Ah, well, maybe."

Claudia laughed and got out of bed. She returned a moment later with a long, black dildo. She looked at Sabina with bewitching mischief in her eyes and without a word she opened her mouth; wetting the dildo with the utmost sensuality. She knelt on the edge of the bed and continued to lick the tip of the black dildo while Sabina watched her with a mixture of fascination and awe. When Claudia was satisfied that the dildo was wet enough she rubbed its tip slowly along Sabina's inner thigh. The Nordic girl sighed as the tip of the dildo tickled her pussy lips.

"This is exactly what my old boyfriend Josh's cock felt like, length and width, it was quite a treat believe me."

Sabina smiled, a little taken aback by this revelation. But soon her mind was elsewhere as the solid heavy rubber began to penetrate her pussy; filling it up snugly. She was still abundantly moist so Claudia had no trouble in slipping the dildo deep into Sabina. She then began to twist it and thrust it in and out. She enjoyed the effect this had on Sabina; she ground her nether regions hard against the heavy instrument and moaned with growing abandon as Claudia thrust it in harder and harder. Soon she bent over and found Sabina's clit too; subjecting her body to a delightful double assault. She exalted in the power that she could wield over her friend; a power that allowed her to give exquisite pleasure. The exercise of that power turned her on like nothing else; it was her secret fantasy – to be able to give whoever she chose, a taste of extacy.

Soon Sabina found all of Claudia's love craft totally overwhelming; she kicked and bucked and called out several names, her mouth opened and she licked her lips until the saliva drooled onto her throat. She collapsed; breathing hard, whereupon Claudia slowly eased the long, black dildo out of Sabina's clasping pussy. She licked some of Sabina's pussy-nectar from it then unceremoniously tossed it onto the floor; its work was done.

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O round mine eye your tresses shake!
Shall we not lie as we have lain?
Thus for love's sake, and sleep and wake,
Yet never break the chain…?

"Nay, never shall we break the chain…"

Claudia awoke with a start and just in time to catch her own words as her voice died away. It was a mystery to her how lines from poems she had read long ago suddenly surfaced from the depths of her subconscious. She often talked in her sleep and it caused her some concern. Her next thought was for Sabina. She turned but found that she was in bed alone. The sea breeze had died down and the room was silent. Claudia listened, thinking that Sabina might have gone into the en-suite bathroom. What she did hear gave her goose bumps. Clearly audible from the direction of the conservatory was the icy sound of the harpsichord. She sat up and listened intently for several seconds. What she heard was slow, plaintive and formal, like a solemn march. She reasoned that it might be Sabina that was playing but then she remembered her saying that she had no musical abilities.

She got up and slipped on a pair of denim shorts. There was nothing in her bedroom that she could use to defend herself so she picked up one of Eleanora's heavy brass candle sticks and held it up. It was unwieldy and awkward in her grasp but it would have to suffice as a weapon. She stepped out of the bedroom onto the landing and advanced one step at a time towards the edge of the curving wall. Beyond she could see eerie shadows cast by candlelight. Her eyes widened and she felt her bottom lip tremble but somehow she managed to remain calm and focused. The music continued to play, becoming more ornate and seemingly growing in complexity as she approached. She reflected that this was the first time that she had actually heard it and finally, every shred of doubt about this

mysterious house was removed from her mind. She swallowed hard and stepped forward.

There she saw Sabina standing between two large candles. She was facing away from her; she was nude with her arms upraised and her hair in wild disarray. In one hand she carried an ornate dagger with a long blade. Claudia now noticed two dark streams that had run down the girl's arms and onto her elaborate tattoos. Even by the flickering candlelight she could tell that it was blood. Then, as though drawn by a sudden impulse, she swiftly stepped to one side to look beyond Sabina. There, sitting upon the music stool she caught a fleeting glimpse of a shadowy, silver figure; like a man made of featureless, polished metal. The figure disappeared in the blink of an eye as Sabina turned to face Claudia and Claudia's last impression was of the harpsichord's keys raising and falling, seemingly of their own accord.

Claudia looked into the girl's face. It was pallid and her eyes were wide open. Claudia felt like yelling at her but fought the urge off. Instead she reached out and deftly took the dagger out of her hand. Sabina let it go easily and Claudia pulled her away from the harpsichord. Sabina moved with difficulty but eventually Claudia reached the light switch. As she turned on the light, Sabina collapsed insensibly. Claudia lifted her and saw immediately that she had stabbed herself in both shoulders and on her left side. While the cuts did not seem to be deep, she made sure Sabina was breathing then ran to the kitchen for bandages. She suddenly realized that she was still carrying a dagger and the heavy brass candlestick and so dropped them both.

She returned several minutes later to find that Sabina had gone and she called her name; Rushing first into the bedroom, she saw Sabina laying on her back upon the bed. Claudia rushed in and switched on the lights she looked down at her shoulders but there seemed to be no sign of the wounds or the streams of blood. The stab in her side had completely vanished also. Claudia suspected some sort of trick and tried twice to rouse her. She could not, so she again checked Sabina's pulse and her breathing. She found that her pulse was regular and her breathing deep and steady. To all appearances she seemed to be sleeping peacefully.

Claudia took a deep breath. She retrieved the dagger from the passageway and gripped it tightly. It was a beautiful, ornate weapon; apparently of considerable age and with a curved blade upon which there were clear traces of blood. So she had not imagined the wounds. The dagger seemed to be of Middle Eastern origin and she wondered where Sabina had got it; deciding finally that she must have brought it and the candles with her. But why? What on earth was she doing, and how had she stabbed herself in three places only to have the wounds vanish? Claudia looked at Sabina's placid, beautiful face. Any answers would have to wait until morning.

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As Claudia opened her eyes the first thing she saw was the geometric pattern of the rug running in zigzags towards the skirting board, then, a matter of inches away from her face, was the comforting curve of the black dildo. She had fallen asleep on the floor still clutching the dagger. She quickly sat up and turned towards the bed. With great relief she saw Sabina still sleeping peacefully. The sun had long risen above the horizon and the coolness of the air told her that it was around 6am. The

house was quiet as usual and she stepped out of the room to look at the conservatory floor. There were several spots of blood on either side of the candles; both of which had been extinguished. Claudia did not recall doing this but she was very glad that the flames had been put out by whatever means. Now she heard a feeble voice call her name and she swiftly returned to the bedroom. Sabina was awake and looked like she was suffering from a major headache.

Claudia stood by the bed and put the dagger down,

“How do you feel?”

“Terrible, do we have some coffee?”

“Coffee?”

“Yes, I’d like some, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Ok, just don’t go anywhere.”

Claudia stared at her silently while Sabina rubbed her temples. Suddenly she caught sight of the dagger on the bedside table and gasped. She looked Claudia in the eyes and immediately gauged her grave concern.

“Oh Claudia, I’m so sorry. I guess I owe you an explanation.”

“Ok, but once you’re feeling better. Rest now and I’ll get us some breakfast.”

When Claudia returned carrying the breakfast tray, she found Sabina sitting up in bed, smiling impishly.

“Well, you look a bit better.”

Sabina said nothing between gulps of espresso and big bites of bread and fig marmalade. Claudia watched her and was subtly reminded of her childhood. She smiled but quickly remembered the events of the previous night. Sabina took another gulp of coffee and put her cup down.

“Sit.”

Claudia made herself comfortable at the foot of the bed.

“Claudia my friend, this beautiful house of yours has a reputation. A reputation founded upon nothing but rumour I’ll admit, but the rumours go back many generations; even back to the time before the house was built. They say there was a spring sacred to Persephone upon this headland once.”

“Who says?” Sabina hesitated and looked down. “Professor Barricelli?” Sabina nodded and Claudia

was quick to reassure her. “It’s ok, the professor has already helped me. What else did he tell you?”

“Nothing, honestly. I went to see him because he knows more that anyone else about the history and folklore of the area.”

“Ok, so what were you up to last night?’ Sabina looked up at her with obvious shame in her eyes. “Were you trying to kill yourself?

Sabina took a sharp breath and her eyes widened.

“Oh no, it was nothing like that.”

“Ok, good. Go on.”

“You remember I said that my husband Alessandro died. Well he had cancer; an inoperable brain tumor. We went to see many doctors and specialists; both here in Italy, in the US, in Britain and in Europe. No one could help him, no one. I watched him die slowly. In the end I brought him home and with the help of the *professore* I made him as comfortable and as happy as I could. While I looked after him, Barricelli kept instructing him in music; a little every day. Eventually Sandro could no longer play so Barricelli played for him, even up to the very end…”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you.” Sabina gathered her thoughts for a few seconds then continued, “A few weeks before you arrived in Agrigento I was in Switzerland; at an oncology clinic in Lausanne. There I was diagnosed with the same tumour that Sandro had.” She paused and looked up at Claudia with tears in her eyes, “They gave me about six months to live.” She started crying and Claudia hugged her; holding her close until her sobs had subsided. She offered her more coffee which Sabina accepted. “It must have been a day or two before you moved in that I was driving past here on my way to San Leone to visit some friends for lunch. On the way back I remembered hearing that your grandmother had recently died. She was a fine lady by all accounts and I had heard how lovely *Tintamare* was. So I stopped here to have a look. It was early evening and it was still hot. I walked through the garden and saw how beautiful it is. I came to that strange curved wall with the orange tree growing out of it, you know?”

“Yes, I know the spot.”

“I suddenly felt very tired; I must have drunk too much at lunch, so I sat against the wall and soon fell asleep. Hours passed and it was well after dark before I awoke. I went home without even seeing the house. That night the dreams started. Actually it was the same dream and I had it every night until yesterday.”

“What did you see?”

“It’s very strange and I can’t understand most of it. I always see myself walking through the garden towards this house. It is night and there is a full moon low over the horizon. It is a harvest moon; yellow and dark featured. I am nude and I carry a dagger like the one I brought with me. I step into this house and there is nothing at first, just total darkness. Then I hear it, faintly at first but as I walk further into the house it becomes louder.”

“The music of a harpsichord?”

“Yes, have you heard it too?”

“Last night was the first time.”

“It plays in the darkness and its notes are full of sadness. Eventually I see a dim light, like the light of two candles and I walk towards it. The music becomes louder and more intense; almost frightening and then it suddenly stops. In the light I see a figure. He is standing still like a statue but a statue like no other; his entire body is a mirror and as I approach him I see only my own features reflected in his face. Now I offer him my blood; I prick my shoulders and side just enough to make them bleed; as you saw me do. As I stand before him wounded, he lifts his hands and cups them in front of my face. Water then springs from his hands. I know that I must drink it. When I do, I find it is sweet like mountain spring water but it is also ice-cold. The cold wakes me and it is always at dawn that I dream this, always just as the sun is about to rise.”

Claudia was silent for a long time.

“Wow,” she whispered, “That’s quite some dream. So that’s what you were doing last night, recreating the dream?”

“Please don’t be angry with me,” Sabina begged, “What could I do Claudia, I’m desperate. Sandro and I were childhood friends. I don’t know how we ended up with the same disease but I know I don’t want to die like he did.”

She started sobbing again and Claudia hugged her. In her gentlest voice she whispered,

“I’m not angry at you.”

“Then you must think me insane.”

“No, no I don’t. I’ve had quite a few strange experiences of my own since I moved in here.”

Sabina’s mood brightened considerably upon hearing this,

“Do you think the…entity or whatever it is, is trying to help me?”

She said this with such pathos that Claudia was almost moved to tears herself. Gravely she replied,

“I don’t know Sabina, I honestly don’t know, I’m sorry.”

“What do you think it is that lives here?”

“I don’t know what it is,” she began cautiously, “but it seems to communicate symbolically; through music, through dreams and through meaningful objects – I found a passionflower one day that it had left for me.”

“A passionflower?”

“Yes, it was so fresh it looked like it had just been picked. I don’t know where it came from. There is no passion fruit vine anywhere near the house as far as I know. The passion vine has the scientific name *Passiflora incarnata.”*

“Oh, as in your name!”

Claudia nodded whilst casting a knowing glance at her. She lowered her voice and went on,

“I hid my phone in the conservatory one night and secretly recorded its music. It found the phone and it could have smashed it but it didn’t. Whatever it is, it is secretive and probably has good reason to be. As far as I can tell it seems to mean us no harm, but how can I really be sure?”

“Have you seen it?”

“I think I caught a glimpse of it last night for the first time; sitting at the harpsichord. He was just as you described in your dream.”

“You said *he.”*

“Did I? Well I guess we just don’t know. What do you remember?”

“Ah, I was reliving the dream step by step. It was like I was in a trance and only partly in control of my actions. But I felt euphoric, like I had been drinking, then I remember seeing my reflection in his face. Then, I guess, you came in.”

“I think I probably caught him by surprise for once. You do remember stabbing yourself?”

“Yes but there was no pain; it was like I was making a sacrifice to him.”

“Or he needed a sample of your blood.”

“My wounds were healed.”

Claudia nodded gravely once again, “You were definitely bleeding when I found you.” After a pause she smiled sadly and added, “My poor Sabina.”

“It’s ok, I feel fine now and there’s plenty of life in me yet.” She laughed and just then, the sea breeze brought the aroma of the sea into the room. “A sweet scent,” thought Claudia, “and a far sweeter sound.”

“Do you feel up to going for a swim?

“Yes but only if we go nude.”

“I insist upon it!”

A quarter of an hour later Sabina sat on the balcony overlooking the bay. She was immediately captivated by the dazzling beauty of the scene before her. It was an exceptionally clear day and she delighted in seeing the distant prospect of Porto Empedocle. The cloudless sky seemed like an azure canopy flecked with gold above a plain of polished lapis-lazuli. The tranquility of the morning now filled her with a profound sense of peace. She gazed at the horizon and, as she had often done, imagined a face. It was the face of a fine-featured young man; a face that had smiled and greeted her with love every day and that she had kissed in return with fervent passion.

“Alessandro, mio caro, mio amante, mio amore perduto,” she whispered; adding her voice to the orisons of the breeze.

“I see you’re enjoying the view.” Claudia had returned, carrying a large bottle of sun-block.

“It’s just wonderful.”

“Yeah, my old flat back in Melbourne used to look out onto railway tracks. Now, off with the t-shirt.”

Not with out a little reluctance, Sabina slipped off the baggy tee that she had found in Claudia’s underwear drawer. The phrase ‘night clothes’ was a contradiction in terms to Claudia who now looked down with approval at Sabina’s pert breasts with their rose-bud nipples, as she squirted a generous amount of sun block onto her hand.

“This might be a bit cold.”

Without waiting for an answer she massaged the cream into Sabina’s shoulders and her upper back then slowly worked her way down to Sabina’s breasts. They were fine, ripe handfuls and Claudia relished the task of protecting them from the harshness of the sun. Now she could see that Sabina was relaxing and enjoying being pampered. She applied more sun block to Sabina’s face and looked deep into her beautiful blue eyes.

“There, you’re all done.”

“Great, now it’s your turn.”

To Claudia’s surprise, Sabina began by rubbing the creamy sun block into her breasts. She made a big deal out of doing so and Claudia could tell that she was enjoying herself.

“Good,” she thought, “I have opened you up to new experiences.”

After both women had anointed themselves, they sprinted to the back door. Laughter and flying limbs filled the air around them while locks of gold and purest ebony bounced and flew as they ran. Their voices were a delight to listen to as they competed to be the first to reach the stone stair. First Sabina then Claudia gained ascendancy; once outside in the brilliant Sicilian sun they sprinted across the hot sand on the pathway past the bustling bumblebees and black carpenters, past the multicoloured butterflies and all the myriad insects at work upon the wild blooms.

Had the small denizens of the garden observed their rapid transit; they would have seen two beautiful nude bodies glistening with sweat, two beautiful faces with teeth clenched and brows lowered in competition, two pairs of lithe, tanned legs exerting their power on the scorching pathway and two beautiful pairs of hips and buttocks completing a picture that the ancients might have immortalized in ode or epigram. As it was, only one pair of eyes saw them; a pair of fathomless, cold, unblinking eyes; as beautiful and terrible in their own was as the eyes of mythic Persephone whose shrine *Tintamare* had once been. The owner of that pair of eyes watched the women as they rapidly disappeared down the stone steps and smiled in his own way. His work was almost done.

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It was a simple glass cylinder, no more than seven or eight centimeters in height. It had been left rather precariously on the edge of the lid of the harpsichord. The lid had been shut. Claudia was far from surprised by this and said nothing. Both women had wandered into the room after returning from two blissful hours in the reviving waters of the bay and an hour sunbathing on the pebbled beach below the cliff. Now they stood looking at the glass as though expecting it to perform some marvelous feat at any moment. After several minutes Claudia noticed Sabina discreetly scanning the room.

“Forget it, he’s long gone,” she whispered, “or he might be standing right next to us and we wouldn’t know. Our ‘entity’ is a master of stealth.”

Sabina turned and looked at her with a rather worried expression then her brow wrinkled with annoyance when Claudia asked her if she was hungry.

“No, can’t you see? It’s just like in my dream, a glass of water; the healing water from his hands. I must drink it.”

She stepped closer to the glass but hesitated; looking back at Claudia for encouragement. Claudia merely stared at her and whispered,

“It’s purely up to you.”

Sabina reached out slowly and picked the glass up. Immediately she turned to Claudia, eyes wide with wonder,

“Feel it! Touch the glass; it is ice cold – just as in my dream.”

Claudia placed two fingers on the side of the glass. Sure enough the surface of the vessel was ice-clod; as though the water in it had just been taken from a refrigerator and yet there was no condensation on the surface of the glass and no telltale ring of water on the lid of the instrument. Claudia kept these minor mysteries to herself as Sabina took the glass back and walked with it to the window.

To herself she said, “It’s just pure water. I have to drink it, I must, it’s my only hope.”

Before Claudia had time to answer, Sabina turned back to face her and in one gulp, she drank the entire contents of the glass. Claudia was surprised and intuitively moved closer. Sabina said nothing but met Claudia’s eyes with a fleeting look of wild triumph. Then she collapsed.

Claudia rushed forward and caught her, placing her limp body upon the couch. She was still breathing and her pulse was strong, but not long after she had double checked these vital signs, frustration began to overcome her.

“Damn you!” She whispered loudly, “Damn you, who or whatever you are. Cure her, or so help me, I’ll burn this house and everything in it to the ground!”

Coming soon …Claudia Incarnata…Part VI