

Behind  
the Eyes  
of **Dorian Gray**



A Novel By

**Beth A. Carpenter**

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# Dedication

To my family for always encouraging and inspiring my imagination, to my friends for all of their criticism, good, bad and indifferent, and to everyone who helped me beat this book into shape.

With special love to my husband, John, and my daughter, Caitlyn Rose. Your continued support, patience and love while I write is the best motivation any author could have. I love you both.

# Behind The Eyes Of Dorian Gray



## Prologue

LONDON, 1893

The portraits that hung along the staircase leading from the foyer at street level up to the first floor of the townhouse were carefully removed from their places on the wall. The canvases were painstakingly cleaned, the frames cleared of the layer of dust that tarnished them, before being packed away in heavy, wooden crates for transportation and storage. The artwork was in remarkable condition, the colors still vibrant, the lines still crisp, each with an engraved silver plate identifying the individual the paintings captured for time immemorial. When the portraits were all packed, the handlers moved on to the sitting room and then every other room within the three-story building.

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The old townhouse had seen better days. Some of the plaster was now freeing itself from the ceiling high above the oval library, the brown stains of water damage marring the surface. The circular staircase in the corner was rusting, and many of the gaslight fixtures that were evenly dispersed throughout the three-level structure no longer worked. The hardwood floor was worn, the chimney needed fixing, and the lingering smell of mildew clung to the air. It needed work and a good airing out, a loving hand to restore the interior to its grandeur, for the outer structure was still quite sound. That was assuming a loving hand could be found.

The very last portrait was found in an upstairs room, covered with a cloth of deepest purple. The handlers quickly moved it to the foyer for packing, never uncovering it until the very last minute. There was no silver plate to indicate the identity of the individual in the painting. The packing crate was left bare and unmarked, and the men that handled it did so quickly, almost as if they were afraid it would burn them. There was an aura about the richly painted portrait, an aura of evil that the superstitious handlers did not care for.

It was a full-length painting, and, when the cloth was removed, an exquisite oil of a beautiful man in his mid-twenties was revealed. But, there was something bizarre about the portrait. It was considerably older than the rest, yet the clothing the man wore in it was of the present day. A light ruffle of white peaked above the flowered gray waistcoat, his overcoat and trousers made of a slightly darker pinstripe. Even in the portrait, his boots shined, the white of the spats a bold slash

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against the black of the foot. The chain to his gold pocket watch was visible above his pocketed right hand, a finely crafted walking stick with a silver tip clutched in his left, on which his family ring of deepest sapphire and gold glittered on his middle finger.

But it was the man's eyes that caught one's attention. Deep brown, set above chiseled cheekbones, they stared at a person and seemed to follow them through the room, as old portraits were wont to do. They made a person miss the full, red lips that were carefully placed above a strong, goateed chin and the carefully shaped mustache. Or even the dark hair that seemed to fall playfully across the right side of his forehead before making its way along his cheek to caress his shoulders. The eyes made all forget everything else in the portrait, as if the unidentified man was peering into a person's very soul.

It was whispered that the young aristocrat in the painting was the owner of this large townhouse. But no one could verify the rumor. The valet had long since fled the city, returning to his home in the Cotswold's, and none of the house staff could be found. The house had stood empty for two years, after the owner's mysterious death, no one coming to claim it, no one wanting it.

Now, the house was cleaned, the furniture covered, the books that lined the walls neatly arranged and dusted. The musty smell still clung to the air, but it was not as strong as it had been. No one knew who sent the missive instructing that the work be done. No one asked or cared. Closing up the

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house was simply a few extra shillings in the handlers' pockets and they loaded the portraits onto a cart and hauled them away. Some were to be given to a gallery, for they were worth a small fortune; some were sent to a London warehouse, only to be lost for all time. And one held a destiny not even the artist, who painted it could ever have imagined.

The house was ready for a new owner, if one was forthcoming.

Little did any of the handlers and cleaners know that the three-storied townhouse on the east docks of London, along the river Thames, would remain empty, devoid of life, for one-hundred and eleven years.

## Chapter One

LONDON, DECEMBER 21<sup>ST</sup>

Rachael Lafferty stomped the snow from her booted feet as she stepped into the street level entrance hall of her Victorian townhouse. She took the stairs two at time in her excitement to reach the upstairs foyer, running her fingers along the newly-installed banister as she went. She was waiting for a package, an item she had purchased at auction two weeks earlier. The crystal window of the upstairs door twinkled at her as she opened it and she took a deep breath of the cinnamon-scented air, which wafted from the potpourri in the jar by the door. At the sight of the long crate, setting against the sideboard to her right, the portrait inside waiting to be uncrated and proudly displayed, she squealed with delight. “Oh, good, you’re here!”

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She hung her leather jacket on the coat rack in the corner and rushed to the crate.

Following her up to the townhouse's second level foyer, Duchess Tessa Falcon, Rachael's best friend and also her literary agent, paused at the top of the stairs, a little out of breath. "I can only wonder what would make you so enthused that you ran up these stairs." The duchess shook her red curls to free them of snow, and water gently splattered against the glass of the entrance door, causing small rainbows to appear in the beveled panes. "There's no one here." She looked around as she removed her heavy coat, hanging it on the stand beside the door. She rubbed her arms briskly through her thick black sweater, her eyes scanning the dark corners high above her. Every time she entered Rachael's home, Tessa experienced a sense of foreboding, for which she could not find a reasonable explanation. "I don't understand how you can live here. This place gives me the creeps, Rachael."

Rachael ignored her complaint, having heard it over and over so many times that she could recite it in her sleep. She loved the huge townhouse as soon as she'd seen it, and bought it right away, not even caring how much work was needed to fix it up or why it had stood empty for so long. The realtor made sure he pointed out every flaw in the building, every item that needed repaired or replaced. He had actually made the comment that the place needed a match. Rachael didn't agree. She wanted the Victorian, complete with leaking pipes and peeling plaster.

And she had restored the place in timeless fashion. The

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walls of the upstairs foyer and the staircase leading to the third floor were encased in dark tongue-and-groove paneling, the deep brown enriched by the small lamps she had installed to replace the decaying gaslight fixtures. Family photos lined the staircase, the smiling faces of the Lafferty clan gazing down on the room with love. The foyer opened up into a large oval sitting room and library. The spiral staircase that stood just inside the enormous sitting room shined with a fresh coat of black paint. The hardwood floors were highly polished, the wide oak strips warm and golden. Her own unique touches of scented candles and potpourri were everywhere, her extensive collection of dragon figurines covering the empty spaces upon the bookshelves that lined the walls.

To Rachael Lafferty, the Victorian was not just a house. It was a home.

“My painting is who is here,” she answered as she grinned devilishly at her friend over the wooden box. “Or should I say, he is here.” She slipped her fingers between the edges of the wood and pulled. “Let me get something to pry this open with.” She quickly jogged from the foyer and disappeared.

Tessa’s curiosity was peaked and she took up position at the opposite end of the crate. “He?” She stared at the crate, her hands propped on her hips as she waited. “Hurry up, Rachael! Julian will be here in a half-hour to pick me up,” she called in a huffy tone. She cocked her head, wondering what hideous Art Deco monstrosity was inside. As soon as Rachael returned, Tessa helped her pull the wood free, the slats falling to the floor with a clatter. The painting inside was covered by

a cloth of purple which was barely visible through the packing material.

Rachael pulled the remainder of the packing material free, the straw-like substance littering the floor around her feet. Carefully they eased the portrait from its wooden confines, taking care not to catch the canvas on anything as it cleared the packing crate. They propped up the life-size portrait, which stood over six feet, and leaned it against the wall. Rachael pulled the purple cloth and acid-free protector from the gilt frame. "Turn on the light, Tessa," she instructed as she took a step back. She smiled as the overhead chandelier softly illuminated the room, casting its light upon the portrait. "Isn't he beautiful?" she whispered in awe as she propped her elbow on her arm.

Tessa looked at the portrait then back to Rachael before shrugging in boredom. "I can see why you like it. He looks like he stepped out of one of your novels."

Rachael pulled off her tan blazer, draping it on the newel post. The sparkles in her blue blouse danced as she moved back towards her painting. She tilted her head as she tapped her finger against her lips. Tessa was right, he did look like a character from one of the historical romances she wrote. She couldn't resist the childlike grin that lit her face. "Really? Which one?"

Tessa snorted in disdain as she walked away from the portrait. Her boots clicked on the wooden floor until she stepped on the Persian rug in the sitting room. The room was shaped like a huge oval, a large fireplace gracing the far wall, a litho-

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graph copy of Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Starry Night* above the mantle. Books lined the walls to the right and left from floor to ceiling, broken only by the entrances that were dispersed every five feet leading into the hallway both upstairs and down. The furniture was as old the house itself, original pieces that were priceless antiques dating back to the late 1800's and the glory that was Victoria's reign. They were arranged within the length and breadth of the Persian rug and provided a comfortable atmosphere for entertaining. "Any one of those tawdry gothic novels that you're so good at," Tessa replied as she stopped at the sideboard beneath the circular staircase. She poured each of them a glass of rich, sweet port wine from the crystal decanter and returned to Rachael's side, handing her one of the glasses. "So, who is he?"

Rachael took a sip of the spirit, rolling it over her tongue. It was sweet with the slightest nutty flavor, the perfect bouquet. "I don't know," she remarked wistfully.

Tessa looked at her in surprise, trying to keep the disbelief from her voice. "You bought a painting of a strange man and you don't know who it is?"

Rachael nodded, swirling the wine in the glass. "That's what I said." She moved into the sitting room, settling down in the brocade, wingback chair that stood just feet from the cold fireplace. She had spent a small fortune restoring the antiques in the house to their original splendor, the only liberty she had afforded herself being the new upholstery that covered the wing-backed chairs, love seat and sofa that graced the room. The craftsmanship that was the wooden framework of

the furniture was unparalleled and needed little to no work.

They were not the only items within the townhouse she had fixed. New plaster coated the walls of the halls, fresh paint in the lightest of tan bringing them warmth. The plaster on the ceilings had also been repaired, a new decorative medallion installed around the fixture of the large chandelier that hung over the library. She had refurbished the old kitchen with the best countertops, cabinets and appliances money could buy, hiring handcrafters to create everything that was not electrical. Even the bath upstairs had been modernized, although she kept the large claw-foot tub that she had found within when she bought the house. Long, hot bubble baths were her main vice and she enjoyed them tremendously in the deep tub. Every fireplace worked with a clear chimney and vented flue, every window was storm protected, every tile on the roof new. The entire house appealed to her romantic side and the modernization gave it a breath of new life.

Rachael gazed at Tessa as she sat primly on the sofa. “Oh, face it, Tess. He could be anyone,” she commented in regard to the portrait she could see standing in the foyer from her seat. “So I bought a nameless portrait. Sue me.”

Tessa simply shook her head. “Now I know you are crazy.” Her eyes met Rachael’s and the two women chuckled softly at the unspoken jest. She finished her wine as the mantel clock chimed seven. “Well, at least you’re happy. I suppose that is all that matters.” She stood up, returning her glass to the sideboard. “Julian will be here any moment. I’ll help you hang

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your mysterious man before I leave,” she offered as Rachael sat her glass down. Both women passed through the wide doorway back into the upstairs foyer.

Together, Rachael and Tessa lifted the portrait of the handsome, young aristocrat. They carried it up the short flight of stairs to the landing. “Right here. I hung up the nails two days ago.” She pointed to the empty space on the wall.

“Smart girl,” Tessa commented. She glanced at the hangar on the back of the portrait and they lifted it into place.

The portrait fit perfectly in the spot Rachael had chosen for it, almost as if it was designed to hang there. The two small lamps hanging on either side of the painting, their pale blue shades softening the harshness of the bulbs beneath, cast a warm glow on the man’s face, bringing it to life. His eyes seemed to brighten in the shadowy confines of the landing. There was a luster to his boots and the chain of his pocket watch. And, if one didn’t know better, the portrait’s subject seemed to suddenly stand up straighter.

Rachael stared at the portrait with tears in her eyes. He was inspiring, with his full red lips and twinkling brown eyes, and her fingers wiggled with the desire to type, a new story working its way through her body. It sent a pleasurable shiver down her spine. “Do you see it Tessa?” she asked softly. She still couldn’t get over the raw beauty of the man in the portrait. She trotted down the stairs and looked up at the painting from the foyer floor. “It’s as if he could just walk from the canvas.”

Tessa looked down at Rachael. “You need a long vaca-

tion.” She heard the soft rap of knuckles on the glass door and calmly walked across the foyer, fetching her coat. “I better not find you standing in the same spot come morning.” She wrapped her scarf around her head before giving Rachael a sisterly kiss on the cheek. “I mean it,” she warned as she closed the door.

Rachael took one last look at the portrait and turned away, bending down to gather up the packing material that was spewed across the floor. She tossed it all back into the crate, pausing every now and then to study the portrait of her mystery man. She could almost feel his eyes on her back as she moved about, clearing the foyer of the packing crate and inside material. That fact didn’t seem to bother her in the least. She reached out and turned off the foyer light just as the door opened, letting in a gust of cold air from the street side entry on the floor below.

“See? She has moved. Rachael is not a statue, Tessa.” Julian Falcon, the head curator at the British Museum of Art, remarked as he gazed at his wife as she made her way back up the stairs from the entrance hall. He swept into the foyer, his tan wool coat billowing around him as he took the stairs to the landing two at a time. He considered the painting of the unknown man with a critical eye. He motioned behind him with his left hand. “Turn on the light, love. These lamps aren’t bright enough.”

Tessa shrugged and with a sigh, she did as her husband requested. Standing beside Rachael they watched as Julian slipped on his small, wire-rimmed glasses and began to in-

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spect the portrait. “He insisted on seeing it, Rachael. He turned the car around and drove back here,” she whispered to her friend, not wanting to disturb Julian, who running a trained and critical eye over the canvas.

Rachael glanced at Tessa. “Oh, please,” she teased as she leaned against the newel post. “You barely had enough time to get to the car.”

Julian began at the bottom of the portrait and took his time, gazing over every inch of the full-sized painting. He ran his hand carefully along the gilt frame, shaking his head in disbelief at what he was seeing. “This painting is,” he paused searching for the right word, “phenomenal. Definitely mid-1700s.” He stepped back, cocking his head before bending down to gaze at the scarlet slash of the artist’s signature in the lower right hand corner. “Rachael, where did you get this?” he asked softly. He never took his eyes from the portrait.

“At an auction about two weeks ago. I was about to leave when they brought it out.” She shrugged. “No one bid on it and they were about to close the auction when I raised my little card.” She smiled with glee as she waved her hand. “I got him for a song.” She climbed the stairs to stand next to Julian.

“How much, if you don’t mind me asking,” Julian inquired as he lightly touched the canvas, feeling the rough edges of the oil paint that was used to create the masterpiece before him.

“Two thousand pounds.” Rachael glanced down at him as he coughed in disbelief, withdrawing a white handkerchief from his pocket and dabbing at his lips. She could see the

sparkle in his eyes and her smile faded only slightly as she sensed that the museum curator was about to confirm her suspicion. “He’s worth more, isn’t he?”

Julian stood up and removed his glasses, carefully folding the arms down and placing them in their case. “Rachael, this portrait is priceless.” He tucked the glasses case back into the inner pocket of his coat along with the handkerchief. “Do you have any idea who this man is?” His green eyes met hers in earnest.

Tessa snorted as she leaned against the sideboard, her hands folded before her. “She has no idea, Julian. She bought a painting of a nameless man.”

Julian’s eyebrows rose as he gazed at his wife, turning slightly to lay a hand on the banister, motioning to the portrait with the other. “Tessa, he is not nameless.” He turned back to the painting in awe, admiring the fine brush strokes that detailed the man’s rich clothing and accouterments. “This painting has been missing for over a hundred years.” He chuckled softly. “This is none other than Dorian Gray.”

“Dorian Gray?” Tessa scoffed as she stood up and walked towards them. “Jules, that is a story. A literary classic, but a work of fiction.”

Rachael moved closer to the portrait entranced, her eyes locked on the eyes in the painting. “Dorian Gray. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was written by Oscar Wilde in 1891. It’s the only full-length novel he ever produced. A beautiful, yet sad, work of fiction about a lonely and decadent man in Victorian England.”

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Julian shook his head as he walked down the stairs. “But it wasn’t fiction,” he remarked in excitement. He drew his coat back and tucked his hands into the pockets of his charcoal trousers. “Oscar Wilde was none other than the character Lord Henry Wotton, Dorian’s friend and confidante. He was among the people who identified Dorian’s withered corpse in one of your second floor rooms.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “Wilde had also seen the portrait before Dorian died. He had seen the old man in the painting and made sure to warn Dorian away.” He shrugged. “And we know what happened,” he added as an afterthought as he looked at Rachael knowingly.

Rachael stood still, stood gazing at the portrait before continuing Dorian Gray’s sordid little tale where Julian had left off. “When Dorian slashed the painting in his relentless search to regain his lost youth, he signed his own death warrant. The portrait, restored itself to the image of Dorian as a virulent young man.” She glanced at Julian, an odd look on her face. “At least the image of the virulent young man he still was at the time. Which explains his clothing compared to the age of the painting itself,” she whispered in fascination as she lightly ran her fingers along the brushstrokes that made up the gray pinstripe of Dorian’s finely tailored suit.

Julian smiled up at her. “Precisely.” He pointed to Rachael. “This is why the painting is invaluable. I would have it insured, if I were you.”

Tessa’s mouth dropped open. “Please don’t tell me the two of you believe this nonsense.” She sniffed derisively. “You are

both insane. You've been breathing London's foul air for too long." She turned on one heel and headed back out into the night. "I'll be waiting in the car," she called back to her husband, having had enough of legends and gothic tales based on a piece of literature.

Julian laughed as he watched his wife walk back out into the cold. "It is a fanciful story, but it is also the truth. I wrote my doctoral thesis on Dorian Gray and the portrait Basil Hallward had painted. Some of Hallward's paintings are displayed in the gallery, which is how I knew he at least was real." He looked over his shoulder, giving the portrait of Dorian Gray one last look before making his way to the glass door of the foyer. He stopped, one hand on the doorknob as his gaze lingered on the painting for another brief second before looking at Rachael. "I wonder where it has been since 1893. I suppose we'll never know. He's in good hands with you, Rachael." He nodded to her. "Good night." Julian closed the door gently behind him and the house grew silent once again.

Rachael smiled at the painting, marveling at her good fortune. "Good night, Dorian Gray," she stated warmly, chuckling at the fact that she had said goodnight to a painting. She made her way back to the foyer, locked the inside door for the night and turned off the light. She glanced once last time at the painting before stepping into the sitting room and lighting the fire. By the time she returned from the kitchen with a hot cup of Earl Gray tea, the room had warmed as the fire crackled cozily. She decided to take the night off

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from writing and settled on the couch with a book. It wasn't long before she was asleep, her tea cold on the table beside her, and thoughts of Dorian Gray whirling through her mind.

The small clock upon the fireplace mantel in the sitting room chimed midnight. The witching hour. The fire had burned down to low embers, emitting a soft orange glow across the hardwood floor. Only the small lamp Rachael had been reading by illuminated the large sitting room, its light not even touching the shadows that seemed to close in upon the sleeping figure on the couch. The light didn't touch the bottom of the third floor balcony. Occasionally the house settled with a soft creak, almost as if it were sighing. Beyond that, the house was still, as if waiting for something.

Snow fell outside, blanketing London with its white radiance beneath the electric street lamps that were evenly dispersed along the roadways. It glittered outside the glass panes of the shops and eateries, sparkling in the night. Even the city, usually bustling at midnight, was silent and still, holding its breath as the deepest dark fell upon it. Not even the inhabitants of the old city braved the cold, dark night of winter, having scurried indoors at the first sign of inclemency. It was a perfect night for staying inside to keep warm, watching the television, listening to music, enjoying one's family.

The portrait shuddered in earnest, expanding like the lungs of a newborn child as it took its first breath of air outside the womb. The paint that had been carefully placed on the canvas moved with the fabric beneath it, each stroke of the brush lengthening before returning to its proper size, stretch-

ing, retracting, stretching, retracting. A soft glow emanated from the painting, starting above the heart of the man captured for all time in oil and moving outward, illuminating the raised pigments, making them appear as if they were once again wet. The colors suddenly became brighter, warmer, fresher.

Dorian Gray became aware at the last stroke of midnight and he could feel himself finally starting to warm up after an eternity of coldness and darkness, similar to this night that gave him rebirth. His deep brown eyes began to clear, focusing on a strange, new world as he stared down into the foyer of a large home, the surroundings familiar yet strange. It took him quite a few moments to realize that the room he gazed into was the second-floor foyer of his own townhouse on the East docks of London. Yet he could not place the uneasy feeling that settled into the pit of his stomach as his gaze traversed the room, recognizing only a few pieces of the furniture that were strategically positioned along the walls.

He had no idea how long he had been trapped in his own portrait, positive that his decadent and less than savory lifestyle had damned him to the deepest pits of hell. He took a deep shuddering breath, the first since his tragic demise in 1891. It caused the canvas to move slightly, as if a soft breeze had touched upon it. It was at that time he took his first tentative step forward.

Dorian felt the pull of the canvas, the painting not wanting to give him up. Yet he was determined to become free and he forced his body to move. He reached out slowly, his hand

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appearing from the portrait like a white specter, his booted foot following. The colors of the painting stretched behind him, reluctant before snapping silently back into place on the canvas as the man continued his forward motion. His face became elongated as it pushed through the shroud that held him in the painting, his hair falling to his shoulders as it was finally released. The magic that surrounded the portrait shattered, the glow that came from deep within intensifying until the landing in the foyer stairwell was coated in brilliant white that disappeared as fast as it had appeared.

For a moment, the world swam around Dorian, blurring the colors that sprang to life as he stepped onto the solid landing beneath his portrait. His vision cleared and could feel the silver top of his walking stick, cold and hard beneath the palm of his left hand. He raised it into the air, studying it for a moment in remembrance before tapping its tip in the palm of his right hand. A small smile crossed his lips as he breathed a sigh of relief. He was finally free of the portrait that had haunted him for so long. He gazed back from whence he came to see his image still upon the canvas, the colors now more faded, before turning on the ball of his foot to descend the stairs.

Photos lined the wall to Dorian's left, and he pondered over each one for a few moments before moving on, the faces unknown to him, causing him to contemplate whom they could possibly be. The clothing they wore was strange to him, the women in trousers of a blue material he had never seen before. Many of the women wore their hair cut above the

shoulders, something that was almost of unheard of in his day. Even the style of the men's clothing and hair was puzzling.

He paused at the last portrait on the wall, his fingers sliding slowly down the glass that covered it. It was of a single woman with piercing violet eyes and bow-shaped lips that were tilted in the softest of smiles. Her low cut blouse revealed an ample amount of creamy skin and his eyes widened in curiosity. "And who are you?" he whispered in question, pleasantly surprised by what he saw. His cultured, accented voice was rough from disuse, yet he dismissed it knowing that a strong cup of tea would cure the raspiness in the back of his throat.

Dorian continued through the foyer, running his fingers along the small table that stood near the door. The silver plate that once held visitors calling cards still sat in the middle of the tabletop, polished and bright, but now it held a set of odd-looking keys. He picked up the keys, dangling them before him as he studied their shape. They were not the standard skeleton keys he knew. Instead, they were smaller, the shiny metal cold and jagged. He grunted softly as he replaced them in the silver plate. Turning, he gazed once again through the room, noticing the crystal chandelier above him and the fresh paint that coated the walls. Even the hardwood floors beneath his feet no longer held the scratches and scuffmarks it once did. He ran his fingers along the leather jacket that hung on the stand in the corner, the material soft, a stark comparison to the hard keys he had just handled. After a moment, he continued to the entrance door, reaching out to wrap his fingers

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around the bronze doorknob that beckoned him. Instead of the solid metal he expected to grip, his fingers passed right through the knob. His brows furrowed as he tried again with the same results.

“That’s strange,” he mumbled, staring at his fingers as he rubbed them together. Why could he handle objects in the house yet he could not grip the handle of the front door? Was it a trick, some strange repercussion that allowed him to leave his painted prison but not his home? He blinked in confusion and once again reached out to stroke the warm leather of Rachael’s jacket. He looked back to the door and tried grasping the knob for a third time. The results were still the same. He simply could not grasp it. With a disgusted sigh, he set his walking stick next to the coat rack and moved on into the sitting room.

Dorian’s boots were silent up the hardwood floor as he moved through the foyer to the sitting room. One would have expected to hear the click-click of his boots as he moved, but there was nothing. He gazed around the room that had once been his favorite. All of the furniture that graced the room once belonged to him, although the upholstery that now covered it was in considerably better condition than he remembered. It was also different. Whereas his furniture had been upholstered in muted tones of burgundy and light tan, the fabric that covered the antiques were patterned with small flowers and complimented with light mauves and pinks. He looked at the mantel clock as it chimed half past twelve. Withdrawing his pocket watch from his vest pocket, he

opened it with a soft click in the silent room. The mantel clock was fast, again. He snorted slightly, for the clock above the fire had never kept the proper time. Satisfied, he snapped the watch shut and returned it to his vest. Slowly he made his way around the room, touching a book here, a trinket there as he inspected every subtle nuance of change that occurred in his home.

The soft feminine moan behind him gave him pause and he turned. Dorian cautiously approached the sofa, taking care not to entangle his feet in the odd cord that ran from the room's only source of illumination to an even odder square in the wall. He gazed over the back of the couch and found himself suddenly staring into the sleeping face that graced the stairway wall. Her thick eyelashes lay softly upon her cheeks as if they were the finest black lace. Her rose colored lips were slightly parted as she slept, her cheek cradled upon a delicate hand. He watched as she shivered slightly, turning more fully on her side and away from him, drawing her knees to her chest as she curled into a ball. The book that was in her other hand slipped free, falling to the floor with a dull thud as her fingers relaxed.

Dorian walked slowly around the sofa and retrieved the volume, gazing at the title embossed on the leather binding. "*Nicholas Nickleby*," he read out loud. "A bit dry, but still very good." He peered down at Rachael before striding to the wall and replacing the book on the shelf where it belonged. He gazed over the titles, noticing many classics by Dickens, Shakespeare, and the Brontë sisters. There were also many

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other authors, names he did not recognize. The shelves that lined the walls of the sitting room were filled from top to bottom, a fact that comforted him. It seemed that the stranger, who inhabited his home was well-read, a pleasing thought that left intelligent conversation an option. That was assuming she could see and hear him, a fact that yet remained to be discovered.

A soft blanket was draped across the back of the chaise in the corner, and he retrieved it, snapping it open. Gently, he covered the beautiful and mysterious woman, who had invaded his home, then he reached out to lightly stroke his forefinger along the line of her jaw. Her skin was soft and warm beneath his touch, sending a jolt through his body that he was not expecting.

He smiled to himself, the simple gesture softening his features. He retreated to the circular staircase that led to the upper floor, pausing at an opening between the tall bookshelves to gaze down. He could see more clearly the subtle, yet feminine, changes that graced the dark room below, the softness of the newly remade furniture, the small trinkets that littered the shelves and tables of a womanly bent. He could not help returning his gaze to her face and he let it trace the features of the sleeping woman. "The face of an angel," he murmured haughtily, "with the body of temptress," he finished in a husky growl.

Satisfied that she would not awaken, he continued on along the balcony to peer in the rooms he once inhabited in life. He found himself inexplicably drawn to the room that

once held the bane of his existence, the smallest of the three bedrooms on the second floor. It was the furthest room from the master bedroom and usually the coldest. He stood within the doorway, his eyes scanning the room. The easel that had propped up his life-size portrait for more than a century was gone. In its place before the double windows that overlooked the street was a large oak desk. An unusual two-inch thick rectangle stood on a pedestal in the middle of the desk, its surface flat and black. There was a board beneath with the letters of the alphabet scattered across in what appeared to him to be in no semblance of order. It reminded him of the typewriter he had seen a friend use to compose letters and articles that appeared in the daily press, except it was considerably more compact. A smaller box sat beside it, a red ball perched in the middle of it.

“What is this?” he queried softly as his fingers tentatively touched the ball. The rectangle flared to life, causing him to squint in the darkness as he stared at the image of a dragon, which had appeared before him. A small arrow moved across the image as he rolled the ball in its cradle, his brow furrowing. “Interesting.”

Dorian lifted his hand and stepped away from the desk, glancing back momentarily before returning to his inspection of the room. His armoire, which once housed his elegant clothing, stood against the wall to the right of the desk. Carefully he opened the doors finding that now it was filled with soft angora sweaters and neatly pressed trousers, including a few of the strange blue ones he had seen in the photo. He

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closed the doors and moved to the window, brushing aside the curtain as he gazed upon the river Thames. The snow glistened as it fell, covering the street below. Metal and glass beasts lined the roadway opposite the river, horseless carriages of the modern age that he had read about before his death, but had never seen.

A single dark eyebrow rose as he considered how much things had changed since his death. He had the desire to feel the cold air on his skin and reached for the window latch, planning to open it wide for a brief moment to breathe the air of London. But as with the foyer door below him, his hand could not grip the latch, his fingers simply slipping through it as if he was not even there. With a disgusted sigh, he turned away from the window and once again studied the room.

Dorian's eyes fell to the bookcase beside the door and he carefully made his way around the desk to peruse the books that were neatly lined upon the top shelf. He glanced across the titles printed on the spines, stopping when one caught his attention. He picked it up and smiled. "*The Rake Notorious*. There is a term I haven't heard in a long time," he commented to himself as he thumbed through the pages of the volume in his hand. He paused, carrying the book back to the desk and glancing at the picture on the back flap of the dust jacket by the light of the computer monitor. "So," he breathed in mild surprise, "your name is Rachael Lafferty." He read the short biography. "An American nonetheless."

He closed the book and tucked it beneath his arm as he

walked from the room, gazing over the balcony to spy on Rachael still sleeping below. Her chest rose and fell in deep sleep. "Sweet dreams, Miss Lafferty," he whispered before touching the fingers of his left hand to his lips and throwing her a kiss.

His footsteps were once again silent as he moved along the upper floor towards the master bedroom, pushing open the double doors and pausing. The room was just the way he remembered it. A large four-poster bed stood on the far wall, a set of round back Victorian chairs in the alcove before the window. A heavy dresser with a full mirror stood across the room from the bed and he paused at it, leaning forward to glance at himself. "Haven't changed a bit, Gray. Not one bit," he murmured as he smoothed his fingers along his mustache. His hair was still thick and a rich mahogany brown, falling to his shoulders with an impish curl, not even a hint of silver running through it. His cheekbones were still high and chiseled, his skin smooth with no lines, no wrinkles, no crow's feet around the eyes. His lips had retained the fullness of youth and his clothing still held the crisp feel of newness.

He turned away from the mirror, pleased with the reflection he had gazed upon and tossed the book onto the bed. It softly thudded on the lavender bedspread. "Not exactly my color, but it will do," he remarked off-handedly about the spread. The lamp on the night table was lit and he shrugged off his jacket and vest, tossing them casually on one of the chairs before removing his boots. He sat on the bed, his brow furrowing. The mattress was harder than he expected, but it

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seemed comfortable enough as he propped the pillows against the headboard. The movement caused the scent of vanilla to drift to his nose and he inhaled deeply, closing his dark eyes and savoring the smell. Leaning back against the pillows, he gracefully crossed his ankles and opened the book, quickly becoming involved in Rachael's story of the notorious rake.

The still winter night settled around the old townhouse, a comfortable silence as the snow continued to lightly fall. The impression of the house holding its breath dissipated, as if it knew its master was home. Had anyone walked into the bedroom that night, they would've seen the most unusual of sights. A hard covered book floated above the lavender coverlet, the pages eerily turning by themselves in the quiet London night, and only the sound of invisible fingers upon paper disturbed the stillness.

## Chapter Two

DECEMBER 22<sup>ND</sup>

Rachael hummed to herself as she carried the third plastic storage box of Christmas decorations from the attic of her townhouse. It was the only area of the Victorian she had not modernized, with the exception of new insulation, and it was large enough to eventually turn into a writing studio. She knew exactly how it would look when she was done with it, the walls that formed the peak of the roof covered with white board that would eventually hold her Post-It note outlines. That was assuming she could bring herself to clean the attic out. There were steamer trunks of items scattered all around it and she had yet to have the time to look through them. She paused on the landing, gazing at the full-length portrait of

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the tragic Dorian Gray. “Are those steamer trunks in my attic yours, Mr. Gray?” she asked playfully. She chuckled at her own silliness before continuing to the floor of the foyer.

The compact disc player in the sitting room spilled the sounds of Christmas carols through the townhouse and Rachael found herself humming along with them as she lined up the boxes of decorations. A ten-foot Douglas fir stood in the corner opposite Dorian’s painting, white lights already twinkling from its boughs, keeping time with the music that was playing. She picked up the remote and turned the music up as she rubbed her stiff neck, rolling it to loosen her muscles. She didn’t see the apparition that had been watching her, following her from level to level as she decorated for the holiday.

Dorian stepped up behind Rachael, reaching out to rub her neck, his fingers merely inches from her flesh when the second-floor entrance door swung open. He closed his eyes, stifling a growl of aggravation at the intrusion. He had been enjoying his quiet contemplation of her, listening to her voice as she sung with the carols that emanated from the stereo in the library. He wanted to know more about her, wanted her to slow down long enough to comfort her, to ease her stiff muscles. She had been on the move since dawn, having woken from her sleep on the sofa and returning to the bedroom, totally unaware of his presence in the house. She had made an impression on Dorian, one that he could not yet describe, but one, nonetheless.

Dorian turned his attention to Tessa Falcon, taking an

immediate dislike to the woman. She exuded arrogance, and he had known plenty of women like her. They had no qualms about complimenting one to their face before cutting them off at the waist behind their backs. He had to find out what her connection was to Rachael.

His eyes narrowed as he stood before her, blocking her path as she closed the door behind her, pausing to stare at the tree. When Tessa did not scream at his presence, he simply stepped back, blending into the shadows of the corner as if he was part of them. Her lack of reaction confirmed a nagging suspicion that had plagued him the entire night and it opened another door to a myriad of questions and possibilities. He gracefully folded his perfectly manicured hands at his waist, his eyes following Rachael's every move. He was a patient man and he knew he could wait until the opportune moment before determining whether she was an asset or a liability to the young woman, who now resided in his home. For Dorian had taken an instant liking to Rachael the moment he had set eyes on her sleeping on the couch the night before.

"Good Lord, Rachael," Tessa exclaimed rudely, "do you think it's large enough?" She removed her leather gloves, laying them on the sideboard before hanging her coat upon the rack in the corner.

Dorian sighed in disgust, and he pushed the coat out of his line of vision. He smiled as he saw Rachael silently mocking the woman as she added another strand of white lights to the back of the tree.

Tessa didn't see. She checked her cell phone before setting

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it by her gloves. “You always did have a penchant for excess,” she sneered with a haughty shake of her head. “Tea?” she asked as she rubbed her hands together.

Rachael leaned over one of the boxes, pushing items aside as she searched for the ornaments she wanted. “I have a penchant for large Christmas trees, Tessa,” she remarked as she wiped her hands on her blue jeans. She straightened, her eyes dancing as she looked at the pine. “Besides, a large Victorian townhouse deserves an equally large tree.”

She turned away from the tree, shivering for a moment as Dorian slipped behind her, his hand brushing across the back of her neck. “You let the cold air in,” she chided Tessa as she walked towards the sitting room. When a glint of silver in the corner caught her eye, she stopped and picked up the ornate, silver-tipped walking stick. “Where did this come from?” she asked as she studied it, rolling the finely crafted cane in her hands, taking in the minute detail of the scrollwork along its length. The handle wiggled slightly in her hand and she tugged, revealing a very sharp sword within the length of the cane. “Oh my,” she giggled as she pulled it free. “*En garde!*”

Tessa backed away, her hands up in defense. “Put that away before you get hurt! Really, Rachael, the things you purchase.” She snorted. “You’re becoming way too involved in the research of your stories.”

Rachael slid the sword back into the cane. “Did you leave this here?” she asked curiously, wondering if Tessa was playing a joke on her. The literary agent knew of her love for unique things, and the cane with its hidden sword would’ve

been a perfect gift.

“Hardly.” Tessa waved her hand in dismissal. “I would suspect that one of the delivery men left it.” She turned away, walking deeper into the sitting room.

Dorian stood on the landing beneath his portrait. “Not highly likely,” he muttered in annoyance. He never expected anyone to see the cane, and his curiosity was peaked. How could they see his walking stick and not him? It simply defied reason and logic, and added to the mystery that surrounded both him and his release from the portrait. Were the two tied together? They almost had to be. He stroked his mustache as he watched the two women, his mind racing in contemplation of his sudden freedom.

Rachael turned her head towards the stairs. “Did you say something?” she called as she set the cane back in its place. When Tessa didn’t answer, she shrugged and followed her friend through the house, to the kitchen in the back. She leaned against the island counter as Tessa filled the kettle and set it on the stove. “How was dinner last night?” she inquired, attempting to make small talk as Tessa prepared the ceramic teapot. “Was that new restaurant as good as everyone said?”

Tessa shrugged. “It was all right. The service was slow, but the quality of the food made up for it.” She looked at her friend as she leaned across from her. “Where is my manuscript? You were supposed to have it to me two days ago. I cannot keep putting off the publisher, Rachael.”

Dorian stood outside the kitchen, listening to Tessa berate the younger woman. He shook his head as he walked away,

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pausing as he continued listening to the conversation.

“Do you hear footsteps?” Tessa asked suddenly as she looked from the kitchen door into the hall. She walked to the entrance, glancing up and down the curved corridor. “Hello?”

Rachael snorted. “Great. Now you’re hearing things, Tess.” She poured tea into the cups she had set on the table. “And you talk about me.”

Dorian smiled to himself as he continued back to the foyer, sure that the sound of his footsteps could still be heard in the kitchen. He had enjoyed the discomfort he heard in Tessa’s voice when she called out. He gazed at the enormous tree skeptically and wondered just how close to Christmas it was, and he peered into the boxes of decorations Rachael had set out. He bent down, resting one arm on his gray trousered knee as he lifted a small glass ornament from the box.

The small, strange, gray box the woman called “Tessa” had lain on the table chirped and he stood, picking up the cell phone and staring at it. He let his eyes slide sideways at the laughter that erupted from the kitchen, before sliding it into his pocket and returning to his inspection of the items before him. He picked up a whimsical ornament of a teddy bear and shook his head. “No, no, dear Rachael, these will never do.”

He stood and made his way up the staircase, heading for the attic. Dorian was surprised to find the old steamer trunk that held his decorations still in the farthest corner of the attic, right where he had left it after he had celebrated his last Christmas on Earth. He ducked beneath the rafter, opening the trunk carefully after blowing away the debris that covered

the lid. He reached in to push aside the decaying packing material, and it crumbled to dust in his hands, giving him pause, remembering the feeling of his demise as his body decomposed the same way. His lips thinned as he brushed his hands on his pants, pushing the memory away, his eyes resting upon the purpose of his journey to the attic.

Reverently, Dorian lifted from the trunk the porcelain angel that had graced his own tree at one time. Her velvet dress was faded and he half expected it to disintegrate when he touched it. Yet it didn't, the tight seal of the trunk protecting it from the ravages of time. He rubbed a gold curl between his fingers before setting her aside and gathering up the now antique crystal ornaments that were stored within. He stood and felt the phone in his pocket vibrate. Shifting his gifts to Rachael into one arm, he retrieved the small device and tossed it in the trunk, shutting the lid before leaving the attic.

When he returned to the landing, he tilted his head to listen for Rachael and Tessa. He could hear their voices drifting from the kitchen and raised in argument, discussing what he could only assume was a scene in the newest of novels that the author was penning. He did not like the arrogant tone Tessa took with Rachael, yet he knew that he was powerless to do anything about it.

Or was he? He looked at the coat hanging on the rack behind him and set the ornaments and angel aside, and, picking up his cane, he unsheathed the sword. With two quick slashes, he let his displeasure be known, shredding Tessa's coat. Content for the moment, he returned to the tree and be-

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gan to put the ornaments on it.

“Fine, fine. Let the scene stand as is. Who am I to argue?” Tessa’s voice floated from the entrance of the sitting room into the foyer. “And, about this party, I still think you should allow me to have it at the estate. There is no way you are going to be ready.” Her boots clicked on the hardwood floor as she crossed the sitting room. “Besides, this place is...” She stopped just within the doorway, her mouth hanging open, her words dying on her lips.

Rachael sighed as she pushed past Tessa, not seeing what had silenced her friend. Rachael pulled her long hair into a ponytail. “Yes, I know, Tessa. Creepy,” she finished sarcastically, glancing back at her and wiggling her fingers. She laughed as she stopped walking, turning to look at Tessa. “What’s the matter? You’re always teasing me about this place being spooky. Can’t I have a little fun back?”

Tessa had paled visibly. “Spooky? Right now the word *haunted* comes to mind,” she managed to stammer. “Okay, Rachael. Pack up your belongings and let’s go. You are not staying here,” she ordered as she set the teacup she had been carrying on the sideboard. She picked up her gloves, her brow furrowing as she bent over to peer under the piece of furniture. “Where’s my phone?” she asked in a panic.

Rachael started to follow Tessa, stopping mid-turn as she saw what had caused Tessa’s sudden panic. “By your gloves,” she answered breathlessly as she covered her mouth with her hand, tears springing to her eyes. She stared lovingly at the angel in her red dress atop the tree, slowly reaching out to

slide her fingers over a crystal ornament of a partridge. “Tessa, she’s beautiful.” She cradled the bird in her hands, looking at the other woman. “And these ornaments. Where did you find them?”

Tessa straightened, staring at the ornaments that Rachael was admiring and touching ever so gently. “Nowhere,” she remarked, the slight hitch of fear marring her cultured voice.

Rachael laughed. “Oh, stop it, Tessa. C’mon. Tell me. How did you do this?” She walked over to the door, swinging it open and gazing down into the entrance hall. “Come out Julian. The game is up, I’ve seen the tree,” she called out into the empty space. She stepped through the door, leaning over the railing to peer into the lower entrance hall, her lips pursing when she didn’t see Julian hiding from her.

Dorian leaned on the balcony railing above the library. He had a clear view down into the foyer from his vantage point and was utterly amused. After spending the night reading the novel Rachael had penned, he knew she would love the ornaments that survived in the trunk upstairs. He leaned his hip on the rail, clasping his knee, enjoying the fear that emanated from Tessa.

Tessa shook her head vehemently as she pulled Rachael back into the foyer, pushing the foyer door shut as her hand clutched her friend’s arm. Red strands of hair stuck to her cheeks, her eyes wide with terror. “We did not do this, Rachael,” she insisted as she pointed to the decorations on the tree. “I’m telling you, this house is haunted.”

She was facing Dorian, never seeing him as he observed

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them from the upstairs balcony. "Let's go. Now." She grabbed her coat and screamed as she held it up, looking at the slashes down the back. "You wretched poltergeist!" she yelled.

Rachael's eyes widened as she took Tessa's coat, gaping at the torn fabric. "Tess, I'm sorry. I...I must have done this when I was fooling around with the cane." She removed her leather jacket from the rack. "Here. I'll buy you a new one, I promise," she apologized, chewing her lower lip in worry.

Tessa stared at her in horror. "This place is haunted, and I'm not staying." She grabbed her coat from her.

Rachael shook her head sadly as she gazed at her friend. "Get a grip, Tessa. I've apologized for your coat. What more do you want?" She watched as Tessa pulled her ruined coat on, visibly shaken by finding her clothing ruined in such a fashion.

Sighing in resignation as she turned away, wiping the tears from her eyes, Rachael knelt next to the box of her grandmother's beloved ornaments, searching for ones that would compliment the crystal gifts that glittered on her tree. She took the first one and slipped a slender green hook in the loop on top, hanging it up before gathering another ornament. "If you don't want to admit to buying these, then don't." She sniffed in hurt as she stood, setting the second ornament on a branch. "And I'll replace your coat."

Tessa grabbed Rachael's arm roughly, spinning her around to face her. Her eyes were fervent as they silently begged with her friend. "To hell with my coat, Rachael. Julian and I did not do this. And your house, dear, is most definitely haunted.

It is not safe," she finished in a hurried whisper, her eyes darting around the room. "Please."

Rachael jerked her arm free, her jaw clenching as she protested adamantly, "No. I'm not leaving my home." She chuckled ruefully, shaking her head. "The party is in three days. I've already sent out the invitations and booked Grace." She turned away sadly. She knew Tessa was wavering between fury and fear and she did not want to get into a heated argument with her over a bunch of decorations. It was bad enough she was agitated over her friend's reaction and she hid the shaking in her hands that agitation caused by continuing to place the decorations on the tree. "Feel free to come if you wish, but not if you're going to be uncomfortable." She paused a moment, hanging her head when Tessa slammed the door, rattling the glass.

Rachael's Christmas spirit had been dampened by her friend's outburst, and she truly was sorry for destroying the coat. There couldn't possibly be any other explanation for the mysterious cuts that marred its woolen surface.

She reached out, retrieving the stereo remote from the sideboard and walked to the doorway of the library. She set the remote on top of the stereo after turning it off, the sudden silence of the house pressing in on her. She didn't mean to upset her friend, but the townhouse was her dream home. She had put too much sweat and tears into modernizing and restoring it as best she could to its original grandeur. She was not about to give it up. Not even for a ghost.

She turned and looked around, hoping maybe to see her

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invisible housemate. But she saw nothing, no spectral image, no wavering shadows, no mist. "Thank you for the angel and ornaments," she said softly. "They are a beautiful gift." She sighed and finished decorating the tree with red and white velvet bows, before packing up the boxes and returning them to the attic.

Dorian walked slowly down from the balcony to the landing, where his portrait hung, watching Rachael as she reached out to extinguish the chandelier above them with a flip of a dark switch on the wall. He reached up and unbuttoned another button of his white shirt, tucking his hand in the pocket of his trousers as he stepped back, giving Rachael room to pass him on the landing. "You are quite welcome, Rachael," he replied. He watched her pause on the stairs and glance around before continuing on her way with a slight shrug of her shoulders. He remained gazing at the tree as he heard the water turn on in the bath, filling the claw foot tub. "Beautiful," he commented. Turning on one foot, he made his way back to the master bedroom to gaze out the window.

People were bustling in the fading light of day, carrying packages, moving along with harried expressions upon their faces. Dorian leaned against the window frame, not understanding what the hurry was. He had always enjoyed the parties that were held during this time of year, remembering how anxious he had been to receive certain invitations to the *fêtes* that occurred. He suddenly found himself yearning for those lost days of his youth, when his life was simpler, easier, before he allowed Basil Hallward to paint that damned por-

trait.

It wasn't the first time he had felt that way.

Dorian heard the soft splashing of water and turned to look towards the door. The lost days of his youth were not the only yearning that plagued him, for he found himself longing to be with Rachael Lafferty. It suddenly occurred to him that she was the first woman he'd been interested in since Sibyl Vane—the young actress whose death he had been ultimately responsible for.

However, his attraction to Rachael presented him with a problem. He was now a ghost.



Rachael pushed the door to the first-floor foyer closed with her foot, juggling the packages that were in her arms. She had gone out after taking a long and relaxing bath, and returned to the Victorian townhouse and her ghostly guest in brighter spirits than when she had left. The more she thought about the apparition that apparently resided in the house, the quainter the idea became to her. Her ghost was obviously thoughtful, as she gazed at the antique ornaments that were mingled with her grandmother's. She grinned.

"I'm home," she called out loud, not the least bothered by the fact that she was probably talking to herself. She glanced at Dorian's portrait, still amazed at her wondrous find.

Carefully, Rachael set the parcels in her arms down beneath the tree. There were packages galore within the paper

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shopping bags, each of them neatly wrapped in festive paper and bows. A bouquet of fresh cut flowers peaked out of one of the bags, and she picked them up carefully, unwrapping them from the paper the florist had put them in and arranging them neatly in the crystal vase upon the sideboard. They were a perfect combination of red and white roses, difficult to obtain in the winter months, unless one knew where to find them. She leaned over and breathed in their scent, before hanging her jacket upon the rack.

“Welcome home, Rachael,” Dorian commented from the landing. He had heard her enter the townhouse and made his way from her office to see what she had brought home. He heard her humming to herself as she moved through the sitting room towards the kitchen. He gazed into the bags, smiling as he reached into the first one and withdrew a small box, placing it beneath the tree. By the time Rachael returned to the foyer, each package had been carefully arranged beneath the huge Christmas tree, the bags folded and neatly stacked on the stairs. And Dorian had slipped into the shadows to await her reaction.

Rachael stopped before the tree with her hands propped on her hips. “Well, I see you are a bit impatient,” she chuckled as she gazed at the gifts beneath the tree. The white lights nestled within the boughs were twinkling at her, another surprise from her invisible guest. “And we seem to have figured out the mystery of electricity, although you probably just saw me plug the light strand in, didn’t you?” She gathered up the bags that were on the stairs, pausing in thought as she enjoyed

the smell of roses and pine that permeated the foyer. "Thank you," she offered quietly, before returning to the kitchen to put the bags in the pantry and pick up her cup of tea.

Dorian watched as she climbed the circular stairway toward the second floor, waiting as he saw the light in her office turn on. He moved to the sideboard to select the most perfect of red roses, before finding his way into the kitchen. She would return to refill her teacup, and he placed the small leather notebook on the island counter, the red rose placed atop its cover, a stark contrast to the darkness of the leather. "You say you know my story, Miss Lafferty," he remarked to himself as his fingers smoothed the leather of the book. "Well, then, here is side that no one has ever seen."

The notebook was his personal journal, the pages yellow and brittle, faded with time. He had discovered it in the attic while she was absent from the house, and decided that it would be the most appropriate of clues to his identity. Once again, he slipped into the shadows, gazing out the small window near the table at the Thames. He had no idea how long he stood there before she returned, but her shocked gasp and the sound of ceramic hitting the floor behind him made Dorian turn to face her.

Rachael stared at the notebook and rose, before turning around to see if she could discover who had left it. She searched every room of the townhouse, returning to the kitchen in curiosity. She slowly picked up the shards of ceramic that had recently been a teacup and deposited them into the rubbish, then returned to the island to stare at the note-

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book.

Cautiously, she reached out to run her fingers along the embossed leather cover, her fingers tracing the same path Dorian's had only a short time earlier. The leather was worn in the center of the book, as if the owner's fingers had traced the design that was once there over and over. She picked up the rose and raised it to her nose, breathing in the flower's heady fragrance as she opened the cover of the book to gaze at the first page. "*Property of Mr. Dorian Gray,*" she read the refined handwriting within, setting the rose aside. She retrieved another teacup, almost afraid to turn the page of the notebook and glance at the secrets within. Yet, the writer's imagination within her took hold and she made her way into the sitting room to curl up in one of the wing-backed chairs to read.

Dorian stood behind her chair watching as she slowly turned the first page. He saw a small shiver slide down her body when she looked up. Backing away, he kept to the shadows as she gathered the soft blanket she had found herself beneath earlier that day when she awoke. She wrapped it around her like a cape as she sat back down and began to read aloud from where the book had opened in her lap:

*March 12, 1890. Oscar came to visit me again and although his company does not upset me, I find myself craving solitude all the more. It could be that the portrait continues to age no matter what I do to stop the haggard lines that appear upon my brow. Is it not enough that I must bear the weight of my deeds upon my conscious? Is it*

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*not enough that I must remember the joy of my youth, yet never experience it again, even though physically I have not aged a day since Basil finished the damnable painting? I have seen too many of my contemporaries pass beyond this realm, yet I am not given such reprieve.*

Rachael took a sip of her tea and she turned the page, intrigued by the story that unfolded on the pages in her lap. An additional story of Dorian Gray that no one else, except for her, seemed to be privy to.

Dorian knew the words within by heart and he paced along the outer edges of the sitting room, keeping to the shadows. He made sure his footsteps remained silent on the hardwood floor, for Rachael had yet to acknowledge that she heard him as he moved about with her in the townhouse. He whispered the words in unison with her as she continued reading:

*I have wasted my life in the pursuit of hedonistic pleasures, giving up the comfort that would have been afforded me had I not fallen to the wayside of sin and debauchery. I fear that no matter how hard I try to make amends for what I have done, it will never be enough. It will never satisfy the bloodlust of the cruelest of Fates, who have cursed me. In my own naïveté of youth, I have damned myself to immortality. The fear of my own mortality has given way to a new fear.*

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He paused in his pacing, gazing back at Rachael. She was staring straight at him, a disturbing look on her beautiful face. He finished the passage softly in the soft light of the lamp at her side: *“The fear of never being able to enjoy the fortitude and wisdom that is born of old age.”*

Rachael slowly closed the notebook and stood up, placing it beneath her arm as she let the blanket fall from her shoulders to the chair. She walked past Dorian, paused at the tree long enough to unplug the lights, and stopped on the landing to gaze at his portrait, tracing her finger along the line of his painted jaw. “Maybe you weren’t as selfish as people thought you were,” she muttered to herself. “Young and naïve, an example to others possibly?” she pondered. She sighed and headed up to the office.

Dorian watched her from the doorway as she settled before the device she referred to as a computer. Her hands operated the machine with expert capacity and she seemed to slip into a world of pure imagination. He looked to the right, retrieving another book from the shelf and slipping from the room, leaving her to her thoughts and creativity. It was almost twenty-four hours since he had stepped from the portrait. He began to wonder what the next twenty-four would bring.

Later, Rachael staggered to her feet as she pushed away from her desk, the notebook that had mysteriously appeared in her kitchen temporarily forgotten. She glanced at the clock. It was almost three in the morning. She had been sitting in front of the computer trying to work for almost four hours, and she had accomplished absolutely nothing. She was ex-

hausted, both physically and emotionally. Between decorating the house, dealing with Tessa's irrational outburst, and fighting a case of writer's block that had been plaguing her for weeks, she was ready to settle beneath the heavy down comforter that decorated her bed.

"Sleep. I just need some sleep," she mumbled as she stepped from the bathroom, her body functioning on autopilot well enough to get herself changed into her nightgown. She yawned as pushed down the light switch, trudging into the hallway. Her right foot met something solid and she blinked, bending down to feel for the unknown object. She walked into her office and turned on the light. In her hands was her copy of *The Rake Notorious*.

"What are you doing in the hallway?" she asked the book, hoping beyond hope that it would not answer, especially considering that her house was certifiably haunted.

Rachael carried it to the bookcase and slid it back onto the shelf. There was another hole in the row of books and her brow furrowed as she ran her fingers through the empty space. She tilted her head, reciting the titles that sat on the shelf, trying to jog her cloudy mind as to the title that was missing. "Now where did you go?" she asked as she gazed beneath the shelf, blinking sleepily. She peered beneath the armoire and then her desk, running her fingers through her thick hair as she stood in the center of the room, bewildered. She scratched her neck and shrugged. "Great, I have a ghost that reads," she stated quietly. "Or, Tessa snagged it for some reason."

She closed the door to her office and turned to trudge up

## Behind the Eyes of Dorian Gray

the corridor towards her bedroom. She stopped, slowly turning on one foot and gazing down into the foyer. The lights of the Christmas tree twinkled at her in the darkness of the house, casting dancing shadows across the foyer floor and along the staircase wall. She was positive she had unplugged the strand. “Fine. I’ll leave it on. Obviously you enjoy it and who am I to argue? Besides, you’ll just turn it back on,” she muttered.

Rachael rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands as she headed back towards the bedroom. Once again, she bumped into something that was blocking the hall. Except, this time, it wasn’t just her foot that connected with an object, it was her whole body. She reacted before the fear of an intruder in her home could take hold; she lashed to the right with her hand, before following with her left. A pair of strong, masculine hands wrapped around her wrists as she let out a startled scream and kicked her attacker, her foot connecting with a solid shin. Her attacker grunted and released her. Her hands now free, she pushed the man into the wall and fled into the bedroom, throwing herself across the four-poster bed. She pulled the drawer of her night table open, her fingers fumbling through the drawer before wrapping around the can of mace she kept hidden within for such an occasion.

“Wait! Please!” Dorian called, following her into the bedroom, just as confused and bewildered as Rachael. He saw her slide back off the bed, the can in her hand as she swung her arm around, aiming it towards him. Instinctively, he slapped at her hand, knocking the can from her and sending it bounc-

ing across the room.

They stared at each other for a brief moment before she lunged towards Dorian, again. Taking a step toward her, he threw up his arms, grabbing for her wrists, but missing. The small area rug beneath his foot slid forward, knocking them both off balance. He couldn't stop his forward momentum towards the bed, and he fell on top of her, pressing her down into the mattress with his body.

He grabbed her hands as she smacked at him, pounding her fists into his shoulders, and pinned them above her head. "Stop! I will not hurt you, Rachael," he said, his voice husky and slightly breathless from the exertion of defending himself.

Rachael froze, her heart slamming wildly in her chest as her gaze met and locked with the warm, brown eyes of Dorian Gray. "You're...you're..." His solid body was warm above hers, and she could feel the softness of his gray trousers upon her legs. She watched in amazement as his jugular pulsed in his neck. Even his breath was warm against her cheek and she shook her head. "It can't be. You're a ghost," she finally managed to stammer. "You're *my* ghost."

"Obviously, I'm a bit more...corporeal than either of us expected," Dorian replied.

He was as shocked as she was by the revelation, yet he could not discount his good fortune. He could smell the vanilla that surrounded her in a soft, fragrant cloud, and he released her wrists, pushing himself off of the bed, away from her, hoping to hide the sudden and strong reaction his body had to the lushness of hers. Gazing down at her on the bed did

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not help, for she was wearing nothing more than a thin white satin nightgown that only accented her very womanly figure and soft curves.

Rachael sat up, her cheeks stained red as she gathered her robe into her hands, the look of appreciation on Dorian's face having been noticed. She stood and pulled it on, tying the sash as she slowly walked around Dorian. She tentatively reached out and touched the ruffle of his white shirt. The silk slid through her fingers, soft, warm, her eyes catching a glimpse of his chest beneath the material.

"How is this possible?" she asked, looking at the vest and overcoat that was draped over the chair before the window. "Where did you come from?" she whispered as she touched his face, expecting her fingers to pass through him. Instead, they met the smoothness of his cheek.

Dorian smiled slightly as he caught her hand in his, raising it to his lips and kissing her palm, before turning her hand over. His eyes sparkled in the dim light of the moon that shone through the window, his lips lingering longer than was proper on the back of her hand. "I came from the portrait," he answered, his breath warm on her skin, causing the slightest of trembles to course through her.

"You, Rachael Lafferty, brought me home."

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