

Wisdom of Dead Men

Oisín McGann

Random House Children's Publishers UK

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Prologue: The Witch of Tinahely

I: A Cousin's Grievance

II: A Visit From the Royal Irish Constabulary

III: No Cure for Club Foot

IV: The Changeling

V: An Inquisitive Mind

VI: A Garrulous Old Harridan

VII: A Paupers' Asylum

VIII: Fearsome Agents

IX: Something a Little More Martial

X: His Mother's Shoes

XI: An Outlandish Story

XII: A Fear of Spontaneously Combusting

XIII: Preparing for the Ball

XIV: 'You'll See'

XV: An Area of Ill Repute

XVI: The Back-Stabbing Poltroon

XVII: A Gentleman Does not Offer Explanations to a
Servant

XVIII: In the Year 1833

XIX: The Morning After

XX: Borrowing in Secret

XXI: 'The Devil's in that Child'

XXII: Inappropriate Activities

XXIII: The Knights of Abraham

XXIV: Rich Men's Skeletons
XXV: An Uncommonly Bright Example of Her Gender
XXVI: A Matter of Breeding
XXVII: 'Whatever They Wish to Do'
XXVIII: An Unpleasant Reunion
XXIX: A New Kind of Relative
XXX: The Baby is Saved
XXXI: The Dragon's Teeth
XXXII: An Assault on The Asylum
XXXIII: A Bizarre Apology
XXXIV: A Sad Melody
XXXV: Planning For The Future
XXXVI: Death Rides At His Heels

Epilogue: The Origin of Species
Acknowledgements
About the Author
Also by Oisín McGann
Copyright

About the Book

Good intentions can get you killed . . .

As the head of the rich and ruthless Wildenstern family, Berto is determined to change their cruel ways. And Nate, his younger brother, must protect him while he does so.

But the burned remains of women are being discovered in and around the city. Nate joins his sister-in-law, Daisy, to investigate the deaths, and they quickly realize that it's not just their back-stabbing relatives they need to fear.

From the bizarre and dangerous world of *Ancient Appetites*, comes the second story of the murderous Wildensterns.

If you can't trust your family, who can you trust?

The
of Wisdom
DEAD
MEN

Oisín McGann

RHCP DIGITAL

For Chris, who believes reason and faith are not mutually exclusive.



Prologue

THE WITCH OF TINAHELY

Vicky Miller stumbled dizzily out into the darkness, away from the house and the stranger who lay dead inside it – the man she had just killed. Beyond the rectangle of light thrown from the open doorway, the night's gloom swallowed the old woman and she stretched her hands out in front of her to feel the way.

She could smell smoke from somewhere. It was hard to tell where it was coming from, because she was so disorientated. Her head spun and her vision, which had long been fading with age, was even worse now. Everything was blurred. Everything was dark. There were blackthorn bushes at the bottom of her garden and she stumbled into them, pulling herself free with an exasperated gasp. What was wrong with her? Why was she so weak?

Vicky stopped as she realized that she could feel the damp grass beneath her feet. Why had she left the house without her shoes? And she was in her nightdress. There was blood on her arm and it had stained the white cotton. The old woman stopped meandering about her garden, staring down at a line of cabbages that bordered the

vegetable patch. Pull yourself together, girl, she thought to herself. What's wrong with you?

She remembered killing the man. Feeling pain as she woke, she'd acted on reflex. The stranger was just standing there in the low light of the lamp on the sideboard. He was unarmed, he wasn't attacking, but he was in her home and she had been scared. Old reflexes, born of a childhood spent among villains and killers - her hands had moved of their own accord. Then she'd noticed the door was open and she had staggered outside. And now she was here. Outside. In her nightdress . . . without any shoes.

The smell of burning was stronger now.

Gazing back at her house, Vicky became alarmed. Had she knocked over the oil lamp on her way out? Everything she owned was in that little cottage. The walls were stone, but the floor was wooden and if the thatched roof caught . . . She moaned with fear.

There was no other dwelling for miles around. Even if she screamed for help, there was no one to hear. Water! The well was on the other side of the house. Vicky made her way clumsily round the side of the cottage, past the shed and the small stable. It was only a few yards away when her legs finally gave out beneath her. With a wheezing thud, she hit the ground. No matter how hard she tried, she could not get up again. What was wrong with her?

There came the sound of a scream that was not her own. It came from somewhere near the house, piercing the night. Vicky let out a frightened whimper. She did not believe in the mythical banshee, the woman whose shriek foretold your death. She did not believe . . .

The odour was very strong now. Her nostrils twitched, her nose wrinkling. It didn't smell of paraffin, or wood, but . . . Her senses spun in a whirl, the world rolled around her. It was a wonderful relief to close her eyes, to just lay her face on the cool grass.

The night was cold; she could feel it in the air. But her skin felt hot, as if the fire was right beside her, instead of being inside the house. The house. Lifting her head from the ground, Vicky pressed her hands against the ground and pushed herself up. Her strength failed before she could even lift her belly off the grass. Collapsing with a grunt, she started crying, tears streaming down the spider's web of lines that age had woven into the skin of her face. Unable to do anything else, she called out hoarsely for help, knowing it was useless. Nobody could hear. By the time anyone saw the fire, it would be too late.

She heard the scream again. It sounded loud and raw in the empty night.

Her own cries used up what little breath was left in her withered breast and with a last, feeble call, she passed out. Her head slumped limply into the grass and she was dead to the world. Then flames began to flicker into life along her body.

The cottage had two small windows looking out onto the back garden. They were lit from within, not by a raging fire, but by the oil lamp, which sat undisturbed on the sideboard in her bedroom. The windows watched without expression as Vicky Miller's motionless body ignited, flames spreading over her back and shoulders and down her thighs.

Vicky was right. It was some time before anybody noticed the fire. By then, there wasn't much of Vicky left.

And that was how the Witch of Tinahely met her death.

I



A COUSIN'S GRIEVANCE



ROBERTO WILDENSTERN WAS the Patriarch, the eldest living son of the late Edgar Wildenstern, Duke of Leinster and ruler of the family's vast business empire. As the richest man in Ireland - indeed, one of the richest and most powerful men in the British Empire and, therefore, in the entire world - he had extraordinary resources at his disposal. As Chairman of the North America Trading Company he controlled the fates of many thousands of people, and influenced the lives of millions more in dozens of countries across the globe. The Wildenstern business interests stretched east through Europe, south to Asia and Africa, west across the Atlantic to North and South America, and on across the Pacific. The Wildensterns had huge merchant fleets, as well as special charters empowering the Company to commandeer ships of the Royal Navy and draft armies in Ireland. There were few countries in the world that could match the Company's might, and even fewer business empires that could. Roberto Wildenstern controlled it all.

And he was thoroughly sick of it.

‘If I have to endure one more of these bloody meetings, I’m going to have a seizure,’ he moaned as he waited for another gaggle of visiting envoys. ‘I’ve seen furniture with more life in it than some of these yaw-yaws. Couldn’t they just put it all in a letter?’

‘We’ve been over this a hundred times, Berto,’ his wife replied. ‘It’s not just the negotiations with these people that are important; they need to see you in control. Your father ran this business with an iron fist for decades and everyone has to understand that you’re in charge now.’

‘You want to force this family to mend their ways; you’ve said it enough times. So you have to stamp your authority on everything your father left behind – especially the business – or we’re going to have the whole family fighting over whatever piece of the pie they can snatch out of your hands.’

‘Good luck to ‘em,’ Berto muttered, running his fingers through his carefully styled, dark-blond hair. ‘They can have it . . . and the bloody great headache that goes with it.’

‘Don’t start that again. I thought you were beginning to enjoy doing some good.’

‘Hmph!’ He began sticking the point of his dip pen into the back of his hand, leaving black-stained dots along it.

They were sitting in his study. Berto was behind his desk, a warm mahogany slab that did, he was forced to admit, make him feel very business-like. It also hid the fact that he was in a wheelchair, a state he had hoped would be temporary. These hopes were fading. From time to time, he would adjust the thin gold discs on the belt that pressed against his bare back. The Wildensterns had long ago found that applying gold to an injury helped speed up their unique healing powers. Every day he grew less confident that it was doing any good.

The heavy blue velvet drapes had been pulled back from the tall windows to let in the late-afternoon light. This

corner room, high up in the towering house, looked out on the Wicklow Mountains to the south, with the coast visible to the east and, if one stuck one's head far enough out of the window, the near edge of Dublin, blanketed in smog, to the north. The study was sumptuously decorated, with dark green ivy-printed wallpaper, mahogany furnishings, two large bookcases and an impressive collection of Japanese prints.

Berto's wife, Melancholy - or Daisy, as she preferred to be known - was sitting in an upright, but comfortable, chair with a notebook on her lap and a pen in her hand. Daisy had decided as a child that one's name could affect one's fate, and she would not spend her life as Melancholy, despite her mother's love for tragic romance novels. And what Daisy decided in her family home more often than not became policy. Now, she managed her husband's affairs with equal deliberation. Her dark hair was pinned up, her blue crinoline dress and matching shoes were as comfortable as fashion would allow. She kept the minutes of the Company meetings and, discreetly, acted as Berto's adviser. Many of the men who came to meet the Patriarch were amused by her interest in her husband's business affairs and tolerated her womanly whims with a patronizing civility. They would have been appalled to know just how much power Daisy was capable of wielding - and not just by nagging her husband until she got her way. Berto relied heavily on his wife's analytical skills, but he was slowly getting to grips with the massive responsibilities heaped upon him.

'I'm just *bored*,' he sighed, adjusting his tie and patting down his waistcoat. 'They're all such *dry* sorts - and you've never met such a bunch of asses and toad-eaters in all your life. I haven't had a good laugh in ages.' Waving to Winters, his manservant, he sighed again and added, 'All right, then, show the next lot in. I know how to take punishment - I went to public school, you know.'

'Begging your pardon, Your Grace,' Winters spoke up. 'Master Simon would like a word. If I might be so bold as to say, he seems a bit . . . restless, sir.'

Berto let out a breath and nodded. Simon - 'Simple Simon', as he was known to crueller members of the family - was a somewhat distant cousin who, at the age of seventeen, had the mind of an eight- or nine-year-old. Berto, a sensitive individual at heart, patiently put up with Simon's constant need for attention. It wasn't the boy's fault he was dull-witted, after all, and he had a lightness of heart that was sorely lacking in most of the rest of the family.

But Simon's usual gormless smile was missing as he stumbled into the room. His suit was as rumpled as always, despite being provided with a freshly pressed one at the beginning of every day. His wild tufts of brown hair stood out from his head in every direction. He stood by the door looking furtively to right and left as if reluctant to come any further inside.

'What's on your mind, Simon?' Berto asked.

'Need to talk,' Simon muttered. 'Just with you, Berto . . . if I may.'

It was unusual for the boy to speak in anything other than a breathless gabble and Berto looked at him with concern. He glanced at Daisy, who nodded slightly and stood up, straightened her bulky skirts and walked towards the door. Simon turned towards Winters as if afraid the footman might jump on him. Tall and thin and immaculately groomed, Berto's manservant had been trained from childhood not only for domestic service, but also as a bodyguard.

Berto lifted his chin to the servant and Winters nodded, following Daisy out the door and closing it softly behind him.

'What's on your mind, old chap?' Berto asked again.

Simon wouldn't meet his gaze, fixing his eyes firmly on the floor. He kept plucking at the collar of his suit jacket.

'You sent my mother away,' he said in a near-whisper.

'What's that?'

'You sent my mother away!' Simon growled, tears welling in his eyes. For a moment, he glared at his older cousin.

Berto saw the expression on the boy's face, but could not believe what it was telling him. So he was slow to react. The knife was already drawn from inside Simon's jacket - what the boy lacked in wit, he made up for in speed. With a flick of his wrist, he hurled the blade at Berto's heart.

Berto was already pushing his wheelchair back from the desk, turning his body to bring it side on to the path of the knife, which cut across his chest, but missed its target. It thudded into the wall behind him.

'What the bloody hell—!' he shouted, before Simon leaped onto the desk, another knife in his hand.

The door was thrown open. Voices cried out. Simon raised the knife, but Berto was by no means defenceless. Grabbing the sawn-off shotgun clipped under his desk, Berto wrenched it free and swung it in one smooth move, sweeping Simon's legs out from under him. The boy fell hard on his back onto the desk, but was up again with the slickness of an eel. Berto could not bring himself to shoot the youngster. He fired both barrels into the ceiling over Simon's head, the blast and then the burst of exploding plaster above making the boy flinch away. But the shot was rushed, the recoil of the gun tipped Berto backwards and he tumbled out of his chair.

Before Simon could follow through on his attack, four strong hands seized him from behind and threw him to the floor. A foot kicked the knife out of his hand. He was rolled onto his front and gripped roughly in a ground hold that pinned both his arms behind him and pressed his head and chest to the floor. Berto's younger brother, Nathaniel,

continued to hold the boy while Winters snapped a pair of handcuffs onto Simon's wrists.

'You sent my mother away! You sent my mother away!' Simon yelled over and over again, tears streaming down his face.

Nathaniel and Winters pulled him to his feet and the servant dragged him away. Berto was sitting up, trying to set his chair back on its wheels. He wrenched at it, swearing at his limp and useless legs, his movements jerky with confused anger and embarrassment. Nathaniel righted the wheelchair and helped his brother into it as Daisy hurried into the room.

'Oh my God!' she gasped. 'Berto, darling, are you hurt?'

'What the hell was that about?' Nate asked, as he picked up the smoking shotgun.

Berto ignored both questions until he had settled his nerves, straightened out his clothes and hair, and taken a few deep breaths.

'No, I'm fine . . . and I have no idea what that was about,' he said in a shaky voice. 'But I mean to find out. You should have seen the hatred in the boy's face. I never knew he had that kind of venom in him. What do you think he meant about his mother?'

'Don't know,' Nate replied, breaking open the shotgun and letting the spent shells fall out onto the desk. 'I'll have a word with him when he's calmed down a bit.'

'Don't be unkind to him,' Daisy cautioned her brother-in-law. 'This didn't come out of nowhere. It's clear that someone put him up to it. We must discover who has been pulling his strings.'

'Obviously. Are there any other aspects of my job on which you'd like to offer instruction?'

'You seem to have it well in hand,' she replied brightly. 'Except, of course, for the simpleton who managed to slip *two throwing knives* past your *security*.'

Nate's face went red, but he did not reply. He took a couple of shells from a drawer in Berto's desk, reloaded the weapon and swung it closed.

'All right, so we've a snake in the house,' he grunted as he clipped the shotgun back into position under the desk and assessed the damage to the ceiling. 'Some treacherous cur with murder on his mind.'

'So it seems,' Berto said sourly. 'The family's all home at the moment. Do you think we should mention it at dinner?'

'If you like. But frankly, I don't think any of them would own up.'

'It's probably better not to say anything,' Daisy sighed, shaking her head as she wrapped her arms around her husband. 'You don't want to go giving the rest of them ideas.'

Berto nodded grimly.

'Ah. There's no place like home.'

II



A VISIT FROM THE ROYAL IRISH CONSTABULARY



NATHANIEL WILDENSTERN WAS brooding in the breakfast room late in the morning, when the police inspector came calling. He was alone; the rest of the thirty-odd members of the family resident in Wildenstern Hall had eaten and left. The rich, wake-up scent of eggs, bacon, kippers, tea, coffee and fresh bread hung in the air. The maids had cleared the tables and only his manservant, Clancy, hovered unseen nearby. The large fireplace was filled with a display of flowers during these warm summer days and the paintings on the walls had all been changed to pastoral scenes to suit the season. Not that any of this could improve his mood.

Nate was sitting in the light of the east-facing French windows, indulging his taste for hot buttered toast – cooked on one side only, as all toast should be – berating himself for failing to anticipate Simple Simon’s attack.

It was true that the boy was thought so innocent he could not constitute a threat, but even so, Nate should have taken the proper precautions with him, as he did with everyone else.

Berto had become Heir after their older brother, Marcus, had been killed by Edgar, their father, in self-defence . . . and had then been elevated to Patriarch when Edgar was murdered by a group of very old, very savage relatives. The upheaval that had resulted in the family had forced Nate to give up his boyhood dreams of wandering the world in search of adventures and instead, to support Roberto in his new role.

Nate had committed himself to the protection of his older brother - a serious undertaking for a nineteen-year-old who had spent most of his life avoiding responsibility. But he was well-trained in armed and unarmed combat, poisons and explosives, and had been given a thorough education in the family's history of plotting and conspiracy. He had an intimate knowledge of the house's defences - the booby-traps, hidden rooms and passageways, the armouries and secret weapons caches. And he could count on the support and expertise of Winters and Clancy, along with a team of loyal and able footmen. He had convinced himself it was enough.

After Edgar's death, there had been a rash of plots to remove Berto, some bordering on the absurd, others planned with chilling precision. Nate had succeeded in foiling all of them before they could get close. As Patriarch, Duke of Leinster and Chairman of the North American Trading Company, Roberto controlled the Wildenstern Empire and its vast resources. There were many among their flock of uncles, aunts and cousins who wanted Berto's power and would stop at nothing to seize it. Roberto was trying to reform the family, but his efforts were simply creating more enemies.

Berto was not perturbed by the family's resistance and was determined to force them to change their ways. And he was certain that they would, eventually. Nathaniel found it difficult, sometimes, to share his brother's optimism.

Not for the first time, Nate cursed the Rules of Ascension and the predatory practices they encouraged. For the Wildensterns were no ordinary family. Ordinary families did not think it acceptable to betray those closest to them in order to get ahead. Ordinary families did not tolerate murder.

It was Nate's job to weed out the conspirators and deal with them. Anyone who defied Berto's will had to be dealt with. Nate had thought himself up to the job, but he was beginning to have his doubts. He had thought that giving up his dream of a life filled with travel and adventure showed that he was maturing. But now he was feeling the pressure, and his initial confidence was giving way. He was desperately afraid of failing and beginning to fear he should have left this task to someone with more experience. But who could they trust?

The Wildensterns were bred to be cunning, deceptive and ruthless. Simple Simon's unpredictable attack was just the latest proof of just how dangerous they could be.

Nate had questioned the boy, but could get no sense out of him. Simon had sat at the table in the small boxroom where he was being held, his face in his arms, moaning incessantly about his mother. As far as anyone seemed to know, Simon's mother had died of tuberculosis when he was three or four. His father had passed away a few years later.

Nate chewed his toast thoughtfully. His tea had already gone cold. He was about to call for more, when his manservant appeared behind him and softly cleared his throat. Clancy was a Limerick man who had been raised to serve the Wildensterns. For many years now, he had been Nate's personal manservant and bodyguard, as well as his

tutor in the family's unorthodox survival skills. Dressed in a black suit with tail-coat and buckled shoes, he was a short, solid man with a straight back, square shoulders and greying hair. His inscrutable face was shadowed by bushy eyebrows and looked as though it had been shaped out of wood with a blunt hatchet. Nate had seen Clancy's short-fingered hands sew the finest seams and break bones with equal ease.

Nate could sense Clancy's eyes on him and suddenly resented the degree to which he relied on his manservant. The older man often seemed more like a mentor than a member of staff and he had saved Nate's life on more than one occasion. Nate had the definite impression that Clancy disapproved of his more reckless behaviour and expected better of him - a ridiculous attitude to have. That feeling was even stronger now that Nate had actually taken on some responsibility.

'Inspector Urskin of the Royal Irish Constabulary requests a moment of your time, sir,' Clancy informed him now, handing over the policeman's card on a small silver platter.

Nate picked up the card and gave it a curious look. He nodded to Clancy, who retreated to the hallway, returning with a narrow-featured man dressed in a long grey coat, a mediocre brown suit and cheap but tasteful shoes. He held a slightly scuffed bowler hat in his hands. The policeman had a prematurely crumpled face sporting a bushy lip-whisker that was a shade lighter than his auburn hair. His eyes were intense and intelligent. He was accompanied by a young constable dressed in the RIC uniform of dark green with black buttons and insignia.

'Inspector Urskin and Constable Mahon,' Clancy announced. 'Nathaniel Wildenstern.'

Nate avoided using all the titles to which he could lay claim - they made him feel old, and besides, his family name was more than enough to impress anyone.

'Thank you, Clancy,' he replied. 'What can I do for you, Inspector?'

'Thank you for seeing me, sir,' Urskin addressed him, speaking with a guttural midlands accent. 'If I may be so bold, I was hoping you or your brother could shed some light on a case that has come to my attention: the unfortunate death of an old woman in Tinahely.'

Nate restrained himself from asking if any death could be considered 'fortunate'. The policeman had a very solemn look about him.

'And what makes you think we could help?' he enquired.

'Well, it seems the woman might have had some connection with your family,' Urskin replied, handing over a small framed daguerreotype of a man and woman sitting in a formal, posed portrait. 'That is your father, I believe.'

Nate gazed at the silvery image, intrigued by it. He had never seen this picture of his father before. The daguerreotype was old and faded, and crude by the standards of modern photography, but there was no mistaking the countenance of Edgar Wildenstern, the most fearsome Patriarch ever to rule the family.

'And this is the woman?' he asked, nodding to the other person in the picture.

'Yes, sir. Vicky . . . Victoria Miller was 'er name. She was well known in the area. Had the reputation of being a . . . well, a healer an' all that.'

'I see.' Nate studied her face, noticing for the first time the likeness to his father's. Was it possible she had been related in some way? 'My father was not fond of having portraits done, and certainly not with common folk. Perhaps some of my older relatives might recognize her. I can ask at dinner. How did she die, if you don't mind me asking?'

'Ah, well . . .' Urskin shifted uneasily on his feet. 'That's one of the more . . . puzzling aspects of the case. It seems

she burned to death. We just can't for the life of us figure out *how*.'

'I'm not sure what you mean.'

'I've seen enough deaths in my time, Mister Wildenstern. Bodies burn a certain way. You'd have to see the scene to understand why it's so damned odd.'

'Well, then, Inspector,' Nate said to him, 'why don't you show me? We can go now if you like.'

It did not occur to Nathaniel that the policeman would refuse. Nor did he. Urskin knew that the Wildensterns owned most of Wicklow and had almost as much influence in Ireland as Her Majesty's government. They were accustomed to getting their way.

'I'll be waiting for you in the square in Tinahely,' Nate told him. 'Try not to be too late.'

Daisy knew that Nathaniel did not want anyone else to question Simon, but she also knew that her brother-in-law could be something of a blunt instrument at times. Despite her strict Christian values, she could appreciate that Nate's keen survival instincts and somewhat ruthless edge helped keep Roberto safe, but she didn't always agree with his methods. His maturity left a lot to be desired too. She suspected that shouts and threats were not the course to take with Simon. Some finesse would be required to bring him out of his shell.

Roberto's fifteen-year-old sister, Tatiana, had learned of the attack and insisted on joining Daisy for the interview. Daisy had objected at first, but then thought better of it. Simon was fond of Tatiana, and that might help open him up. There was the matter of protecting Tatiana's innocence to consider, but Tatty had seen more violence in the previous year than most girls see in their entire lifetime, and had come out of it relatively unscathed . . . although it seemed to have left her with a taste for penny dreadfuls and some of the more sensationalist news articles.

Daisy was on her way to the garden, trying to find Tatty, when Tatty found her.

‘Daisy, have a look at this!’ the younger girl exclaimed, waving the newspaper she was carrying as she scurried along the sumptuously decorated hallway towards her sister-in-law in a manner that made her thick, green, layered skirts look like she was running through a tumbling bush. Her golden curls bounced around her cherubic face, her cheeks rosy with colour. ‘There’s a new highwayman preying on the wealthy who travel by the roads over the mountains. They say he can’t be more than sixteen years old! Isn’t it splendid? They’re calling him “The Highwayboy”.’

‘Marvellous, Tatty,’ Daisy replied, taking the paper from her hands, glancing at the questionable article. ‘I’ve been looking all over for you—’

‘Do you think perhaps we could take a ride out over the mountains this evening and see if he might rob us? It would be awfully exciting!’

‘Tatiana,’ Daisy said in a stern voice. ‘One does not allow oneself to be robbed for the sake of some cheap titillation. It would be most unseemly. Not to mention the inevitable loss of your valuables.’

‘We could wear costume jewellery. Besides, you’re always saying that it’s a lady’s right to be able to pay for her own entertainment.’

‘Being cleaned out by a teenage cutpurse was not what I had in mind. Now, do you want to help me talk to Simon or not?’

‘Of course. I’m just taking the opportunity to broaden my mind.’

‘A little *depth* wouldn’t go amiss either, Tatty,’ Daisy admonished her. ‘I’ve told you this paper is a rag. Why don’t you read something more reputable?’

‘This one has the best illustrations!’

Daisy sighed and, holding her sister-in-law's hand, led her to the elevator that would take them up to the fifth floor, where Simon was being held in a small, bare boxroom.

The boy looked awful. His face was drawn and pale, his eyes red from crying. When a footman opened the door to admit the two young women, Simon looked at them with palpable relief. Women were not inclined to ask questions with their fists. She and Tatty gathered their skirts and sat down at the table opposite the prisoner. The footman went to stand inside the door, but Daisy motioned for him to wait outside. The man gave Simon a hard look to warn him to behave, and then left.

'What are they going to do to me?' Simon wailed as soon as the door had clicked shut. 'Berto must be furious! And Nate hates me, I know it! They'll kick my bucket for sure!'

'There will be no kicking of buckets, Simon,' Daisy assured him. 'Don't you worry. We know you didn't mean to —'

'Of course I *meant* to!' Simon protested. 'That's why I brought the *knives*. For stabbing Berto. That's what they were for.'

Daisy sat back, exchanging glances with Tatty.

'But why would you want to hurt Berto?' Tatty asked gently. 'He's only ever been good to you. I thought you were his friend.'

'He sent my mother away,' Simon explained, his eyes welling up again. 'When I was little, she went away and it was him who made her.' This last sentence was spoken with the peevishness of a child. He had always been one for biting his nails and now there was little left of them, but still he chewed at the remains.

'Didn't your mother die of consumption?' Daisy took his hand in hers. 'You were four, you must remember? And anyway, Berto would only have been nine years old. How could he have sent your mother away?'

‘But h-he was in charge of th-the estates back then,’ Simon stuttered, frowning. ‘She wasn’t sick at all. He sent her away because she was a troublemaker.’

‘But he was only *nine*, Simon. How could he have been in charge of anything?’

Daisy knew that the boy did not have a firm sense of the passing of time. He could think in days, but not many of them. Weeks and months were yawning gaps in time and years were impossibly long. She was not surprised that he could make such a mistake. It was the conviction that his mother had not died, but had been sent away that bothered Daisy.

‘Who told you she was sent away?’ she pressed him.

‘Nobody!’ he retorted unconvincingly.

‘Simon, we’re trying to help you,’ Tatty said in a soothing tone. ‘Somebody’s tricked you and we want to find out who it is. Who told you Berto sent your mother away?’

Simon’s eyes flicked from one young woman to the other and back again. His chin was trembling, his hands moving constantly from the tabletop to his mouth and back again. There was a very visible struggle going on in his mind; the exaggerated expressions on his face would have been comical if the situation had not been such a serious one.

‘I got letters . . .’ he said finally. ‘They told me what happened.’

Daisy closed her eyes. Tatty let out an exasperated growl.

‘You tried to kill my brother because some *letters* told you to do it!’ she snapped, standing up so suddenly the chair fell over behind her. ‘You blithering idiot! I should—’

‘Tatiana,’ Daisy said quietly, trying to calm her sister-in-law. ‘There’s no need to be unkind. Simon, would you be willing to show us these letters?’

‘No,’ he said quickly.

‘I’m sure Berto and Nate won’t ask so politely. You don’t want them messing up your rooms, do you?’

His imagination played with that one for a moment. Simon had several books of lewd cartoons stashed in the back of his chest of drawers. It was the worst-kept secret in Wildenstern Hall, but he didn't know that. Preventing their discovery suddenly became uppermost in his mind.

'All right, then,' he said.

A maid was sent to fetch the letters from their 'hiding place' - a drawer in Simon's bedside table - and they were brought back up to the boxroom. Daisy and Tatty inspected them carefully. There were four of them, all written in an awkward and unfamiliar hand. If it was a member of the family they were disguising their handwriting, feigning a lack of education. Simon had not kept the envelopes, so there was no telling where they had come from - the writer might not have even been in the country when they were sent - but Simon said he had received each letter a week after the last.

The two young women read the first one carefully:

Dear Simon,

I am a friend. Please forgive me for not telling you my name. I am scared of what Roberto and Nathaniel will do to me when I tell you what happened to your mother. She did not die of tuberculosis, as everyone has told you. She was sent away for causing trouble in the house. Roberto sent her to a place where they put mad people. Please, please DO NOT TELL ANYONE ABOUT THIS LETTER. If you tell anyone, I cannot write to you again. I cannot help you take revenge on Roberto.

I will write again soon with more information.

Yours faithfully,

A Friend

The other letters told much the same tale, each one adding a little more tantalizing detail. Daisy could imagine Simon stewing away for days at a time as he waited for more information about his mother's fate. The language was of a rudimentary nature throughout, so that Simon could read it without assistance. The writer claimed that Simon's mother, Catherine, had fought with Edgar Wildenstern over some land upon which he wanted to build a workhouse. She claimed it was hers, left to her by her father when he died. According to the letters, Roberto was in charge of building the workhouse. He had Catherine taken away to an asylum, where she was imprisoned until she too passed away.

Daisy and Tatty stared at the correspondence in amazement. It was a fiendishly blatant lie from beginning to end, but Simon had fallen for it. It was a ludicrous idea that Roberto would have been put in charge of anything at that age; even when he became old enough for such responsibility, he had spent the entire time defying his father's will at every opportunity and was not trusted with the most mundane task.

Catherine could not have been left land by her father because women had no right to own property or, indeed, to own or run a business, take part in government or even vote, all of which caused Daisy no end of irritation. Legally, women were under the complete control of either their husband or father - sometimes even their brother. And that got Daisy thinking about the one part of these letters which could be investigated.

'Simon, you've been told a horrible, horrible lie,' she said to the boy. 'You've been tricked into committing a terrible act. You must apologize to Berto and ask his forgiveness. I'm sure if your heart is pure, God will already have forgiven you. I might take a little longer. But I promise you this: as God is my witness, I'll find out what really happened to your mother.'

‘I will too,’ Tatty added, nodding. ‘We can’t have people going round writing down whatever nasty ideas pop into their heads and sending them off to be read by gullible souls.’

Daisy was about to comment on the kinds of newspapers Tatty had taken to reading but restrained herself. Her mind was already seething with thoughts about this blackguard who had poisoned Simon’s mind. Whoever it was, they knew Simon well enough to choose just the right means to manipulate him. He had hardly known his father and idolized his mother. He had no less than six portraits of her on the walls in his rooms.

Merely by implying that Berto was responsible for her death, the conspirator had sown the seeds of murder; instincts bred into Simon by his upbringing would have done the rest. Despite his limited intellectual resources, Simon had received much the same martial training – although in a less comprehensive form – as all of the other boys in the family.

The Wildensterns were special, not only for their wealth and influence. They were one of the very few families in the world who benefited from *aurea sanitas*. They enjoyed extended life spans, superb powers of healing and excellent fitness and health. Their superhuman recuperative abilities could even be boosted by the application of gold to any injury. But they needed every advantage they could get. Generations of bloodthirsty ambition had resulted in the secret family tradition known as the Rules of Ascension.

With the intention of honing survival instincts and promoting aggression, cunning and ruthlessness, the men of the family were permitted to assassinate those of a higher rank in order to improve their own position in the Wildenstern Empire. The family would cover up any killing committed according to the Rules, which had been drawn up to maintain order and enforce the ideal of ‘civilized murder’.

Daisy had only learned of this tradition after marrying Berto. By then it was too late: there was no way out of this insane family. She did not have the same blood in her veins. The families with *aurea sanitas* normally married into each other, to keep their bloodlines pure and avoid passing any of their extraordinary qualities on to less worthy types. But Berto had rebelled against his father and taken Daisy as his bride. Now, like everyone else, she knew the Rules by heart:

Number One: The Act of Aggression must be committed by the Aggressor himself and not by any agent or servant.

Number Two: The Act must only be committed against a man over the age of sixteen who holds a superior rank in the family to the Aggressor.

Number Three: The Act must only be committed for the purpose of advancing one's position and not out of spite, or because of insult or offence given, or to satisfy a need for revenge for an insult or injury given to a third party.

Number Four: All efforts should be made to avoid the deaths of servants while committing the Act. Good servants are hard to find.

Number Five: The Target of the Aggression can use any and all means to defend themselves, and is under an obligation to do so for the good of the family.

Number Six: Retribution against the Aggressor can only be carried out after the Act has been committed. Should the Aggressor fail in his attempt, and subsequently escape to remain at large for a full day, only the Target of the Aggression and no other person will be permitted to take Retribution.

Number Seven: No Act of Aggression or Retribution must be witnessed or reported by any member of the public. All family matters must be kept confidential.

Number Eight: Any bodies resulting from the Act must be given a proper burial in a cemetery, crypt, catacomb or funeral pyre approved by the family.

Daisy shook her head as she and Tatiana walked away from the room where Simon was being held. The boy was a victim of the malevolent traditions in which he'd been reared. He was raised to be capable of murder.

Women could not hold positions of power in the family, but they could assist their menfolk. There were no rules to govern the killing of women - but then perhaps none were necessary. Daisy wondered if Simon's mother, Catherine, had really died of tuberculosis. If she hadn't, then one of the people who knew her real fate had written those letters to Simon. And Daisy was determined to find them.

Nate still felt a thrill of excitement whenever he made his way down to the enginal stables that lay at the back of the massive collection of structures that was Wildenstern Hall. Inside, in the low, dusty light, the place throbbed with the soft idling of engines, the exhalation of steam and shifting of restless wheels. Flash was kept at the end of the stables in one of the largest stalls. The velocycle grunted with pleasure when Nate looked over the door of the stall.

The notorious Beast of Glenmalure - named after the valley it had once haunted - was over eight feet long from nose to rump. Its tiger-like torso of metal and ceramic stretched between thigh-high wheels, its bullish head scraping mighty horns against the wooden sides of the stall. It raised its front wheel and thumped it down on the floorboards, eager to be let out. Pistons compressed and bulged outwards. Motors whirred. The creature's black and silver body parts were lined with streaks of gold and red, as well as scars that spoke of countless territorial fights and the hundreds of attempts that had been made to capture it or destroy it.

All that had ended the night Nate had hunted it down, trapped it and bent it to his will. Jumping on its back, he had managed to stay on while the creature bucked and