



Grave
Disorder

Charlotte de la Guette



GRAVE DISORDER

Charlotte de ne Guerre

Eschatology, LLC



Chapter I
The Dream

Mourners duck out of the funeral home into a gray wall of water, by themselves and in pairs. Women hunching their shoulders are held close under the strong arms of men wielding umbrellas as empty promises of shelter. One woman stretches her leg past the curb to overstep the river speeding through the gutter. “Such a shame,” she whispers at the lapel of her husband’s raincoat. A second woman grasps her spouse’s elbow as she navigates the water-slicked sidewalk and remarks, “She was so young.” A lone older woman follows close behind, bobbing to dab at her cheek with a handkerchief, murmuring to no one in particular, “Who will look after the children?”

The rooms inside betray the Gothic limestone facade with their soft light and pastel cushioning. The view from the windows is oppressive and bleak, revealing only the pounding rain on the asphalt parking lot, while the pictures hanging on the wall show divine swords of light piercing cotton-candy thunderheads.

Dark doors open into the chapel. A few friends and relatives linger, paying their respects to Claire Foster. Doleful organ music hums as they pass a flowerbed of wreaths and arrangements to approach the coffin. Gladioli tower over roses; chrysanthemums vie with carnations; and sprays of orchids preen in front of fountains of lilies.

Three children sit in the front row of the sanctuary. The eldest, Victoria, wears a white-collared navy velvet dress with an oval gold locket at her neck that displays her initials. The girl is fragile in appearance but has a core of iron that will be needed for every waking moment of the oncoming weeks as she faces one of the greatest possible tragedies of childhood: the loss of a parent. Holly rubs the toe of one Mary Jane with the heel of the other and gnaws at the end of her braid. In between them, young John curls up to Victoria’s right arm and presses his nose into the dress’s comforting nap as he swings his feet. Normally, it would be Victoria’s job to tell him to stop fidgeting or she’d tell Mom, but now she knows that she can’t tell on him. She tries to swallow the quarter-pound lump in her throat and keep her face dry. She wants to be brave for him and Holly, to show her father that she can help care for the younger ones. But it’s too much to ask. As she gazes into the back of her father’s black coat, two hot streams squeeze out of her eyes.

Stuart Foster stands at the head of the coffin and greets mourners.

To the children he looks like a magician, in a costume he might wear to a Halloween party, with mother as the beautiful, sequined assistant with her own tricks up her sleeve. He's about to cover the coffin with a big silk square, wave a wand over it and say "Abracadabra!" After the magic word their mother would spring to life and step out of the box. As he kissed her hand, she would curtsy to the audience's applause.

Victoria snuffles as a neighbor steps up to her father. "She looks so peaceful, Stuart. Natural. Resting." Stuart's ears grate from so many repetitions of trite sentiment. He wants to grab Mrs. McDarien and shake her until her glasses fall off, her false teeth rattle, and all the wads of Kleenex fly out of her purse. He knows that the imagined fit of hostility is not him.

The open casket suddenly strikes him as barbaric and he shudders. *What is the matter with you people?*, he wants to scream in fatigue and sorrow. *Don't you believe that she's really dead?* Stuart pauses to understand, as if being robbed of your soulmate, partner, sometime adversary and always-cherished mate is a trigonometry problem only requiring assignment of appropriate functions. When his hand is grasped by a skeletal claw, he sees his own reflection in old Jack McDarien's spectacles. He looks like hell. His usually robust face is now gray and haggard. Pouches cast shadows beneath his eyes. His mouth gapes as he forces himself to speak: "Thank you, Jack." He reaches forward to grip the man's shoulder. "I know she'd appreciate you coming."

Stuart moves on to confront the last mourner, a fellow volunteer from Claire's charity work. She collapses on Stuart's chest, sobbing. Stuart feels the head of this woman on his collar and leans in to hug her as if he's burping a large child. How odd that this stranger is hiccupping grief all over him while he is the one desperate for comfort—and the three children sitting on the hard pew more so than himself.

"Such a tragedy. I know she's in a better place." Stuart steps back from her, looking at the remains of his wife in repose. Claire is pale, but not with the wax-on-ashes pallor common to the dead. She is wearing her favorite dress, a stylish steel-gray gown. "My warrior goddess," he had teased her whenever she wore it. "My iron-eyed Athena." His mind raced in all directions: no justice in this world, nor rhyme, nor reason. Like Job, he had an impulse to hide his children. What would his maker take from him now? What loss could occur next?

At last the woman leaves, trailing in the wake of the neighbors. The undertaker appears and reaches into the coffin to remove Claire's jewelry. Stuart steps forward and says, "No, no—leave the wedding band." The plain gold band had meant everything to them when they were starting out: a simple circle for eternity, the purity of gold, the metal that most conveys warmth.

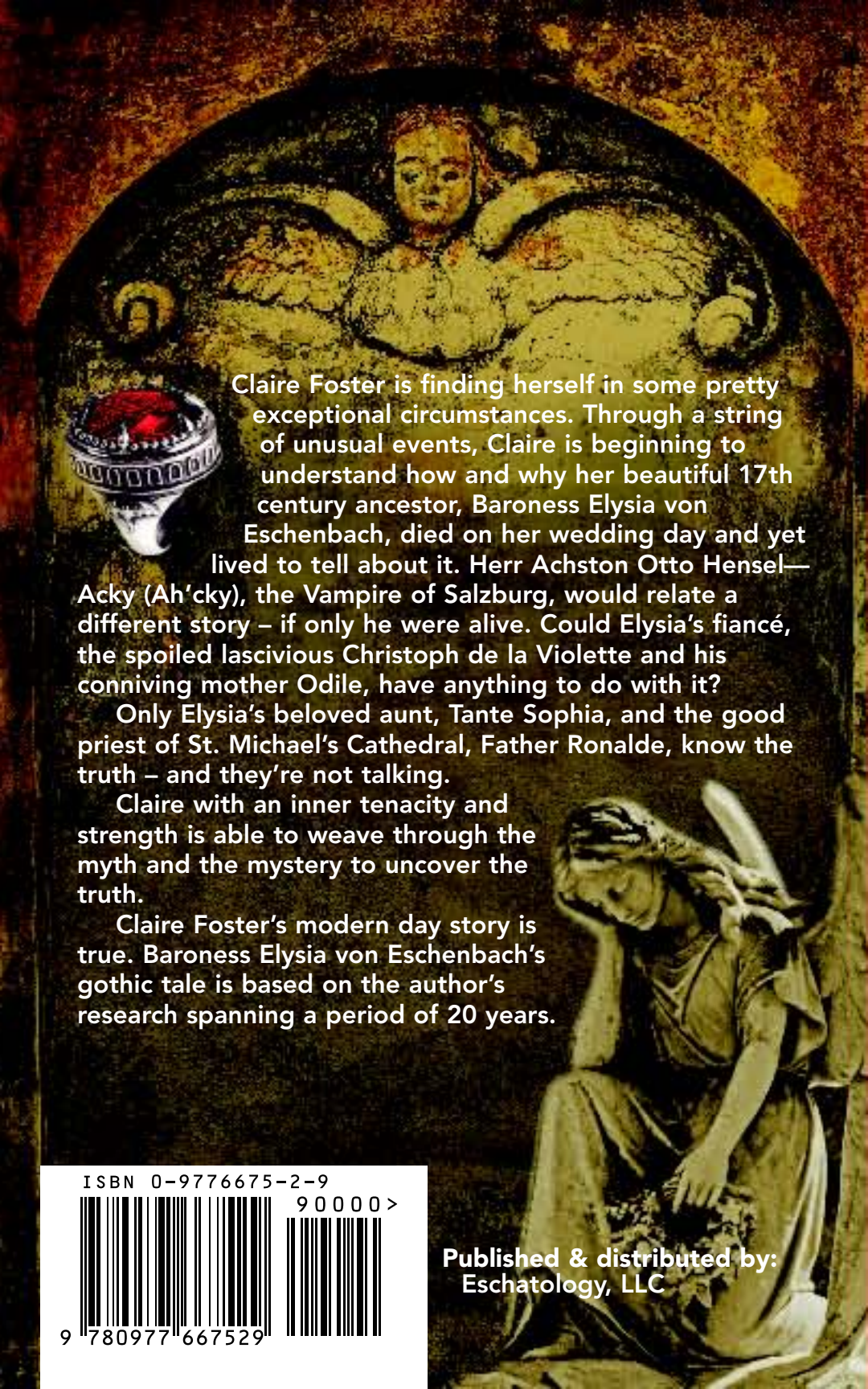
"From her father's mother," he explains. He is handed her charm bracelet. "Each charm represents a line of ancient lore from family tradition, and..." *Damn*. He should have had her write it down so he could pass the history on to Victoria or Holly. Of course, he never would have imagined he'd be left to raise the children alone.

Stuart holds it up to the light, the better to examine the small creatures and odd items hanging from each link. A small clove of garlic, a bunch of grapes, a miniature bottle, a cross, a tear-shaped drop, an arcane coat of arms on a shield and a bat-winged dragon all hung in a row like so much gold laundry on a fairy-tale clothesline. Stuart is reminded of her inherited dragon ring tucked away in the bank's lock box.

The necklace he is handed next is one he bought for her on their last trip to Europe. His eyes dampen as he recalls their voyage on the Rhine. They had embraced as the tour boat passed the cliffs where the Lorelei sang, luring sailors to their deaths on the river.

After the Lorelei's perch there was the Mouse Tower, *der Mausturm*. He held her from behind as the boat rounded the corner and approached the landmark. "Europe is covered with history, Stuart," Claire observed. "Layers and layers of it. I wish I could scrape off a little and take it home, nibble a bit of a kingdom. Could we put a stained-glass window in the breakfast nook and dine in a cathedral every morning? Or perhaps get a set of medieval wooden trenchers and eat heartily like ladies and courtiers? Would you like to take lute lessons?" Her uncharacteristic whimsy drew a tighter squeeze from Stuart. The spray from the boat made her blouse adhere to her camisole, barely serving to camouflage the fullness beneath.

Once they disembarked in Frankfurt they wandered past a shop full of antiques and curiosities and stopped in to see more, to perhaps find a piece of history to grace their shelf at home: a Dresden figurine of a porcelain shepherd girl wooed by a harlequin painted with black and



Claire Foster is finding herself in some pretty exceptional circumstances. Through a string of unusual events, Claire is beginning to understand how and why her beautiful 17th century ancestor, Baroness Elysia von Eschenbach, died on her wedding day and yet lived to tell about it. Herr Achston Otto Hensel—

Acky (Ah'cky), the Vampire of Salzburg, would relate a different story – if only he were alive. Could Elysia's fiancé, the spoiled lascivious Christoph de la Violette and his conniving mother Odile, have anything to do with it?

Only Elysia's beloved aunt, Tante Sophia, and the good priest of St. Michael's Cathedral, Father Ronalde, know the truth – and they're not talking.

Claire with an inner tenacity and strength is able to weave through the myth and the mystery to uncover the truth.

Claire Foster's modern day story is true. Baroness Elysia von Eschenbach's gothic tale is based on the author's research spanning a period of 20 years.

ISBN 0-9776675-2-9

9 0000 >



9 780977 667529

Published & distributed by:
Eschatology, LLC