

"I do," Miss Vaux said, in a voice clear and cold, and hard as ice. From Bertha there came no answer.

"It is one of the few things I recollect about her," Gabrielle said again, very softly, "the rest is almost all indistinct, like a half-forgotten dream. I was only four years old, you say, Joanna, when she died?"

"You know it; why do you ask?" Miss Vaux said, harshly and quickly.

There was a pause. It was so dark that none of their faces could be seen, but one might have told, from the quick, nervous way in which unconsciously Gabrielle was clasping and unclasping her hand, that there was some struggle going on within her. At last, very timidly, her voice trembling, though she tried hard to steady it, she spoke again.

"Sisters, do not be angry with me. Often lately have I wished so very much to ask you some things about my mother. Oh, let me ask them now. Dear sisters, tell me why it is that you never speak to me, or hardly allow me to speak of her? Is it because it grieves you so much to think of her death, or is there any other cause?"—her voice sunk so low that it was almost a whisper—"why her name is never mentioned among us? I have kept silence about this for so long, for I knew you did not wish speak of it; but, oh sisters, tell me now! Ought I not to know about my own mother?"

"Hush!" Miss Vaux said, in a voice stern and harsh. "Gabrielle, you do not know what you are asking. Let it be enough for you to learn that anything I could tell you of your mother could give you nothing but pain to hear—pain which we would gladly spare you yet, knowing, as we so well do, the great bitterness of it. I ask you, for all our sakes, yours as much as ours, never again be the first to mention your mother's name!"

She had risen from her seat, and stood upright before Gabrielle, the outline of her tall dark figure showing clearly against the window. In her voice was not one trace of emotion; her whole manner was hard and cold and unimpassioned; like that of one who had, long ago, subdued all gentle feelings.

Gabrielle's tears were falling fast, but she made no answer to Miss Vaux's words. She stood much in awe of both her sisters, especially of the eldest, and knew well how hopeless all remonstrance with her would be.

After a few moments, Bertha laid her hand on Gabrielle's shoulder, saying, with something of gentleness in her voice.

"You distress yourself too much, my child. Trust more in us, Gabrielle. We would try to keep sorrow from you; do not make it impossible."

"Yes, yes; I know it is meant kindly toward me," Gabrielle said, gently, "but you forget that I suffer from being in ignorance. I cannot forget that you are concealing something from me."

"Which I would to God I could conceal from you forever," Miss Vaux said. "Gabrielle, foolish child, do not seek for sorrow; it will come quickly enough of itself;" and she turned from her with some muttered words that her sister could not hear.