



WHISHT
HALL

JANE JORDAN

Her nerves were shattered, and she didn't know who she could trust...

A single haunting human scream rang out from the moorland, chilling Amy's blood and sending terror through her psyche. Completely blinded by the mist, she was unable to see even a few feet in front of her face, but the following silence boded evil. She drew in her breath sharply and slammed the window shut, threw on her dressing gown again, and ran across the bedroom and out the door. She bolted down the stairs, screaming for someone to help. No one came.

All she could think of as she ran to the front door and flung it open was someone needed help, and she raced into the whiteness, toward the moor and the sound of that scream. The mist surrounded her in its insubstantial cloak, confusing her senses, and compounding her fear as she collided heavily with Calin.

"What are you doing out here?" he demanded angrily, clearly shaken by her running into him.

"Didn't you hear the *scream*?" she cried, feeling frantic now. "Someone's out here and that dog is out there, and we have to help him."

Calin grasped her firmly. "Look at you, what can you do? If there is anything out here, it would rip you to shreds," he reasoned. His breath was fast as though he had been running. A blood-curling howl sounded again. Calin grabbed her hand and pulled her after him and back through the front door. "I will deal with it. You have to stay here," he said firmly. "Amy!"

The way he said her name made her jump, and she nodded. Calin seemed satisfied she would remain, and he went back out the front door, slamming it behind him.

Amy's thoughts jumbled, nothing made sense. Why had Calin been outside in the mist?

After losing her father, Amy Derneville travels to remote Whisht Hall on Dartmoor, the home of her step uncle and three step cousins. Far from being close, her cousins have unresolved rivalries, and one possesses an odd and destructive power. After an eventful outing to a dangerous tor and haunted wood, Amy does not know who to trust, and the cries from of the legendary Whisht hounds shatter her nerves completely.

As the mystery of the family starts to unravel, her uncle is murdered on the moors. Fearful that she could be next, Amy flees to New Orleans and to a strange house in the middle of the black-water swamp—where lies some dark fragment of a past she never knew. Drawn into the world of voodoo, she uncovers the shocking truth of her family as she is propelled toward disaster. Now, Amy must return to England and face an adversary who means to destroy everything she holds dear.

KUDOS for *Whisht Hall*

In *Whisht Hall* by Jane Jordan, seventeen-year-old Amy Derneville has recently lost her father. Her only remaining family is her step-uncle and step-cousins in Dartmoor, so Amy travels to Whisht Hall to live with her uncle and cousins. Once she gets there, however, she soon learns the things are not as they should be. She hears hounds crying on the moors and learns that people are dying. Her cousins also don't seem to be normal, and Amy doesn't know who to trust. As she digs for the truth, the mystery will take her from England to New Orleans and the black water swamps of Louisiana, and into the practice of voodoo and magic, where dark secrets are revealed that may change her life forever...Combining the paranormal with an intriguing mystery and a sweet love story, Jordan had crafted a tale that will grab and hold your interest from the very first page. ~ *Taylor Jones, The Review Team of Taylor Jones & Regan Murphy*

Whisht Hall by Jane Jordan is the story of a family cursed by an evil voodoo priestess. Seventeen-year-old Amy Derneville, whose mother disappeared when she was baby, is lost after her father dies. With no other family than her father's stepbrother and his three children, Amy is sent to Dartmoor to live at Whisht Hall. However, Amy soon learns that the family has problems. Her twin step-cousins, Calin and Damien, hate each other, while Lisette, their younger sister, seems to have strange powers. Amy doesn't know who to trust, especially after she hears hounds on the moor and tales of the people they have killed. Fleeing to New Orleans in fear for her life, she is drawn into the world of voodoo, where she learns some dark secrets about her past. Well written, fast paced, with marvelous characters, *Whisht Hall* will keep you enthralled all the way through. A great read. ~ *Regan Murphy, The Review Team of Taylor Jones & Regan Murphy*

WHISHT HALL

JANE JORDAN

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GENRE: PARANORMAL THRILLER/ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

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WHISHT HALL

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WHISHT HALL

CHAPTER 1

Gris-gris

New Orleans, 1989:

After the relentless heat of the day, a brief shower at twilight promised to ease the oppression, but still the breath of the Louisiana night choked the air. A ghostly white haze had formed over the fingers of the bayou. Penetrating every tributary of the swamp, it crept across the black waters to steal along the shadowy ground. Even when full darkness descended, heat still seeped from the earth, giving no relief from the general airlessness of the night.

It was a fitting atmosphere for the occasion, already surreal, except the effectiveness of the mind-altering herbs influenced the scene. The bayou's misty fingers appeared to leave their earthly domain and rise higher into the air, encouraged by the breeze, strange otherworldly patterns formed. The shapes snaked across the sky with purpose, transforming into swirling masses, then, slowly descending to eclipse the witchdoctor's silhouette.

He moved wildly and unnaturally. A reaction of the altered mind was to fancy his image as dark and demonic, as the moon's luminosity highlighted the whites of his eyes, the only visible impression against the darkness of his skin. The image was thrilling, the ambiance so significantly charged, it felt as though it was a tangible organism, and if you were inclined, it was possible to reach out and grab the vibe as it flowed through the air.

At the same time, his figure was darkly frightening. He flaunted the guise of a strange magician, coming close enough so that Marguerite could feel his breath upon her skin. In the next moment, he moved so dangerously close to the flames that he appeared to step into the fire. He repeatedly performed this ritual, as sparks spewed in all directions and landed on his skin. He did not appear to notice. The drums beat faster and he shook the gourd rattle as though demented.

“*Dambellah, Dambellah!*” he chanted, before disappearing behind the fire, only to emerge seconds later with a large snake draped around his shoulders. It writhed about his body, shifting and contorting until it was tight around his neck, noticeably laboring his chant and constricting his windpipe. His eyeballs rolled backward, and he forced the mantra through his lips while giving himself wholly to the trance.

The energy built. The power of the snake amassed and the entity he had called upon, crawled up his body, gliding over his skin and infiltrating every pore. The power overwhelmed him as it entered his earthly form, entwining itself around every fiber of his soul, taking possession. Free will suppressed, he was a willing slave to the bidding of the Loa. He fell to the ground, while his body writhed and undulated as he and the snake became one. They moved in unison, even his tongue darted in and out of his mouth, as if he were mimicking the gesticulation of the great white serpent.

Cecile gathered up a white cockerel in her arms and moved into the circle. Her body began to convulse in time with the drumbeat. She chanted and plucked feathers from the screeching bird, moving toward the ceremonial *poto mitan* that was set into a stone plinth, and covered with sacred offerings. Cecile’s dance became wilder as the posturing of the witchdoctor intensified. Her eyes glazed over as she clasped the bird in both hands and offered him up to the Loa.

Other figures moved closer to the *poto mitan*, their steps close to the geometrically complex and intricate symbols drawn upon the ground, they contorted their bodies and joined the frenzy. Faces were mostly obscured by darkness and shifting shadows, as they moved around the circle. Pungent incense

mixed with smoke scented air, rose in hazy spirals into the dark pitch of night. The collective incantation grew in timbre and the beat of the drums became steadily louder. The cockerel's scream pierced through the hedonistic chaos for a brief moment, as a dagger plunged into its chest. The head was ripped from its body, and blood sprayed out in all directions.

Marguerite screamed. The pain tore through her in waves that felt never-ending. Cecile discarded the bird and went to where she lay, at the edge of the circle. Placing her bloodied hands on Marguerite's naked belly, she chanted. Her words were barely audible above the thumping drum. The Creole girl's eyes rolled in her head, and as she exerted more pressure, Marguerite let out another cry and squeezed her eyes tightly shut, trying not to hyperventilate and to suppress another ear-splitting scream. Her efforts were futile, it soon escaped from deep within her.

The pain was excruciating, and Marguerite could easily believe that Cecile had plunged the dagger into her flesh. A wave of heat rushed over her body, her eyes snapped open, meeting Cecile's gaze that glowed darker by the light of a candle. She moved her hands lower.

"Don't fret now, Ms. Marguerite, it will soon be done."

She could not believe Cecile's words. The sweat was pouring off her skin, even if, she felt chilled. Fear filled her up. It felt as though she were dying, her body agonizingly torn in half, for the pain was too intense, more than she could stand. She screamed again.

Cecile reached down between her legs. "Push, Ms. Marguerite. I see the head, tis almost over!" Marguerite lost the ability to focus, mental numbness embedded firmly in her psyche, as her mind inwardly retreated to a dark place.

Just when she believed that she no longer cared to live or die, an uncontrollable sensation forced her body to recover briefly, making her fight to bring this life into existence. Clenching all of her muscles at once, she pushed hard, willing the baby to come.

It was shocking to her that her body could endure so much torture, and having lain here for hours in pain, she was in a state

of near exhaustion, wholly convinced that it was taking too long. She could not bear any more agony, right now, she would give anything, even her soul, just to make the pain stop and be able to close her eyes.

There was to be no reprieve. The next contraction was too powerful and all consuming. She pushed hard and with what remained of her voice, screamed loudly as the baby's head delivered. It was a shock to realize this was the end. Her will to live resurfaced, her fatigued muscles rallied, and the rest of the baby came easier. A few moments later, the pain stopped, it was as if it had never been. Marguerite breathed freely, dazed and overwhelmed that she was alive. She caught her breath and took a deep gulp of air.

Cecile cut the umbilical cord with a knife, and lifted the bloodied infant, turning toward the onlookers, as the baby let out its first cry. Marguerite's mind conflicted, mostly she wanted to close her eyes and not open them for a week, the other emotion was to ignore how violently her body shook, and hold her baby. With some difficulty, she leant up.

"Cecile," she murmured, "give me my..."

The word was lost. A pain shot through her insides, disorientation clouded her relief, and she collapsed backward as panic overcame her senses. All her muscles tightened and her head drew back sharply. She screamed. Something was wrong.

She caught her breath and shook her head in denial. This was abnormal. She'd had the baby, only now that felt like a fanciful dream.

The pain came again, faster this time and even more severe.

Cecile had been watching her intently, and she spoke quickly to someone out of Marguerite's line of sight, handed the baby to the crowd, and knelt down. Realization dawned, and a slow smile spread across her face.

"Tis twins, Ms. Marguerite, the Loa is pleased to give you such a gift."

The words barely registered. Marguerite didn't care, what she was enduring was foremost on her mind. Drumbeats grew louder again, and she looked sideways to the powerful images that danced about the *poto mitan* and the fire. She prayed then,

to the spirits, begging for it to be over. Between her cries and the drumbeats, the voices became distant in her head as pain tore through her repeatedly. Fever hovered over her, and she felt grateful that a cool damp cloth touched her brow. Believing she was on the brink of death, it was no surprise when a dark shadow passed over her. Confirmation that death had come to claim her, and just before her mind gave in entirely to this thought, the baby came.

“Did you feel that,” she asked hoarsely, while staring at the cockerel’s blood spattered on her skin.

A real shadow fell across her body, and she tilted her head to gaze up into the vacant eyes of the witchdoctor. Up close, his dramatic makeup made him appear more sinister, and his black weeping eyes and swollen muscles alarmed Marguerite more. Cecile was beside him with the second infant, and he took it from her, raised it high into the air, all the while speaking words she did not understand. Then he moved away carrying the child.

Marguerite wanted her babies, but she could not protest, her muscles were unable to prop up her body any longer, her voice was gone, and she could not even resist as Cecile forced a liquid into her mouth. The narcotic took effect at once and her lids became so heavy that it was impossible to hold them open any longer. The torment, the excruciating pain was over, even her body that, moments before, had shaken uncontrollably, now was still, and she could no longer remain in the moment.



The fire had died down, only a few embers glowed as Marguerite woke. There were sleeping bodies all around the perimeter of the clearing, and the air was clearer. She looked skyward to the long beards of Spanish moss, studying their shapes and patterns, as they dangled from the cypress tree under which she rested. The drums had ceased, the darkness was intoxicating, and lingering scent from the incense came to her on a slight breeze as the beards began to sway gently.

Listening to the sounds from the black water swamp was comforting. The warm Louisiana night was full of cicadas hypnotic song and loudly croaking frogs, intent on drowning their rival's noise, by making their own territorial din. An occasional bellow or splash from the bayou signaled an alligator in the vicinity. The thought frightened her, knowing that the scent of blood must still be pungent in the air. Their prehistoric disposition would draw them to her, and in alarm, she looked across to where the noise had come from. She breathed a small sigh of relief, two figures sat by the bayou, keeping guard.

A movement by her side, startled her, and she looked down at two infants swaddled in a dark cloth. She blinked, unable to comprehend that these babies could be her children. All at once, somebody reached out and touched her shoulder. Marguerite jumped violently. She looked up and into the milky eye of an old woman who crouched beside her. The other eye was a glowing ebony color. Marguerite did not know her. She looked Creole, with her one dark eye, graying black hair, and deep-set lines etched into bronzed skin. She was reminiscent of an ancient voodoo queen, with many amulets around her neck and rings adorning all her fingers. The woman stared at her for a few seconds, as though she might read her mind or draw out some bad spirit. She said nothing until she reached across to the babies.

"Your sons," she murmured.

Her voice was light, like that of a young girl, as she pulled the dark cloth aside. A black cord bound the babies' wrists together, in the center was a leather pouch, somehow, it distorted the innocence and purity of new life.

Marguerite's hand instinctively caught hold of the old woman's sleeve, her eyes opened wider, and a cold chill passed through her body as her senses heightened. After tonight, she would see danger symbols in everything. Her nerves felt frayed and thought patterns adhering to superstitious beliefs to keep her children safe. The night suddenly felt darker than ever, and a shadow settled over her mind as she stared at the gris-gris.

CHAPTER 2

Whisht Hall

Dartmoor, England 2010:

The Lexus slowed and turned toward closed iron gates that marked the main entrance through a high impenetrable wall. Coiled metal decoration and bold gothic lettering displayed the name of the property, while sharp pointed finials topped the gates, giving an impression of foreboding. The journey was at an end. The chauffer lowered his window and spoke clearly into an intercom mounted on a weathered stone plinth.

After a few moments, there was an audible sharp click and the heavy gates slowly swung apart. The car moved forward steadily. Amy sat in the back seat, craning her neck so that she could watch the gates close together. She stifled a sigh, realizing she felt slightly sick. Her hands curled into fists, and she clasped them together, reminding herself that there was no going back now. In an effort to curb the hesitation that hovered in her mind, she reiterated the thoughts in her head.

I didn't have any other choice.

Despite what she told herself, the doubt did not disappear. She drew a deep breath, attempting to relax her tense shoulder muscles as a kind of distraction. She thought about her friends and the lasting impression their parting words had made. They had urged her to stay in London. As she stared out of the window at the unfamiliar surroundings, the pang of doubt and nag-

ging voice in her head grew stronger. It persuaded her that she should have listened to them, after all.

Forcing her thoughts back to the present, she gazed at the lime trees flanking the driveway. They looked old and had most likely been planted decades ago. Their close proximity to each other, did not allow much sunlight to shine through, and this winding driveway felt as if it had no end. Between the tree trunks, she could see that sheep grazed the field to her right, while great lawns to the left contained huge trees, magnificent oaks and beeches that easily reached heights of fifty feet or more. Wetting her lips, Amy leaned forward, so that the chauffeur might hear her better. She caught his eye in the rear-view mirror.

“Where is the house?”

Smile lines creased around his eyes, and he moved his head a little to the right. “Close, you will see.”

A few seconds more and she did see. The limes thinned toward the end of the avenue, sunlight poured down onto a vast circular driveway, and, as they drove closer, she could see that low stone walls, with pink and purple flowers spilling over the edges, bordered the pavement. In the circle, a mass of lavender filled in the geometrically shaped box hedging, it was beautiful and manicured, but the array of color and delight paled into insignificance, for the feature that dominated the landscape was Whisht Hall.

The car came to a stop and the chauffeur got out. After opening Amy’s door, he went to get her belongings out of the trunk. Amy sat unmoving for a few moments, just staring at the house. It was so big, much more than she had imagined, and she suddenly felt daunted by the prospect of even walking inside. Reluctantly, she stepped from the car and her eyes roamed over the stone turrets, chimneys, and windows. The slate-gray stonework gave the appearance of it being somewhat unfriendly.

At first, she did not see the people who stood just outside the entrance porch, overwhelmed as she was by the magnificence of the entire aspect. Realization quickly dawned, and, embarrassed by her lack of manners, she took a deep breath, tried not

to pay any attention to the fluttering sensation in the pit of her stomach, and walked toward them.

At her approach, an older man with graying hair, wearing a smart dark blue jacket, stepped forward and extended his hand.

“Amy my dear, welcome to Whisht Hall,” he said with a warm smile.”

Amy placed her hand in his. His handshake was firm and she returned his smile, suddenly feeling self-conscious about her untidy appearance. The car journey had been long, her dress was creased, and her hair tangled.

“It’s been a long time since I last saw you, and you probably don’t even remember,” he continued, “you were very young?” He was Henri Louyar, Amy’s rich uncle. More importantly, Henri Louyar was now her legal guardian.

“I do remember you, Uncle, although my recollection is a bit vague.”

He nodded, and stepping back, he turned to his side, with a little difficulty, she thought. Behind him was a girl, who looked about seventeen or eighteen, around the same age as Amy. Half pinned-up blonde curls secured by a clasp in the shape of a butterfly, her dress looked expensive, no doubt it had some designer label, Amy noted with a pang of regret. She wished that she had worn something more expensive looking. She felt like the poor cousin with her Top Shop dress and cheap sandals she had bought on sale for seventeen pounds.

The girl was staring at her, and Amy perceived the strangest feeling as she met her look. There was an indication of a hard jaw line, subtle narrowing of the eyes, before the girl’s face radiated into the warm smile of her father.

“Hi,” she said, “I’m Lisette,” and leaned forward to hug Amy briefly.

Amy felt a little taken aback, although determined not to give in to her negative first impression.

“Hi,” she said brightly enough, keeping the smile fixed on her lips as she diverted her attention to the dark-haired man at Lisette’s side. Her smile faded into what she hoped was not a stunned grimace, as Lisette gestured lightly with her hand.

“This is my brother Calin.”

Calin moved closer, it was hard to believe that Lisette was really his sister. Chalk and cheese was an understatement. Lisette was light skinned, with blonde hair and bright blue eyes, whereas his skin was darker and reminded Amy of Mediterranean ethnicity. That aside, it was not his skin or hair coloring that shocked her, it was the color of his eyes. In the sunlight, they were the color of dark amber. It was so unexpected and unusual that she did not believe they could be real. She forced the corners of her mouth to turn up fractionally, trying not to stare at him, even though his eyes were so remarkable that she couldn't help herself. After an awkward moment, she suppressed her initial shock and forced herself to believe that they had to be contact lenses.

Calin was taller than both his father and sister, his hair was very dark, it was wavy, untidily layered and falling to his shoulder. As much as she tried not to linger on his appearance, she could not help noticing everything about him, right down to his black jeans and a dark purple top with an oriental design in wisps of silver thread. He looked exotic, out of place, and certainly not someone you would expect to find standing in the porch of an English country mansion. She briefly gazed into his eyes again.

"Hello," was all she could think of to say.

"Welcome to *my* home." His voice was cool and smooth.

She hoped that her face was not flushed as he looked down at her and then, took her hand for just a moment, pulling her close enough to kiss her cheek. Amy felt certain now that the color rose dramatically in her face. Her skin felt flushed, she nervously tossed her blonde hair over her shoulder, and looked back to Henri.

"Now the formalities are over with, let's go inside," he said jovially, leading them through he paneled double entrance doors heavily carved in wood. Amy thought about what had just happened. With both Henri and Lisette, she had felt welcome, despite her initial reaction to Lisette. Henri seemed kindly in his disposition. In addition, Amy mused that perhaps it was natural for Lisette to feel a small amount of resentment where her father was concerned, after all, she was the only girl,

and Henri probably doted on her. Perhaps she saw Amy as a rival for her father's affection, which was the farthest thing from Amy's mind. She did not know these people. Her vague recollection from years ago did not endear Henri to her other than out of politeness.

That said, she was grateful for the invitation to be a part of his family. Calin's cool reception was entirely something different. He had said, "welcome to *my* home." Something about the way he had delivered the words, did not feel sincere, it felt like a warning. She tried not to think about his unusual eyes, even if, all she wanted to do was look at them again.

Amy followed Henri and Lisette through the entrance hall, past a robust granite fireplace with an elaborate plasterwork ceiling. She tried not to read too much into these odd perceptions. She was tired, it had been a long journey, and her life was complicated enough. Her entire existence had taken a turn for the worst, and the odd feeling of being alone was making her mistrust everyone. Every person she knew was trying to be nice, but along the way, everybody insisted on giving advice, and every emotion conflicted in her head.

This hall housed a grand staircase, which they continued through toward open double doors at the far end. She cast an interested glance at the photographs they passed displayed on a circular center table, as they reached another door. Sensing Calin close behind her, she could not shake the feeling of his eyes burning into her back. It made her feel completely unsettled, and she didn't know why she got an impression that he disliked her already. Just before they entered this room, Henri turned to her.

"I'm sorry that I could not attend the funeral," he said somberly, "my own health is in decline, and travelling these days is not something I do very easily."

"I understand, Uncle Henri," Amy replied. "Mr Pascal explained that you had instructed them in respect to my father's wishes."

Henri nodded and pushed open the double door. "Come into the drawing room and I will ring for some tea, you must be

thirsty.” He thought for a moment. “You do drink tea?” he inquired, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, I do,” she said, entering the drawing room behind Henri and Lisette, and waited out of politeness until she was asked to sit.

Calin brushed past her, a little too close it seemed. She frowned. He appeared to be deliberately trying to make her uncomfortable. The sick feeling was back, combined with a sinking feeling in her stomach which made her wish she had not come. A sudden feeling of homesickness hit her with full force.

Friends’ voices filtrated through her head, telling her not to leave London. She thought about their warnings of how she would be bored stupid in the countryside, and she didn’t really know the people that she was going to live with. Now, she could perceive a heavy shadow that hung over the room and wished she had not brushed their warnings aside, because family or not, these people were complete strangers to her.

Already it seemed, she had made an enemy, and for the life of her could not think why, or how would she deal with Calin’s hostility if she were to live in his house, as he put it. Henri indicated that she and Lisette should sit on the comfortable looking chintz covered couch, and she obliged.

The room was largely dominated by another granite fireplace and over-mantle delicately carved swags of flowers and vines.

“Lisette can show you around later. It’s a big house, we don’t want you getting lost in here,” Henri said cordially, “besides, it will be good for her to have another female in the house,” he remarked, looking at his daughter who returned his look with a brief awkward smile.

He pulled a handle on the wall that was next to the fireplace, and in the distance, Amy heard the faint sound of a bell. Henri sat on a brocade chair, with some difficulty. Amy tried to push her negative thoughts away as she observed her uncle and wondered exactly what was wrong.

He was a few years older than her father had been, though it did not seem the right moment to inquire after his health. Calin sat a little away from them. He was in her direct line of vision.

She caught his eye, and forced herself not to dwell on their color or allow him to think he fascinated her in any way. She turned her body slightly, so that he was not her sole focus of attention.

Lisette was talking to Henri about the price of a doll, and when Amy listened to her words, they seemed childish and immature. It was a strange thing for a girl of her age to be getting so upset about.

“Lisette, I am not talking about this now, we have a guest, remember?” Henri remarked pointedly.

Lisette looked berated and mumbled an apology under her breath. Amy was not certain if Lisette aimed the words at Henri or her, but she did not waste the opportunity of the lapse in conversation.

“I wanted to thank you for offering—” she began.

Henri held up his hand. “We will talk tomorrow, and there is no need for thanks, I am happy to have you in my house.”

Lisette turned to Amy. “I will give you the tour of the house tomorrow. It has so many rooms and corridors. After tea, I’ll show you your room. I picked out the colors, we had it decorated especially for you, and it has a great aspect out onto the moors.”

“I hope you didn’t go to any trouble,” Amy said, feeling anxious.

“It was no trouble,” Lisette said immediately. “Dad was happy to pay for a decorator, he won’t pay for my new doll though,” she complained, looking pointedly at Henri.

“Enough, Lisette, I’ve told you I am finished with that discussion.” Henri had raised his voice and Lisette glared at him.

Amy felt awkward, perhaps this was the initial resentment she had felt, and while it was embarrassing to listen to what should have been a private discussion, Amy was more astonished that Lisette could be getting so het up over a doll, of all things. Her initial reaction was to pipe up and say that she should have grown out of dolls at her age. With anyone else, she would have, never being one to bite her tongue.

This situation was different. She couldn’t say what was in her mind or on the tip of her tongue. It had become glaringly

obvious that she was here at these people's mercy, and she didn't want to cause any unpleasant atmosphere. There was already enough of that as the mood of the room suddenly felt oppressive.

"That would be great," she answered, trying to diffuse Lissette's obvious anger with her father, "if you would show me around. I have never lived in a house of this size."

She forced a smile, wishing the tea would hurry up. She wanted nothing more than to go to her room and be alone for a while.

Thankfully, tea arrived moments later via a housekeeper. Henri introduced her as Maggie, who smiled brightly and welcomed her. Maggie stayed long enough to pour tea from the teapot into fine bone china teacups and hand them around. Amy sipped hers grateful to have something else to focus on. After Maggie left the room, Henri turned to her.

"Maggie only works during the day, she does not live-in, but she cooks for us as well, and we have a gardener here, they live on the estate in the cottages you may have noticed from the driveway."

"No, I did not see them. I was too busy looking at everything else."

Henri paused for a moment, as Amy realized the underlying point was that only the family resided in the house. "There are other cottages on the estate, they are farther on the moor. Although they are empty, they need completely refurbishing. We might actually get around to it one day," he said, shifting his gaze to Calin.

Amy glanced in his direction to be polite, but did not allow her gaze to fully focus on him. She looked back to Henri, feeling noticeably warmer than before.

It felt like such a different world from the one she had grown up in. Her father had money, but nothing on this scale. He had been a brilliant surgeon, until the degenerative disease had destroyed his motor functions and ultimately took his life. Her mother had left when she was young. It was her father and a nanny that had raised her. Her life felt a little unreal, as her father's funeral, only two days ago, still weighed heavily on her

mind. The wake was almost a blur, the well wishes and condolences of friends already paling into a muddy fog. Her immediate future was decided when Leonard Pascal, the solicitor, had read the will.

The sale of the Georgian town house was already in motion, and that money was to be held in trust, until she was twenty-one. Her father thought it better that the solicitor and Henri oversee the financial aspects of his will. He had not wanted to overburden a seventeen-year-old, and made his daughter the ward of his stepbrother, Henri, thus enabling her to become a part of the family she knew little about.

But Laurent knew that without them, once he was gone, she would be all alone in the world. Some of his last words also revealed that her mother's abandonment still weighed heavily on him.

"Not that you even care," her father had said, "she has never wanted to see you before, but when I'm gone, who knows? Word gets around and she may be in touch before long. Henri can protect you from any complications."

Amy had been crying and holding his hand, too upset and angry to see her father was so matter of fact about his death, tying up every loose end. He was so calm and she was not. She did not care about the house, the money, her mother, or family she had mostly never met. "All I want is for you to be here," she'd cried miserably.

He tried to be positive for her sake and remind her that she would have a great future, but it was a mask, his sorrow was evident in that last smile. Within the hour, he had died as she still clung to his hand.

"Lisette, don't overwhelm her." Henri's voice broke through her thoughts.

Amy quickly blinked away the tears and looked up, embarrassed, not sure of her cousin's previous words. She looked apologetically at Lisette. "I'm so sorry, I'm just really tired."

"That's all right," Lisette said after a moment's thought, "the journey from London must have been very long."

Amy nodded. It was the first sensible thing the girl had said.

“Yes, it was. I didn’t realize how far Dartmoor was, and from what I’ve seen already, albeit out of the car window, it’s beautiful.”

“It is,” Henri agreed, “if a little remote from the sort of life you have led. We tend to be a little insular at Whisht Hall. It’s a completely different world from being in a big city and I’m sure it will take you a while to settle in, but once you do, you will come to love it as I do.”

Amy smiled at Henri and caught Calin’s eye again. It felt, as though he had not taken his eyes from her.

It was only now that she realized he had not spoken a single word since they entered the room.

CHAPTER 3

A Bone of Contention

Lisette led Amy to a large sun-filled bedroom overlooking the garden. The honey colored walls made the room feel warm and inviting. Burnt orange and gold curtains, along with matching bedding and gold tasseled throw cushions, gave the room an expensive feel. A connecting door led through to an en-suite bathroom, decorated in the same tones, and the large picture window in the bedroom looked over the dramatic landscape of the moor. It was easy to see why Henri loved the place. Its ruggedness and wilderness had a beauty she had not encountered before.

“I’ll leave you alone then,” Lisette remarked, hovering close to the door, “if you need anything I’ll be downstairs.” She paused for a moment. “And dinner’s at seven.”

“Thanks,” Amy said appreciatively, glancing at her suitcases on the floor by the bed. “I think, I’ll change and just unpack for a while.”

Lisette nodded and closed the door behind her. Amy breathed a small sigh of relief. She knew everyone was trying to be welcoming. *Except Calin*, she thought with a frown. It was the only sour note since her arrival, although it was possible she had misread him. Perhaps he was just reserved. The idea made her feel better and she dismissed any more thoughts about him, she didn’t want to think about any of them right now and was grateful to be on her own for a while. She walked to the window and gazed out at the countryside.

Sheep grazed over the vast amount of barren moorland, and here and there were swathes of woodlands and rocky outcrops, with no other building in sight. Amy took in unfamiliar landmarks and the odd atmosphere that seemed as if it changed constantly. The bright sunshine of before had transformed into dull light, due to the clinging damp fog that crept across the countryside with considerable speed. After only a few minutes it looked as if the clouds had fallen out of the sky and simply lay upon the ground. She could see over the top of them and through them, like looking at the panorama in layers.

When Amy opened the bedroom window, the thing that struck her most was how eerily still everything appeared. She breathed in the dense chilled air that was neither refreshing nor exhilarating. Instead, it felt as though her lungs were closing down, making her breathing labored. It was a strange sensation, and so unexpected that she pulled the window shut and turned away.

She opened a suitcase and changed her creased dress for a navy ankle-length skirt, a cream camisole top, and completed the outfit with a navy cardigan. It was Ralph Lauren design—elegant, although casual enough to make the statement that she had just thrown it on without that much thought.

She ran a brush through the tangles in her hair and checked her image in the mirror, her gaze finding its way past her immediate reflection to the stack of clothes she had already pulled out of the suitcases. It would be better to hang them up now, so the creases would fall out, but a voice in her head told her it could wait for later. It would be a distraction from the day's events, and give her something to do presently. At the very least, a purpose to return to her room if she needed to. Deep down she hoped there would no longer be an awkward atmosphere, and that Calin might be a little more sociable. Again, there was that niggles about him. She sighed and made up her mind to reserve final judgement until after dinner.

At ten to seven, and with some reluctance, she headed for the door. Despite what she previously wished for, the anxious gnawing feeling in the pit of her stomach would not go away. It took a few moments to reconcile her feelings, gather her cour-

age, and determination to make a good impression at dinner. Making enemies was not on her list of things to do today, but she was not a timid mouse either, and Calin was going to be in for a shock, if he thought he could intimidate her.

The first few minutes in the dining room was not as bad as she might have imagined. Calin had not yet arrived and Henri made her so welcome that she began to relax and not to feel so out of place and such a foreigner amongst them. As they went to take their seats, she noticed that there were only three places set. Seeing her look, Henri announced that Calin would not be joining them tonight.

“A business meeting, he had to attend,” he said.

Amy suppressed the urge to question him on that point, not knowing what that really meant. She couldn't quite decide if her uncle was covering up some altercation that had gone on behind her back. Perhaps, Calin did not want to sit at a meal table with her.

“He sends his apologies,” Henri continued, as he took his place at the head of the table. “He'll be back tomorrow.”

Amy nodded and sat down, inwardly feeling the disappointment. Mentally she had prepared herself for this evening and for any disagreeable remark Calin might have made, only now the conflict in her mind would have to struggle for several more hours.

Henri was attentive and she answered his questions about the life she used to have in London. Lisette was generally quiet, although a couple of times Amy caught her eye, and tried to ignore the feeling that Lisette was judging her, or waiting for her to say the wrong thing. It was an odd feeling, and Amy wondered if she were not just being over anxious at wanting everyone to like her. Normally, she got along with everybody, although normally, she wasn't foisting herself upon them as a legal responsibility.

Amy tried to be as agreeable as she could manage. She smiled at Lisette a few times and attempted to engage her in the conversation. Even though, Lisette was civil, her brief answers did nothing to shift the uneasiness from Amy's mind, and she

couldn't quite let go of the thought that Lisette felt put out in some way.

As the evening wore on, Amy became quieter and concentrated on the food before her, reasoning to herself that she had Henri's full attention ever since they sat down to dinner, perhaps Lisette was just plain jealous.

After they had eaten, Henri went to answer a phone call, and Lisette showed her through to a second living room. This room was dedicated to books and a large flat screen television.

Lisette sat on the couch and Amy sat at the opposite end. She thought that it was now or never, she had to be the one to offer some sort of olive branch. Amy cleared her throat and shifted her position to look at Lisette.

"Lisette, I hope we can be friends." She hesitated, waiting for some encouragement, but Lisette stared back at her with an expression of indifference. "I have never been around any family my own age before and..." Amy sighed, not really knowing what to say. "I mean, I'd understand if you felt a bit resentful," she added with a shrug, "I know we are cousins, but I am like a stranger, being forced upon you, and you being the only girl. I don't want you to think I am in competition with you for...well, anything really." She was not making sense to herself, let alone to Lisette, and she didn't really know what she was trying to say.

A brief smile passed across Lisette's face and she shrugged lightly. "It's okay, you're an orphan, and I get it."

The implication as well as the word sent a chill up Amy's spine. She stared at Lisette in shock. "No I, I am not," she said at once. "I mean, I do have a mother somewhere in the world."

Lisette nodded wryly. "Don't worry we are not in competition, it's your first night. I'm sure you'll feel better in a day or two."

Amy had not expected that response, she didn't know what she had wanted Lisette to say, but it definitely wasn't that. *Orphan*, the word troubled her, and the idea firmly planted itself in her mind. That was how they all saw her. Poor little orphan girl who they had to help, as it was their obligation. Amy sat back, her spirits feeling even lower than earlier.

Lisette flicked a button on the remote control and the television filled the room with music, and voices, appropriately, there was a commercial advertising headache medication. Amy stared at the screen resentfully. She didn't really see anything beyond flickering images.

"Do you mind if we watch *Antiques Roadshow*," Lisette asked, interrupting her thoughts.

Amy forced the smile. "That would be great," she said, trying to sound enthusiastic.

Inside, half of her was fuming, the other half just felt incredibly sad. No one had ever hinted this before. Perhaps since her father's death that is what everyone thought, even her friends.

Eventually, Henri returned, plucked a book from one of the bookcases, and settled down for the evening with it. Amy watched the television screen, trying not to wallow in negative thoughts. A while later, Lisette announced she was going to bed, and Amy stayed a few minutes longer, then, after wishing Henri a goodnight, she also took the opportunity to escape.

Alone in her room, she sat on the bed, her mind full of the sudden changes in circumstances. It just wasn't fair. She had no family apart from these people. They were so unfamiliar, and to top it all, she really did have the beginnings of a headache. Trying not to think too much, she walked into the en-suite to get a glass of water. She drank half of it and swallowed back the tears.

"Stop being such a child," she told herself firmly, "you have to be strong."

Back in the bedroom, she sat on the floor before the last suitcase, which still needed un-packing and emptied it completely, half-heartedly she stood up again and began to hang up her clothes. The wardrobe was large, more room than she could fill with her possessions. Arranging everything filled the time for a while and put her in a better mood, so she pulled her laptop free of its carrying case, and logged onto the internet and onto Facebook, hoping that someone familiar was online.

Amy felt deflated to see that no one was. She sent a message to Caitlin, her best friend, expecting her to respond soon. In her status box, she typed, *at my uncle's house on Dartmoor*, then,

after scanning the social network list of friends, she changed her mind. She didn't feel sociable at all and deleted the post. These people didn't know or care how very cut off from civilization she was, and no amount of "liking" her comments would make the overwhelming feeling of loneliness go away.

After Amy got ready for bed, she checked the computer again and, with a miserable sigh, turned it off. Caitlin obviously wasn't missing her quite as much. Minutes ticked by as she sat on the edge of the bed. The curtains were open, and she got up, walked to the window, and, on impulse, pushed it open so that she could lean out. Thinking it would help her head, she took a couple of deep breaths of the damp night air. The night was strangely surreal, earlier fog had filled in and wrapped itself about the house so that she could no longer make out trees and bushes in the garden.

This alien landscape was intriguing as unusual noises came to her from the moors. She had read about deer bellowing, and she was now listening to their haunting sounds emanating back to her through the murkiness.

Shivering slightly, she was just about to pull the window shut, when she heard a whine like a dog might make. Straining her ears and listening harder, she heard it again, closely followed by the sound of movement through the undergrowth. The thrill of fear and goose bumps rising on her skin sent another shiver down the length of her body, as damp air permeated through the thin fabric of her nightshirt. Fear of the night and of what might be lurking out there, made her nervous and she quickly pulled the window shut. She went to the bedroom door and turned the key in the lock, feeling a little more secure.

"This is crazy, what am I doing here?" she said aloud, sudden despair filling her senses. She shook her head as if she might shake the negativity away from her. "It was just a whine," she told herself, and maybe her uncle kept a pet dog, even though she had not seen one since her arrival. Feeling cold now, she climbed into bed and the chill on her skin was soon lost under the cozy duvet. "Tomorrow, things will be better."

Despite her faith in that conviction, she tossed and turned, unaccustomed to the different bed and surroundings. A door

shut in the hallway and muffled voices sounded below, then everything went quiet. Amy turned out the bedside lamp and lay for a while, staring at complete darkness. It had never been this dark in London and, with no city lights for miles, there was no light pollution whatsoever. In fact, she couldn't remember ever sleeping in such darkness before. It unnerved her. She closed her eyes, turned from her side, then to her back, and repeated the process, unable to find a comfortable position.

Orphan, the word replayed through her head too many times to consider it normal. Why was she so sensitive about the word, and why did it bother her so much, or to know that Lisette thought of her like that? When she reasoned logically, she was certain Henri would have told his children that her mother had left them alone. It was true she never had known Kara, but falsely labeling her an orphan seemed cruel. The harsh reality was she no longer had a place in the world. No more could she even consider that she was the daughter of Laurent, her beloved father. She was just a person with no real identity. For all she knew, Kara could be dead, then, Lisette's words would not be wrong.

Perhaps she was an orphan, after all.

It felt as though she shifted positions hundreds of times before she eventually fell into an uneasy sleep. When dreams came, they were confused. Kara and Laurent were with her, and the three of them were laughing, then the sequence changed as Laurent's coffin lowered into the ground. She did not recognize the cemetery. There was water everywhere, and she saw through dozens of strange contorted trees to a ruin of a house. Kara was speaking, her voice was lamenting at first, with words Amy could not understand. Her voice grew shriller and her mother let out a blood-curling scream. Amy woke with a start.

The beat of her heart was fast, and fear gripped her as she held her breath, listening to any noise in the room. In the blackness, there was silence, and she breathed easier, thinking about the strange and powerful dream that could curdle the blood.

Amy forced herself to let go of the lingering images. She wondered how she knew it was Kara's voice. Perhaps locked

away in her sub-conscious was the memory of her mother's voice and an odd connection with her.

Amy rubbed her forehead, refusing to think any more. She turned onto her side, plumped up her pillow, and closed her eyes again, the reassuring tick from the bedside clock lulling her into a sense of security.

A long mournful howl resonated through her head. Her eyes snapped open as uncertainty flitted through her mind. Out from the darkness, the howl came again, penetrating through the glass of the window. Her senses became fully alert as she jumped out of bed.

Unaccustomed to the room in the darkness, she stubbed her toe on the corner of the bedroom chair and, letting out a cry of pain, she hobbled across to the window. Her toe throbbed, but knowing the source of the noise was more important. She pushed the window open a few inches, allowing the icy air to crawl over her skin. Another blood-curling howl sounded again, this time closer. Tiny hairs rose on her skin as she strained her eyes to see through the murkiness. There was movement in the undergrowth and she stared at the abstract black shapes that by daylight were probably shrubs. Suddenly out from the hypnotic grayness she could make out a silhouette moving closer to her. She held her breath, eyes straining hard and starting to hurt from the intensity of her stare.

Despite her alarm, she refused to move, determined to figure out what it was that was terrorizing her mind, but many minutes passed and the fog revealed no great mystery. The sound was gone, replaced by an eerie silence, and fear of the unknown penetrated her every sense, until she finally pulled the window shut. Whatever had been there was gone.



The next morning, she was up early. In reality, she had lain in bed, not daring to sleep. The sounds she had heard coming from the moors disturbed her out of all proportion, and she was thankful when she walked downstairs to find Lisette was talk-

ing with Maggie about breakfast. Everyone was behaving completely normal. No one else seemed traumatized.

She was in half a mind to ask Lisette about the noise, though Amy hadn't forgiven her for the previous night's comment and thought it best not to speak beyond casual civil conversation. Henri was nowhere to be seen, and after enquiring, Maggie told her that she had last seen him in the garden. Amy quickly downed a cup of tea and a slice of toast and politely excused herself. She walked into the garden to find him.

She found him in a little while later in the Victorian orangery, which was next to a large glasshouse. Dressed in different attire today, and wearing an old battered panama hat, he appeared far more casual. His face lit up when she approached.

"Good morning, my dear, I trust you slept well?"

"Not really, I'm not used to the complete darkness...or hearing such strange noises from the moor." It was the most leading statement she could make, but Henri just nodded.

"You'll soon get used to it," he said, picking up a small watering can and filling it from a tap on the wall. "I barely hear the wailing and moaning of the wind anymore."

Amy frowned. What she heard was not wind, but she decided not to pursue the subject any further and, looking at the array of colorful plants, her expression changed.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" Henri said, following her gaze. "Blue tango bromeliad from the tropical Americas." He carefully picked up one of the nearest plants that displayed a spectacular pink and blue flower spike. "You just have to handle them with care," he continued. "They have very sharp spines. Botany has been my real passion in life and I have collected all manner of exotic plants from around the world. I have given many to plant societies and botanical gardens, but I don't get to go on many plant hunting expeditions these days," he concluded, taking a seat on an ornate cast iron chair and gesturing that she be seated in the matching chair.

"This is my favorite place to be," he admitted happily, "surrounded by so many beautiful things. This—" he pulled a pot toward him, containing a yellow and pink orchid, "—is very rare. I brought this back from South America a decade ago."

“It must be fascinating to travel so much, to so many different countries,” Amy remarked.

“Yes, I have been all over the world, seen many great things and many strange things as well,” he said with a slight frown. He gave the impression that he was lost in thought for a moment. “I am glad we have this chance to be alone,” he continued. “I wanted to talk with you, my dear, about more formal issues.” He cleared his throat. “I know this may be hard for you, and as you know the details of your father’s will, so I don’t need to go over that, unless, there is something you don’t understand?” he inquired, raising an eyebrow.

“I understood the conditions of the will,” Amy answered solemnly, not really wanting to touch on this subject. It was still so raw, except, she felt that she should gain a little perspective for her uncle’s feelings. Henri nodded.

“You will be very wealthy when you reach twenty-one. Your father ensured that. Until that time, you and your financial interests will remain under my protective custody.”

A few more seconds passed and Amy got the impression he was deliberately stalling. “Are you worried about my mother?”

“Your father was,” he said gravely. “He believed that once she knew of your inheritance, she would come back into your life, and he wanted me to protect you from any fortune hunters, even if it was your own mother.” Henri glanced uncomfortably at her. “There is more I need to do regarding this, and we have to put in place some contingencies. I am old and frail as you may have noticed,” he said, with a small smile, “but if something should happen to me, then as my oldest son, Calin will become your guardian.” Amy stared at her uncle with dismay, trying to think through all that revelation entailed. She wasn’t happy to hear his words, especially since she was convinced that Calin didn’t even like her.

“Calin can only be a few years older than me. I don’t like that idea.” Amy would have gone on.

“Don’t worry about that,” he interrupted, patting her arm, “it’s just a formality, the solicitor has the controlling power. No one, not even Calin, can touch the money.”

Amy was doubtful. "It's not about the money," she said slowly, "guardianship, means you have a responsibility. My father was happy for you to have that, and so am I, because you understand all it entails, Calin is different, it would be a burden for him. I don't want to burden anyone," she said, shaking her head, "and he doesn't even know me. I met him for the first time yesterday." She paused. "Besides, it doesn't feel right."

"My dear, you don't have any other family," Henri pressed gently, "and as I said, it's just a formality, it's nothing, but a few words on a piece of paper," he said lightly with a wave of his hands "and in less than four years, Calin would have no further obligation. You will make me feel happier if you agree to this proposal." He seemed genuinely sincere, and since it was unlikely that Henri would die that quickly, Amy reluctantly nodded her head.

"Good, now there is something else, not something I relish discussing with you." He sighed heavily. "It's all such a dreary subject, unfortunately, such things cannot be neglected." He was clearly uncomfortable as he shifted a couple of times in his chair. "But there is no easy way to say this." He talked briskly. "If you should die, then you need to think about where you would like your inheritance to go." He hesitated for a moment. "Obviously, your mother is your next of kin, and without a will, she would be entitled to a large portion. Your father hated that idea." He stopped speaking for a few moments. "Even so, I would like to hear your thoughts on the subject."

Amy felt suddenly overwhelmed. She was seventeen, and most seventeen-year-old girls were not estate planning, dreaming up scenarios as to when they would die, or facing mortality in such a basic and calculating way as to their financial worth. She stared at her uncle, finding difficulty in responding to the question. At last she shrugged.

"I don't know. My mother shouldn't have it. Then again, will I really care when I am dead anyway?" All this talk of death troubled her and she clasped her hands together in her lap. Henri put his hand over hers.

"I'm sorry to burden you with these thoughts, although, the quicker we can get all legal matters out of the way the better,

and you can forget all about it, knowing everything is in accordance with your own wishes. It's just a safety net, for your own protection."

Amy sighed. "I know, but what can I do with a small fortune if I don't need it myself, give it to the poor or to charity?" She shrugged. "What do you suggest?"

"I agree that a charity might be the wisest solution. If I were in your position, that is what I think I would do."

Amy thought for a moment. "In that case, if I would give it to charity, then surely it's hypocritical not to allow my mother to have a share. Or you and your children, I mean you're right, you are all the family I have left."

"Your mother made her decision, Amy," he said gently, "all those years ago, when she left you and your father." Henri cleared his throat. "It is an appalling thing, leaving you while you were just a baby, and perhaps even that could have been forgiven if she had at least showed some interest in you or your life. Giving her money will not right any wrong she has done to you or your father." He hesitated. "My children will have their own inheritances, they do not need yours."

Amy sat quietly for a few moments. "Uncle, do you consider me an orphan?"

Henri's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Why would you say that?" But he didn't wait for her answer. "No, I don't, not in the least, you are my niece, and a part of my family. It's just a shame we never got to know each other sooner." He narrowed his eyes fractionally. "Has someone said something to you?"

Amy shook her head, not wanting to get Lisette in trouble, despite the thoughtless comment. "No, it's just that I don't want to be thought of that way, and it sort of bothers me to think that...well, maybe not you," she said, considering, "but I don't want my cousins to think of me as some sort of charity case that has been forced upon them."

"Don't ever think that, Amy. My children know you are the daughter of my only stepbrother, who I not only had great admiration for, I loved him. I was truly devastated when I heard just how sick he was." The sadness in his tone was evident. "I was recovering from an illness and could not travel, so I never

got a chance to say goodbye,” he confessed, wearing a pained expression. “That was the hardest thing for me to come to terms with.”

Amy was silent for a moment. She had never realized how close Henri had felt toward her father. “I am so sorry. I didn’t even think anyone really cared.”

The empathy was apparent in her tone and he smiled softly. “I cared, a great deal.” He was subdued for a few moments chasing the thoughts around his head. “At least, I have a small part of him left in you, and that is the best tonic for me,” he said, putting his arm around her shoulder and squeezing gently.

An unexpected release of tension flowed through Amy’s psyche. She never would have believed she could feel it again after the previous few weeks, and in that instant, all her previous despondency vanished. “I will be glad if I can bring you some happiness.”

“You have already, my dear. My own children have not had the most conventional upbringing, living in two countries, with parents that pulled them apart. Lisette is spoiled I know, I tried to compensate for the fact they had a broken home.”

“I thought you were still married,” Amy queried with some surprise.

Henri nodded. “Yes, we are, although, we have had a strange marriage. We spent too many years apart and living in separate countries. We still consider ourselves man and wife. At least I do, and when I am able, I still travel to America to be with Marguerite.” He smiled warmly. “But you need to put such nonsense of being some sort of charity case right out of your head. You just need time to adjust to a new life here with us.”

She nodded positively. “I will.”

“Good, that’s settled then,” Henri, said approvingly. “Now, back to what we were discussing. I did briefly talk of this while your father was still alive. Laurent was very interested in the medical work that my wife was involved in. I don’t know if you knew about the institute she founded in Louisiana?”

Amy’s ears pricked up at once.

Henri went on, “It was not long after she permanently moved back to America. It is a non-profit organization researching the uses of alternative medicine for the help in degenerative disorders, they have done some great work, with very interesting results. Perhaps you would like to think about that?”

Amy didn’t need time to think. To her, it seemed like a perfect solution. “If my father wanted to support that organization then I will as well, and if Aunt Marguerite owns it, then the money will be connected to the family anyway.”

Henri pulled out a sheaf of papers. “I thought you might say that,” he said contentedly. “Here are the detailed documents relating to the charities work. You should read them.” He handed Amy the papers so she could read the title page:

The Durand Institute of Medical Research.

CHAPTER 4

Legend of the Whisht Hounds

Amy pored over the papers for a while, interested to read that the institute worked in human genetic cell investigation, and the analysis of case studies interpreted how different people responded to various drugs and treatment. It seemed logical that Henri's interest in plants was a justified reason he had a genuine interest, as the institute maintained a pharmaceutical garden of plants that yielded therapeutic compounds of proven value, in current medicinal practice.

Amy sadly recalled that, before her father died, he had talked of taking a more holistic approach to his illness, and she had urged him not to stray into the unknown and to stick with the proven conventional drugs. Maybe, she had been wrong. The evidence before her suggested that very idea, and she wondered if this institute could have prolonged his life.

Henri saw her melancholia. "Laurent had the best care, you know that. Many of these trials take years and the breakthroughs are minimal in the grand scheme of things."

"I know," she said. "It is really interesting work, though."

"It is," Henri agreed. "Much of the work is still experimental." He cleared his throat. "Did you know that your mother worked there for a while?"

Amy looked up, her shock evident as she absorbed his words. Henri nodded, pained by her reaction. "No, I didn't know. In what capacity?"

Henri frowned considering, and staring at nothing in particular for a few moments, concerned he may have said the wrong

thing. “Stem cells, and the possibilities of taking the cells from umbilical cords of newborns and using them for research. Initially, she went out to America soon after Lisette was born.” He glanced anxiously at Amy. “It was at Marguerite’s request.” He sighed heavily. “She had a difficult time with Lisette, and thought that there was something wrong with the baby. With Kara being a pediatric nurse, Marguerite knew your mother would be honest with her. Perhaps, if Marguerite had not insisted, your mother would never have left you—” Henri paused. “It was only going to be for a couple of weeks, but Marguerite asked her to stay longer, and she worked at the institute for a while, I don’t exactly recall now, how long she stayed,” he said, thinking. “Of course, when Laurent agreed that she stay a little longer, he thought, it was only a matter of time before she returned to England and to you.

“We all thought it would actually benefit her, to get away from things for a while, after suffering from postnatal depression. Those two months turned into four, and then came the arguments by phone, which did not help matters. I wasn’t there a lot of the time. I was traveling of course,” he said with regret, “so I only got the stories second hand, from Marguerite and Laurent.” He paused again, thinking back. “Laurent flew to New Orleans to take her home, you know,” He shook his head. “But it was too late, she had disappeared.” Henri hesitated, seeing the look on her face and feeling uncertain if he should continue. “I don’t know if you really want to hear this or not?”

Amy answered in a flat voice, her eyes gazing at him steadily. “Dad would never really talk about her, only snippets. I knew she went to America and saw Aunt Marguerite, although, I never got why she worked with children and yet didn’t want her own.” She shook her head. “I didn’t realize she worked over there, at this institute,” she said, staring at the papers on her lap. “As much as I tell myself I don’t care and don’t want to know, there is a part of me that still wants to understand why she left us.”

Henri remained silent for a few moments. “Marguerite told me that she left a note. Her things were all gone, and that was that. None of us really knew what to make of it.” He sat in si-

lence for a few moments. “Who knows what really goes on in people’s minds, as you say? Laurent never spoke about it that much, even to me, and having a baby can be a traumatic event for many women. Hormones can play havoc with a women’s body. Besides that, we didn’t really know what went on between husband and wife. Despite evidence to the contrary, perhaps she was unhappy in her marriage and saw an opportunity to get out. Maybe she liked being in America too much, or met somebody else. She gave up everything in her old life and never looked back. We can only speculate,” he said regretfully. “Although it always puzzled me that she never came back for you, even if she didn’t want to be with Laurent, not wanting your child is a bit harder to reconcile.”

Amy nodded thoughtfully. “I sort of have the same thoughts. There must have been a bigger attraction than me. It’s okay, Uncle,” she said quickly, seeing the obvious pang of regret on his face. “I have spent years thinking about it. I don’t hate her. I just really don’t have any feelings at all. You can’t have feelings, good or bad, for someone you have never known.”

Henri looked unconvinced. “You sound so much older than your years,” he remarked sadly. “You are right not to dwell on why she did what she did,” he said, staring at the papers on her lap, and they sat in silence for a few minutes. “I can have all the necessary documentation drawn up with a solicitor, if you think this is what you want to do,” he offered.

“Yes,” Amy agreed, “please do it. The institute sounds impressive and interesting, and something I could support.”

She handed the papers back to her uncle, and he placed them on the table.

“Now, I think you should go and explore the garden. You are far too pale and need to enjoy some of this rare warm sunshine.”

Amy laughed lightly, shaking off any regret about her mother. No matter what she felt or thought, it didn’t change the reality. “Is it really rare down here?”

Henri smiled, happy to hear her laugh again. “Unfortunately, yes, Dartmoor does not have the reputation for abundant sunshine, so go and enjoy it while you can.”



The gardens were large and well established. Hydrangeas and fuchsias filled the wide borders, and there were many wide herbaceous beds filled with many different colorful shrubs. She walked around the large kitchen garden, wandering in and out of the fruit cages and greenhouses, filled with tomato and grape vines. She sampled the sweet strawberries from under the green protective netting and walked around the wig-wam structures entirely covered by rampant runner bean plants. She was mildly surprised to find a gardener hoeing between rows of cabbages.

“Hello,” she said brightly.

The gardener looked up, clearly startled, having believed he was entirely alone. He stood up straight and leant on his hoe. “Hello, miss,” he said warmly.

He appeared to be in his mid-fifties, with brownish hair that showed a few streaks of gray, he had a welcoming smile that showed white and even teeth, and a slightly rugged complexion indicating he spent a lot of time in the outdoors.

“I’m Amy, Henri’s niece,” she offered, thinking she needed to give him an explanation.

“I thought you must be. Henri did mention you were coming. It’s good to meet you, Amy,” he said, wiping his hand on his trousers. He walked a few paces and extending it to her, “My name’s Ned.”

Amy stepped forward and shook his hand. “Are you the only gardener?”

Ned nodded. “There used to be another, but he retired a couple of years ago, so now it’s just me, I live in the cottage on the edge of the property,” he said, pointing to the west, and paused for a moment. “The others don’t come into the garden that much, only Henri has a real passion for plants.”

“I have been hearing about all his plants, and his fascinating hunting trips to get them. I like being outside and I love flowers, so perhaps it runs in the family,” she said happily, as her attention diverted to the masses of large purple poppies and swathes of lavender, in some of the borders. “This is such a pretty garden.”

Ned smiled at the remark. "It's a bit unconventional, but I like to grow flowers and vegetables together, makes things more interesting," he said, looking about him.

Amy could see his hazel eyes oozed with genuine warmth, and from the very first moment, she liked Ned immensely.

Ned turned back to her. "How long have you been here?"

"I arrived yesterday. I was just exploring the property. The house and gardens are so big that I could easily get lost."

Ned laughed. "You'll soon get used to it. It's not the house or garden you have to worry about, getting lost on the moors is a far more daunting prospect. Especially when the fog falls fast, it can disorientate you completely. Hard to believe isn't it, looking at it now," he said cordially. "I was just about to stop for a cup of tea." He looked at her hesitantly. "Would you care to join me?"

Amy smiled enthusiastically. "I'd love to."

Ned's gardening shed was more than just a shed. Built out of stone, with large mullioned windows and leaded glass, it was large enough for three workbenches, numerous shelves stacked with tools and two wooden chairs. An old tin kettle rested on a small camping stove.

Ned lit the stove and pulled down two identical blue mugs from brass hooks. "For whenever I have visitors," he said, grinning.

He opened a mini countertop refrigerator, and took out a pint of milk. It was a warm day, and a big pot of pink begonias held the large wooden door open. They pulled the chairs onto the tiny porch so they could sit in the sun. Amy soon discovered that Ned was a wealth of information.

He explained that the building had once been a complex of several, this remaining one had been a dairy, and the adjoining buildings pulled down many years before. He had worked for her uncle for twenty years and knew practically everything about the garden, and local countryside. Ned had accompanied Henri on some of his plant hunting expeditions and they had travelled extensively when he was younger.

He enchanted her with accounts of their South American expeditions, of how they had gotten lost in the jungle for two

days, and all manner of creatures they had encountered. He told her of their search for rare and unusual plant species in Indonesia and Africa.

Amy listened intently. She finished her tea and put the cup on the porch to the side of her chair, noticing a dog's drinking bowl underneath an old potting bench, inside the door. It brought to mind the howling she had heard the night before.

"Does my uncle have a dog?" she asked suddenly.

Ned's eyes narrowed fractionally as he learned forward. "What makes you ask?" he said, watching her guardedly.

"Last night, I heard a dog, at least, I think it was a dog. I thought it was in the garden, but I have not seen one here."

"Those noises come from the moors," Ned said. "They sound close, but the fog changes your sound perception."

"Who do the animals belong to?"

"There are lots of sheep dogs," he said, placing his cup on the floor. "They belong to the various farms, and you can sometimes see them during the day herding the sheep."

"What I heard was not the barking of sheep dogs. It was defiantly more sinister, and more like a wolf's howl."

Ned smiled briefly and nodded. "Of course, there are lots of old stories around these parts—legends, folklore, myth—and the hounds feature in many of them. I am sure you have read the old Sherlock Holmes stories. His creator Conan Doyle stayed in the village not too far away. Dartmoor inspired him enough to write the now famous *Hound of the Baskervilles*. Having lived on this moor, it is not a far stretch of the imagination to conjure up such ghostly tales." He was silent for a few moments. "Although, some people that have lived on this part of the moor for long enough believe in another legend, they believe in the Whisht hounds."

"Whisht hounds, what are they?" Amy asked mildly, tantalized to realize there was a real mystery associated with the moors and possibly this house.

Ned stood, and pointed out to the moors. "Do you see that rocky outcrop in the distance?"

Amy stood up and focused her eyes to where Ned was pointing. "I see it."

“That is Hound Tor, and over that far ridge on the Eastern slope of the West Dart river,” he said, moving his finger across, “is Wistman Wood.”

Ned sat down again. Intrigued, Amy sat too, hanging on his every word.

“Many years ago that stack was known as, The Hound. Back then, people believed that it was really a dog that had a spell cast upon it to turn it to stone by witches, but in the mid-nineties, The Hound came crashing down. Hundreds of tons of granite fell, and as it did so, the legend says that was when The Hound was released from its curse, to stalk the moors.

“Wistman Wood is one of the most ancient woods, and the most haunted place on Dartmoor. The hound’s blood-curling howl has been heard many times in the woods, and eye witnesses swear that the Whisht hound is not alone.” He lowered his voice a fraction. “When the dark mantle of night is drawn over the moor, the Whisht hounds come out from Wistman Wood.”

Amy felt a cold chill run down her back as she embraced the fear Ned’s words had on her. “Are they real?” she asked in almost a whisper.

Ned shrugged. “Some say they are just shadows of a phantom pack, others call them the hounds from hell!” he said dramatically.

Amy stared at him for a long moment. Ned smiled.

“Do you believe in these ghost dogs?” she asked.

“No,” he said cordially, enjoying her reaction. “I just think they are wild dogs that have bred and now roam about the moor.”

“Not frightening my cousin with your superstitious stories are you, Ned?”

Amy jumped and looked up startled. Calin stood only a few feet away.

“Hello, Calin,” Ned said, bending to pick up the two cups. “I didn’t see you there.”

Amy also stood. Calin was wearing dark clothes different from the day before, but still with that exotic eastern look to them.

“How long have you been there?” She wondered why she had not heard him approach.

Calin stepped up onto the porch close to Amy. “Long enough to hear Ned’s tall tales. Those barks and howls echo across the moor when the wind blows in from the west, and there are farms and cottages on the moor. You heard their animals chasing sheep, more like.”

“You don’t really believe that, Calin,” Amy said pointedly. “Sheep dogs don’t howl like that.”

“How would you know?” he said, staring at her fixedly.

It was not only his eyes in the sunlight, which took on an undeniable mesmerizing quality, but the way he delivered the question, took her aback. The truth was she didn’t know, never having owned a dog in her life, and yet she doubted sheep dog’s howls were as blood curdling as what she heard last night, and especially because it was the middle of the night. In her mind, she doubted any farmer would let their dogs roam the moors by night. Amy did not answer the question and didn’t meet his gaze again. Calin shrugged, realizing she was not going to meet his challenge.

“Any wild dog out there is bred from dogs that belonged to Damien,” he said, casting an odd glance at her.

“Your brother, is he here?”

“Damien doesn’t live in the country,” he said dismissively. “I came to find you to tell you lunch is ready.”

Amy said goodbye to Ned, feeling slightly intimidated to be alone with Calin, but as they walked back through the garden, he appeared to be in a more jovial mood than the previous day. It brought her some relief to think he had warmed to the idea of her being at Whisht Hall.

“What have you been doing with yourself all morning?” Calin said, keeping his eyes upon her.

“I was in the orangery with your dad. He wanted to go over a few legal details with me,” she said, feeling as if she should explain, “and then I met Ned, and that was where you found me.” She furrowed her brow slightly and looked sideways up at Calin. “Is Uncle Henri very sick?” She bit her lip. “He doesn’t sound as if he thinks he will live long,” she asked, hoping her

words would not upset him, and was a little surprised when Calin laughed.

“He’ll outlive all of us. He did have a minor stroke out on the moors a few months back, and he is frailer than before, but that’s just age catching up with him.” He was silent for a moment. “Your father’s death hit him harder than anyone would think.”

Amy nodded in agreement. “Yes, I gathered as much, I know they were only stepbrothers, even so, they were very close as children, from what my father told me.”

“You knew then,” Calin said, looking pointedly at her. “I wasn’t sure you realized.”

“Yes, I knew. It was good of Henri to make me his ward. I mean, I know they grew apart as they got older. I guess siblings do.”

Calin nodded and they took a more direct, if not more overgrown part of the path. Calin held a branch back so Amy could walk through,

“Thanks,” she said appreciatively.

“Have you seen your mother lately?” Calin said. “Dad said the relationship was...difficult,” he added cautiously.

Amy looked up at him, surprised by his directness, let alone the question. No one ever asked her about her mother. In the dappled shadows, his eyes looked an even darker hue of amber, and she didn’t want to stare at him too long. He really was good looking. Amy pushed the thought away quickly. “Difficult, is one way of putting it. She left many years ago, when I was a baby. My father said she went to America to be with Aunt Marguerite—and actually, Uncle Henri more or less just confirmed that—but instead of returning home as she had promised, she disappeared. She sent him a couple of letters, but he destroyed them and never forgave her.” She hesitated, thinking back. “They never divorced, so I guess legally she is still his wife. My dad really never spoke about her, and I knew better than to ask questions.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard the same story. Maybe she had more than one reason to go to America back then.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s only what I’ve heard over the years. It’s a bit strange that she just left like that.”

“I really don’t know. Dad told her to come home and think about her own child, and she put the phone down, and he never heard from her again. That was why he was so adamant that she never gets her hands on a single penny, if anything ever happened to him.” She sighed. “Besides, it’s so long ago and in the past. I don’t even know her.”

“What if she turned up now?”

Amy was under no illusion. Calin did not want any trouble for his family, having her here was obviously trouble enough.

“My mother is dead as far as I’m concerned.” There was an awkward silence for a few minutes. In truth, Amy’s heart was cold where her mother was concerned, and that upset her, it shouldn’t be that way, but as much as she told herself she just didn’t care, she could not help the resentment she felt.

Calin felt it too. “You have a new family now,” he said, looking down fixedly.

The genuine warmth in his tone surprised her.

“Thanks,” she managed, as the word caught in her throat as he stared at her and she tore her gaze away. “What about you, what do you do?” she asked, needing to change the subject urgently.

Calin smiled faintly at her expression. “I oversee the estate, which is a matter of necessity since Dad has been ill. I am actually an art dealer. I divide my time between here and wherever else I need to be. I own a couple of galleries in London and Bath.”

He sparked her interest, she could well imagine him in prestigious art galleries pouring over old masters.

“I deal a lot with Japan,” Calin continued, “and more recently China. They are very big on their contemporary art over there.”

Amy’s illusion shattered. “I don’t really understand modern art. A lot of it seems like anyone could do it, and it’s got no skill, no discipline, no years of training to achieve a result. I just don’t see the value in it,” she admitted.

“Contemporary can be beautiful. It’s not governed by rules, it can take you to another place and time, it can transport your imagination to another dimension.”

Amy laughed lightly. “Is that what you tell your customers?”

Calin smirked. “No that’s what my staff tell them, I just do the buying, travel a lot, and try to predict what is going to be the next ‘Scream’ phenomenon,” he said, as they reached the house and opened the door for her.

Amy’s opinion had changed. Calin seemed exotic, with his strange eyes and unusual clothing, he had a truly international career that involved the Far East, his life sounded very exciting, and he, seemed far more appealing, if not, a little odd at times. Amy longed to hear more, and she suddenly felt less intimidated and far more comfortable in his presence.

“I heard you worked in a library.”

“Yes, it was only to be a temporary thing, as my father and I were going to spend some time traveling.” She paused. “That never happened, so I ended up working there until very recently. Now, I am not sure what I am going to do. Perhaps I could get a job locally.”

“Well, maybe you can still travel, if that’s what you want to do.”

Amy frowned. Was he actually trying to figure out how to get rid of her quickly? She was careful with her reply. “Maybe I will, although I think that a local job will enable me to meet new people and help me familiarize myself with living down here.”

“Aren’t we enough for you, then?”

The question and his abrupt delivery of it flustered Amy completely.

“No, I don’t mean that—I didn’t mean that at all.”

Calin laughed at her obvious discomfort. “It’s okay. I am only teasing you.”



Amy, Calin, Lisette, and Henri all sat in the magnificent conservatory. It was warm and bright and scented from several pelargoniums in large pots. Lunch was a pleasant affair, everyone was amiable, and for the first time since her arrival, Amy felt as if she could relax around them. Afterward, Henri and Lisette excused themselves and she and Calin were alone.

“Do you ride?” he asked and she shook her head. “That’s a shame the moors are good to see on horseback, but no matter, the Land Rover copes well with the terrain, and if you want, we could go onto the moor tomorrow.”

Amy was pleased to hear that he was actually trying to be friendly, and she was just as eager to go out and explore. “That would be great, and I would really like to go to the woods Ned spoke of,” she said hopefully.

Calin grinned. “Fueled your curiosity, has he?”

Amy pursed her lips and wondered if it was sensible to let him know that Ned’s stories had left a lasting impression. “I’m not really one for superstitious stories, the woods just sounds interesting.”

CHAPTER 5

Hound Tor

That same night, the sound of distant howling came again, confirming Amy's belief that it could not be the sound of a sheep dog. It was far too menacing. Her pulse quickened, and she ignored the impulse to get out of bed, reminding herself that she was safe behind stone walls, closed windows, and a locked bedroom door. She calmed down and forced her thoughts in another direction. The noise eventually quietened, and she relaxed. After a while, she fell asleep.

Subsequent dreams manifested into packs of dogs, running across the wilderness, and of great granite mountains tumbling downward and crashing through the amethyst heather toward her. Then, as only dreams can conceive, the mountains became white, the granite hurtling downward turned into an avalanche of dense snow that passed above her head and fell heavily over Whisht Hall, covering it entirely.

When she woke the next morning, the room was bright and sunny, and on drawing back the curtains, she half expected to find the outdoors white. It was green and dry, with light fog touching the tops of the far rocky outcrops. She dressed and went downstairs to the dining room. Breakfast was quick, a slice of toast and cup of tea. She had never eaten much in the mornings anyway.

Amy followed the sound of voices through the hall and saw that her uncle was in his study with another older man, who she instantly recognized as Leonard Pascal, having met the solicitor

once before at the reading of her father's will. She approached the study and Henri looked up, gesturing that she should enter.

Pascal got up from his chair, beaming at her. "Hello, Amy. I am pleased to see you're looking so well. The air down here must agree with you."

Amy met his smile. "I think it's my uncle who has more to do with it," she said, with an affectionate nod in his direction. "He has made me so welcome in his home."

"The pleasure is all mine, Amy," Henri said affably. "Please come and sit down. There are a few papers that you need to look over, regarding the matter we discussed yesterday."

Amy's eyes widened as she looked at Pascal. "Is it really that urgent for you to drive all the way from London so quickly?"

Pascal looked amused. "I was in the area. I have a second home in Devon, and I was on my way back to London today."

"Oh, of course." She gulped, trying to hide her embarrassment at the suspicious thought.

Amy sat down quickly and glanced through the documents given to her, hoping the warmth that had radiated to her face was not visible. She scanned the pages and everything seemed in order. The stipulation in the document was that, should she meet with a premature death, then her chattels would remain with the Louyar family, and the vast majority of her wealth would be bequeathed to the institute. She took a pen from Henri's desk and signed where it was marked. Henri and Pascal made small talk while they both sighed and witnessed in the appropriate places.

"Well, that really does conclude my business here," Pascal announced, smoothly rising from the chair.

He shook Henri's hand and then extended his firm handshake to her. As Henri walked Pascal to the door, Amy gathered up her copies of the paperwork. The whole thing seemed dreamlike, there were no embellishments to the contract, it was straight forward and matter of fact, her immediate future laid out in black and white before her eyes.

She sat quietly, reflecting on how much simpler everything would be if there was no money. No need for paperwork,

guardianship or protection, the legacy was, in fact, a burden and dictated everything had to be legal and formal. Amy closed her eyes for a moment, wishing her life had been normal, that her parents had remained together, and, more importantly, her father had lived.



Amy and Lisette lunched alone. Initial conversation felt strained. Amy could not help wondering that, in spite of her wishes, Henri had said something to Lisette. There was no urgency to lunch, though Amy felt anxious to be done with it and hurried her food. Just as she was nearly finished, Lisette began talking about her dolls. Again, the thought crossed Amy's mind that it was a strange obsession for a girl her age.

"My last Parisienne doll sold for nearly nine thousand pounds," Lisette remarked casually, as Amy choked on the food in her mouth.

"Are they all that valuable?" she spluttered, trying to recover her composure as she stared at Lisette in amazement.

"Some are even more valuable, but I would not part with many of them. Then again, some have no monetary worth. Too many have ended up as children's playthings, and once the original clothes are lost, the value goes down even more."

"Isn't that what dolls were made for, to be played with?" Amy remarked, mindful of the immediate cold glance in her direction.

"No," Lisette replied sharply, as if forgetting herself. She softened her tone. "Not all were meant for kids, many were made just for collectors."

The idea that Lisette was over sensitive where dolls were concerned planted firmly in Amy's mind.

"For the right price, there are serious collectors who will part with some of the very precious dolls, and I can be persuasive," she added, with a particularly cold edge to her voice.

"Well, I suppose money is a great incentive for some people," Amy agreed, trying to be affable and realizing that Lisette was not as she had previously believed.

On the surface, Lisette was spoiled. Henri had even admitted that fact. She gave the impression of being an airhead and somewhat childlike in nature, although, the truth of the matter was there was a cruel, even sinister, element in her. Amy thought back to the remark that had made her so uncomfortable on her first night, and it dawned on her that she no longer believed Lisette had just been insensitive. There was an ulterior motive, and she had been malicious.

Amy watched her cousin closely. She was beautiful, with a pale flawless complexion and looks that could rival top models that graced the covers of beauty magazines, but underneath the pretense was a calculating and possibly dangerous young woman.

The conversation stuttered again, and Amy pushed the last of the salad around her plate, contemplating how to move away from the subject of dolls without antagonizing Lisette. "Do you ever get lonely here?" she asked cautiously.

Lisette also looked up from her plate and considered her with a curious expression. "No."

For a moment, there was silence, and Amy started to feel that she was wasting her time. Though she was no longer trying to be friends, she still had to maintain civility. With Lisette's abrupt response, it was obvious she wasn't interested in even doing that. Amy went to stand up.

"I have the dolls."

Amy froze and instinctively sat back into the chair, feeling chilled by the way Lisette delivered that statement. "What do you mean?" Her voice felt as though it faltered.

"They are not all collector's items to me," Lisette remarked. "I know the majority of people don't understand. Some are special, they have..." She paused, and Amy wondered if it was just for effect. "...special qualities."

Amy could not suppress the feeling of something cold sliding over her skin at Lisette's disturbing words. In the deepest places of her mind, she was struggling to decipher her real meaning.

"What sort of qualities?" Amy felt compelled to ask, even if she was uncertain that she really wanted to hear an answer.

Lisette gave her a long look. “Do you believe in the supernatural?”

Amy’s throat went dry and her voice came back in a croak. “I don’t know.” She laughed lightly, more out of nervousness than anything else. The exchange felt surreal. It was not just her imagination, rather there was an underlying feeling that Lisette believed her dolls were living things. The conversation was steering in an uncomfortable direction, and brushing her misgivings aside, she tried again. “I was thinking more along the lines of that when Calin is away and there is only you and your dad, don’t you long for company of someone your own age?”

Lisette stared ahead for a few moments, seeming to think about the question. “No,” she said at last. “Not really. I like being alone, I have the moors, and I go to lots of collector fairs where I meet like-minded people.” She hesitated. “I will show you my dolls, if you like.”

“Oh, yes, of course—I’d like to see them,” Amy said disjunctedly.

“But not right now, they aren’t ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“People don’t normally see them, so I have to prepare them.” The words were spoken warmly enough, as Lisette got up from the table. “I have to go out, but I will show them to you, I promise.”

Amy stared after her as she walked out of the room, wondering what she meant. She hoped she just meant she would rearrange them, or a couple of dresses needed straightening, even if her mind was considering another meaning, something sinister and possibly even supernatural.



As Amy left the room, she had a sudden reluctance to be anywhere near her cousin and was certain that she didn’t particularly want to look at an old doll collection. She had only agreed out of politeness, now she wished she hadn’t. Lisette was most decidedly odd, no doubt about that. Trying to figure her out was too difficult, although Amy did consider that Lisette had grown

up in a house full of men, with no mother for guidance, a bit like herself, really. Perhaps Lisette viewed her as just as strange. Although, having grown up in London, Amy had friends and was always out and about, going to libraries, museums, and shops. The thought made her sad—that had been her life, and now everything had changed.

Whisht hall was remote, and she didn't even know how close the nearest shop was, but suspected you couldn't walk to it. She wondered exactly where Lisette was going and had a sudden pang for friends she had left behind. Acting on her first instinct, she went to her room and turned on her laptop. Caitlin had responded to her email.

Missing you lots, going out to Cafe Noir with everybody, speak soon.

Amy frowned. Caitlin could have at least asked her if she was okay. Outta sight, outta mind, the phrase was so true. Amy did not respond and turned it off again. The house was silent, and being alone was pleasing for a while, as she rearranged her closet before venturing back downstairs. Finding sudden courage to explore the house, she walked into a few rooms before wandering into the library. She closed the door behind her. It wasn't a particularly big room. Several cases housed a good size collection of books with many interesting volumes, mainly on botany and exotic plants from around the world. She pulled one out and began flicking through the pages, only looking up when the door opened, and Calin walked in.

"I wondered where you had got to. Do you still want to go and explore the haunted wood?" he asked, with a playful gleam in his eye.

"Yes," she replied. Forgetting her cautionary thoughts about him, she closed the book. The prospect of being in Calin's company rather than his sister's was definitely more desirable. Calin's eyes traveled over her clothes.

"Wear something warmer. The moors can be cold at higher elevations. I'm going to get the Land Rover, and I'll meet you outside in ten minutes."

It was fifteen minutes later when Amy climbed in beside Calin, wearing jeans, a T-shirt, a lamb's wool cardigan, and flat

laced boots, and she threw her jacket onto the back seat. Calin stared at her for a few moments.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Nothing.” He shrugged good-naturedly, covered his eyes with sunglasses, and pressed his foot on the accelerator.

They drove up the driveway and Amy gazed out of the window at the reverse perspective from her arrival at Whisht hall. They soon were on the road, only minutes later, they turned onto a dirt track and the Land Rover veered off across the moors. Calin took a haphazard route, which Amy found to be particularly bumpy.

“It looks smoother over to the right,” she said, catching his expression of amusement.

“Yes, much smoother, if you want to have to pull the vehicle out of the mire. Don’t worry, I know the moor well,” he added, seeing her alarm. “There is no such thing as walking or driving in a straight line over this moor. You have to read the terrain.”

“Are there many mires?” Her nerves were suddenly on edge, especially as Calin’s drove faster than was sensible for the treacherous ground.

“Yes, plenty, especially higher up, and the mists hide the dark pools of liquid peat, but I’ve never got this thing stuck yet.”

“There’s always a first time,” she said grimly.

Calin sensed her tone and glanced at her impatiently. “I told you, I know the moor well, better than most and I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Amy felt a little appeased by his words. After all, he had grown up here, and it was possible that her fear was totally unfounded. “So why are they only on that part of the moor?” she asked with an enquiring glance?”

He laughed. “The mires are everywhere, some of the worst ones are featherbeds, because they look like a bed of moss, until you step onto them and are pulled down into the mire, before you’ve even had time to think.”

“Does that happen a lot?”

“Occasionally,” he said a little hesitantly.

A horrible thought struck her. “Did that ever happen to you?”

“When I was young, I was walking on the moor with Dad. He told me not to go into certain parts.” He shrugged. “You know what kids are like and I was a willful child. I paid no attention to him. I walked where I had been told not to and the ground seemed to simply open up and slowly began to drag me down. No matter how much I struggled, I found myself waist high in stinking mud, and every movement pulled me farther under.” He drew a deep breath. “Damien laughed as I sank lower. He would have watched me die,” he said, in all seriousness.

Amy stared at with surprise. “I’m sure he would have helped you, perhaps he didn’t realize the real danger.”

Calin cast her a sharp glance. “It was my father’s quick thinking that pulled me to safety.”

“You must have been terrified,” she said, wondering why there was so much animosity in his tone regarding Damien.

“Yeah, it was an experience, one I have never repeated. Many of the old families have known someone who succumbed to this moor.” He grinned. “I’m sure Ned told you a few of the old stories.”

“Not really, only fiction, stuff that everybody associates with the moors.” She thought for a minute. “It’s horrible to think of people getting trapped like that, and being alone, no one to hear their cries for help and when no one comes—”

“I suppose when you put it like that, it does sound quite chilling. Many people have died up here. These sphagnum and peat pits conceal many rotting bones.”

Amy’s blood chilled completely at that thought, as she speculated how many corpses were in the ground. Maybe they hadn’t rotted, some could be quite fresh. The lingering thought made her shudder. She stared out of the window at the ground, half expecting to see a limb sticking up from the earth.

Calin switched on the CD player. “Feeling Good,” by Nina Simone was playing, instantly lifting the melancholia.

“What music do you like?” he asked.

“All sorts really, this is good,” she said, thankful of the distraction.

“Yeah, its old, but I like it.” Calin negotiated the heather, bracken, and gorse bushes on a somewhat-well-used dirt track. It was obvious he had used this route a lot, as he didn’t really seem to pay much attention to the direction and only slowed the vehicle when sheep got in the way. “Look,” he said, after a few minutes, “over there, Dartmoor ponies.” He was pointing to the right, and Amy saw there were about ten or twelve ponies running across the moor.

“Do they get stuck in the mires as well?”

“Sometimes, sheep also, although not that often,” he said, trying to reassure her.

Amy soon lost sight of the Dartmoor ponies as they drove into a wall of fog. It was so dense that she could not see beyond the front of the Land Rover. Even Calin slowed down as the strange swirling whiteness surrounded the vehicle.

“I have never seen fog like this. There was nothing here a minute ago.”

“We are higher now, more exposed. It will clear as we dip down into the next valley.”

Sure enough, as Calin found the main track again, the fog lifted a little, and as they decreased their elevation, it cleared.

Before them, the rolling moors stretched ahead and, in the distance, was a big rocky outcrop. Calin left the track and negotiated the Land Rover onto a main road, which felt incredibly smooth to drive on after the moorland assault course. They headed in the general direction of the outcrop, which loomed bigger with every minute that passed. Calin stopped at a wide lay-by, although they could have parked anywhere. The road was completely deserted.

“We have to walk from here. Stay close to me and stay on the footpath.”

The atmosphere was weirdly static as Amy climbed out of the vehicle, thankful that she’d brought her jacket because of the significant drop in temperature. Calin led her across the road and through the gorse, toward the rocky outcrop.

Amy did not intend to stray away from Calin. His stories had made an impression, and the last thing she wanted to do was step into one of the treacherous bogs on this moor, or face the humiliation of him having to rescue her. Amy looked up at him as they walked.

“Is the wood this way?”

His eyes lingered on her face for a long moment. “No, this is Hound Tor, I thought you might like to see the source of the mysterious stories you have been listening to.” Suddenly he grasped her arm firmly and pulled her closer to him. “Careful, the ground on that side looks dark and wet, a sure sign you will get stuck if you put a step wrong.”

He let go of her and Amy now scanned the ground ahead of her. The tor loomed large and foreboding before them.

It was easy to see how stories with sinister connotations would have perpetuated. The mist made the air feel thick, the great granite outcrop was black and menacing, and any noise they made deadened in the atmosphere. Amy’s voice sounded strange in the haze, and she surmised that even birdsong would sound ghostly up here. Except there were no birds, and as far as she could tell, they were the only living things around, which in itself felt queer.

As they reached the foot of the granite, Amy was amazed to see how big it really was and, shrouded in a light mist, it looked like an alien landscape. Up close, the rocks were glistening and damp.

Calin stepped up and onto the granite. “This way,” he said, looking back at her, “we can get all the way to the top from here.”

Amy had doubts. It appeared too high and dangerously slick.

Calin saw her reluctance. “Come on,” he said, bending down to take her hand, “it’ll be worth it.”

Amy wasn’t sure, but she didn’t want Calin to think she was afraid. She placed her hand in his and stepped where he did. On the more slippery steep parts, he pulled her up after him. It was not as bad as she had first thought, until they reached a ledge that they would have to climb.

"I'll go first," he said, and, as surefooted as a goat, he sprang up it and looked back down to where she stood. "Give me your hand, and I'll pull you up."

"I don't know, Calin, I might slip, I might break something if I fall, and I'm not as used to climbing things like this as you are."

Calin laughed, and reached down. "I won't let you fall."

Amy felt as though she had no choice as reluctantly she took his hand, and he gripped hers firmly.

"Put your foot on the ledge."

She did and held on tightly to him. He pulled her up easily, and as she landed beside him, her foot slipped and she stumbled slightly, hitting her hand on a sharp piece of rock.

Calin quickly caught her round the waist, holding her securely against him. "I've got you," he said as she looked down to the crevice they had climbed between. It was a long way down, one wrong step could be lethal.

"I'm all right," she said, wishing he would let go.

His closeness was beginning to feel awkward. He did let her go and picked up her hand instead. The cut wasn't deep, but blood ran from it and dripped onto the rock.

"Ouch." She winced and tried to wipe the blood away.

"You should put a plaster on it. I have a first aid kit in the car."

"It'll be okay, it's stopping already."

She found a tissue in her jacket pocket and wiped the blood from her hand. Calin walked up to an easier platform, and she followed, disappointed that there were not the far-reaching views she had anticipated. Instead, it looked like every inch of countryside was covered in fog, like a heavy blanket, clinging tightly to the ground. Through the rocks came the moan of the wind. It was eerily mournful. Up here, the air felt heavier and damper, as if it was drizzling lightly, but it wasn't raining at all. Amy pulled her jacket tighter.

"Are you cold?"

"Not really," she said, "the atmosphere just makes me think I should be."

Calin smiled softly. “On a clear day, you can see for miles from up here.”

“There’s a clear day up here?” She shook her head, finding those words hard to believe, as the breath of the wind came again, and lifted the hair from her face.

Calin didn’t answer. She shrugged and stared back into the grayness at its mesmerizing quality. The hollow echoes through the thick air were unsettling, Calin’s footsteps on the granite moved away from her. She looked behind her, and he was a few feet away, just a silhouette in the mist. She turned and stared back into the murkiness. She had never experienced anything like this before, and the feeling that came to her was being somewhere otherworldly, with an atmosphere that could consume her wholly.

The silence was un-nerving.

Real fear came out of nowhere. A distant forlorn howl wound its way across the moors, up the black granite tor and penetrated her head. In that instant, every tiny hair on her skin stood to attention, paralyzed with fright, her breath stilled. The howl died away, then, it came again, louder than before. Amy moved backward. In a panic she turned toward Calin. He was gone and she was alone in the mist.

“Calin!” Her throat was hoarse, fear consuming her. Surely, he wouldn’t leave her, not up here. Her alarm was short lived as he suddenly appeared over the top of a higher piece of granite. He looked oddly pale, making his eyes appear disturbingly intense.

“What is it—you did hear that, didn’t you?” she asked in a hushed whisper, as the noise came again, closer this time.

Calin grabbed her hand roughly, increasing her fear tenfold as he pulled her after him. “It’s nothing, just a stray.”

His voice betrayed that belief, as he moved fast, pulling her downward, and urging her to follow him as he jumped down onto the lower ledge.

Amy’s heart was beating fast, adrenaline focused her effort and she scrambled down. In a few moments, the hound would be bounding up this tor with ease, its blood red eyes gleaming

out of its black coat, powerful muscles that could outrun anything, and lethal jaws capable of ripping flesh from bone.

Calin was below her now. She was balancing on the steep ledge and, as he reached up, and she took his hand and quickly stepped downward, her foot slipped and she screamed, feeling powerless to save herself as she fell heavily toward him.

He caught her just before she slipped down the deep crevice. "Be careful, look where you are going!" he snapped, his eyes were wide and his hostility obvious.

Torn between terror and relief, it was anger that took over. "You told me to come this way! If it's just a stray, then, what's the hurry?"

"Let's just get down, shall we?" he said firmly.

She glared angrily at him, not speaking as he kept hold of her hand and guided her down over the more difficult parts. Just as they reached the bottom came another long and mournful howl, but the noise had grown fainter and it died away. Amy frowned and looked at Calin. She saw relief on his face. She too was glad to be off the tor. The mist had thinned, allowing a faint glimmer of light to shine through and remind her the sun was still somewhere in the sky. Her anger was brimming, and with her feet back on firm ground, she had a sudden surge of emotion.

"Well?"

"Well what?" he said sharply as he stared back at her.

"Is there a phantom dog, is it real, or is someone just trying to scare me?"

His expression was hard to read, his pupils dilated and he continued staring down at her.

"Perhaps you—you are trying to scare me."

Calin stiffened slightly, and, seeing his reaction, she immediately regretted her choice of words.

"Is that what you think?" he replied harshly, with a look of incredulity.

Her accusation clearly wounded him, and she wished that she had not directed it so bluntly. She tried to backtrack. "I'm sorry," she mumbled. "I was scared, all this talk of phantom

dogs...Although, you must admit, it's all too much of a coincidence."

"I told you yesterday the fog changes the perception of everything." His tone had also softened. "I didn't mean to frighten you. I just wanted to get you on the ground quickly when I saw the panic in your eyes."

Amy now felt ridiculous. He had gotten her down safely and saved her from what could have been a terrifying fall, and she was behaving like a petulant child. "*I am* sorry," she repeated, hoping he would just say that it was okay, and there were no hard feelings.

He didn't speak, and there was a look of disappointment in his eyes as he turned and walked back to the Land Rover. Amy followed a few paces behind, stepping where he did, and trying to figure why he would be this way. As they reached the Land Rover, he turned around and faced her. There was no expression of friendship now, and his face looked hard and pained.

"Calin, I didn't mean to accuse you," she began.

"But you did," he said unnecessarily. He wasn't about to let this go.

Now, who was behaving like a petulant child? she thought, sighing unhappily.

"Can we still be friends?"

He remained unresponsive for a few moments, his eyes betraying nothing, and the intensity was back in the strange amber hue that was brighter than before. "Of course," he answered, with a slight edge to his voice, and climbed into the vehicle.

CHAPTER 6

Wistman Wood

They drove in silence for a while, and as each minute passed, the questions in Amy's head multiplied. On the tor, Calin suspected something was close to them, of that she was certain. Whether it was the stray dog he had spoken of, or something else, it had made him fearful. When she considered further, the Hell hound, Whisht hound, or whatever else they called it in these parts, seemed integral with the moors, and its legend appeared to have more substance to it than just a colorful story retold for the tourists benefit. Just a stray dog, wandering about up here, would not cause the kind of reaction she had just witnessed.

Her thoughts came back to the old Sherlock Holmes stories. Did he base them on fact? Perhaps it was not a work of fiction at all, and Conan Doyle had discovered a terrifying actuality, which inspired him to run more than a vein of truth through his book.

Amy shuddered, trying to remember the story in detail and the curse placed upon the fictitious Baskerville family. Even though she felt reluctant to talk of what had happened, and uncertain of the impact her words might have upon Calin, the quietness between them was becoming excruciating.

She bit her lip, took a deep breath, and looked sideways at him. "Why were you so frightened when we were up on the tor? I think you were afraid of something more than just a stray dog."

Calin pulled the vehicle to an abrupt stop, making Amy instinctively put her hands out, to stop her body flying forward.

“Let’s get one thing clear, shall we?” he said sharply, “I am not afraid.” He hesitated briefly. “What I haven’t told you is that there have been reports of dogs mauling sheep up here. They’re dangerous, they might attack a person, especially if there was blood,” he said, eyeing her hand. “I just didn’t want to take the risk with you. You can’t see them coming out of the thick mist. If it had been a clear day, then, I wouldn’t have worried.” He hesitated again briefly before reaching into his inside jacket pocket and pulling out a revolver.

Amy stared blankly shocked into muteness for a few seconds. “Is that real?”

Calin made a noise of impatience. “What do you think? I don’t take any chances, and no one gets the better of me,” he said pointedly. “So, can we let this subject drop?”

Amy nodded and was silent as he replaced the gun. He watched her for a moment.

“Perhaps bringing you out onto the moors wasn’t such a good idea.”

“It was,” she said adamantly. “I still want to go to the woods, and, besides, we have come all this way...” Her voice trailed off.

Calin narrowed his eyes fractionally. “Okay, as long as you don’t start accusing me of something else.” His voice was abrasive and his demeanor had become somewhat prickly.

“Well, don’t give me any reason to then,” she said haughtily, noting his immediate raised eyebrows and expression of surprise at her biting remark.

“You are...very spirited,” he said, trying to find the right word.

“I am used to dealing with Londoners. You learn quickly to give as good as you get,” she said, feeling even more irritated at the brief smile that touched his lips. There was a certain satisfaction in knowing she had caught him off guard, and she turned her head to stare out of the window.

Calin put his foot back on the accelerator, and they moved forward again. Despite her bravado, Amy didn’t know what to

think, never having seen a handgun up close before. And despite her initial horror, she really wanted to ask if he had ever used it. A voice in her head told her that she already knew the answer to that question.

She could feel him watching her as the Land Rover jolted, and he narrowly avoided collision with sheep that had wondered onto the road. She suppressed any reaction to his driving style or the gun. She was determined not to blow any of this up out of proportion. After all, she would have been grateful for that gun if a dog had attacked her.

Calin seemed to relax after a few minutes, as he drove a little slower and when he spoke his voice gained a little joviality. "Does your hand hurt?"

"A little," she said, glancing at the cut. "It will be all right. It's really just a scratch." She looked out again at the moors. She wasn't paying that much attention to the countryside; she was too busy trying to make sense of the thoughts going around her head. A particular rough bump pulled her attention. They were off-roading again, and after several minutes more, they stopped close to a turn-style.

"We have to walk from here." Calin gestured with his head to a grove of trees in a valley. "That is Wistman Wood, overlooked by the hill of Bards, and up there is Longaford Tor."

"We are not going to climb that one, are we?" Amy remarked unwillingly.

Calin grinned at her, appearing to be back to his former self. "No, I think we've both had enough of the tors today." And he got out of the Land Rover.

Amy followed, and they climbed over the wooden style and walked in the direction of the cluster of trees.

At first appearance, the wood did not feel sinister at all. It didn't look very big either. As they grew closer, her perception changed, and she realized there was something very peculiar about it, after all. Everywhere she looked, she saw stunted oak trees. The ancient granite was visible beneath the tree roots. It appeared that all the tree branches were knarled and twisted. Emerald mosses, lichens, and ferns littered the floor, as did the numerous boulders that varied in size; some were just the size

of a football, while others formed massive lumps of rock. Velvety moss coats, that were much too inviting not to touch, covered many of the boulders, and feeling their addictive lure, Amy ran her hand over them.

The verdant luxuriating mosses clung thickly to all the trees, making for unusual patterns, and the more she looked, the more her attention drew to actual recognizable features in these coverings. For a moment, she didn't quite believe her eyes. In front of her, as plain as day and fashioned out of moss, was a bearded man. Captivated by the image, she stepped closer. It was like something out of a fairy tale, and she surmised that this is what a talking tree would look like. She felt Calin move closer to her. She did not look up. Her eyes remained on the enchanted tree.

"That's been here for as long as I can remember," he said. "The early dwellers of the moor came here to hold their pagan rituals, they were buried here in their sacred graves, and there is a druid stone through the trees with a very early date upon it."

"This must be ancient," she replied, tearing her gaze from the face in the tree and looking up at him.

He was staring at her and not the tree. "Yes," he agreed.

They were standing closer than she realized and his eyes had an immense effect on her. She wanted to move even closer to him as she watched his face, feeling unable to look away, as she suddenly imagined his lips on hers. Her face flushed as he picked up her hand, with his eyes still fixed on her face.

"I am sorry you got injured," he said, "it must still hurt?"

"N—no," she stammered awkwardly. "I told you in the car." Her heart pounded and his continued touch on her skin made her feel breathless. She shook her head. "It's fine." And torn between desire and caution, she suppressed the urge to snatch it from his grasp. "I—I think you should show me the rest of the woods," she said and pulled her hand away gently.

Calin smiled briefly at her. "Do I make you nervous?" He sounded merely curious, even so, Amy was not sure how to answer.

"No," she said a little too abruptly, "of course not," and turned from him.

She needed to think and hoped he would not see how flustered he made her feel. They walked farther, although Amy's mind was not exactly on the surroundings anymore, rather the idea that Calin had brought her here for another purpose. She didn't know how to feel about that, realizing that if she had not pulled her hand away, he would have kissed her, she was certain of it. More to the point, she rather regretted her action.

Amy reminded herself bluntly that he was her cousin, and she should not be attracted to him. The truth of the matter was a bit more confusing. He did interest her, and since she had seen his gun, she imagined him to be far more daring, which at the same time was making the dangerous side of him even more intriguing.

Not having that many boyfriends before, she always felt a bit daunted by the prospect of any relationship. She thought about the boyfriend she had at school. He could hardly be counted, it was all very sweet and innocent. They had kissed and held hands for six weeks, until his family moved up north.

When she was sixteen and a half, she had dated Liam for eight months, her first real love affair that fizzled itself out when she realized he had cheated on her. In retrospect, it didn't bother her that much, and when they parted, she wasn't exactly broken hearted. By then her father's illness had taken up most of her time anyway.

Her thoughts came back to Calin. A relationship with him was to be avoided at all costs, she told herself adamantly, imagining how awkward life could get. Not to mention how Henri and Lisette might react to that scenario. Amy reconciled the conflict in her head and tried to concentrate on making her way through the woods, wondering if Calin was just testing the water with her anyway.

Boulders carpeted the majority of the floor, so negotiating the woods took some good navigational skills. The woods really did feel enchanted to Amy, not just visually, it was more about the atmosphere. There was no movement of air, partly because they were down in a valley, and the leaves hardly moved on the trees. The rich green cloak that enveloped the

whole woods deadened any other noise, and even the noise they made sounded subdued.

“I can see why people think it’s haunted.” She stopped and turned as they reached a small clearing.

“It is haunted.” Calin’s voice was assured. “And when darkness falls over the woods, that is the most dangerous time to be here.” His words were so similar to Ned’s the previous day, and he was close enough to her again that his conflicting opinions and mood was creeping her out.

“Why?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“The Whisht hounds come out from Wistman wood!”

“Stop it, Calin,” she said feeling justly irritated. “You’re not going to frighten me with those superstitious stories.”

Calin’s amber eyes fixed on her and his lips pressed together in a bitter smile. “I am just teasing you. You *so* want to believe in something sinister, I thought I would play along.”

“Well, stop it, you are not funny.”

At that precise moment Calin’s cell phone rang, making Amy jump violently. Calin grinned at her reaction. “So, you’re *not* frightened?”

The smirk on his face made her madder still, as he turned away to answer the phone.

“Hello...hello...” He looked back apologetically. “I can’t get any reception in here. Will you be okay for a few minutes? I’m just going to higher ground.”

“Yes, I’ll be fine,” she said irately and watched him disappear through the contortion of mossy limbs, feeling infuriated for letting him scare her.

He was not to be trusted. So what if he was good-looking and intriguingly dangerous? Underneath it all, he was an idiot. What exactly was his problem anyway? Playing her with his stupid mind games, one minute telling her it was a stray dog and the next implying that the legends were real and the Whisht hounds were here.

As the minutes passed, she felt even more annoyed for allowing herself to be taken in and charmed by him. The evidence was clear, he was deliberately trying to mislead her. She thought that it really would be better to go back to Whisht Hall

as soon as possible, and it was of course possible that he and Lisette had devised a plan just to scare her. With this new development firmly lodged in her mind, she was angry. Amy looked back in the direction Calin had gone. He was nowhere to be seen or heard for that matter.

Here she was standing like a fool in the middle of the haunted wood, waiting for him. She shook her head. She was not an idiot. If he thought she was going to stand around waiting for him like some scared little girl, then, he would have to think again. Determinedly she climbed up a little incline and walked as quickly as the mossy terrain would allow. It was not fast progress, as there was no straight path, and every stunted tree trunk or large boulder had to be negotiated around. The wood had grown darker than before, and it seemed eerily silent. The stunted limbs and strange growth patterns on the trees fascinated her, and as much as she wanted to get out of these woods fast, certain things kept catching her eye, and she wished she had brought a camera.

A little farther on and the terrain suddenly dipped. The stream, she had been making her way toward at the bottom of the valley, was wider than she first thought. It looked impassable, and she had to change direction and move away from it. Having a sudden pang of doubt at the direction she was taking, she stopped to look behind her, not able to hear the water running, just complete silence. It must be because of the weird angle of the hillside, she told herself. It briefly crossed her mind that Calin might be angry with her if she just left, not that she cared what he thought. She didn't need him and would find her way out of the wood eventually.

The sharp crack sounded behind her, like a branch splitting underfoot. Amy spun around to find Calin standing not far away in the shadows. Despite her previous annoyance, she breathed a little easier on seeing it was him, and not something more fearful. Even so, she felt put out that he found her so easily. At the very least, she had wanted to worry him.

A suspicious thought entered her head. Perhaps he had followed her all along. She masked her thoughts and took a couple of steps toward him.

“Did you manage to make the call?” she said brightly, as she drew nearer.

He didn’t answer and, as her gaze lingered on him, a strange feeling passed over her. There was something different about him and the odd sensation stopped her in her tracks. “Did you change your clothes?” Her eyes narrowed in suspicion, thinking that he must have moved fast to get back to the Land Rover.

“No,” he said simply and moved closer.

An alarm bell sounded in her head, and her voice faltered when she spoke. “You were wearing a dark green jacket and—” The sudden realization made her catch her breath. He was different. His eyes were darker than before, and it was not the fading light, his face was harder. Subtle differences that made the blood drain from her skin. “Who are you?” Her voice sounded weak, fear overcoming her curiosity.

There was something like a contemptuous smile on his lips, as he stepped closer still. His eyes showed no emotion and his nearness invoked all sorts of terrifying thoughts. “I am your cousin,” he said, with a note of satisfaction.

Amy narrowed her eyes a fraction. “Damien?” She watched him closely.

He stood still, eyes steady and the corners of his mouth rose up a fraction, as if she should have known it all along. He nodded. “You thought I was Calin, didn’t you? People always do.”

She stared at him for a few moments, unable to comprehend that it was Damien and not Calin standing in front of her.

“Why are you here?” she said at last, slowly regaining her composure, “Calin said you were abroad.”

Damien smirked. “Calin hoped I was abroad.”

It was a strange thing to say, laced in insinuation, and it made Amy’s head reel. Why didn’t Calin know of his brother’s whereabouts and what was the big secret? She pulled her jacket closer, not certain why she felt so afraid. “How did you know I was your cousin, I could be anybody?”

Damien leant against the nearby tree, his expression giving nothing away. “I don’t think Calin would bring anybody else up here right now, and I bet you are taking up all his attention.”

Amy frowned, wishing that Calin would come back. “What do you mean?”

Damien shrugged. “Way too complicated to explain right now, I just wanted to make sure you came out of the wood.”

A chill ran down her spine and a sinking feeling grew prominent in the pit of her stomach. “Meaning that I might have not?” she said, feeling more uneasy by the second. “What do you mean—”

“Sh—” Damien hissed quickly, much to Amy’s complete shock. “I have to go.”

She felt her eyes widen in amazement as he turned from her.

“Amy! Where are you?” Calin’s voice was to her left.

Damien looked up to where the noise came from and looked back to her. “I’ll be seeing you soon, Amy.” He hesitated for a moment. “Best not to mention that you have seen me to Calin.”

Amy picked up the underlying threat in his tone. She did not reply.

“Amy!”

Calin’s voice was closer, and she turned toward it. “I’m okay and I’m over here,” she called back before looking to where Damien was, but he had gone.

Amy blinked a couple of times and stared harder through the trees and amongst the boulders. He had simply vanished, and the day had just got even stranger. She turned and was about to walk in the direction of Calin’s voice, when she could have sworn that she heard a low plaintive noise of an animal. Afraid to take a single step, her heart raced and every sense felt terrifying alert as the blood pumping through her ears, and then the breeze lifted her hair as it wailed through the trees. If it came again, the noise was lost in the rustling of leaves and winds lament.

At that moment, a cry from overhead sounded, making Amy jump. The whole atmosphere suddenly seemed alive, and she looked skyward to see the raven’s black silhouette against the silver-gray sky. The raven called again, seemingly a warning cry as it circled above her head, giving her the feeling of a bad omen, and the sentiment from her heightened sensitivity was

the bird viewed her like prey, just like a hungry vulture might do.

Amy was still staring at the circling raven when Calin appeared. The look of relief on his face, mirrored how she felt, and despite her earlier thoughts, she was glad to see him.

“I thought I’d lost you,” he said sharply. “My father would never have forgiven me.”

Amy moved toward him, smiling at his words. She had no intention of mentioning Damien, or what she might have heard, not after everything that had happened between them already. “I’m sure he would have sent out a search party had that been the case, and, sooner or later, you would have found me.”

Instead of laughing or humoring her, he stared grimly at her. “This is not a good place to ever be lost in.” His manner completely threw her especially as he seemed unimpressed with her comment. To complicate matters further, he held out his hand. “Come on, let’s get back.”

Amy didn’t want to hold his hand. He seemed genuinely annoyed with her, but the light was rapidly fading and the path that Calin was taking looked difficult to negotiate. After her initial hesitation, she reluctantly took hold of his hand, and he gripped hers tightly.

They did not speak as they made their way back to the edge of the wood. Amy’s thoughts were a muddle. There was something strange going on. Calin’s mood changes were making her head spin, his insinuation about the woods was unsettling, and the final revelation troubled her even further—Calin and Damien were identical twins.

CHAPTER 7

The House on Prytannia Street

New Orleans 1989:

The car stopped in the Garden District, and Marguerite stepped out, needing to stretch her legs and shake off the beginnings of a headache. After adjusting the position of the baby in her arms, she began to walk, turning only to ensure that Cecile, who followed a few paces behind carrying a twin, kept the pace.

The air was heavy with the scent of jasmine, and Marguerite breathed in the sultry air, letting it fill her lungs fully. Only in New Orleans was the atmosphere this potent. It was as if the place breathed with heady incense, and the swirling light breeze concocting its own blend of cologne to heighten the senses. At same time, the addictive allure of freshly bathed newborn skin pulled at her motherly instincts. It compelled her to nuzzle closer to the infant and kiss the fuzzy dark head.

The breeze played carelessly over her skin, lifting her hair and heightening her senses, and she finally understood why women suffered to bear children. They endured for the reward, to experience a feeling of absolute closeness and irresistible infatuation with a tiny helpless human being. It made every other emotion seem weak by comparison. Logic insisted that these infants would not be babies for long. They would cause upset, even disappointment, and, most likely, be capable of breaking her heart. Even that fact paled into insignificance, any negativity diluted by stronger maternal feelings.

By the time she turned into First Street, her head felt clearer. She felt alive, more so than she ever remembered feeling, as if the world was full of possibilities that just had to be initiated. With this sudden energy spurt, it felt good to walk and to take in the familiar surroundings in the leafy suburb, the neighboring properties that she knew so well. She was grateful for the canopy of branches that overhung the pavement and filtered the sun, testament to the longevity of the host trees planted decades ago. Despite the bundle in her arms, she felt capable of walking for miles without even breaking into a sweat, and there was a small amount of resentment at not being able to do just that, when a few minutes later she reached Prytannia Street.

The black railings marked the boundary to the empire style mansion. Graceful architecture and ivory colored siding was barely visible through the vast oaks with their great dense swathes of Spanish moss that tumbled downward in heavy gray spirals. Flowers, searching for sunlight, stretched their stems upward to meet the gray coils, while their heads nodded in accord with the breeze.

It was a long-neglected garden. The masses of giant ferns, with their primeval heritage and tactile curling fronds, had multiplied considerably. The ungainly Louis Philippe shrub rose was clearly out of control. Nevertheless, it flowered sporadically.

The garden seemed to beckon her. It had always been her own piece of paradise, and apart from cutting the meandering lawns, and trimming the high branches on the trees, no one else was allowed to touch anything. Marguerite liked it wild and interesting. It made it mysterious and enchanting, and she had to suppress the urge to kick off her shoes and go and rediscover its secret places.

The baby in her arms whimpered, and Marguerite frowned. The daunting prospect of taking care of two babies dampened her mood.

She stopped at the iron gate. A simple metal plate stated that this was the house of Durand. As she pushed it open, the hinge groaned noisily. Its familiar sound served to remind her she was

home, and she walked up the winding path, through the vegetation, until her gaze fell upon the portico.

The door to the house was open, and Eleanor waited on the porch, a sudden smile lit up the older woman's face when she saw the figures on the path.

"I'm so happy to have you home," she called, getting up from the rocking chair and running down the steps.

She threw her arms around Marguerite, who beamed back at her. Good old Eleanor, she could always count on her to lift her spirits.

"Oh, my goodness, what beautiful babies," Eleanor cooed, taking the infant from Marguerite's arms.

"It's good to be home," Marguerite replied, with genuine feeling.

Also, glad to have the load taken from her, she kissed the older woman warmly on the cheek and felt more relaxed than she had all day, that encroaching headache now merely a distant memory.

Eleanor had come to New Orleans with her from England five years before. Her official role was housekeeper, although, Eleanor was far more than that. She was a confident, friend, and organizer of everything. Eleanor had fallen in love with the house the moment she stepped over the threshold, and that love affair had never ceased. The house of Durand was light and airy on the remodeled portion of the house, but the original part retained old world charm, and more than just a bit of southern nostalgia.

It was the one thing Marguerite could not give up and had longed to be back here whilst at the bleaker Whisht Hall on Dartmoor. The house had been in her family for generations. She had been born here and her heart had never really left. In essence, she was part of the Deep South, the French Creole heritage was in her blood.

Ancestors on her mother's side had originated from San Dominique, and the house of Durand had passed to her mother after her grandfather's death. A few years later, it passed to her. Marguerite vowed then that she would never sell it. In the past, she had hoped Henri might decide this was also where he

would rather be. Marguerite sighed heavily. She no longer had that thought.

Eleanor had transplanted herself with ease into the Louisiana way of life, and to talk to her now, it was hard to believe she had ever come from anywhere else. Having no children of her own, and a marriage of eleven years that had ended badly, she had no real ties. In an effort to put the past behind her and start afresh, Eleanor had applied for the job of housekeeper and companion. Her primary role was to accompany Marguerite on her frequent travels, but the two women had bonded easily, and they had traveled between the two locations for just over three years, their time being spent more and more in New Orleans. It came as no surprise when Eleanor expressed a desire to stay in New Orleans permanently, and Marguerite did not object. It just made coming to the house of Durand on Prytannia Street easier. It felt like coming home, and consequently, Whisht Hall felt cold and desolate by comparison. Accordingly, her trips away from Henri and Dartmoor grew frequent and more prolonged.

Marguerite walked into the house, leaving Eleanor with Cecile. She knew, without asking or telling, that Eleanor would take care of everything. Marguerite made her way up the stairs, opened the door to her room, and let out a sigh of relief. Normality at last.

After closing the door firmly, she sat upon the stool in front of a dressing table and stared at the reflection in the looking glass. Her complexion was that of her French father. Only her eyes, dark with a rich amber overtone, marked her as something exotic. She normally considered herself an attractive woman, with fine boned features and long chestnut hair, but pregnancy and childbirth had given her a haggard appearance. She ran her fingers through her hair, noting pregnancy had changed it. It felt coarser and no longer seemed to have the silk-like texture she had taken for granted. Standing up again, she discarded her clothes and ran her hands over her nakedness, feeling mildly repulsed by the still evident bulge in her belly. Either way, it would go, whether it be naturally or surgically. After all, she

had given Henri the heir he wanted with one to spare she mused. Now, she could get on with her own plans.



Henri arrived two days later. He entered the house, carrying a large bouquet of roses and two teddy bears. A sense of unreality persisted as it always did when Henri was around. He assumed, the babies had been born in the hospital, he assumed that everything was fine between them, and Marguerite did not set the record straight. She had far too much to lose. Marguerite nodded over his questions and gushed over the flowers and bears, allowing Henri security in his beliefs. She asked Eleanor to bring the babies to their father, and he gazed down at them adoringly when he held both on his lap.

He raised his head and looked across to where Marguerite sat. “Did you know it was twins?” Marguerite shook her head. “Didn’t the hospital do a scan?” he asked, the disbelief evident in his tone.

“I didn’t keep all my hospital appointments,” she said apologetically, “and then everything happened so fast.” She got up and walked to the window. Feeling suddenly too warm, she pulled the sash up to open it wider, and for a few moments savored the cooling breeze over her skin. “I was just glad when it was all over,” she said, turning toward him again.

“I’m sorry that I wasn’t with you. I should have been here, but when I got the call, there was no flight available until the following day.”

“It’s fine, Henri, the babies are healthy and I had Cecile with me all the time.”

“Cecile! That girl is useless. I would have thought you would have wanted Eleanor with you.” Henri seemed genuinely appalled.

“Eleanor has enough on her plate, and you’re wrong about Cecile, she is a great help to me, she is brighter than what you give her credit for and—I am having her educated now.”

“And I suppose I’m paying for that, am I?” His tone was bitter.

Marguerite shook her head. “I would have thought you would welcome an opportunity to help someone better themselves. She wants to be a doctor, and she has the ability. You, of all people, should understand that,” she answered shortly, needing to get the words out.

Henri caught his breath. He obviously wasn’t convinced. “There’s just something about her that makes me uncomfortable, and sometimes the way she looks—it’s her eyes,” he said, with a certain edge to his voice. “They’re evil.”

“Rubbish,” she said testily, repressing the urge to rise to his absurd way of thinking. “It’s all in your mind.” She frowned slightly. “Anyway, enough of that. You might like to know that I put the names we agreed on the birth certificates.” And she looked down at the sleeping infants. “They are official now, Calin and Damien.”



Cecile listened to the conversation from the garden. The large magnolia concealed her position by the open window, and a brief shudder passed through her body. There was always trouble when Henri was around. The quicker he left, the better for everyone. Her face was expressionless as she pulled the ovanga doll from her pocket and looked down at the long sharp thorn in her other hand. She lifted her head, drew a deep breath as her eyes rolled back in her head, her eyelids fluttered rapidly, and the incantation was, barely a whisper, so low the rustling leaves concealed it thoroughly.

Cecile’s eyes snapped open, her body trembling as she unleashed the power from her hands, and drove the thorn through the doll’s leg. A loud scream rang out from the occupied room.

CHAPTER 8

A Meeting of Minds

Ten months Earlier - The French Quarter:

The pure simplicity of the window first drew Marguerite's attention, and she stopped underneath the sign that depicted a great white serpent. Lettering fashioned in bold black script read *House of Damballah*. Nine white candles burned in the shop window, and a small statue of Saint Michael the Archangel stood in the center.

Most voodoo shop windows of the Quarter displayed too much clutter with dozens of statues and magical bric-a-brac, giving the appearance of badly organized junk shops. This one was refreshingly different. It was quite by chance that Marguerite took a short cut through one of the less-used side streets, and the window display greatly appealed to her tidy sense of being, causing her stop and stare.

Even the white serpent looked serene and inviting, as if beckoning her to come closer. As she contemplated why this imagery appealed to her so much, a deep-rooted need or just mere curiosity that halted her journey in the first place, she stretched out her hand and opened the door.

As a child, she had haunted these types of shops. They always held mystery and magic with their many candles and statues. She coveted the strings of glass beads and often brought small strange trinkets or spirit dolls, believing they possessed some unknown power. Even as an adult, she regularly negotiated the hordes of tourists to seek out her favorite shops and buy

candles and incense. She burned it at home, believing it somehow brought her closer to her ancestors and her Creole heritage.

A small bell jangled above her head as the door swung open and she stepped inside. It took a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the muted soft light of the shop, as she savored the familiar scent of jasmine and sandalwood. Her attention was instantly drawn to the brightly illuminated lifelike replica of a white serpent, which rested on a high shelf over the shrine. Several offerings of coconuts and white sweets lay beneath the snake and the whole alter was decorated with lit white candles. A sudden movement toward the back of the shop caught her eye. Housed in a large glass case was an albino python, and beady eyes watched Marguerite's progress with interest, before it turned its head away and appeared to go to sleep.

Marguerite didn't see the girl that sat on a stool behind the counter until she was just a few feet away. Surrounded by voodoo dolls, a varying range of glass bottles and herbs in little mesh bags, she appeared statue-like until she moved her head to look at Marguerite.

"Good morning," Marguerite said, after realizing she was not alone.

The girl acknowledged her with a nod and when she spoke, her accent was tinged with Haitian. "Can I help you, ma'am?"

"I am just looking," Marguerite replied, slowly moving around the counter to examine the various herbs for purchase.

Closer now, she gazed up at the girl who appeared to be in her early twenties. She was struck by eyes that appeared almost black, against her dark flawless skin. She was beautiful, like some exotic princess, with her long dark braided hair and deep red dress. Complementing the outfit was long gold and red earrings and a gold snake bangle on her arm. Marguerite was quite unprepared as she felt the sudden intensity of the black eyes that stared back at her. This girl saw things. It felt as if this stranger could look into her very soul, and she wondered if she dared to reveal her most intimate requirements to this striking creature.

"I never realized this shop was here before." The girl made no reply. "I was just passing, but..." She was glad there was no

one else in the shop, as she knew her face flushed a little. "I have been told to consort with Mami Wata."

The girl's face changed subtly and she shook her head. "Her spirit is not with us today. Damballah will grant your wish if it pleases him and give you the child you desire."

A shiver ran down Marguerite's spine. She had not mentioned children, and the realization dawned. This girl had read her mind.

Suddenly nerves got the better of her as she remembered Henri's words.

"Evil people," he called them and scoffed when she mentioned ancient spirits and how they could channel wishes. "Superstitious nonsense. You should not put your faith in archaic African religions."

She put his words to the back of her mind. He did not understand, he did not realize that these obscure religions, as he called them, were very real to her. She had grown up believing in their power, and she had known people that believed wholeheartedly in the spirits and were helped, whereas evildoers received powerful charms that had resulted in their failure or in an extreme case, their demise. Here in New Orleans, it was more than religion. For some, it was a way of life, and ever since her mother's death she felt the need to connect with her true roots and follow a truer heritage, one which was handed down from her mother's people.

The girl got up from the stool and reached under the counter. She pulled out a white candle molded in the crude shape of a woman with a distinctive bulge in its belly. Methodically she anointed the bottom of the candle with scented oil from one of the glass bottles.

"Are you a seer?" Marguerite asked cautiously, recovering from the shock.

"I see things," the girl replied, turning toward her and placing the candle in her hand. "We will make a request, the wick will draw the oil up the candle, and the smoke will be sacrosanct. Papa Legba is the gatekeeper and the spirit of communication between all spheres of life and death. He will open the

gates for me to draw the Loa from the spirit world,” she replied nonplussed, and struck a match.

She lit the candle and indicated that Marguerite place it upon the altar. “You need to make an offering,” she said, gazing steadily at Marguerite. “Do you have something that is personal to you?”

Marguerite slipped off her silver bracelet and placed it upon the altar next to her candle.

“Concentrate on that which you want most. Channel your thoughts through the energy of the candle, then you will be able to ask your question.”

Marguerite concentrated on her candle’s flame, she fixated on the light, and the words, *give me a child*, filled her minds thoughts. The girl stood next to her with her eyes closed. She was still for a moment and then she spoke. The words she chanted were not familiar, and Marguerite believed they were in the Haitian tongue until the dialect changed. She swayed her body and her breathing became rapid, Marguerite could have sworn something entered the room. She suddenly felt an intense warmth flush through her body as the candles flames flickered wildly for a few seconds, before the flames became horizontal as if they might be extinguished at any moment. Then they became still.

“*Bon dieu baie yeuse ca qui yeuse demande vous*,” the girl cried loudly several times, appearing to call down the spirit of Damballah.

Marguerite tried to concentrate, but she was distracted as the albino snake woke and banged its body loudly against the glass, coiling itself around and around the glass case as the girl finished her chant. With a satisfied smile hovering on her lips, she left Marguerite’s side and went to the snake. Marguerite was dismayed to see that she opened the top. The snake slid out of its confined space and slithered across the floor to where she stood.

“Don’t move,” the girl instructed, “it will not harm you.”

The snake wound its way around Marguerite’s ankles. She began to sweat, adrenaline mounting at the sensation of the snake’s skin over her naked legs and sandaled feet. She shiv-

ered and suppressed the urge to cry out as its head moved slowly up her leg. The girl's chanting began again and the snake stilled. Suddenly, it moved back and away from her. Her breath, which was suspended, came back in a gasp. The snake began winding its way up the girl's body, and she maneuvered it until it coiled around her shoulders.

The air suddenly felt heavier. Whether it was the incense, the adrenaline flowing through her body, or the fact that there were many lit candles in such a small space and they were draining the oxygen from the air, Marguerite felt the overwhelming need to sit down before she fell down. Feeling as though she was literally wilting, she sat down heavily and closed her eyes for a few minutes. When she opened them, the snake was back in the glass case, and the girl was holding out a bag to her.

"Put this under your pillow every night for a month, and you will have your wish."

"What is it?" Marguerite said, taking the bag.

"A gris-gris, it is a powerful charm. Feed it with a few drops of oil each day, and its power will increase." She nodded her head. "It will work. Keep the gris-gris out of sight."

Marguerite got the oddest feeling at these words, completely believing this girl and her voodoo magic. "Thank you," she said, taking the bag. "How much do I owe you?"

"Twenty dollars."

Marguerite fished in her purse for a twenty-dollar bill and handed it to her. "What did you say, when you called upon Dambellah."

The girl smiled slowly "God gives them that which they ask."

Marguerite nodded. "Thank you..."

"You can call me, Cecile, ma'am."



After Marguerite returned home, she could not get the ritual out of her head. She relived every moment, trying to recall the words spoken, as she placed the gris-gris under her pillow that

night, just as Cecile had instructed. During the following week, she and Henri made love several times, and a week to the day, she returned to the shop.

As before, Cecile sat on the stool by the counter. "I knew you would return, your blood draws you back," she said, getting up and moving closer to study Marguerite's face.

Cecile's gaze was intense and Marguerite felt oddly drawn to her, even when Cecile continued to stare without speaking.

"The quarter is like a magnet for me, I come here often," she replied, and then as a polite distraction from the uneasiness, she asked, "Do you own this shop?"

Cecile remained unresponsive for a moment, as if she were mesmerized. "The shop belongs to my aunt Mari," she said at last. "I help out when she has other commitments."

Marguerite nodded thoughtfully and, taking her gaze from Cecile, she noted that the glass case was empty. Discreetly she scanned the room, hoping the snake was not loose.

"Simbi is with my aunt today."

Marguerite looked back at her in surprise.

"I saw you looking for him, your discomfort is obvious for anyone to see, ma'am."

"I just am not that comfortable with snakes," Marguerite said, her tone full of apology, preferring not to think about the sensation of that snake slithering over her skin. "I was just wondering...how did you know what I wanted? The other day when I first came in here. It's been playing on my mind ever since."

"The same way I know that you have that baby in your belly."

"*What?*" Marguerite gasped in disbelief.

Cecile nodded. "The magic is powerful. There is a reason you were given this gift from the Loa. This child must be special."

Marguerite stared at Cecile for a few long moments feeling stunned. Surely, Cecile's words could not be true. "Are you certain?" Her voice was barely there.

"Yes, most definitely, you are with child. I feel the aura that surrounds it."

Marguerite could not quite believe those words. Despite all her medical knowledge, she suddenly felt ignorant to everything. "How is this possible?" she said slowly. "Henri and I, that's my husband, have tried for four years. I suddenly walk in here and five minutes later, hey presto, I'm pregnant."

"You have copulated with your husband, yes?"

Marguerite nodded, slightly embarrassed by the question.

"Belief in the power of the Loa is sometimes all that's needed to be granted his sacred blessing. Besides, my gris-gris always works, my aunt taught me well." Cecile paused. "She is a high priestess, although she does not practice as much anymore."

Marguerite's head spun as she finally accepted what Cecile was saying, as she realized that she did feel different. No longer did she believe that the strange ache in her stomach was due to something she had eaten, and, thinking about it further, it didn't feel like a normal stomach-ache. In fact, everything felt a bit unusual, and she could only be a couple of days pregnant at the most, but something was definitely different with her. Maybe, it was the baby's aura as Cecile had said.

"Here drink this and sit down." Cecile said, handing her a glass of water.

"Thanks," Marguerite said gratefully, sitting on the bench. "I think, I am in shock," she said in-between sips of the cool water. Marguerite looked back to Cecile trying to bring her thoughts together. "How long have you lived in New Orleans?"

Cecile took a seat beside her. "I grew up in the swamplands, living in an old wooden shanty that was built by my ancestors, near Honey Island swamp."

"I have heard of it, never been out there though, I always thought that it was pretty inaccessible," Marguerite said, reflectively.

Cecile made a noise of agreement. "It is. Although necessary, my distant ancestors were slaves that escaped captivity and made a living through trade and smuggling networks with free coloreds. They lived out in the swamp as no whites would dare come looking for them." She shook her head slowly. "Not in those dangerous black waters. My family never had much

time for rules and laws, so generations were born and stayed out there. Over the years they added different sections and only came into New Orleans to trade. Once freedom was no longer an issue, several family members came into the city to earn a better living, but they always returned to the black water swamp and the house we had built. My aunt gained a reputation for her spells and magic, and she started this shop forty years ago." She fell silent for a few moments. "Several years back one of the storms was so furious that it destroyed a great part of my family home, so I no longer could remain out there." There was genuine sorrow in her voice.

"That sounds like such a precarious way to live," Marguerite said gently. "You are probably safer here. Are there even paved roads to this house?"

A brief smile touched Cecile's lips. "No, we lived in one of the most untamed parts of the swamp. Even now, most people do not go in there for fear of getting lost."

"You sound as if you miss it."

Cecile nodded. "I do, and still visit, the city is good, but I still miss the house I grew up in and the wildness of living out there. If I ever have the money, I would rebuild it, and it would be amazing," She lapsed into a thoughtful silence.

Marguerite saw that the light had glazed over in her eyes and she felt desperately sorry that she had lost what she considered her home and birthright. "Are you really psychic?"

Cecile shrugged. "I just know things, strange things that ordinary people don't understand, and they can't understand because their fear stops them." Her eyes shifted back to Marguerite. "You do not fear the magic, ma'am."

Marguerite stared at her, the words made sense. Her own ancestors were Creole, after all. They knew about the magic. "Please call me Marguerite." She hesitated. "I want to learn the magic, can you teach me?" She paused for a moment. "You have already helped me more than you'll ever know..." She stopped again, trying to find the right words to say. "This is going to sound cliché, ridiculous even, but ever since I walked into this shop, I felt a connection, maybe it was even before,"

she said, thinking back, “before I stepped over the threshold, it was as if I was drawn to come in here.

“I have always felt at odds with things, I went into medicine to help people, although the ways I want to help are frowned upon—” She shrugged lightly. “—moral issues and suchlike. My research and work with cells could be revolutionary, but I have been hindered in actually doing any good, too many moral issues from people that can’t see the bigger picture and everything always gets so tied up in paperwork and bureaucracy.”

Cecile smiled compassionately appearing to understand her heartache.

“Seeking the magical help of a Loa, some would also call that immoral, and yet whatever forces are at work here, I am going to have a baby because of it.” Marguerite sighed heavily. “I’m sorry. You don’t need to hear my personal problems.”

Cecile placed her hand on Marguerite’s arm. “I can help you and I can teach you. I wanted to learn proper medicine and to be more knowledgeable. My education was not conventional, but you,” she said, pursing her lips, “perhaps you just need to find another way to do exactly what you want.”

Her eyes were wide and sparkling like a child that had discovered some delightful new revelation, and it thrilled Marguerite to know that Cecile understood what she was saying.

“And from the moment you walked in here, I felt the connection with you, which is very rare for someone like me.”

“Someone like you?” Marguerite asked, puzzled.

“Uneducated, black, disadvantaged, diaspora, the list is endless, and you are obviously an educated woman of good standing. We are worlds apart.”

Marguerite felt saddened by Cecile’s lack of self-worth and the faint touch of pain in her voice. “You do not strike me as disadvantaged, Cecile, and, besides, we are akin in our heritage. You use the word diaspora as a negative. These days there are so many displaced people belonging to a different land, it is not a discredit to you, and if its education you need, then I could help with that. Medicine would be a wonderful opportunity for you, and all those things you think hinder your progress, well, I can show you that they would not. Your talent...whatever it is,

it's amazing," she said in awe. "I've never met anyone like you and if I was drawn to this place, then, it was for a reason." She paused and smiled at Cecile. "We are connected, even though we are complete strangers."

Cecile nodded and stood up. "Not anymore, Ms. Marguerite. I'm sure we are going to be firm friends."

CHAPTER 9

The Ruin in the Black Water Swamp

Five months into the pregnancy, the hairs stirred all over Marguerite's body as she stood at the edge of the clearing, looking at the ruin. The impression of the place felt as though it might forever be engraved on her soul. There was something powerful here, something she could not reconcile in her head. Echoes of lives once lived seemed present, and yet there was no sound or visual evidence to support that odd feeling. Only curiosity gave her the courage to move closer.

The roof had been ripped apart by savage winds, the shutters hung haphazardly from rotting hinges, windows were broken, and the rest of the building had pretty much succumbed to the onslaught of time and the elements. Sorrow at what had become of Cecile's childhood home pricked her conscience further. Remnants of several old outbuildings were still visible, and the once sizable barn had been reduced to a carcass of stone foundation with a skeletal structure of rotting planks. In the past, it must have been a thriving homestead. Only now standing and gazing at the reality, the sad realization dawned on her. It was probably unsalvageable.

A silence had come over Cecile as she walked ahead, avoiding eye contact with the ruin. She had not even glanced at the battered veranda of the main house, or the rocking chair that moved gently with the breeze. Marguerite felt her pain. She could well imagine the generations that had sat in that chair. From Cecile's distant ancestors hiding out from the early slave masters, ready to defend life and limb, to the later generations

that survived out here. No words could have accurately described this scene. It had to be experienced. For the first time she really understood how Cecile felt about this place and the veracity of her family's great effort and determination to endure life out in these swamplands.

The very last part of their journey had been impassable on foot. They had left Marguerite's car on the bank of the old Pearl River and climbed into one of two canoes that they uncovered from old green tarpaulins, so well concealed in the undergrowth that at first, she had not even seen them. Cecile seemed unconcerned by the prospect of cottonmouths or other vipers, that Marguerite knew frequented this type of habitat, when she pulled the tarpaulin away. Only a frog, startled by the bright light, leapt up from the canoe and disappeared into the swamp.

The canoe was big enough for three people to have traveled in it, and it looked sturdy and strong as Marguerite stepped down into it. She sat quickly, feeling the wobble of the vessel. Cecile pushed off from the bank, and it was clear that she was skilled at steering through the black waters and using the paddle with great dexterity, as if it were entirely second nature to her.

Marguerite began to relax. In reality, they were only on the water for a few minutes, but it was long enough for Marguerite to lose sight of her car and to watch in wonder at how Cecile managed to navigate her way through the unforgiving cypress, gum, and tendrils of vines that insisted on snagging the paddle. It was as if the wilderness was waiting to ensnare its next victim and to pull them down to the murky black waters, where all kinds of noxious substances and creatures awaited.

It was not hard to imagine how Cecile's ancestors had remained hidden for generations out in this swamp.

A sudden jolt made Marguerite catch her breath. Dreading that she might fall into the water, she clutched at the sides of the canoe.

Cecile only laughed. "Just a vine, Ms. Marguerite, they have grown a lot since I was last here." She put the paddle down and pulled out a knife from the bag at her feet. She slashed at the offending plant, pulling up the long tendrils and throwing them onto the bank.

A few minutes later, the canoe collided with the part of the bank they had headed for, and Marguerite saw there was a patch of earth where the weeds and branches retreated from the water's edge. Cecile jumped out and held the canoe steady for Marguerite to follow, and then they pulled the canoe high up onto the dry earth.



Marguerite looked back to the ruin, taking in the atmosphere of the place, and slowly followed Cecile as she walked around the perimeter, heading for a previously well-trodden path that ran alongside the black waters of the swamp. The path soon left the water's edge and wound its way through the encroaching undergrowth and into the wooded distance. There were noises from the swamp, insects and the occasional small splash, and a very low humming. They followed the path for a couple of minutes, going deeper into the wilds, and the humming grew in volume.

Marguerite looked at Cecile. "What is that noise?"

"Honeybees, there is a big nest over there," Cecile said, pointing through the tangle of trees and vines. "They will not bother us." She thought for a minute. "The honeybees are the reason the swamp got its name."

Marguerite smiled at her. "It seems like a perfect place for them, undisturbed in a pristine swampland."

Cecile nodded. "Some people have tried to come out here and take their honey, but not many have succeeded. They normally get stung and lose their way back. We have often found the remnants of their bodies."

"That's horrible, Cecile!" Marguerite cried, with a slight shudder.

Cecile shrugged, with an air of indifference. "It's a good deterrent for others not to try."

They walked in silence for a while, and Marguerite hoped no one had come out here recently and lost their way home. Although, she reasoned that the vultures and alligators would make short work of any rotting carcass and perhaps, Cecile had a

point. Why would anyone come out here unless they were up to no good? She frowned. Wouldn't the likes of Henri say exactly the same thing about her?

The undergrowth cleared away to reveal a large circle. In the center was a darkened patch of ground where silver ashes clung to the desolate earth. Several feet away, a large upright wooden pole was set into a stone plinth.

"The *Poto Mitan*," Cecile remarked, following Marguerite's gaze. "Ceremonial pole," she added, as an explanation. "This ground is sacred," she continued, "bathed with the tears of my ancestors and the sacrificial blood of our enemies."

Despite the humid hot day, Marguerite felt her blood chill. "People were killed here, sacrificed?"

Cecile looked back at her. "Times were different back then, often it was a case of kill or be killed, and, besides, who mourns the death of a really wicked person?"

"I suppose you're right," Marguerite said pensively, "it's just, I have been thinking that the journey to get here through the swamp is not straightforward, and I am not sure how safe it is. There must be snakes and alligators and many other risks"

Cecile dismissed the words quickly. "Here you will unite with the spirits. When your child enters this earthly domain so close to the Loa, it will not be at odds as you have been, it will be connected. It is the natural way of things." Her eyes were shining brightly. "Your child will be born into the arms of the spirit, like generations of our people before."

"I don't know, Cecile. What if there is a complication?"

A slow smile spread across Cecile's face. "Nothing will go wrong, you know this. You have lived your life by western convention. Here you must feel something. It's unfathomable, but real. The spirits gave you this child, they will not take it away."

Despite her misgivings, Marguerite smiled. "I think that perhaps Henri had just a little something to do with it."

"His seed is weak, without the Loa's help you would have never of conceived. Birthing your child in this sacred place in the presence of the Loa will give it strength and, more importantly, it will be protected from anyone ever wishing it

harm, as will you. Besides, I am not ignorant to these things,” she said with confidence. “I have delivered dozens of babies, and we will not be alone. The witchdoctor and priestess will preside over everything, the faithful followers will bring offerings and prayers. With so much positive energy, when we call up the presence of the spirit, you will bear witness. Believe me when I say nothing will go wrong.”

Marguerite’s apprehension dissolved and her faith in Cecile’s words took on new meaning. After all, Cecile had shown her a path that she had longed for. Standing in this clearing, on a hot humid sultry afternoon close to the banks of the black water swamp, she was more than ever convinced that she did feel something out of the ordinary. “Okay,” she agreed, “I want to do this.”

“I knew once you came here, you would feel the potent power. It will be an amazing experience. You will be closer to your people than you can imagine, you will feel the influence of the Loa, and never question the power again. What better gift can you bestow upon your child?”



As they made their way back through the vegetation to the ruin, Marguerite wondered if it would upset Cecile to ask if she might walk inside, as she was dearly longing to take just a quick glance. She was still debating this as they reached the first outbuilding and she saw Cecile looking toward the ruin.

“I will not enter and witness any more decay. Just be careful, the wood is rotten.”

The regret was heavy in her tone as she left Marguerite’s side and went to sit upon a fallen tree trunk. It was always a shock to Marguerite when Cecile seemed to know her thoughts better than she did. She did not waste the opportunity and walked up to the ruin. Cautiously, she stepped on to the first wooden step, which creaked underfoot, but appeared intact, and carefully she stepped up the remaining steps and onto the porch. The front door was ajar, and she pushed it a little more, hoping the hinges still had some substantiality.

The door swung open, and she was surprised to see pieces of furniture still intact and scattered about the room, the smell of decay and mold invaded her nostrils as she carefully made her way inside. The wooden floor felt soft and spongy. She gingerly moved forward and looked up to the second floor, only accessed by stairs that looked precariously dangerous with a missing banister and rotting wood. The varnish had worn away completely by a constant drip from the gaping hole in the roof, although it allowed a shaft of daylight to illuminate the staircase. The ruin creaked and groaned with every breath of the wind, and Marguerite felt overcome with a sudden feeling of melancholia. She knew why Cecile did not want to walk in here again.

As she left the ruin, an idea was forming in her mind.

Cecile watched her closely as she approached the fallen tree.

“I see the shadow on your face, Ms. Marguerite. It is a sad place for you as well, I think.”

Marguerite nodded, seating herself next to Cecile. “What if we could fix it?” she said slowly, her eyes bright and shining. “It could be a secret, if we only hire people you would trust to come here and rebuild it.”

Cecile sighed. “It would take a lot of money. You have seen the state it’s in. It would cost thousands.”

“I have money, and it doesn’t have to happen all at once. I could pay a bit at a time, that way Henri would not suspect anything. Besides,” she added coyly, “you do know that children cost a fortune these days.”

Cecile just stared at her. “Would you really do that for me?” she said disbelieving.

The idea grew stronger in Marguerite’s mind. It was an obvious solution and a good cause. She and Henri led virtually separate lives anyway, and he did whatever he wanted when he wanted it. It was his choice to remain in England most of the time and away from her. Who knew if he had different lovers or even a mistress, let alone what other secrets he kept from her? The more she thought about it, the more certain she became. Why shouldn’t she have something that was very secret from

him? “Yes, it will be a great project, and I will do it for both of us.”

CHAPTER 10

A Darker Side of Magic

The afternoon was warm, and high humidity lingered in the air. Marguerite wished for a rainstorm to clear the oppressiveness away, and in doing so, she fancied it might purge the confusion of her thoughts. Eleanor always understood her point of view. She accepted her decisions and reasons without question. Except today, when she had taken Marguerite to one side and voiced her concern over the relationship with Cecile and recent events.

It didn't matter what Eleanor thought, Marguerite told herself, feeling irritated that her friend's words had now given her reservations. She looked up. The sky was blue with only a wisp of cloud for as far as she could see. There would be no storm today.

She found Cecile in the garden, sitting on the grass under the white oleander tree. The situation was not impossible. She could control Cecile. The girl was just acting on her natural instincts and an overwhelming feeling of protection toward her and her children. She could not be too harsh with her. Marguerite sat beside her and plucked a blade of grass. She rubbed it between her fingers, as she gathered the right words and best approach.

"Someone in pain is a horrible thing to witness, and you cannot do this to him," she said, with regret.

Cecile gazed earnestly at her. "He will take the babies and put you in a psychiatric hospital if he knows the truth. I can't let

that happen. He needs to focus on something else for a while,” she declared bluntly.

Marguerite sighed heavily. “I know things have been difficult between us, and he would never understand my reasons, but I can’t torture him because of it. You are very powerful, Cecile, and we are in tune with our beliefs, although at the end of the day, I am still his wife. I can’t let you do this.”

“I have to protect you,” Cecile answered, with a hurt expression, “it’s for your future and the future of the twins. Don’t fret, Ms. Marguerite, I don’t do enough to harm, you know that. Besides, we can’t have him asking questions and getting suspicious. Anyone can take a little pain, and when he leaves New Orleans, he will be none the wiser. Your sons need you, they don’t need him.”

“I do love him you know, in a way,” Marguerite remarked, the sadness evident in her voice.

“Don’t feel guilty, you have no reason to. I just want to give him a reason to leave, so we can finish the house and start working on building the career you want without any interference. You are capable of such great things. Don’t let guilt cloud your judgement.”

“I know you’re right, it’s just...it’s the suffering. Do you have it make it so painful?”

Cecile met her gaze straight on. “Like I said, it’s just a distraction. Men are babies. What’s a bit of pain compared to the labor of childbirth?”

Marguerite nodded. “When you put it like that, I suppose it’s not that bad, after all.”



The tests proved nothing conclusive. Dr. Bannister was baffled with a strange case that had recently presented itself. Henri Louyar was in good health, the EKG, blood tests, X-rays, and physical examination showed no reason why he had these sudden excruciating bouts of pain in his legs and ankles. He had been on the point of dismissing this case as psychosomatic, concluding that the affliction was in Henri Louyar’s mind. He

procured the name of a reputable psychiatrist, and then yesterday, after witnessing an attack first hand, he changed his mind.

Henri was an educated man, a research scientist in the same field of obscure disorders and diseases. He was a fascinating conversationalist, and Henri's appointment ran overtime as he and Dr. Bannister discussed various cases they had encountered. Henri had been perfectly calm, rational, and chatting jovially. Then, out of nowhere, came an expression on his face of horror and distress. His skin erupted with dampness as sweat oozed from every pore, as his eyes filled with moisture.

Initially, Ryan Bannister was stunned. He reacted by grasping Henri's wrist and noted that the pulse was abnormally rapid. He witnessed Henri's body going into a shock-like reaction. He grasped the stethoscope and placed the cup on Henri's chest. The heartbeat was fast, as if he were about to suffer a heart attack. Doctor Bannister jumped up ready to summon help and that was when Henri bent forward and clutched at his leg.

"Oh, my God, make it stop, Ryan." Henri was panting, now struggling for breath. His eyelids fluttered as if he might pass out.

Just as Ryan Bannister felt uncharacteristically panicked himself, Henri let out a sigh and sat back. From the expression of relief on his face, Ryan knew the pain had gone. The two men's eyes met, and Ryan pulled a chair closer to Henri. Then, he rubbed his chin as a thought struck him.

Ryan stood and moved quickly to the window. He pushed down on one of the window blind slats to get a better view into the street. It was empty, save a slim figure that was already some distance from the building. The clothes gave no real indication if it had been a man or woman. He could only see a generic gray hooded top and shorts. Ryan let the slat release into place and pursed his lips.

Henri thought the doctor's behavior was odd, although, he did not question him. "I can't deal with much more of this, Ryan. It's like it's stripping away all my energy. There must be something you can give me." He looked at the doctor with pleading eyes.

“I can see the trauma you are going through,” Ryan said with sympathy and sat back down again. “Describe to me, while it’s still fresh, the exact feeling you got from the pain.”

Henri shook his head. “It’s an unbearable pain, and it’s indescribable.”

“Try,” Ryan urged, “tell me the words that come into your head, as you think about it.”

“Painful.” Henri smiled sarcastically. He was attempting to be cordial, but Ryan saw terror in Henri’s eyes. Henri shut his eyes. “It felt as if someone had plunged a red-hot knife into my leg and the flesh was burning, and as if the knife was dragged downward in a slow and deliberate movement.” He opened his eyes and stared at Ryan. “What on Earth is wrong with me? Ever since I came back to New Orleans, it has been like this every day or so, and then it stops. Then, it’s like it’s never been, and it’s as if I’ve imagined it.”

Ryan shook his head, as Henri continued. “I know that’s what you thought, and even I thought the same, because how can every single test come back normal? I even started to believe it was in my head.” He paused for a long moment, staring straight at the wall before him trying to fathom reasons. “I’ve studied cases, you know. People that are locked away in hospitals because they believe something that no one else can see or hear. We scientists and doctors dismiss them as nutcases, but my experiences make me question everything.” He paused, clearly traumatized. “I consider myself a sane man, a logical man, a scientist, for God’s sake, so why am I now questioning my own sanity?”

“I don’t believe you are insane, Henri, although, I am beginning to wonder if you are being attacked psychologically—hear me out,” he added quickly, as Henri scoffed. “I have seen people fall into trances and become possessed with whatever they conjure up. It’s frightening to witness, but so is the attack I just witnessed, because, Henri, you are under attack. Something or someone is causing you this pain, and it’s not an illness. Of that, I am certain.”

Henri stared at his doctor, and his voice trembled despite his effort to control it. “Are you talking about witchcraft?”

Ryan Bannister smiled. “This is New Orleans, and here we call it voodoo.”

CHAPTER 11

The Priestess

Henri felt uncomfortable as he left the hustle and bustle of the French Quarter for a deserted narrow side street. Ryan told him that he was looking for a house with a green door. He saw only one green door on this shadowed street. He pulled Ryan's card from his pocket to recheck the address written on the back. Number twelve. He looked again and, sure enough, he saw the numbers scratched into the chipped paintwork.

A wire bell cord protruded from the side of the doorframe. Henri pulled on it, and somewhere in the distance, a bell sounded. He waited for several minutes before the door opened.

The woman's Creole heritage was obvious, and her skin wrinkled with age. Henri tried not to feel disturbed, by the milky haze of an early cataract beginning in one of her exceptionally dark eyes. He cleared his throat.

"Mari Lacroix?" he inquired.

The woman gave a quick nod of her head.

"Doctor Bannister sent me," he said, holding out Ryan's card. "He said you would be expecting me."

The woman gave another nod and opened the door wider, allowing Henri to enter, and waved him down the dimly lit hallway. After a slight hesitance, he crossed the threshold, which felt like stepping into an unknown world, and gazed at the strange pictures that adorned the narrow hallway. Mari followed him through to an open doorway, which opened to a large sitting room.

Once inside, Henri was a little overwhelmed at the Aladdin's cave of ornaments, candles, patterned fabrics, cushions, and throws. He had never been in a room filled with so many distracting objects before. Mari indicated that he should sit in a comfortable looking chair, situated before a low round table. The only thing on the table was a black cloth which appeared to be covering an object underneath. Mari sat across from him and looked up to meet his gaze.

"You have enemies here."

It wasn't a question, and being the first words out of her mouth, the effect unnerved him. He swallowed nervously, mildly surprised at the tone of her speech. He'd expected a deeper, cracked voice from such an ancient-looking woman. Her voice was light. It gave him the strangest impression that, at any moment, she would jump up and discard this old woman disguise, then he would be looking at a beautiful young girl. That belief was fleeting as Mari held out her wizened hand. On her fingers she wore several rings set with exotic-looking stones. Instinctively, he put his hand in hers, and she closed her eyes.

Despite her age, she radiated an odd sort of energy. It pricked his skin until small goose bumps rippled across his flesh, and her aged fingers belied unexpected strength as she gripped his hand tighter.

Then her eyes snapped open. "They wish you harm."

"Who wish me harm?" Henri queried, growing more uneasy by the second. Half of him didn't like this. He didn't believe in this stuff anyway, but he did not pull his hand away. A small part of him was intrigued.

"I feel your skepticism," she remarked, releasing his hand and narrowing her eyes fractionally. "You are under attack," she concluded and sat back in her seat. "If you want to be free, then you will have to open that closed mind."

Taken aback by her words, Henri shifted uncomfortably in the chair. He did not consider himself to be naïve or narrow-minded. "How can you be sure, I have never dabbled in this stuff, there could be a more logical reason?" he challenged, feeling indignant.

Mari gave him a long look. Henri knew his words must seem ridiculous, after all, he had sought her out.

“I have seen many like you over the years. The ones I helped are still living. Those who poured scorn on my words are no longer of this world.”

A shiver ran down Henri’s spine. He took a deep breath and sat back into the chair. This old conjure woman was trying to scare him into handing over money, for some hocus pocus potion she would no doubt give him. If it weren’t for the fact that Ryan had given him this recommendation, and had told him that she was powerful in diverting the dark arts, Henri would have got up and left immediately.

His rationale sought counsel in his head, telling him to leave anyway, walk away, and find a specialist, a medical professional to solve his case. Henri frowned. Ryan Bannister was that, and now Henri was running out of options. He had no choice. He dismissed the voice and resigned himself to remaining and listening to Mari’s words. “How did you help the ones that lived?” he inquired, watching her closely.

“Tis different with everyone, it depends on what is being used against you.”

Henri remained skeptical. It was even more of a disappointment when she lifted the black cloth on the table to reveal a crystal ball.

It brought to mind the cheap fairground tricks that had intrigued him when he was still a boy, growing up in the south west of England. Every fair that came to town had the fortune-seeing gypsy with her crystal ball. Henri tried not to allow his thoughts to cloud his judgment, and for the sake of curiosity, he figured he would play along for a while to see what gem she could wheel out of him.

Mari’s hands were either side of the crystal, as she peered intently into its depths, her concentration so intense that after a few minutes, Henri leant forward and stared into it. It was strangely mesmerizing. He blinked quickly a few times.

What had been perfect crystal sphere, moments before, was clouded. Not on the outside, but as if someone breathed on it from the inside.

Mari made a noise in her throat, then she drew a sharp breath. "I see there is much danger for you."

Henri's tension released and he laughed to himself, thinking it must be a standard line to entice the gullible.

"The powers of night have been summoned."

Henri started to enjoy himself. He marveled at people actually believing this crap. No wonder they got such bad press in the media.

"I see two baby boys." Henri's smiled faded.

"Twins born at midnight, amidst the dust and sacrificial ceremony of a voodoo ritual."

"No." He shook his head. "That cannot be my children. They weren't born like that."

Mari looked up at him, a small frown furrowed her brow, giving him the distinct impression that she knew something that he didn't. "Are you certain?"

"Yes, I am certain," he insisted, mildly annoyed.

Mari did not seem convinced, as she sat back a little, thinking. "These children, there is such a strong connection with you." She raised her eyebrows and looked back to the crystal as if uncertain whether to continue. She cleared her throat, making up her mind to speak. "You are being deliberately harmed and I am willing to bet...violently?"

"Yes," he said warily, "it's the pain, I can't stand it."

Mari nodded. "Not many can take the pain for long."

"Who is it, who is doing this to me?"

"The source of this power is hard to see." She shook her head. "The crystal's gone dark."

Henri looked back to the crystal and the cloudiness had gone. It was as transparent as the first time he looked at it. He looked at Mari. She was watching him closely.

"You are not from here, have you had a recent disagreement with anyone that would wish you harm?"

He shook his head.

"What about bad debts, or any legal matters?"

"No, nothing," he said, unsettled by the thought.

Mari sat back, viewing him with speculation. "I can give you a counter charm. It will stop the attack," she said at length.

“I can protect you from the evil, but take my advice, do not stay in New Orleans. The source is here, and you need to be away from it.”

Her tone was so sincere that Henri nodded in agreement. He thought about her words, as she moved about the room opening drawers and gathering several strange looking items into a small leather pouch. She held the pouch before him and pronounced some words in French.

“Here,” she said holding it out to him. “Do not open it. Keep it about your person at all times.”

“What’s in it?”

Mari’s mouth turned up a fraction. “You don’t really want to know. All you need to know is it has power and will work if you follow my instructions.”

Henri took the pouch, feeling somewhat better by her reassurance, even if it was false. “How much do I owe you?” he said, standing up to leave.

“When you have been free of the attack for a few weeks, you can decide what you would like to pay me.”

Henri was surprised. His previous belief shattered, and he suddenly put faith in the contents of the pouch and Mari’s abilities.



With the pouch in his possession, he felt better. Even if, he could not shake the feeling that perhaps its magic was nothing more than a placebo, but if he truly believed then, perhaps it would really help him. Walking back through the French Quarter, he replayed everything that had happened since he arrived in New Orleans.

By the time, Henri reached the house on Prytannia Street, his doubts about the birthplace of his sons multiplied. Marguerite should have known it was twins. Any good hospital would have insisted on a scan much earlier. He walked into the hall. It was empty. He then walked through to the kitchen where Eleanor and Marguerite were talking.

He walked up to his wife and placed his arm around her. "Where are the boys?"

"With Cecile." Marguerite felt him stiffen, and she and Eleanor exchanged glances. "Henri, Cecile is devoted to them."

Henri smiled at her, determined to keep his thoughts to himself for the time being. "Can I have a word?" He paused. "In private."

Eleanor took the hint. She picked up the vase of flowers she had been arranging and carried them through to the next room.

Marguerite leant against the kitchen counter. "What is it, did doctor Bannister give you some bad news?" she asked with some concern.

"No, nothing like that." He hesitated, not wanting to frighten her. "He thinks it's nerve related, and it will go away in time." He wondered if Marguerite would be horrified if she really knew where he had been that afternoon, or if she was actually capable of something dark and sinister herself. Could she easily lie to him? "I have just been thinking that it's strange you never knew it was twins. I think we have a negligence case against the hospital. Something terrible could have happened and I want to engage an attorney."

Marguerite did not bat an eyelid. "Perhaps they were a bit lax. It's my own fault, and it would never stand up in court. At the end of my pregnancy, I was disagreeable with everyone. I felt so tired, and I missed too many hospital appointments. I know, I shouldn't have." She paused gauging his reaction. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. My head was confused, you weren't here, and I didn't want to worry you."

Henri pulled her close and kissed her lightly. "You should have worried me, going through all that on your own."

Marguerite smiled. "Here," she said, reaching into the kitchen drawer. "This may put your mind at rest." She pulled out a photo and handed it to Henri. "The nurse took this a couple of hours after they were born."

Henri looked down at the photo showing his wife with the two babies in a hospital bed in a sterile white room.

Marguerite smiled up at Henri. "You couldn't be there, so I thought you would like to see them at a few hours old."

Henri pulled her closer. “I do,” he said, feeling relieved that Mari had been so misinformed, although how strange it was that she had picked up on everything else accurately. Henri shrugged and smiled to himself. Perhaps there had been a few crossed vibes in that room, after all.

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About the Author



Jane Jordan was born in England, then, in the 1990s, she immigrated to Detroit, USA, eventually settling in South West Florida.

She returned to England, after a fifteen-year absence, to spend six years in the South West of England living on Exmoor. Here, inspired by the atmosphere, beautiful scenery, and the ancient history of the place, she wrote her first novel *Ravens Deep*. The next two books *Blood & Ashes* and *A Memoir of Carl* completed her gothic vampire trilogy.

Jordan's fourth novel was, *The Beekeeper's Daughter*, a historical dark romance combined with a supernatural thriller.

While England and Scotland provided a backdrop for previous novels of vampires, witches, and haunted mansions, New Orleans presents a setting for her fifth novel, *Whisht Hall*, a multi-layered thriller that combines the age-old struggle between good and evil, a tale steeped in voodoo, the culture of the deep south, and the hauntingly desolate Dartmoor.

Jordan returned to Florida in 2013, and now lives in Sarasota with her family.