



# Everlong

Barbara Valletto

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by

**Barbara Valletto**

*Mystic Books*  
*by Regal Crest*  
**Tennessee**

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## **Dedication**

For those who question the “powers that be.”

# Prologue

THE NIGHTMARE WREAKED havoc with Kylie Vinson's subconscious. Images of the past year flew through her mind like scenes from a horror movie. There she was waking up in a hospital bed after surviving a brutal physical assault. Seconds later, Kylie was in Verhoven, New York, a place she'd always felt safe and secure, to come to terms with her trauma. But instead of finding solace, Kylie's life was thrown into further chaos when she discovered a murder victim in a barren, desolate field, the first in a series of grisly murders that gripped the small community. And there beside her was Sheriff Lea Carlson, her former lover, who joined forces with her to hunt for the killer.

For the briefest of moments, she felt herself stirring awake from the nightmare until another barrage of images assailed her subconscious. A strikingly beautiful woman with raven-black hair, cobalt-blue eyes, and ruby-red lips filled her senses. In her deep sleep, Kylie's breathing grew ragged as her heart raced. Maya Holworth's stunning visage stared directly at her and seemed to feed off of Kylie's raw emotions. And, as always, Maya's aura of mystery and sexual allure drew Kylie in like a magnet and held her spellbound. Their passionate affair flashed in her mind, making her ache with desire.

Finally, the nightmare reached its peak. Kylie had discovered a dark secret that implicated Maya in the murders. Maya confessed that through supernatural means, she avenged victims incapable of avenging themselves. And she needed an accomplice. Together, they sought out another murderer, a murderer with a strong connection to Kylie's past, to exact vengeance. At that climactic moment, Kylie realized that she was as capable of committing violence as her lover. Blood and screaming bombarded Kylie's subconscious. Then, there were only Maya's hypnotic eyes. They seemed to be reaching into Kylie's very soul. This closing scene, as mirrored in real life, was the last time Kylie ever saw Maya Holworth again.

Kylie woke from the nightmare with an anguished scream. A myriad of emotions accosted her, ranging from horror and disbelief, to profound loss and abandonment. This time, she didn't surrender to gut-wrenching sobs or fits of anger. For that, she was grateful.

# Chapter One

KYLIE WAS SO engrossed in preparing for her afternoon court deposition, she hadn't heard the knocking on her office door until its glass panes rattled. She moved into the anteroom. Dr. Shelby Reynolds scowled at her through the glass and motioned for her to unlock the door. Kylie met the intrusion with an intermingled sense of excitement and annoyance.

Shelby was a vibrant, intriguing presence with her statuesque build, sea-foam green eyes, high cheekbones, and full, sensuous lips. She possessed the perfect combination of brains and beauty to make one stand up and take notice. As a child and young adult, Shelby's face and lean, tanned body graced the pages of a slew of popular fashion magazines. Amassing enough money over the years from her modeling career to fund her education, she studied psychiatry at New York's prominent Columbia University.

Now, in a whirlwind of energy, and amid wafts of a vaguely familiar designer-brand perfume, Shelby strode into her office. Without waiting for Kylie to offer her a seat, she settled in the chair closest to her desk, crossed her legs, and let out an exaggerated sigh.

"I've been trying to reach you for hours. I've left umpteen messages."

"I'm sorry, Shel. The office phone goes directly to voicemail, and my cell's on vibrate." Kylie rounded the desk and rifled through a stack of papers. "I'm due in court in an hour, and I need to make sure all my documents are in order so I'm not fumbling on the witness stand for an exhibit item. This is a make or break case for the prosecution."

Shelby lightly tapped the tip of a polished, manicured fingernail against her lower lip. "The Norman Hodge trial, right? The bastard who raped then poured acid on the genitals of five women?"

Kylie nodded. "He's the FBI's lead suspect. It's crucial my behavior profile analysis leaves no loophole for a reasonable doubt conviction."

"I shudder every time I think of the horrors those women endured."

"They're scarred for life, and the defense has the gall to pitch an insanity plea."

"Which you'll dispute."

"Damn right. Norman Hodge doesn't suffer from what his court-appointed psychiatrist describes as delusional ideation and feelings of persecution. He's not a victim of a diseased mind. His brutal attacks were premeditated. He's a sociopath who gets off torturing and maiming innocent women."

"I have no doubt your testimony will nail his ass to a cell wall for life."

"From your lips to the jurors' ears."

Shelby brushed aside a strand of honey-blonde hair that fell across her eye. "So, once you testify, are you free to indulge in some self-pampering?"

Kylie refrained from rolling her eyes. For Shelby, self-pampering could consist of anything from a manicure to a bikini wax, neither of which appealed to her. Since she didn't want to hurt her feelings, Kylie politely asked, "What did you have in mind?"

"A trip to the salon for an aromatherapy bath and full body massage. You might also consider getting an au naturel body-bronzing. Your tan's so faded."



Kylie smirked. "It's fall, and we live on the East Coast. What do you expect?"

"A golden goddess year-round. I love how your tanned thighs accentuate your strawberry-blonde bush."

Kylie felt heat rise to her cheeks. "You sure know how to get a girl's heart racing."

"As well as her libido. That's why I'm such an attentive lover."

Kylie's blush deepened. "I won't dispute that." Her mind wandered to the not-so-distant past. Their paths crossed when Shelby, chief psychiatrist at Abbott Memorial Hospital, interviewed and then hired Kylie on the spot for an open psychologist position.

Although attracted when they first met three months ago, Kylie tried to keep a low profile and concentrate on her job responsibilities. But her efforts ended in vain as weekly consults and staff meetings, both initiated by Shelby, popped up on her schedule with maddening frequency.

KYLIE SUSPECTED SHELBY arranged staff seating so Kylie sat directly across from her at the large oval conference desk. Shelby had made no mention of her sexual orientation, but Kylie's "gaydar" reached new heights of detection. Lingering eye contact, on Shelby's part, was a constant distraction. No matter how hard Kylie tried not to focus on her, it always occurred at the same time Shelby's gaze fell upon her. Flustered by the attention, Kylie reacted by quickly looking away, which was a dead giveaway of a mutual attraction.

After one meeting ran well into the dinner hour, Shelby startled her by asking, "Want to share a taxi into town for a drink?"

Since Kylie didn't want to decline her invitation outright, she voiced the first excuse that came to mind. "If I drink on an empty stomach, I'll be smashed in the space of a half hour."

Shelby clapped her hands in delight. "Does that mean that there's a possibility you might dance on a table top or flash your breasts for multi-colored beads?"

Kylie's cheeks turned crimson. "I wouldn't go that far."

"Too bad. I'd love to see how unreserved you are when away from a professional setting."

"And contribute to the hospital's rampant rumor mill? No, thanks."

Shelby surprised her by reaching for her hand. "I can assure you that whatever wild behavior you exhibit would be held in strict personal confidence. And pleasure."

That statement confirmed Kylie's suspicions.

Shelby continued. "I hate to have to pull rank, but you are my subordinate," she said in a half-teasing, half-serious tone. "I'd think you'd want to kiss my ass sideways to please me."

You have no idea, Kylie thought.

"Come on," Shelby goaded.

Kylie caved beneath her pleading gaze. "Okay, you win. But you have to promise not to analyze me."

Shelby grinned. "Isn't that what we both do best?"

At the outside bistro, they ate light fare and shared a bottle of Chardonnay. Their conversation ranged from favorite movies, to worst blind date experiences, to their chosen career paths. Laughter permeated the air, and Kylie was glad she'd accepted Shelby's invitation.

When the night ended, Shelby, ever the gentlewoman, shook Kylie's hand and hailed her a cab. During the taxi ride, Kylie felt disappointed that Shelby hadn't invited her back to her apartment, which was only a few blocks from the bistro. She wondered if maybe she was reading too much into Shelby's body language. Maybe all she wanted was a friend.

By their second “date,” Shelby was far from coy in expressing her intentions. After a romantic, candlelit dinner at a local Italian restaurant, where they consumed two bottles of Pinot Noir and shamelessly flirted until the wee hours of the morning, Shelby walked Kylie the short distance to Kylie’s place. As they stood on the top stoop and Kylie hunted in her purse for keys, Shelby asked, “Have you ever been overcome by an irresistible urge?”

Kylie’s mind flashed back to a winter afternoon in Verhoven, New York, when she stood on Maya Holworth’s landing in the freezing cold, and Maya met her in the doorway scantily clad in a gauze shift. Her world drastically changed that afternoon. When Kylie realized her mind had drifted, she quickly answered. “On occasion, I’ve allowed impulse to overcome reason. What’s this urge you can’t contain?”

Without hesitation, Shelby leaned in and kissed her. It wasn’t a soft, tentative roaming, but a firm, lip-on-lip contact. Kylie wasn’t sure how long it lasted, but when Shelby released her, Kylie had trouble catching her breath.

Shelby fixed her with a smug smile. “Just as I thought.”

Kylie eyed her questioningly.

“Not only did you return my kiss, but you drew me in at the waist. Sure signs of an irrepressible sexual chemistry.”

Seeking proof of her body’s betrayal, Kylie looked down and saw her hands gripping Shelby’s curvaceous hips.

“Damn,” she said.

“Yes,” Shelby purred. “Damn.”

And then Shelby kissed her again.

So, they became lovers. As far as emotional ties, Kylie was ashamed to admit to herself that there were none. Shelby Reynolds had begun as a one night stand that just happened to last longer than Kylie expected. It pained her because she knew Shelby wanted, hell expected, more.

KYLIE’S ATTENTION RETURNED to the present when she noticed Shelby glaring at her. “What?”

“You’re not listening.”

“I’m sorry. My mind’s a blur. What were you saying?”

“That my impromptu visit and tenacity to contact you isn’t without purpose.”

“This isn’t a veiled attempt to arrange a booty call?”

Shelby huffed. “You’re incorrigible.”

“So I’ve been told.”

When Shelby shifted on her seat, her skirt hiked up and exposed a toned thigh. Kylie’s thoughts again wandered. Focus, she thought. You’ve got a hearing in less than an hour.

“I have a proposition for you,” Shelby said. “How’s your caseload?”

“Manageable.”

“Would you be interested in doing a consult for me?”

“A consult? Since when does the renowned Dr. Shelby Reynolds need any assistance diagnosing patients?”

Shelby laughed. Kylie loved when she laughed. It was throaty and incredibly sexy.

“Flattery will get you everywhere.”

“Seriously, my schedule is always open for you.”

“Excellent. How about I fill you in on the details when you’re not so preoccupied?”

“Fair enough.”

With a self-satisfied grin, Shelby rose from her seat. “Knock ’em dead, Kylie.”

“I intend to.”

Shelby winked and shot Kylie an alluring gaze before sashaying out of the office.

Kylie inhaled the lingering scent of her perfume and then focused her attention on her case files.

THE COURTROOM WAS packed with Hodge’s victims and their families, media representatives, and curiosity seekers. Reporters stood at the ready with their notepads flipped open and their pens poised. Two hours had passed since closing arguments, and the twelve-panel jury entered the deliberation room to determine Hodge’s fate. Now, they were ready to reconvene. Kylie sat in the rear of the courtroom and, like the others, expectantly awaited a verdict. She was content with how she’d performed on the stand, despite Hodge’s malicious glares and attempts at intimidation. With his wrists and ankles shackled, he reminded her of a wild animal trapped in a metal snare. She only hoped that he’d soon be confined to a cage.

When the court clerk and court stenographer appeared out of an antechamber, the anxious crowd fell silent.

“All rise,” the clerk said.

Counsels for both the defense and the prosecution stood. The rest of the courtroom followed suit. The judge emerged from the same side office and nodded acknowledgement to the audience before taking his seat on the bench. An etched brass name plate rested next to a microphone: Honorable Joseph Ramses. Ramses addressed the clerk. “You can summon the jurors.”

Twelve people of mixed ages, sexes, races, and ethnicities entered the courtroom and filed in to their assigned seats on the panel. Ramses waited for the clerk to swear them in as a group before he spoke. “Ladies and gentlemen of the court, have you reached a verdict?”

A slim, Asian woman stood. At the beginning of the trial, she’d been selected as spokesperson for the panel. “We have, Your Honor.”

“In the case of Norman Hodge, Docket #46578, the following charges have been filed: kidnapping, rape, and assault with a deadly weapon. On each count, how does the jury rule?”

Kylie was relieved to hear that on all counts, the jury found Hodge guilty.

Obviously ecstatic over the verdict, everyone in the courtroom, with the exception of the defense and its now lawfully convicted client, gave the jurors a standing ovation. The gavel sounded and Ramses shouted, “Silence in the courtroom! A sentencing hearing will commence two weeks from today. Until then, the defendant is remanded to the Norristown Correctional Facility. Court is adjourned.” Ramses again rapped his gavel.

With Norman Hodge tried, found guilty, and awaiting sentencing for his abhorrent crimes, Kylie felt a tremendous emotional burden lift. When she left the courtroom, she was jubilant yet exhausted. She longed for a hot bath and a nap and hoped she could squeeze both in before Shelby arrived for their anticipated, celebratory dinner.

When she arrived at her apartment, she kicked off her shoes and wriggled beneath the covers fully clothed. Her head had no sooner hit the pillow when she heard a key slide into the door’s lock, and the security bolt shift in its cylinder. Kylie let out a frustrated groan and struggled from bed. Stifling a yawn, she met Shelby in the hallway. As always, Shelby stood before her,



gorgeous and radiant. She wore a button-down white madras shirt, tight denim jeans, and calf-high, suede boots. A strand of interlocking silver hoops, fashioned into a belt, hung loosely at her waist. She'd repainted her fingernails a bronze shade to match her ensemble.

In one hand she held a bouquet of sunflowers, Kylie's favorite, and in the other, a bottle of champagne. Knowing Shelby's high standard of living, she suspected the champagne was either Dom Perignon or of the same top-notch quality.

Kylie kissed her in welcome before searching for a vase for the flowers. Shelby bypassed her at the sink to rummage through overhead cabinets. "You must have fluted glasses hidden somewhere."

"I think I may have some stashed behind the beer mugs."

Shelby made a face. "Beer. Ugh."

"As you know, it's my alcoholic beverage of choice. It's exceptional with red licorice."

With a twinge of sarcasm, Shelby replied, "And all this time I thought you preferred red wine and dark chocolate."

Kylie chuckled. "And don't forget hand feeding me grapes while I lounge on my divan."

"Only the best for my baby."

After Kylie set the floral arrangement on the dining room table, she loosened the champagne's wire cage and undid its foil wrapping. Using her thumbs, she worked the cork until it shot free with a loud pop. At the sound, Shelby whirled. Kylie clamped her mouth over the top of the champagne bottle and attempted to staunch its surging flow of foam. Her cheeks swelled with fluid.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you that champagne requires proper chilling before opening?" Shelby asked.

Kylie gurgled out an unintelligible reply. In one quick motion, Shelby snatched the bottle, placed her lips against Kylie's, and proceeded to suck the expensive bubbly from her mouth. Neither seemed to care that the bottle frothed or that champagne dribbled out the sides of their mouths and stained their blouses. Kylie was caught up in the erotic kiss, her tingling taste buds as they tongued each other, and what followed soon after.

Later, with passions sated, they lay together in the dark.

Sensing Shelby's unusually somber mood, Kylie raised herself up on an elbow.

"You're upset."

Shelby shrugged beside her.

"Tell me what's wrong."

"What's the use? You'll only think I'm being overly emotional."

Concerned, Kylie turned on a bedside lamp. Bathed in its warm ambience, Kylie could see tears brimming on Shelby's long lashes. She clasped her hands. "Was the sex that bad?" Kylie asked, trying to lighten the mood.

"This isn't funny, Kylie. I thought things would be different..."

"I don't understand."

"I thought that once you confided to me about your past and being attacked by that maniac, you wouldn't feel embarrassed about making love with the lights on. Your scars are beautiful. They prove how strong you were in the face of death."

"Shel—"

"I want so much to see you, to see into the depths of your beautiful eyes and watch your facial expressions as you come."

Kylie again attempted humor to diffuse the tension. “From the position you had me in when I climaxed, you wouldn’t have seen my eyes anyway.”

Shelby gave her a reproachful look. “I knew you wouldn’t take me seriously.”

Feeling like a jerk, Kylie said, “I’m sorry. Isn’t it enough to feel my body move, to hear how excited you get me?”

“No.” Shelby turned onto her side with her back to Kylie.

“Shel, I can’t help the way I feel about myself. About my body. It’s an issue that may take some time to resolve.”

“How much time?”

Kylie stroked her shoulder. “I don’t know, but I am trying. I really am.”

Kylie didn’t tell Shelby that she preferred making love in the dark because, in her imagination, Shelby could be any lover she so desired. In the shadows, Shelby could be Maya Holworth. But she’d never tell Shelby that. Kylie could never be that cruel.

“Please be patient, Shel.”

“I’m trying.”

KYLIE AWOKED THE next morning to the tantalizing aroma of fresh-brewed coffee. A flashback of she and Shelby’s conversation had her worrying that Shelby might still be licking her wounds. She hoped not. She warily made her way to the kitchen, relieved when Shelby kissed and then embraced her.

“I’m sorry about last night, Kylie. I was acting selfish. You’ve endured so much. It’s unfair of me to rush you. Take all the time you need to come to terms with the attack and to be comfortable with your body.”

Another pang of guilt hit Kylie in the gut. “I don’t deserve you.”

“No, you don’t deserve what happened to you.”

Not wanting to prolong the conversation, Kylie peered over Shelby’s shoulder. “What have you been up to?”

“Whipping up a homemade breakfast of western omelets and french toast. I hope you’re famished.”

“Ravenous.”

After satisfying their appetites, Kylie asked, “Now that you have my undivided attention, tell me more about this consult you spoke of yesterday.”

Shelby dabbed at her lips with a napkin. “Her name’s Sophie Brighton. She’s twenty-eight and a highly successful career woman. She came to my office about a month ago and asked if I’d take her on as a patient. She apologized profusely for barging in unannounced, but explained if she hadn’t come when the urge struck her, she would’ve lost her nerve.”

“How did you find her demeanor?”

“Distressed but not depressed or exhibiting any abnormal behavior. At least on the surface.”

“Did she choose you at random as her therapist?”

Shelby shook her head. “She’s on the board of directors overseeing the Rutherford Foundation which, as you know, funds half the psychiatric research programs at Abbott Memorial. We’ve rubbed elbows at numerous charity benefits and established a friendly rapport from the start. I believe she felt comfortable reaching out to me in a clinical rather than social capacity because of our shared interests.”

“Why did she seek you out?”

“Sophie’s tormented by intense nightmares. She’s convinced they’re omens of an inevitable, life-altering event.”

“How life-altering?”

“Sophie’s convinced she’s dreaming of her own death. I won’t go into further detail because, if you agree to see her, I want you to hear her account firsthand. Suffice it to say that the nightmares have escalated to the point where she’s experiencing flashbacks during her waking hours. Whatever’s troubling her has a hell of a hold on her psyche.”

“You’ve ruled out generalized anxiety? Panic disorder?”

“Yes, and a myriad of other disorders such as delusional or hallucinatory ideation, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia. At my request, Sophie’s undergone extensive psychiatric testing and has run the gamut as far as neuroimaging screens, with nothing abnormal evidenced. I think you can understand my dilemma in being unable to determine a diagnosis.”

“You’re certain Sophie isn’t hiding a trauma in her family history that’s manifesting itself in her dreams?”

“One can never be one-hundred percent sure, but I strongly doubt it. Again, the series of tests Sophie’s taken would’ve revealed some clue into a pre-existing emotional or physical trauma. Remember, too, Sophie approached me for help. She isn’t concerned with someone disclosing a horrific event that took place in her past.”

“If you’re stumped over the cause of her distress, what makes you think I can help?”

“Because my approach may be too black and white, too scientific, that it’s preventing me from seeing deeper into Sophie’s psyche. Unlike me, you immerse yourself in many gray areas of study. You’re more open to nontraditional concepts involving the mind’s idiosyncrasies.”

“Is this your roundabout way of referring to my obsession with the paranormal?”

Shelby nodded and nibbled on a piece of crust.

“I thought you didn’t put much credence in such psychic phenomena. You were such a skeptic when I initially confided to you of my interest in parapsychology.”

“All because I advised you not to quit your day job? Granted, parapsychology is not on my top ten credible professions list, but that doesn’t mean I discount its significance. First and foremost, my role as a psychiatrist is to remain open-minded to any disturbances the human psyche creates, whether they’re real or imagined. My personal opinion is irrelevant. Sophie believes tragedy is in her future. Maybe she’s a seer, or a clairvoyant, or susceptible to precognition. I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking you not as a friend or lover, but as a fellow clinician to see her.”

Kylie took her time sorting through the information before making a decision. “When can she meet me?”

## Chapter Two

SOPHIE BRIGHTON WASN'T at all how Kylie envisioned her. She stood tall and lean, with hazel-colored eyes and close-cropped black hair. She walked with a confident gait, which one might, on first impression, misinterpret for cockiness. She exuded a strong presence, not one Kylie perceived as intimidation but one which commanded respect. Eye contact remained constant and steady. She gripped Kylie's hand firmly in greeting.

When Kylie offered her a seat, Sophie opted for the chair closest to her desk. Kylie noted her rigid posture. This woman's wound tight, she thought. She hides whatever's troubling her beneath her controlled persona. She couldn't help but think that when Sophie's emotional dam broke, the ensuing flood would be catastrophic. Kylie again had to remind herself she agreed to evaluate Sophie as a parapsychology research subject and not in any clinical capacity.

"Dr. Reynolds speaks of you with high regard," Sophie said.

Kylie felt her cheeks burn. "Dr. Reynolds is often overstated."

"She said you'd favor modesty, which is why I did some personal research."

"You Googled me?"

Sophie smiled sheepishly. "I couldn't resist. You tout quite an impressive resume." Sophie held up a hand and ticked off Kylie's credits on each finger. "You've done behavioral analysis for the FBI, assisted local authorities in profiling suspects, and have an exemplary record of aiding defense attorneys in convicting criminals. Are you sure you didn't agree to see me because I fit a certain criminal criteria?"

Although spoken in jest, a flicker of unease clouded Sophie's expression.

"Not at all. I'm in the process of mainstreaming from criminal psychology to other areas of personal interest involving the mind and its untapped resources."

"No longer delving into the dark side of human nature, huh?"

"I'm more focused on delving into human nature as a whole rather than choosing any particular side."

"An intriguing concept."

"We'll see. So, enough about me. Tell me a little about yourself. Shel...Dr. Reynolds tells me you're on the Rutherford Foundation's Board of Directors."

Sophie's expression brightened. "It's been a personal aspiration for years."

"I imagine frustration can run high in such a position."

"Quite the opposite. My work is an excellent stress reducer."

"Reducer?"

"To endow organizations with monetary funds to promote health and wellness is an extremely gratifying career."

"How do you decide which organization's more in need of financial assistance?" Kylie asked. "The sheer number of applicants must be astounding."

"It's often a daunting process, but one the Foundation takes seriously."

"How did you come upon such a rewarding opportunity?"

Sophie smiled. "During my senior year at the university, I interned under John Rutherford. He was impressed with my genuine empathy for people suffering from debilitating diseases and my commitment to assist in finding a cure. He invited me to join his team upon graduation, and I accepted. Since then, he often jokes that he made the offer not because of my business savvy, but because I brewed the best cup of coffee."

Kylie laughed. "A Jack, or should I say, Jane of all trades?"

Sophie shrugged. "And expert at none, I'm sad to say."

"I find that hard to believe. Let's move on to your social life."

Sophie frowned. "By social life, do you mean friends or lovers?"

"Both."

"I'm selective when it comes to friends. The few I have, though, I'd trust with my life."

"And lovers?"

"Not much success in that area, although not for lack of trying."

"Do you feel lonely? Frustrated?"

"On occasion, but I don't lose any sleep over it. I don't mind solitude. Less drama."

They shared a laugh.

"Dr. Vinson," Sophie started.

"Please, call me Kylie. I'm not a fan of formal titles."

"Kylie, then. Earlier you mentioned focusing your studies on the mind and its untapped capabilities. What did you mean?"

"Are you familiar with the 'ten percent myth'?"

"No."

"There's a misconception that humans only use ten percent of their brain function."

Sophie gawked at her. "Talk about a waste of the cerebral cortex!"

"Of course it's unfounded, but I'm not entirely convinced that we, as humans, have accessed every area of our brains and utilized each to its fullest potential."

"So, to paraphrase from a legendary sci-fi series, 'the mind, not space, is the final frontier'?"

"Maybe so."

"Which means if we tapped into hidden resources, we might have the potential to leap tall buildings in a single bound?"

Kylie smirked. "For someone so young, you sure have a sweet spot for old television shows."

"Blame it on syndication and its endless reruns. Allow me to rephrase. What you're saying is that you are stimulated by feats of consciousness that are as of yet unexplainable?"

Kylie clapped. "Bravo, Sophie Brighton. Bravo."

Sophie did a half bow in her seat. "Thank you."

When their amusement passed, Sophie asked, "Does dream interpretation play a significant part in your research?"

"Very much so. Dr. Reynolds told me you're experiencing disturbing, recurrent dreams."

At Kylie's admission, Sophie's attitude shifted from playful to serious. Kylie noted a slight nervous tic at the corner of Sophie's mouth. Yet another crack in the dam, she thought.

"To label them dreams is an understatement. They're nightmares that leave me trembling with fright and in a cold sweat. I can't rid my mind of them during the day, which makes it difficult for me to function. I'm in a constant state of anxiety. You're probably thinking I'm already a hopeless cause. That I can't distinguish between what's real and what's imagined."

Surprised by Sophie's self-deprecating manner, Kylie said, "You're far from a hopeless cause, Sophie."

Sophie leaned forward and gripped the desk's edge. "How do you know for sure?"

Sophie's face was close enough for Kylie to notice orange flecks in her hazel eyes. For a few seconds, she zoned out and had to ask Sophie to repeat herself.

"How do you know I'm not hopeless?"

"Dr. Reynolds..."

"For the time-being, let's put Dr. Reynolds's assumptions aside. If you met me without any prior knowledge, and I confided in you my torment, how could you be certain of my sanity?"

"I base my perception of others on gut instinct. It's rarely proved me wrong."

"Is that enough for you to take me on as a patient?"

"As a subject, yes."

"Subject? That's an odd word to describe someone seeking treatment."

Kylie took a deep breath. Here goes nothing, she thought. "Sophie, did Dr. Reynolds mention to you my ongoing research in parapsychology?"

Sophie seemed perplexed. "Para...what?"

"Parapsychology. It's the study of consciousness with relation to unexplained phenomena."

"You mean psychic phenomena? The supernatural?"

"I tend to shy away from the term 'supernatural.' Let me try to explain. Modern science tends to frown upon abilities that defy logic. For instance, it's universally accepted that humans are gifted with five known senses."

"Sight, touch, taste, smell, and hearing," Sophie offered.

"Yes. However, parapsychologists believe that those basic senses are only the tip of the iceberg and that other senses exist such as telepathy, precognition, clairvoyance, and psychokinesis, to name a few."

"So, as a subject, I'd learn to read other people's thoughts, foresee future events, and move objects with my mind?"

"It's possible. Parapsychology encompasses many altered states of being. I believe that if a person can search within themselves for further enlightenment, these abilities will occur without much conscious thought. They're inherent in us, but most people aren't aware they possess such intuitiveness."

"That's a lot to wrap my mind around."

Kylie grimaced. "I've lost you, haven't I? I'm sure you're now questioning my sanity."

Sophie squirmed in her seat. "Well...uh..."

"It's okay, Sophie. Parapsychology is in a realm all its own."

"Would I offend you if I said that I'd like to think about it?"

Kylie felt the weight of disappointment settle in her chest but didn't let it show in her expression. "No offense taken. Take all the time you need. My door is always open."

Sophie slowly rose and extended her hand. "I very much enjoyed speaking with you. I can understand why Dr. Reynolds thinks the world of you."

"Thank you."

It might have been Kylie's imagination, but it felt as if Sophie was hesitant to release her grip. And then there was the lingering eye contact, as if she wanted to say more but thought better of it. When she finally turned to leave, Kylie found herself staring at the door long after Sophie had left the room.

Shelby called her ten minutes later. "How'd it go?"

"Hard to say."

"You hit her with too much mumbo jumbo too soon, didn't you?"



Kylie felt a surge of annoyance. “Parapsychology is not mumbo jumbo, and I resent you referring to it as such.”

Shelby was quick to change her tone. “You know what I mean. What I meant to say is it’s not an easy subject to explain. What was Sophie’s reaction?”

“She’d have to think about it.”

“Hmm. Well, at least she didn’t reject you outright. Don’t get discouraged. All is not lost. Besides, you always have me to experiment on. Speaking of me, do you want to come over tonight? I’m in the mood to woo you with wine and delectables.”

“Not tonight, Shel.” Kylie didn’t mean to sound dismissive but sensed Shelby took it that way.

“Two nights in a row too much of a commitment for you, Kylie?”

Kylie winced. “It’s not that. I plan on catching up on some dated paperwork and getting to bed at a decent time. Please don’t be angry.”

Shelby let out a loud groan. “Maybe tomorrow night, then.”

“Maybe.”

“Or maybe I’ll wait for you to invite me next time. Sleep well.”

Shelby clicked off before she could respond. “Shit,” Kylie muttered as she rubbed her weary eyes.

WHEN KYLIE ENTERED her apartment, loneliness swelled inside her. She fumbled in the dark for the light switch. Once she flipped it on, an overhead fan whirred and the living room became bathed with a warm, inviting glow. She set down her briefcase and kicked off her shoes at the door before padding into the kitchen. Opening the refrigerator door, she snagged a cold beer and a small wedge of smoked Gouda left over from the previous night’s celebratory dinner. She collapsed on the couch and took a long swig of beer before plopping the cheese into her mouth and chewing absentmindedly. She leaned her head on the cushion and closed her eyes. Seconds later, thoughts of Maya Holworth swirled inside her head and forced her to reminisce about a past that had changed not only her life course but her perspective of it. Blinking back tears, Kylie said, “I miss you so damn much and hate myself for it. How could I pine for you after you left me alone to deal with this damn longing?”

As always, no answers came. Annoyed at herself for allowing the past to darken her mood, Kylie rose and walked to her bedroom. As she disrobed, she glimpsed the lighted, digital clock on her bedside table:

11:00 p.m. Damn, she thought. So much for getting to bed at a reasonable time.

As she unfastened her bra, she felt a waft of air across her shoulders and back. It felt as if someone was standing behind her, breathing softly on her skin. Gasping, she spun around, hoping against hope that Maya would be there, as naked and hungry for sex as before. Of course, no one was there. Depressed, she slid beneath the covers and tried to sleep. As had become habit, it would be hours later before her mind and body surrendered to exhaustion.

THE NEXT MORNING, Kylie arrived at the office earlier than usual. She had two court depositions to close out and a slew of patient phone calls to return. A new day was upon her, ripe

with new possibilities. She made a silent vow to try to focus on the future instead of dwelling in the past. Maya Holworth was gone. She was never coming back, no matter how hard Kylie wished for it.

Kylie had just finished reading a case study when a rapping sound echoed from the anteroom. She looked up from the file. Sophie stood in the doorway with an expectant look in her eyes. I'll be damned, Kylie thought. Sophie Brighton doesn't spook so easily.

Kylie rose and, with a welcoming smile, motioned for her to enter the office.

"I apologize for showing up without the courtesy of a phone call," Sophie said.

"No notice required. I'm glad you decided to stop by."

"Had your doubts that I'd show, huh?"

Kylie pinched her thumb and index finger close together. "A little. Please, sit down."

Sophie settled into a chair. "The nightmares haven't stopped. They've changed me. I'm not the confident, level-headed woman I was a month ago. I need to find the reason why my life's in such turmoil and, in order to do so, I need to understand what the nightmare signifies. Can you tell me more about your work with parapsychology in terms of dreams?"

"Sure. Can I get you a cup of tea or coffee before we start?"

"No, thank you. I've had my morning quota."

"I wish I had your discipline."

Kylie moved toward a credenza and refilled her mug from an automatic, single-serve coffeemaker. She stirred in sugar and creamer before returning to her swivel chair. "For centuries, ancient civilizations went to great pains to decipher dreams," Kylie began. "They initially recorded them as drawings, later termed hieroglyphics, on clay tablets and stone walls. Various cultures interpreted dreams to represent such phenomena as a soul leaving its physical body to visit ancestors, to omens from the gods of future events, to the devil's attempt to corrupt moral beliefs."

"Superstition runs amok in many cultures."

"I agree. In the late nineteenth century, Freud and Jung theorized dreams were manifestations of our deepest desires and anxieties, often stemming from childhood memories or experiences. While in a dream state, repressed parts of the mind are able, through fantasy, to experience feelings and act out scenarios the conscious mind cannot deal with."

"Dreams can help reveal and resolve emotional conflict?"

"Dreams are connections to a person's subconscious. You have no control over their course or the extent of their stimulation."

When Sophie crossed her legs, a muscle bulged in her thigh beneath her tight-fitting, gray linen pants. Kylie felt a pang in her groin and was surprised that such a natural motion could cause such a sexual reaction. Kylie began a running dialogue in her head. Don't even think about going there. Yes, you have an open relationship with Shelby, but you don't have the patience or stamina to deal with two women simultaneously. Not to mention the issue of ethics. You'd never compromise your standards for any woman, no matter how sexually appealing she may be. What Sophie said next increased the throbbing sensation emanating from Kylie's center.

"I once read an article about sleep subjects achieving orgasm while dreaming. Is that possible?"

"There are documented cases."

Sophie giggled. "I've definitely had dreams where I've awakened stimulated, but not to that extreme."

“Again, dreams are imaginary playgrounds where repressed thoughts and desires run rampant, with no set rules.”

“I’ll take a wet dream over a nightmare any time.”

Kylie chuckled when Sophie’s cheeks reddened. It was only their second meeting, but Kylie decided that she liked Sophie Brighton very much. “Sophie, does your dream play out a scenario from start to finish, or is it fragmented?”

“Fragmented. It’s a mixture of sensations and images.”

“Can you go into detail?”

“I’m terrified and distraught. I’m soaking wet, cold, and barefoot. I’m dressed in a garment that’s white and loose-fitting. I’m running without direction through a black fog. Tremendous heat hits me from behind, but I’m afraid to turn back for fear of what I might see. The ground is hard and rough. Unforgiving. It tears at my feet, making them bleed. My screams of pain echo in my ears before being swallowed by the wind. I feel utterly alone and on the verge of almost certain death.”

Kylie took a long sip from her steaming mug before she responded.

“Interesting. In dream analysis, darkness is often perceived as repression or denial, heat as shame or embarrassment, and pain as inner torment. The white attire could represent purity or colorlessness, lack of personal depth. Running is extremely common and could symbolize not taking responsibility for an action or not confronting an unknown stressor. Do you think you’re running from a physical presence or a perceived one?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Needless to say, there’s much to consider in regard to dream interpretation. Before we venture any further, I want to rule out any possibility you’re suffering from a parasomnia-related disorder.”

“A para...what?”

“Not to be confused with parapsychology, parasomnias are disruptive sleep disorders involving abnormal movements and behaviors. The disorder occurs while falling asleep, between sleep stages, or during arousal from sleep.”

“What would I need to do for you to rule it out?”

“Undergo a sleep study.”

Kylie again noticed the nervous twitch at the corner of Sophie’s mouth. Quick to diffuse her anxiety, Kylie said, “Abbott Memorial has a highly trained staff and a section of the hospital’s west wing reserved for such testing. Basically, you’ll be in a controlled environment, hooked up to a series of sensors that are, in turn, hooked up to a computer. The computer monitors vital signs and records a person’s muscle activity and brain wave patterns while asleep. Any changes show up as electrical signals. Once the testing is complete, the computer presents a data readout for analysis.”

“My actions are monitored the entire time?”

“Yes.”

“I’m uncomfortable with the idea of someone watching me when I’m at my most vulnerable.”

“That’s a normal reaction, but honestly, there’s not much to it. If you want, I can accompany you to the study.”

Sophie’s tense expression softened. “You’d do that for me?”

“Absolutely.”

“How soon can it be arranged?”

“I’ll check the roster. Usually, the study is conducted in the evening so as not to further disrupt a patient’s sleep patterns. I’ll call you as soon as I can reserve a room.”

Sophie jumped up from her seat and surprised Kylie by coming around the desk and giving her a hug.

“I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You just did.”

AN HOUR LATER, still guilt-ridden over how their phone call ended the night before, Kylie took the elevator up to the fifth floor and entered Abbott Memorial’s Adolescent Behavioral Wing. She found Shelby in her office, dictating a case study into a voice recorder. When she saw Kylie, a glimmer of a smile tinged her lips. Encouraged that her presence hadn’t prompted Shelby to hurl the recorder at her head, Kylie tiptoed to her desk and lowered herself into a chair. She waited until Shelby concluded her dictation before speaking.

“I’m sorry about last night, Shelby. I didn’t mean to sound standoffish.”

Shelby swept her hair from her face and with three quick twists had it secured in a low pony tail draped across a shoulder. She fixed Kylie with a serious gaze.

“I believe you. The look in your eyes when you entered my office was enough to convince me. They are the windows to the soul, you know.”

Remembering a past conversation with Maya Holworth, Kylie said, “Yes, they are.”

“I notice you didn’t go to any extra trouble, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“No reconciliatory flowers. Not even a box of chocolates.”

Once Kylie realized Shelby was teasing, she relaxed.

“I’m totally heartless. Will you let me make it up to you?”

“Depends on what you have in mind.”

“How about something orgasmic?”

When Shelby seductively licked her lips, a twinge of excitement coursed through Kylie and settled between her legs.

Relieved they were on good terms, Kylie said, “I didn’t come here just to apologize.”

Shelby arched a brow. “No?”

“Sophie came to see me today. She’s agreed to undergo a sleep study to rule out any parasomnia-related disorders.”

Shelby’s expression darkened. “Sleep study? Hell, why didn’t I pursue that approach?”

Kylie realized too late that she’d struck a nerve. Thorough to a fault, Shelby detested being one-upped. Eager to appease her irritation, Kylie said, “If you had, you wouldn’t have needed my help.”

“True, but—”

“Stop second-guessing yourself, Shel. You can’t think of everything. Besides, I need your mind focused on carnal desires.”

“And delights.”

## Chapter Three

THE FOLLOWING EVENING, Kylie met Sophie outside Abbott Memorial's sleep study chamber. She'd managed to secure an appointment on such short notice because of her friendship with Marco, AM's resident sleep technician.

Kylie could tell from Sophie's anxious demeanor and rigid posture that she was ill at ease. "Are you having second thoughts?" Kylie asked.

"Just feeling a little antsy."

"The sleep study's stress free, Sophie. All you have to do is lie there and close your eyes. Marco will do the rest."

"But what if I say or do something to embarrass myself while I'm asleep?"

Kylie raised her hand, palm facing Sophie, as if taking an oath. "I promise not to judge."

Sophie grimaced. "Better yet, don't tell me. That way, I won't be shamed into crawling under a rock afterwards."

"I'll do whatever it takes to get you into that bed."

"Sounds like a pickup line to me. Do you get many dates with that?"

Kylie rolled her eyes and tugged on her arm. "You'd be surprised. Now, no more stalling. Let's get you undressed."

"My, my. You are full of sexual innuendo."

Realizing her mistake, Kylie groaned. "From here on out, my lips are sealed."

While Kylie and Marco engaged in small talk and bantering in the sleep study room, Sophie used an adjoining room to change into a starched-white hospital gown and a pair of footie socks. When she returned, the bed covers were drawn and the overhead lights dimmed. A large metal cart stood beside the bed. A computer terminal took up most of the cart's surface. Its front panel consisted of a series of dials and lighted switches. Color-coded electrodes were wound in loose coils beside it.

"Looks harmless enough," Sophie said.

Marco, a dark-haired and dark-eyed Italian, was quick to exude charm. "It's very safe. Especially with me working the controls."

Kylie reproachfully slapped him on the shoulder. "Chill. You're here to work, not schmooze."

Sophie laughed good-naturedly. "Don't take this the wrong way, Marco, but I'd be more schmoozed by a woman working the controls."

Faking despair, Marco dramatically clutched his left breast. "Another one lost to the other team. The injustice of it all."

Kylie tried not to let her surprise show at Sophie's admission. So, the chemistry she felt upon their first meeting must have been her gaydar shining through. Her fondness for Sophie deepened with the revelation. With an encouraging smile, she led Sophie to the bed. Once comfortable, Marco hooked her up from head to toe with the electrodes and connected them to the data analyzing machine.

“Did Kylie explain what these electrodes monitor?”

“Brain wave patterns, right?”

“Yes.”

“Where will you monitor the study?”

Marco pointed toward a large, floor-to-ceiling window, behind which stood a bank of computers lined against a wall and a large workstation.

“Kylie?”

“I’ll be with Marco.”

Marco affixed the last electrode slightly above Sophie’s left breast before adjusting a few dials on the computer. He turned to Sophie. “We’re almost ready. Just to give you a brief overview, sleep onset generally occurs in less than twenty minutes. That’s from the moment of ‘lights out.’ There are three levels of sleep: non-REM, REM, and wakefulness.”

“What does REM stand for?”

“Rapid eye movement. The non-REM level consists of three stages. Each stage progresses from light sleep to deep sleep. A patient doesn’t dream in non-REM. When a patient reaches the REM level, brain activity’s at its peak. A clear, physical indication a patient has entered the REM level is rapid and continuous eye movement, thus the acronym. In this stage, dreaming occurs. Each dream can last a few seconds or up to twenty minutes in length. The average person is in REM sleep twenty- to twenty-five percent of the actual time they’re asleep, and dreams three to five dreams a night.”

“So, if I slept eight hours a night, I’d be in REM sleep for no more than a few hours?”

“Exactly.”

“I didn’t realize the sleep process was so complex.”

“It can be for some.”

“What if I can’t fall asleep?”

“You will. Everyone does, eventually. All you need to do is relax.”

“Easier said than done.”

Kylie squeezed her hand in encouragement. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

MARCO SAT ALERT, facing dual computer screens in the monitoring room. Kylie sat beside him and marveled at the array of colored blips and wavy lines that passed across the screen’s dark background.

Marco reached for the microphone. “Are you ready for nighty-night, Sophie?”

Sophie gave a curt nod and clamped her eyes closed.

“Lights out,” he said. With a flick of a switch, darkness enveloped the sleep study room. Only a low-wattage floor light cast enough illumination for Marco to observe Sophie’s facial expressions and body movements.

It took Sophie exactly twenty-three minutes to fall asleep.

Kylie watched the wide, arced lines on the polysomnogram travel across the computer screen. “Care to elaborate?”

“She’s in stage one, light sleep. You can tell by how slowly her eyes are moving beneath the lids. Her breathing’s normal, unhindered. She may drift in and out of consciousness. If awakened now, she’d remember bits and pieces of visual images.”



Kylie jerked in alarm when she saw Sophie's arms suddenly tense at her sides and her fingers grip the mattress.

"Relax, Kylie. That's normal. Most people experience a sensation of falling during stage one sleep."

"A patient can be startled even while asleep?"

"Yup."

Twenty minutes later, Sophie's brain wave patterns spiked in a burst of rapid waves.

"She's entered stage two of non-REM sleep," Marco said. "All eye movement's stopped, and her brain waves, although slowed, will experience surges. They're called sleep spindles. Sophie will spend about twenty percent of her sleep time in this stage, so if you want to grab yourself a cup of java and a snack at the vending machine, you won't miss anything."

Kylie took the reprieve as an opportunity to step out of the room and phone Shelby.

"How's our girl doing?" Shelby asked.

"All hooked-up and brain-waved out."

"It sounds like you're in for a long night."

"I promised I'd stay with her to lend my support."

"Such a shame. I've been indulging in lustful fantasies all evening."

"Didn't you get enough last night?"

"With you, there is never such a thing as enough."

Kylie laughed. "You keep stoking that wild imagination of yours. There'll be plenty of time to experiment later."

"If I must."

"By the way, did you know that Sophie's gay?"

"From the moment I set eyes on her. Why? You didn't?"

"I guess it wasn't at the forefront of my mind."

"Or maybe your gaydar's rusty."

AFTER VISITING THE vending area, Kylie returned to the data recovery area with a newly replenished cup of coffee for herself, one for Marco, and a package of jelly-flavored crumpets to share. She leaned over his shoulder and stared at the polysomnogram. "What did I miss?"

"Sophie's still in the non-REM level but approaching the deep sleep stage. Although brain waves are slow, they're sporadically disrupted by smaller, faster waves. Soon, you'll notice slow wave patterns and no eye movement or muscle activity. It'd be difficult waking Sophie during this progression. She'd be groggy and disoriented. Also, it's during these stages that such parasomnia-related disorders as night terrors and sleep walking are exhibited."

"So Sophie's on the verge of REM sleep?"

"Yes. Hang tight. The show's about to begin."

Forty-five minutes later, Kylie didn't have to study the parasomnogram to realize Sophie's dreams had overtaken her subconscious. She peered through the glass and noticed Sophie's eyes dart frantically in all directions beneath thin lids. It reminded her of a ball-bearing let loose in a porcelain basin. Upon Sophie entering the REM stage, the monitors came to life with low bleeps, hums, and flashing colors. The computer screen exploded with jagged brain wave lines that spiked and waned.

Uneasy, Kylie asked, "Is she okay?"

“Her respiration, heart rate, and blood pressure are accelerated but within normal realms.”

“And the spikes on the screen?”

“She’s dreaming.”

“Can you tell if it’s a nightmare?”

“No. Sophie could be in the midst of an orgy and the patterns would appear the same. Remember, sleep studies observe disorders, not invade a person’s thoughts. If you’re that curious, when she wakes, you’ll be able to tell if she has a grin on her face or a frown.”

“She could have a frown if it was bad sex.”

“You’re too funny, Kylie.”

Kylie made a comical face and finished off her crumpet.

Marco returned his attention to the screen. “Now, that’s bizarre.”

Kylie leaned closer. “What?”

“There should be a distinct break, a rest period, between dreams.”

“What do you mean?”

“The initial dream typically lasts ten minutes. Then there’ll be a lull and another dream will occur, and so on. A dream’s length progresses the further a patient is in REM sleep. Sophie’s dreams are inconsistent. Her first dream lasted five minutes and I timed this last one at two minutes.”

Kylie’s anxiety deepened. “What do we do?”

“Monitor and wait. That’s all we can do. Sophie’s in no danger as long as her vital signs remain stable.”

Kylie didn’t have a chance to respond before he leaned forward.

“Damn it. It’s started again.”

Sophie’s third dream lasted thirty-two seconds, with a reprieve of ten. Observing the process was harrowing and terrifying. Her ensuing dreams were so varied in time lengths that Marco’s perplexed expression changed to one of concern.

“This is unreal. Sophie’s dreams are coming way too fast with minimal rest periods in-between.”

Kylie gasped in shock when Sophie suddenly let out a blood-curdling scream and lurched upright on the bed. Her arms snaked out and her fingers clawed blindly at the air. Her lids remained closed, but her eyes ricocheted beneath her lids. Her legs thrashed uncontrollably on the mattress. Kylie imagined an unseen supernatural force had taken possession of her and was flinging her around like a ragdoll. Without the aluminum guardrails to restrain her, Sophie would have fallen onto the linoleum tile and probably injured herself.

Gripping his arm, Kylie said, “Talk to me, Marco. Is she having a seizure?”

Marco nervously adjusted dials and rechecked Sophie’s vital signs. “No. She’s experiencing a night terror. Check that, she’s experiencing multiple night terrors.”

“Wake her up.”

“I can’t. The study would be inconclusive.”

“Fuck the study. Wake her up.”

As he reached for the microphone, Sophie let out a haggard moan and collapsed on the mattress.

Marco glanced at the screen. “She’s in a state of rest.”

“But for how long?”

Twenty minutes later, Sophie snapped into chaotic action. Her violent thrashing dislodged electrodes from her right arm and upper thigh. The monitoring system let out an ear-piercing

alarm. This time, Kylie didn't wait for Marco to make a decision. She leapt from the chair, yanked open the door, and raced into the sleep study room. In a haze of confusion and unbridled fear, Kylie grabbed Sophie about the waist and held on for dear life until she woke.

## Chapter Four

MARCO REMAINED BEHIND the partitioned glass as Kylie tried to console a distraught Sophie.

“What happened?” Sophie asked.

“You were convulsing across the bed. I thought you were having a seizure. I was afraid you’d injure yourself.”

Through trembling lips, Sophie said, “It was so real.”

“The nightmare?”

Sophie nodded.

“Do you remember anything?”

“I remember everything. The dark, the heat, the fear, the pain. My God, Kylie, it felt like I was actually there, in this strange woman’s body, experiencing her terror firsthand. I must be going crazy.”

“No, you’re not crazy. You were in the throes of a night terror.”

“What’s a night terror?”

“It’s when a dream is so intense your body acts it out.”

“Like sleepwalking?”

Kylie answered honestly. “I was afraid that if the guardrails hadn’t been in place, you would have ended up doing that, too.”

“I can’t stop shivering.”

“That’s a normal reaction. You’ve been through a frightening ordeal. Let’s get you into the changing room and into some warm clothes.”

Obviously unnerved, Sophie had trouble undoing the gown.

“Here, let me,” Kylie said. Standing behind her, Kylie worked on the knotted ties at her neck and waist. Once the gown fell from her shoulders, Kylie helped Sophie dress in an oversized sweatshirt and pair of jeans. She tried to ignore Sophie’s sculpted body, but it was difficult. With the incident over and Sophie none the worse for wear, Kylie’s self-control evaporated and she began to shake. Sophie reached for her hand.

“Hey, are you okay? You’re as pale as a ghost.”

“It was...I was...”

“What?”

Kylie stared into Sophie’s confused eyes. “You scared the hell out of me. I’ve never felt so helpless in my life.”

“I wouldn’t call what you did helpless at all. You were heroic. You saved me, you know.”

“From what?”

“Myself. The question is, will you be able to save me the next time?”

Once Sophie regained her composure, Kylie escorted her to the hospital lobby where she hailed an idling cab. At curbside, she opened the taxi’s passenger door. She turned to Sophie. “Promise me you’ll go straight home and rest up. No pit stops along the way.”

“I don’t know how much rest I’ll get. I’m way too keyed up, but I’ll stay put once I get home.”

“Good, and please text me when you arrive.”

Sophie embraced her. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For being there.”

Kylie pulled away and looked deeply into her eyes. “You’re not in this alone, Sophie.”

Her lips quivered. “I’m glad.”

WHEN KYLIE RETURNED to the sleep study room, Marco sat waiting for her with computer printouts lined across a long, rectangular table. His fingertips were smudged with colored ink. Without looking up, he said, “I can’t make any sense out of these readouts.”

Kylie plopped down next to him and leaned tiredly against his shoulder.

“Please don’t tell me that.”

“Sophie’s actions defy reason.”

“How so? Night terrors and sleep walking are common symptoms of a sleep disorder.”

“Yes, but not in the stage of sleep Sophie was in when she exhibited them.”

“You’re losing me.”

“You see, when in REM sleep, the brain cuts off all contact with muscle activity. The body’s left in a state of atonia.”

“Temporary paralysis.”

“Right. The reason for this is to ensure that a patient doesn’t, while dreaming, inadvertently cause or suffer injury.”

“An ingrained safeguard?” Kylie asked.

Marco nodded. “There’s documented cases where patients have gone to great lengths to protect themselves or others from injury, such as strapping their bodies to headboards or mattresses, using pillows and blankets as barricades, to even sleeping in empty rooms with the door locked and a mattress on the floor.”

Kylie remembered the violent force of Sophie’s body bucking against the guard rails. “What can we do to minimize her exposure to hazards?”

“I suggest a treatment of Clonazepam.”

Kylie stared at him in shocked disbelief. “That’s an anti-seizure drug that’s mainly prescribed to treat epilepsy.”

“If what we witnessed wasn’t similar to a seizure, I’d be hard pressed to say what is. I’m also concerned with the erratic time intervals between sleep stages. That much physical exertion and mental strain on a prolonged basis wreaks havoc on the body.”

“I need to talk to Shelby. She’s her physician of record. She’ll determine the best course of treatment.”

AFTER LEAVING THE hospital, Kylie drove to Shelby’s apartment. Shelby answered the door with a scathing glare. Kylie noted that her hair was a tangled mess, and she’d gone to bed without removing her makeup.

“Do you know what time it is, Kylie?”

“Early morning, I know. But this couldn’t wait.”

Kylie brushed past her and paced before a picture window in the living room. Shelby slammed the door for emphasis. “This better be good. You know how I hate my beauty sleep disturbed.”

“It is important.”

After Kylie recounted what transpired during the sleep study, Shelby’s annoyed expression changed to confusion. “Clonazepam?”

“That’s what Marco said.”

Shelby huffed. “Marco’s not a clinician. He’s a technician.”

“Someone’s in a snooty mood.”

“I’m sorry. I’m frustrated. None of Sophie’s neurological exams or imaging screens indicated she might suffer from a seizure-type disorder.”

“I was in that sleep study room, Shel. What I witnessed was not restless slumber. Sophie was flailing about as if a demon possessed her.”

“I want to reevaluate her. If I deem it necessary, I’ll prescribe a low dose of Clonazepam on a temporary basis and monitor her closely. Clonazepam is extremely habit-forming. The last thing we want to do is have Sophie addicted to a medication she doesn’t need.”

“I agree wholeheartedly. I don’t want Sophie becoming drug dependent, but she can’t go without sleep much longer without crashing.”

“Have her come to my office tomorrow morning.”

“Tomorrow meaning in a few hours, right?”

Shelby glanced at the clock in the kitchen and cursed. “For God’s sake! The birds haven’t even started chirping yet. I need to go back to sleep.”

Kylie kissed her. “You do that. Thanks, Shelby.”

Shelby grunted a stream of unintelligible words and shuffled into her bedroom, leaving Kylie to let herself out.

WHEN KYLIE REACHED her apartment, she stumbled into the bedroom and threw herself face first on the bedspread. She fell asleep moments later. Her preset alarm woke her two hours after that. Tired and cranky, she tried to rouse herself by taking a scalding hot shower, followed by consuming two cups of black coffee. She dressed in the dark, not caring if her clothes matched, and set off for the hospital. She found Sophie sprawled on a bench outside her office. She looked exhausted and wore the same clothes she’d had on for the sleep study.

“Did you get any rest at all?”

Sophie rubbed her eyes. “Not much. A couple of cat naps while I was waiting for you.”

“You didn’t go home?”

Sophie hung her head in shame. “I had the cabbie round the block a few times before dropping me back at the hospital entrance. The truth is, I was afraid to go home. I thought if another episode happened, at least I’d be in a facility that can help me if I unconsciously hurt myself.”

Kylie grimaced and slid a key into the door lock. “Come in. Maybe you can catch some Zs on my couch. I don’t have any appointments scheduled for today.”

“Bless you.”



As Sophie retired to the leather couch, Kylie checked her voice messages. “Before I forget, Dr. Reynolds wants you to stop in her office.”

“Why?”

“She wants to do a quick reevaluation on you before she tries a pharmacotropic regimen.”

“You mean drugs?”

“For a time. We suspect you may be suffering from a seizure disorder.”

Sophie frowned. “Great.”

“Don’t worry. It’s a trial approach and one that’ll be closely monitored. We’re trying any and all options.”

Sophie nodded in understanding, but the frown remained.

“Speaking of options, would you consider hypnotherapy, Sophie?”

Sophie blinked. “You want to hypnotize me?”

“Is that any more far-fetched than what we’ve done so far?”

“No.”

“Good. Then lie back and close your eyes.”

Like an obedient child, Sophie did as Kylie requested.

Kylie locked the outer office door and dimmed the office lights before sliding a chair beside the sofa.

“Relax, Sophie. This time there are no electrodes or noisy machines. It’s just you and me.”

“Don’t you need a metronome or some dangling bobble to put me into a trance?”

“Nope. My voice will guide you into a relaxed state. Considering last night’s fiasco, this should be a painless exercise.”

Sophie opened one eye and stared at her. “You won’t use any powers of suggestion on me, will you?”

“Not at all. Using powers of suggestion can cause a patient to create false memories.

Hypnotherapy is a natural process where your concentration is focused inward on a memory you might be unconsciously repressing. Under hypnosis, you’re unaware of what takes place in real time. Are you ready to begin?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Now, concentrate on the sound of my voice. Imagine your body’s light as a feather, twirling in a soft breeze...”

A short time after Sophie lapsed into a trance, Kylie probed through the layers of her psyche. She painstakingly took Sophie through different stages of her life, ever diligent to detect any change in her mood as they revisited past experiences. Other than normal life changes, Sophie’s history proved uneventful in terms of deep-rooted emotional trauma. Kylie felt disappointed. Yet another avenue explored with no sound results. As Kylie prepared to bring her out of hypnosis, Sophie’s lips parted in a broad smile. Intrigued, Kylie leaned closer. “What are you remembering, Sophie?”

“Moonlight filtering through the trees. The smell of rain after a recent downpour. The tenseness in my thighs as I straddle a horse’s massive flanks. The sound of the animal panting and snorting from exertion. I’m riding her hard and fast in my eagerness to see her.”

“Who is she?”

“My salvation.”

To Kylie’s astonishment, Sophie’s eyes opened. Unbelievably, without any prompting on Kylie’s part, Sophie roused herself from her own hypnotic state.

“You can’t do that,” Kylie stammered.

“Do what?”

“Wake up on your own.”

“I just did.”

“Maybe you weren’t under all the way. Do you remember anything?”

Sophie shook her head and sat up.

“You spoke of riding a horse in the middle of the night.”

Sophie laughed. “That’s pure imagination. I’ve never ridden a horse in my life.”

“While under hypnosis, imagination doesn’t exist.”

“I’m serious, Kylie. I’ve never ridden a horse.”

Kylie was unable to let the conversation go. “You talked of your excitement to meet a woman. You said she’s your salvation.”

“I hate to disappoint you, but the only salvation I want or need right now is a decent night’s sleep.”

Sophie stood and smoothed her sweater so that it hugged her body’s sexy curves. Kylie felt a pang of lust. She hadn’t realized she was blatantly staring until Sophie snapped her fingers in front of her eyes.

Kylie blinked in confusion. She heard herself blubber out a lame apology. “I’m sorry, Sophie. I must’ve zoned out.”

“Uh-huh.”

Busted.

Sophie bent over to reclaim her purse and a teal-green windbreaker. “I’m starving. Care to take a short walk? I know a fabulous eatery that serves breakfast fare until noon.”

Although Sophie’s invitation sounded innocent enough, Kylie reminded herself to keep Sophie at a professional distance to avoid any conflicts of interest. “Sounds lovely, Sophie, but I have a full schedule of meetings lined up.”

If Sophie was disappointed, Kylie didn’t see any trace in her expression. She flashed a smile. “Maybe next time, then.”

Kylie reached for a business card and scribbled on its reverse side. “Here’s my contact info. I’ve added my home address and phone number in case you need to get me in the off hours.”

Sophie plucked the card from her fingers. “You’ll be on call for me?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll sleep with it under my pillow.”

“Don’t forget about Dr. Reynolds.”

“I won’t.”

As Sophie turned to leave, Kylie stood and touched her shoulder.

“Sophie?”

“Yeah?”

“Please don’t be discouraged by a lack of progress. Sorting through the mind’s complexities takes time.”

“And patience, which definitely isn’t one of my strong suits.”

## Chapter Five

KYLIE OPENED HER apartment door and the tantalizing aroma of sautéed mushrooms and onions wafted to her nose. She found Shelby in the kitchen, with her back to her, seasoning two lobster tails with Old Bay. Kylie approached her, slid her arms around Shelby's waist, and leaned in to kiss the base of her neck. Shelby all but purred with delight at the sensual welcome.

"Whatever you're cooking is nowhere near as delicious as you taste," Kylie whispered into Shelby's ear.

Shelby turned so they could kiss. "And you're a sweet talker to the nth degree."

"Merely showing my appreciation of your versatile talents."

Shelby arched a brow. "Why don't you make yourself useful and pour us a couple of drinks? White wine for me and whatever flavorless beer you've taken a liking to this week. Dinner's in a matter of minutes."

As they ate, Kylie filled Shelby in on her hypnosis session with Sophie.

"While under she spoke of riding a horse?" Shelby asked.

"Which she adamantly denies ever doing in real life. That, in itself, is odd. A person doesn't make up stories while in a trance."

"Sophie's a mystery, for sure. I retested her and the results remained the same. After giving her a complete rundown of all the side effects associated with the use of Clonazepam, I wrote her a low-dose prescription."

"Thanks, Shel."

"Don't thank me until we see marked improvement."

INSISTENT POUNDING SENT Kylie scrambling from bed in a panic. In her fogged mind, she finally realized someone was knocking on the front door. As she shrugged on a robe, Shelby grumbled a protest and plopped a pillow over her face.

Cinching the robe's sash, Kylie padded into the entry hall and peered through the peep hole. Two brawny, stone-faced policemen stood in the harsh glow of the porch light. She disengaged the lock and pulled open the door. Her confusion turned to dismay when she spotted Sophie, a good foot shorter than the two, standing beside them with a forlorn expression on her face.

With her hair matted and disheveled and her eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot, she resembled one who'd narrowly escaped danger. She wore a pair of flannel pants and a long-sleeved, crewneck shirt. Kylie gasped when she noticed her scraped hands and bare, bloody feet.

"Jesus, Sophie!" Kylie said. She moved toward her, but the older-looking officer thrust out an arm.

"Are you Dr. Vinson? Dr. Kylie Vinson?" His tone was gravelly, like he was chewing on a mouthful of crushed stones.

"Yes."

“We have an incident.” His icy demeanor riled her.

“I don’t understand. Incident?”

The other officer stepped forward. “Excuse the interruption at such a late hour, Dr. Vinson. I’m Officer Sykes and this is my partner, Officer Jordan. While on patrol, we found Ms. Brighton wandering through a patch of woods outside her apartment complex. Since she was disoriented and unresponsive to our inquiries, we initially suspected alcohol or illegal substance abuse. We were on the verge of taking her to the station when she tripped and fell. The impact must have jarred her from her stupor. She voluntarily agreed to a sobriety test and came up clean.”

During Sykes’s dissertation, Sophie lowered her head and remained silent.

“Ms. Brighton informed us she’s under your care for a type of sleep disorder and that you’d take full responsibility for her welfare.”

“That’s correct. I’ll take it from here, officers.”

Jordan didn’t bother to hide his annoyance. “Whatever issue Ms. Brighton has, you should urge her to keep it indoors. In the time it’s taken us to ferry her halfway across town, a true emergency might be in progress with no backup available.”

With a cursory nod, Kylie reached for Sophie’s limp wrist and tugged her inside.

“I’m sorry,” Sophie said as Kylie closed the door and secured the locks.

“There’s no need to apologize. You did the right thing in asking them to bring you here.”

“I was afraid to return to my place, afraid to fall asleep. I didn’t know what I might do to myself...or to others.”

Kylie led her to the couch before disappearing into the kitchen long enough to pour a tall glass of water. She placed the glass in Sophie’s trembling hands.

“Here, drink this.”

Sophie downed the water and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “It was so surreal. One minute I’m in bed, drifting off to sleep, and the next I’m confronted by the police. They must’ve thought me a raving lunatic, prime for the nearest psych ward. I didn’t know what else to do. I couldn’t make sense out of how I’d gotten outside.”

Reflexively, Kylie swept tangled strands of hair from Sophie’s eyes. “You’re safe here, Sophie.”

Kylie decided to treat what seemed to be the worst of Sophie’s injuries first, her feet. She sat cross-legged on the floor and lifted them onto her lap to examine the soles. Kylie winced.

“They’re all torn up. What did you do? Tromp through a patch of thorn bushes?”

Suddenly, a tired voice spoke from the hallway.

“Sophie?”

Deciding it didn’t help the current situation to appear embarrassed, Kylie played it cool. She cocked her head in Shelby’s direction. “So, it doesn’t take Armageddon to wake you after all.”

Shelby ignored Kylie’s quip and moved into the living room. She blanched when she noticed the condition of Sophie’s hands and feet. “What the hell happened to you?”

Sophie didn’t seem surprised at finding Shelby at Kylie’s place. “I guess I picked an inopportune time to walk barefoot in the park,” she replied with a wry grin.

“What?”

“She was sleepwalking.” Kylie said. “The police found her and brought her here.”

“Sleepwalking?”

“Now do you understand why I wanted you to prescribe Clonazepam?”

“Apparently, I need to increase the dosage. Are you okay, Sophie?”

“Besides making an utter ass of myself in public, I guess I’ll survive.”

“Those wounds need cleaning. I’ll get the first aid kit.” Shelby turned down the hall.

After she disappeared from earshot, Sophie surprised Kylie by saying, “You have matching robes.”

Kylie chose not to respond.

Sophie grinned. “Hers and Hers. The embroidery on the left breast pocket.”

So much for not addressing the elephant in the room, Kylie thought. “I always have an extra one hanging around,” she joked.

“Extra robe or extra woman?”

Kylie didn’t rise to the bait.

“You complement each other,” Sophie said.

“On most days.”

Their conversation ended when Shelby returned with the kit. Kylie set to work swabbing Sophie’s scraped soles with an antiseptic-soaked cotton ball while Shelby sat perched on an ottoman.

Kylie broke the silence. “Can you recall any significant details about the dream?”

Sophie’s eyes gleamed with excitement. “Yes. The images weren’t sporadic or disjointed this time. They ran in a series from start to finish.”

Encouraged by Sophie’s breakthrough, Kylie urged, “Go on.”

“I now know that the woman in my dream is fleeing from real danger.”

Kylie grasped her hand. “You said ‘woman.’ This is the first time you didn’t refer to yourself in recounting the dream.”

“That’s the thing. I’m convinced I’m reliving an event in another person’s past.”

Shelby looked skeptical. “You think someone’s speaking to you from the dead?”

“Yes. This woman’s reaching out to me, trying to tell me her story. I know it sounds crazy.”

“Psychiatrists tend to shy away from the word ‘crazy,’” Shelby told her.

“Shel,” Kylie warned.

Avoiding Kylie’s pointed stare, Shelby handed her a tube of antibiotic ointment and a large adhesive bandage.

Sophie continued. “Kylie, you have to admit that it makes sense. Just hours ago, while in a trance, I described riding a horse through moonlit fields in search of a woman. You said the subconscious isn’t capable of creating imaginary images while under hypnosis. That what’s revealed is purely based on genuine events and emotions locked away in a person’s subconscious.”

Shelby yawned and rose. “On that note, my lovely ladies, I’ll retire for what’s left of the evening.”

Shelby gave Sophie an encouraging squeeze on the shoulder and blew an air kiss to Kylie before returning to the bedroom. Once she heard the bedroom door close, Kylie said, “Don’t mind Shelby. She’s not much for entertaining thoughts of the supernatural. For her, it defies scientific reason.”

“That which isn’t easily explained can thus be easily ignored?”

“Something along those lines.”

Sophie smiled and inched over so Kylie could join her on the couch. “Does this new development mean we’re getting closer to finding the truth?”

“It’s definitely a step in the right direction.”

“I need to get on with my life, Kylie. I can’t do that if someone else’s life is taking center stage in my own.”

“I know.”

Suddenly, Sophie jumped up from the couch and bolted across the room to the fireplace mantel. Her motion sent the uncapped bottle of antiseptic skittering across the hardwood floor, leaving a slippery mess in its wake. Kylie sidestepped the bottle and moved beside her.

Sophie’s attention fixated on a framed, black and white photograph of Holworth House. Kylie had taken the picture a year ago as a reminder of her own turbulent, unresolved past.

“Where’d you get this picture?” Sophie asked.

“I took it.”

“Where?”

“Upstate New York.”

“What is this place?”

“A residence bequeathed to me by a close friend.”

The fervent manner in which Sophie spoke her next words sent chills racing up and down Kylie’s spine.

“It exists here,” Sophie said.

“What?”

“Her past.”

“Whose past, Sophie? You’re not making sense.”

“The woman in my dreams.”

SOPHIE CRADLED THE framed photograph in her lap while Kylie took Sophie’s glass to the kitchen to refill it with water. For herself, she poured a tumbler with whiskey.

She handed the glass of water to Sophie. “Here you go.”

Kylie downed her drink in one gulp. Sophie stared at her. “Sorry, but I needed this. And it’s best that we stick to water for you with the medication you’re on.” Kylie nudged the picture with her index finger. “You’re certain that this is the house from your nightmare?”

“Yes.”

“You know, these types of structures, particularly built in the early part of the twentieth century, were widespread. Is it possible you could be mistaken?”

The expression on Sophie’s face made Kylie want to eat her words.

“Are you doubting me?”

“No, just clarifying.”

“I’m positive this is the house. Although I get a strong sense that its use was geared more toward housing people in need. Maybe a hospital?”

Sophie’s assumptions were so dead-on, Kylie felt light-headed and nauseous. Her next words dashed any uncertainty Kylie harbored that Sophie may have imagined Holworth House played a significant part in her nightmare.

Sophie placed the tip of her index finger on a spot in the photograph. “See that section off to the right of the main entrance? The area that’s sealed off?”

As she had trouble finding her voice, Kylie nodded.

“People died there.”



Kylie felt the room swim in and out of focus. Sophie's revelations came as painful bursts of chaos in her mind. I'll be of no use to her if I lose it, she thought. With much effort, Kylie forced herself to remain calm and controlled.

"I think we've had enough excitement for one evening," she said. "You must be exhausted. Why don't you sleep here tonight? There's a spare bedroom."

Sophie's eyes widened. "Oh, I can't do that. I've intruded enough."

"Sophie, I'm serious. I don't want to take any chances with your safety until Shelby can adjust your medication. I'll keep watch over you."

Overcome with emotion, Sophie pulled Kylie into a fierce embrace, forcing the wind out of her. Sophie released her from her stranglehold. "Can I ask you a question?"

Kylie adjusted her robe. "Sure."

"Is what I said true? That people died in the house in the photograph?"

Kylie took a deep breath and hoped her voice didn't tremble. "Yes. The house harbors a history of its own. A quite sad history."

"I was right about it being a hospital?"

"Yes, but its patients weren't terminally ill."

"I don't understand."

"Long before it was named Holworth House, it was known as Stanwood House. It was an insane asylum. And its inhabitants all perished in a fire."

THE NEXT MORNING, Kylie was awakened by a firm nudge to her shoulder. She rubbed her eyes and found Shelby standing over her with a confused expression.

"Why are you sleeping on the couch?"

When the previous night's events surfaced in her mind, Kylie sat up and quickly glanced toward the spare bedroom. The door remained shut, and all appeared quiet.

"Shh. I wanted to stay close in case Sophie had another episode."

"Sophie's still here?"

"You saw how upset she was. How her hands and feet were all torn up. I couldn't let her leave in that condition."

Shelby's expression softened. "That makes sense. Did you sleep at all?"

Kylie yawned. "Not much."

Shelby flopped on the couch beside her. "I think we've gotten ourselves into one hell of a predicament."

"You think? Remind me not to mention the fact that you brought me in on this."

"Once I up the dosage on her meds, Sophie shouldn't have a recurrence of nocturnal roaming."

"That puts my mind at ease, especially since I need to do some off-site research."

"Off-site research?"

Kylie squirmed beneath Shelby's penetrating gaze. Kylie decided to answer truthfully.

"I know this is going to sound strange, but I think there may be a connection between Sophie and the place I own in Verhoven."

"The old insane asylum? Stanwood House?"

"Yes."

“What the hell would Sophie know about such a place? It’s not like she’s ever visited it, right?”

Kylie chose her words carefully. “No...”

“Then what connection are you talking about?”

“A psychic one.”

Shelby’s eyes glazed over. The sudden, tense silence amplified noises Kylie usually took for granted. She found herself counting off the seconds on the burnished-steel clock in the kitchen. She got to twenty before Shelby responded.

“Really? Is that the best excuse you have to set off to your old stomping grounds? Or is something else luring you back? Or someone?” Shelby didn’t hide the anger in her voice.

Kylie stiffened. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know the old saying, once the fire’s stoked...”

It was Kylie’s turn to get pissed. “Who’s stoking what fire? You know I hate it when you talk in riddles.”

In an instant, Shelby’s mood changed. “Look, forget I said anything. Truth be told, I’m jealous I can’t sneak away with you for a long, much-deserved weekend. How many days are we talking?”

“Two. Three at the most.”

“When will you leave?”

“As soon as I can tie up some loose ends at the office. I don’t want to wake Sophie.” She glanced at the guest room. “She needs all the rest she can get. Will you tell her for me?”

“Of course.”

“Oh, and one other thing. Can you watch over her while I’m gone? It’d only be in the evening hours, when she’s most vulnerable. We have the spare bedroom, so it shouldn’t be any bother.”

“Okay.”

When Kylie leaned in to kiss her, Shelby’s lips were, at first, firm and unyielding. When Kylie parted them with her tongue, Shelby moaned and opened wide.

After a while of making out, Kylie said, “I owe you, Shel.”

“Add it to the list.”

“Are you sure there’s nothing else upsetting you?”

Shelby smoothed her skirt. “No, just letting my imagination run wild, I guess.”

Kylie cupped her chin. “Please believe me when I say I’m stoking no one else’s fire but yours.”

Shelby gave her a curt nod.

Kylie rose from the couch. She hesitated before heading to the bedroom. Still feeling uncertain she asked, “So, we’re okay?”

“‘Okay’ meaning whatever trivial spat we just had is over? Yes.”

“Good. I don’t want to leave if there are unresolved feelings.”

Shelby flashed an encouraging smile that fell well short of assuaging Kylie’s unease. Deciding to leave any further discussion until she returned from her trip, Kylie strode to the bedroom and filled a duffel bag with jeans, sweaters, and other essentials.

She carried the bag to the living room and gave Shelby one more kiss. “I’ll call you.”

## Chapter Six

SHERIFF LEA CARLSON'S mood shifted from impatience to nervousness as she waited for the commuter train's passengers to disembark at Verhoven's Regional Rail Station. Her impatience stemmed from her eagerness to see Kylie after a year's absence. The nervousness resulted from lingering, unresolved feelings for the green-eyed, auburn-haired beauty.

As promised, they'd maintained contact since Kylie left Verhoven, but brief phone conversations and sporadic e-mails paled in comparison to close physical proximity.

When Kylie stepped onto the train platform, her natural allure took Lea's breath away. God, the hold she still has on me, she thought.

Kylie slung a satchel onto her shoulder and hefted a duffel bag in her other hand before she scanned the crowd. When she spotted Lea, she grinned and strode toward her. Too tongue-tied to speak, Lea stood there feeling like an idiot until Kylie made the first move by dropping her bag and hugging her. When she drew back, Kylie's eyes shone with delight.

"Lea Carlson, you're a sight for sore eyes."

"And you're a vision to behold." Lea meant every word.

Kylie laughed. "Flattery will get you everywhere."

"Promises, promises."

Kylie gave her a good-natured punch on the shoulder. "Thanks for meeting me."

Lea bent down and hoisted the duffel bag. "I couldn't let you trek the five miles to Holworth House. Or should I now refer to it as Vinson House?"

"Neither. I've decided from here on out that I'll refer to it by its original name. Stanwood House."

"Tell me about your spur-of-the-moment visit to research the house's past. Since when did you become a history buff?"

"Since I inherited a historical landmark."

"More of a town eyesore, if you ask me."

Lea opened the Jeep's passenger-side door. "Where to first?"

"Verhoven Public Library."

ON THE RIDE into town, they made small talk.

"Is Strokowski still a royal pain in the ass, or has he mellowed with age?" Kylie asked.

"Yes and no. I'll give him this much credit. When the shit hits the fan, he sure knows how to dodge it. He survived the media backlash over last year's murders with hardly any political fallout. Verhoven's tourist season weathered the public's scrutiny with a ten percent profit over the previous year. All around, we lucked out. Two murders within a week and that close to summer could've crippled the town. Not to mention the first murder went unreported until the feds took over."

“Sounds like you’ve resorted to tolerating each other.”

“As the old adage goes, keep your friends close and your enemies closer.”

“Sorry about the short notice. Are you sure you can play hooky from the stationhouse for an entire afternoon? I understand that Verhoven’s quite the trendy vacation resort, even in the fall.”

“Harvey’s protecting the fort. I’m yours for as long as you need me.”

“Good. There’s much I need to do, and not a hell of a lot of time to spare.”

AS ALWAYS, THE familiar scent of age-worn books made Kylie nostalgic for her younger years when Verhoven’s Public Library offered her a haven for indulging her imagination and exploring varied subjects of interest. One day she’d be absorbed in reading about Huck Finn afloat on his legendary raft, finding adventure on the Mississippi River, and the next engrossed in true crime mysteries. Again, Kylie chastised herself for her lack of commitment in visiting and for using the Internet as a quick fix to satisfy her thirst for knowledge and entertainment.

They sought out the head librarian, a stern-faced woman with wiry gray hair and thick-lensed glasses. When asked about town events that occurred in the early part of the twentieth century, she informed them that all reference material, newspapers, and other mass media accounts prior to 1950 were either archived or placed on microfilm.

Working the microfilm machine proved a challenge in itself, from threading the data reel into the machine’s metal spindles, to utilizing manual knobs to advance or rewind sections of data displayed on a monitor. The newsprint was small and difficult to read, and photographic images were of poor quality and clarity. Lea spent hours scanning news footage from years past. They knew only that the fire occurred in the early 1930s. Just when Kylie thought their search would turn up fruitless, she found a newspaper clipping with a faded, grainy picture of a fire-damaged Stanwood House. The date read, Sunday, November 12, 1933. The article was brief and uninformative. Arson was suspected but ruled out. Authorities determined that an overturned kerosene lamp in the patient quarters had caused the blaze. No survivors, no witnesses, no suspects.

Kylie cursed and switched off the machine. She rubbed her bleary eyes. “There has to be more.”

“A century ago, the media didn’t have as strong of a hold on the public’s pulse as it does today. An event happened, locals reported it, and that’s the extent of it.”

Kylie pushed away from the table. “It doesn’t make sense. How can a newspaper dedicate a one-page spread to a sewing bee and bake-off but only a paragraph to an event that killed a dozen people? To me, that wreaks of a cover-up.”

“Maybe so.”

As Lea removed the microfilm and placed it in its metal container, she said, “It may be a long shot, but I know someone who might remember more details about the Stanwood House fire than what history’s recorded.”

“Does this someone have a name?”

“Alice Clarke.”

“Verhoven’s retired librarian? Geez, I don’t think I’ve seen her since I was a kid. She must be well up in years.”

“She’s over eighty and going strong. Her recall of town events is amazing. There’s a good chance she may have some of the answers you’re looking for.”

Her hope restored, Kylie said, “Well, what are we waiting for? Why don’t you give Alice a call and see if we can pay her a visit?”

BEFORE THEY HEADED out of town center toward Alice’s residence, Lea stopped at the Homemade Beanery Company and picked up a small tray of assorted butter cookies, Alice’s favorite.

As they drove along tree-lined roads, they commented about the vivid color transformations of a changing season. Multicolored leaves in vibrant hues of red, yellow, and orange blended together, painting the area in a shroud of warmth. The smell of wood smoke hung heavy in the air. In northern New York, the seasons seemed to blend one into the next, with winter the longest and most relentless.

Alice Mae Clarke met them at her front door with a hand-crocheted, pale pink shawl draped across her shoulders. Her clear blue eyes danced with delight. Kylie found her demeanor not only warm and engaging, but infectious. Alice had aged gracefully and still exuded vitality.

“I must say, Lea, I’m tickled to death that you called,” Alice said. “Sometimes, it gets damned boring out here with only memories and old sitcoms to keep me company.” Once inside, Alice eyed Kylie. “I see you’ve brought a friend.”

“Alice, I’d like you to meet Kylie Vinson. She used to vacation in Verhoven during her teen years.”

Kylie extended her hand. “Hello, Ms. Clarke. I’m not sure if you remember me.”

Alice squinted. With a glint in her eyes, she said, “You always sat in a corner of the library’s reading room with your legs intertwined like a pretzel. If I remember correctly, you were a voracious reader, intrigued by murder, mystery, and mayhem.”

Kylie grinned. “You have an exceptional memory.”

“It’s my sincere hope my mind will be the last of my inner workings to fail me. Please, make yourself comfortable.”

Seated on a worn couch, they indulged in polite conversation, sampled cookies, and sipped herbal tea before Lea broached the reason for their visit. “Alice, do you recall any details, other than what’s recorded in town records, about the old Stanwood House?”

For a split second, Kylie could’ve sworn she saw a flash of wariness in Alice’s eyes. She seemed to recover quickly.

“Hmm. Stanwood House. It’s been ages since I’ve heard mention of that place by its original name. For a while, when Maya Holworth purchased the property, town gossip was stirred up but died out rather quickly. Why your interest, Lea?”

Kylie spoke before Lea could respond. “The interest is mine, Ms. Clark. I recently inherited the house.”

“Inherited? Did something happen to Ms. Holworth?”

“Oh, nothing serious. Ms. Holworth had extended business abroad. Since she was uncertain when she’d return, she entrusted Stanwood House to me. I’ve taken it upon myself to research its history.” Kylie felt a pang of guilt over the partial lie. Come to think of it, she’d been getting a lot of those pangs recently.

Alice’s brow furrowed, and her lips creased into a frown. “Stanwood House’s history is tragic, Kylie. Unfortunate circumstances led to its ruin.”

Kylie was about to speak, but Lea beat her to it. “Yes, Alice. We’re well aware of the fire. We hoped you could give us more information surrounding the events leading up to it.”

Alice shuddered. “Stanwood House was one of the first of its kind in the United States. You see, in the late 1800s, there was a massive expansion of these types of mental health facilities throughout the country. History marks it as the ‘Asylum Era.’ These were state-funded institutions staffed with hospital superintendents, in later years known as psychiatrists, medical staff, and orderlies. The state erected these places of retreat for people afflicted with illnesses that surpassed reason or defied diagnosis.”

“What couldn’t be rationally explained was considered immoral or insane,” Kylie said.

“Indeed. At the time, a family member could judge another family member insane because they were mentally challenged or held different moral or social beliefs, and the laws of the time condoned it. Many people who suffered from learning disabilities, chemical imbalances, and emotional disorders were placed in these institutions because society didn’t consider them normal. Patients were often referred to as ‘unfortunates’ or ‘degenerates.’ Social alienation became a form of treatment, but never a cure.”

Lea shook her head. “Society’s ignorance at its most heinous.”

“Yes. Please pardon my initial reluctance to your inquiry. The truth is I, too, possess a strong sentiment toward Stanwood House that’s lasted my entire life.”

“How so?” Lea asked.

“My father worked as Stanwood House’s groundskeeper and handyman from the day it opened its doors. He was a young man at the time, barely twenty, intent on making his mark in the world. He’d recently married my mother and relocated to Verhoven to begin their new life. He dreamed of building a house, tending to the land, and raising a family in a rural environment as opposed to what he thought of as the moral depravities of big city life. He got his wish.

“Although a child myself, scarcely able to ride a two-wheeler or tie my own shoes, my father often spoke of his time at Stanwood House and how he so enjoyed cultivating the land and fixing odds and ends in need of repair. He took great pride in his work and was well-regarded by all. But what stands out foremost in my mind was the crestfallen look in his eyes whenever he reminisced about a female patient who resided at Stanwood House. He described her as maybe a year or two shy of womanhood, with haunted eyes. Every time he saw her, she seemed to bear a heavy emotional burden.”

“Did he tell you her name?”

“Clarissa Moore. She was the daughter of Jonathan Moore, Verhoven’s resident pastor, and his wife, Margaret. From all outward appearances, their daughter seemed normal, but as she grew into adolescence, rumors circulated that Clarissa adopted habits the family, Jonathan in particular, found disturbing and an embarrassment to his reputation as a devoted man of the cloth.”

“Do you know what behavior Clarissa exhibited that her father found unacceptable?” Kylie asked.

“No. In any event, one fall day Jonathan Moore arrived at Stanwood House with Clarissa in tow. There were rumors that a great deal of money switched hands at the time Clarissa was institutionalized.”

“How cold and heartless,” Lea muttered.

Alice turned to Lea. “Much as in today’s society, a man’s reputation is held in high regard. Any type of public scandal could render a devastating blow. For whatever reason, Moore

perceived Clarissa as a threat. Shortly after he institutionalized her, he and Margaret packed up stakes and disappeared.”

Lea shook her head. “So they abandoned her. Jesus.”

Kylie leaned forward. “Did your father ever speak of daily life at the asylum?”

“Oh yes. He had a colorful story to tell practically every night at supper. In the early days, Stanwood House stood a grandiose, sprawling estate. It’d fallen into dilapidation after the fire, when the county condemned it. With the exception of windows barred, any passerby might imagine a regal landowner resided there, instead of a group of wayward souls. However, as with all people in need of institutionalizing, either to protect themselves or others, supervision remained constant. The residents were stringently kept under lock and key in the evening. During the day, they moved about within Stanwood House’s confines, doing chores and attending therapy sessions. Social interaction with peers was limited. On the rare occasions when patients were permitted to partake of pleasant weather, orderlies and nurses accompanied them. My father described the scene as people herded in groups like cattle. It sickened him to watch.

“Over time, my father fostered a paternal fondness for Clarissa. He knew of her parents’ betrayal and took it upon himself to watch out for her.”

“Alice, did your father ever go into detail about the fire?” Kylie asked.

Alice picked up her teacup and took a sip. Lea noticed her arthritic hand tremble when she set the cup in its saucer.

“He woke up on that fateful night to a deep sense of foreboding. Restless, he dressed and decided to take a walk to clear his thoughts. Before long, he found himself moving in Stanwood House’s direction. When he smelled smoke and spotted the reddish-orange glow above the trees, he took off running. He reached the asylum too late. The fire had already consumed the entire first floor. He’d suffered first and second degree burns on his face, chest, and hands trying to no avail to rescue the patients.”

“How distressed he must have felt at being so close and unable to help,” Kylie said.

“For months, he was tormented by the memory of the high-pitched, wailing screams as Stanwood House’s inhabitants burned to death or succumbed to smoke inhalation. He was racked with guilt that he hadn’t done enough to save the victims, especially Clarissa. It took a heavy emotional toll on both my parents for many years.”

“Alice, you said when your father arrived at Stanwood House, he found the fire raging through the first floor?” Kylie asked.

Before Kylie could probe further, Alice added, “I know what you’re thinking. The investigative reports stated the fire originated on the second floor, in the patients’ wing, but they’re wrong. To this day, I trust my father’s account that the blaze started on the first floor. By the time the local fire crew and fire trucks from surrounding areas arrived, it had engulfed the entire first floor, making any rescue efforts futile. Before the fire spread too far throughout the second floor, the crew contained it and salvaged the building. I’ve often questioned whether arson played a role in the loss of those innocent lives.”

“Such a tragedy. How about patient records?”

“Destroyed, but...”

Kylie looked at her hopefully.

“After the blaze died down and they recovered the bodies, my father snuck inside. You see, he remembered an incident involving Clarissa that occurred weeks before. While working in the attic, securing rafters damaged during a recent hail storm, my father found Clarissa huddled in a darkened corner, clutching a leather-bound book and a charcoal pencil in her hand. Clarissa

begged him not to reveal her hiding spot or tell the medical staff of her cherished possession, a diary. She explained that secrets weren't permitted in Stanwood House, and she'd be severely punished for such a transgression. Well aware of Stanwood House's rigid house rules, my father agreed to keep her secret and went about his work. Unbeknownst to Clarissa, he saw her stash the diary beneath a loose floorboard before resuming her chores."

"Was he able to reclaim the diary?" Please say yes, Kylie thought.

"By some miracle, it remained untouched by the flames. You see, in my father's eyes, the diary was the last tangible evidence of Clarissa's existence. He'd made her a promise that the diary would remain their secret, and my father was a man of his word. He'd never jimmied its flimsy lock, either. He respected Clarissa's privacy so much, his loyalty to her wishes prevailed long after her death. To this day, in fact."

Kylie's eyes widened. "Alice, are you telling me that you've kept the diary all these years?"

"It's sitting on a shelf in the basement."

ONCE ALICE SENT Kylie down to the basement to retrieve the diary, she blindsided Lea by saying, "You're smitten with her."

Lea played dumb. "Who?"

"Oh, don't act stupid with me. Ms. Vinson."

"Now Alice, there's no need to stir up any town gossip. Kylie's a longtime friend."

"You're not fooling me, Lea."

When Lea met her steady gaze, she knew Alice wouldn't let the conversation die. "Whatever attraction existed between us lost steam many years ago."

"You don't have the urge to reclaim the past?"

"Over time, I've come to value Kylie more as a friend than a lover." Lea ducked her head so Alice couldn't see her blush.

"And that gleam in your eyes when she's in the room?"

"What can I say? Old habits are hard to break."

Alice winked. "Old habits are stubborn, especially when they involve the libido."

"They wreak havoc on emotions, too."

Before Alice could comment, footsteps ascended the basement stairs. Kylie emerged holding the diary. A thin layer of dust clouded its cover.

"I apologize for the disorder and cobwebs," Alice said. "With my arthritis, I can't manage the stairs very well. I hope my memory served me well as to its whereabouts."

"I found the diary exactly where you said it'd be."

Alice searched her eyes. "You'll take good care of it while in your possession, won't you?"

Kylie looked surprised. "You're entrusting me with the diary?"

"From the manner in which you spoke, Stanwood House and its secrets mean a great deal to you. I hope you find what you're looking for."

Kylie leaned over and hugged her. "Rest assured, I will. Thank you, Alice, for offering me a glimpse into Stanwood House's history."



ON THEIR RETURN, Lea opted for the scenic route that wound along the lake. Every few seconds, she snuck a glance in Kylie's direction. She appeared immersed in thought, miles away from the present, more than likely lost in the memory of a young woman and her tragic demise.

"You're impressed by her, aren't you?"

Kylie turned to Lea. "Who?"

"Alice."

Kylie smiled. "She truly is a walking encyclopedia when it comes to Verhoven's past and present. Without her, I wouldn't have found a true link to Stanwood House's history."

"The link being Clarissa Moore and her diary?"

"Yes."

"I can't explain it, but I have a feeling the diary will tell you more than you could ever imagine about what led to Stanwood House's downfall. Where to next, Historian Vinson?"

"Stanwood House and a fresh pot of coffee. I have a lot of reading to do."

WHEN LEA DROPPED her off, Kylie promised to touch base with her later in the day to discuss meeting in town for a beer and dinner.

Stanwood House's outward appearance, albeit a work-in-progress, showed signs of a long overdue face lift. In her absence, Kylie hired a landscaper to maintain the grounds, a mason to do extensive reconstruction and pointing work, and a glazier to replace all the windows. She hoped now, with its improvements, the house wouldn't be so drafty.

As she stood on the stoop, her fingers worked nervously over the set of keys in her coat pocket. I'm stalling, she thought. Maybe it's too soon. Maybe I should have thought twice about coming. Maybe I'm not ready to confront the memories. Maybe, maybe, maybe. Kylie reminded herself that she hadn't returned to Verhoven for personal reasons. She came here to help Sophie.

Still, returning to Holworth House revived a memory of hearing Maya's voice on the breeze that spring day close to a year ago. *Soon, my sweet. Soon.* Kylie was convinced she hadn't imagined Maya speaking to her from afar. And that memory kept Kylie's hope alive that one day they'd reunite.

Stanwood House was as she'd left it, with sheets draped over furniture and dust motes swirling in the air. Kylie entered the expansive living area and stared for an immeasurable time at the large-framed, black-and-white portrait above the fireplace. It was a photograph of Maya and Donia Thorne, Maya's former lover, who'd met a violent, tragic demise over a decade ago. Did I make her as happy as she appears in the photograph, Kylie wondered. If I did, why did she leave me?

A ray of sunlight broke free from a cloud formation and streamed through the bay window. The beam glittered off a pink, metallic object perched on the mantel. She smiled. It was a foil-wrapped bottle of champagne. Lea had given it to her the day she closed up Holworth House and returned to New York. Kylie promised her they'd open it and celebrate the next time she came to town. Hard to believe it'd taken her longer than anticipated to return.

Kylie found the quiet disconcerting. Everywhere she looked revived memories of Maya and their time together. She absorbed the memories with a mix of melancholia and pleasure. It was here that Kylie felt the most in tune with her inner self, where she'd surrendered to another's charms. It was here that Kylie had found, and lost, her one true love.

She dropped her duffel bag and satchel unceremoniously beside a spiral staircase and moved toward the fireplace. She opened the flue, stuffed kindling between the stacked logs, and set them ablaze. On her way to the kitchen to look for coffee, she yanked the sheet off the couch and let it unfurl on the floor behind it.

As she waited for the coffee to brew, she decided to touch base with Shelby. Her cell rang five times. Kylie was about to hang up instead of leave a message, when Shelby picked up. Her voice sounded groggy.

“Hey, Sleeping Beauty, did I interrupt your afternoon nap?” Kylie asked.

Kylie heard Shelby yawn. “After last night’s drama, I had to sneak one in somewhere.”

“Sophie?”

“She’s a little harried but seems to have rebounded. She’s off doing errands.”

“But—”

“Have no fear, Kylie. Sophie’s a big girl. Since her episodes happen while asleep, she’s fine to roam around in her waking state. After all, I am her therapist. I know what’s good or bad for her. A breath of fresh air can do wonders for one’s emotional outlook.”

“Doctor knows best.”

“How’s the research going?”

“It’s going.”

“Seen any familiar faces?”

Kylie didn’t rise to the bait. “A few.”

“Hm.” Shelby let out an exaggerated yawn. Taking it as a cue, Kylie said, “Look, go back to sleep. I’ll call you again soon.”

“Try not to miss me too much,” Shelby said.

After Kylie hung up, she retrieved the diary from her satchel and placed it on a countertop. She wrestled with indecision. By opening the diary and reading its contents, she was invading Clarissa Moore’s innermost thoughts. It felt wrong, almost immoral, to read secrets the young woman hadn’t wanted to share, especially with a stranger.

I’m not doing this to exploit Clarissa, she rationalized. I’m doing it to help Sophie. If Clarissa’s diary can help me find the truth behind Sophie’s disturbing dreams and erratic behavior, then I’m obligated to do everything in my power to find it.

Kylie had a strong suspicion that although Clarissa may be departed from the earthly world, her presence was alive and kicking in the spiritual one. She remembered Sophie saying that her dream apparition had a story to tell. Apparently, Clarissa had one of her own.

She slid open a utensil drawer and rummaged through its clutter. She found a rusted screwdriver and used it to pry open the diary’s delicate lock. When she opened its cover, she smelled aged paper. Kylie sat down and began to read, quickly absorbed in aged memories.

# Chapter Seven

Monday, June 12, 1933

ON THIS PICTURE-PERFECT day, I rode my young mare hard through the dense woods. Every fiber of my being thrummed with anticipation. Two days had passed since I'd last glimpsed Laura Wentworth. She'd been wearing a beautiful dress and twirling a yellow parasol as she stood on a lawn strewn with daisies. It seemed an eternity.

I'm beginning to think that my parents' decision to settle in Verhoven isn't all for naught. As my father is an ordained minister, we've traveled the eastern seaboard for many years so he could preach God's word from town to town, pulpit to pulpit. Because of these frequent moves, I never allowed myself to get too comfortable in one place. Until Verhoven. Verhoven is a sparsely populated town with many old-fashioned traits. Its townsfolk live the simple, unhindered lifestyle, one which my father has embraced wholeheartedly. I've often heard him tell my mother that he doesn't regret his decision to remain a permanent presence in such a devout community.

Being of the adventuresome sort, I had no desire to partake in such mundane activities as weeding and plotting out an area for future garden growth, or hanging hand-washed clothes to air dry on rope strung between wooden poles. There were woods to explore, lakes to swim, and wildlife to capture and observe. In my mind, everyday tasks paled in comparison to such exciting endeavors.

My desire to see Laura again woke me at dawn. I scrambled from my four-poster bed and reached beneath it for a button-down cotton shirt and a pair of my father's worn breeches. I didn't bother rolling stockings on my feet before pulling on paddock boots. Not only were they itchy, but they'd be an added hindrance to remove when I found the lake and took a dip. Time was short when it came to exploring. I had much ground to cover before the mid-day sun bore down on me, hot and vibrant, and my father would expect me home, without delay or argument, to partake in our daily prayer ritual.

Eager to begin, I snuck into the barn and geared Ginger, my cherished chestnut mare, with a leather bit and rein. I made sure she was well fed and watered before leading her from her stall and mounting her. The pressure of sinew and muscle rippling between my legs was invigorating. With a slight nudge of my heels to Ginger's flanks, she obediently set off at a slow, purposeful gait. As we rode, I stroked her long mane and cooed, "That's my baby. That's my Ginger. We're set for an adventure and will follow whatever trail leads us to it."

To my delight, Ginger whinnied and snorted.

I ducked beneath a splintered tree branch as Ginger meandered through thickets of trampled shrubs and foliage. The mare's ears twitched as bothersome gnats swarmed about her head and settled on her lustrous coat. I heard her tail swish to ward off the pests that relentlessly attacked her hind quarters.

I squinted as early morning sunlight refracted between the overhead tree branches that served as a natural canopy. So peaceful, I thought. I belong here. I took advantage of the quiet to reflect

on our move. I hadn't put up a fuss when father suggested relocating to Verhoven and establishing strong roots in the community. By the time I'd reached seventeen, I'd tired of my monotonous life. I went about my scholarly duties as was expected of me, while careful to keep female classmates at a distance. In my opinion, the girls were squeamish and prissy. They only cared about who managed to get kissed first and by whom, how many children they'd have when they married their true love, what type of house they'd live in, and blah de blah de blah. I, on the other hand, craved excitement and adventure. Any sense of comradeship I'd forged was primarily with boys who allowed me to participate in their rough-and-tumble activities, usually with the hope they could sneak a kiss or a grope. Billy Blackthorne had tried getting fresh once and had the grotesque hues of a black eye to show for his brazenness. Since I proved myself as tough and game for a challenge as my male counterparts, I eventually earned their respect. I never wavered under female ridicule over my rambunctious, tomboyish behavior. Didn't bat an eye when Jezebel Lighthouse accused me of having a crush on her. Let them believe what they want of me. I'm my own person and will make my way in this world under no other's terms but my own.

Ten yards shy of breaching the woods, I dismounted and looped Ginger's lead around a thick, drooped tree branch. I reached into my trouser pocket and pulled out a handful of oats for the mare to munch on before I crept toward a tree nearest a clearing. Once certain I was hidden from view, I surveyed the open expanse of land before me.

The Wentworth estate stood grandiose and intimidating across a stretch of well-tended lawn. The place bustled with maids and servants. My gaze shifted from a woman barking orders at two men who were hard at work digging out a rectangular-shaped area, to a woman dressed in a black skirt and crisp white shirt wailing an oversized area rug with a long handled, rattan carpet beater. Another woman, shirt sleeves rolled to her elbows, knelt as she scrubbed the weathered brick patio with a steel-bristled brush.

Upon hearing the sound of a door slam, I glanced to my left and saw a stout, dapper-dressed man hurry across the front veranda toward an idling, fancy car. I think it's called a limousine. I never saw one in person. I'd only heard of them. My heart skipped a beat when I saw Laura Wentworth trail after him with a determined stride. The man, her father I presumed, turned and placed his hands on her shoulders. Whatever he said seemed to be met with resistance because Laura's scowl deepened, and she whipped her head from side to side. Finally, the man lowered his arms in what I surmised as a gesture of acquiescence. Laura embraced him and showered his cheeks with kisses.

Entranced, I watched Laura wave at the departing limousine until it rounded a bend in the road before she darted to the corner of the house and peered around its brick façade. Her attention seemed focused on the woman ordering the two groundsmen to dig the space, a garden plot, deeper. Must be her mother, I thought. Laura was well into her late teens, much too old for a nanny.

In the flash of an instant, Laura pivoted and sprinted down the front steps and across the dirt road to another outcropping of woods. Intrigued, I out-skirted the grounds alongside the estate and followed in close pursuit. A well-worn footpath wove its way through the overgrown foliage for a lengthy stretch before it reached a steep embankment. Sensing Laura near, I dropped to my knees and crawled the short distance to the precipice's sloped edge. Carefully, I raised my head and chanced a quick peek.

My breath caught in my throat. I imagined I'd died and gone to heaven. I'd not only found Laura but also fulfilled my mission for the day: finding the lake. It swirled below me with its

undulating surface sun-dappled and translucent. Submerged rocks twinkled beneath the water's flow and the sun's penetrating rays. Off to my right, Laura lay on a downed tree limb. Its thick trunk provided ample room for her to spread out and bask in the sunshine. Spread out she did, I realized with a start. In the time it took for me to catch up to her, Laura had removed her flowery dress and lacy undergarments. Her pale, naked body lay immersed in sunshine. One of her legs was bent at the knee, teasingly concealing her sex. Her breasts were small, with areolas as dark as coffee beans and as large as silver dollars.

She's magnificent, I thought. The imaginary butterflies that flitted in my stomach mattered little compared to the intense, tingling sensation that spread even lower. I closed my eyes and surrendered to warm waves of pleasure.

When I dared yet another discreet peek at the golden-haired beauty, I was embarrassed to see that Laura had propped herself on her elbows against the tree limb and was looking directly at me.

"You're welcome to join me. I promise not to bite," Laura called out. Again, my heart leapt in my chest. It was the first time I'd heard Laura's voice. It was deep, throaty, and extremely sensual. The panging in my groin continued in earnest.

Although I felt mortified over being discovered, I tried to act nonchalant as I traversed the jagged outcroppings of rocks the twenty or so feet to lake level. When my feet met solid ground, I took a deep breath to steady my nerves and looked up. I gasped in surprise at the vision in front of me. While I had negotiated my descent, Laura had moved from her sunbathing spot to within arm's reach and hadn't bothered to clothe herself.

Up close, I appraised her with a profound sense of awe. Laura's eyes were emerald green starbursts. She offered a wide smile in greeting. Straight white teeth gleamed at me. A spattering of freckles tinged her nose and cheeks. I couldn't help staring at a small raspberry-colored beauty mark on her upper lip.

Laura thrust out her hand in greeting. "I'm Laura Wentworth. Might you have a name, my Peeping Tom or should I say, Peeping Thomasina?"

"I...I wasn't peeping," I managed to stutter out.

Laura laughed. "Of course you were. It's okay, you know. You're not intruding on my privacy. There's enough scenery to share."

Since Laura didn't seem aware of how enamored I was with her, my trepidation waned.

"My name's Clarissa Moore, but my friends call me Cissy."

"I didn't think you had any friends. *Girl friends*, that is."

A lump lodged in my throat.

Laura continued. "Word around town is you hang with boys."

I swallowed hard in an attempt to talk around the lump. "I like boys."

Laura giggled. "Most girls our age do."

The way Laura accentuated the word "most" had me wondering. "Boys are uncomplicated," I said.

"And dull, and unreserved, and in pursuit of a girl's virtue. Or at least that's what the nuns beat into our brains at school. I don't have the least interest in boys, and I doubt my attitude will change."

I was so fearful of saying the wrong thing that I was rendered mute.

Laura grimaced and fanned her face with both hands. "It's so ungodly hot. Do you swim?"

I managed a nod.

"Then what's keeping you?"

My mouth worked, but I still couldn't speak.

"Oh, I see. The shy type, huh?"

My cheeks burned at the comment.

"If you insist, I will allow you the courtesy of disrobing without probing eyes upon you,"

Laura offered. With that, she swiveled on her heels and walked toward the lake's edge.

Marveling at Laura's shapely rear, I wriggled out of my clothes. Now, I thought, if I can only get to the water before she turns around. With a surge of nervous energy, I bolted past Laura and flung myself, head first, into the ice-cold, serene water.

When I emerged yards later and looked to shore, I couldn't help but grin. In my eagerness to get into the water to avoid being seen naked, I'd splashed Laura with enough lake water to soak her from head to toe. She stood a dripping, soggy mess.

Laura glared at me. "Was that necessary, Clarissa?"

I tried my damndest to voice an apology but couldn't stop laughing long enough to get words out. Instead, I motioned for Laura to join me. Throwing her hands wide in obvious exasperation, Laura waded into the lake. She squealed with each step. "Oh my lord, this is cold!"

I laughed even harder.

"It's not funny, Clarissa. Unlike you, I prefer a gradual adaptation to changing temperatures."

"Stop prolonging the agony. Dunk your head and get it over with."

Laura gaped at me. "Out of the question. I can't muss my hair."

"Why Laura Wentworth, I hadn't realized you're such a priss."

Laura thrust both hands in front of her as I dogpaddled closer to where she shivered in knee-high water.

"Don't come any closer," she warned. "And beware the consequences if you dare splash me again."

"You're the one complaining about the heat."

"Mother would have an absolute fit if she knew where I am and what I'm doing."

"Why?"

"Society girls do not, I repeat, do not partake in such unrefined activities as skinny-dipping," Laura said in a haughty, put-upon voice in an obvious imitation of her mother.

"Society girl, huh?"

Laura shrugged. "It's my mother's wish."

"But not yours?"

"Not by a long shot. Who'd want to act prim and proper all day long?"

"You must have many suitors."

"Again, boys are of no importance to me. I favor the company of women."

I couldn't resist teasing. "So, I'm one of the select few you've chosen to grace with your presence?"

Laura slapped the water in front of her, which sent a small wave sloshing into my face. While I sputtered, Laura threw her head back and laughed long and hard. I fought the sudden urge to trail my fingers down Laura's exposed throat and feel her pulse. To my surprise, Laura reached under water for my hands and squeezed hard.

"You make me sound snobbish, Cissy."

My hands tensed in her grip.

"What?" Laura asked.

"You called me Cissy."

"Yes."

“Only my friends call me Cissy.”

Laura gave me a sly smile.

“Does that mean you consider me your friend, Laura?”

“Why yes, Cissy Moore. You’re my one, true girl friend.”

I sensed that Laura’s declaration was the start of a wonderful relationship.

Hours later, we parted ways where the woods met the dirt roadway, with promises to meet at the lake the following day.

Once reunited with Ginger, I trusted the mare to lead me home at her own pace while my mind swirled with images of Laura Wentworth. Never had I imagined I’d have the nerve to speak to her, let alone swim and lounge naked with her on the lake bank. More than once, I slapped my cheeks to reassure myself I wasn’t fantasizing. I felt exuberant from our chance encounter and couldn’t wait to chronicle it here, in my diary. I find myself counting the hours, the minutes, the seconds, until dawn.

THE CALYPSO-SOUNDING RINGTONE of Kylie’s cell startled her from reading Cissy’s diary. She whisked a finger across the lit screen.

“Did you forget about me?” Lea asked.

Kylie shot a look at the microwave’s lighted digital display: 6:00 p.m. “Sorry, Lea. I’ve been so engrossed in Cissy’s diary, I lost track of time.”

“Cissy, huh?”

“Clarissa favors the nickname.”

“Can I entice you into taking a break and meeting me for drinks and dinner?” Kylie’s stomach grumbled in favor of the invite. “Name the place.”

MURPHY’S SEAFOOD SHACK lived up to its name as a Verhoven landmark for over fifty years. From the outside, it looked weather-beaten and shoddy, but once inside, polished oak floors greeted patrons upon entering. Black tabletops and chrome chairs gleamed. Dim lighting added to the eatery’s ambience and reflected off the multicolored bottles stocked on the shelves behind a wraparound bar.

Lea was waiting for her at a booth nestled in a corner, away from the sports-oriented crowd. A candle flickering at the table’s center illuminated her face. For a moment, Kylie was struck by Lea’s attractive features. Damn her, she’s getting sexier with age.

“I took the liberty of ordering you a Blue Moon with an orange slice,” Lea said as Kylie settled into the seat across from her. “On tap, of course.”

“Excellent. Did you check out the specials?”

“All you can eat King Crab Legs, Old Bay fries, coleslaw, and corn on the cob.”

Kylie moaned. “I think I’m in heaven.”

“Are you in a rush?”

“Not at all. You have me for the entire evening.”

“Promises, promises,” Lea teased.

A waitress arrived with their beers. She fished two cardboard coasters out of an apron pocket and tossed them on the table like she was dealing a deck of cards. Once she set the beers down,

she pulled an order pad and pen from another pocket. It was an easy order since Lea wanted the same entrée as Kylie. Again alone, Kylie leaned in to sip the beer's frothy surface before she picked up the mug and took a hefty swig.

"Ah, icy cold. Happy hour doesn't get any better than this."

Lea raised her mug in a toast. "To rekindled friendships."

"Here. Here."

They clinked mugs.

"So, how'd your afternoon research go?"

"Cissy is quite the author. She's extremely vivid in her recounts. She has a definite love interest. Her name's Laura."

Lea grinned. "You mean to tell me that we have a baby dyke in our midst?"

"It appears so. I get the impression Laura's held to higher social standards as far as poise and etiquette than Cissy." Kylie described how the two became friends.

Lea sat back with a wistful expression. "Ah, young love."

"Why Lea Carlson, is that a nostalgic twinkle in your eyes?"

"It's either your imagination, or you're a lightweight and the beer's already gone to your head."

"Oh, come on. Don't you ever pine for the teenage years?"

"Nope. Just the ones between then and now."

"I have no room to talk. I don't have much of an urge to revisit the past either."

Lea took another sip of beer and wiped foam from her lip. "Not even the most recent past?"

"What do you mean?"

It seemed Lea carefully chose her words when she said, "You don't think about her at all?"

Kylie's heart started thudding hard against her ribcage. Maya.

"No."

"Liar."

Kylie scowled. "I forgot how much of a pain in the ass you can be."

Lea persisted. "Is that why you've stayed away so long? You needed to come to terms?"

"Maybe. In any event, I don't want to talk about Maya Holworth. We're here enjoying each other's company. There's no other place I'd rather be."

"Fair enough."

After the waitress placed two heaping platters of steamed crab legs and their sides before them, Lea motioned to their mugs for a refill. While Kylie set to work cracking open a crab leg, Lea buttered her corn.

Kylie decided to do her own probing. "So, how's your love life?"

"You never were one for beating around the bush."

"And?"

"I don't have a love life."

"How about a lust life?"

Lea smirked. "There's a women's bar about an hour's drive from here. Sometimes I get lucky, and I don't have to make the return trip the same night."

"I never thought of you as the one-night stand type."

Lea shrugged as she snagged a fry. "On occasion, meaningless sex suits my needs. Verhoven is a far cry from a prime lesbian hotspot. You could grow old and dry up before the right person came along and stole your heart."

"Feast or famine, huh?"



“More famine than feast. And you?”

“I’m seeing someone. She’s a psychiatrist.”

“I didn’t ask about your mental state, Kylie. It’s your sex life I’m nosy about.”

Kylie sucked a clump of meat from a claw and washed it down with a mouthful of beer. “She is my sex life, smart ass. She just happens to be a therapist.”

“Is it serious?”

“She thinks so.”

“I take it you don’t?”

“I’m conflicted.”

“What else is new?”

Kylie frowned and kicked her shin beneath the table. “Don’t be mean.”

“Ouch.” Lea reached down to rub her leg. “No malice intended.”

“I’m not ready to commit to more than a few nights a week either at her place or mine.”

“So, it’s purely a sexual relationship?”

“Of course not, Lea. I’m not that shallow.”

Thankfully, Lea changed the subject. “On another note, I need your opinion on a potential life change. I’m considering pulling up stakes and heading to what you fondly refer to as the ‘big, bad city’.”

Kylie’s eyes widened, and her jaw dropped. Her lips worked but no sound emerged.

Lea burst out laughing. “I knew someday I’d leave you speechless.”

“Why do you want to move?”

“There’s a couple of reasons. You remember Harvey Wilkes, my deputy?”

“Sure.”

“Well, his wife’s pregnant, which means he’ll soon be feeding three. A deputy’s salary is pathetic, not much more than minimum wage. He’s the logical choice to succeed me as sheriff if I retire. I sure as hell have the time vested and a pension as financial security for when I’m old and gray.”

“Where’s all this talk coming from? I thought you were content with your life, that you’d found your niche, and didn’t feel the need to prove yourself by moving on to bigger or better things.”

Lea took a long draw on her beer as if needing to stall a little before answering. “I don’t know. Sometimes I think it’s time. Larry keeps dogging me to come on board with him and work for the state.”

At the mention of Lea’s long-time friend, Kylie said, “How is our renowned medical examiner faring?”

“As always, content to poke and prod corpses and crack morbid jokes.”

“If you accept Dawson’s offer, you’ll be following in your father’s footsteps as a law enforcement officer. You’ll say goodbye to small town woes and hello to urban crime. Hell, I bet you make detective within a year.”

“Ironic, isn’t it? Anyway, nothing’s set in stone. It’s just an idea I’m mulling over.”

Kylie reached across the cluttered table and squeezed her hand. “When the time comes, you’ll make the right choice.”

“How can you be so sure?” Lea asked.

“Because, like me, you’re committed to fighting forces of evil.”

“One of many Dynamic Duos, I’m sure.”

Kylie smiled. Lea had dubbed them the catchphrase last year, when at the height of the Verhoven murders, she'd agreed to provide Lea with a criminal behavior profile of the killer.

For the remainder of the evening, they indulged their appetites and reminisced over old times. Kylie noticed that each steered clear of any conversation involving their past sexual relationship. Although they'd reached closure and nurtured a friendship, Kylie had a feeling it still might be a sore spot for Lea.

After dinner, Lea drove her home. Since she wasn't tired when she returned to Stanwood House, Kylie pulled out Cissy's diary and continued reading.

# Chapter Eight

Tuesday, June 13, 1933

MY DAY BEGAN with frustration. Damn, I thought, as I kicked at clods of dirt with the heel of my boot. It's almost noon. Where is she? I'd been waiting for Laura at the ledge overlooking the lake for close to three hours. I'd even placed a stick in the ground so I could keep track of the time by the sun's lengthening shadows. Ginger snorted with impatience behind me and shifted her weight on her strong legs. "I sympathize with you, old girl. I'm not in the best of moods myself."

I knew I couldn't wait much longer without risking my father's wrath for tardiness to prayer services, but I couldn't bring myself to leave. Instead, I closed my eyes and leaned my head against a tree stump. Silently, I began to count backward from one hundred.

A snapping of twigs and rustle of leaves off to my right had me bounding to my feet. When I saw that Laura had finally arrived, I spread my arms wide in welcome. She rushed toward me and flung herself into my arms. "I'm so glad you waited for me," she said.

Flustered, I broke free of our embrace but continued to hold her hands. "Thank God you're okay. I was worried something terrible happened to you."

"Something did. It was the most dreadful experience of my life." With an exaggerated flair, Laura flopped on the matted grass and I, the adoring lapdog, hunkered down beside her.

"What happened?"

"Mother made me travel into town to select a new wardrobe."

I couldn't help but snort derisively. "That doesn't sound so dreadful."

"Trying on garments that squish your breasts and tightly cinch at your waist is tortuous. I'm in dire need of a nap to relieve my stress, but knew if I didn't make a hasty escape while mother oversaw lunch preparations, I wouldn't see you."

Lunch, I thought. Damn. "I've got to go."

Laura pouted. "That's unfair. I've risked life and limb to meet you."

Although I hated to part ways, I knew Father expected me at home. I quickly released Ginger's reins and hoisted myself into the saddle. "Let's meet again. Tonight."

"Tonight? I don't know if I'll be able to sneak away twice in one day."

"Wait until the witching hour so your parents will be fast asleep and unaware of your escape."

"What do you mean by 'witching hour'?"

I lowered my voice to sound ominous. "Folklore has it that at the stroke of midnight, ghosts and goblins, and witches and warlocks run amok."

Laura fixed me with a horrified expression. "Then why on earth would you want to meet at night?"

"Because I'm not afraid of the dark or evil spirits, and I can't bear to let another day pass until we see each other."

Laura wrung her hands. "I don't know..."

“I promise to protect you from evil and return you, safe and sound, to your bed before dawn.”

“Cross your heart and hope to die?”

I made dual motions across my chest. “I hope to die a thousand deaths rather than see harm befall you,” I said dramatically.

Laura’s worried expression changed to amusement. “You’re quite chivalrous, Cissy Moore.”

I bowed in the saddle. “I’m at your beck and call, my fine lady.”

“All right, then. Tonight.”

NIGHT SOUNDS ECHOED through the forest as I impatiently waited for Laura to arrive. I peered through a grouping of trees and saw a flicker of light approach from the north. Anticipation swelled inside me. It’s her. When the light drew ever closer, I called out, “Laura. Over here.”

Laura’s face, illuminated by an oil lantern, made my heart quicken. She truly was the most beautiful person I’d ever seen. With a smile as vibrant as mine, Laura slipped a hooded cape off her shoulders and spread it on the grass so we’d have a place to sit.

“There’s a chill in the air. Won’t you be cold?” I asked.

“I’ve brought a potent to help keep us warm.”

From the cape’s pocket, Laura retrieved a silver flask. I eyed it with suspicion. “What exactly is that?”

“Some type of whiskey. I poured it from a crystal decanter in my father’s den. I figured he wouldn’t miss it.”

“You’re shameless, Laura Wentworth.”

“I fancy myself the rebellious sort.”

An hour later, with the flask empty and the alcohol taking full effect, I felt uninhibited. So much so that I turned to Laura and, with a slight slur to my voice, said, “I love watching the moonlight dance in your eyes.”

Laura giggled. “Why Cissy, I do suspect you’re drunk.”

“A little tipsy is all.”

“Mother says imbibing in spirits brings out the worst in everyone.”

“On the contrary. Besides, you’re the one who brought the temptation.”

“But you drank most of it.”

“You’re not the only one who can be shameless.”

I noticed Laura shivering. “Come, lie down next to me, and I’ll wrap us in your cape.”

Lying hip-to-hip, we stared at the iridescent moon and glittering stars. “Maybe, if we’re lucky, we’ll get a glimpse of a shooting star so we can make a wish,” Laura said.

“What would you wish for if we saw one fall from the sky?”

To my surprise, Laura reached for my hand. “I’d wish that we’d be forever frozen in this moment.”

I gulped. “Really?”

Laura turned on her side to face me. “No one makes my heart skip a beat like you do. It’s a quite unexpected surprise. I thought I’d never feel it again after...” Her voice trailed off.

I felt torn. Should I tell her how I feel? Or am I reading too much into her words? Any doubt I had evaporated when Laura asked, “Cissy, have you ever kissed a girl?”

I squirmed. Finally, I shook my head.

“How about a boy?”

“They’re no mature boys around here. Only babies.”

“You didn’t answer my question, Cissy.”

“No. And you?”

“Boy or girl?”

“I think I’m more interested in learning if you’ve ever kissed a girl.” I waited in anticipation for what I hoped Laura would say.

“I fell in love with a classmate my second year of parochial school. She enlightened me to the joys one can experience with their soul mate. I sensed you might share my sentiment.”

I was amazed that Laura was so in tune with my emotions but also frightened. I was worried that if Laura could see through me, if my emotions were that transparent, maybe other people might discover my deep, dark secret. People who would not approve. I chose my words carefully.

“Maybe where you come from a woman’s love of another is accepted. Not here. Not within my family. I’d be shunned at the least. I don’t even want to think about what measures my father would take to try and change me.”

“We aren’t meant to be changed.”

I closed my eyes and wished everyone felt that way. When I opened my eyes again, Laura was only inches from me.

“I want to kiss you, Clarissa,” she whispered. “More importantly, I want you to return my kiss.”

When Laura grazed her lips across mine, I acquiesced to her wishes and kissed her back. It felt as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do. Laura’s lips were full and soft, and molded perfectly with my own. I lost myself in pure sensation. But when I felt Laura’s fingers on the top button of my blouse, I stiffened and my eyes flew open.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I’m afraid.”

“Of what?”

I answered honestly. “That I won’t be able to please you.”

Laura ran the tip of her tongue across my lower lip. “I have a feeling you’re a natural. Throw caution to the wind and trust your instincts.”

As Laura had prior lovemaking experience, she assumed the lead. She took her time kissing and fondling me until I was beyond myself with desire. Laura’s fingers stroked my skin, arousing sensations I’d ignored for far too long. My body felt consumed by tremendous heat, as if molten lava was flowing from deep within my core. Oh, what glorious release, I thought, as I writhed beneath her.

Now, late into the evening, as I excitedly write of my loss of virtue and burgeoning love, I’m filled with a profound sense of peace. For years I’ve felt restless and discontent, never imagining it had anything to do with my sexuality. Now that I’ve chosen this true path, I wish summer would never end.

Wednesday, July 12, 1933

MANY DAYS AND nights have passed since my last entry. Please forgive me for my lapse, but I've been living a life of pure bliss. Today, Laura and I strolled with fingers entwined through woods dappled with rays of summer sunshine. I counted a month to the day I'd spotted her at the lake. A month to the day my life changed for the better. I don't want to think about the fall and how our lives will take different paths. Laura told me she's transferring from her parochial school to a Massachusetts boarding school in October as I continue my own studies here in Verhoven. I guess Laura has been on a waiting list for the boarding school and the first week of October is the earliest she can start. Oh, how I wish the next year would fly by until I turn eighteen, the age of majority, and I can make my own way in this glorious world. But for now, I have no choice but to accede to my parents' demands.

Friday, August 18, 1933

ON THIS UNSEASONABLY balmy summer afternoon, while I stroked Laura's cheeks with blades of grass, she surprised me by asking, "Do you ever wish you could run away?"

"Run away from what? My fears? My desires?"

"No, silly. Responsibility. Sometimes I want to run for the hills when it feels that everyone who expects something from me is snapping at my heels. But they never get close enough to latch hold. I'm definitely a free spirit."

"Indeed, you are."

Laura looked deeply into my eyes. "I'm serious. Would you come with me if I decided to escape? We could find a place far away from restrictions where we could grow vegetables and fish in the stream. Live off the land. Hell, we could run around naked all day long and then at night, fall into each other's arms and surrender to our desires."

I smiled. "It's a wonderful fantasy."

"It doesn't have to be a fantasy, Cissy."

That evening, I lay beneath a diamond-patterned quilt and dreamt of wandering hand-in-hand with Laura through the woods. When we reached an open field, we grinned at each other and took off running. Suddenly, our feet left the ground and we flew through the air with the wind at our backs, pushing us along to our own secluded paradise.

Friday, September 29, 1933

AS THE DOG days of summer yielded to the crisp coolness of fall, I find myself filled with anxiety over Laura's impending transfer to continue her schooling in Massachusetts. The realization that within a week we'll be estranged has taken its toll on our happiness. However, just when I felt all was lost, the tide seemed to turn in our favor. It happened this early evening when I met Laura after dinner at the lake. From Laura's bubbling enthusiasm, I sensed something of significance had taken place. Indeed, something had.

"You wouldn't believe our good fortune," Laura said as I approached her.

"What? Did you find a pirate's map that will lead us to buried treasure? Or a hot air balloon with enough food and drink to last for a month?"

“Don’t be silly. This is better than any hidden chest of gold and jewels or a free ride in the sky. My father’s been called overseas on a business venture.”

I stared at her in confusion. “How does that affect us?”

“He’s never been separated from my mother for an extended period of time. She’s heartsick over his departure. My father’s worried that she’ll lapse into a depression, so he’s agreed to let me remain in Verhoven to keep her company. I’ll be able to continue my studies at St. Catherine’s here in Verhoven until he returns.”

I grabbed Laura’s wrists. “Promise me you’re not playing with my emotions.”

“It’s true, Cissy. I can stay!”

“For how long?”

“At least the first semester of my senior year.”

Overcome with joy, I pulled her tight and gave her a deep kiss. Once I caught my breath, I asked, “What should we do to celebrate?”

Laura’s lips slid into a sly smile. “I found a place that’ll keep us dry from the oncoming storm. It’s an old, abandoned work shed.”

I looked up at the army of storm clouds marching across the sky. “How far is it from here?”

Laura pointed ahead. “Over that hill.”

I grabbed her hand. “We better hurry.”

We were a hundred yards from the shed when the sky opened up and released a torrent of cold rain. Giggling and squealing, we raced for the shed. It took a few forceful tugs on its dilapidated door to swing free. When we finally wrenched it open, we rushed inside. Heavy raindrops spattered the corrugated steel roof and reverberated off the partitioned wooden walls. I noticed various-sized shovels and other digging and razing tools propped in a corner. They were rusted or broken from lack of proper care or use.

Laura’s gaze raked over me from head to toe. She burst into hysterical laughter.

Feeling self-conscious, I asked, “What’s so funny?”

“Why Cissy Moore, you look like a drowned rat.”

“It takes one to know one.”

Laura reached for the buttons on my shirt. “Here, let’s get you out of these wet clothes before you catch a chill. When the storm lets up, we’ll lay them outside to dry.”

“And what’ll we do in the meantime?” I asked, although I knew damn well what was on both our minds.

Without a word, Laura dropped to her knees, pulled down my breeches and underwear, and buried her face in my mons. The loud claps of thunder and pummeling raindrops against the steel roof drowned out my moans of ecstasy. At the peak of release, I opened my eyes. And screamed. My body involuntarily jerked forward, knocking Laura to the dirt floor.

“What’s the matter?” Laura asked.

“Someone’s spying us.”

Laura scrambled to her feet. “Who?”

“I don’t know. Someone. I saw a pair of eyes peering through the wooden slats. Oh God, Laura. We’ve been found out.”

Her face full of anger, Laura yanked open the shed door and stomped outside. She whirled in the pouring rain. “I don’t see him!” she yelled. “The bastard’s hiding, probably behind one of those trees. If I catch him, there’ll be hell to pay.”

I rushed up behind her. “We need to go.”

“No. Not yet,” she said. “I won’t be scared away by someone who doesn’t have the courage to show himself.” Laura clenched her fists. “Do you hear me? Show yourself!”

When I tugged on her arm to coax her back inside the shed and out of the rain, she didn’t budge.

“Come on, Laura. It’s late. There’s no telling how long we’ll have to wait for the storm to pass. We’re both expected home before sunset. Chances are slim the ogler’s still around. I’m sure he high-tailed it when he realized he’d been seen.” At the look of dismay that crossed Laura’s face, I said, “Don’t fret, my beautiful Laura. One day, we won’t have to answer to anyone but ourselves.”

Laura kissed me with passion as rain streaked down our cheeks. She pulled back and held my face in her hands. “Yes, my dear. One day.”

WHAT I NEXT have to recount has shaken my life to the core and made me doubt my strength to cope.

Once Laura and I parted ways, I raced home. I tried to wring out my soaked shirt as best I could before tromping up the front steps. When I entered, I found it unusually quiet. I smelled the pleasing aroma of our earlier dinner of corned beef and cabbage coming from the kitchen, but when I entered the room, my mother wasn’t there. My father’s den, the place where he spent much of his time, was also empty. Assuming they were in the backyard, I raced to the stairs and bounded up them two at a time. If I hurry, I thought, I can change from my wet clothes before they come back. That way, I can avoid having to bear Mother’s frustration over my unkempt appearance.

I stopped dead in my tracks when I entered my bedroom. My father stood ramrod straight at the foot of my bed, his face red with fury. Geez, I thought. I’m not that late. I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. I turned. My mother, clutching a set of pearl rosary beads between trembling hands, stared at me with teary, bloodshot eyes.

“Close the door, Margaret,” Father ordered. My mother, ever the submissive one, obeyed.

“Father,” I started.

He cut me off. “You were always a troublesome child,” he began. “I prayed that, with maturity, your high-spirited behavior would abate. I see now there’s no hope for such an unnatural progression. In fact, there isn’t much about you that is within the laws of nature.”

His words sent goose bumps rising on my arms. He knows, I thought. Oh dear, sweet, baby Jesus, he knows. “Father, whatever you’re thinking...”

He held up a hand to silence me. “Do not insult my intelligence. I saw you, Clarissa. I saw you with that girl, engaging in sinful, carnal acts. You are an aberration. You disgrace our family with such perversity. In the beginning, I wasn’t concerned when you’d disappear hours on end. I thought it was plain old wanderlust. But when you began creeping out of the house after dinner and slinking back hours later, my concern deepened until I had to find out for myself what you were up to.”

Behind me, my mother wailed, “She’s sick, Jonathan. She needs help.”

“Yes, I agree. And I know a place that can give her direction and purge the demons that possess her.”



With a voice devoid of emotion, he said, “Margaret, make arrangements with Stanwood House for us to drive Clarissa there first thing in the morning.” My blood ran cold from his words. I knew that Stanwood House was a mental asylum.

My mother sobbed out one last choked cry and dashed from the bedroom. When I tried to chase after her, my father wrenched my arm so hard that the pain almost made me pass out.

“You’re not going anywhere. You’re confined to your room until morning, when I will personally see you admitted at Stanwood House. Since you can’t be trusted, you’ll remain locked in here, and I’ll have our house staff posted at your bedroom door. And don’t even consider using the window as an escape. I will keep vigil outside to make sure you don’t get away. Maybe now that you’re confined, you’ll realize your sinful ways and seek God’s forgiveness. Only then can your period of atonement begin.”

Father released his grip and thrust me to my knees. He yanked the bedroom key out of his trouser pocket and strode to the door. I was so petrified for my well-being, I dared not turn around. I shuddered at the slamming of the door and the rattle of the key in the lock. One thought kept turning over and over in my mind—Laura would be waiting for me by the lake, wondering why I didn’t show. I was helpless to get word to her.

My terror overwhelmed me to the point that I gave in to uncontrollable sobs. If my father is true to his word, I will soon be a prisoner in a place I don’t belong. The idea that I could be banned from seeing Laura is inconceivable. I’m determined to fight for my freedom and chronicle every moment of my detainment in my diary. But I must be careful that the diary travels with me, in secret, to the asylum. It is my sole link to the outside world, and I will protect it at all cost. I will hide it in the waistband of my breeches, in the hollow of my back, and pray that it is not discovered upon my admittance.

## Chapter Nine

OUTRAGE ROILED INSIDE Kylie like a turbulent sea. Her heart ached for the young woman who'd come to terms with her sexuality, only to be demeaned and ostracized for it. And by her own flesh and blood, no less. Kylie cringed over what she imagined Cissy would reveal as the pages describing her tumultuous life unfolded. Too upset to read further, Kylie pushed the diary aside and turned off the first-floor lights. Fatigue weighed heavy on her body as she ascended the stairs to the master bedroom, the one place she'd avoided upon her return because the memories would be vivid and painful.

When she turned the doorknob and pushed the door inward, Maya's aura permeated its interior. Kylie deeply inhaled her lingering scent. Her essence remains, she thought, as tears welled in her eyes. Locked away in this isolated chamber and revived by the slightest breeze of an opening door. It's as if nothing's changed.

Unable to control herself, Kylie flung her body across the mattress and pressed her face into a satin-shammed pillow. Maya's unique smell was more pervasive here and intoxicating in its effect. It revived memories of nights spent in each other's arms, indulging in reckless sexual abandon. Kylie unabashedly rolled herself in the bedspread and gave in to bittersweet emotion. She cried until exhaustion gave way to sleep's sweet surrender.

THE NEXT MORNING, Kylie felt anxious. She didn't have much of an appetite but forced herself to eat a piece of dry toast and wash it down with a half pot of black coffee. Melancholia again took hold of her emotions, and Kylie resented the relapse. When Maya had left, Kylie hadn't repressed her feelings. She'd suffered through the various stages of grief from sadness, to anger, to acceptance. And yet, one night spent in Stanwood House made Kylie feel as if she hadn't made any progress at all. So much for living and learning and putting the past to rest, she thought. The pain of Maya's abandonment surrounds me. I've just been too obstinate to realize it. It suddenly occurred to her that she and Cissy Moore shared a common bond. They'd both loved and lost. Cissy's love was taken away from her, but not of her own free will, much like Maya was taken from her.

Thoughts of Cissy made Kylie reach for the diary but fall shy of picking it up. Not yet, she decided. Let me get my head on straight before I read any further of Cissy's tortured past.

A soft, scraping sound caught her attention. She moved toward the kitchen window. A low-hanging tree branch brushed against the pane.

Its leaves, now in the latter stage of changing colors, were curled and brittle. One powerful wind gust and they'll be on the ground, Kylie thought. She rested her forehead against the cool glass, closed her eyes, and let the sun's early morning warmth caress her skin.

A walk, she decided. What better way to clear my head than with exercise. She quickly changed from her flannel pajamas to a sweatshirt, a pair of jeans, and running shoes. When she

stepped outside, the invigorating fall air wafted over her face. Her mood instantly lightened. She set off with a purposeful stride. With each step, Kylie felt the past cede to the present.

Kylie had walked a little over a mile when an unusual sight made her falter in her step. At first, she thought the sun's blinding glare was playing tricks with her eyes, making her see fluttering shadows among a copse of Leland Cyprus trees at the peak of a hill. But when she regained her pace and drew ever closer, what she thought was a shadow was really someone dressed in an ankle-length, charcoal-gray coat. A hood concealed all but the lower section of the person's face. The person's skin was pale with the exception of a splash of red lipstick. Whoever it was stood as still as stone, facing her.

Recognition hit Kylie, and she gasped. Her skin tingled, and her heart pounded out a staccato beat. Even though distance and the person's attire didn't allow for positive identification, she knew it had to be Maya. Temporary paralysis gave way to an adrenaline rush that had her running toward the figure. The steady thump of her sneakers on hardened dirt echoed in the fields and resounded in her brain. To her dismay, when she came within fifty yards, the figure retreated behind the trees. Kylie screamed in frustration and threw herself into the tangle of tree limbs, mindless of the gnarled branches that slashed her hands. She broke free on the other side, but only a wide expanse of abandoned field greeted her. It stretched in either direction for as far as she could see.

Tears of disappointment clouded her eyes and a sob caught in her throat. Impossible, she thought. Maya couldn't have vanished into thin air. But what other explanation could there be? The realization that she might have imagined the incident left Kylie feeling unsettled. Please God, she thought. Please don't let me be losing my mind.

With a saddened heart, Kylie returned to Stanwood House. She threw a couple logs in the hearth and refilled her coffee mug. Hoping she could lose herself in another's torment and forego her own, Kylie picked up Cissy's diary and continued to read of her plight.

The Asylum Monday, October 2, 1933

I SPENT THE first twenty-four hours of my confinement locked in a pitch-black room, eight paces wide by as many paces long. I knew this because I'd walked the paces more times than I could count. Before the lights had been shut off, I got a good look of the room. My bed, constructed of unfinished, splintery wood, sagged in the middle. Its lumpy mattress consisted of hay and bunched-up rags. Once I'd ripped open a hole in the underside of the mattress, it served as the perfect hiding place for my diary. As the room had no windows, once they'd turned off the lights, I had no conception of time. Alienated and frightened, I lived in a dark limbo. Although disheartened by my dismal circumstances, I will remain on my best behavior so that I may soon be released from this asylum for unfortunates to be held once again in Laura's loving arms.

The metallic sound of keys jangling in a lock woke me from a restless slumber. I sat up and pulled a thin, discolored sheet to my chin in more of a defensive rather than modest gesture. Rusted hinges groaned as the door swung inward. Dim light pierced through the darkness and caused my eyes to tear. I blinked until my vision cleared, and I could focus on a dour-faced woman dressed in hospital whites who stood in the doorway. The woman fixed me with ice cold, pale blue eyes. Her gray, wiry hair, tightly wrapped in a bun, pulled the skin back from her face.

Her rigid countenance made me involuntarily shiver. When she spoke, the woman's voice was harsh and exuded contempt. I knew right then and there that I'd met my nemesis.

"Case C, you are now a ward of Stanwood House. From this point forward, you will address me as Nurse Frank."

Confused, I asked, "Case C?"

Nurse Frank's scowl deepened. "Dr. Dreschler has instructed the staff not to address patients by their first names, only their first initials."

"But what if there's more than one patient with the same first initial?"

Nurse Frank quickly advanced into the small room within inches of my face. Dried spittle caked the corners of her mouth. In a tone seething with rage, Nurse Frank said, "It's also forbidden for a patient to speak one's mind unless requested."

I refused to cower. "With all due respect, Nurse Frank, I wasn't expressing an opinion, only asking a question."

Nurse Frank gave me a long, measured appraisal. "I can see that you have the propensity to cause discord. As such, it's best that disciplinary matters be stressed immediately. First offenses are meal restrictions for one day. Second offenses are solitary confinement for one day as well as meal restrictions. Third offenses are solitary confinement with meal restrictions for an indeterminate period of time. Do I need to go on?"

Nurse Frank's threats came through loud and clear. The last thing I wanted was to cause trouble. I had no intention of staying at Stanwood House any longer than necessary. I was determined to find a means of escape even if I had to tunnel my way out. To appease Nurse Frank, I shook my head and lowered my gaze in what I hoped she'd construe as acquiescence.

Another woman, also dressed in hospital whites, appeared behind Nurse Frank's imposing frame. She looked much younger and wore a congenial expression. She wheeled in a cart with a basin of water and a washcloth sitting on top. A starched white hospital shift and a pair of leather-soled slip-ons were neatly arranged on a lower shelf. I looked down and realized I still wore yesterday's clothes. They smelled faintly of lake water. Another pang of longing assailed me as I longed for the comfort of Laura's arms.

Nurse Frank motioned to the clothes on the lower shelf of the cart. "This is your hospital attire for the duration of your stay. We encourage patients to pay strong attention to their hygiene on the days when baths are not a scheduled regimen. Unfortunately for you, bath day was yesterday and every third day thereafter. The restroom area is down the hall. Nurse Lane will accompany you. I expect your presence in the great room within fifteen minutes. Any delay will not be tolerated."

Nurse Frank gave me another disdainful look before she edged past Nurse Lane and stormed out. Her retreating footsteps echoed loudly down the corridor. Dutifully and in silence, I followed Nurse Lane to the restroom. Three doorless stalls occupied its cramped space with one rusted sink set in a dingy corner. Intermingling smells of urine, vomit, and sweat made me gag in revulsion.

To my surprise, Nurse Lane said, "I apologize for the lack of privacy. Dr. Dreschler demands that patients are watched every waking moment. It's for their protection, as well as the staff's."

Having learned my lesson about submissiveness, I didn't respond.

"I'm not as strict as Nurse Frank, Case C. I don't mind conversation. This isn't a prison, after all."

When I looked into Nurse Lane's kind eyes, I felt as if I might have an ally.

"Are patients always locked in their rooms at night?" I asked.

“Yes. It’s for their physical safety. Not all of Stanwood House’s wards are as mild-mannered as you.” Nurse Lane glanced at her watch and frowned. “You must hurry.” She turned to face the wall. I took that as my cue to disrobe.

DRESSED IN MY itchy hospital attire, I padded behind Nurse Lane down a shadowed hallway. We passed many glass-paned doors with drapes drawn low, ostensibly to avoid prying eyes. From within their recesses came loud moans, frightening fits of laughter, and hysterical shrieks. I shuddered and hastened my step. We reached a cross-section of hall and a tall metal door painted brick red.

“That’s the boy’s wing,” Nurse Lane said. “Under no circumstances are female patients permitted past that door.”

“We’re segregated?”

“Stanwood House has enough trouble handling female temperaments without adding male influence to the mix.”

“Are there many male patients?”

“At present, only two.”

The hall stopped at the brink of a wide spiral staircase. The smell of sizzling breakfast meat wafted up the stairs, making my stomach growl and mouth water. I hadn’t eaten since my ordeal began. I heard murmured voices, the clatter of plates, and movement of chairs. I cast a nervous glance at Nurse Lane, who gave me an encouraging smile and guided me by my elbow toward what awaited below.

We entered a moderate-sized dining area. A long, rectangular table occupied its center. Six girls, I guessed ranged in age from mid-to-late teens, and dressed in identical starched-white shifts, sat at the table. Two muscular men stood at adjacent corners with their arms crossed and legs spread wide. Their biceps and thighs bulged against their uniforms. Their purpose was clear. They were here to keep us in line. Their eyes remained fixed on us as we ate in silence. Nurse Frank stood at the head of the table. When she spotted me, she cleared her throat. Immediately, the girls set down their tin spoons, folded their hands in their laps, and turned toward her.

“Girls, today we have a new arrival at Stanwood House. You will address her as Case C. Like you, Case C is assigned to the asylum to deal with issues deemed reprehensible in society, whether in a lawful or moral vein. Although her issues may far differ from yours, you are all here for the same purpose: to right your wrongs and to seek enlightenment so that society will welcome your return to the fold with open arms. For some, this transition will prove moderately easy. For others, it may take months, even years. As long as each of you is willing to accept change for the betterment of self, then you’ll see the day when you will walk away from Stanwood House as free, unhindered women and valued assets to society. Make room for Case C to sit down.”

A red-headed, freckle-faced girl about my age shifted to her left on the hard wooden bench. Nurse Lane lightly nudged me forward. With a smile of gratitude, I inched in beside her. A kitchen matron shuffled forward and placed a steaming plate of scrambled eggs, a charred piece of scrapple, and a slice of over-buttered toast before me. It took all of my willpower not to sneak a piece of meat.

To my annoyance, Nurse Frank continued her diatribe. “As many of you know, there are set rules each patient is to obey while under our care. House Rule number sixteen states all food is

eaten and plates cleaned and stacked neatly on the metal cart to my left. Conversation is permitted, but in soft tones. Any intent to cause a ruckus will result in disciplinary measures. Understood?"

All the girls, with the exception of me and another girl, who huddled in a corner sucking her thumb, spoke in unison. "Yes, Nurse Frank."

Nurse Frank glared at me. "Speak up, Case C. I asked if you understood?"

"Yes, Nurse Frank," I replied in as respectful a tone as I could muster.

"Fine. Once daily chores are assigned, all can resume eating."

Nurse Frank proceeded to rattle off a list of duties. I heard my name grouped with Case H for washing windows.

With tasks assigned, Nurse Frank turned on her heels and left the great room. Upon her exit, it felt as though a cloud of tension dissipated. The girls let out grateful sighs of relief. Now comfortable amongst themselves, their curious gazes shifted to me, the newcomer.

"What'd you do?" asked an overweight girl with dark, inset eyes and an acne-scarred complexion.

For some inexplicable reason, I felt wary of the girl, as if whatever loyalty she might possess toward another could be easily swayed. Being a good judge of character, I decided I'd give this girl a wide berth. However, not wanting her to perceive me rude by not replying, I voiced the first excuse that came to mind. "I bucked authority. Rejected school."

The girl smirked. "Ah, an insubordinate. Much like myself." She thrust out a pudgy hand. "My name's Abigail."

The red-haired girl warned. "No first names, Case A. You know the consequences."

"Oh, balderdash, Hattie," Abigail said. "The staff doesn't want us to use our first names because they want to keep us detached from each other. Less chance we'll form any meaningful alliances or plot to undermine their command. Nurse Frump, I mean Frank, takes great pleasure in intimidating us. I'll speak my mind whenever I want when no one's around to enact punishment."

"We're not alone," Hattie said. "The orderlies—"

Abigail interrupted her. "Stone statues, that's what I call them." She flexed her arms and tapped the side of her head. "They're goons. All brawn and no brain matter."

"You best be careful, is all I'm saying," Hattie told her.

A sudden disturbance erupted in the food prep area. At the sound of plates shattering and exasperated cries from the female cooks, the two orderlies sprang into action and ran toward the commotion. Eager for excitement, most of the girls scrambled from their seats and raced to the open doorway. I sat dumbstruck until Abigail grabbed my arm and pulled me along. From a safe distance, we watched a tall, gangly boy of about sixteen run gleefully amok through the kitchen area. He upturned pots and pans, stuck his hands in food bowls, and finger painted the tiled walls.

"His name's Darwin," Hattie said. "He's always escaping from the boys' wing. He has issues with repetition and harbors a fierce temper."

"Repetition?" I asked.

"Darwin scrubs his hands to the point where they'll bleed, and he paces or walks in circles for hours on end. I've seen him run into a brick wall and fall down from the impact, only to jump to his feet, retrace his steps, and run into it again. He talks to himself, repeatedly reciting a series of numbers or letters. Like I said, he's prone to fits of uncontrollable rage and goes wild when the nurses or orderlies try to prevent him from performing his rituals. One day, he stole a box of

matchsticks and tried to burn his bed sheets. Dr. Dreschler's put him in solitary confinement more times than I dare count. He's one of the doctor's more challenging patients. I've heard Nurse Frank call him a 'hopeless cause'."

In horror, I watched an orderly tackle Darwin about the waist and body-slam him to the floor. He straddled him while the other orderly, the beefier of the two, bound his wrists and ankles with leather straps. Together, they lifted the screaming, bucking adolescent to his feet and dragged him away.

Apparently alerted to the upheaval, Nurse Frank arrived in the kitchen area too late to intervene. She glared at me and the snooping girls and in a clipped, harsh tone said, "Showtime's over. Return to your seats."

A DENTED METAL pail, near full of vinegar water, sloshed at my side as me and Hattie made our way from room to room, window to window. After Hattie washed a pane, I followed up by drying the glass free of any lingering residue or streaks. For a time, we worked quietly beside each other. On more than one occasion, I caught Hattie sneak a furtive peek my way. Amused rather than annoyed, I finally asked, "What is it about me that intrigues you so? I'm not much to look at."

"I'm having a hard time figuring out why you're here. You seem so...so normal," Hattie whispered.

"Exactly what does that mean?"

Hattie's cheeks reddened. "I mean you don't babble like an idiot, or try to hurt yourself, or worse yet, try to hurt someone else."

"I could say the same about you."

"I'm currently in a state of regression."

"Regression? From what?"

"I have mood swings. Sometimes I can't control myself. They say that when I'm in the throes of an episode, I act out of sorts in ways that are frightening or harmful to others."

I stared at her in disbelief. "Are you aware of what you're doing?"

Hattie shook her head. "I black out. Afterwards, I have a horrendous headache and don't remember any specifics."

"What's Abigail's story?" I asked.

At the mention of the girl's name, Hattie shuddered. "She's demented. I heard Nurse Lane tell another nurse that Abigail hates all that's beautiful, or at least what another might perceive as beautiful. She killed three of her mother's Siamese cats."

I gasped. "That's horrible. How?"

"One she stomped to death, the other she drowned in the bathtub, and the last she poisoned with arsenic."

It was my turn to shudder. "But why would she kill such defenseless creatures?"

"Out of spite. Another patient overheard Abigail telling Dreschler she did it because her mother doted on the cats more than she did on Abigail. When Abigail learned that her mother was with child, she tried to throw her down a flight of stairs. That's when they institutionalized her. She's a bad seed, that one. Full of jealousy and hate. You don't want to get close to her."

"And the other girl? The one who doesn't speak?"

Hattie frowned. “Poor dear. Her name’s Daphne. The orderlies call her ‘daft.’ One day, many years ago, she stopped talking. No one knows why. She’s as introverted as they come. You’ll never get her to make eye contact or show any type of emotion. She’s mute. Sometimes she’s so out of it that the nurses have to spoon-feed her and swaddle her in diapers.”

“How many patients reside here?”

“We’re segregated, so it’s hard to tell. In our wing, maybe five to eight female patients. Depending on the day or days, one may be under intense therapy with Dr. Dreschler or on restriction. Some even manage to get released.”

“But not many?”

“Not from what I can tell.” Hattie glanced at the floor and grimaced. “Pay attention to how you handle that bucket, Cissy. You’re trailing water down the hall.”

AT COMMUNAL DINNER, I once again sat down beside Hattie. I soon learned that with speech restricted, eye contact and facial expressions conveyed much emotion amongst the patients. I had to stifle a giggle every time Nurse Frank passed the table because Hattie would make comical faces behind her back. As usual, Daphne remained silent and didn’t meet anyone’s gaze. Two other patients snuck bits of whispered conversation with each other while Abigail concentrated on scarfing down every last morsel from her plate.

Later, as we cleared dishes, Hattie whispered, “Abigail’s jealous of us, you know. She shot daggers at you with her eyes the whole time at dinner.”

I was confused. “But I haven’t done anything.”

“It doesn’t take much to set Abigail off. She resents the way we’ve bonded. She envies our new friendship.”

I bridled. “I can’t help who I wish to share company with.”

“I’m just telling you to watch your back.”

An ear-splitting, bell chime sounded. Obediently, all of us moved to the center of the dining area and stood in single file. From the head of the line, Nurse Frank made sure all patients faced forward.

“Girls, please proceed in an orderly fashion from the great room and follow Nurse Lane up the stairs to your assigned rooms. Reading is permitted for ten minutes before lights out.”

“Yeah, if Bible reading’s your favorite bedtime story,” Hattie mumbled low enough for only me to hear. I smirked. As I started to pass by Nurse Frank, she hooked her claw-like fingers around my elbow and yanked me aside. “Dr. Dreschler will see you tomorrow morning at nine sharp for your introductory session. Make sure your hygiene is beyond reproach. Dr. Dreschler detests lack of care to one’s person.”

“Yes, Nurse Frank.” I didn’t flinch when Nurse Frank’s talons released their pinched hold, and she shoved me back in line.



# Chapter Ten

Tuesday, October 3, 1933

I WOKE TO the screech of the clothing cart as it made its way down the linoleum-tiled corridor. I stretched and rubbed the last traces of sleep from my eyes. I took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and mentally prepared myself for the daily ritual. When we entered the bathroom, Nurse Lane respectfully turned to allow me privacy, just as she had the day before. I dipped a cotton cloth into a water-filled basin and cleansed my face, neck, and armpits. The tepid water helped warm my chilled skin. Despite its lack of windows for cold air to seep through, the bathroom was as frigid as an underground meat chest. After washing, I donned the rough-textured hospital shift. The incessant urge to scratch made my sensitive skin prickle. It felt as if the garment hadn't been thoroughly rinsed of soda crystals.

When I cleared my voice to let Nurse Lane know I was presentable, she turned and gave me a quick once-over. She smiled, satisfied. "You clean up quite well, Case C."

"Thank you, Nurse Lane."

DR. KARL DRESCHLER'S treatment room was past the great room and down a long, narrow corridor. Hattie had warned me that no patients were permitted in this area of Stanwood House unless Dr. Dreschler requested their presence. She told me that he kept his treatment room locked, and only Nurse Frank possessed a spare key. If a patient was found in near proximity to the area, they would be severely punished.

I noticed that Nurse Lane's pleasant demeanor changed as soon as we entered the isolated corridor, and she rapped on the treatment room's oak door. A voice, foreign-sounding in dialect, shouted, "Enter!" German, I thought. I'd bet odds Dreschler's an immigrant. Nurse Lane opened the door halfway and all but shoved me into the room before she scurried away.

At first glance, Dreschler's treatment room didn't impress me. It resembled more of an office than what its name signified. Bare, stark-white walls glared at me. A massive mahogany desk occupied the center of the room and all but covered a rectangular area rug. A notepad and an inkwell sat on the table. I turned my attention to the window and stifled a scream. Perched on the window ledge was a skeletonized head. The hollowed-out eye sockets of the grayish-white skeleton with its rotted teeth seemed to stare directly at me. I imagined that its jaw moved and a foreboding voice whispered, "You're next, Clarissa Moore. You're next to meet your doom."

A chuckle behind me made me jump in fright. I turned to find who I presumed was Dr. Dreschler close enough to touch. He was tall in stature and muscular in build. His scalp was clean-shaven. His cheekbones were well-defined, but the skin surrounding them hung loose, giving his face an emaciated appearance. His lips were thin and colorless. His eyes were a pale gray, lacking depth.

“Did I frighten you, Miss Moore?” he asked.

I was surprised by his soft-spoken tone.

“I’m rather skittish when someone sneaks up on me.”

His eyes seemed to glint. No trace of a smile lined his lips. “Ah, a wary individual. Are you always so anxious and untrusting of others?”

I felt my insides drop. Our session had only begun, and I thought it was headed for disaster. I felt as if Dreschler was toying with me, trying to get under my skin. Without a doubt, he had the advantage. Calm, cool, and collected, I reminded myself. You want to get out of this loony bin, and Dreschler’s the man who’s in charge of signing the release papers.

I forced a smile and assumed a relaxed stance. “Not usually. The events of the past few days have caused me great distress.”

“As well they should. I’ve read your case file.”

I felt my heart sink. Case file? How could that be? I’ve only been at Stanwood House three days, one being in total isolation. Unless Father had kept a journal of my relationship with Laura. And, if so, how long had he known before he committed me to such a god-forsaken place? And Mother. Why hadn’t she tried to reason with him? Why hadn’t she fought against his decision to send me away, especially to here? To make me an outcast?

Emotion swelled inside me and weakened my resolve to stand strong. “I don’t belong here, Dr. Dreschler.”

He smirked. “If I had a nickel for every patient who professed his or her sanity, I’d be a rich man.”

“I haven’t committed any crime.”

“Not all crimes are against people. There are crimes against nature.”

My stomach tightened, as I watched Dreschler cross the room and sit at the desk. There were no other chairs in the treatment room.

“I stress again that I am without fault.”

Seemingly unaffected by my words, Dreschler said, “I beg to differ. I must admit, I’m concerned that your hospitalization among persons of the same sex might lead to additional immoral transgressions.”

My anger flared, but I held my temper in check. “I’m far from promiscuous. I don’t show affection to another unless I feel it in my heart.”

Dreschler slammed his palms on the desktop, further setting my nerves on edge. In an incredulous tone, he asked, “Are you referring to love? Do you honestly believe that your indulgence in carnal delights with someone of the same sex equates to love?”

I clenched my hands into fists. Ignorant bastard, I thought. “Only with Laura.”

Dreschler’s eyes narrowed. “Tell me, Clarissa. Why does this Laura so enchant you?”

I straightened and squared my shoulders. “She’s beautiful and kind-hearted. She’s not afraid to ask questions or search for truth.”

“You are quite the naïve, young woman. This Laura that you speak of so highly is a temptress, a demon.”

“No.”

“She’s corrupted your morals and laid your soul open for the devil to claim.”

I fought for composure. “What I feel for Laura is genuine and pure.”

“Then our session has concluded for the day. I suggest you become better versed in Bible teachings.” Dreschler drew a pen from the inkwell and scribbled on a pad of paper. “I’ve assigned you the following scripture passage to read at day’s end. It speaks of the Seven Deadly

Sins, one of which is lust. Perhaps, in the morning, you will shake off hedonistic beliefs, and we can begin anew.”

AFTER MY DISASTROUS session with Dreschler, I returned to the great room. I was permitted five minutes to eat breakfast before being given my daily work assignment. A nurse I had never seen before told me that I was again paired up with Hattie and that we were to oversee laundry duty. In silence, Hattie and I walked to the west wing.

The laundry area consisted of two large, waist-high tubs and a manual clothes wringer. Boxes of bath salts lined a shelf above a folding table. Four clotheslines ran parallel from a low-hanging ceiling. I frowned at the laundry cart heaped to overflowing with dirty clothes.

I saw Hattie make a face as she handled one of the sheets.

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s Betty, I mean Case B, again. She’s a notorious bed-wetter. We all take turns hiding her soaked linen to protect her from Nurse Frank’s fierce temper.”

“Maybe we should monitor what Betty drinks before she goes to bed,” I offered. Hattie didn’t comment. She seemed to be in a world of her own. For the next ten minutes, we worked in silence until I couldn’t stand the quiet any longer. “You’re unusually somber this morning. Aren’t you the least bit curious about my session with Dreschler?”

“We’re supposed to work in silence,” Hattie answered in a hushed tone.

I spread my arms wide and spun around. “We’re alone. No one can hear us.”

When Hattie looked at me, I felt my skin grow cold and clammy. “My God, you look like you’re about to jump out of your skin. What on earth has come over you?”

Tears welled in Hattie’s eyes. “Darwin’s gone.”

“Gone? What do you mean gone? Did he escape?”

Hattie shook her head. “At breakfast, Nurse Frank informed us that Dr. Dreschler released him under his own recognizance.”

“That can’t be true. Just the other day the orderlies had him in restraints. Weren’t you the one who told me that Nurse Frank said he was a hopeless cause? That he’d never be released?”

Hattie wrung her hands. “That’s what troubles me the most. I don’t think Darwin was released. I witnessed something last night, after lights out. Now, I fear for my life.”

I gripped her hands. “Tell me.”

“I heard moaning sounds coming from the boy’s wing. My room’s next to the red door. The sounds became panicked and more and more hysterical. Curious, I slipped from bed and lay on my tummy on the floor. The door doesn’t fit flush there, so I could peer through the open space. I saw Darwin. He was dressed in some type of garment that had a lot of buckles and straps on it. Two orderlies carried him out into the hall. One held his feet and the other gripped him under the elbows. Darwin bucked like a bronco. His eyes were wild with fright. White, frothy spittle spewed from his mouth. He managed to scream, “Please don’t take me there!” before one of the goons stuffed a wadded piece of cloth in his mouth to silence him.

“I was so out-of-sorts from watching the scene that I began to cry. I didn’t know that Nurse Frank was in the hall until I saw her shoes outside my door, inches from where I lay. I quickly jumped into bed and pulled up the covers. I heard the scraping of her skeleton key as it slipped into my lock. I closed my eyes and acted as if I was asleep. Oh, Cissy, I thought I’d die of fright. Nurse Frank stood there a long time. I felt her eyes boring into my back. It took all of my

willpower not to tremble. It seemed an eternity before she left. I didn't sleep the rest of the night."

Hattie collapsed into my arms and sobbed. "I fear I'll pay dearly for what I've seen. That's why I didn't want to tell you. I didn't want to endanger your life, too."

"No one's life's in danger, Hattie. Don't let your imagination run wild."

Hattie pulled away and sniffled. I whipped out a tattered rag and gave it to her to blot her nose. "There's more," she said. "Not long after they took Darwin away, I heard these god-awful screams as if the bowels of the earth opened up and released banshees into the night." She shook her head. "I know, I sound crazy, don't I?"

I tried to reassure her. "We're out in the middle of nowhere. You could've heard a wild animal or the wind whistling in the trees. Normal sounds we take for granted during the day tend to sound eerier at night."

Hattie's expression grew even more somber. "The screams were not coming from outside, but beneath me. Beneath the floor."

"Hattie, you're not making sense."

"Dreschler's treatment room is directly below my bedroom."

"I was in Dreschler's treatment room only hours ago. I saw no sign of a struggle."

"Dreschler might have covered it up."

Fearing Hattie would succumb to hysterics, I gripped her shoulders and gently shook her. "Look, I don't doubt something's happened to Darwin. He probably acted up and was put in solitary. I promise to keep my eyes and ears open. We'll find out where he is, so please don't worry."

AT DINNERTIME, HATTIE remained detached and nervous. I noticed that she'd gone out of her way to avoid Nurse Frank and had succeeded until the bell chimed for us to line up. Nurse Frank chose that moment to summon her with a long, crooked finger. The expression of sheer terror in Hattie's eyes made me want to run to her defense. I fought the urge. If Nurse Frank suspected anything, rushing to Hattie's rescue would confirm her suspicions and make matters worse. I had no choice but to hope for the best. Staring straight ahead, I walked past Nurse Frank and ascended the spiral staircase.

I tossed and turned the entire night with worry. Was Nurse Frank or Dr. Dreschler holding Hattie captive? Dawn finally arrived. I bolted from my bed at the familiar sound of the approaching clothing cart. I needed to see Hattie and assuage my fears. The sooner, the better.

My anxiety intensified when I entered the great room and found the seat Hattie normally occupied empty. I searched faces for my newfound friend. When my gaze met Nurse Frank's, goose bumps rose on my arms. Nurse Frank's lips were curled upward, like a Cheshire Cat.

Dread settled on me like a death shroud. Unable to restrain myself any longer, I stormed toward where Nurse Frank stood with her arms crossed. Nurse Frank tracked me with her steely blue eyes, like a predator stalking its prey.

"Where's Hattie?" I asked.

In a calm, authoritative tone, Nurse Frank said, "House Rule number eight states that a patient does not confront hospital staff without risk of solitary confinement. It is also forbidden to refer to another patient by his or her first name."

I didn't back down. "I need to know if Case H is okay."

At this point, some of the patients shifted on their benches, obviously nervous over the unexpected confrontation. Nurse Lane tried but was unable to quell their unease. Suddenly, Abigail stood and shouted, “Yes, Nurse Frank. Where is Case H? We all want to know.”

Behind Abigail, there was a shuffle of movement. The rest of the girls, with the exception of Daphne, stood in support of Abigail. Nurse Frank tried to stare them down, but the girls stood firm. A few heart-pounding seconds passed before she spoke. “In order to avoid any spread of rumor, I will say only that Case H has taken ill and is confined to bed rest for an indeterminate period of time.”

I was unconvinced. “That’s impossible,” I said. “Hattie was fine yesterday. What’s wrong with her?”

Nurse Frank glared at me, her face contorted in anger. “Case H’s condition is of no concern to you, Case C. Return to your assigned seat or risk meal restriction and possible solitary confinement.”

I was about to say something more when Nurse Lane gripped my elbow firmly from behind. She whispered, “You’ve made your point, Cissy. Don’t complicate matters for yourself any more than you already have.”

As I had grown to respect and trust Nurse Lane, I heeded her advice and moved toward the dining table.

KYLIE ABRUPTLY STOPPED reading the diary. She felt distracted and unable to focus on Cissy’s written words. Her mind refused to let go of what had happened that morning. The event replayed over and over again, torturing her. She tried to make herself accept that the figure she’d seen in the woods was an imagined version of Maya Holworth, but doubt overshadowed her sense of reason.

Since Maya’s abandonment Kylie tried, often to no avail, to block out any thoughts of her. Yet Maya’s spiritual presence seemed to overcome Kylie at times when she was the most in need. Kylie never once questioned her sanity when she sensed Maya’s spiritual intrusions, so she reasoned that she shouldn’t be fazed by Maya now appearing to her in the flesh. But why the aura of mystery, Kylie wondered. Was Maya keeping her distance for fear that I would reject her? Or did Maya have other intentions ?

Exhausted, Kylie decided to take a stress nap. An hour later, her troubled mind had cleared enough for her to resume reading the diary.

DURING MEALTIME, I was lost in thought. I knew that acting on emotion instead of reason would serve no meaningful purpose in finding out more of Hattie’s fate. Abigail, however, remained in a heightened state of irritation. She grunted and uttered curses as she ate. In direct defiance of house rules, she used her hands instead of the supplied tin spoon to cram food in her mouth. Patients on either side of her inched farther away, fear evident in their eyes.

When the time came to clear dishes, Abigail was first in line. Under Nurse Lane’s watchful eyes, Abigail turned her tin mug upside down on the tray but failed to scrape her plate. In as genteel a manner as possible, Nurse Lane said, “Case A, you know that a patient’s plate needs to be thoroughly clear of any excess food.”

With a sneer, Abigail flicked out her tongue and proceeded to lick the plate clean of residue. Gasps from the other patients echoed throughout the great room. Nurse Lane tried to take the plate from her. Abigail's face reddened in rage. Abigail reached beneath her hospital shift and pulled out a wooden stake. She raised its sharpened point above her head and began stabbing Nurse Lane. Nurse Lane's shrieks of agony finally incited the orderlies to action, but not before Abigail had brutally slashed Nurse Lane's face and neck. Blood spurted from a gaping wound above Nurse Lane's collar bone and splattered across stacks of dirty dishes. Nurse Frank barreled across the room and single-handedly rendered Abigail unconscious with two swift blows to her throat. She then grabbed a dish towel and knelt before Nurse Lane's convulsing body. Nurse Frank applied pressure to the most serious wound at the neck. Within seconds, the dish towel dripped with blood.

"Bring me more towels!" Nurse Frank screamed.

Suddenly, a loud, booming voice erupted in the great room. "What the hell is going on around here?" All heads turned in Dreschler's direction. Anger seemed to roll off of him as he stood in the entryway. The two orderlies yanked a semi-conscious Abigail to her feet and dragged her across the room. Dreschler's eyes flared in an ugly light. "Take her to solitary."

In the chaos, Nurse Frank had lost her headpiece. Her hair was a tangled, gray-black mess. Blood smeared the front of her uniform. Over her shoulder, she shouted for Dreschler's assistance. Everyone made way for his imposing frame.

Kneeling beside Nurse Frank, Dreschler examined the wound and checked Nurse Lane's vital signs. Her eyes had glazed over and were unblinking. Blood splatter drenched her face. A thick trail of blood ran from the base of her ear down to the curve of her chin.

"Keep applying pressure," Dreschler said. "One towel on top of the other so that you don't disrupt the clotting process. Someone get me a blanket!"

A chubby nurse hustled down the hall far faster than I'd imagined her stubby legs capable of moving. I was close enough to listen in on Nurse Frank and Dreschler's conversation.

"Will she be okay?" Nurse Frank asked.

"It's too soon to tell. She's in shock. I need her stabilized before I can move her to my treatment room."

"But, Dr. Dreschler, shouldn't we call an ambulance to take her to a hospital?"

He glared at her. "Are you out of your mind, woman? Bring attention to Stanwood House and risk public scrutiny? Nurse Lane is safe enough in my care."

He extracted a syringe from a lab coat pocket. Pushing up Nurse Lane's shirtsleeve, he injected a clear substance into a vein in the crook of her arm. Dreschler grabbed her wrist and monitored her pulse against the secondhand on his watch. His facial expression remained grim. He then rose to his feet and used his forearm to sweep a stack of dishes from a large utility cart. The clatter of fallen tableware further upset some of the patients. They began to moan and wail.

"Silence!" Dreschler shouted. "If I hear so much as a pin drop, all of you will be placed in solitary, and I'll throw away the keys."

When he turned to Nurse Frank, she visibly cowered beneath his dark gaze. "I demand a full report."

"Case A attacked Nurse Lane with a knife."

"How is that even possible?"

Nurse Frank grabbed the blood-stained stake and handed it to Dreschler. He flipped it over once, twice in his hand. "This is nothing more than a wooden bed slat honed into a point. How does a patient conceal such a weapon when she is under constant scrutiny?"

Nurse Frank shook even more and said nothing. Disgusted, Dreschler spun on the hospital staff. "All patient rooms will be inspected at once for any weapons. If any such items are found, the patient is to be brought to me."

The orderlies returned. Dreschler motioned to Nurse Lane. "Carefully place her on this cart and follow me." While the orderlies did as commanded, he turned to Nurse Frank. "And you."

Nurse Frank wearily got to her feet. "Yes, Dr. Dreschler?"

"I hold you directly responsible for this grievous breach of security. I will deal with you later. For now, you will ensure that order is restored."

"Yes, Dr. Dreschler."

IN REACTION TO Dreschler's directive to have all patient rooms searched, I panicked. I feared that they would find my diary, and that I would be in trouble for sure.

While Nurse Frank took the steps necessary to calm the disturbed patients, I used the momentary distraction to sneak away from the great room.

Two minutes, I thought. That's all I need to get upstairs, down the hall, and into my bedroom. I'll stash the diary somewhere on my person until a better option presents itself and return to the great room. Oh please, dear Lord, please don't let anyone notice I'm missing.

I took the steps two at a time and sprinted down the dimly lit hall. I passed Hattie's closed bedroom door but didn't dare waste precious time trying to communicate. Hopefully, there would be time for that later. I entered my quarters and dropped to my knees beside the mattress to recover the diary. I lifted my shift and shoved it in the waistband of my underwear before making a hasty retreat.

I slinked into the great room. Not much had changed since my harried departure. The patients remained visibly upset and it took all of Nurse Frank's strong will to curtail their discontent. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Daphne staring at me. I was disconcerted from the contact because Daphne never met anyone's gaze dead-on. My anxiety intensified. She must've seen me leave, I thought. What if she finds a way to tell Nurse Frank what she's seen? I'll surely be sent to confinement if she finds out. To my relief, Daphne raised a finger to her lips, a sure sign that she would not betray me. Reassured that my secret would remain safe, at least for the time being, I relaxed.

While half the staff searched the patient rooms, the remainder assisted Nurse Frank in cleaning the great room and supervising work assignments.

Nurse Frank walked up to me. "Case C, you will accompany Case D in sweeping out the attic. Be mindful of loose floorboards and jutting nails. Any reports of injury sustained to person due to negligence will warrant meal restriction."

With eyes downcast, Daphne shuffled over to where I stood. In silence, we collected cleaning supplies from the storeroom. When we reached the second floor level, we found that someone had released the attic's trap door and an access ladder had been set in place. Carrying a broom and canvas bag, I took the lead. Daphne followed behind with a dustpan and brush.

A sole, octagon-shaped window allowed minimal sun exposure. Dust swirled in its dull span of light. On more than one occasion, I swore I heard scurrying sounds. I cringed. Whatever lurked in the shadows better damn well keep to them, I thought. As I worked, it dawned on me that I could stash my diary in the attic. Granted, I may have to go without it for a time, but the attic was the ideal spot to avoid discovery.

My decision made, I handed Daphne the broom and moved to a far corner, away from view. I scanned the floor for any loose boards. Suddenly, from off to my right, I heard someone approach. Wide-eyed and terrified, I clutched the diary to my chest. Out of the shadows, a man appeared wearing a leather tool belt and wielding a hammer. A few large nails were clamped between his teeth. He seemed as surprised to see me as I was to see him. He spat the nails into a metal can and scratched his head in confusion. He eyed the diary.

“Why, look who I’ve stumbled upon,” he said, in a jovial tone.

I was frozen with terror. When the man realized he’d frightened me, he flashed a broad, disarming grin. “I mean you no harm, young lady. I’m the hired hand whose job is to fix one of the rafters. If you desire a place for privacy, I’m none the wiser.”

I felt my anxiety wane. “You promise you won’t tell?”

The man held up his hand with palm facing forward, as if taking an oath. “On my beloved daughter Alice’s head, I will not tell a soul.”

With a conspiring wink, he ambled off. Seconds later, I heard banging. I took advantage of the noise to offset the sound of creaking wood as I placed my cherished diary beneath a loose, splintered floorboard. When I returned, Daphne had swept a sizeable area of the attic floor free of debris. I grabbed the dustpan and brush and stooped to complete my share of the chore.

Monday, October 9, 1933

AS THE DAYS passed since Nurse Lane’s attack, the asylum was virtually on lockdown. No outside activities were permitted and patients’ whereabouts were monitored round-the-clock. Dreschler had even gone a step further and hired an additional orderly to assist in maintaining patient compliance. On more than one occasion, I tried to sneak away from the staff and go to Hattie’s room to have a quick, whispered conversation through the door. I was willing to risk punishment to alleviate my concern that Hattie was in danger, but my attempts at contact failed. I was tempted to write Hattie a note and slip it under her door, but if she was as ill as Nurse Frank led us to believe, Hattie may not have the strength to retrieve the note and it could fall into the wrong hands. Nurse Frank’s hands. Or worse, Dreschler’s. I shuddered at the thought of the consequences.

I hadn’t met with Dreschler on a one-on-one basis since my initial session, nor did I look forward to a reprisal of our earlier conversation. No matter to what lengths Dreschler tried to reform me, I would remain committed to Laura Wentworth in mind, body, and soul. I would never renounce my feelings. However, with the threat of indefinite confinement at stake, I can’t help but feel disheartened by the thought that the more time I spend at Stanwood House, the more I’ve lost touch with the life I’ve lived outside of the asylum. Stanwood House, for now, is my reality.

Thursday, October 12, 1933

ON THE TWELTH day of my incarceration, we were ecstatic to learn that Nurse Lane had returned from medical leave. The stitches on her face and neck were covered with thick gauze



bandages to protect the lacerated skin from infection. She smiled at me, but it lacked the vitality I had grown accustomed to seeing. There's no light in her eyes, anymore, I thought. The realization that Nurse Lane looked as forlorn as the rest of the patients she oversaw weighed heavy on my emotions.

My luck changed for the better a few days later when daily assignments were doled out. Nurse Lane charged me with sweeping and mopping the hallway outside the patient rooms. My hope soared. Finally, I thought, I'll have a chance to try to get word to Hattie.

# Chapter Eleven

KYLIE CLOSED THE diary and stood. She extended her arms outward before raising them to form a pointed arch above her head. Cissy's account of daily life at the asylum disturbed her because it literally struck too close to home...the home that Maya had bequeathed to her. The cause of Cissy's emotional torment existed within these walls. No matter how many years had passed, and despite numerous renovations, Kylie imagined Stanwood House harbored many disquieted spirits. As she debated popping open a beer or pouring herself a tumbler of whiskey, her cell phone rang. Lea's name flashed across the screen.

"Care to meet me in town for another round of shellfish and beer?" Lea asked.

Kylie's taste buds tingled. "Although tempted by your invite, I'll have to take a raincheck. I need to finish reading Cissy's diary tonight. I have a train to catch tomorrow."

"Why don't you save the rest to read on the train?"

"I wouldn't feel right. For years, the diary lay untouched in Alice's basement and now, in a bizarre twist of fate, it's returned to the place where she'd written her last entry. It belongs here."

"Cissy's memories have come full circle, huh?"

"In a sense."

"If you change your mind..."

Kylie smiled. "I know where to find you."

"Don't forget to confirm your reservation and departure time. I'll give you a ride to the station."

"Will do."

She'd no sooner ended her conversation with Lea and placed her cell phone in silent mode when its screen lit up. She grimaced. Shelby. Kylie felt a pang of guilt. She'd forgotten to call her back as she'd promised. She could blame it on her preoccupation with Cissy Moore's plight, but that wasn't the reason. The old adage of "out of sight, out of mind" was never truer when it came to Kylie's emotions. What does that say about me, Kylie thought, as she debated letting the call transfer to voicemail. More importantly, what does it say about our relationship? With a heavy sigh, she answered.

"My poor baby. You sound exhausted," Shelby said.

Another wave of guilt washed over her. "I am. I've been pouring over a young woman's account of her stay in a mental asylum."

"What do you mean by account?"

"It's a diary."

"Diary? Where on earth did you uncover that?"

"A woman here in town entrusted me with it."

"Does it have any bearing on your spur-of-the-moment visit to Verhoven? Or support Sophie's claims?"

"It's too soon to tell. Speaking of Sophie, how's our girl faring?"

“Stable and in relatively good spirits. I think the meds are finally taking effect. She hasn’t had a sleepwalking episode since you left.”

Kylie blew out a breath. “That’s great news.”

“I’m intrigued. Tell me more about this young woman and her diary.”

Kylie filled Shelby in on Cissy’s life prior to her institutionalization. “It’s heart-wrenching how Cissy lost her sense of self all in the name of love.”

“All in the name of forbidden love, Kylie.”

“It galls me to think that until the mid-1970s, one’s sexual preference or beliefs, when contrary to society’s norms, was considered a mental illness. Cissy Moore didn’t suffer from any mental defect. She was being true to herself and for that she was hospitalized. It’s disgraceful.”

“Well, at least society doesn’t burn so-called deviates at the stake anymore, or banish them to exile.”

Kylie bristled. “Why do you sound so cold and heartless? As if the past doesn’t matter?”

“It’s not that I don’t sympathize. I’m just saying that science and society have come a long way in the past century. You know as well as I that psychiatry isn’t an exact science. By using trial and error—”

“Fuck trial and error,” Kylie snapped, then slammed her eyes shut at her outburst.

The silence on the other end of the line was deafening.

“I’m sorry, Shel. It’s been a grueling day.”

“Then maybe it’s time to give yourself a break. Take a nap or hit the sack early. Whichever one you choose, I wish you sweet dreams.”

“I don’t deserve you, you know.”

There was a slight hesitation before Shelby spoke. “I know. Sleep tight, my love.”

With the sound of blown kisses, Shelby disconnected without waiting for Kylie to reply with her own term of endearment. Kylie was relieved because none came to mind. She turned her attention to the diary.

# Chapter Twelve

Sunday, October 15, 1933

I FELT THE painful strain in my shoulder and arm as I toted the water-filled pail up the spiral staircase. On my knees, I wrung out a cotton cloth and began to hand wash the scuffed wooden floor in a circular motion. To my left, I snuck a peek at two patients, supervised by Nurse Lane, busily hanging iron-pressed drapes. I worked at an even pace. I knew if I over-exerted myself, I'd tire well before the noon hour, which would make completion of afternoon chores an excruciating effort. All the while, I kept my eyes deadlocked on Hattie's closed bedroom door.

When Nurse Lane and her two charges disappeared around a bend in the hall, I sprang into action. In three quick strides, I reached Hattie's room. I lay prone on the floor and peered under the door into blackness.

"Hattie," I whispered. "Hattie, it's me. Cissy. I'm so worried about you. Please say something, anything, to ease my distress." Silence met my urgent pleas. Tears welled in my eyes and my lips quivered. "Please, Hattie. You must speak to me. You must tell me all is well."

Without warning, I felt a vice-like grip on my ankles. A scream lodged in my throat as I was dragged on my stomach across the slick, soap-sudsy floor to the top of the spiral staircase. When I tried to rise up on my elbows, something hard pressed between my shoulder blades, pinning me in place. Through blurry eyes, I glimpsed regulation-white nursing shoes. Varicose veins wove thin tendrils about the unseen person's ankles. My body went numb. I knew of only one person whose body was afflicted with the condition. Nurse Frank. The realization paralyzed me with fright. Like a lamb primed for slaughter, I braced myself for the worst. Never in my most horrific nightmare could I have imagined what ensued next. With one vicious kick, Nurse Frank sent me plummeting down the steep staircase.

I AWOKE IN a dark, dank place. My first conscious thought was I'm in a coffin, and Nurse Frank and her henchman are going to bury me alive. And then a worse thought surfaced. Maybe I'm already dead, and I don't realize it. I tried to stretch out to my full length but couldn't move more than a few feet in either direction.

White-hot pain surged through my body, making me cry out. My heartbeat pounded so loudly in my head that it blocked rational thought. I lay on the cold floor in a fetal position and wept.

"Tears are for the weak," a gruff voiced sounded.

Startled, I struggled to sit up. "Who's out there?"

"Abigail. I'm in the next cell, if you want to call it that. Aren't cells supposed to have bars?"

Cell? What is she talking about? Then it came to me. We were both in solitary confinement. I pressed my back against the wall and slowly, agonizingly inched my way up until I could stand. Although bruised and sore, I didn't think I'd suffered any breaks from the fall. I paced out the chamber's interior. It was no more than four-feet squared. When I reached above my head, my fingers touched the ceiling and the boxed frame of an air vent.

"First thing to remember is to stay calm," Abigail said. "Panic wears down your strength."

I felt my throat constrict. "I can't be closed in. I won't be able to breathe."

"You're breathing just fine and, if you want to continue doing so, you better keep your voice down."

Memories of how Abigail had violently slashed Nurse Lane filled me with anger and disgust. "You're evil, Abigail. You deserve to be locked up. You scarred Nurse Lane for life. She was the only kind soul in this godforsaken place."

Abigail's voice became strained. "I didn't do it of my own volition."

"You're lying. I saw you stab her over and over. No one forced you to commit such violence. You took it upon yourself, and with no provocation, to attack a defenseless woman."

Abigail's tone was pleading. "You don't understand. I wasn't aware of what I was doing. Dreschler made me do it."

Abigail's words sent chills skittering along my spine. "Dreschler wasn't even in the great room during the attack."

"He needn't be. He'd already corrupted my mind. Put insane thoughts into my head. Turned me into his puppet."

"You're not making any sense, Abigail."

"The truth lies in the treatment room. I wouldn't blame you for not believing me, Cissy. Not with my history. But I swear I don't remember anything in the moments leading up to, during, or immediately after I attacked Nurse Lane."

"You had the weapon in your possession."

"I can't explain that, nor can I explain what caused me to snap. I'll never see the outside of this cursed place, but there's hope for you if you heed my warning."

"Which is?"

"Remember that evil exists within Stanwood House, and its name is Dr. Karl Dreschler."

Stunned by Abigail's words, I felt an all-consuming numbness invade my body. Shock, I thought. I'm going into shock. My legs buckled and I collapsed to the floor.

AS THE DAYS passed, I lost all track of time. In the darkness, my imagination tormented me with violent images. My dreams were nightmarish and unnerving. If it weren't for my lapsing into fantasies of me and Laura's future together, I was certain I would lose my mind.

An orderly fed me a piece of stale bread and a bowl of water twice a day through a sliding steel panel. A metal pail was also thrust into the chamber for me to relieve myself. I felt dehumanized. After a while, I began to talk or sing to myself to pass the time. Abigail remained silent.

I imagined days, then weeks passed before I heard Nurse Frank's voice outside the chamber.

"Case C, your term of punishment will end if you can answer in truth my questions. Will you promise to obey all house rules henceforth?"

I croaked, "Yes, Nurse Frank."

“Will you mind no one else’s business but your own?”

“Yes, Nurse Frank.”

“Will you willingly accept treatment from Dr. Dreschler so that one day you can return to your family and begin a new life?”

“Yes, Nurse Frank.”

At that point, I would’ve chewed off my own hand to get out of the wretched hellhole. A latch turned and the door swung outward with a screech that echoed in the still night. A cold chill hung in the air, invading my bones, making them ache. I wasn’t sure if Nurse Frank’s eyes were red and fiery, demon’s eyes, or if I hallucinated it. When I took a hesitant step forward, my knees gave out. I didn’t so much as flinch when one of the orderlies roughly gripped me about the waist and half-dragged, half-carried me to Stanwood House’s rear entrance. I was free and that was all that mattered.

DUE TO THE late hour, I wasn’t permitted to wash until morning. When the orderly opened my bedroom door, there was ample light coming from the hallway for me to make out a clean cotton shift lying across my pillow. I waited until the orderly locked me in before I peeled away my filthy clothes and donned the garment. I inhaled deeply of its bleached scent. Over the days of my confinement, I smelled only my own waste and sweat. Physically weary and emotionally broken from my ordeal, I crawled into bed. I was on the verge of surrendering to sleep when I heard a soft, whooshing sound. When I looked down, I couldn’t believe my eyes. Someone had pushed my diary beneath the door. But who? Daphne? The kind man in the attic? Overjoyed, I scrambled from bed and retrieved it. I held it close to my heart and cried tears of gratitude. Once I calmed down, I put charcoal to paper so that I wouldn’t forget any moment of my ordeal.

Monday, October 23, 1933

WHEN I ENTERED the great room the following morning, all eyes fell upon me. I imagined myself a slave remanded to an auctioning block for public inspection and bidding. Nurse Frank smirked in the foreground, seemingly satisfied another rebellious spirit had been beaten into submission. I felt sick to my stomach. I’d gone without proper nourishment for so long that the aroma of cooked meat nauseated me. With my head lowered, I shuffled across the floor to the dining table. Quite to my surprise and elation, I saw Hattie seated on the bench. With renewed vigor, I sat beside her and squeezed her hand beneath the table. When Hattie didn’t return the gesture, I cast a glance her way and bit my lip so as not to scream in horror.

The upper portion of Hattie’s skull, from forehead to midway across her crown, was shaved clean of hair. A grotesque, jagged line of black stitches lined her scalp. The tender tissue around the stitches was pinched and swollen with infection.

“Oh, my dear Hattie. What has become of you?” I whispered.

To my dismay, Hattie showed no reaction. She sat hunched forward, her eyes unblinking and unfocused. A thin stream of saliva dribbled from the corner of her mouth.

I was overcome with despair. First Darwin had disappeared, then Hattie had supposedly taken ill. A short time later, Abigail had stabbed Nurse Lane and later vehemently professed her

innocence in not knowing what she was doing. And now Hattie sat beside her with her skull showing signs she'd been cut open. Abigail's warning returned to haunt me. Something unspeakable lurks within Stanwood House that involves experimentation beyond the scope of my imagination, I thought. I must be very careful.

I felt intense fury consume me. I gripped the table's edge with both hands to steady my trembling fingers. Hatred roiled inside me. Through bleary eyes, I saw Nurse Frank watching me with the same smug expression. I will kill you, I thought. I will take you off guard and send you to the deepest realms of hell and, in so doing, avenge all you have tormented. I will bide my time and wait for your weakest moment to strike with a violence you so justly deserve. You and Dreschler will feel the full brunt of my wrath. I will expose you both, but not before I've rendered my own form of judgment. I must find access to the treatment room and expose proof that such atrocities exist.

When breakfast was served, I forced myself to eat. I need to revitalize myself, I thought, as I swallowed watery oatmeal and stifled a gag. I'll be of no use to anyone, especially Hattie, if I'm too weak to act when the time for vengeance is at hand.

I silently thanked the powers that be when Nurse Lane assigned me the task of storing boxes of old draperies in the attic. Finally, I can replace the diary in its hiding spot. Ever since the night before when a kind soul—who I presumed was Daphne—slid the diary beneath my bedroom door, I lived in fear of its discovery. Hidden amidst the attic's shadows, I take this small bit of time to write a hasty entry.

I sense time draws near to discovering Stanwood House's evils. When it arrives, I must do what I feel in my heart is just. Not another hapless victim should be subjected to such reprehensible torture. I promise to write again when I'm able.

# Chapter Thirteen

KYLIE REREAD THE final few lines of Cissy Moore's last entry. She closed her burning eyes and cursed. The promise of finding Sophie's link to Cissy's past died in the girl's last entry. Kylie had no choice but to return to New York and leave the past unresolved.

But all was not lost. She had an idea and was irritated at herself for not thinking of it sooner. She decided to sleep on it to ensure the idea was still a viable one in the morning.

THE BEEPING OF a car horn directed Kylie's attention toward the master bedroom's window. She peered out. Lea's Jeep idled out front, and Lea raised her head to look up at the window. After she'd confirmed the train's departure time, Kylie had called Lea to swing by and pick her up.

"Punctual as ever." Kylie quickly zipped her duffel bag and bounded down the stairs. She gave the house a quick once-over as reassurance that it was in passable order. Then she stepped out on the stoop and locked up. Once inside the Jeep, she tilted the heating vents in her direction and leaned forward. "Damn, it's cold," she muttered, as she held her hands over the warm air blasting from the vents.

"Winter's coming early. You can feel it in the air. It's still. Lifeless. Do you have everything?"

"Yes, considering I didn't come with much."

"Maybe next time you'll pack more."

"An extended stay, huh?"

"Maybe." Lea winked. "Now that the possibility of a reunion may be in the works."

Kylie stared at her, confused. Seeing her expression, Lea burst out laughing. "Not between us, stupid. With you and Maya Holworth."

Kylie pivoted in her seat. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Lea shifted the Jeep into drive. "I thought maybe passion's fire would rekindle now that she's returned from her mysterious absence."

"You've se...seen Maya?" Kylie stammered. "Here? In Verhoven?"

"In the flesh."

The fine hairs on her forearms rose. "That's not possible. Maya's abroad." In truth, Kylie had no idea where Maya Holworth spent her days or her nights. She tried to convince herself that she didn't give a damn, but wasn't very successful.

"I caught a glimpse of her in town square this morning. In the time it took for me to do a double-take, she was gone. If the woman I saw isn't Maya Holworth, she bears a damn strong resemblance."

Kylie's mind was a whirl of confusion. When she'd chased Maya through the woods the other day, she'd later convinced herself that she'd chased a vision. Yet now, Lea was telling her



that she'd seen Maya as well. Could it be true? Could she have returned? Or were both her and Lea's imaginations playing tricks on them? Kylie felt a stirring of hope and immediately squelched it. She couldn't afford to lose herself again. It'd taken way too long to recover the last time.

Lea must've realized she'd upset Kylie. She tried to fill in the awkward silence with small talk, but Kylie didn't respond. When they arrived at the train station, Kylie couldn't wait to get out of the Jeep. She needed time to think. Alone.

"Thanks for the ride, Sheriff," she said, forcing a smile.

Lea flashed her badge. "All in the line of duty, ma'am."

"Don't 'ma'am' me."

Lea laughed. "Then don't 'Sheriff' me, deal?"

"Deal."

"Don't be a stranger, Kylie."

"That's never been my intention. Take care, Lea." As Kylie walked toward the station, the idea she'd been mulling over the night before sprang to mind once again. She planned to return to Verhoven within the week with Sophie in tow. The hard part was breaking the news to Shelby.

BY THE TIME Kylie reached New York's Grand Central Station, twilight had descended, and the city's streets were wet with mist. Bone-tired, she hailed a taxi curbside and gave the driver her apartment address. She fell into a light doze during the ten-minute ride. The cabbie had to rouse her once they arrived. She slipped him a twenty and ascended the flight of stairs leading to her apartment.

When Kylie opened the front door, she found Shelby sleeping on the couch. Closing the door as quietly as possible, Kylie tiptoed over to her. She bent down and kissed Shelby lightly on her brow.

Shelby opened her eyes and sat up. "You look like shit."

Kylie grimaced. "And hello to you, too."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that the way it sounded. You just look whipped." Shelby patted the couch cushion. "Come, sit next to me. I'll give you a back rub."

"Thanks for the offer of TLC, but right now I think I'm more in need of a hot bath and about ten hours of uninterrupted sleep."

"You sound discouraged. What happened?"

After Kylie filled her in on Cissy's final diary entry, Shelby said, "Okay, so you reached a dead end. That doesn't mean that your search for the cause of Sophie's dilemma is over. You went to Verhoven on a hunch that didn't pan out. Rechart your course."

"It was more than a hunch, Shel. Sophie knew things about Stanwood House that she shouldn't have. It's almost as if she lived there in a past life. Which is why I need to return to Verhoven with Sophie as soon as possible. I'm hoping that once she is in Stanwood House and feeds off the energy, it may resurrect her repressed memories."

Shelby abruptly pulled away from her. "Oh, I see," she said, her voice dripping in sarcasm. "Sophie's paranoia must be contagious. You're now convinced she's a conduit for a disgruntled spirit? What happened to maintaining an open mind?"

Kylie immediately went on the defensive. "I believe what I'm proposing is the very definition of an open mind."

“No, it isn’t. You’re not looking at Sophie’s issue from a clinical viewpoint. You’re allowing fantasy to affect reason.”

Kylie bristled. “Dealing with the paranormal is not fantasy. It’s opening your mind to explore different states of mental awareness. You asked me to assess her. I have and will continue to do so. The fact that Sophie is experiencing sensations and experiences you aren’t comfortable with does *not* mean she’s emotionally disturbed.”

Shelby folded her arms over her ample breasts and turned away. Kylie reached for her. At first, Shelby resisted, but when Kylie cupped her chin and guided it in her direction, she relented. Tears brimmed in Shelby’s eyes and spilled over to her long, dark lashes.

“What’s really wrong, Shel?”

Shelby squirmed. “Spending too much time by myself, I guess. The truth is, I’ve started wondering if finding the root of Sophie’s psychological issues isn’t the only reason for your return to Verhoven.”

“What other reason would I have?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a certain Lea Carlson.”

Shelby’s admission confounded Kylie. “Oh, come on. You can’t be serious. Lea is a close friend.”

“Then if it isn’t Lea, is it the woman from your dreams? Maya?”

Kylie held back a gasp. “Wh...what are you talking about?”

“She haunts your dreams, makes you call out her name in your sleep. Who is she?”

Kylie felt betrayed by her own subconscious. Jesus, she thought. How long has Shelby known? Or suspected? Kylie replied honestly. “She’s someone from my past.”

“I suspect she’s someone you wish to share your present with, too.”

Kylie didn’t respond.

“I can’t compete with a memory, Kylie.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

“Yes, you are. By having me hang on.” Shelby swiped at a tear. “It’s why I’ve decided that it’d be best for us to take a break from our relationship. Hell, I’m not even sure relationship is the right word to describe what we share.”

Guilt pressed heavily on Kylie’s shoulders. She wanted to tell Shelby that Maya didn’t matter, that no other woman mattered, but Shelby deserved the truth. “You’re an exceptional woman, Shel.”

“Yes, I know. And intelligent, and caring, and rock-your-world sexy, but that’s not enough for you. You’re living in the past, which leaves no room for me in your present or your future.”

They stood and awkwardly looked at each other. When Kylie took a step toward her, Shelby took a defensive step back.

“Don’t, Kylie. Let it be. For now.”

Kylie helplessly watched Shelby shrug into her leather jacket and flip up its collar.

“I hope you find what you’re looking for,” Shelby said. When she opened the door, she almost collided with Sophie, who was reaching for the doorknob on the opposite side. If Sophie hadn’t done a quick side-step, she would’ve ended up face flat in the entryway. Head lowered, Shelby muttered an apology and shouldered past Sophie.

Once inside the apartment with the door closed, Sophie said, “Talk about bad timing.”

Kylie plopped heavily on the couch. “Fuck.”

“Sounds like you could use a beer. Got any in your refrigerator?”

Kylie numbly nodded.

Sophie retrieved a beer for Kylie and a diet soda for herself from the kitchen. She popped both tabs, handed one can to Kylie, and sat cross-legged on the floor. She took a sip and wrinkled her nose from the carbonation. "You look exhausted."

"It was a rough weekend, emotionally."

"I only saw the tail end, but it doesn't seem to have improved upon your return." Sophie motioned at the front door with her can.

Kylie grimaced. "My life's a total mess."

"I'm sure it's nothing that you can't make right."

Kylie took a long pull from her beer. "I appreciate your vote of confidence. We'll see."

"Shelby told me you found a girl's diary."

Kylie arched her back and felt something pop at the base of her spine. "Her name is, or was, Cissy Moore. She was a patient at the asylum."

"Did her diary shed any light on my predicament?"

"Not that I could say for certain. Her last entry indicated she was on the verge of discovering something sinister involving the psychiatrist and some of the medical staff, but she never had the chance to write it down."

"Sinister?"

"From Cissy's accounts, Stanwood House was far from a safe refuge for the tormented."

"Do you think that whatever Cissy suspected endangered her life? Maybe she met a violent demise shortly after writing that entry."

Kylie leaned forward and rubbed her weary eyes. "I don't know, and that's what's driving me crazy. There's more to her story than what lies in the diary. I think it exists within Stanwood House."

"I assume it wouldn't be in my best interest to read the diary."

Kylie shook her head. "I don't want Cissy's memories getting confused with your own. They need to remain separate."

"What can I do to help?"

"How about agreeing to take a trip with me?"

Sophie fluttered her long lashes. "I thought you'd never ask."

Sophie's playful flirtation amused Kylie and helped ease the tension between her shoulder blades. "Very funny."

"This trip doesn't involve any horseback riding, does it?" Sophie teased.

"Now that you mention it..."

"What?"

"I know it's a reach, but..."

Sophie leaned forward and gripped Kylie's knees. "Don't leave me in suspense. Tell me."

Kylie voiced the idea that came to mind the evening before. "Cissy's diary begins with a passage about her riding a horse through the woods with the hope of catching a glimpse of a girl. When you were under hypnosis, you described a similar scene. You said this girl was your salvation."

Kylie watched Sophie's mood change as her words sunk in. "So, you think Cissy is the one trying to reach out to me through my dreams?"

"Maybe."

"No maybes about it. When do we leave?"

## Chapter Fourteen

KYLIE SPENT THE better part of the week managing her case files and tying up loose ends. When she locked her office door the following Friday afternoon, her conscience was clear. As she rounded a corner en route to the elevators, she saw Shelby conversing with another doctor. Since Kylie wasn't ready for any sort of confrontation, she darted for the stairwell. She knew it was a cowardly reaction but didn't waste time browbeating herself over it. She had twenty minutes to meet Sophie at the train station. If she ran late, they'd have to wait over an hour to catch the next train departing for Verhoven.

Sophie met her as she exited the revolving glass turnstile leading into Grand Central Station. Kylie again felt déjà vu as she stood in line to board the commuter train. Once seated, and as the train ambled forward, Kylie asked, "Are you sure our unplanned trip to Verhoven isn't going to interfere with your work?" Kylie asked.

"Not at all. The Foundation's on recess until mid-month. I'm footloose and fancy free."

Kylie noticed that Sophie appeared relaxed and rested. There were no dark circles or puffiness around her eyes. Her skin tone was tinged with color.

"You look rejuvenated, Sophie."

Sophie smiled at Kylie's compliment. "I feel well-rested and clear-headed for the first time in weeks. Dr. Shelby upped the dosage on my meds so that I could sleep. She said a sonic boom wouldn't wake me."

"It shows."

Sophie gave her the once-over. "It's a shame you don't take your own advice."

"What are you talking about?"

"You resemble something the cat might've dragged in after a long night on the prowl. I'm sure you don't need me to tell you that no amount of caffeine will replace a good night's sleep. Are you still upset over your lover's spat with Shelby?"

Kylie's face heated in embarrassment.

"You can trust me, you know," Sophie said as she nudged Kylie with her shoulder.

Kylie reached for her hand and squeezed. "I know. Let's deal with one impasse at a time, for now?"

"Okay." Sophie tilted her seat, leaned back, and immediately fell asleep.

KYLIE PHONED LEA to tell her she was returning. Lea again offered to meet her at Verhoven station and drive her to Stanwood House. When they stepped down from the train, Kylie noticed Lea's rapt attention on Sophie. Hell, who could blame her. Sophie was a knockout. Lea met them midway on the platform, and this time Lea took the initiative and hugged Kylie.

"I knew wild horses couldn't keep you away from me," Lea teased.

"Nor a stray mare."

Lea released her and grinned at Sophie. “And to whom do I owe this pleasure? You didn’t mention bringing company.” Before Kylie could respond, Lea brushed past her and extended her hand. “Sheriff Lea Carlson, at your service.”

“Sophie Brighton. I’m Dr. Vinson’s trusted sidekick for the weekend.”

Not wanting to expand on their relationship, Kylie said, “Sophie’s assisting me with my research.”

“The hands-on kind?”

Kylie scowled at her and quickly changed the subject. “Where’d you park?”

They walked to Lea’s Jeep. Kylie tried to curb her impatience when Lea directed her to the backseat to allow Sophie to sit in the front. Instead of taking the main route to Stanwood House, Lea offered to show Sophie the town. For the next twenty minutes, Lea pointed out various areas of interest and historical landmarks. When Kylie glanced at Sophie, her annoyance flared. Sophie seemed enthralled with Lea. I can’t possibly be jealous, she thought. The more she watched the two of them, the more annoyed she got. Okay, maybe a little.

Another twenty-five minutes passed before Lea pulled into Stanwood House’s driveway. While Sophie scoped out the property, Lea helped Kylie inside with the bags.

“She’s a looker,” Lea said.

Kylie got a load of Lea’s lascivious expression and shoved her. “She’s a client, stupid.”

Lea’s grin widened. “All the better for me.”

“Sophie’s here to work, not to cavort with you.”

“We’ll see.”

As much as Lea tried to prolong her stay, Kylie sent enough visual daggers that she finally got the hint. As she reversed the Jeep out of the drive, Lea called out, “If you need anything at all, call me on my cell.”

Sophie waved and lingered in the drive as the Jeep pulled away. She finally followed Kylie into the house. “Lea’s charming.”

“She’s drooling over you like a love-struck puppy.”

“I like puppies, especially the light-haired, light-eyed ones.” Upon stepping inside, Sophie eyed her surroundings. “Oh my God. It’s huge.”

“Yes. Stanwood House is definitely grandiose.”

“And you own this?”

“For now.”

Sophie whistled under her breath. “I think I’ve made the wrong career choice.”

“Oh, the house was a gift. I could never afford this on my salary.”

“Some gift.”

Kylie moved toward the circular staircase. “Let’s put your stuff in one of the spare rooms, and then I’ll give you a tour.”

As they moved from room to room, Kylie explained the daily activities of Stanwood House’s patients, including where they ate, slept, and received treatment.

“It’s definitely not what I expected,” Sophie said. “The photograph gave me the impression that Stanwood House was a dark, foreboding place.”

“It’s under renovation, but don’t let the improvements fool you. It’s still a house harboring its fair share of secrets.”

“As most are.”

FOR DINNER, THEY ate Chinese take-out. While Kylie opted for beer, Sophie settled for sweetened ice tea.

“Good girl for choosing a non-alcoholic beverage.”

“It was a sacrifice, but I don’t want to mix with my medication. I’ve got enough troubles without risking an adverse reaction. So, what’s the deal with Sheriff Carlson?”

Kylie took the last swig from her bottle and hiccupped. “What do you mean?”

“You both seem rather chummy.”

“Lea’s a very close friend.”

“Close is code word among lesbians to mean at one time you were lovers.”

“I wasn’t aware of that little fact.”

“Yup. So, fess up. How long ago?”

“Years and years ago.”

“Was she any good?” Sophie asked with a smirk.

Kylie smacked Sophie’s arm. “I’ll never tell.”

“You’re no fun. Does she have a girlfriend now?”

“None at the moment. Why? Interested?”

Sophie seemed lost in thought. “Maybe. How can I resist those bedroom eyes?”

“Okay, Brighton, enough with the twenty questions. Let’s call it a night.” Kylie stood up from the sofa. “We’ll start fresh in the morning.”

“Care to elaborate on our plans?”

“And ruin the suspense? Hell, no.”

AFTER SOPHIE RETIRED to a second-floor guest room, Kylie stretched out on the sofa and waited for the fire in the hearth to die down. It seemed as if every muscle in her body ached. I’m so damn tired, she thought. The past few days had taken their toll.

Suddenly, Kylie’s attention was drawn to the front door. Through its frosted glass pane she swore she saw a figure standing on the stoop, its silhouette backlit by what she knew was a full moon. The silhouette wavered in her blurred vision. She held her breath and watched as the doorknob turned slowly to the right. On a soft breeze, it swung inward.

Maya Holworth stood in the entryway. Her mesmerizing, cobalt-blue eyes shone bright in the otherwise darkened foyer. Kylie feared she was seeing an apparition and that if she did so much as blink, Maya’s image would dissipate into the air in a cloud of gray-white smoke.

“I’ve returned, my sweet,” Maya said. Her silky, sensual voice sent tremors of excitement coursing through Kylie’s body. Awestruck, she watched Maya cross the room and kneel at her feet. Wordlessly, Maya leaned forward and caressed her thighs before burying her face in Kylie’s lap. Only thin fabric separated Maya’s lips from direct contact with her mons. Kylie’s clit throbbed from the heat of Maya’s breath.

“Oh, my dear Kylie, I’ve missed you so much,” Maya said. When she raised her head, tears glistened in her eyes. “I’ve waited so long for this moment. Craved for it. Craved for you.” Maya glanced at Kylie’s throat and smiled. “I’m pleased. You’re wearing the locket.”

The locket Maya referred to was taken as a trophy by the psychopath who'd viciously attacked Kylie in an abandoned warehouse two years before. Over time, the physical scars had faded, but the emotional ones remained raw. When the time of reckoning came for her attacker, Maya and Kylie rendered their own brutal form of vengeance. After the deadly confrontation, Maya had reclaimed the locket. She left it in an ornate box for Kylie to find the day she disappeared from Kylie's life. Without thinking, Kylie reached for the heart-shaped charm and stroked its shiny finish.

"I know it meant a great deal to you," Maya said.

"I replaced the picture."

Maya seemed surprised. "The one of your mother cradling you as an infant?"

"Yes." Kylie undid the locket's clasp. When the heart split in half, Kylie watched Maya's reaction. A photograph of Maya now occupied the place of distinction.

"I'm pleased that you still hold me dear to your heart."

An onrush of emotion raged inside Kylie. She could no longer hold back her feelings. "Why did you leave me, Maya? I've been so lost and alone. So frightened."

Maya enfolded Kylie in a warm embrace. "My mission was endangered. I needed to distance myself."

"At the cost of losing me?"

Maya pulled away and searched Kylie's eyes. "Is that what I've done? Lost you?"

When Kylie didn't answer, Maya gripped her hands. "You must understand that I disappeared to save us. There's much in life we're destined to explore. You're the love of my life, Kylie. Now that the storm's passed, we can begin anew. That is, if you haven't totally lost faith in me."

Kylie watched as a myriad of emotions swirled in Maya's hypnotic blue eyes. Finally, Kylie leaned forward and kissed her. She pulled away and held Maya's face in her hands. "Promise me."

"Anything, my sweet."

"Promise you'll never leave me again."

"I promise you that only death can ever separate us."

"There will be no such talk, Maya. Not when we haven't yet lived."

They held each other for a long moment before Maya spoke again. "I'm proud of your efforts to uncover Stanwood House's secrets and to help Sophie achieve peace."

"How do you know of Sophie's troubles?"

"Through the gift of foresight. Don't be discouraged, Kylie. Sophie's on the verge of self-discovery. Soon, the mystery will unfold. The truth will free Sophie from her past and reaffirm your mission in this life."

Kylie closed her eyes and surrendered to a profound sense of inner calm.

KYLIE STRUGGLED TO awaken when she felt firm pressure on her shoulder. Through a haze, she saw Sophie hovering over her. When disorientation passed, disappointment set in. The sun had risen, and Kylie was in the same spot where Sophie left her the night before. On the couch. Alone. With a saddened heart, Kylie accepted that she'd dreamt her encounter with Maya. Even in sleep, her true emotions betrayed her. Disappointed, she swallowed the lump in her

throat. It had felt so real. She swore she could taste Maya on her lips and smell her on her clothes.

Sophie broke into her reverie. “You were dead to the world. I was beginning to think you’d sleep until noon.”

Kylie sat up and rubbed her eyes. “What time is it?”

“Eleven-thirty. Lea must’ve stopped by at the crack of dawn. She left a note under the front door and a bag of freshly baked muffins on the stoop. They were still warm when I brought them in. I can warm them up in the toaster oven if you’re hungry. Oh, and I brewed a fresh pot of coffee.”

Kylie breathed in the wonderful aroma. “You’re a godsend.”

“Or an enabler. I know how much you’re addicted to that caffeine jolt.”

Kylie stood and stretched before following Sophie into the kitchen. As they savored a variety of berry-flavored muffins, Kylie said, “I’ve been thinking of a different approach to explore your subconscious.”

“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again?”

“Precisely.”

“What do you hope to uncover?”

“Yet another glimpse into another’s past.”

Sophie’s expression turned serious. “You mean Cissy’s past and the hold she has over me?”

“Yes. Are you afraid?”

“No. Intrigued, but not afraid. I trust you, Kylie.”

Kylie squeezed her hand. “I’m glad.”

“Any particular place in mind to try out this new approach?”

“Now that you mention it…”

Based on Cissy’s writings and Stanwood House’s layout, Dreschler’s treatment room was in the same location as what Maya referred to as her meditation room. That secluded chamber of the house had revealed many secrets, some that defied logic. Kylie thought it’d be the ideal place to revive long-lost memories.

Once inside the room, Kylie noticed that Sophie eyed the lack of furniture. The only thing in the room was the round sisal rug in its center. “This is a far cry from your office and that comfy divan. Do you expect me to lie on the floor?”

“No. We’ll be seated while we stream.”

“Stream?”

Kylie realized she’d gotten ahead of herself. “Streaming is a process that bypasses the stereotypical hypnosis approach. It’s a mental transference of thoughts and feelings from one mind to another. A probing of one’s subconscious, so to speak.”

“Like telepathy?”

Kylie nodded. “I have to be honest. There’s no scientific proof that streaming works. It’s a theory, but one I fervently support.”

She guided Sophie onto the floor. They sat opposite each other, in lotus-like positions, knees touching. Kylie held Sophie’s hands.

“This time, Sophie, I want you to focus on your emotions and not facets of the nightmare. How does your dream woman’s mental state make you feel? Make you react? You won’t be totally under, just in a highly receptive state between conscious and subconscious worlds. It’s important to keep your eyes closed and maintain hand contact. Any distraction, no matter how minimal, will disrupt the process.” She squeezed Sophie’s hands. “Are you ready?”



Sophie took a deep breath and nodded.

An interminably long period of silence ensued. Kylie felt the warmth of Sophie's grasp and listened to her soft, unhindered breathing. Remembering what Maya had taught her in past streaming sessions, Kylie strained for their mental psyches—their pulse points—to merge in order to attain an altered state of being.

Suddenly, Sophie flinched and let out a low, guttural cry. Kylie's grip tightened. She pressed her eyelids tighter and waited for the psychic connection to meld. But enlightenment never came. Instead, Sophie screamed in abject terror. She broke hand contact and lashed out with her legs, knocking Kylie backward. Kylie's head hit the floor with a bone-jarring thud. Disoriented, Kylie struggled for traction while Sophie thrashed violently atop the rug. Kylie managed to get to her knees, but when she reached for Sophie, Sophie shoved her aside and began clawing at the carpet's roughly bound edges. In a bizarre reenactment from when Sophie suffered a night terror during the sleep study, Kylie flung herself at Sophie and held tight until Sophie awoke from the trance.

At first, Sophie looked dazed and frightened. They lay side-by-side, panting from exertion.

"God, Kylie. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Maybe it was too soon to introduce streaming. It aggravated your condition. You reenacted the nightmare again."

"Did I hurt you?"

"A few bumps and bruises. Nothing serious. Do you remember anything?"

"No, damn it." Sophie sat up. And gasped.

"What is it?"

"Please tell me I'm not seeing what I'm seeing."

Kylie leaned up on her elbows and followed Sophie's gaze. She inhaled sharply. "That's a...that's a..."

"Yes, it is. A trap door."

In their tussle, they'd displaced the area rug. It lay in a half-rolled heap in a corner of the room. The removal of the rug revealed a piece of squared wooden panel inset in the floor. A rusted oval ring protruded from the panel's splintered surface. They crawled to the hatch. When Kylie reached for the oval ring, Sophie swatted her hand away.

"Don't."

"Why? It probably leads to a wine or cheese cellar."

"My dear, Dr. Vinson, I've seen enough horror movies to know there's always something monstrous or demonic lying in wait below. This trapdoor was hidden for a reason."

"Maybe it conceals a buried treasure."

Sophie snorted. "Or buried secrets."

Kylie took in Sophie's somber expression and offered, "If you're that squeamish, I'll take the lead."

"No way. If we're really doing this, I'll go down there first. I am by no means a wuss."

"Suit yourself."

Together, they struggled to release the hatch. Its hinges, aged from disuse, creaked and groaned. Once they raised the thick panel high enough to challenge gravity, Sophie gave it a hard push. It slammed on the wood floor, sending up a plume of dust. An offensive odor emanated from its depths. They gagged as they peered into the black, eerie abyss.

Sophie pinched her nose. "It reeks of death down there."

"You smell damp earth and stale air."

“How do you know? It’s too dark to make out anything.”

“I can fix that,” Kylie said as she got to her feet. “I’ll be right back.”

When she returned, she handed Sophie a heavy-duty, aluminum flashlight and tucked a spare one in the back of her pants.

Sophie blinked her flashlight on and off a few times. “That was fast.”

“After surviving one of the worst blizzards in Verhoven’s history two winters ago, I took the added precaution of stocking up on flashlights and batteries before we came.”

Sophie directed the flashlight’s beam into the hole. “There’s a ladder set into the side of the wall. I’m not sure how far it extends. I hope it’ll support our weight. To be safe, let’s go down one at a time.”

Sophie clicked off the flashlight and jammed it into the front of her pants. She sat, swung her legs over the edge, and used her arms to pivot her body onto a ladder rung. She bounced a few times. “Seems strong enough.” She glanced at Kylie. “Can you aim your light at the ladder so I can see where I’m going?”

“Sure.” Kylie held the flashlight at an angle to bathe the area in as much light as possible. Sophie stepped down to the first rung. “Count the rungs aloud as you go.”

“Why?”

“So I can keep track of you.”

Sophie laughed. “Now who’s acting squeamish?”

“Humor me, okay?”

Sophie’s voice droned, “One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Ouch!”

“What’s wrong?”

“One of the rungs is split. Number six.”

“Be careful.”

When Sophie counted to fifteen, she called up, “Your turn!”

“Okay. Give me a sec to get my footing.” Kylie hadn’t realized how edgy she was until she looked at her whitened knuckles gripping the hatch’s opening. What the hell have I gotten us into? Steeling herself for what they might discover, she followed after Sophie.

Dirt-packed walls with wooden bracings overhead and at its base made up the narrow corridor. Kylie carefully stepped between them and followed the beam of Sophie’s flashlight as it bounced off the walls a few yards in front of her. Kylie tried hard not to dwell on what creatures and creepy-crawlies lurked in the shadows. She fought against a cloying sense of claustrophobia the further she progressed. So focused on not tripping, she ended up colliding with Sophie who had stopped short. They screamed in alarm before shining their lights into each other’s faces. They laughed nervously.

Sophie whispered. “What the hell is this place?”

Kylie looked past Sophie’s shoulder as goose bumps prickled her skin.

A large, open area extended off the corridor. The chamber consisted of two cots equipped with wrist and ankle restraints. Wadded up bed linen, stained a dark rust color, littered the floor. A stainless steel cart lay overturned in a corner. Gauze, tape, and other medical supplies were scattered across the floor. Gore-spattered surgical utensils spread across a long wooden workbench. Some of the utensils were easily recognizable: forceps, surgical scissors, knives, and sewing needles. Others seemed out of place, more belonging in a handyman’s tool shed than in a surgical environment. A rubber hose dangled from a filthy porcelain sink. Kylie noticed a large drain inset in the ground. On a shelf above the workbench sat large mason jars filled with yellowish-gray fluid and white blobs. Kylie shuddered, imagining they held human tissue

samples preserved in formaldehyde. Corked vials and test-tubes nestled in a metal caddy were so coated with grime that she couldn't read their labels.

"What do you think? A makeshift lab?" Sophie asked as she looked around the room.

Kylie swallowed hard. "Or a human torture chamber."

Sophie whirled on her with eyes wild with fright. She spun around so quickly that she lost her hold on the flashlight. It clattered to the ground and rolled midway across the chamber. When it stopped, its high-powered beam shone on a grotesque scene: a badly decomposed, fully clothed skeleton.

Sophie's blood-curdling scream echoed off the walls. She pushed Kylie aside, bolted from the anteroom, and staggered down the corridor to the ladder. Kylie stuck around long enough to retrieve the flashlight before following fast on her heels.

# Chapter Fifteen

AFTER MAKING IT up the ladder, Kylie sought out Sophie. She found her in the living room, running her fingers through her hair and pacing before the fireplace. Her body visibly trembled. Her complexion was ashen and her eyes had a dazed, far-away look. Kylie felt just as shaken as Sophie but tried to remain calm in light of what they'd witnessed.

"Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god," Sophie said as she gripped her hair.

Kylie rushed to her and pulled her hands down. "I know that you're frightened. So am I. Scared shitless, really. What we've discovered goes far beyond what we expected."

"It's demented. I told you nothing good would come out of going down there." Sophie's expression changed. "I'm sorry about shoving you aside to get the hell out of there. I was so scared."

"It's okay. You're wrong, though, about nothing good coming out of this."

Sophie glared at her and resumed pacing.

"Please, Sophie. Listen before you tune me out."

Sophie threw her hands up in the air and collapsed onto the couch. Kylie sat perched on the edge of the coffee table.

"Finding that secret chamber is the breakthrough we need," Kylie told her.

Sophie gave her an incredulous look. "How do you figure that?"

"Because Cissy Moore's fate may lie in that room."

Sophie groaned. "I think it's time you tell me everything Cissy wrote in her diary, from beginning to end."

Before Kylie could respond, a hard knock rapped on the front door, causing them both to jump. Kylie twisted toward the sound and saw Lea peeking at them through the arched window.

"Damn," Kylie muttered. She turned to Sophie. "Say nothing. Absolutely nothing. The last thing we want is for Lea Carlson to get involved."

As soon as Kylie opened the door, Lea strode inside without waiting for an invitation.

"What's wrong? You're as white as a sheet," Lea said.

"You're the second person in as many weeks to insinuate that I'm in need of a tan. Sophie, remind me to make a salon appointment."

"Bullshit." Lea looked at Sophie. "You, with the deer-caught-in-headlights expression, what's going on?"

"Sophie..." Kylie cautioned.

Sophie blurted out, "There's a dead body beneath the house."

It apparently took a few seconds for her words to register. Lea blinked twice.

"Run that by me again, please."

"We found a trap door. We went down into a chamber and found all this weird surgical shit, and then a...a body."

Now that Sophie had blown their secret, Kylie had no choice but to explain. "Skeletal remains is a more apt description."

Kylie blanched when Lea unclipped her service revolver. "Let me get this straight. You're telling me that a dead body is on the premises?"

"Uh...yeah," Kylie said.

"All right. Show me."

Kylie held up a hand. "On one condition. Promise that what we show you stays among the three of us. No one else can be involved."

Lea all but snarled at her. "I can't promise you that. You've told me that you found a body. I have no way of knowing if the person's death was due to an accident or by an act of violence. It's very likely an investigation is in order."

Kylie squared her shoulders and stood her ground. "You need to keep an open mind, Lea. Remember that I own Stanwood House. Unless you have a search warrant on you, I can deny you entrance."

Lea gave her a smug smile. "Too late. I'm already in."

"Don't be a hard ass."

Lea eased her rigid stance. "Look. I'll meet you halfway. I'll agree to maintain an open mind and to discuss all options before I make a final decision."

Kylie wavered. "I'm not sure that's good enough."

"Take it or leave it, Vinson."

Sophie fidgeted on the couch. "I'm not going anywhere near that cursed hole. I've seen enough gruesome shit and madness for one day. Hell, for a freaking lifetime."

Kylie's mood softened. "You don't have to. Considering the circumstances, I think a shot of whiskey will help calm your nerves. Just don't tell Shelby."

"Excellent suggestion." Sophie launched herself from the couch and into the kitchen.

Kylie motioned for Lea to follow her down the hall. "If it helps, keep telling yourself that what you're about to see occurred in the past and holds no significance now."

"How far in the past?"

"Give or take eighty years ago."

They reached the meditation room. Lea's eyes widened when she saw the open hatch set in the floor's center. "You're going to need that." Kylie motioned at the high-powered flashlight clipped to Lea's service belt. She moved toward the ladder. "Follow me and be careful. The rungs are unstable and one's broken midway down."

Lea unclipped her flashlight and switched on the beam. "Thanks for the warning." She aimed the light toward the hole.

"I'll holler when I reach bottom," Kylie said. She descended the ladder carefully until she reached the floor below. "All right! I'm down!"

Lea's descent was slower than Kylie's since she had clipped the lit flashlight back onto her belt. The light bounced around a little, but thankfully, Kylie wasn't completely in the dark. Lea finally reached the ground, stood beside Kylie, and let out a breath. "Glad that's over." She thrust the flashlight into Kylie's hand. "I'll let you lead the way since you've been here before."

The cheap plastic flashlight she and Sophie used in their earlier descent paled in comparison to Lea's service-issue flashlight. Kylie aimed its penetrating beam ahead of them. The light picked out strands of cobwebs and dust motes swirling in the air. Kylie stifled a gasp and averted her eyes when her fingertips came within an inch of a decomposed rat. She raised the flashlight to waist level and slowly let its glow sweep the area in front of her. Eerie silence and palpable tension hung heavy in the air as they advanced toward the chamber. The stench of death and decay again invaded Kylie's nostrils.

Lea gagged behind her. “Now I know how Indiana Jones felt when he was trapped in that narrow tunnel, trying to outrun that huge boulder.”

Kylie didn't comment.

“How much farther?” Lea asked.

“The chamber's around the next bend.”

Seconds later, Kylie entered the chamber and aimed the flashlight's beam at the body. Lea cursed and sidestepped her. She squatted before the rotted remains and performed a visual appraisal while Kylie peered over her shoulder.

“It's male,” Lea said. “ID clipped on lab coat's right pocket reads Karl A. Dreschler, M.D. You were right about it being a decades-old corpse. ID's issue date is stamped November, 1930-something. Hard to read because the print's faded over time. No confusion as to cause of death, though. This guy was definitely murdered.”

Lea's quick determination surprised her. “How can you be so sure?”

Lea pointed. “Uh...there's the handle of an ice pick poking out of his chest.”

“Damn. Can't believe I missed that before.” Well, actually, I can, she thought, considering how scared shitless I was just moments before. “Did it puncture the heart?”

“The angle of penetration would've made it hard to miss.”

Lea scratched her temple. “Did you or Sophie disturb the scene at all?”

“Other than footprints? No.”

“Hand me the flashlight, will you?”

Kylie obliged and watched from the shadows as Lea expanded her search of the presumed murder scene. “Lots of broken glass and strewn instruments on the floor. There was a struggle. Blood splatter projections on the walls and around the body indicate he was stabbed multiple times. The poor bastard bled out fast and furious.”

Lea leaned far to her left across the width of an overturned service cart. She balanced precariously on one foot. “Now, that's strange. There's another large pool of dried blood over here. There's no indication anyone moved Dreschler's body, so I can't understand how... Shit.”

“What's the matter?”

“I found another body.”

Mindful not to disturb the crime scene, Kylie joined her. Highlighted by the flashlight's beam was a sheet-enshrouded body wedged in a half-sitting, half-lolling position against the wall. Although the sheet obscured its face, blood had bled through the cotton fabric, imprinting the victim's facial features on the sheet and transforming it into a death mask.

“Sweet Jesus.”

Lea handed Kylie the flashlight. She then bent over and pinched a small section of the sheet between her thumb and forefinger and tugged the fabric aside. Kylie shuddered at what was revealed: yet another skeletonized corpse, but the right-side skull region had caved in.

“It's female. Pelvic structure and petite frame are clear indications. If you look closely, you can see strands of long hair.”

“Age?”

“That's for the medical examiner to decide. She's dressed in a hospital gown. I'd say she was a patient.”

“She looks more like a sacrificial lamb.”

Lea reached for her hand and squeezed. “Hey, remember what you told me before you brought me below. Whatever transpired here took place close to a century ago. Her suffering's long past.”

Kylie remembered reading passages from Cissy's diary that alluded to mistreatment of patients by the hospital staff. "For me, it's fresh in my mind."

"Let's get out of here."

Lea took the lead. Quite by accident, or maybe destined by fate, Kylie glimpsed two leather-bound books standing upright beside a stethoscope in a wall-mounted, glass-paned cabinet. She wondered if they were Dreschler's medical journals. Much like Cissy had chronicled her stay at Stanwood House, Kylie suspected Dreschler recorded his own experiences. In her gut, Kylie felt that the books detailed further proof of abuse. She fought against the urge to break free from Lea and retrieve them. She was fairly certain that until Lea made her decision whether to initiate an investigation, she wouldn't want to compromise the crime scene or disturb potential evidence by traipsing through the area again. Kylie needed to bide her time. At first chance, she'd return for the journals. The sooner, the better.

"What do we do now?" Kylie asked, once they cleared the ladder. Lea rubbed her dirt-smudged hands on her khakis and holstered the flashlight.

"Nothing."

Lea's response shocked her. "I don't understand."

"I need time to assess the situation. Make sense of it all."

"Murder never makes sense, Lea."

"You know what I mean. I need to decide how to proceed."

"Lea, it's important for you to understand that the truth behind what happened in that secret chamber greatly affects Sophie's emotional vulnerability. She's suffering with her own private demons. If you make this official, you'll take all control away from us. The truth will die down there, and Sophie will be left to bear the burden."

"How could there possibly be any connection? As we both know, these murders are close to a century old."

"I can't really explain right now. You're going to have to trust me on this one."

"So, you're convinced whatever horrific events transpired in this house in the past are preventing Sophie from finding peace in the present?"

"Yes."

Lea seemed to weigh her words before responding. "You've got two days to find whatever the hell it is you're looking for. Then, I'll make my final decision."

Kylie's tense body sagged with relief. "Thank you, Lea."

"Consider it a temporary reprieve. The truth is, I'm merely abiding by the old adage of 'when in doubt, do nothing.'"

"Works for me."

Lea held up her hand. "Not so fast. You need to promise me something in return."

"Name it."

"Promise you'll stay away from that room and the secret passage."

Kylie made a pouty face...and lied. "If I must."

They returned to the living area and found Sophie as distraught as they'd left her.

"It didn't work," she said as she paced around the room.

"What didn't work?"

"The shot of whiskey. I'm still a basket case."

Suddenly, a thought sprang to Kylie's mind of how to get Lea out of the house long enough for her to return to the chamber and grab the journals. "Why don't you and Lea go for a walk and breathe in some fresh air? It'll help clear your head. There are a slew of hiking trails in the area."

Kylie ignored Lea's suspicious expression and kept her focus on Sophie.

"You want us to go for a walk?" Sophie asked.

"Sure."

Kylie tossed a sweat jacket to Sophie and ushered her to the front door. Once opened, Kylie all but shoved her onto the porch. "Hurry up, Lea," she called over her shoulder. "You wouldn't want to keep a girl waiting."

After they were outside and the door closed firmly behind them, Kylie waited until they'd set off before engaging the lock. She wasn't taking any chances that Lea would wise up to her intentions and backtrack. She grabbed the extra flashlight from atop the mantel—where Sophie had left it—and wasted no time returning to the subterranean chamber of horrors.

TEN MINUTES LATER, with Dreschler's journals in her possession, Kylie tossed another log in the hearth and sat on the couch. She glanced at the year scripted in the corner of each journal's front cover and selected the oldest. She opened to the first passage and began to read.

Sunday, November 1, 1931

Ellis Island, New York

I STAND ON American soil amidst herds of immigrants from neighboring countries. My transatlantic voyage, via steamship from my native Germany, was a long, grueling journey. A great many of my fellow travelers either succumbed to illness or were unable to bear the physical rigors of such a stressful passage. Those of us who survived know that reaching America is only part of the challenge. What lay ahead plays a monumental role in how our lives will take shape in this new world.

No fanfare greeted us upon arrival. Stoic-faced federal immigration inspectors sat at scratched wooden desks with clipboards and various rubber stamps at the ready, scrutinizing our credentials. They rejected many foreigners on the spot and detained them until they could be deported. Others, like myself, passed inspection and were waved on to undergo medical evaluations and psychological testing. They isolated those who showed any mental dysfunction or physical incapacitation and refused them entry. Thankfully, I was given a clean bill of health.

Now, I again find myself crossing water as a ferry takes me to the Port of New York. It is there that my destiny awaits as well as the woman who has agreed to join me in my new venture. I gaze upon my first national landmark, the famed Statue of Liberty Enlightening the World, which France bestowed as a gift of friendship to the United States in 1886. Although its enormous countenance commands attention, I'm uncertain if the copper monstrosity commands respect. In my opinion, "Lady Liberty" with her torch held high and broken chains at her robed feet seems too pompous and grandiose. Ah, America. The land of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Are you all that is said of you? Are you truly the land of the free and the home of the brave? I'll soon decide for myself.



NUMEROUS TIMES, OVER the course of an hour, Kylie had to stop reading out of revulsion over the atrocities Dreschler had committed. He often justified his demented experiments “for the sake of forging new frontiers in medical science.” You’re a sadist, Dreschler, Kylie thought. Nothing but a fucking sadist.

At the sound of muffled voices outside, she stuffed the journals beneath a couch cushion and hurried to the front door to disengage the lock. She opened the door to two red-cheeked, beaming faces.

“You were right, Kylie.” Sophie breezed past her. “I feel so much better. Lea is such charming company.”

Lea looked like she’d been struck by Cupid’s arrow more times than Kylie could count. She winked at Kylie and followed Sophie into the living room. With a scowl, Kylie shut the door.

Lea and Sophie stood side by side, warming their hands by the fire. “The temperature’s plummeting,” Lea said. “Harvey radioed in that a storm’s coming. A nor’easter. I wouldn’t be surprised if we get snow.”

Kylie groaned. “Just what we need.”

“I told you that winter comes around early in these parts.”

“The idea of being snowed in sounds thrilling.” Sophie eyes sparkled with excitement.

“Yeah, with two corpses as company,” Kylie said.

Sophie gawked at her. “Two?”

Kylie glowered at Lea. “You didn’t tell her?”

“I was under the impression that our nature walk was to help Sophie forget what she’d seen, not remind her.”

Sophie shuddered. “God, this is getting creepier and creepier.”

Lea patted her shoulder. “It’s not the dead that you should fear, Sophie. It’s the living. I could stay the night and keep any resident ghosts at bay, if it’ll make you rest easy.” Lea’s tone was hopeful.

Kylie was quick to decline her offer. “I’m confident we’ll be able to manage on our own, Lea. With a storm coming, I’m sure they’ll need you at the station house.”

If Kylie’s words didn’t convince Lea she didn’t want her around, her pissed-off tone did. Lea’s smile faltered.

“Ah, yes. Alas, duty calls.”

Kylie grabbed Lea’s arm and started to push her toward the door. “And I suggest you get a head start.”

This time, Lea was not as easily dismissed and stuttered to a halt. “In a second. I have something to do first.”

With a smug expression, Lea pulled a padlock out of her jacket pocket. “I knew I had an extra one in the Jeep and got it before we came back in the house.”

“What’s that for?” Kylie asked.

“Consider it a precaution.”

Lea strode down the hall, with Kylie chasing after her. Lea entered the meditation room. She gripped the wooden trapdoor by its splintered corners and hoisted it to waist level. With a hard push, it fell with a deafening bang over the hatch. She knelt and secured the padlock to the metal loop.

“Is that necessary?” Kylie tried for a tone as testy as she could muster.

Lea stood and turned to her. “Absolutely. I know you, Kylie. I know that you aren’t one to let sleeping dogs lie, or, in this case, let the dead rest.”

“So, you’re saying that you don’t trust me.”

Lea made a face as if she was thinking about it. “I wouldn’t use those words. Think of it as I’m protecting you from yourself.”

Kylie cursed. “You know, sometimes you can be a real pain in the ass, Lea.”

“Comes with the job. This way, while I’m not here, there won’t be any temptation.”

“Okay,” Kylie said, silently having the last laugh because she’d already swiped Dreschler’s journals.

Lea placed a hand on her shoulder. “It’s for your own good.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Now, as you so bluntly put it, I need to get back to the station.”

Sophie and Kylie walked Lea to the front door.

“Are you sure you have enough provisions in case you do get snowed in?” Lea asked.

Kylie ticked off items on her fingers. “The fridge and pantry are stocked and, as always, we over packed.”

“Don’t forget that we have plenty of firewood to keep us warm and extra batteries for the flashlights,” Sophie added.

“Well, then…” Lea hesitated leaving until Kylie nudged her again toward the door. “I’ll stop by in the morning to see how you’re faring.”

Sophie grinned at her. “I look forward to it.” Again, Kylie saw sparks fly between the two women and had to stifle a gag. Jealousy, yet again, reared its ugly head. What is wrong with me? She wondered. It was years ago that Lea and I had our fling.

Finally alone, Sophie turned and squinted at Kyle. “You have a lot of explaining to do.”

SEATED ON THE couch and bathed in the fire’s subtle hues, Kylie spent the next hour recapping Cissy Moore’s diary entries. She ended with Lea and her discovering the second corpse.

“My heart aches for the pain and suffering Cissy and the other patients endured,” Sophie said. “Were you able to identify the female victim found in the chamber?”

“Sadly, no.”

“Do you think it’s Cissy?”

“I don’t know what to think. I’m hoping Dreschler’s journals will lend more insight into the mystery.”

Kylie pulled the leather-bound books from their hiding spot under the cushion.

“Dreschler’s journals? And where, pray tell, did you find these?”

Kylie smiled devilishly.

Sophie arched a brow. “My, my, someone’s been a bad girl while I was gone.”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures.”

“Well, I’d hate for you to bear the guilt of deception alone. Fill me in.”

AGAIN SEATED WITH their glass tumblers refreshed with whiskey, Kylie told Sophie what she had discovered in the writings.

“Dreschler’s entries read much like Adolph Hitler’s in Mein Kampf. Autobiographical for the most part. Dreschler immigrated to the states from Germany. It was in the years before World War II and Hitler’s rise to power. The Third Reich didn’t exist, but was in its planning stages by select members of the burgeoning Nazi party. Hitler began grooming Dreschler, a young medical student at the time, to oversee an ultra-secretive program. The program entailed conducting medical experiments on people not of the Aryan race. If Dreschler’s account is correct, Adolph Hitler’s vision of a superior race began long before he achieved Fuhrer status.”

Sophie shuddered. “Barbarians.”

“As I read further, I learned that something went wrong. For some unknown reason, Dreschler fell out of favor with Hitler and was ostracized.”

“I’m sure that pissed Dreschler off.”

“Apparently, from his written rantings, Dreschler’s rage was so intense over being blacklisted he immigrated to the states and procured a position as Chief Alienist at Stanwood House so he could set his own deviant plans in motion.”

“Alienist?”

“That’s an old-fashioned term for psychiatrist.”

“Do you think that Nurse Frank was the woman waiting for him to arrive stateside?”

“It would make the most sense.”

Sophie took a huge gulp of whiskey. “And Dreschler continued his horrid experiments here on people he deemed inferior? The mentally and emotionally imbalanced?”

“Right and none were the wiser. He preyed on the weak, the forgotten. His detailed accounts of medical experimentation on Stanwood House’s patients are graphic and repulsive. He used electroconvulsive treatment to the point where patients’ brains were fried. He induced comas and performed surgical lobotomies often without anesthesia. He amputated limbs purely for study purposes and subjected patients to drug and chemical injections to see how their internal organs would react. The extent of his sadism and maliciousness was boundless.”

Sobered by Dreschler’s revelations, they sat in silence. Finally, Sophie asked, “What do we do now?”

“Give our minds and our bodies a rest for the evening.”

“Is that even possible? After everything we’ve learned about the asylum?”

“I suggest we try our best. Tomorrow is a new day, and we’ll need our strength.”

As the words left Kylie’s lips, hail began pelting the house.

## Chapter Sixteen

FRANTIC, UNINTELLIGIBLE RANTING snapped Kylie awake from a sound sleep. She bolted from her bed and raced into the hallway in time to see Sophie descend the stairs. Sophie's movements were disjointed, erratic. Kylie called out to her, but Sophie continued on, unresponsive. It finally dawned on Kylie that Sophie was sleepwalking. Concerned for her safety, Kylie followed her down the stairs and into the great room. For close to a minute, Sophie roamed about the room, eyes darting, fingers splayed and groping, before she changed direction and started toward the narrow hallway leading to the meditation room. Kylie rushed past her to reach the room first. She wanted to gauge Sophie's reaction to the padlocked trapdoor. As long as she remained free of danger, Kylie would let Sophie reenact her nightmare without interfering. Kylie hoped that maybe this would be the last time Sophie would suffer the dream's torment.

Sophie entered the room and immediately dropped to her knees. With her eyes closed, she felt around in the dark until her fingers fell upon the hatch. She fumbled with the padlock. It fell with a dull thud against the wood but remained secure. Sophie whimpered and moaned. Her hands skimmed the hatch's surface. She crooked her fingers along the hatch's wooden edges and tried to pry it open. From her movements, Kylie could tell Sophie was becoming increasingly agitated. Seconds later, all hell broke loose. To Kylie's horror, Sophie began clawing at the hatch and screaming like a madwoman. Before long, the tips of her fingernails had chipped and her fingertips became raw and shredded from her futile effort to gain entrance into the chamber. Unnerved that the situation had gotten out of control so fast, Kylie rushed to her and grabbed her hands.

"Leave me alone," Sophie shouted, even though still immersed in a trance. "I have to save her! I have to save her!"

"Save who, Sophie? Who are you trying to save?"

"Hattie!"

Suddenly, Kylie's mind exploded with bright white light, and her body jerked and thrummed as if struck by a powerful electrical current. Its jolting force surged through her veins. It's finally happening, she thought. I've tapped into Sophie's pulse points. We're streaming.

Kylie met the realization with a mixture of excitement and terror. The last time she streamed, she and Maya found themselves face-to-face with Kylie's attacker, followed closely by a violent encounter. To not break the telepathic connection, Kylie tightened her hold on Sophie's hands. She blocked out her own thoughts and focused on Sophie's, for it was within Sophie's mental images that Cissy Moore's tortured story came to life.

FOR DAYS AND days, Cissy went through the motions of subservient patient in performing her chores. She felt like an automaton, programmed to eat, work, and sleep. Her bi-weekly therapy sessions with Dreschler left her frustrated and exhausted. At the last session, Dreschler

warned that if she didn't reject the sins of the flesh, he would resort to more invasive treatment. Cissy cringed when she thought of Hattie and wondered if the same sinister fate awaited her.

Many weeks had passed since Abigail was remanded to solitary confinement. Cissy dared not obsess over what became of her. In her absence, another female patient joined Stanwood House's group of misfits. Fair skinned, blonde-haired, and waifish, she had a detached look in her eyes. Cissy thought she'd fit in just fine. It appeared as if none of the other patients noticed Abigail's prolonged absence. Or maybe they did and simply didn't care. It appeared their self-esteem, like hers, had been dashed to bits. But they didn't know what Cissy knew. What Abigail had told her about Dreschler and his mind control experiments. Many times since their conversation, Abigail's haunting words echoed in her ears. "I wasn't aware of what I was doing. Dreschler made me do it."

Cissy wanted to write in her diary and express her distress in words that she hoped Laura would read one day, but no opportunity arose for her to sneak into the attic. Nurse Frank kept her under close watch. In times of weakness, Cissy's resolve faltered and she thought, I'm going to die here. The possibility that she might never be free to live her life as she wanted threatened to break her spirit. But Cissy's will to survive triumphed. She recommitted to her promise to Hattie that she'd find and destroy the evils lurking within Stanwood House.

Twilight of the nineteenth day of her release from confinement, Cissy sensed heightened anxiety in the air. Medical staff appeared impatient, on edge. As she emptied trash bins, Cissy overhead two orderlies talking in hushed tones about an impending storm. A nor'easter. As always with these storms, there was great potential for enormous destruction. While the orderlies had their backs turned, Cissy crept to the nearest window and peeked out. The sky loomed black and foreboding. Flashes of lightning illuminated the abandoned field that surrounded Stanwood House, making the landscape appear like gray-white ash. Oddly, though, no claps of thunder erupted. Powerful wind gusts caused spindly tree branches to eerily writhe beneath dark gray storm clouds. Somewhere off to Cissy's right, she heard Nurse Frank bark commands at the orderlies to barricade windows with large sheets of plywood to prevent shattering glass. It seemed that every precaution was taken to ensure staff and patient safety.

Some of the patients had already surrendered to fits of hysteria. Staff had quickly restrained and sedated them. Other patients fretted and cried. Cissy felt certain that the situation had worsened because Nurse Frank rang the hand bell alerting staff to round up the patients and report to the great room at once. Cissy receded to the rear of the crowd to observe without having Nurse Frank's eyes on her. Per the normal routine, all patients lined up, side-by-side, in front of Nurse Frank as she referred to her patient roster. After a quick scan, Nurse Frank nodded to Nurse Lane that all were in attendance. That can't be right, Cissy thought. Hattie's not here. Patients are arranged in alphabetical order, which means Hattie should be two down, to my right. She's not. Cissy racked her brain to think of the last time she'd seen her. An hour ago? She'd been sitting in a rocking chair, looking out the bay window. Whatever Dreschler had done to her had rendered Hattie incapable of even the simplest of tasks. The Hattie that Cissy had come to know and love no longer existed. What remained was a fragile shell of a human being.

Filled with a sense of doom, Cissy turned to Nurse Frank. Their eyes met and held. Nurse Frank pursed her lips and leered at her. Her sadistic expression revealed all that Cissy feared. Dreschler had Hattie. In the treatment room.

A sudden, frightening boom of thunder rattled the window panes. Shrieks of panic broke out in the great room. Nurse Frank sprang into action. "Staff, take all patients to the east wing's

visitation room and remain with them under lock and key until the storm subsides. I will not tolerate disruption of any kind.”

Nurse Frank grabbed the patient nearest to her and thrust her toward a sour-faced orderly. As Nurse Lane moved toward Cissy, an earth-shattering clap of thunder ripped from the sky. The overhead lights flickered, then died out, immersing Stanwood House in darkness. Bedlam ensued as staff and patients struggled in the dark. Nurse Frank’s voice rose above the din. “Staff, get the kerosene lanterns and all the candles you can find! And keep those patients moving. Now!”

The time is here, Cissy’s mind screamed. Escape!

In the bedlam, Cissy forced her way among flailing arms and tightly compressed bodies until she had wedged herself in a corner. Luckily, a bolt of lightning illuminated the great room and gave her a split second to get her bearings. As patients and staff hurried in the opposite direction, Cissy felt her way along the wall until she reached the hallway leading to the treatment room. In her gut, she knew that Hattie’s life was in danger and that time was of the essence. She hastened to her rescue.

Another lightning flash seared down the hall, lasting long enough for Cissy to see the treatment room’s door was ajar. Acting on pure adrenaline, she raced down the corridor and into the room. A flickering candle sat on a window ledge beside the grotesque human skull. Cissy could see that the desk had been moved off to the right, along with the area rug. What stood in its place made Cissy’s skin crawl and her breath catch in her throat. A rectangular section of the floor had been cut away. From its depths, Cissy saw yet another form of light emanate.

Although terrified, Cissy didn’t hesitate. She dropped to her knees and crawled to the opening. She thrust a hand into the hole and searched for a means of entry. She felt what appeared to be a wooden ladder inset into one of the interior walls. Fighting dread, she descended.

Cissy stepped from the last rung onto a dirt-packed floor. Ever mindful to use caution and remain silent, she peered into the murky grayness. The stream of light lay ahead of her. Cissy mouthed a silent prayer and inched forward. Squeaking and scurrying sounds made her cringe. She bit down hard on her lower lip when she felt the brush of fur and a rigid, spindly tail rake across her bare ankle. Rats. Go away, her mind shouted. Please, go away.

When she finally reached the threshold where the light was brightest, the true horror of what she’d found threatened to immobilize her. Cissy stared, aghast, at a most frightful sight. Dreschler stood before a steel table with his back to her. Unbelievably, he was whistling an upbeat tune as he worked on a body resting atop the table. His massive frame obscured any view of the patient from the pelvis up. It didn’t matter. Cissy knew who was on the table. Hattie. By a kerosene lantern’s eerie glow, Cissy saw a tray of metal instruments to Dreschler’s right. They appeared to be coated with blood and gore. When Dreschler reached for a tool that resembled an ice pick, Cissy’s pent-up anger exploded. Without any concern for her own self-preservation, Cissy screamed, “Get away from her, Dreschler! Haven’t you tortured her enough?”

Dreschler tensed and spun on her. His startled expression changed to one of fury. His grip tightened on the ice pick, whitening his knuckles. In the lamplight’s glow, his pupils glowed red, demonic. He sneered at her. “You are a menace, one I should have dealt with a long time ago. So defiant. So utterly incorrigible. And here you stand, the righteous heroine. Don’t you know, unfortunate one, that your time has come and your fate is as sealed as your friend’s?”

He took a menacing step toward her. Fighting against panic, Cissy stood her ground and searched the area for an object to use as a weapon. To her dismay, Dreschler was closer to the

barbaric instruments than she. I'll use my teeth and fingernails to render violence if I have to, she thought. Dreschler will not escape this hellhole as long as I draw breath.

As Cissy braced for attack, someone from behind wrenched her arm upward between her shoulder blades. She yelped like an abused dog. Through a haze of pain, Dreschler flashed an evil grin. "Well done, Nurse Frank," he said. At the mention of her nemesis's name, Cissy frantically bucked against Nurse Frank's rigid body, but it was no use. With a maniacal laugh, Nurse Frank again twisted Cissy's arm with such ferocity that the pain brought Cissy to her knees. The torture chamber swam in and out of focus as Cissy fought to remain conscious.

Dreschler's eyes smoldered with hatred. "Alas, Nurse Frank, I've concluded that these many months of study and exploration are now in jeopardy. First Case H grew suspicious after one of the male patients disappeared, then Case A acted out prematurely at Nurse Lane's unfortunate expense. And now, this degenerate has discovered my laboratory. As such, we must preserve our secret by drastic measures. There must be no witnesses. All who reside within Stanwood House are to be terminated."

"All? Staff included?" Nurse Frank asked in an incredulous voice.

"Yes. We can't have them speaking to the authorities. I understand that this was not in our initial plan, but if I'm to continue my research, we must leave no shred of evidence behind."

Cissy thought that Dreschler sensed Nurse Frank's reluctance to act on his command because his tone hardened. "When you agreed to assist me in my work, Nurse Frank, you promised to obey without constraint."

"But how will we explain so many deaths?"

"We'll report that there was a patient uprising. A fire was set, and in the mayhem to regain order, staff as well as patients, succumbed to smoke inhalation. It was only by the grace of God that our lives were spared."

"I understand, Dr. Dreschler. I will see to it."

When Cissy cried out in outrage at their plan for mass murder, Dreschler lurched forward and slapped her hard across her face. "There will be no further outbursts from you, Case C, or I'll use this ice pick to scramble your brain." He returned his attention to Nurse Frank. "Have the staff herd the unfortunates into a contained area and lock them in."

"Already done. The storm caused the patients to panic. I decided they should be watched as a whole instead of separately. Staff and patients are in the visitation room."

"Excellent choice of venue, Nurse Frank. When the staff isn't paying attention, lock the visitation room from the outside. Then soak all the curtains in the entryway with kerosene and set them ablaze. With the visitation room windows barred, they will have no means of escape. I'll take care of unfinished business here, collect my journals, and join you outside. From there, we will make a swift escape."

Nurse Frank released Cissy, and she fell hard to the dirt floor. Cissy heard Nurse Frank's receding footsteps behind her. Dreschler leaned forward and pressed his foot on the small of Cissy's back, pinning her to the floor.

"You're a vile creature," Cissy said and spat out a mouthful of blood.

"No, you are gravely mistaken. I am a visionary. Only through experimentation can we make great advances in medical science."

"At the sake of innocent people's lives?"

"You and your fellow patients are unfortunates, banished to this asylum because society has no use for you. Your deaths are meaningless."

"You mean our murders."

“Again, meaningless.” Dreschler crouched beside Cissy and wielded the ice pick before her eyes. “I’m disappointed that the urgency of my escape prevents me from probing the recesses of your brain. You were scheduled as my next research subject, you know. Among other experiments, I had a pre-frontal lobotomy planned. It’s quite an intricate procedure.”

Cissy struggled beneath his weight.

“Now, now, child. If you resist, I may not be able to kill you on the initial attempt. You need to remain unmoving and submissive.”

“Damn you!” Cissy cried out.

Dreschler gripped her shoulder and flipped her onto her back. Straddling her hips, he raised the ice pick. Cissy watched in horror as the ice pick’s elongated shadow rose on the opposite wall. Realizing her death was imminent, she closed her eyes and prayed aloud. “Our Father, who art in Heaven...”

Suddenly, a wild, banshee yell reverberated in the room. Dreschler grunted in protest and shifted his weight off of her. As Cissy clambered to her feet, he bellowed, “You are the scourge of the earth!”

Incredibly, Hattie had summoned enough strength to hurl herself from the operating table onto Dreschler’s shoulders. The two now grappled with each other on the blood-stained floor. During the melee, Dreschler lost his grip on the ice pick. It skittered into a corner, well within Cissy’s reach. Cissy lunged for it. Now armed with a lethal weapon, Cissy advanced on the tangled shapes. Enraged that he’d underestimated Hattie, Dreschler gained control and head-butted her. The violent motion sent Hattie rocketing backward, smashing her skull against a brick wall. She sagged to the floor and her head lolled to the side. She lay still, lifeless.

Panting, Dreschler got to his knees. Letting out her own cry for bloodlust, Cissy lunged at him and thrust the ice pick into his shoulder blade. Dreschler howled in pain and tried to grab her wrists, but Cissy was too fast. She recoiled, gripped the ice pick tighter and again attacked him. This time, she plunged the ice pick flush into his chest. From the way the handle pulsed in her hand, she knew she’d punctured his heart. Dreschler’s eyes bulged in shocked disbelief. When he tried to speak, a choked, gurgling sound came out and blood spewed from his lips. He collapsed and lay twitching in the final throes of death.

Cissy rushed past his lifeless body and knelt before Hattie. What she saw made her stomach heave. Hattie’s skull had caved in upon impact. Pale gray brain matter dangled in bunched tresses from the gaping hole. Hattie’s eyes stared straight ahead, unseeing, in the flickering darkness.

Cissy whimpered and clutched Hattie’s body to her chest. “Hattie, oh Hattie. Not you. Not you.” Grief threatened to root her in her place, but Cissy fought against it. Her survival had become a race against time and insurmountable odds. She already caught the scent of smoke drifting into the chamber from above. With trembling fingers, she closed Hattie’s eyelids, yanked the blood-stained sheet off the table, and draped it over her.

“I will always remember you, my dearest friend.”

Cissy fled the torture chamber, clambered up the rickety ladder, and raced out of Dreschler’s office. Once she reached the hallway, plumes of black smoke swirled menacingly toward her. Her eyes watered and burned as she blindly felt her way in the dark. Her throat constricted from the acrid smoke.

The patients’ and staff’s screams of agony threatened to paralyze her. They were blood-curdling and intermingled with loud, pounding sounds. Twice, Cissy stumbled and fell as she forced her body to move through the oppressive darkness. When she reached the great room, the



shrieks intensified. In revulsion, she realized the banging she'd heard were people throwing their bodies against the locked visitation room door in a desperate attempt to escape from the inferno. Blue-white tongues of fire shot out from beneath the door and lapped across the floorboards. Cissy heard the hiss and crackle of wood set aflame. I can't leave them here to burn alive, she thought. I could never live with myself. With a surge of courage, Cissy held her breath and disappeared into the cloud of smoke churning about the visitation room's door. Try as she might to release the lock, it didn't budge. Within seconds, tremendous heat seared her face, forearms, and hands. She screamed in anguish and retreated from the flames. It was useless. It was too late to save anyone except herself. The front door loomed before her, beckoning to her. Her salvation from purgatory. Not trusting her legs to support her, Cissy crawled toward freedom.

When she was within five feet of the front door, a motion to her left caught her attention. Out of the smoke, a ghastly image emerged. Nurse Frank. Her eyes gleamed with malevolence. If evil incarnate existed, it had indeed taken possession of this fiendish woman. She advanced slowly, deliberately toward Cissy.

"I should have killed you that first night," Nurse Frank hissed. She pulled a pair of scissors from the folds of her skirt and held them, outstretched. She clicked the blades open and closed, open and closed.

In a final act of defiance, Cissy rose to face off with Nurse Frank.

"I'd rather die than see you escape, you wicked crone."

Nurse Frank's lips spread into a demented leer. "So be it," she said in a hoarse whisper and lunged. Suddenly, a blinding burst of lightning shattered the front door's arched window and struck Nurse Frank square in her chest. Her arms flailed out from her body and her back arched as the powerful electrical current seared through her and fried her from the inside out. Her legs jerked in a macabre dance as death staked its claim. Finally, the current exited through her ankle, ricocheted off the floor, and struck a wooden pillar. The pillar split apart and collapsed atop Nurse Frank's convulsing body.

The magnitude of the lightning assault had blown the front door inward. It hung lopsided from a mangled hinge. Cold November air wafted across Cissy's heat-scorched skin. Using what little remained of her strength and emotional will power, she staggered outside. Barefoot and ill-clothed for the weather, Cissy made her way across the rough terrain toward town. She never once looked back.

## Chapter Seventeen

THE TELEPATHIC MENTAL stream, and its telling images, mercifully faded to black. Kylie was the first to open her eyes. She released her grip on Sophie. When she did, Sophie swayed as her body lost its rigidity. Kylie grabbed her before she toppled over. She lowered her to the floor and gently shook her shoulders and rubbed her hands. “Wake up,” she whispered. “Please, Sophie, wake up.” Kylie felt immense relief when Sophie’s eyelids fluttered open.

Sophie’s confused expression gave way to one of understanding. She grabbed Kylie fiercely about the neck and pulled her down alongside her.

“Finally, it all makes sense,” Sophie cried. “The sensations of heat, pain, and fear that have tormented me for so long. And, most important of all, Cissy escaped. She didn’t die in the fire!”

Kylie wiped tears from her eyes. “Yes, Cissy’s story’s finally been told. Maybe now you can reclaim your own life.”

Stretched out on the floor, they surrendered to unrestrained fits of giddy laughter. When they finally composed themselves, they helped each other to their feet.

“It’s not totally over, though,” Sophie said.

Befuddled, Kylie asked, “How do you mean?”

“We still don’t know what became of Cissy.”

“Maybe we aren’t meant to know.”

“But we can’t give up. Not now. Cissy had to have sought shelter somewhere. Someone had to have seen her. Helped her.”

“Sadly, anyone from that period of time is no longer alive. Cissy included.” A thought struck her. “Except...”

“Except what?”

Kylie snagged her coat and strode to the front door. “Come with me.”

KYLIE REMEMBERED MAYA once telling her she owned a sleek, black SUV. It was in mint condition and rarely taken out of the garage. Since she didn’t want to ask Lea for a lift, and she assumed the SUV came with the house, Kylie decided now was the ideal opportunity to take it out for a spin. When they entered the garage, Sophie whistled her approval. The keys were in the ignition and the gas tank was full. It turned over without a glitch.

The nor’easter had lost strength within hours of reaching Verhoven, and most of the sleet and freezing rain changed to a light mist by morning. Now, with the storm long passed, the sun shone on the glistening landscape, washing it anew with vibrant color.

“I feel as if the weight of the world’s finally off my shoulders,” Sophie said.

“I’m glad.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you, Kylie.”

“I can say the same.”

“Really?”

Kylie nodded. “Stanwood House stood as a reminder of a painful time in my past. If not for the psychic connection between you and Cissy, I don’t know if I would’ve ever had the nerve to return and face the memories.”

“And now that you have?”

Kylie sighed. “Now that I have, I’ve attained peace as well.”

When they arrived at the Clarke residence, Kylie asked, “Do you mind waiting in the SUV? If there’s more to tell, I don’t want Alice feeling uncomfortable sharing it. I’ll leave the engine running and the heater on full blast so you don’t get cold. I shouldn’t be more than a half hour.”

“That’s fine with me. I could use a well-deserved nap after what we’ve been through.”

Sophie hunkered down in her seat and zipped her coat until it covered the lower half of her face. Kylie could have sworn she heard Sophie snoring before she closed the SUV’s door.

Carrying Cissy’s diary, Kylie bounded up the front steps and rang the doorbell. Through a hand-stitched, eyelet curtain covering the door’s upper pane, Alice appeared in the kitchen archway. When Alice recognized Kylie, she wiped her flour-dusted hands on her apron before undoing its sash and draping it over the arm of an easy chair.

She greeted Kylie at the door with a warm, welcoming hug. “Why, Ms. Vinson. What a pleasant surprise. I just finished whipping up a batch of butter cookies. Please say you’ll stay for a spell.”

“How could I refuse such a warm invitation?”

Alice clapped her hands in delight before ushering her inside and closing the door. She nudged her toward the living room. “Please, make yourself comfortable while I put the kettle on for tea.”

“Oh, no thank you. You don’t have to go to any trouble for me.” Kylie refrained from adding that she preferred coffee, anyway.

Alice winked. “I can make it stronger, if you like. A hot toddy with a splash of rum will take the chill out of your bones.”

Kylie grinned. “As long as you’ll imbibe with me.”

SEATED ACROSS FROM each other with Alice in an easy chair and Kylie on the couch, Kylie took a sip from her steaming mug and coughed as the potent liquid seared her throat. So much for a splash of rum, she thought.

“I see you have Clarissa Moore’s diary,” Alice said.

Kylie wiped her teary eyes. “Yes. Her account of daily life at the asylum was a depressing read.”

“As I suspected. Poor girl.”

Kylie chose her words carefully. “Alice, I have reason to believe that Cissy didn’t perish in the fire.” She noticed Alice’s right eye twitch. “I also have a gut feeling that you haven’t told me the whole story.” When Kylie saw Alice’s hands tremble, she held them. “I would never betray your trust.”

“Oh, Kylie, I wouldn’t have allowed the diary to leave my possession if I didn’t believe your search for the truth wasn’t with good intention. I don’t know what Cissy wrote in her diary, nor did my father. I only knew of the young woman my father carried into our house on that tragic night, so many years ago.”

“Please, Alice, tell me the rest of Cissy’s story.”

Kylie watched Alice grapple for composure. “The events transpired as I’d recounted to you and Lea on your last visit. My father awoke in the night. He’d gone outside and, seeing the thick billows of smoke, rushed to Stanwood House. He’d tried to gain entrance, but the fire had so engulfed the first floor, his life would’ve been as fated as the patients if he continued. When he realized that he couldn’t rescue any of them, he collapsed in the field and watched the mansion burn from the inside out. After a time, he said the screams ceased and all he could hear was the crackle of flames and splintering of wood fragments rendered to ash.” Alice shuddered.

“Take your time, Alice.”

“My father said that he surrendered to tears of grief and sat in the field for what seemed hours but must’ve only been minutes until he heard emergency sirens in the distance. When he finally composed himself, he trudged through the field in the direction of home. It was there that he found Clarissa. She was a tattered, bloody mess huddled beside a large oak tree. She was barefoot and dressed in a thin hospital shift, soaked through from the rain. She was inconsolable and terrified my father would bring attention to her by alerting the volunteer firefighters who’d finally arrived at the scene. She pleaded with him to take her away and keep her safe.”

Kylie took a long sip from her mug. This time, she welcomed the alcohol’s heat.

Alice continued. “My mother and I woke to incessant pounding on the front door. When I undid the latch, my father staggered in with Cissy in his arms. Both looked the worse for wear. I remember that it was the first time my father spoke harshly to me.”

“What did he say?”

Alice laughed. “He said to stop standing there twiddling my thumbs and close and lock the door. He then ordered my mother to pull the heavy drapes across the front windows. If it weren’t for the fire burning in the hearth, we would’ve been cast into complete darkness.”

“You must’ve been terrified.”

“I was. I’d never seen my father lose his composure. He was in an utter panic.”

“Your mother?”

A trace of a smile lined Alice’s lips. “She reacted as if unfazed by the gravity of the situation. While my father settled Cissy on an area rug beside the fire, my mother disappeared down the hall. She returned minutes later with a basin filled with hot water and a washcloth. Ever the gentleman, my father moved into the hallway while my mother undressed and bathed Cissy. Soon after, Mother shooed me out of the room in search of one of her extra nightgowns, which I found and delivered lickety-split. While my mother dressed Cissy, I reheated some leftover vegetable broth and carried it into the living area. Cissy was so weak from her ordeal, my mother had to spoon feed her.

“When a semblance of calm returned, we sat around the fire and assessed Cissy’s haggard condition. Her eyes were dark and shadowed. Bruises and burns were evident on her face, forearms, and hands. After a time, and without much prodding on our part, she slowly and in detail recounted the circumstances surrounding the fire. Remember, after the fire died down at Stanwood House, my father went inside and risked injury by climbing into the attic to retrieve Cissy’s diary. He brought it home and placed it the basement where it lay until I gave it to you. That’s why I had no need to read Cissy’s diary. I learned firsthand of the atrocities she and the other patients suffered.”

“Did she speak of Laura Wentworth?”

Alice eyes shone bright. “Oh, yes. Although I was too young to fully understand the extent of Cissy’s love for Laura, I did realize how desperate Cissy was to see her. I will never forget the

crestfallen look in her eyes when my parents broke the news to her that shortly after Cissy's father had her committed to Stanwood House, Laura's parents sent her to England to finish her studies."

"How did Cissy react to the news?"

"With a steadfast determination to go there and search for Laura." Alice brought an unsteady hand to her forehead.

Alarmed, Kylie asked. "Are you ill?"

"No. You'd think after all of these years, Cissy's plight would've lost its stronghold on my emotions."

"Some memories aren't that kind. You cared for her."

"Very much so. She became the big sister I never had or, should I say, cousin. Long-lost cousin as the story went."

"Story?"

"After the fire, Cissy was left homeless and parentless. As you recall, her natural parents abandoned her shortly after her institutionalization. My parents decided to take her in and raise her as their own until she reached the age of majority. They devised a story to tell the townsfolk that Cissy's parents had died in a tragic train wreck, leaving her orphaned. As Cissy's birth parents had only relocated to Verhoven a few months prior to her admittance into Stanwood House, the town didn't know her that well. We only had to cut her hair short and tint it with a homemade dye my mother favored to hide her own gray hair. Cissy had lost so much weight, you wouldn't have recognized her. Besides, all who truly did know her lost their lives in the fire. Cissy's real identity was never in jeopardy."

"And when she reached the age of eighteen?"

"As vowed, Cissy set sail for England. My mother sold her china and silver so that Cissy could survive until she attained a job. The boarding school Laura attended was in London. Cissy hoped she could learn Laura's whereabouts from student records. She kept us abreast of her search through letters, which, of course, we received months later due to delays in overseas correspondence."

"Did Cissy ever succeed in finding Laura?"

Alice beamed. "Four months into her search, they reunited."

Elation swelled inside Kylie. Finally, a happy ending. But it was short-lived when she saw Alice dab at her tear-filled eyes with a linen handkerchief. Worried, Kylie jumped up from the couch and sat perched on the arm of Alice's easy chair so she could stroke her shoulder.

"What's wrong, Alice?"

Alice drew in a deep breath. "Cissy's horrific experience while at Stanwood House had deeply scarred her. She lived her life with a heavy heart, guilt-ridden that she hadn't done more to save the girls. She suffered from survivor's guilt and spent many years undergoing therapy. You see, Cissy considered herself a coward for not returning to Verhoven and exposing the ugly truth behind Stanwood House. She felt as if she'd betrayed Hattie and the other patients by remaining silent all of these years. She carried this guilt to her death."

Kylie felt her insides drop. "Wait. Death? Cissy died?"

Alice reached up to pat Kylie's hand. "She died five years ago at the ripe old age of ninety-four. Not everyone can live to be one hundred, my dear."

Kylie rebounded quickly. Since she'd only envisioned Cissy as a young adult, she'd reacted as if Cissy had died prematurely instead of having lived a long, fulfilling life.

"How did you receive word?" Kylie asked.

“Laura phoned me from England. She explained that the night before Cissy passed, she’d complained of being overly tired and decided to retire early. When Laura joined her a few hours later, she found Cissy seemingly resting peacefully with a smile on her lips and her hands folded across her chest. When Laura tried to rouse her, Cissy didn’t respond. She’d apparently died in her sleep. You don’t know how much of a consolation it is for me to know that at least in death, Cissy didn’t suffer.” Alice dabbed at her eyes once more. “As often happens with true love, Laura passed only two months later.” Her expression grew troubled. “What does sadden me is knowing that besides you, no one will ever be made aware of Stanwood House’s evils.”

“I think that’s about to change.”

“How?”

“I can’t go into detail, but rest assured Cissy’s diary will remain our secret. But the atrocities that happened within Stanwood House will not remain as such. I will expose the truth, no matter what it takes.”

“Unearthing the sins of the past is a daunting task.”

“I’m a dauntless person. What Cissy and the others endured will not be in vain. Who knows how many countless other asylums wreaked the same havoc. Justice needs to be served.”

Seeing how much their conversation had tired Alice and realizing she, too, needed a break to emotionally absorb all that was told, Kylie stood and extended the diary toward her. “Thank you, Alice. I’m forever grateful that you entrusted me with Cissy’s diary.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like you to keep the diary.”

Kylie was incredulous. “But Cissy meant so much to you. You thought of her as a big sister.”

“She’s alive and carefree in my memories. I’m an old woman. I don’t have much longer on this earth, and I’d hate to have the diary found by someone who’d disrespect its value. Cissy’s memories are far too personal to end up mishandled or exploited. Since most of her diary entries revolve around her detention at Stanwood House, I think it should remain there.”

“Alice, words cannot express how much this means to me. I promise I will take good care of it.”

“Oh, there’s something else I want to give you.”

Alice struggled up from her easy chair and shuffled over to a curio cabinet. She slid open a drawer and rummaged through a stack of papers until she found an aged, black-and-white photograph. She handed the photo to Kylie. “This is a picture of Cissy. It was taken a few weeks before she left to search for Laura.”

Kylie gazed upon an image of a woman dressed in a button-down cotton shirt, a pair of breeches, and riding boots. Her gaze was serious, determined. Kylie gasped, hardly even noticing the chestnut-colored mare standing behind Cissy.

“Are you okay, my dear? You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I have.”

KYLIE RETURNED TO the SUV.

Sophie eyed her expectantly. “How’d it go? Was Alice able to tell you what became of Cissy?”

“Yes.”

“Care to share?”

Silently, Kylie handed Sophie the photo.

Sophie stared at it long and hard before whispering, "Is this some kind of joke?"

"If it is, it's been played on all of us. Alice included."

"The resemblance is uncanny."

"Right down to the adorable cleft in your chin."

"That's me in this picture."

"Yes."

"Me standing by a fucking horse."

"Yes."

"That's impossible. This picture's decades old."

"Yes."

"Can't you think of anything else to say besides 'yes'?"

"What I'm thinking may astound you."

"Oh, I don't know. After the past few days, I'd believe anything."

"I think Cissy's spirit chose you as a conduit."

"You've got to be shitting me."

"Why does that sound so far-fetched after everything we've experienced?"

"It doesn't. That's why it's so mind-boggling. But you'll have to forgive me for not feeling comfortable with the idea of a displaced spirit inhabiting my body."

"Cissy Moore's spirit hasn't taken possession of your body, Sophie. She only used you to tell her story."

"And now that the story's over? Now what?"

"I believe Cissy's spirit is at peace."

"How do you explain the striking physical resemblance between us?"

Kylie grinned. "You're already weirded out. Do you really want to probe deeper into supernatural realms and risk discovering something else to scare the bejesus out of you? Haven't you had enough?"

Sophie's face drained of color. "You're right. Don't go there."

Kylie laughed and turned over the ignition. "Smart girl."

## Chapter Eighteen

WHEN THEY REACHED Stanwood House, Kylie immediately noticed Lea's Jeep parked in the driveway.

"That's funny," Kylie said. "I don't remember making any plans with Lea."

"You didn't. I did. I totally forgot we're going bird watching this morning."

"Bird watching? Lea hates birds."

"She says she knows this secluded place where they roost."

"Secluded, huh?"

Sophie gave her a sheepish expression.

"Well, I'll be damned. Sounds like the two of you definitely hit it off."

Sophie didn't answer as she got out of the SUV. "I left the front door open in case we ran late. I hope you don't mind."

They found Lea sitting on the couch, tight-lipped and stone-faced. Kylie spotted Dreschler's journals open on her lap. Busted.

"You took this from the chamber, didn't you?" Lea asked, in that condescending tone that always got under Kylie's skin.

Sophie inched a safe distance away from Kylie. Traitor, Kylie thought.

Kylie nervously shifted from one foot to the other. "I guess you were right about my not being able to resist my own impulses."

"You tampered with evidence, Kylie. That's a serious offense."

"I'm sorry. How much did you read?"

"Enough to know that Dreschler was a psychopath."

Kylie nodded. "He savagely destroyed many innocent people's lives."

"From what I've read, that's an understatement. You do realize that I will have to launch an investigation."

When Kylie nodded, Lea looked confused. "Wow! That wasn't the reaction I expected. I thought you'd fight my decision tooth and nail. That you wanted to keep all of this psycho stuff hush-hush."

Kylie shrugged. "I can't let another moment pass without exposing Stanwood House's horrible secrets. Hattie's remains deserve to be exhumed and given a proper burial. As far as that fuck Dreschler, he can rot in a potter's field for all I care."

"Once the feds get involved, any privacy you have within Stanwood House will be nonexistent. And, of course, the media will catch wind, and then there will be the gawkers and the newshounds trying to break down your front door. Are you ready for all that, or would you prefer to head back to New York and wait for the hype to die down?"

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm committed mind, body, and soul to avenging these lost souls. Nothing will stop me from seeing this through. Bring it on."

Lea shook her head in disbelief. "You amaze me sometimes."

"There is one thing that no one is entitled to touch, let alone read."



Lea eyed the diary sticking out of Kylie's coat pocket. "The diary can lend further proof into what happened."

"The diary was never part of Stanwood House. It's a personal account, not to be used as evidence in any criminal investigation. Besides, there's enough in Dreschler's journals as damning proof that many innocent souls perished within these walls by violent means. It's about time Stanwood House's horrors are finally laid to rest."

ONE MONTH LATER, Kylie, Sophie, and Lea stood outside Stanwood House, enjoying an unseasonably mild winter day. The criminal investigation and resultant media frenzy had died down, so they could breathe easy. Verhoven had, once again, reclaimed its peace and quiet and it was time for goodbyes.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay a few days longer?" Kylie asked Sophie.

"I'd love to, but the Foundation's reconvened and they need me on the Board."

"Speaking of *on board*, if you don't hurry up, you'll miss getting *on board* the next scheduled train to New York," Lea said. She'd placed Sophie's luggage into the back of the Jeep. She kept glancing at her watch and shaking her head.

Sophie smirked. "Don't you admire a woman who knows how to play with her words?"

Kylie smiled. "I couldn't help noticing that your bed didn't appear slept in last night. Late night at Lea's?"

Sophie blushed. "Very."

"Your afterglow is blinding."

Sophie nudged her playfully. "You're shaming me."

"Not at all. I'm happy for you both." All jealousy aside, Kylie meant it.

Lea joined them. "I've been meaning to ask you, Lea, if you've given any more consideration to Larry Dawson's offer to join the NYPD?"

Lea turned to Sophie and leaned in for a kiss. When she looked at Kylie, her eyes seemed to twinkle. "I have an interview scheduled with a Police Chief Galloway in Manhattan within the week. Larry set it up."

"What? So you're leaving with Sophie today?"

"Yup. Harvey can handle the station for a few days while I'm gone. Big bad city, here I come."

"Woo hoo!" Kylie shouted.

"How about you?"

"I think I'll stay around a while longer. I'm enjoying the serenity."

"Well, don't wait too long," Lea said. "We still have that bottle of champagne to crack open."

"I promise to bring it with me when I return. We'll toast to a new chapter in your life, Officer Lea Carlson of the NYPD."

"Don't jinx me. What if they don't take me?"

Sophie punched Lea lightly on the upper arm. "Of course they'll take you."

After many hugs and kisses, Kylie shooed them toward the Jeep. "Okay, already. Enough stalling. I promise to keep in touch." As Kylie watched them walk to the Jeep, a surreal event occurred. Kylie could've sworn she saw a spiritual being hovering beside Sophie. Thinking it might be the sun's glare playing tricks on her, she blinked her eyes and refocused. The hazy

apparition remained. To her astonishment, Sophie must've sensed the spirit's presence because she turned toward it and smiled. Seconds later, the apparition disappeared. Kylie felt intense warmth invade her body. It was clear to Kylie that Cissy Moore needed to say her final farewell.

Now alone, Kylie went inside Stanwood House. She intentionally left the door unlocked. She welcomed the quiet. With Stanwood House's dark secrets revealed, the house seemed revitalized. Kylie, herself, felt reborn.

She stacked the hearth with dried logs and kindling. In a cylindrical, cardboard container atop the mantel, she pulled out a long matchstick. She struck it against the coarse side of the container and touched its flame to the wood. Within minutes, the room was enshrouded in warmth. Kylie closed her eyes and let her thoughts wander. She didn't turn when she heard the soft click of the front door glide open. She held her breath and stood perfectly still. A soft breeze wafted across the nape of her neck. And then she heard an oh-so-familiar voice. Maya's voice.

"It is to you, Kylie, only you, that I return," Maya whispered. "Together, we will breathe as one. Together, our love will be everlong."

Kylie smiled. "Yes. Everlong."

## About the Author

Barbara has been writing fiction (psychic/supernatural, suspense/mystery, and horror/thriller genres) since the late seventies, and has had numerous short stories published. Most of these stories were inspired by intense childhood nightmares.

She works as a safety representative for a major utility company. Her free time (when not writing, of course) is spent enjoying her wife, her daughter, and any activities that involve being on, under, or near the ocean, for that is where she feels most in tune with her emotions. Everlong is her second full-length, lesbian fictional work. If you crave shock value, being kept in the dark until the last possible moment, and being haunted by memories long after the last page has been turned, then this is a must-read.

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Sky is a single mother struggling to support herself and Drake, her blind son, with hardheaded determination and a waitress' salary. Meg watches Sky stumble through one doomed relationship after another with the wrong men, never daring to reveal the secret love she has for Sky. When Sky learns that an aunt she's never known has left her a manor house, the three of them move to Green Grove, a town hidden away to anyone without magic in their blood. Not all the magic is good, however. The Sect, a dark magic group, wants Sky's new home and Sacru Teren, a magical place her family is bound by blood to protect. With the arrival of Roger Thompson, a charming local doctor that seems determined to sweep Sky off her feet, Meg is left with little but jealousy and doubt. Will the handsome doctor steal away their chance to be happy together, or will visions of Sky's past and the dark secret that past holds change everything?

**\*\*Second Edition\*\***

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### *Natural Order*

**\*\*Book One in the Daughters of the Goddess series\*\***

by Moondancer Drake

An evening at the movies turns into a living nightmare for Elizabeth Crew as her lover Dusty battles for their lives and the unborn baby Elizabeth is carrying. Dusty's dying request is that Elizabeth go live with Dusty's family, where she and the baby will be safe. Dusty's family takes Elizabeth into their home with open arms and a bit of concern. What will happen if Elizabeth learns that her new family includes shape-shifters? For Elizabeth, the family secrets are not all that awaits her in the darkness.

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## *Chaos Beneath the Moonbeams*

by Sharong G. Clark

The age of magic has been over for nearly three centuries; finalized with the War of Harmony. Even the gods willingly melt into forgetfulness, letting mortal life grow as it would, for good or bad. Not all the gods had agreed unanimously. So, when a mortal man decides to release a banished god for his own purposes, nothing will ever be the same.

Kareina of Clan Gradyln has posed as her twin brother Karr (with the aid of minor forbidden magic) for over a decade, since Karr's disappearance and Kareina's kidnapping and torture. Even Caldier Hassid, her father, forgets her true gender. So, when Hassid agrees to a betrothal between Karr and Mayliandra, it's up to Kareina to figure a way out of it. Meanwhile, someone has brought the old god T'Dar from the depths of Bahalkar to bring back the old ways of chaos.

Mayliandra of Clan Bredwine, about to be given to the fierce Sher Karr, doesn't know if she should be happy for the opportunity to leave her home, where she's nothing but a servant; or, petrified her future husband will learn her secret. Although Mayliandra intends to do her duty to her clan, she can't help wishing Karr was his dead sister, Kareina.

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# *Woeful Pines*

by S.Y. Thompson

While undercover agent Emily Baptiste is investigating a rash of disappearances in rural Kentucky, she discovers something that strains the limits of credulity. The kidnapped are being hunted for sport. When she is also captured, Emily discovers an insane truth. The missing are taken through an inter-dimensional portal to a place where fantastic creatures reside, predominant among them are a race of vampires. The vampires use other species to hunt as well as for sex and slave labor.

Now Emily is among the hunted. Her only hope is Sheriff Jenna Yang from Woeful Pines, Kentucky. Unfortunately, Emily and Jenna hardly know each other. Will Jenna even realize Emily is missing? If she does, will Jenna be willing to risk everything to cross into an unknown land and face enduring hardship to rescue a virtual stranger?

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# *Ban Talah*

by A.L. Duncan

From the crumbling pages of ancient Celtic scrolls comes a vivid world of mysticism and unflinching valor. Ban Talah is the daughter of Tlachtga, Goddess of the Thunderbolt. Unbound by mortal laws Ban Talah must find strength in her own moral constitutions in all their depths and complexities and not distance herself from the deep undercurrent of her immortality in order to fulfill her Geasa, her duty, as a strength and legend to her people. It is the time of King Henry II, ruler of England, where Celtic-Christianity struggled with Rome's papacy and the legitimacy of paganism within the Church. It is a time that begins the reaping of a terrible sowing.

The insidious heart of a French Cardinal, a man of mysterious dealings, has set the elements of evil astir. In order to save Henry's England Ban Talah must first save the Lady of the Land from the bindings of the Cardinal's sorcerous, wintery enchantment, a spell that is also a wicked inheritance of ills against the healers of her people.

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## *Shadow Stalkers*

by Sky Croft

The mission of a shadowstalker is simple: stalk, hunt, and kill creatures of the night, while protecting the innocent, unsuspecting public who have no idea of the horrors that lurk in the darkness.

For the Valentine women, shadowstalking is a way of life. Supernatural threats lie in wait around every corner, and danger is a regular occurrence.

Though the mission is simple, Cassie Valentine finds her life is anything but. Not only is she in love with her best friend, but past mistakes haunt her dreams.

Along with her mother, Eve, and her younger sister, Vicki, Cassie must learn to negotiate the perilous terrain of day-to-day life, while also coming to terms with the past.

Will Cassie be brave enough to overcome her fears and give love a chance? Or will the Valentine family fall when a legendary foe resurfaces?

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# *Scythian Fields Part One*

by A.L.Duncan

When you think you know what history has shown you, look at it again through another pair of eyes.

1924. For anthropologist Oksana Dimitriova, this meant delving deeper than her life and all that Russia's university scholars had taught her. She had learned early in life that mixing science and the mystical life were something out of the ordinary, and that one didn't express an interest in them lest one was prepared to divulge a good defense against others' harsh judgments. Influenced by their ancestors, Russia and its neighboring countries were imbued with cultures that had faithfully practiced timeless beliefs. As with all such beliefs, there is always a story that strengthens the future in legendary proportion. Time shifts, and events form into place. What was once, long ago, will return again. What Oksana didn't know was that according to the heavens, history was about to repeat itself.

With Lenin dead, Stalin's powerful dictatorship has unfolded a cataclysmic ripple of destruction that spread across the Caucasus Mountains into Georgia. The discovery of a 4th Century B.C. priestess-warrior will take Oksana on a journey to find the warrior woman's descendants, amid the chaos and evils of her nation's politics. This is a tale of two women, whose lives, and the lives of those around them, are bound in synchronicity. There will always be threads of life the constellations will connect. Does it matter the events are 2,500 years apart?

"There is a strangely prevailing spirit that wants us to discover something," said Oksana's mentor. "I know we have found a most unnatural treasure that will transform Russian hearts, and those of the world."

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