

This work is copyrighted material—legal action will be taken if plagiarized or duplicated in any way, shape, or form.

Chapter Two

“But devils are subservient to certain influences of the stars, because magicians observe the course of certain stars in order to evoke the devils.”

— Heinrich Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*

The flight to New Orleans was... interesting. As I walked through the gate that led to the plane, I turned and looked back at my father for the last time. He looked older, more tired, and he watched me leave without protest. Just a half-hearted wave as I disappeared through the door. My chest was a riot of emotions- uncertainty, anger, sadness, shock, disbelief, helplessness, and finally guilt. It sat like a hot burning knot in my stomach.

I felt guilty for being just the teeniest tiniest bit excited. I was traveling outside Maine for the first time in my life. I'd never ridden on a plane before and I was both excited and sad that I wouldn't be sharing this experience with my dad. The aunts, of course, acted like they flew every day of their lives. They breezed through security, the gate, and to the plane oblivious to the other passengers who openly gawked at the spectacle they were. When they were finally seated, they fell promptly asleep and didn't wake until the wheels hit the tarmac.

Night had fallen by the time we made our way to the curb outside. The air was thick, warm, and sticky which ridded me of the chill from the airport's air conditioning. The only light was the glow of the building. The sky pitch except for a sliver of moon barely visible in the sky. While I was paused, not sure where to go, the aunts glided by and approached an old black car covered in what looked like dust parked against the curb. It reminded me of a bullet with white wall tires. An older man dressed in a black suit held the door open for the aunts.

“Thank you, Emerson,” the aunts said in unison. He nodded.

I just stood there and stared. It was like an opening scene from American Horror Story and a chill that had nothing to do with the airport's A/C came over me.

Agatha was already seated in the car and Agnes was in the process of sliding her skinny rear into the seat when she looked up and motioned for me to come along. Agatha's head popped up over Agnes's shoulder as she singsonged, “Buck up, my dear, the moon is young tonight.”

“It is indeed, sister,” Agnes sighed.

I glanced up at the moon, which resembled a luminous fingernail suspended in the night sky. It was as if the darkness was devouring any source of light. No stars dotted its inky blackness and the moon was completely dark except for that small slice of light. It made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I could feel something radiating off the silvery shine the longer I stared.

“Miss?” The English accent that accompanied the voice was enough to startle me out of the trance I had been under as I stared at the moon. I

think the aunts had called the man Emerson. He was short, about my height, and frail looking. He was also completely washed out. His hair, skin, and eyes were the same rheumy milky color as the rest of him. The crisp black suit with his black dress shirt and tie made his coloring more pronounced. Was he driving the car?

“Come now, Belle. You’re letting the bugs in the car,” Agnes said, impatience bleeding into her tone.

I guess she wasn’t worried about making it to Ravenfell in one piece.

“Emerson has been driving a lot longer than your father has been alive.”

I know I didn’t voice my doubts aloud... I stared hard at Agnes and all she did was stare back with a carefully blank expression.

Panic crawled along my brain and my throat closed. The hand holding the handle of my suitcase clenched while the other tightened on the strap of my backpack. My muscles were coiled ready to flee from these strange women and the possibly blind driver.

“I wouldn’t.” Her voice was quiet but the words ran through my head like a cymbal crash.

It was impossible, right? No one had the ability to read someone’s thoughts. That was something out of a movie- not real life. Agnes’s face took on a pitying look and I knew... She was riding my train of thought right along with me.

“How?” I croaked. The urge to flee and never look back was strong. My feet itched to put distance between me and Agnes.

“We’ll explain on the way to Ravenfell, dear, but you need to get in the car first. It isn’t safe being so out in the open.” She scanned the area as if someone was going to appear out of thin air and hack me to bits outside of the airport.

I was probably crazy but something inside of me knew what she said was true. Some sixth sense was telling me I wasn’t safe. It was like a thousand ants were crawling all over my skin and stinging me. I couldn’t reply. The words were frozen on my tongue, and even so, I’m not sure what I would have said anyway. I just nodded and stiffly made my way toward the car.

When I was in front of the open back passenger door, Emerson reached in my direction which caused me to jump and take a step back. I looked to the aunts and saw Agatha had an amused expression, and Agnes just sighed and lifted her eyes heavenward. I watched her roll them back toward me as she said, “He’s just going to put your luggage away. Relax.”

“I can put them in the back.” I gestured toward the trunk.

“No, missus. Let me handle it.” He proceeded to take my things and shuffled his way past me.

“Get in the car,” Agnes ordered.

I pulled my eyes away from Emerson and bent my frame to slide into the backseat.

“Close the door! La, we’re going to get eaten up by bugs the whole way there.”

“You’re in a temper, Ness...” Agatha commented.

I closed the door and was instantly assailed by the stale smell of the car along with floral scent wafting from the aunts. The combination made me sneeze.

“À vos souhaits,” Agnes and Agatha said simultaneously and continued on with their conversation.

“Well, *Aggie*, it has been a long twenty-four hours.” Agnes pulled out a delicate lace-edged hankie and dabbed her brow then lifted her chin and dabbed her neck. Agatha rolled her eyes.

“You’re getting old.”

“*Old?* I’m the same age as *you!*”

The slam of the car door and then the roar of the engine interrupted whatever Agatha was about to say. I pulled the seat belt across my lap and said a prayer as Emerson pulled away from the curb. I drowned out the sound of the aunts resumed bickering as I rested my forehead against the window and watched the lights of New Orleans pass me by and fade into the distance. My eyelids felt heavy and before I knew it the darkness engulfed me.
