

CHAPTER 1



R *un!*
Run, as fast as you can.
Joss was coming.

He was coming for *her*.

Clelia d'Ambois woke with a start. Beneath her, the earth was damp. Above her, pine trees had their arms thrown around one another in the light of the moon, the circle of old giants staring down at the intruder with quiet curiosity.

She jackknifed into a sitting position. Snow, her wolfdog, yelped. From farther away, the other three wolf hybrids, Rain, Cloud, and Thunder, howled.

The horizon was already a deep purple. Morning wasn't far. The pine needles rustled in the breeze that swept through the forest. She shivered, not only because her pajamas were wet from dew, but also because the trees had turned restless as if sensing the danger.

Snow licked her arm.

She trailed her fingers over his fur. "How long have I been out here?"

If only he could answer. He trotted to the other dogs that waited on the outskirts, anticipating her command with a wagging tail.

“Home, boys,” she said, getting up and dusting her hands.

The dogs took off in the direction of the cottage, slowing at the top of the hill to make sure she followed. Trailing behind, she mulled over the dream that had accompanied her sleepwalking.

It was always the same. A helicopter circled over the sea, casting a net of ripples over the water while she walked down the jetty like a bug to a windshield. Around her, the forest bordering the island was dark, and beyond it, the village was burning.

The helicopter turned and dipped, no longer circling but with deliberate direction this time. They’d found her. Her heartbeat leapt with the flames as the aircraft landed on the quay at the end of the jetty. The sound of the blades vibrated in her chest.

Swoosh. Swoosh.

They rippled the air like a pebble in a pond.

The stink of fermenting seaweed broke through the salty scent of the ocean with every ebb of the breeze. It mixed with the smoke of wood turning into charcoal and the diesel from the boats. The hot carbon dioxide fumes burned her nostrils.

Her senses told her this was real even as her mind screamed at her to wake up. Yet she remained in the dream, standing frozen like a rabbit in headlights as the hatch lifted.

A masculine boot hit the wooden boards of the quay. The tip of a long coat slipped from the seat, revealing the dark shine of the man’s pants. He had to fold his body double to fit his tall frame through the opening. His black hair fell loose to his shoulders, the ends whipping around his face in the wind of the rotor.

Her breath caught as shock slammed into her chest. Even if she’d dreamt it countless times, this part always shook her.

Josselin de Arradon.

Joss for short. A village and castle were named after the French ancestor whose name he’d inherited. The castle still belonged to Joss, even if it lay in near ruins.

He targeted his gaze on her as if he’d known she’d be standing there at that moment on that day. Rooted to the spot, she watched helplessly as he advanced along the jetty. His coat flew around his midriff in the wind. Powerful thigh muscles bunched as his boots hit

the ground. His features were older, but his jaw had the determined set from his youth, and his gray eyes had the same haunted look.

Joss was coming for her.

She didn't know why, but she knew she had to run as fast as she could.

When the home she shared with her grandfather, Erwan, came into view, she pushed away the disturbing memory of the dream. The fisherman's cottage stood alone on the French shore of the Gulf of Morbihan, on the Island of Berder, the Breton name that meant The Island of Brothers. It was high tide. The sea had washed up to the stone wall of their terrace. Erwan's boat was gone. He would've left at four in the morning with the turn of the tide.

Their house rose white against the backdrop of the aquamarine ocean and a luminous-green grass hill. It was a simple home with a kitchen, bathroom, shower, and two bedrooms. Around the back, they had a chicken coop for rabbits, hedgehogs, and turtles, a shed for Erwan's fishing gear, and wooden houses for the dogs. The stray cats slept wherever they could, usually inside, as far away from the wolfdogs as possible.

Snow sat down next to the wild rose bush by the door while the other dogs ran off to the beach. Caressing Snow's head, she made her way inside. Tripod, a three-legged mongrel, lay in the kitchen on a cushion by the stove. She filled the black kettle with water and lit the gas for Erwan's tea before laying the table with baguette, butter, and mulberry jam. When the water boiled, she turned off the gas and poured the hot water over tealeaves in a pot. After feeding the animals, she went upstairs to shower and dress.

Braiding her hair, she stared at her features in the mirror. Her slanted eyes were too big for her heart-shaped face and too dark for her pale skin. The black curtain of her bangs obscured the high curve of her eyebrows. She looked nothing like the sturdy Larmorians with their brown hair and sharp noses who inhabited the islands and Larmor-Baden on the mainland. Her physical appearance had always set her apart, reminding the villagers she didn't belong.

She was an outcast and people her own age were wary of her. They disliked and teased her because of who her mother was. Even though

her mother had been dead for twenty-three years, the tradition-fast Brittany people remembered. There was no chance of her being accepted through the slow process of forgetting. They were a community who held fast to their roots and who told the same tales their pre-Celtic ancestors, famous for erecting their standing stones, had. To a people who'd held onto their culture for more than six thousand years, twenty-three was a drop in the ocean. Only a few of the older people had learned to look past who she was.

Erwan's red boat appeared in the window frame of the attic room that looked out over the sea. He came from the east, from the direction of Île Longue. Quickly, she finished her grooming and went outside to meet him.

He removed his rubber boots on the stone steps of their veranda. The boat was already anchored. There were no crates or net. He rolled up the legs of his blue pinafore and left the pipe that always seesawed in the corner of his mouth in the astray on the garden table.

"Mat an traoú," he said by way of greeting.

Erwan still spoke the Breton language and encouraged her to practice it, even if the younger people all spoke French these days.

"Ya, mat-tre," she said.

He patted her with a weathered hand on the shoulder as he entered the house, his frame stooped and his wrinkled face brown from the long days on the salty water.

She followed and poured the strong tea he liked into his breakfast bowl. "You didn't go fishing, Erwan." She'd never called him grandfather. It wasn't because he wasn't her biological grandfather. It was just the way it had always been.

"Nah." He lowered his body with a flinch into the chair.

She watched him with fondness from under her lashes. He was getting too old for taking out the boat, even if he wouldn't hear anything about retiring.

She put the bowl in front of him and waited until he cupped the warm brew before she asked, "Where did you go?"

"Larmor," he said, avoiding her eyes as he blew vapor over the bowl.

She sucked in a quiet breath. “There was another fire, wasn’t there?”

He slurped his tea.

“Which one was it this time?” she asked.

He took a while before answering. “The mayor’s house.”

Dear God. “Was anyone hurt?”

“It started in the kitchen. Brendan woke up before the flames got to the bedroom.”

“What about the house?”

He shook his head.

“At what time did it happen?” she asked, her heart pounding like a hammer between her ribs.

“Four. I saw the glow from across the water when I went out to get the boat.”

She turned her back on him so he wouldn’t see the anxiety in her eyes. Standing on tiptoes, she opened the overhead cupboard and took out a mug.

It wasn’t easy to ask her next question. “Did you check on me before you left?”

There was a long silence. When she finally faced him again, he stared at her with compassion.

“Did it happen again?” he asked.

“I woke up in the woods this time.”

“I see.” He studied his tea.

Gripping the edge of the table, she exclaimed, “What if it’s me, Erwan?”

He looked up. “You were fast asleep when I left.”

“I could’ve gone before, taken the dinghy, and been back before you noticed the flames.”

“You haven’t started a fire since you were three.”

“Who’s to say it’s not starting again?”

In the past month, fifty houses had been burned mysteriously. The village was swamped with police, firemen, and forensic experts who couldn’t determine the cause of the fires. The villagers suspected arson. If they’d known about her weird ability to involuntarily set objects alight, even if it only happened to her as a toddler, they would’ve had

her on the proverbial stake in the blink of an eye, condemned as the witch they'd accused her mother of being.

"Clelia, it happened twice. You were just a baby."

He wanted to believe it as much as she did. Once, while playing on the beach, she'd seen a boy kicking a dog. When she'd told him to stop, he'd laughed and picked up a stick, starting to chase the helpless animal. She couldn't remember everything, but Erwan said the stick in the boy's hand had caught fire. He'd had a fright, had thrown it down and run away. The second time was when she'd almost been trampled by a horse while visiting the stables with Erwan. The hay had burst into flames. Erwan had told the bystanders he'd dropped his pipe.

Now one house after the next was burned to ashes from the same time her sleepwalking had started. And the dream. She hadn't told Erwan about her dream. Deep down, she knew the dream, the sleepwalking, and the fires were connected, but she was too petrified to voice the thought.

She became aware of Erwan watching her.

"Joss is back in town," he said in a quiet tone.

Her body went colder than the icy Atlantic. Although she'd never said anything about her feelings for Joss, Erwan wasn't blind. He was a wise old man who didn't need words to know the truth. She reminded herself of this as she carefully pushed back her emotions, trying not to show her shock. She even managed to keep a straight face when she asked, "Really? When did he get back?"

"Yester night."

She kept her tone casual. "That's a surprise."

"He's not alone." His voice held a measure of warning like when he was preparing her for bad news. "He's with a woman."

Lowering her eyes, she wiped breadcrumbs from the table into her hand. "I thought he was in New York."

"Ay. That's where he came from."

"Why would he come back after all these years?" she asked, swallowing fear and irrational hurt at the news of his female companion.

"Who knows? Maybe he's finally ready to face his demons or maybe he brought the woman to make her mistress of his home."

“Mistress of his home?” She chuckled. “You still speak as if he’s royalty.”

She disapproved of social casts, something Erwan hadn’t completely let go. A lot of the villagers were royalists, still honoring their ancestral barons and earls.

“Our predecessors may have chopped off the head of the king, but the lad’s got a duke’s blood flowing in his veins, and nothing can change that.”

She dared to glance at her grandfather. “Do you think he’ll move back into his house?”

His eyebrows furrowed. “A woman can heal a man in ways doctors and therapists sometimes can’t. But don’t forget, there’s still his castle.”

Yes, of course. Joss was heir to the castle that stood in near ruins in the forest of Brocéliande. When his mother married his father, a high-ranking officer with a poor income, the family didn’t have the means to sustain the expansive land and enormous stronghold. Instead they moved into the big house near the sea. After Joss’s grandfather’s death, the castle was left to waste away in that enchanted forest. Could it be that Joss had found the means to restore it back to its former glory? Or did he find the means to heal his heart? She was suddenly envious of the woman who had such magic at her disposal.

“Have you seen him?” she asked, busying herself with rinsing the teapot.

“Nay.”

After the de Arradon family tragedy, no one expected Joss to return. Goosebumps ran over her arms.

Snow cried at the door.

“I’m late for work,” she said, drying her hands. “There’s Pintade Chouchenn in the oven for lunch.”

She kissed Erwan on the cheek, threw her flip-flops into her backpack, and pulled on a denim jacket and her rubber boots. Their veranda steps gave access to the beach. At low tide, the boats were stranded, but at high tide they could take the fishing boat or dinghy straight out to sea.

After giving Snow a quick hug, she tossed her bag into the motorized dinghy and steered the boat across the Gulf in the direction

of the mainland. At low tide, she had to pedal her bike across the bridge that connected the Presque Isle to the village, but across the water was quicker, and navigating the dinghy had a calming effect.

At Larmor-Baden, she tied the dinghy to the jetty, changed into her flip-flops, stored her rubber boots in the boat, and made her way through the small harbor and past the luxury tourist hotels to the town square. For some time, she stood studying the black frame that used to be the mayor's house, which was still steaming in the fresh morning and smelling of melted plastic and wet wood.

A few passersby stopped to ponder the mystery of the pyromania that was sweeping through their quiet village. A small crowd of elderly people was gathered at the tables in front of the bakery with espresso and croissants, talking in hushed Breton as they watched the firemen go through the debris.

Turning away from the destruction, Clelia followed the tar road toward the bus stop. The seven-thirty bus would take her to the stables in Carnac where she worked. Helping out in the tourist office that offered horseback rides couldn't really be called a job, but it was all that was available in a village with nine hundred inhabitants.

On the bend of the long stretch of road between the square and the bus stop, she paused to lift her eyes to the abandoned house. For all of her life she'd walked this road, first to school and then to work, but she hadn't looked at the haunted house for the past nine years. Not because of the horrific nightmare that had played out behind the shuttered, sad windows, but because of *him*. Because of Joss.

As long as she could remember, she'd been in love with Joss de Arradon. Secretly. Joss was four years her senior and the most beautiful being she'd ever seen. He had bronze skin with hair so black it shone blue in the sun and eyes so gray they glowed in his head. Those eyes had captured her with their pain and intensity. All through school, she'd watched him from afar, the boy who was so strong and defenseless at the same time. While she admired him from a distance, he was barely aware of her existence. After all, she was an expert at hiding. Life had taught her it was safer to remain invisible.

Joss had only spoken to her once. It had been on a summer's day after school. She'd sneaked to the forest behind the schoolyard because

she'd known she'd find him there. She'd stand behind a tree and study the movement of his hand as he smoked a forbidden cigarette. She'd memorize the manner in which he pulled his fingers through his rebelliously long hair, and the way he laughed loudly into his gang of friends even when his eyes cried or blazed.

That day however, he wasn't with his friends. He was with a girl. Her name was Thiphaine and she was the most popular girl in school. She was blond, slim, and beautiful with blue eyes and red painted fingernails. Clelia watched from her hiding place as Joss backed Thiphaine up until her body pressed against the trunk of a tree. It was an *athuja occidentalis*, but the townsfolk called it a witch tree because of the tangled roots that resembled crippled limbs and the branches that looked like knobbed fingers. The setting was eerie for a romantic adventure, and yet it suited Joss. He seemed right at home, whereas Thiphaine looked around nervously. His hand went to her cheek, his palm huge, dark, and rough against the porcelain paleness of her face, while his other hand slipped under her blouse. His gray eyes looked like melted steel when he lowered his head.

When he pressed his lips to Thiphaine's, his hair fell forward, and he moved his hand from her cheek to brush it behind his ear. Clelia recalled the deliberate movement of his jaw, the way the muscles dimpled in his cheek, and the hand under Thiphaine's blouse. All the while, Joss maintained his composure as Thiphaine came undone under his caress. The beautiful girl made low moaning sounds. Her knees buckled, but Joss, without breaking the kiss, grabbed her waist and pulled her so tightly against him her back arched. Keeping her up with his arm, he made her weak with his touch and tongue.

Watching them stabbed into her chest. Hurt speared her heart. The ache was greater than the heat of shame in her pores and on her cheeks, but she couldn't tear her gaze away from the forbidden sight. It was Iwig, a boy from her class, who broke the spell when he discovered her behind the tree. He was a tall, blond boy with a strong build who she disliked for his habit of hunting abandoned cats with his pellet gun.

"What do we have here?" His eyes darted to the distance where

Joss and Thiphaine were embracing. "A peeping tom." He took a step toward her.

When she tried to back away, he grabbed her braid, inviting a yelp.

"Not so fast, witch." He hauled her closer by her arm, making her stumble against him. "You like to watch, don't you?" He grinned. "How about a taste of the real thing?"

She opened her mouth to tell him to go to hell, but he'd already brought down his head and kissed her so hard his teeth split her lip. Swinging back her arm, she slapped him with all the force she could muster. The blow was strong enough to fling his face sideways.

They both froze. When he looked back at her, his eyes simmered with fury. He glared for a second, baring his teeth, before lifting his fist. Unable to free herself from his grip, she steeled herself for the blow, but another pair of hands grabbed Iwig by the shoulders and flung him to the ground.

Her gaze collided with Joss's violent expression. Her lips parted, words refusing to form, as she stared at him with shock and relief tangling in her stomach, leaving her feeling slightly sick. Before she could find her voice, Joss had lifted Iwig by the lapels of his jacket. Iwig's legs dangled and his arms flayed like fish flapping on soil. Letting go of one side of the jacket, Joss hooked a fist under Iwig's chin. The impact sent Iwig flying through the air. He hit the ground with a thump. With his arms wide and fingers flexing, Joss stepped over a cowering Iwig.

"If you ever lift your hand to a girl again, I'll hang you from a tree under a pack of wild boars and let them eat you from your feet to your useless dick," Joss said. "Understand?"

He'd spoken very softly, but the woods had gone quiet. No birds chirped. Not even the leaves rustled. Thiphaine stood aside, hugging herself.

Iwig tried to scurry away on his elbows, but Joss stepped on his jacket.

"I asked you a question," Joss said.

Iwig started crying. "Yes."

When Joss lifted his boot, Iwig scrambled to his feet. He didn't look at Clelia before running down the path toward the school.

Only then did Joss turn to her. After a moment of studying her, he gripped her chin and tilted her head. Trailing his thumb over her lower lip, he said, "You're bleeding."

Then he did something that shocked her wildly. With his gray eyes locked onto hers, he brought his thumb to his lips, slipped his finger into his mouth, and licked it clean.

She couldn't move. She didn't dare as much as blink.

He saw her. It felt like he saw *through* her. She couldn't speak with the power of the knowledge weighing her down. He was a god, a rebel, a cruelty, a stolen sight, and he saw *her*.

He'd *tasted* her.

He'd swallowed her DNA.

He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the blood from her lip before pressing the ball of fabric into her hand. "He won't bother you again, but you better go home."

He was so tall she had to crane her neck to look up at him. He shifted, and then the shadows obscured his face and the sun at his back blinded her, breaking the spell.

Her flight instinct kicked in. She remembered wondering if he'd forgotten about Thiphaine who still stood to one side with wide eyes as she hurried down the path.

"Wait," he called after her. "It's Clelia, right?" he asked when she'd stopped to look at him.

"Yes." Everyone knew who everyone was in town, but he hadn't acknowledged her until that day.

"You're fourteen."

Of course he knew. There was only one school. He had to know in which class she was.

His voice became soft and dark again like when he'd spoken to Iwig. "You're too young to wander alone in the woods."

His intense stare was unnerving. That was when the insight hit her. Catching Joss's attention was dangerous. A girl couldn't survive it, not with her heart. Her body wouldn't stand a chance. She realized it instinctively, even if she was much too young to know.

The way he scrutinized her with a smirk tugging on his full lips and knowledge burning in his eyes told her he knew. He *knew* what she was

doing here. Shame crept through her veins. Scarlet heat rose to her cheeks. She wished the path would open up and swallow her.

His gaze continued to consume her for another moment, and then, as if nothing had happened, he turned. Just like that, she'd been unseen, going back to how it had always been.

She went back to nothing.

Without sparing either of the lovers another glance, she sprinted home with his bloody handkerchief in her hand, shaken and disgusted with herself while something that refused to be quieted tingled under her skin, a kind of exhilaration, the kind you feel when you fall in love.

They'd never spoken another word. Joss had left the village that same year in August, the summer he'd finished school, just after the fateful incident in his life.

Nine years was enough time for fixation to bloom into unrequited love. The pain of knowing her feelings would never be returned only made them stronger. In a twisted way, it gave her one-sided love a poetic edge. Besides having heard via the grapevine he'd gone to New York, she hadn't had news and she'd refused to look at the house in which he'd grown up. Being reminded of her hopeless crush was too hurtful.

Now she stood facing it, taking it all in with a mixture of mounting fear and premonition. It was the biggest house—three stories high with two turrets framing the pointed roof—for miles around. The once pretty garden had been transformed into weeds strangling rose bushes and climbing the fence. Nine years ago, there was a swing bench on the porch overlooking the grassland that flattened out to the sea. The white shutters had stood out against the gray of the stone walls and the silver slate of the roof, but now the wood was the color of ash, faded, cracked, and splintered in places, hanging askew in front of the narrow turret windows.

His bedroom was on the top floor in the west tower. Sometimes he smoked a cigarette on the balcony with his gaze trained on the ocean or maybe what lay beyond, what the eye couldn't see. It was the room in which the light burned the latest. Often, when Erwan was out fishing at night, depending on how the tides turned, she'd sneak out here on her bike and stood in the road until his light went out.

After *that* night, the house had been barred and sealed. It belonged to Joss now. People wondered if he'd sell, although it would have to be to foreigners, they said, from Paris or England, because no one in his right mind, no one from Larmor-Baden or the islands, would ever want to live there.

A trickle of perspiration ran down her spine. The summer was warmer than usual, and the July sun already high. She pulled off her denim jacket and checked the time on her phone. She had to hurry or she'd miss the bus.

SHE ARRIVED at Tristan's stables on the outskirts of Carnac just before eight. By nine, busses full of tourists arrived to visit the three thousand mysterious prehistoric standing stones. A number of the tourists would rent horses and a guide to explore the oldest part, which dated back to 4500 BC and ran from the border of the stables over four miles toward the sea.

When she pushed open the door of the office, Tristan, almost the age of Erwan, lifted his head.

He grimaced. "Every morning I pray you won't show up, but here you are again."

"Where else will I go?" She dropped her backpack by the desk and opened the book in which they noted the tour reservations.

He flicked through some papers on the desk. "To Paris. To university. Anywhere but here."

"This is my home."

"You're wasting away, throwing your talents to the wind," he said, lifting and slamming down books and old telephone directories.

"Who will take care of Erwan and my animals?"

Tristan looked up. She smiled.

"If it wasn't for that old man, you wouldn't be here."

"He's all I've got," she said gently.

"No." He waved a finger at her. "You're all *he's* got." His expression softened. "Kompren a ran," he said with a resigned air. *I understand.*

He plucked open a drawer, rummaged through it, and banged it closed again.

“What are you looking for?” she asked.

“The damn receipt book. It was here,” he pushed his finger on the desk, “just yesterday.”

She walked to the stack of plastic trays they used for organizing their filing and lifted a blue book from the top. “You left it here last night.”

He grabbed it from her. “What will I do without you?”

“Asks the man who wants me to leave,” she said as she took her seat behind the desk.

“You know I have to say things that are in your best interest. I never mean them.”

She smiled with affection. “I know.”

Nobody from here truly wanted anyone to get away. It would be proof that a world existed beyond theirs. As long as they remained here with the people they grew up with, they felt secure. Joss’s return had turned her safe world upside down. The meaning of her dream was a mystery, but the message was clear. Larmor-Baden had become the least safe place for her to be.