

Chapter One

The dream was always the same. A helicopter circled in slow motion over the sea, the dynamic of its movement casting a net of circles 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 dipped, turned—deliberate this time—and descended. Lower still. She could feel the wind from the propeller on her face, fanning the flames. It landed where the jetty expanded onto the quay. The metal body was motionless, but the machine continued to cut through the air. Swoosh.

Suddenly it all seemed wrong. Upside down. She could see the image of the craft disperse, as if she were seeing it through water. The sea beneath was weightless, atmospheric. Nothing. There was nowhere to fall. The blades made ripples in the liquid air, a pebble thrown into a pond. It was done. The stone had been dropped. The waves had to follow.

She could smell the ocean now, the fermenting seaweed that broke through the clean scent with every ebb and flow of the breeze. It mixed with the scent of wood turning to charcoal in the fire and the diesel from the boats. The hot carbon dioxide fumes burned her nostrils. Her senses were alive, indicating it was real, even as her mind urged her to pull out of her sleep. Yet, she stood watching like a rabbit rendered helpless by the hypnotizing headlights, its extermination a forlorn conclusion.

The hatch lifted. A masculine boot was placed firmly on the wooden boards. 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, streaked with silver, fell loose down his back, the ends whipping up around his face in the wind of the blades.

Her breath caught in her throat. It always happened the same way, and even if she had dreamt it repeatedly, his identity always shocked her.

Josselin de Arradon. He straightened unhurriedly and turned slowly, his gaze targeted on her, like he had known she would be standing there, at the top of the pier, at that moment, on that day. For a few seconds their eyes remained locked. She had frozen, and now he started to move. As he walked along the jetty his dark coat lifted to his midriff, flying to the beat of an invisible fan. His hair billowed behind him. After the terrible tragedy the strands framing his face had turned white overnight. His thigh muscles flexed and bunched as his flat boots hit the ground. His features were older now, mature, but his jaw had the determined set from his youth, and his gray eyes had the same haunted look. Josselin de Aragon was coming for her. She didn't know why, but she knew it meant she had to run. As fast as she could.

Clelia d'Ambois woke with a start. Beneath her, she felt damp earth. Above her, she could see branches of the giant pine trees holding hands in the light of the moon. A cry escaped her lips as she shot upright. Snow, her wolfdog, sat beside her. He yelped softly. A little way farther off she could make out the other three wolf hybrids, Rain, Cloud and Thunder, who started howling when she moved again. She couldn't tell the time, but morning wasn't far. The faint light of the coming sunrise turned the distant horizon purple.

The pine needles rustled as the wind suddenly picked up. She shivered. Her cotton pajamas were wet from the dew. She felt Snow's warm tongue on her arm.

Clelia took a deep breath and lifted her head. Usually she liked being in the woods before sunrise. It was like seeing a person who had just tumbled out of bed, with his face still unwashed, the night's dreams still in his eyes. But this new thing frightened her. Her fear spoiled the untainted day's beauty. Snow nudged her with his nose. She trailed her fingers down the white fur of his back.

"Oh, Snow. Not again. How long have I been here?"

Snow trotted to the outer circle where the other dogs stood guard. They immediately obeyed their alpha by falling in line.

Clelia got up and made her way back to her grandfather's fishing cottage, her feet light but her heart heavy.

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The 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 stonewall of their terrace. Her grandfather Erwan's small fishing boat was gone. He would have left at four in the morning with the turn of the tide. Beyond the smooth surface of the ocean their house rose white against the black grass hill that would turn a luminous green in the light of the day. 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 the house, as far away from the wolfdogs as possible.

At the backdoor, Snow sat down on the rock slab next to the wild rose bush while the other dogs ran off to the beach. Tripod, a three-legged mongrel, lay in the kitchen on a cushion by the cold stove. Clelia filled the black kettle with water and lit the gas for Erwan's tea. She laid the table with baguette, butter, and mulberry jam. When the water boiled, she turned off the gas and poured it over tea leaves in a pot. She first fed all the animals and then went upstairs to her attic room to get dressed. She washed her face and brushed her teeth in her ensuite bathroom cubicle. Her straight, black hair reached her shoulders. She made a braid and tied it with a ribbon.

She stared at her Asian features in the mirror, the dark slanted eyes that were too big, dominating her heart-shaped face and pale skin, and the curve of her eyebrows that showed just under the curtain of her fringe. She looked nothing like the Larmorieners who inhabited the islands or Larmor-Baden on the mainland. Her physical appearance had always set her apart, reminded the villagers that she didn't belong. She was an outcast and people her own age were weary of her. They disliked her, teased and degraded her, because of who her mother was. Even if her mother had been dead for twenty-three years, the tradition-fast Brittany people remembered. No, there was no chance of her being accepted through the slow process of forgetting. They were a community who held fast to their roots, who told the same tales their pre-Celtic ancestors, famous for erecting their standing stones, had. To a people who had 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 live with her, had managed to look past who she was.

From the window in the tilted roof she saw Erwan's red boat approaching from the east, from the direction of Île Longue. Quickly, she pulled on denim shorts, a pink T-shirt, and white flip-flops. She went downstairs and through the sea-facing door of the kitchen to watch Erwan remove his rubber boots on the stone steps of their veranda. His boat was already anchored. He had no net, no crates. 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 traoù," he said by way of greeting.

Erwan still maintained the Breton tongue and encouraged her to keep the language of the ancient ways, even if everyone else her age in the village 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 shoulders stooped and his wrinkled face yellow from the long days on the salty water.

Clelia followed and poured the strong tea he liked into his breakfast bowl.

"You didn't go fishing, Erwan," she said.

"Nah. I didn't go fishing." Erwan placed his palms on the table and lowered his body with a flinch into the chair.

Clelia 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 of retiring. She had never called him grandfather. She didn't know why. It wasn't because he wasn't her biological grandfather. She just grew up with his first name always on her lips. She put the bowl in front of him and waited until he cupped the warm brew with both hands, sighing approvingly.

"Where did you go?" she said, even if she knew the answer.

He blew vapor over the edge of the bowl. "Larmor."

Clelia closed her eyes fleetingly. "There was another fire, wasn't there?"

Instead of answering, Erwan slurped his tea.

"Which one was it this time?"

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He took a while before he answered, and when he spoke, he didn't meet her eyes. "The mayor's house."

She inhaled sharply. "Was anyone hurt?"

"It started on the kitchen side of the house. Brendan and Petrounel woke up before the flames got near the bedroom."

"And the house?"

Erwan only shook his head.

Clelia took a shaky breath. "At what time did it happen?"

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

She turned her back on him so that he wouldn't see the anxiety in her eyes. Standing on tiptoe she opened the overhead cupboard and removed a mug. It was hard to ask her next question.

"Did you check on me before you left?" she said softly.

There was a long silence. When Clelia finally faced Erwan again, she saw compassion in his eyes.

"Did it happen again, grandchild?"

"Yes. I woke up in the woods this time."

"I see." He stared intently at his tea.

She gripped the edge of the table. "What if it's me, Erwan?"

He looked up. "You didn't start that fire. You were fast asleep when I left."

"But I could have gone before, taken the dinghy and been back before you noticed the flames."

"Clelia, grandchild, it was a long time ago. You haven't started a fire since you were three."

"But who's to say it's not starting again?"

Angst tied her stomach in a knot. In the past month fifty houses had been burned mysteriously. The village was swamped with police and firemen and forensic experts who couldn't determine the cause of the fires. The villagers suspected arson. If they had known about her supernatural ability to involuntarily set objects alight, even if it only happened to her as a small child, they would have had her on the proverbial stake in the blink of an eye, condemned as the witch they accused her mother of.

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

Clelia bit her lip. She knew Erwan wanted to believe it as much as she did. Once, while playing on the beach, she saw a boy kicking a dog. When

she told him to stop, he laughed and picked up a stick, starting to chase the helpless animal. She couldn't exactly remember everything, but Erwan said the stick in the boy's hand caught fire. He had a fright, threw it down and ran away. The second time was when she was almost trampled by a horse while visiting the stables with Erwan. Then the hay had burst into flames. Erwan told the bystanders that he had dropped his pipe.

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

She became aware of Erwan watching her, and when she met his gaze, he said in a quiet tone, "They say Josselin de Arradon is back in town."

Clelia's body went colder than the icy Atlantic. Although she had never said anything about her feelings for Josselin, Erwan wasn't blind. He was a wise old man who didn't need words to see the truth. Clelia reminded herself of this as she carefully pushed her emotions back. She tried to show nothing of her shock. She even managed to keep a straight face when she said, "Really? When did he get back?"

"Yester night."

"That's a surprise," she said, not quite succeeding in sounding casual.

"They say he's not alone." His voice held a measure of sympathy and warning, Erwan's way of preparing her for bad news. "He's with a woman."

She lowered her eyes and started wiping bread crumbs from the table into her hand. "I thought he was in New York."

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

Swallowing her hurt and disappointment so that she could speak in an unaffected tone, she said, "Why would he come back, after all these years?"

"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? You still speak as if he's royalty."

Clelia disapproved of social casts, something Erwan had not completely let go of. Actually, a lot of the villagers still honored their ancestral barons and earls.

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“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.”

Clelia dared to glance at her grandfather. “And you think he found a wife and brought her here, to make a home in his childhood house?”

Erwan looked at her regretfully, as if it pained him to say, “A woman can heal a man in ways doctors and therapists sometimes can’t. But don’t forget, there is still his castle.”

Yes, of course. Josselin de Arradon was heir to his grandfather’s 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 the enormous stronghold. Instead, they moved into the big house near the sea. After Josselin’s grandfather’s death, his gambling addiction having financially crippled the heritage, the castle was left to waste away in that enchanted forest. Could it be that Josselin had found the means to restore it back to its former glory? Or did he find the means to heal his heart? Clelia found herself suddenly envious of the woman who had such magic at her disposal.

“And have you seen him?” she said, busying herself with rinsing the teapot.

“Nay.”

After the de Arradon family tragedy, no one ever expected Josselin to return. A shiver ran down Clelia’s spine. Snow cried softly at the door.

“I’m late for work,” she said, drying her hands. “I’ve fed the animals and 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 red rubber boots that stood by the backdoor. Their veranda steps gave access to the beach at low tide when their boats would be stranded, but at high tide the stairs were flooded and they could take Erwan’s fishing boat and the dinghy straight out to sea. Outside, she tossed her bag into the motorized dinghy and untied the rope from the metal peg. She climbed in, started the engine and steered the boat across the Gulf in the direction of the mainland. At low tide she had to take her bike and pedal across the bridge that connected the Presque Isle to the village, but across the water was quicker, and navigating the dinghy always had a calming effect on her. As she looked back, she saw Snow standing on the steps. She could hear his howl over the roar of the engine.

At Larmor-Baden she tied the dinghy to the jetty, changed into her flip-flops, left 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 watching the black frame of what used to be the mayor's house, still steaming in the fresh morning, smelling of melted plastic and wet wood.

A few people who passed by greeted her by name and some stopped to verbally ponder the mystery of the pyromania that was sweeping through their quiet village. The bakery opened at seven, and by then a small crowd of elderly people talking in hushed Breton had gathered at the tables on the pavement with espresso and croissants to watch the firemen go through the debris.

Clelia followed the tar road away from the smell of destruction and walked toward the bus stop in front of the library that would take her to the stables in Carnac where she worked. She more helped out in the tourist office that offered horseback rides than what could be called a job, but it was all that was available in a village with nine hundred inhabitants.

It was on the bend of the long stretch of road between the square and the library that she paused to lift her eyes to the abandoned house. She hadn't looked at it in nine years. For three-thousand-two-hundred-and-eighty-seven days she had walked this road, first to school and then to work, never turning her head as much as an inch. Not because of the horrific nightmare that had played out behind the shuttered, sad windows, but because of *him*. Because of Josselin.

For as long as she could remember, she had been in love with Josselin de Arradon. Secretly. All through school she had watched him, so strong and defenseless at the same time. Josselin was four years her senior and the most beautiful being she had ever seen. He had bronze skin with black hair, and eyes so gray they glowed in his head. Those eyes had captured her with their pain and intensity. While she admired him from a distance, he wasn't aware of her existence.

Josselin had only spoken to her once. It was on a summer day after school. She had wandered to the dense forest at the back of the schoolyard because she knew that was where she would find him. She stood behind a tree and watched him—studied him—the movement of his hand as he smoked a forbidden cigarette, the manner in which he pulled his fingers

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through his dark hair, and the way he laughed loudly into his gang of friends, even if 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 blonde and slim and beautiful with blue eyes and red painted fingernails. Clelia watched from her hiding place as Josselin slowly backed Thiphaine up until her body pressed against the trunk of the witch tree. It was *athuja occidentalis* but the townsfolk had baptized it so because of its twisted and crippled branches. The setting was eerie for a romantic adventure, and yet, it suited Josselin. He seemed right at home, while Thiphaine looked around nervously. His hand went to her cheek, his palm huge and dark and rough against the porcelain paleness of Thiphaine's face, while his other hand slipped under her blouse. His gray eyes looked like melted steel when he lowered his head.

His shoulder-length black hair fell forward when he pressed his lips to Thiphaine's and he moved his hand from her cheek to brush it back behind his ear. Clelia remembered the deliberate movement of his jaw, the way the muscles dimpled in his cheek, the hand under Thiphaine's blouse, all the while maintaining his composure while Thiphaine came undone under his caress. The beautiful girl made low moaning sounds. Her knees buckled, but Josselin, without breaking the kiss, grabbed her waist, pulling her so tightly into him that her back arched, keeping her up with his arm while he made her weak with his touch and his tongue.

Watching them ignited both yearning and pain inside of Clelia. The hurt she felt speared her heart. The aching in her soul was suddenly greater than the heat in her pores and on her cheeks, but she couldn't tear her stare away from the forbidden sight. It was Iwig, a boy from her class, who broke the painful spell when he discovered her behind the tree.

"What have we here?" he said.

His eyes darted to the distance where Josselin and Thiphaine were embracing. He knew what she had been doing. He was a tall, blond boy with a strong build, and Clelia disliked him for his habit of hunting abandoned cats with his pellet gun.

"A peeping tom," he said, taking a step toward her.

When she tried to back away, he grabbed her long braid and tugged it roughly, causing her to yelp.

“Not so fast, witch.” He grabbed her arm and hauled her so that she stumbled into him. “You like to watch, don’t you?” He grinned. “How about a taste of the real thing?”

She opened her mouth to scream, but he had already brought his down and kissed her so hard that his teeth split her lower lip. In reflex her free hand shot up, aiming for his cheek, and collided with its target. The force of the blow shot Iwig’s head back and froze him in his action, but only for a second, before Clelia saw his arm lift. Not able to free herself from his grip, she cowered instinctively, but instead of his fist coming down on her, another pair of arms grabbed Iwig by his shoulders and flung him to the ground.

When she looked up, she stared into the face of Josselin, and what she saw was frightening. His features were twisted into a terrifying expression, and before she could say anything, Josselin bent down and lifted Iwig by his jacket lapels. Iwig’s legs dangled, flapping like fish on soil, while his arms flayed in the air as if swatting flies. Josselin let go of one side of the jacket, his fist arching and hooking under Iwig’s chin, while at the same time unknitting his other hand from the fabric of the jacket. The impact sent Iwig flying through the air. When he hit the ground, she could hear the loud thump as the air was knocked from his lungs. Josselin moved forward, his arms away from his body, his fingers flexing, his shoulders pushed forward, until he stood wide-legged over the submissive body of Iwig. Iwig lifted his hands in front of his face, mumbling pleas for mercy.

“If you ever touch a girl in that way again, I’ll hang you from a tree under a pack of wild boars and watch them eat you from your feet up to your useless dick, until they rip your stomach open and your insides fall out,” Josselin said.

He spoke very softly, but the woods had suddenly gone quiet. His voice all but echoed in the absence of the sound of birds and wind. From the corner of her eye, Clelia noticed Thiphaine who stood to the side, hugging herself.

“And if you ever lift your hand to a woman again, I’ll cut off your balls and make you eat them and then I’ll feed you to the boars. Do you understand?”

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

“I asked if you understand.”

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“Yes. Yes,” Iwig said. He had started crying.

When Josselin lifted his boot, Iwig scrambled to his feet. He didn’t look at Clelia before he ran down the path in the direction of the school. Only then did Josselin turn to her. She shook from head to toe while Josselin studied her quietly. After a moment he walked to her, took her chin in his hand and tilted her head.

“You’re bleeding,” he said, trailing his thumb over her lower lip.

And then he did something that shocked her wildly. He brought his thumb to his lips, slowly, his gray eyes locked onto hers while he slipped his finger into his mouth and licked it clean, tasting her blood.

Clelia couldn’t move. She stood still, unable to speak or blink.

He took a white handkerchief from his coat pocket and wiped it over her mouth before pressing it into her hand.

“He won’t bother you again, but you better go home.”

She only nodded. He was much taller than her, so that she had to crane her neck to look up at him. He shifted and then his face was obscured by the shadows with the sun at his back, blinding her. She remembered wondering if he had forgotten about Thiphaine, who still stood to one side, silently observing, her eyes wide. Clelia looked from Thiphaine to Josselin. When life finally returned to her legs and she started to hurry down the path, he said, “What’s your name, girl?”

She stopped. “Cle ... Cle...” Her teeth chattered.

He frowned. “Take a deep breath. You’re in shock.”

She did as he instructed, and found her jaw relax slightly.

“That’s better. Now, tell me again.”

“Clelia.”

His lips twitched. “The witch?”

She flinched. That was what her classmates called her.

He didn’t show any kind of emotion. Only his smile became a little bit more pronounced. “How old are you?”

“Fourteen,” she said through parched lips.

“You’re too young to wander alone in the woods.”

When he said that, his voice became soft and dark again, like when he had spoken to Iwig, and without sparing either of the lovers another glance, Clelia sprinted home and curled into a ball on her bed with his bloody handkerchief in her hand.

Josselin left the village that same year in August, the summer he finished school, just after the fateful incident in his life. They never spoke another word. He had never acknowledged her after that day. Not a hint or a sign that they had shared the episode with Iwig.

For nine years she slept with his handkerchief under her pillow. Besides having heard via the grapevine that he had gone to New York, she hadn't had news since he had left and she refused to look at the house in which he had grown up. Being reminded of him was too painful. 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 was nothing more than weeds strangling rose bushes and climbing the fence, obscuring the ground level view. Nine years ago there was a swing bench on the porch that overlooked the grassland that flattened out to the sea. The white shutters had stood out against the gray of the stonewalls and the silver slate of the roof, but now they were the color of ash, the wood 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. She knew because he sometimes smoked a cigarette on the balcony, his gaze trained on the ocean, or maybe on 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 had snuck out here on her bike and stood in the road to see his light finally go out.

After *that* night, the house was barred and sealed. It belonged to Josselin now. People were wondering if he was ever going to sell, although it would have to be to foreigners, they said, from Paris or England or Europe, because no one in their right mind, no one from Larmor-Baden or the islands, would ever want to live there.

Clelia felt a trickle of perspiration running down her spine. It was an exceptionally warm summer. The July sun was already high. She pulled off her denim jacket and checked the time on her mobile 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 wanting to visit the three thousand mysterious prehistoric standing stones would arrive. A small number of them would rent horses and a guide from Tristan to explore the oldest part,

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which ran from the border of the stables over four miles toward the sea, and dated back to 4500 BC.

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

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

"And where else should I go?" Clelia dropped her backpack by the desk and opened the book in which they noted the tour reservations.

"To Paris. To university. Anywhere but here."

"This is my home, Tristan."

He flicked through some papers on the desk that stood opposite the one she occupied. "You're wasting away, throwing your talents to the wind here in this dump," he said grumpily, fishing around the desk, lifting and slamming books and telephone directories down.

"And 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, Tristan?"

"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.

"Here it is. You left it here last night."

He rolled his eyes and grabbed it from her. "What would I ever do without you?"

"And you really want 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 really mean it."

She smiled affectionately. "I know."

Nobody from here truly wanted anyone to get away. It would be proof that there existed a world beyond theirs. As long as they remained here,

Charmaine Pauls

with the people they grew up with, they felt secure. Somehow, Clelia knew that Josselin's return had turned her safe world upside down, and that Larmor-Baden was suddenly the least safe place for her to be.