

# *Remembrance*

R I T A W O O D S



A T O M D O H E R T Y A S S O C I A T E S B O O K N  
E W Y O R K

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REMEMBRANCE

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# 1

## Gaelle

*Current Day*

“How do I look?”

Gaelle glanced up from the *mayi moulèn* she was spooning into Rose’s mouth. Her grandmother stood fidgeting in the kitchen doorway. Grann always looked beautiful, but this morning she looked especially stunning, the emerald green of her suit shimmering against her dark skin. She pulled at the buttons that ran down the front of the jacket.

“Grann, *yo sispann*,” cried Gaelle. “You look lovely. You will get the job.”

Her grandmother gave her jacket another tug. “I don’t know. Maybe I am too old, *wi?*”

Gaelle sucked her teeth. “You? Old? Don’t be silly.” She swatted her sister’s hand. “Rose, stop. You’re making a mess.”

There was the faint rumble of thunder.

Grann looked up and sighed. “I’m going then.”

Another rumble, this one much louder, rattled the tiny house. Gaelle felt it in her teeth. A teacup crashed to the floor. She felt the chair vibrate beneath her. And then a roar cracked the morning into a million pieces, drowning out all other sound. Gaelle leaped to her feet, reaching across the table for her sister.

“Grann?”

But her grandmother was staring up at the pale blue sky where just moments before there’d been ceiling.

“Grann,” she screamed.

They locked eyes, and then her grandmother vanished beneath a mountain of wood and plaster and dust as the world ripped itself apart.

Gaelle jerked awake, gasping for breath, arms flailing, reaching for Grann.

A dream.

The same dream she’d had countless times in the more than ten years since the earthquake had destroyed her family, her island. She lay rigid under the covers, waiting for the shaking to stop, the tears rolling unheeded into her ears.

Taking a quivery breath, she turned her head and glanced at the clock: 5 a.m. The terror, the devastation of Haiti was a long time ago. A lifetime. And she had to get to work.

She moved mechanically around her apartment, turning on the coffee, ironing her scrubs. The apartment was small. The owner called it a carriage house, but it was really little more than a converted garage at the back of a decaying mansion in the middle of a long block of decaying mansions, most of which sat empty, or were occupied by squatters. She grabbed her travel mug and headed for the car, her mind thankfully blank. There was nothing in her past except pain.

It took barely a quarter of an hour to reach the Stillwater Care Facility where she worked, the streets nearly empty in the winter predawn. Stepping from her car, she stood for a moment, breathing deeply. She imagined the cold air traveling down to her lungs, layering her insides with a glaze of ice crystals, shimmering in the darkness, purifying her.

Everyone thought she was crazy. Her sister thought she was crazy; Rose said she would never live in a cold place again. But the dead of winter was Gaelle’s favorite time of year. The world seemed to slow down, to grow quieter, coating everything in a layer of

snow and ice, so that even the ugliest parts of Cleveland acquired a certain beauty. She held her face to the sky and felt the snowflakes melt on her lips. Smiling, she walked into work.

“You lose somethin’ in there?”

Gaelle started. She turned to find Toya peeling off her thick bubble coat and stuffing it into her locker. Toya Fairfield was another nurse’s aide who worked the same shift. She’d been at Stillwater even longer than Gaelle. They’d become good friends.

“You standin’ there starin’ in that locker like you expectin’ a genie to come poppin’ out.”

“No.” she smiled. “No genie.”

“Well, if one does, then I got dibs on at least one wish. You feel me?”

“And what would you do with your one wish?”

“Girl, I’d wish for three more wishes, that’s what.”

Gaelle laughed lightly. It was what Toya always wished for.

“And what about you, Miss Thang? What would you wish for?”

She shrugged and closed her locker. She would wish for Grann. She would wish for her and Rose to be together again. She would wish for Haiti to be made whole. But wishes were for children. They held no real power.

“A million dollars,” she said. “I would wish for a million dollars.”

“I heard that. Holy Christ! It’s cold as a polar bear’s butt out there,” cried Toya, kicking off her boots. “I’m freakin’ freezing. Quick. Do that thing you do.”

She thrust her hands into Gaelle’s.

Gaelle gripped her fingers and squeezed. She closed her eyes and felt a prickle of heat start in her elbows and flow down her arms into her hands, felt the hard coldness of her friend’s hands lessen, then disappear. She opened her eyes as Toya sighed contentedly.

“Damn, girl! You’re just a little walking furnace.” She slipped her badge over her head. “Should probably get your thyroid checked out or something, but appreciate if you’d wait until this weather’s over. You better than a space heater.”

Gaelle held up her hands. “No thyroid, just my superpower.”

“Well, it ain’t a bad superpower to have in the middle of December, that’s for darn sure.” Toya opened the lounge door into the hallway. “By the way, you get the old lady again today.”

“I do not mind.”

“Yeah, I know you don’t. You and her got some weird kinda thing going on.”

Gaelle grinned and stepped into the still-quiet nursing home hall.

\* \* \*

From where she stood in the doorway, the old woman was barely visible, the barest suggestion of a person-shaped lump tangled in the blankets on the bed in the darkened room. The television was on and shadows flickered across the ceiling and walls.

Twice, the director of nursing had tried to switch from the twenty-four-hour news station to something she deemed more suitable, something more cheerful for a geriatric nursing home resident: *Dancing with the Stars*, or one of those Real Housewives shows, but both times, the old woman had bolted upright in her chair as if suddenly electrified, eyes blazing in her cadaverous face, shrieking and cursing until the windows rattled and

the terrified assistant had gone running from the room. After the second time, the DON decided to leave her alone. Now, solemn voices intoned from the television speakers all through the day and all through the night about earthquakes and fires and drought, about the opioid crisis and far-flung wars.

From the corner of her eye, Gaelle saw Toya coming down the hall toward her, pushing the med cart ahead of her.

“Seriously, Guy, what is with you and that old lady?” she asked, stopping beside her.

“I do not know. I just feel . . .” She shrugged and pointed to her heart. “I feel a connection.”

She turned and looked at her friend. “Do you not ever look at her and think: There is something . . . ?”

“Yeah,” responded the other aide. She tugged at her straining scrub top. “There’s somethin’ alright. Somethin’ freaky. All this time and still don’t nobody know nothin’ about her. Where she came from. Who she is. Nothin’. She just sits in that chair not sayin’ a word, news playin’ twenty-four/seven. She gives me the heebie-jeebies for real, girl. Like she came back from the dead or somethin’.”

“Not well is not dead,” said Gaelle, something she’d heard her grandmother say.

“What? What does that even mean?” Toya rolled her eyes. “Girl, you as peculiar as she is. Why’n’t you go on now and hang out with your weird, not-dead friend. I got meds to pass.”

Gaelle chuckled and turned back to the darkened room as the aide rolled her cart down the brightly lit hallway. Toya wasn’t the only one who thought her attachment to the old woman was odd. Everybody did. The rest of the aides did the bare minimum required: changed her sheets, gave her the pill at night to help her sleep, cut the food on her tray into the tiny pieces she barely touched. Gaelle was the only one who lingered. She massaged the old gnarled hands, rubbed oil into her cracked feet. Even she didn’t understand it, her affinity for this mysterious elder, but she understood that some questions had no answers. Their spirits were linked in some way, and so she accepted that as the beginning of it, and the end.

Plus, it gave her an odd measure of comfort to offer the old woman this bit of extra care. She was most likely someone’s grandmother, someone’s great-grandmother, yes? Maybe out there, somewhere, there were people who loved her, missed her.

She stepped into the room.

“*Bonjou, Manman.*”

She often spoke to the old woman in her native Creole. Except when Rose was home from school, she almost never spoke it any other time. It felt too personal, a thing she wanted to keep just for herself. But here, in this room, there were no odd looks, no personal questions she didn’t want to answer.

She glanced at the television. Onscreen, something was burning. People were marching in the streets. People that looked like her, like the old woman, in every shade of brown. Their mouths were open. They were shouting, their eyes wild, and she was thankful the sound was muted. A swastika flashed on the screen. A line of white men marched side by side, their arms locked, except for the one on the end who waved a Confederate flag high overhead. Something curdled in the pit of her stomach—so much evil in the world. She turned away, blocking the images with her body.

“Come now, Manman. That is not something to watch on an empty stomach, *wī?*” She pulled a chair close to the bed and began spooning applesauce into the woman’s mouth, softly humming a lullaby. When she couldn’t cajole the woman to take another bite, she pushed the tray aside and pulled a fresh nightgown from the drawer and gently eased her into it. She took her time. It was like dressing a kitten: tiny bones under soft, loose skin. There were rumors that the woman was well over a hundred, and that wasn’t hard to believe. She looked every bit of it. She had simply appeared one day in their lobby two years before, bald, skinny, her clothes in rags, pale healed burn scars crisscrossing her arms.

Gaelle glanced at the clock above the door. As much as Toya fussed at her about all the time she spent in here, Gaelle knew her friend would cover for her until she was through. Carefully, she rolled the nearly weightless old woman from the bed into the chair.

“What will you do today then, Manman?” she asked.

She didn’t expect an answer and she didn’t get one, but deep down she was sure the woman could hear her.

“Perhaps you go to the activity room later, *wī?* It is movie day. You get out. You meet your neighbors. Watch something nice. Not these *bagay led?*” She jerked her head toward the screen.

The old woman’s eyes never left the television.

Sighing, Gaelle shook her head and began stripping the bed. Fresh linen sat neatly folded on the bedside table. As she yanked back the blanket, something clattered to the floor and she bent to retrieve it.

“*Ki sa nan syel la?*”

What in the heavens? It was the remote. Or what was left of it. The entire controller was flattened, misshapen, the buttons fused into a single white mess in the center, as if the whole thing had somehow been melted, then put back together badly. She stared at, turning it over and over in her hands.

“What happened here?” She looked up and inhaled sharply. The old woman was staring at her, her red-rimmed eyes glittering under the fluorescent lights.

The hair on Gaelle’s neck stood on end. She felt a surge of fear, an inexplicable sense that this frail, ancient woman was dangerous. They stared at each other for a long moment and she felt her heart pounding in her ears.

“Well,” she said, finally. She bit her bottom lip. “You know you’re going to have to pay for this now, *wī?*”

She gave a shaky laugh and dropped the remote into the pocket of her scrubs. The director of nursing was not going to be happy. She reached to straighten the old woman’s collar.

“Okay, Manman . . .”

She never saw the old woman move. The clawlike hand clamped around her wrist and Gaelle was yanked forward and off her feet before she even realized what was happening, only barely managing to not fall directly on top of the woman. She blinked, stunned. Their faces were mere inches from each other’s, and this close, the sense of danger seemed even greater. She felt a roiling in her gut, as if she might throw up.

“Manman, *bondye,*” she hissed and leaped to her feet. She tried to pull free, but the woman’s hand held her like a vice clamp, belying both her size and her age.

The old woman held fast, her eyes locked onto hers. Gaelle felt a sudden pain in her head and once again she fought the urge to vomit.

*“Kite’m ale!”*

Something changed in the room. The air suddenly smelled of rain, of freshly mowed grass. As if someone had left a window open somewhere. Except that it was winter and a hard crust of ice covered any grass for miles. The pain in her head grew worse.

“Let go, Manman; I do not want to hurt you.” The bones in her wrist felt like they might break.

She felt something shift deep inside her and cried out in pain, instinctively grabbing the woman’s hand with her free hand. There was a sharp, whitehot pulse in her shoulder, then heat, but not the gentle prickle she’d felt earlier in the lounge with Toya. This was a blowtorch firing up, igniting her arm, her hand. The old woman’s eyes widened, first in surprise and then in pain.

And then Gaelle was free.

Gripping her wrist, she staggered backward until she touched the wall behind her. She stared down at her hand. It looked unchanged, yet she still felt the hard thrum of heat echoing in her fingertips. She locked eyes with the old woman. Next to her, police cars rolled across the television screen, sirens blaring.

“What are you?” she whispered.

The old woman opened her mouth in a silent, toothless laugh, and then the world went black.

## 2

# Margot

*Far Water, Louisiana*  
1857

Margot caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror as she passed and stopped to peer at her reflection. Her sandy-colored hair had worked itself loose from its bun and lay damp and heavy against her neck. Her face shone with sweat.

The house had been closed up since the fall, and in the mid-July heat, the air was stale, the rooms like an oven. She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed at her forehead, her cheek, then leaned forward to study herself in the glass. Though the heavy drapes were still pulled closed, enough light leaked into the big room for her to clearly see the freckles scattered across her nose and cheekbones.

She sighed and shifted the heavy linens in her arms. Mistress Hannigan and her three children would be coming down from New Orleans in less than a week, and the house needed to be in perfect order. There was only Margot, her younger sister, and their grandmother to set the house to rights before they arrived . . . and it was a big house.

If only the heat would break.

Something—a movement reflected in the mirror—caught her eye. She turned, but there was nothing in the massive dining room except the mounds of sheet-covered furniture . . . and her.

She laughed nervously. She'd been on edge ever since they'd arrived the night before. Chewing her lip, she scanned the room, squinting uneasily at the odd shadows cast against the walls.

The feeling of dread that seemed to be following her from room to room made no sense. She loved this place—had spent every summer since her birth here: wandering the gardens, reading beneath the old hickory out near the creek whenever she found a spare moment. Every year, from July until mid-October, the Hannigans closed down the mansion in the city and came here—bringing their house slaves with them—to escape the disease-ridden air of the New Orleans summers: malaria, cholera, yellow fever. Here, the air was fresh, the water clear.

But ever since they'd stepped from the carriage, Margot had been unable to shake the feeling that some dark, infected cloud had followed them out of New Orleans and was settling itself all around Far Water.

Far Water.

Named for some plantation in Haiti, lost long before Haiti had been known by that name, the estate had been in the mistress's family for over a half century.

Catherine Hannigan was French Creole but had married James Hannigan, an American. Her family might have been far more scandalized had Monsieur Hannigan had far less money.

Margot brushed aside her unease. There was furniture to be uncovered, windows to be washed, and the half dozen fireplaces all needed to be swept clean of last season's ash. And where was Veronique?

She moved to the window and pushed aside the thick drape. The manicured lawn swept down toward the road, where it disappeared from view beyond two magnolia trees.



Her little sister was supposed to be helping to clean but Margot hadn't seen even so much as her shadow since their morning coffee, hours before.

Something rustled behind her and she spun, the hairs on her neck standing up.

"Veronique?" she called. She cocked her head and listened, but the only sound was that of the old clock out in the hallway.

"*Idiot, fille,*" she muttered.

She straightened and ran a hand across the gritty mantle. Never mind the vague threat she felt oozing from every corner. There was real work to be done and the very real Grandmere to fear.

In less than six months' time Margot would be eighteen. The Hannigans had promised her her freedom on her birthday, but until then, her grandmother could still pinch her arms until they turned blue if she caught her daydreaming instead of working. Margot smiled as she stepped into the hallway.

"Boo!"

Margot yelped and dropped the bundled sheets as her sister danced gleefully in the hallway.

"I scared you, didn't I?" crowed Veronique. "Admit it! I scared you. Did you think I was a ghost?"

Margot glared at her younger sister as she bent to pick the linens from the floor. "I was not frightened. . . . And where have you been?"

Veronique simply laughed and grabbed her from behind in a tight embrace.

"What mischief have you been up to, *ma petite?*" Margot laughed in spite of herself, pulling away to face her sister. "Sweet Virgin, you are a mess."

She ran a thumb across the dirt smudged along Veronique's cheek, tried to smooth down the wild hair, the same sandy color as her own, except that her sister's stood in a wild tangle about her face and was matted with straw and feathers.

"I was collecting eggs."

Margot eyed the feathers. "Collecting eggs or playing with the baby chicks?"

Veronique threw out her arms and laughed. "I do one and then the other is easier, *oui?*"

Margot smiled and shook her head. She thrust a handful of the sheets at her sister to carry. "Come, silly girl. There is real work to be done."

\* \* \*

All night she'd tossed and turned in a fitful sleep, and now, just before dawn, she lay wide awake. Groaning softly, Margot sat up. Yesterday had seemed to last forever—endless hours of scrubbing floors, beating half a year's worth of dust from the carpets, airing out the bedding. The heavy work—mending the coop, taking the shutters from the windows—that would be left to Girard when he brought the Hannigans from the city, though their work had been hard enough and Margot's body ached with fatigue.

Pale light seeped through the window of the small cabin she shared with her sister and grandmother. Wincing, she pushed herself out of bed. Veronique was still asleep, curled in a tight ball at the edge of their bed. Margot glanced across the narrow room toward the cot where their grandmother slept, and groaned softly. Grandmere was not there. The small sitting area off their bedroom was empty as well. Margot pulled a thin shawl from the hook by the door and stepped onto the porch.

“*Non*, Grandmere,” she muttered. “Not again.”

The day was still just beyond the horizon but the predawn air was already thick with heat. Across the damp grass, fireflies flickered in the shadows of the cypress trees.

“Grandmere?” Margot hissed into the darkness. “Grandmere, *es tu ici?*”

From somewhere deep in the gloom, where the grass dissolved into bayou, a cougar screamed. Margot flinched.

Their cabin sat on a slight rise, connected to the main house by a stone walkway, and though her grandmother was an early riser, the house was dark. In the other direction, the walkway led to the creek. Growling in frustration, Margot turned toward the creek. In the shifting light, something brushed across her face and she swatted frantically.

“*Nom de Dieu*, Margot,” she murmured. “Get hold of yourself.”

The walkway was cool beneath her bare feet and she moved slowly in the dim light. She rounded a bend, and there on the creek bank loomed the old hickory tree, a lantern flickering at its base. But her grandmother was nowhere to be seen.

A thick mist rose from the dew-covered grass. Moss, hanging from the tree branches that leaned far out over the creek, quivered in the slow-moving water.

“Grandmere?” Her voice bounced from tree to tree, then disappeared in the fog.

A figure moved in the shadows down at the creek’s edge and she stiffened. Moments later her grandmother stepped into the small circle of light cast by the lantern. Her nightdress was soaked and muddy all the way to the knees, her square face scratched and bloodied.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God,” whispered Margot.

The old woman stared blankly into the trees and Margot rushed to her side. She flung her arms around Grandmere and tried to guide her back up the walkway toward the house. But though her grandmother was well into her seventies and a head shorter, she was strong and solidly muscled. It was like pushing against a tree.

Margot glanced at the sky. It would be light before long, and Veronique would wake and find herself alone. Her sister had an unreasoned fear of being left alone. Margot pushed harder.

“For the love of God, *chère*. What are you doing? Do I look like a wheelbarrow to you? Stop pushing on me.” Her grandmother was squinting at her in irritation.

Margot dropped her arms. “What am *I* doing?”

She glared at Grandmere. “What are *you* doing out here in the middle of the night, *vielle dame*? And look at you.” Grandmere glanced down and grunted, seemingly surprised by the mud caked on the hem of her nightdress. “Ah.”

She picked up the lantern and turned toward the cabin.

“Grandmere!”

“Hush, *chère, chère*,” snapped Grandmere. She grabbed hold of Margot’s hand. “The spirits called my name.”

Margot felt the hairs stand up on her arms.

Her grandmother spoke to the spirits often—as often as she spoke to her and Veronique. Each morning, Grandmere lit a candle and whispered her prayers. Each night she did the same. On holidays, she saved a bit of the choicest meat and the richest cream as an offering to the ancestors. The Hannigans knew and left her to it. At least the mistress did. But the master . . . well that was a different matter.

But when she began to wander—when Margot would wake to find her grandmother gone in the middle of the night, or worse—missing for one whole day, or more—then Margot grew terrified. For it was at those times, few and far between, that Grandmere said the spirits were calling especially to her, had come to whisper their warnings.

The feeling of dread that had weighed on Margot since they'd arrived grew heavier, making it hard to catch her breath. Grandmere was watching her.

"Come," she said. "Your sister will wake soon. The fireplaces all need cleaning and the linens got to be laid in the sun to freshen." She sucked her teeth.

"And that kitchen garden's a mess. I'll get to working on that, then make us some sweet potato biscuits for supper." She smiled. "You and your sister can grow fat as me, *oui?*"

Margot resisted being pulled along. "Grandmere, you promised Master Hannigan . . ."

Her grandmother whirled. "Master Hannigan does not control the spirits, girl! He does not control the world of gods."

"But he controls this world, Grandmere. The one we live in every day. You might remind your spirits of this when they come whispering in your ear late at night."

Grandmere reared back, the air quivering hotly between them. For one long moment Margot thought her grandmother might strike her.

"Master Hannigan is spit in the ocean, Margot," said Grandmere finally. "In fifty years, a hundred, who will know his name? But the ancient ones, they will still rule the ways of the world."

The old woman turned and stomped away, leaving Margot alone in the shadows. By the time she arrived back at the cabin, her grandmother stood waiting on the tiny porch. The two stared at each other.

"*Chère,*" said Grandmere finally. "I will not always be here like this for you and your sister. But when the world is black, when you think you are alone, the spirits, my spirit, will be with you, living in your heart. When you don't know the answers, just listen. Quiet. And the answers will pour into your soul."

She gazed up at the lightening sky and laughed bitterly. "They might not be the answers you want, but the spirits always answer."

She turned and walked into the cabin, leaving Margot shivering on the threshold.

### 3

## Margot

*Far Water, Louisiana*  
1857

Far Water sat on the far eastern edge of the vast Atchafalaya Basin, wedged on a narrow spit of land between seemingly endless miles of swamp and marshland. The estate was far enough away from the poisonous air of the city for safety, yet still close enough should James Hannigan have the need to rush back and attend to his business empire.

The big house was invisible from the main road. Perched at the end of a long, curving drive, it appeared suddenly to visitors—with its heavy stone walls, tall, white pillars, and ornate shutters—rising like a massive wedding cake between the trees.

Catherine Hannigan had filled Far Water's rooms with crystal chandeliers and heavy velvet tapestries. The windows and doors were trimmed in gold leaf. The bureaus and cabinets overflowed with silver. Far Water was as grand in every way as the Prytania Street mansion back in the city, thirty-five miles to the northeast. During the long, hot months of summer, the Hannigans entertained often. Those who made the trek from their plantations along the great River Road that ran beside the Mississippi or from their mansions in New Orleans or Baton Rouge, were feted like the cotton, coffee, sugar, cattle, slave-holding royalty that they were.

Margot was on her hands and knees in the foyer, giving the floor of the great hall a final scrubbing before the family arrived. The marble glowed in the sunlight streaming through the tall windows on either side of the front door.

"You missed a spot."

Margot jerked, nearly overturning the water pail. She hadn't heard Veronique come down the stairs.

"What are you doing?" she asked over her shoulder, dabbing at the spilled water.

Veronique shrugged.

Margot rolled her eyes. "Well, what are you *supposed* to be doing?"

Her sister didn't answer and Margot sat back on her heels to look at her. Veronique sat with her tiny hands clenched in her lap, her lips pinched tight.

"What is wrong with you?"

Veronique reached up and began to worry the scarf knotted on her head. Grandmere had tied it there just this morning, and already most of her pale, thick curls had worked themselves free.

"Is something bad going to happen, Margot?" she asked finally.

Margot inhaled sharply through her nose. "What are you talking about, goose?" She forced a smile.

"Grandmere. I woke up. Really late. And she was gone."

Margot looked away. Sunlight danced on the gleaming marble steps.

"Mar?"

She sighed. "Yes, *chère*. She went out last night."

"Then something bad is going to happen."

"Perhaps not, Vee."

Veronique fixed her with a look and Margot felt a chill spiral up her spine. She remembered the fear she'd felt hours before out by the creek with Grandmere, and she

searched her memory for a time, any time, when Grandmere had wandered in the world of the spirits and the words they'd whispered in her ear had been anything other than a warning of something terrible to come. She shivered.

"Remember the flood?" asked Veronique.

Margot nodded. She'd been ten, Veronique had just turned six—but she remembered clearly how they'd woken to find Grandmere gone, the tiny room off the kitchen they all shared, filled with flickering candles, the door to the outside wide open. Mistress Catherine had been frantic. She hadn't believed for a moment that the old woman had run away. Fortuna Rouse would die before she abandoned her granddaughters. And what reason would she have to leave? Weren't she and her girls treated just like family? Girard had finally found her, wandering Magazine Street in the dead of the night, her white hair wild around her face. She said she would speak only to Master Hannigan. She never shared what passed between her and her master, but James Hannigan had, suddenly and without explanation, moved a large share of his stored cotton out of his warehouses in the business district. Two days later, a levee broke upriver. Water roared down the Mississippi, flooding the district. The stench of the muddy river lay over their neighborhood for weeks, nearly paralyzing the city. But while the other white businessmen wandered the sodden Garden District with pale, pinched faces, stunned, bankrupt, the Hannigans were little more than inconvenienced by the flood. At Christmas that year, Mistress Catherine had slipped three gold coins in Grandmere's apron pocket.

And that had been a good thing, yes? Money in Grandmere's pocket? The Hannigan's fortune spared? Except that James Hannigan had become oddly distant after that, watching Grandmere from across the rooms, his expression wary, fearful.

"And the fever?" Veronique went on. A cloud seemed to pass across the golden floor. Margot nodded, her mouth dry.

"I remember," she murmured.

1853. Just four years before, winter had seemed to last forever, cold rain lashing the muddy streets of New Orleans. A dank fog hovered over the rooftops, the stink of raw sewage choking every breath.

Then suddenly, without warning, it was blazing hot, the fog burned away. The city had been joyous. People poured into the streets to warm up and dry out, everyone's spirits high in anticipation of Mardi Gras.

Everyone except Grandmere.

Once again, she began to wander. One night, then two. Fortuna Rouse moved through the house as if in a daze, lips moving in silent prayer. The bread she baked was thick and tasteless, her stews thin and bland. Margot struggled to get up earlier and earlier every day, trying to cover for her grandmother, while Veronique drifted behind her, anxious and silent.

And then, the Sunday before Mardi Gras, Grandmere had stalked into the dining room and slammed a platter of fish onto the table. Catherine Hannigan's brother, his wife, and their seventeen-year-old son were visiting from Natchez. They'd been discussing plans to have the mistress's nephew start in James Hannigan's business. They all stared in silence as the platter skidded across the tablecloth.

"New Orleans will be filled with death," declared Grandmere. She fixed her eyes on her master. "Get the mistress and the little ones to Far Water. Now."

The whites said nothing. Margot gripped a pitcher of iced wine and glanced at her master. Master Hannigan's Adam's apple bobbed wildly above his silk collar. Time seemed to stretch, then warp, like hot taffy. Margot saw her sister trembling in the doorway, a basket of biscuits in her hand. She shook her head, warning her to stay quiet.

Finally, Catherine Hannigan laughed. A short, quivery bark. "Fortuna is so superstitious. You know these Louisiana Negroes." Her voice was shrill, pleading, as she addressed her guests. "But she makes the best beignets and biscuits in all New Orleans."

"Mistress," said Grandmere turning toward her. "It is the fever. It will come this year. . . ."

"Some fever or another comes every year to this maddening city." James Hannigan had found his voice at last. He rose slowly from his chair and Margot read danger in his eyes. She was certain her grandmother saw it, too, and yet . . .

"This will be like no fever before, or after," insisted Grandmere, her voice hard. "This will become a city of ghosts before it ends."

"Fortuna . . ." Hannigan growled a warning.

From the doorway, Veronique whimpered, so softly that only Margot heard. James Hannigan was a bear of a man, quick to laugh and quicker to anger. He brooked no nonsense: not from his employees, not from his wife and children, and certainly not from his slaves.

Margot stood frozen, staring at the table, shoulders hunched, waiting for the explosion. The fish lay partially off the platter, its dead eyes glazed, as if plotting its escape across the sea of lace and cutlery.

"You will all die," said Grandmere, her voice flat. "Corpses will float in the street like—"

"Enough," roared Hannigan. A fist came down on the table, sending a crystal glass crashing to the floor. "Enough of your voodoo, black magic, witchcraft! Get the hell out of here, old woman, before you make me forget you belong to my wife and not to me."

"James!" His wife was on her feet, her normally pale face as red as her hair.

Grandmere turned and left the dining room without another word, pulling Veronique with her. Margot would have followed except that she had taken root to the spot, heart racing, hands welded to the wine pitcher. Hannigan stood glowering at the door for a long moment, then he turned his great, bearlike head and caught Margot's eye. He blinked slowly, then visibly shook himself.

"Bring me some a' that wine, Margot," he called to her. He plopped in his chair and laughed. "Damn Louisiana niggers. Superstitious as hell with their curses and their ghosts."

"James," said his wife weakly, sinking back into her seat, her face still flushed.

Her brother and his wife sat wide-eyed and pale. Their son, Alain, looked amused. Margot managed to pour the wine without spilling it.

Hannigan raised his glass. "Ain't no saffron scourge can ever get James Hannigan." He drank from the glass and smacked his lips. "And I'm staying right here in New Orleans all summer long just to prove my point."

But he hadn't.

Catherine Rouse Hannigan may have been quiet, and skittish as a rabbit, but she believed to her core in what she called Grandmere's visions. She had made her husband's life a nightmare of tears and pleading and slammed doors. The entire Hannigan family was at Far Water by Easter.

By the end of that summer, fourteen thousand souls had succumbed to yellow fever, including seventeen-year-old Alain Rousse. James Hannigan would never again allow Grandmere in the same room with him.

Now, remembering, Margot tugged nervously at her hair.

“Do you remember . . . ?” began Veronique.

“Enough, *oie*,” cried Margot. She’d had enough remembering. Each memory twisted the knot in her stomach tighter. “You’re a goose. With all this foolishness. And if Grandmere catches you lazing about on these stairs . . .”

A movement on the landing above them caught her eye. They both looked up, and there stood their grandmother, silent, wreathed in light from the round, landing window.

“I am almost done here, Grandmere,” said Margot pulling the pail closer. “And Vee was just . . .”

She stopped abruptly. Grandmere was not looking at them. Her attention was riveted elsewhere. The old woman descended the stairs, stepping absently over her youngest granddaughter. “Grandmere?”

Their grandmother strode across the still-damp marble floor as if she hadn’t heard, and flung open the front door.

“Come,” she snapped.

Frowning, Margot glanced at her sister, who shrugged.

The two girls sprinted after their grandmother, who stood at the edge of the wide porch staring down the drive.

“Grandmere?” Veronique reached a hand toward her grandmother, then pulled it back.

The old woman was trembling. Margot followed her gaze, but except for a wild pheasant pecking in the dirt, the drive was empty. She felt her sister’s hand clutching the back of her blouse.

“It comes,” whispered Fortuna Rousse. “It comes *now*.”

“Grandmere. Come in,” pleaded Margot. A blade of fear pressed itself between her shoulder blades. Sunlight poured onto the porch, and yet she felt frozen to the bone. “There is nothing out here. Come in now. I will put on fresh coffee.”

“Shush,” said Grandmere.

The three slaves stood in silence, waiting, time having seemed to slow to a standstill in the thick bayou air.

Margot couldn’t bear it, the stillness, the crushing sense of dread. The beating of her own heart. She opened her mouth to say those words, to say that there was work to be done, to ask what they were doing standing there like statues in the sun. But before she could speak, she felt Veronique stiffen beside her, saw Grandmere step from the porch, her hands clasped tight over her heart.

And now, Margot could feel it—through the soles of her feet—the faintest vibration. Could feel it before she could hear it.

Horses. Moving fast.

Someone was coming.

Veronique fumbled for her hand and Margot grabbed it, holding tight.

“*Mère Vierge*,” whispered Grandmere. “Sweet Virgin, help us.”

And then, Catherine Hannigan’s barouche hove into view.

Girard, James Hannigan’s groom, valet, jack-of-all-trades, sat high in the driver’s seat, his waistcoat flying wild behind him, his caramel-colored face gray with road dust.

They could just barely make out the huddled figures behind him. The large carriage swung wide, and Grandmere crossed herself, muttering a prayer, as one of the back wheels caught in the gravel that marked the edge of the drive, skidding into the sloping grass on the far side. The horses, eyes wild, heads thrown back, seemed to stumble as the barouche pitched crazily from side to side. For a moment, it looked as if Girard might be hurled from his seat, as if the carriage itself might go over. But Girard fought for control, and until the horses finally regained their footing, and dragged the carriage back onto to the drive.

“Miss Fortuna! Miss Fortuna!”

Margot heard the desperation in Girard’s voice as he screamed for her grandmother. Yanking hard on the reins, he stopped the carriage less than a foot from the old woman, before tumbling from the seat.

“Miss Fortuna, hurry.”

Grandmere shot her granddaughters a look, a silent command to follow. Veronique moved to her side, but Margot stood fixed at the edge of the porch, staring openmouthed at the barouche. As wide and long as a boat, the black metal carriage gleamed in the sun. It had been imported all the way from Paris as a gift from James Hannigan to his wife. Catherine Hannigan rode it to the theater, to the balls, to her grandmother’s house in the Vieux Carré. It was fancy and expensive and completely unsuited for the rutted, unpaved country roads that ran between Far Water and New Orleans.

“Margot, *allez!*”

Her grandmother’s voice yanked her from the porch and she hurried forward. Three feet away, she skidded to a stop once again. The oldest Hannigan child, thirteen-year-old Marie, was already standing in the drive. Thin and pale, eyes pinched closed, her mouth open in a silent scream. Inside the carriage, ten-year-old Lily lay sprawled, half on, half off the forward facing seat, her lavender silk dress covered in black vomit. She had soiled herself as well—Margot could smell it from where she stood—but the girl was beyond caring. Her blue eyes were open and she stared unblinking, unseeing at the hot, blue sky.

But it was the sight of the mistress that froze Margot in her tracks. Catherine Hannigan had clearly gone mad. She was crouched on the floor of the barouche, her skirt up past her knees, legs spread wide, as if preparing to give birth. Her red hair was tangled, stray tendrils plastered against her forehead. Her blue eyes, so like her daughter’s, were wide, crazed. She was shrieking, making high pitched, unintelligible sounds. In her arms was her youngest child, Alexander. He was wrapped, head to toe, in a pink coverlet, but one hand had come free, and Margot could see that his skin was the color of cooked butter.

“Miss Catherine, give him to me,” Grandmere was saying. “You got to give the boy to me now.”

Catherine Hannigan drew back her teeth and snarled, spit flying from her chapped lips. Margot flinched. Her grandmother did not.

“Come, mistress,” pleaded Grandmere. “It’s going to be alright now. But I got to take that baby. Let me take him so I can tend to him, *oui?*”

The white woman blinked and seemed to see the old slave woman for the first time.

“Fortuna,” she whimpered. She grabbed Grandmere’s wrist. “Save my baby. Save my son.”

“I make no promises, mistress. But you give him to me and I swear I try.”

“No!” Catherine Hannigan screamed.



The word ricocheted off the house, the trees, fracturing the air. Veronique cried out. Marie Hannigan gripped the barouche and silently shook.

"No," screeched the mistress again. "You will promise me. You save my baby. You can do that. I know you can do that. Don't think I don't know what you are. Don't think I don't know what you can do. You save my baby. Do you hear me? You save my baby or else."

Bile rose in Margot's throat and she locked eyes with her sister.

"Mistress," said their grandmother, her voice still calm. "You give me *le petit*."

The white woman clutched the bundle that was her son to her chest, the yellowed hand flopping limply against her thigh, then, with a sob, finally released the child to Grandmere's waiting arms.

Grandmere whirled from the carriage, her face hard, the dying boy pressed against her.

"Put the carriage away and take . . . Miss Lily to the root cellar," she commanded Girard.

"Veronique, you get the mistress and Miss Marie into the house and cooled down. Margot come with me now. I need you."

Margot tasted the bile once again climbing into her throat. Her grandmother turned to look at her.

"*Ma petite*," she said. "You come now. We must try and save this baby's life. Before it is too late."

With a last look at the dead girl in the carriage, Margot followed her grandmother into the house.

## 4 Margot

*Far Water, Louisiana*  
1857

They carried the boy behind the main house to the small, stone building that was their kitchen and laid him on the little wooden table.

The sight of the boy laying limp and lifeless where just hours before they'd taken their coffee and biscuits caused Margot's stomach to clench. She clamped her teeth together, fighting a sudden wave of nausea.

Grandmere gently touched the girl's face. "Breathe, *chère*."

Margot nodded, reassured by the rough feel of her grandmother's hand against her skin. Grandmere would make it alright.

"Watch him close, yes?" instructed Grandmere. "I need to gather some things."

Margot nodded once again as the old woman disappeared through the kitchen door. She gazed at the boy. He was short for his age, thin, like his mother and sisters. But while his sisters had the pale skin and red hair of their mother, Alexander was dark like his father.

He was a lighthearted, chatty child who teased his sisters, made up riddles, and loved to go riding with Girard. Now, he lay on the kitchen table, eyes closed, lips blue and crusted with the same black vomit as his dead sister, and only his fast, shallow breathing showed that he was still alive.

Margot took a hesitant step closer and swallowed hard, the sound loud in her ears. Standing over the boy, she reached out a hand, then pulled it back, not quite able to bring herself to touch him. Not yet.

Mistress Catherine had said that she'd known what they could do, known what they were. But she didn't. Not really. She believed that Grandmere had a sort of healing magic, the same magic that brought about what she called "Fortuna's visions." Mistress Hannigan had prayed about it, she said, and she didn't believe, as her husband did, that what Grandmere could do was evil. It had come to her in her prayers, that Grandmere was a gift to her from God. It was part of the reason that she had agreed to free Margot and Veronique on their eighteenth birthdays: as an offering. She wouldn't free Grandmere—oh, she would never do that; Grandmere was much too valuable—but she could free the girls. It was only right, she'd said.

But the mistress had no idea.

Grandmere was a healer. But there was nothing mystical, nothing magical about what she could do. She had a way with plants: knew which ones could temper a fever, which could draw out infection.

The boy twitched on the table. A bubble of black vomit formed at the corner of his mouth, and Margot hissed in disgust.

It wasn't Grandmere that had the magic. It was her.

Most of the time, the poultices and teas Grandmere made from the plants and herbs that grew along river and deep in the bayou were enough to soothe a colicky baby or settle the mistress' nerves. But there were times—when a wagon wheel ran across Girard's foot, when a local teamster's leg wound festered and poisoned his blood—when Grandmere's herbs weren't enough.

And then Margot would use her touch.

She wasn't a healer. Not exactly. But when she laid her hand on someone, she could feel the things that were wrong inside of them, feel them deep inside herself, like a reflection in a mirror. Their pain was not her pain, any more than a reflection was actually her face, but she could feel it, study it in all its details. When Girard's foot had broken, she'd run a finger along his swollen ankle and was suddenly she aware of every bone, every nerve, in her own foot. She knew the size and place of the fracture, could feel the other slave's pain vibrating deep inside her flesh. Grandmere had made a special plaster for him, and now, months later, he barely limped.

She stepped closer to the table to study the boy. She had known Alexander since the day of his birth. He was a sweet child and she loved him in the twisted, complicated way of slave to master.

Warily, she laid a finger lightly at the boy's throat. She winced. His skin was like chilled cowhide. She felt the fever feasting on his organs, digesting the boy from the inside out. Felt the effort each breath cost him. He was far gone, and neither she nor her grandmother had the power to raise the dead. She pressed her hand against his forehead, taking shallow breaths, repulsed by the meaty stench of decay that mingled with his sweat. She forced herself to hold still, to search for the thing that was most wrong inside him. Alexander was dreaming: of hot-breathed monsters, of blood. The hallucinations twisted and warped, terrifying his fevered five-year-old mind, and Margot felt an answering vibration inside her own head. The boy had not much left in him.

*"Chère?"*

Margot started. Her grandmother stood in the doorway, a wooden bowl of water in one hand, herbs tied with rough twine in the other. Under the stench of vomit and rot, Margot smelled lavender. They locked eyes, her grandmother's unspoken question writ clear on her broad face. Could he be saved?

With a nearly imperceptible shrug, Margot bent over the boy and pressed her hands tightly against his shoulders. His pulse was sluggish, stuttering beneath her palm. She held herself motionless, feeling the struggling rhythm in her palm, feeling it in her own chest. Her heart searched for his, found it, grabbed hold. She felt the boy's heart spasm, then . . . beat by beat, begin to speed up, settle down, until it had matched itself to hers.

The little boy exhaled and Margot caught his breath in her mouth, tasting death on her tongue.

Grandmere whispered. "Hold now, *chère*. Keep him bound here with the living."

As if from a great distance she felt Grandmere slip a reed down Alexander's throat, spooning meadowsweet-laced water into him, the wintergreen scent mixing with their body odors, felt the weight of the cooling linens against her skin as they were drawn over the boy. As her grandmother worked, Margot held fast to him, riding his nightmares with him, reaching out when the linens needed changing. Time passed unnoticed until, finally, the fever had retreated to a small, hard thing in the center of the boy. She focused all her concentration there, drawing it toward her like a magnet draws a nail. She saw it, felt it: the heart strengthening, the bleeding slowed. Felt death's hold on the boy loosen, then give way.

And then Grandmere was there easing her down against the cool brick wall, brushing cool water against her face.

*"C'est très bon, chère,"* Grandmere whispered. "It is good, child."

Turning, she went to the boy who was now whimpering on the table.

“Child, drink this tea. It will make you strong.” Grandmere was pleading with the boy, trying to get him to sip from a little china teacup, but the boy pulled away, shaking his head and crying for his mother. Margot looked up. Alexander’s dark hair stood in stiff spikes around his head, and though his skin still glowed a sickly yellow, his eyes were bright and he looked strong as he struggled against her grandmother.

“*Maman*,” wailed the child. “Fortuna, I want my *maman*!”

Grandmere hefted the boy into her strong arms. “Come. We take you to your mama, then to your bed, *oui*?”

Still gripping the boy, she turned to look at her granddaughter. “Rest, *petit*. *Tout va bien*. The mistress will be out of her mind with sorrow about Miss Lily, but seeing the boy will help some. I will come back as soon as I can and we will have our coffee, yes?” She smiled. “Everything will be alright, *chère*.”

And then she was gone, holding tight to the still-wailing Alexander.

Margot laid her head against the cool bricks and closed her eyes. She didn’t have visions. Not like Grandmere. But she’d seen the monsters inside Alexander’s head, felt what he felt.

She’d felt the thickness of the Hannigan’s bedroom rug beneath her feet. Smelled the bittersweet smoke of her master’s cigar.

And there’d been something else as well.

A smell.

A terrible smell.

She’d walked inside Alexander’s head as he entered that room, dark, the drapes drawn, even though it was late morning.

And Master James, laying there on the bed. Still, so still.

That smell, that bad smell, growing stronger.

Margot clenched her eyes tight, her mouth open in a silent, agonized scream.

James Hannigan lay in a pool of vomit, eyes open, his last view in this life the red velvet ceiling of the Prytania Street bedroom.

She screamed because she understood, even if little Alexander was too young to, that her master had finally been caught by the saffron scourge after all. And nothing would ever be alright again.