

## Chapter One

(Clio symbol) *Clio*

This was so effing *frustrating*. If I clenched my jaws any tighter, my face would snap.

My grandmother sat across from me, serenity emanating from her like perfume, a scent she dabbed behind her ears in the morning that carried her smoothly through her day.

Well, I had *forgotten* to dab on my freaking *serenity* this morning, and now I was holding this piece of copper in my left fist, my fingernails making angry half-moons in my palm. Another minute of this and I would throw the copper across the room, sweep the candle over with my hand, and just *go*—like, shopping or something.

But I wanted this so bad.

So bad I could taste it. And now, looking into my grandmother's eyes, calm and blue over the candle's flame, I felt like she was reading every thought that flit through my brain. And that she was amused.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, all the way down to my belly ring. Then I released it slowly, slowly, willing it to take tension, doubt, ignorance, impatience with it. *Please*.

*Cuivre, orientez ma force. Copper, direct my power*, I thought. Actually, not even thought—lighter than that. Expressing that idea so lightly that it wasn't even a thought, or words. Just pure feeling, as slight as a ribbon of smoke, weaving into the power of *Bonne Magie*.

*Montrez-moi*, I breathed. Show me. Breathe in, breathe out.

You have to walk before you can run. You have to crawl before you can walk.

*Montrez-moi*.

Quartz crystals and rough chunks of emerald surrounded me and my grandmother in twelve points. A white candle burned on the ground between us. My ass had gone numb, like, yesterday. Breathe.

*Montrez-moi.*

It wasn't working, it wasn't working, *je n'ai pas de la force, rien du tout*. I opened my eyes, ready to scream.

And saw a huge cypress tree before me.

No grandmother. An enormous cypress tree almost blocked out the sky, the heavy gray clouds. I looked down: I still held the copper, hot now from my hand. I was in woods somewhere—I didn't recognize where. *Une cyprière*. A woodsy swamp—cypress knees pushing up through still, brown-green water. But I was standing on land, something solid, moss-covered.

The clouds grew darker, roiling with an internal storm. Leaves whipped past me, landed on the water, brushed my face. I heard thunder, a deep rumbling that fluttered in my chest and filled my ears. Fat raindrops spattered the ground, ran down my cheeks like tears. Then an enormous *crack!* shook me where I stood, and a simultaneous stroke of lightning blinded me. Almost instantly, I heard a shuddering, splintering sound, like a wooden boat grinding against rocks. I blinked, trying to look through brilliant red and orange afterimages in my eyes. Right in front of me, the huge cypress tree was split in two, its halves bending precariously outward, already cracking, pulled down by their weight.

At the base, between two thick roots that were slowly being tugged from the earth, I saw a sudden upsurging of—what. I squinted. Was it water? Oil? It was dark like oil, thick—but the next lightning flash revealed the opaque dark red of blood. The rivulet of blood also split into two and ran across the ground, seeping slowly into the sodden moss, the red startling against the

greenish gray. I looked down and saw the blood swelling, running faster, gushing heavily from between the tree roots. My feet! My feet were being splashed with blood, my shins flecked with it. I lost it then, covered my mouth and screamed into my tight palm, trying to move but finding myself more firmly rooted than the tree itself—

“Clio! Clio!”

A cool hand took my chin in a no-nonsense grip. My head wobbled. I blinked rapidly, trying to clear rain out of my eyes. My grandmother was holding my chin in one hand, and had her other under my elbow.

“Stand up, child,” Nan instructed calmly. The candle between us had been knocked over, its wax running on the wooden floor. My knees felt wobbly and I was gulping air, looking around wildly, orienting myself.

“Nan,” I gasped, swallowing air like a fish. “Nan, oh, *déesse*, that sucked.”

“Tell me what you saw,” she said, leading me out of the workroom and into our somewhat shabby kitchen.

I didn’t want to talk about it, as if the words would recall the vision, putting me back into it. My grandmother’s blue eyes stayed on mine, even as she automatically began fixing tea. “I saw a tree,” I said reluctantly. “A cypress. I was in a swamp kind of place. There was a storm, and then—the tree got hit by lightning. It got split in two. And then—blood gushed out of its roots.”

“Blood?” Her gaze was sharp.

I nodded, feeling shivery and kind of sick. “Blood, a river of blood. And it split into two, and started running over my feet, and then I yelled. Yuck.” I trembled, and couldn’t help looking at my bare feet. Not bloody. Tan feet, purple-painted toenails. Fine.

“A tree split by lightning,” my grandmother mused, pouring hot water into a pot. The steamy, wet smell of herbs filled the room, and my shivering eased. “And then a river of blood from its roots. And the river split in two.”

“Yeah,” I said, holding my mug in my cold hands, inhaling the steam. “That pretty much sums it up. Man.” I shook my head and sipped. “What,” I said, noticing that my grandmother was watching me.

“It’s interesting,” she said in that way that meant there were a thousand other words inside her that weren’t coming out. “Interesting vision. Looks like copper’s good for you. We’ll work on it again tomorrow.”

“Not if I see you first,” I muttered into my mug.

## Chapter Two

(Thais symbol) *Thais*

*This isn't happening.*

I could tell myself that a thousand times, and a thousand times the cold reality of my life would ruthlessly sink in again.

Next to me, Mrs. Thompkins gave my hand a pat. We were sitting side by side in hard wooden chairs in the third district civil court of Welsford, Connecticut. Two weeks ago, I had been happily scarfing down a *patisserie Anglaise* in a little bakery in Tours. Today I was waiting to hear a judge discuss the terms of my father's will.

Because my father was dead.

Two weeks ago, I'd had a dad, a home, a life. Then someone had had a stroke behind the wheel of a Buick Regal, and the out-of-control car had jumped a curb on Main Street and killed my dad. Things like that don't happen to people, not really. They happen in movies, sometimes books. Not to real people, not to real dads. Not to me.

And yet here I was, listening to a judge read a will I'd never even known existed. Mrs. Thompkins, who'd been our neighbor my whole life, dabbed at my cheeks with a lavender-scented hankie, and I realized I'd been crying.

"The minor child, Thais Allard, has been granted in custody to a family friend." The judge pushed her bifocals farther up the bridge of her nose and looked at me kindly. I glanced at Mrs. Thompkins next to me, thinking how strange it would be to go home to her house, right next door to my old life, to sleep in her guest room for the next four months, until I turned eighteen. And then what?

If I had a boyfriend, I could move in with him. So I guess breaking up with Chad Woolcott right before I went to Europe had been premature. I sighed, but the sigh turned into a sob, and I choked it back.

The judge began talking about probate and executors, and my mind got fuzzy.

I loved Bridget Thompkins—she'd been the grandmother I'd never had. When her husband had died three years ago, it was like losing a grandfather. Could I stay in my own house, and just have her be my guardian, next door?

“And is the person named Axel Govin in the courtroom?” Judge Dailey asked, looking over her glasses.

“*Axelle Gau-vanh*,” a voice behind me said, giving the name a crisp French pronunciation.

“Axelle Gauvin,” the judge repeated patiently.

Mrs. Thompkins and I frowned at each other.

“Ms. Gauvin, Michel Allard's will clearly states that he wished you to become the guardian of his only minor child, Thais Allard. Is this your understanding?”

I blinked rapidly. Whaaat?

“Yes, it is, your honor,” said the voice behind me, and I whirled around. Axelle Gauvin, whom I'd never heard of in my life, looked like the head dominatrix of an expensive bordello. She had shining black hair cut in a perfect, swingy bell right above her shoulders. Black bangs framed black eyes heavily made up. Bright blood-red lips either pouted naturally or had been injected with collagen. The rest of her was a blur of shining black leather and silver buckles. In summer. Welsford, Connecticut, had never seen anything like this.

“Who is that?” Mrs. Thompkins whispered in shock.

I shook my head helplessly, trying to swallow with an impossibly dry throat.

“Michel and I hadn’t seen each other recently,” the woman said in a sultry, smoker’s voice, “but we’d always promised each other I’d take care of little Thais if anything happened to him. I just never thought it would.” Her voice broke, and I turned around to see her dabbing at eyes as dark as a well.

She’d said my name correctly—even the judge had pronounced it Thay-iss, but Axelle had known it was Tye-ees. Had she known my dad? How? My whole life, it had been me and my dad. I’d known he’d dated, but I’d always met the women. None of them had been Axelle Gauvin.

“Your honor, I—“ Mrs. Thompkins began, upset.

“I’m sorry,” the judge said gently. “You’re still the executor for all Mr. Allard’s personal possessions, but the will clearly states that Ms. Axelle Gauvin is to assume custody of the minor. Of course, you could challenge the will in court . . . but it would be an expensive and lengthy process.” The judge took off her glasses, and the icy knowledge that this was real, that I really might end up with this hard-looking stranger in back of me, began to filter into my panicked mind. “Thais will be eighteen in only four months, and at that time she’ll be legally free to decide where she wants to live, and with whom. Although I would hope that Ms. Gauvin is sensible to the fact that Thais is about to start her senior year of high school, and that it would be least disruptive if she could simply stay in Welsford to do so.”

“I know,” said the woman, sounding regretful. “But sadly, my home is in New Orleans, and my business precludes my being able to relocate here for the next year. Thais will be coming to New Orleans with me.”

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I stood in my room, looking at everything I couldn't possibly fit into a suitcase. Actually, I had three suitcases and a large trunk that had belonged to Mr. Thompkins in World War II. My desk wasn't about to fit in any of them.

I sagged down on my bed, feeling my somewhat threadbare quilt under my fingers. I felt numb. I was embracing numbness. If I ever let myself not feel numb, a huge, howling pain would tear up from my gut and burst out into the world in a shrieking, unstoppable, hysterical hurricane of anguish.

I was going to New Orleans, Louisiana, with a leather-happy stranger. I hated to even speculate on how she knew my dad. If they'd had any kind of romantic relationship, it would take away the dad I knew and replace him with some brain-damaged unknown. She'd said they'd been friends. Such good friends that he'd given her his only child, and yet had never mentioned her name to me once.

A tap on my door. I looked up blankly as Mrs. Thompkins came in, her gentle, plump face drawn and sad. She carried a sandwich and a glass of lemonade on a tray, which she set on my desk. She stood by me, brushing her fingers over my hair while I tried not to feel anything.

"Do you need any help, dear?" she whispered.

I shook my head no and tried to manage a brave smile, which failed miserably. Inside me a hollow wail of pain threatened to break through. It hit me over and over again, and yet I still couldn't quite take it in. My dad was dead. Gone forever. It was literally unbelievable.

"You and I know everything we want to say," Mrs. Thompkins went on in a soft voice. "Saying it just seems too hard, right now. But I'll tell you this: it's just for four months. If it works out and you want to stay down there"—she made it sound like Hell—"then that's fine, and

I'll wish you well. But if you want to come back after four months, I'll be here, with open arms. Do you understand?"

I nodded, and did smile then, and she smiled back at me and left.

I couldn't eat. I didn't know what to pack. What had happened to my life? I was about to leave everything and everyone I had ever known. I'd been looking forward to going away to college next year—had imagined leaving this place, this room. But I wasn't ready now, a year early. I wasn't ready for any of this.

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