

WAX WORKS

Chapter 1 A New Dawn 1.

The headmistress of Château Mont Rose, known for the better part of a century as Mademoiselle Wertheimer, fingered the mismatched buttons running up her high-necked dress.

Near her, Asha's sobs grew muffled.

A slate gray sky did little to brighten the leaded glass panes in the narrow tower room or alleviate the chill. The room was a cold, sullen tomb. Mlle Wertheimer knew that for the girl, however, all reactions to her surroundings had nearly ceased.

The headmistress took several steps closer to the wall the young woman had stupidly leaned back against.

"Do you recognize any of these buttons?"

The eye muscles showed the barest response. A quiver.

"You're not a button collector or you would have cared about these two." The old woman tapped first one, then a second, steel-cut button on her dress. Her crooked finger rested on the depiction of a storm cloud with a lightning bolt. The lightning bolt grew bright red. Looking at it, Mlle Wertheimer smiled.

Her finger dropped to rest on a larger button displaying a rooster's head. No bigger than the top of a matchstick, the tiny head jerked out of the button, turned to peer up at the headmistress. The beak opened, emitted a squeak.

"Too spoiled to use a needle and thread?" Mlle Wertheimer's voice was rough. "You let these buttons fall off. I've had your trinkets for years. They helped bring you back."

A groan slid out of the girl's vocal cords, like wind running through chinks in a broken wall.

Mlle Wertheimer tapped the third button, at the base of her neck. "This is a hand-painted Meiji Satsuma button from Japan. Aren't the flowers beautiful? A wasteful girl from Japan lost buttons too."

The audience was barely human. Mlle Wertheimer cocked her head, eyes squinting at the wall. It was senseless to keep babbling.

She went back to her post at the window in time to see a taxi stop. A burly man got out, slammed the door, passed through the château's gate. He wore a fur-trimmed Swiss army hat, ear flaps snapped up. A rolling piece of luggage made him ridiculous. Mlle Wertheimer sniffed. Not the kind of guest she would have chosen. A pity she was not in charge of choosing clients, as when Château Mont Rose had been a boarding school.

No sooner did the thought cross her mind than the piano jerked forward on its wheels, shoved her against the wall. She threw a hand against the window panes, leaving a smudge.

"I'm sorry!"

The piano rolled back to its previous position. The headmistress's deep-set eyes darted down at the smashed hip that, yes, slowly crept back out. She corrected her thought: She did not preside over Château Mont Rose. The estate presided over itself. It had taken her back, kept her alive.

A tiny sigh, no louder than the tick of a fly grooming itself, detached from the wall.

"Stupid girl!" Mlle Wertheimer spat out. There was no teenage retort, no dramatic young adult sigh, an improvement on the old days.

The headmistress felt better.

If only the late Jeanne Bonami, former owner of the school, could have known the true underlying power of the place, could have lived to see it.

Château Mont Rose was reinventing itself.

It had reinvented Mlle Wertheimer.

2.

"How long has it been, Julien?" asked the woman handcuffed to the bed frame. Shapely legs spilled out upon the mattress like two rivers of warm honey begging for navigation. Her raised arms hitched up the satiny red shirt, offering a peek at the black lace-trimmed port of call.

Detective Inspector Julien Cloquet kept his eyes on the sheets he folded. His fingertips tingled with the memory of Katia's silky warm flesh. Since coming back into the room, he had been struggling against the light patchouli and musk fragrance fogging his concentration.

Now he stretched out his arm, turned his wrist, and frowned. The wrist was bare. He pulled out his phone, pushed a button, and illuminated the display. "You've been handcuffed thirty minutes."

"No, darling. I meant since you invited a woman for a tryst."

“That is not what I invited you for.” He slipped the phone back in his pocket.

Katia looked at him, hard. “You know why I agreed to come.”

“Money?”

“Don’t pretend. No matter what you think—there has been no man in my life for a very long time.”

“Really.”

Somehow he had remade the bed with her chained up. Katia had thought it a game, refusing to be unlocked until he gave in. But he hadn’t given in, did not seem the slightest bit interested. What was he trying to prove?

Cloquet placed the bagged linens on top of the few things in his suitcase. Before he gave the sheets to the police lab, he was going to look at them at home, in broad daylight.

Tossing her head, Katia pulled up one leg so the knee was bent. She crossed the other leg over, offered a more provocative view. The manicured toes on the airborne foot played with the edge of his suitcase. “I have missed you.” Her voice was plaintive.

“Please stop that.”

“Don’t you want to have a little fun?” Katia’s voice reminded Cloquet of an oboe, throaty and full, made dramatic by a Russian accent, which she overplayed in erratic bursts. Her ruby-glossed lips pouted.

“That wasn’t the agreement. It was simply to spend the night here.” He gathered the toiletries from the desk by the window and arranged them inside his suitcase.

“Agreement, ha,” she scoffed. “I agree . . . that you are a handsome man.”

Katia had a lot of men to compare him with, and good reason to learn how to compliment all of them. The striking brunette ran a ring of upscale prostitutes from a series of posh flats. Prostitution was legal in Switzerland, but the unending influx of illegal female immigrants bent on the same trade in recent years had put a huge damper on the amount any of them could earn. Competition was staggering.

Cloquet did not want to leave until he found his used Rolex Tudor self-winding wristwatch. He had purchased it after declining a new Rolex from a watch manufacturer years earlier. Detectives couldn’t take gifts if they wanted to keep their jobs, so he had splurged on himself. A gift for self-righteousness?

The watch wasn’t in the bathroom. He had gone through his routine check for countertops, rims, and floors.

“You are a strange man, Julien,” complained Katia. “Why you want me to come stay with you, in a hotel, to just sleep? You have a house in Lausanne, don’t you?”

“A flat.”

“I thought you were running away from your wife. Why did you decide to spend a night at this hotel?”

“Two nights.” He straightened, gaze panning the room. A tall tree swayed outside the window, branches budding. Where the hell was the watch?

She knit her brow. “You stayed here two nights? You brought me on the second one, but you didn’t want to *do* anything. You just want me sleep. Maybe you have another woman the first night, she made you tired.”

“No, Katia. I was alone.” He threw her a reproving glance, then softened. She had been a good sport. “I’m usually the one firing questions. You cross-examine very well, considering you’re locked up.”

She brightened. “I remember the first time I met you. We became friends, didn’t we?”

Sort of, he thought. She had her uses. There weren’t too many complaints coming in about Katia’s girls. They met powerful men through screened connections. Cloquet knew many of their names, but he had no intention of joining the ranks. He no longer qualified, for one thing.

“I thought you needed someone,” Katia said, as bewitching with her legs flat as when they had been crossed.

Perhaps it was the resignation in her voice that got to him. “I used to have a wife,” Cloquet shared, “but the marriage fell apart. Years ago. Around the time I first met you, in fact.”

“So why you lock me up if you don’t want. . . .”

“The handcuffs were your idea, Katia.”

She tilted her head against one arm, soft and resigned, a prisoner hanging from the bedposts. “I could have sent one of the girls, Julien. I came for friendship.” A curl of hair fell over one eye and she blew it away.

Cloquet almost said he would not dream of taking advantage of her, yet that would be a lie. There was more than one way to take advantage of a person, even if one paid for the privilege in cash. He zipped the bag closed.

She changed tacks: “I hope your daughter is not troubled by bad men anymore. Michèle is her name? See, I remember. Such a pretty young woman.”

Cloquet’s face hardened. “No. She is not troubled by bad men.” He fished for the handcuff key in his pocket, moved towards the bedpost. “I’ll unfasten you now if you promise not to go around knocking on bedroom doors.”

“Don’t unlock. You might change your mind.” Katia arched an eyebrow. “Sometimes a man doesn’t say what he wants.”

“*Ab, bon?* I want to make a phone call.” Cloquet pulled a black leather glove onto one hand before touching the doorknob. He moved into the hallway, closing the door.

Morning sunlight lit up dust particles suspended in the stairwell, floating slow motion like debris in a fish tank. He could see grime buildup in crevices of the nearest wax statue’s hands and around its mouth.

“*Allô?*”

“Did you stay with the Greek girl all yesterday?”

“Good morning to you, too, Uncle Julien. I stayed as long as was necessary.”

“I asked you to *maintain* surveillance.” Detective Cloquet’s voice struck gravel. His nephew sounded, by contrast, cheerful.

“I trailed her down to Ouchy on foot. She stopped at a *raclette* restaurant.”

“For dinner?”

“Lunch.”

“No place serves *raclette* that early.” Even as Cloquet said it, he remembered the extent of Helena Stamoulos’s wealth. Money opened doors and pulled out cheese-melting heaters. “Was someone with her?”

“Just me, on the other side of the room.”

Cloquet looked over the balustrade. He moved away from his own bedroom door and lowered his voice. “I hope you didn’t do anything to make her notice you.”

“I wore a cap, kept it pulled down. She went back to her hotel after her meal and took a shower. That’s when I let myself into her room to put a tracker on her phone. Add that to the tracking device on the rented vehicle—”

“She didn’t see you?”

“Of course not.”

“What about Rachel Gordon? What have you arranged?”

“I’m tracking her phone too.”

Cloquet distrusted so much reliance on following mobile devices. “Tracking phones won’t keep these girls safe.”

“It’s easier than cloning myself.”

“If you could start a conversation and persuade the American girl, Mademoiselle Rachel Gordon, to stay in a different hotel, that would be more to the point.”

“Can you speak up? Uncle Julien, really, there is no hard evidence to prove—”

“*Interpol* sees a problem,” Cloquet interrupted. “Lauren Briant arrives in a few hours. You must have *some* idea of how to be charming to young women. Your mother claims you do. Talk them out of staying at this mausoleum.”

“Mausoleum” was not really the word he meant to use, but it fit. “Sweep one of them off her feet.”

“That’s not as easy as—”

“*À tout à l’heure.*” Cloquet ended the call and re-entered the bedroom. “Katia, we’re going. Where did you leave your pants?” He unlocked the handcuffs.

She reclaimed her bare arms, rubbing each wrist and looking around. “Did you pack them in your valise?” she asked.

“Of course not.”

“Did you push them under the bed?”

“I think I would have seen them two seconds ago when I was looking under there,” Cloquet said. Together they looked through the sheets and blankets.

Katia touched his cheek with her fingertips. “What did you do with them?”

He pulled his head away. “I didn’t do anything with your pants. They seem to be gone, like my wristwatch.”

“Pants are more important than watches when it is cold,” Katia lifted her quilted jacket from the foot of the bed. She slid her arm into each sleeve and buttoned up the front.

Cloquet thought she must have taken the pants off outside the room, showing off in front of a hotel client. Or she had stripped in front of the concierge during the time Cloquet had thought her asleep. Prostitutes marketed, just like other professionals.

If Katia wanted to leave her stretchy pants behind as an advertisement, he hoped she had made sure there was a business card in one of the pockets, if they could have pockets.

Seated on the bed, she rubbed her legs, then pulled the blanket over them. “You keep me warm?”

“With money, *chérie*. One hundred and fifty francs is my limit today.” He zipped the bag closed, extracted two bills from his wallet and held them out.

Katia pointed to the dresser. “Put it over there.”

“Are you offended?”

Katia’s brow creased. “In Russia, to put money into someone’s hand passes bad energy. I feel darkness. Something you are not telling me.”

She slid her feet into black ankle boots, rich brown locks swinging around her head as she pushed first one, then the other, heel down. “I accept your fee for the time I gave you, Julien. I have to make a living just like everyone else. But I tell you, I came here because you are special.” She stood up and looked him squarely in the eye. “You didn’t say how your daughter is.”

Katia had an unsettling kind streak for which Cloquet both respected and resented her.

Without answering, he opened the bedroom door. “*Allez*. You can put my jacket on your legs in the car.”

He was glad the concierge, Jean Duvanel, was not around to gawk at Katia’s long, gorgeous bare legs. He went down first, dropped the key by the sign-in book and heard a shriek followed by resounding bumps.

In her high black ankle boots, Katia had lost her footing. Cloquet saw the end of the freefall: revealed black lace panties, satin-covered buttons flying off the jacket, banging elbows and knees tumbling down carpeted stairs. Katia’s body halted at the feet of the waxen Swiss General Dufour.

She lay still.

He raced up the staircase to her, putting his hand out to steady the rocking statue. “*Bon Dieu!* Are you alright?” He ran his fingers over the soles of her boots. “How did wax get on your shoes?”

She moaned, “I think I twisted my ankle.”

Cloquet put a hand under her armpit, pulled her closest arm around his neck. “Hold on.” He left his bag to be fetched after he got her outside. She couldn’t walk on her own. To his relief, the taxi waited by the front steps.

Katia put her palm against the car roof to stop her progress into the car. “Wait, please.” She tilted her pretty head up, creasing her brow to peer at the windows.

“We have to get you to a doctor,” Cloquet said. “Because your ankle may be sprained or worse.”

“Julien, I knew this place as a girl. I was scared of the headmistress. Old bat.” Her eyes up close, in the morning light, were not so much brown as copper flecked with gold.

“When I remember her, I try to be nicer to my girls. They are just trying to survive, you know?”

Unwelcome thoughts scurried for hiding in Cloquet’s mind, like bugs from under a flipped rock. “What do you mean?” he asked. He failed to brace himself for what came next.

“When I was sixteen, I was a student here, at Château Mont Rose. More than twenty-five years ago. There *are* Russian girls who have studied in Swiss boarding schools.” She laughed at the look on his face. “Not as many as Arab or Americans, but there are a few of us. I did not expect to fall on hard times.”

The female cab driver called out, “Your time is on the clock, Buddy.”

“What was her name, the headmistress?” She had to be bluffing.

“You don’t believe me?”

He didn’t *want* to believe her.

“Her name was Mademoiselle Wertheimer.”

Wordlessly, Cloquet helped Katia slide into the seat, attentive that she did not hurt her head on the doorframe.

“I’ll be back.”

Cloquet hastened to retrieve his bag from the unstaffed concierge desk. The statue on the staircase seemed to watch him. That was always the way with statues, wasn’t it?

Cloquet slid into the backseat next to Katia, offering his jacket. She pulled it over her knees.

The skin prickles he felt were not from the cold. When one did not know what to say, it was best not to talk.

At the second street light, Katia pleaded, “Tell me about the lovely girl I saved from villains. Your daughter, Michèle. You are not angry with her?”

It was a well-bred question from a person to whom Cloquet owed a debt of gratitude for helping Michèle several years earlier, when a silly graduation party lured the group into the red-light district.

What happened since then wasn’t Katia’s fault.

“My daughter died over a year ago,” he confessed. “A car accident.”

Katia winced. “Ah, no!” She laid a hand upon his closest, one human being comforting another.

He allowed the contact for two seconds before pulling his own hand away. There was no room in his life for acceptance of pity. Not if he had so little to offer in return.

Chapter 2

Boarding School Rule #1

Lauren climbed, slightly perspiring despite a biting wind, up a steep Lausanne hill. Her fingers gripped the handle of a wheeled suitcase. She regretted not taking the métro.

The spontaneous impulse to walk to a favorite remembered café on the off chance she might find Rachel there now struck her as ludicrous. Rachel had not been at the station to pick her up because Lauren had missed her train. With her phone unable to pick up a Wi-Fi signal, there was no way Lauren could send Rachel a message. It was alright, she told herself. They would see each other soon enough.

She looked at the traffic and raised her arm. She waited but a few moments, watching the occupied cabs pass her, thinking how if her phone worked, she could have called an Uber or something like it. Each passing car stirred the air, pressing her skirt against her legs, blowing her hair. A free cab pulled up at the curb, window down.

“Où, Mademoiselle?”

A wiry young man with a curling, brown mustache sat behind the wheel. He was handsome and friendly looking in a businesslike way. Tattoos, loud music or perceived body odor would have had her waving him on. Sometimes one couldn't tell about personal hygiene, of course, until getting into a car, when it was too late.

“Bonjour. Do you know Château Mont Rose?”

“Bonjour, bien sûr.”

“How much?”

The price he named was higher than expected, but her feet begged for rest. The reflection from store windows of herself pulling a suitcase uphill was not one she wished to encounter again today.

“D'accord.” She got in while he stowed her suitcase in the trunk.

She settled in her seat and was relieved his cab smelled of balsam and sandalwood. A considerate driver. Nice looking, too.

He smiled at her via the rearview mirror.

At the first light, he said, “If you forgive my directness, Mademoiselle, places like Château Mont Rose are not comfortable. Bad plumbing, lumpy mattresses, and bed bugs. I have heard complaints. You could be in central Lausanne, close to cinemas and restaurants.”

Why did a driver care what hotel she stayed at? She raised her eyebrows but did not answer.

The light changed, the taxi accelerated, and the driver's face smiled from the posted identity card. "Paul Junod" sounded like a Swiss name. Ah yes, the Swiss could be opinionated. She pulled the non-functioning phone out of her bag and pretended to read an interesting text message, which of course was not there. Let him think someone knew where she was.

He glanced at her in the rearview mirror, waiting for her response.

"I want to go to Château Mont Rose, the inn."

"Château Mont Rose calls itself a museum, Mademoiselle. A hotel *and* a museum, which is curious. Don't you find it curious?"

"I don't find it *anything* except the place I want to go."

"As you wish, Mademoiselle."

The taxi accelerated and its driver shut his mouth. Reassured, Lauren slipped off her shoes, relieved to wiggle her toes. She stole a glance at his face and found him returning the look. Then a horn blared. He swerved hard and braked.

Lauren pulled herself upright and brushed the long blonde bangs away from her eyes. "What are you *doing*?"

"*Pardon*, Mademoiselle." Paul Junod looked flustered. "Some people drive like no one else is on the road."

"I should have taken the métro," she said, half to herself.

"The métro is closed for repairs in La Rosiaz. The bus line also."

Velo riders—people on motorized bikes—shared the road. The taxi proceeded without further incident, despite the traffic. The sky was bright blue with dappled clouds.

"You speak French so well," he said. "Would you mind if I practice English with you?"

Oh sure, that made sense.

"Where you are from?"

"America."

"Which state?"

"California."

They discussed modes of travel in the city, and he told her about a phone app that could help her around Lausanne. "I can find it for you if you let me see your phone when we stop," he offered.

Lauren could feel her face flush and she looked out the window. She didn't want to show him her phone wasn't working. That would make her look stupid. A pizzeria caught her eye. As teens, she and Rachel had eaten pizza all

over town. It was the only meal they could afford in those days. Now too, probably. She didn't recognize this pizza parlor.

"That is a charming place," said Paul Junod. "The owners are friends of mine. Would you like to go there?"

"Possibly," she murmured, lost in thought.

"Fantastic! My name is Paul. Do you like mopeds?"

"I've never ridden one." Neither, she thought, had Rachel, who must certainly be waiting at the hotel.

"This car belongs to the company, you see. I will pick you up on my moped. You may want to wear jeans."

"What?"

"You have not told me your name."

Lauren frowned. What had they been talking about, exactly?

Château Mont Rose's sign appeared, set in a stone archway overgrown by vines. The taxi rolled onto the driveway cobblestones. There was no one in sight, unlike the day she had first arrived at the school when dozens of girls had stared.

The only eyes she saw now were those of a doorman, peering out from between lace curtains.

"Why is that man watching us?" The doorman didn't smile or move.

"Whenever I bring clients to hotels," said Paul, cutting the engine, "there are people moving around. This place feels too quiet."

"I am meeting a friend here and all I asked is why that man is watching us, not whether you like noise."

Paul did not show offense. "Do you want me to wait while you see if all is well?"

He *did* have kind eyes, a vibrant brown. A butterfly unsettled her tummy. He was right. Château Mont Rose did not appear inviting in the way of bustling modern hotels. It was remote, aloof. There were no humans to be seen, save the unmoving face in the window. Not a single vehicle, save the taxi.

"I would appreciate your waiting." She sprang out of the car before he could offer to open her door.

A small metal sign above the château's main entrance said *Musée*.

"May I leave my luggage for a few moments?"

"I have turned off the meter. Take your time." Paul produced a book and slid down on the front seat.

The doorman watched her ascend without a change of expression. His face struck a chord. One of the old school staff?

She pushed on the door. It creaked open and a bell tinkled.

The man did not say, “Bonjour.”

Lauren cleared her throat. The old fellow maintained his position with the persistence of a bloodhound, refusing to turn or acknowledge her presence.

“Are you the concierge, please, Monsieur?”

Silence.

“I have a bag in the cab outside.”

A thought came—what a fool she was! The man must be watching the taxi driver. Paul Junod, if that was really his name, was likely a well-known con artist who flirted with lone females and stole their luggage. She had heard of situations like that. Lauren ran back out onto the front steps.

Paul looked up, book in hand.

“Um—Never mind!”

“Please call me ‘Paul.’”

“I thought I forgot something.”

“I am here if you need me.” His smile seemed genuine. “I will bring your bag in if you decide to stay.”

Lauren stepped up to the window. The doorman’s condescending face was still there, his eyes peering past her as if he knew the world’s secrets. She rapped on the window at the level of his chin. He was ignoring her on purpose. She rapped at his nose. He did not blink.

“Monsieur, you are very rude not to answer me earlier, and now you are. . .”

A plaque at the bottom of the window offered a name.

“You are Carl Gustav Jung, famed Swiss psychoanalyst,” she read aloud. “Onetime collaborator of Freud.” Lifting her gaze to the erudite wax countenance, Lauren marveled at its realism. Her cheeks burned.

Without turning to see if Paul had noticed her talking to a statue and her now-hot blush, Lauren re-entered the building, took a deep breath, and looked around. Recessed in the inky shadows were six life-size wax figures. Low-wattage bulbs spumed a dim froth of light above their heads. Brass plaques offered hard-to-read names. But of course. *Musée* meant museum. The château was now a hotel *and* a museum.

Her foot found the first step of the stairs. There would be time to study these wax people later. She had to check in with the concierge. It would be nice

to talk to a real human being. Relieved, Lauren saw a person waiting to meet her at the turn of the staircase. She climbed quickly.

“Bonjour, Madame. What an interesting place you have! I was a student here when Château Mont Rose was a school.”

The middle-aged lady regarded her customer with a cocked eyebrow and smile. It was likely she had overheard the one-sided conversation with the wax figure downstairs.

Lauren reached out her hand, touched the woman’s stiff fingers, then plucked her own back.

“Ewww”

A plaque on the wall indicated Madame Tussaud, famous Swiss wax figure maker, attired in modern clothes. Lauren shook her head, grumbled, “Can’t they afford better lighting?”

Cheeks flushed a second time, Lauren stomped upwards, no longer caring what anyone thought. Enough with the jokes. She groaned at what she saw next.

There at the head of the stairs sat an unmoving female figure behind the concierge desk. On the desk lay an open hotel registry book. A pen attached by a chain to a solid wood block on the desk waited in readiness.

The form appeared to be a fortune teller. “She” was frozen in a haunting look of divination, Tarot cards spread in front of her. Every one of her petrified bony yellow fingers was adorned with a large, jeweled ring. Perfect for Halloween.

“What a campy setup!” Lauren hoped someone real would hear her. She raised her voice: “Karl Gustav Jung looks real, and so does Madame Tussaud, but I’m sorry, this one is *really* bad. Yellow skin, a wig falling apart, and eyes too sunken to—”

The glazed eyes rolled. Lauren stumbled backward with a cry. She grabbed at the staircase handrail.

“*Bonjour, Mademoiselle,*” said a rasping voice.

The voice belonged to a demon of the past named Mademoiselle Wertheimer. Despite the “Mademoiselle” title, the woman had been as old as the hills from the first day they met. Now she looked waxier than the figures around her.

“You must speak only in French,” said the old woman.

Lauren’s jaw dropped. A boarding school rule? It couldn’t be.

“*Mais qui êtes-vous?*”

“Lauren Briant. My reservation is under Rachel Gordon’s name. We’re sharing a room.” Lauren studied the woman. She had to be an impostor. Surely Mlle Wertheimer was dead.

The look-alike finger-pecked on a computer keyboard. A screen with a list of names came up on the monitor while a faint odor of long-expired cologne rose from her clothes. Lauren tried not to breathe it in. The Mlle Wertheimer duplicate reminded her of a much-battered doll. Seconds ticked by on a large grandfather clock. Lauren thought of Paul Junod, waiting outside.

“Madame---er—Mademoui—Madame,” Lauren said, not knowing what to call so elderly a woman.” Students had been forced to call the headmistress “*Mademoiselle*” in the old days, if this was truly she. She pointed and said, “I see Rachel Gordon’s name, at the top of the screen.”

“*Et ben, oui.*” The old woman’s right hand fumbled in a drawer. She pulled out a skeleton key. It bore the number 14—the age Lauren and Rachel had been when they first met here.

“You are in Mademoiselle Gordon’s old room.”

It *was* her!

There was no way on earth Lauren could express happiness at seeing the old woman.

“Is Rachel Gordon here?”

Mlle Wertheimer settled her withered frame against the back of her seat.

“Has Rachel Gordon checked in?”

The woman pulled a card from the top of the deck and laid it, with wobbly wrist, upon another card. These were just plain cards in a game of Solitaire, not Tarot cards. A hearing aid lay upon the desk. She had removed it from her ear.

“Forget it.” Lauren turned to descend to the taxi and get her suitcase.

“Your friend . . . is upstairs, waiting.”

That news improved Lauren’s mood in an instant. There was no need to be afraid of the once inflexible ruler of the establishment. How frail she looked! Ignoring the elderly woman, Lauren ascended to Rachel’s old room, two steps at a time.

A waxen military commander, whom a plaque announced as Guillaume Henri Dufour, did his best to block her way at the turn in the stairs. She ducked under his outstretched arm. The haphazard placing of these wax figures would make it hard to get her suitcase up the two flights unless there was a newly installed elevator. Rachel or Paul Junod might have to help her.

The second floor had been converted into a hall of philosophers. A Jean-Jacques Rousseau statue stood across from the turbaned orientalist traveler and

writer Burckhardt, a 19th century native of Lausanne. Doing sentry duty at the end of the dark corridor illuminated by a single 40-watt bulb was a representation of Grock, world-famous Swiss German clown from the turn of the 20th century. The clown stood right by Rachel's old bedroom door. Lauren presumed him a philosopher because, well, life was a joke, *n'est-ce pas?*

She fit the key into the lock of number 14, feeling memories tumble around her. The hinges whined. Her gaze fell on a form reclining on a cream-colored duvet, cigarette in her frozen fingers. The sight was enough to take Lauren's breath away. The female's short brown locks were cut to flatter the jawline and taper down the neck. The wide-open, staring eyes were aimed straight at Lauren.

This was no Swiss philosopher.

This was Rachel.

Chapter 3

Meetings and Greetings

Rachel smashed out the cigarette and sprang into the air with the cry, “Lauren!”

They talked both at once, their words creating a small vortex.

Finally catching her breath, Lauren said, “Rachel, my bag—everything—it’s all downstairs. Hold on, I’ll be back in a flash.”

She rushed out the door and plunged into Paul, standing in the gloom. The two toppled over the suitcase he had carried up. Thumps echoed.

She lay sprawled, on top of him, and felt his heart beating.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

His arm was around her waist. He had taken the fall trying to protect her.

“Oh my God!” Lauren got up, smoothed her shirt. “I am so sorry.” He wouldn’t notice her blushing here in the shadows. The scent of a lovely men’s cologne tingled in her nostrils.

Paul was on his feet too, righting the suitcase. “I wish the Swiss military service had skirmishes like that!”

She giggled.

“Your hotel is very odd. A dead general is on the stairs.”

“Who’s dead?” Rachel appeared at the bedroom door. Light from the room brightened the hallway. Grock the wax clown hunkered in the corner with a circus grin.

“Paul, I would like to introduce my friend, Rachel Gordon.”

“*Enchanté*, Mademoiselle.” Paul extended his hand, but Rachel kept her arms crossed.

“Who is this person?” asked Rachel without emotion.

“Paul brought me here.”

“And you know him from . . . ?” Frost crept into her voice.

Paul’s smile remained, but his eyes grew wary.

Lauren felt a stab of panic. Rachel’s mother hen tendencies had not gone away. Her controlling habit had caused arguments between them in boarding school.

“Rachel, please. Paul drives a cab.”

“I am an engineering student who must drive a taxi until he graduates.” Paul touched his hand to his chest. “Circumstances. It is much more

interesting for me to tell you that my cousin, who is visiting Lausanne just now, is a very good dancer. He would be *delighted* to meet you. Do you like to dance?”

Rachel refused to be charmed. “If it’s ballet.” She disappeared into the room with a few tossed words: “Let him call you!”

Lauren’s heart sank. She did not want to fight with the friend she had just been so happy to reunite with, especially not after working hard to save up money for airfare. Ignoring Rachel’s gaze, Lauren found a notepad from inside the room on which she jotted down the phone number of the inn along with her own name. Paul waited in the hallway.

She went back out to give him the slip of paper along with a few bills.

He took the slip but pushed the money away. “All I want, really, is your name and a *yes*,” he said in a low voice.

“I wrote my contact information down for you. My phone isn’t working yet, so I gave you the hotel number. I guess you could get that off the Internet on your own.” She smiled. “My full name is Lauren Briant.”

“Lauren.” Paul took her hand in his, lifted it to his lips, and placed a kiss upon her fingers. The gesture chased words out of her head.

“When you did not come back out, I worried you had been murdered.”

Lauren felt her heart skip a beat. Had he heard the history of Château Mont Rose?

“Rachel and I lost track of time.”

“Mmmm. Your inn is very dark. Be careful when you walk around. Shall we say, 7 p.m. tomorrow night? I will come to fetch you.”

“I guess so,” said Lauren, making up her mind. “See you then.” She watched his retreating form. The longer she stood alone in the hallway, the more aware she felt of the unmoving wax figures lining the hallway.

But something *was* moving. Lauren had the irrational sensation that the eyes of the clown statue in the corner, next to their bedroom door, were upon her, that he noticed her. More irrationally, she imagined some movement in his face. Was it the effect of a thin sheet of light slipping through the cracked bedroom door?

In the periphery of her vision, the clown’s mouth seemed to twitch and begin to open.

She turned her head and stared at him. He stared back.

Then her feet propelled her to shoot past him, and she slammed the bedroom door shut.

“What’s wrong with you?” said Rachel with a jerk of her head. “Did that guy scare you? So why did you stay out—”

“Rachel, shhhhhh.” Lauren walked on shaking limbs to the window. The tail lights of a car disappeared up the hill. Her heart beat in her ears.

The darkening vista was one she had looked at often in the first months of boarding school, sometimes with tears of homesickness running down her cheeks. It was a view lushly treed, dotted with Swiss villas.

“Paul didn’t scare me. I was standing alone outside the door, next to that horrible wax clown . . .”

“And you got the creeps!” finished Rachel, clapping her hands together like a child at an amusement park. “Perfect! That’s what I told them!” She leaped up from the bed, danced to a drawer, and pulled out a pair of jeans and a shirt, dropping her peignoir to the ground. Years of ballet classes had left Rachel stripped of modesty about nudity. Some things never changed.

“Who is ‘them?’” demanded Lauren.

“My employers. Remember I said I am here on business? That is how I could invite you to stay with me in this suite. You don’t have to pay a red cent. I was just about to explain everything when you and the taxi driver started playing leapfrog in the hallway.”

“We weren’t playing. I knocked him over.”

Rachel shook her head and rolled her eyes. Lauren wondered how she was going to be able to ask Rachel not to be bossy when she was also in her debt.

“You Californians are far too trusting. Forget about him.”

“Rachel, please. . . .”

“Can you just listen for a moment? I’ve been dying to tell you my full position title. I’m the director in charge of location and personnel for ‘Ghost Seekers in Europe.’ I’m going to travel a lot, all expenses paid. The producers want two or three haunted castles near Lake Geneva to start out with. This is like coming home for me, and how could I enjoy it without you? I’ve got the Château de Chillon lined up for tomorrow. The second filming location this week is going to be here, at our old school. If the bosses are happy, we’ll keep on going from there.”

“Huh?” Lauren was not sure what to make of the absolute change in plans. “I thought we were on vacation!”

“We are, Lauren. Sort of. But better, because we’ll be paid. And in Switzerland!”

Rachel had spent every summer of her childhood in Switzerland, even if she always said the first weeks of boarding school were the worst part of her life. It was her New York physician father who felt the country had adopted

him. Lauren met Rachel's dad and stepmother over a long weekend holiday. She and Rachel had taken the train up to Les Diablerets, a resort in the Bernese Alps, for the occasion.

"Haunted castles? You can't guarantee ghosts."

"Every famous castle is haunted."

"You don't say. Who is the ghost at the Château de Chillon?"

"Lord Byron."

Lauren fidgeted with the window lever. What Rachel was saying was absurd, and she had to know that.

"Rachel, has Lord Byron consented? All he ever did was *visit* the Château de Chillon—and write a poem about its famous prisoner. I would have thought Lord Byron's ghost would be haunting his native country, England, or Greece, where he died. I've never heard of a ghost haunting a place that was visited on vacation and departed from in good health. Hawaii must be full of ghosts!"

"It's about audience expectations," said Rachel in a relaxed voice. "People expect castles to be haunted. They will recognize Lord Byron much more easily than Bonnivard or whoever really is haunting the Château de Chillon."

"At least you remembered Bonnivard, the prisoner of the Château de Chillon."

Rachel hooked her arm through Lauren's. "I admit I never studied literature. But I know that poor old Bonnivard didn't make it into the commercial *Who's Who of History*. Byron did. Some people have actually heard of him. That's the way my bosses look at it. I know you take literature seriously; I respect that. Why else would I have recommended you so strongly for employment?"

The idea of being on a paranormal team was not without appeal to Lauren. "How does this ghost-hunting work?" she asked. "You said 'bosses,' plural."

"One is a man. He's attractive, but not my type. Nor yours."

"These bosses think it's okay to make things up?"

"You could change that," said Rachel. "It all depends on your influence as a writer."

"My influence as a writer?"

"Isn't that what you do?"

"It's what I *like* to do."

"Before you start harping about truth to the people you meet tomorrow, I want you to know what I believe in, what is vitally important to me."

“Okay.”

“For starters, I *do* believe in the spirit world.”

Rachel’s voice dropped in pitch but grew in resonance. “I believe in God, spirits, and negative energy. And, my dear friend, I believe in a career.”

Rachel stopped to stare at Lauren, who nodded.

“Somebody,” continued Rachel, “has to make ghosts cost-effective, which includes helping them out any way possible. In business school, we learned to study competitors as much as market trends, to figure out what competitors have forgotten. So far, most people in the ghost-chasing business have been filming orbs and recording barely understandable voices or telling celebrity ghost stories. We have to capture the popular imagination better than other shows do. Our idea is to feature one famous ghost in each program, in a marvelous and creepy setting.”

“Our idea?” echoed Lauren.

“Technically, the show and the ideas belong to my employers—maybe even your employers, if they like you. Aside from the two bosses, there’s a Swiss guy and his partner who are going to be the tech experts. We’ll meet them tomorrow.”

“Château Mont Rose certainly *is* creepy enough to fit into a ghost-hunting TV show,” said Lauren. A thought struck her. “Hold everything. Rachel, did your crew *rig* that stunt I just fell for?”

“Me? Rig something?” Rachel wore the same impish look on her face as when suggesting, years earlier, they forge their parents’ signatures in order to leave the school grounds for a holiday weekend.

“I should have known!” Lauren exhaled in relief.

“You’ll make a great ghost hunter.”

“Writer.”

“Ghost-hunting writer,” amended Rachel. “I’ve got your best interests at heart. In that spirit, I suggest you stay away from the taxi driver.”

Lauren bit her tongue to not say that the scariest part of returning to Lausanne was returning to Rachel’s bossiness. It was too close to the truth. Instead, she asked: “Which ghost will we be hunting at Château Mont Rose?”

“I thought you would have guessed! Our dead teacher, naturally.”

Chapter 4
A Russian-Senegalese Alliance

Cloquet drove Katia back to her apartment building after a drawn-out stop at a medical facility. The entire morning was gone. He was surprised all she had was a sprained ankle. He offered to take her for groceries, but she declined.

“I have everything I need,” she said. “I could make you breakfast.” She tossed him a smile as he held the door of her flat open. “Do you like crepes?”

A wire-haired terrier bounced off a couch with a short yap.

“In Russian, they are called blin—Asta!”

Cloquet attempted to field the dog, which ended up with its front paws on Katia’s legs, now covered in new stretch tights picked up at a store. “Down! Where did the dog come from?”

“I’ve had him a little while. Yesterday he was at the dog spa with one of my girls. So clean and pretty! Do you recognize the name, ‘Asta?’”

“Should I?”

“It is a detective’s dog’s name. *The Thin Man*. Do you watch old movies?”

“Sometimes.”

“American actors. William Powell and Myrna Loy.”

“I thought Russians didn’t like Hollywood.”

Katia sank onto the couch, and Asta jumped up on her lap. “That’s silly,” she said. Cloquet leaned her crutches against the back of the furniture.

She caught his eye. “I wanted a smart detective’s terrier like the one in the movies. You and Asta must be friends.”

“Nothing wrong with pets.” He patted the dog’s head.

Katia thought he seemed glum. How could she have known Michèle was dead? Katia had carefully avoided reopening that wound at the medical facility. Yet she longed to quell his ache. Russian food could fill in spaces of discontent, at least temporarily.

“Julien, have you ever had bliny? They are delicious Russian crepes.”

He shook his head. Perhaps he wanted something heavier or spicier?

“I also have sausages. So easy to cook.”

His hand was on the doorknob.

She pointed to her cheek in the hopes of receiving at least a friendly kiss.

“I am not hungry, Katia. Stay off that foot. *À plus tard.*” The door clicked closed and his footsteps sounded in the hallway.

The smile disappeared from her face.

Katia pulled out her phone.

“*Allo.* Jawara? Thank you for bringing Asta. Can you come downstairs?”

Three minutes later, Katia heard a key turn. A young Senegalese woman dressed in a light gray and yellow striped knit tunic over gray tights opened the door. Katia’s eyes misted with tears.

“Jawara, you look lovely.”

The lithe dark beauty, gold rings sparkling in her woven hair braids, brought a scent of Chanel in with her as she kissed Katia on each cheek.

“What is wrong?” asked Jawara, almond eyes widening in concern.

“I fell. Shhh, Asta.” The terrier stopped yapping but his tail flapped like a flag in a high wind.

“You are in pain? You have crutches.”

“I sprained my ankle.” A tear coursed down Katia’s cheek, followed by several more. She took a breath.

“I will get ice.” Jawara bounded off the couch and into Katia’s little kitchen. Asta ran after her, then changed his mind and jumped back up on the couch with the mistress.

“It’s okay, darling,” called Katia. “My feelings are more bruised than my ankle.” She nuzzled her terrier, waiting for Jawara, who came back with ice. The Senegalese woman was young enough to be if not Katia’s daughter, perhaps her niece. There were a good dozen years between them.

Thirty or so minutes later, they were at the kitchen table, crepes piled upon a blue and white plate set between them. Washed, topped and halved strawberries sat in a blue and white bowl next to an open container of sour cream. Powdered sugar was in a much smaller but non-matching blue and white bowl. Katia loved blue and white in her kitchen.

“You first, Jawara.”

Silver Melchior spoons and forks from Russia had been set. Katia admired the filigreed handles glinting in the streaming sunlight. Jawara served herself three crepes. She turned the stem around for Katia to grasp. The cutlery brought back memories of childhood, before Katia’s father’s bankruptcy and the split from her mother.

The cooking pan sat in a sink full of hot water and soap bubbles. The room felt warmed by the coffee and crepes made swiftly with baking soda. Katia’s grandmother might not have approved of using baking soda instead of

yeast, but she was long since buried. She had taught Katia that food helped quell any ache.

“What were you doing at that place?” asked Jawara before taking her first bite of hot crepes, sour cream, strawberries, and powdered sugar. “I mean, besides—” she cut her words with a wink.

“He was looking for something—police work.” Sitting in the sunlit kitchen, Katia felt hope resurge. She would never admit Julien had not wanted intimacy; she insinuated there had not been enough time. Asta lay on his tummy at Katia’s feet and licked the un-bandaged ankle.

“A ring of thieves?”

“He didn’t tell me anything, but he searched all night. Then he lost his watch and I lost my tights. There’s something weird over there.” Katia rolled her crepe carefully around the sour cream and two strawberry halves, sprinkled it with the powdered sugar, and took a bite.

Asta whimpered.

“Not yet, Ashtuka.”

“You were so happy to hear from him.”

“We are friends,” broke in Katia. “Just friends. I thought—we had romantic potential. But of course, I am glad to help him in a case.” He never actually said she was helping him.

“Maybe he wanted to appear married?” said Jawara. “It will be hard for you to help him with a twisted ankle.” She made a wry face. “How long do you have to hop around?”

“I really don’t know. Perhaps a few days or a week. We will see.”

“What did you have in mind for me?”

“You can find out from Émile what is going on. Julien wouldn’t be digging around at Château Mont Rose if it were not police business.” Katia had her phone next to her and was typing into it. She stopped to sip coffee. “As I thought, the school closed eight years ago.”

“What did you find?”

“An old news item about the school closing its doors. Let me see when it reopened as a hotel.”

“I might eat all your strawberries while you are searching.”

“No, you won’t, you’re too considerate.”

Jawara laughed. “If you say so. I don’t think Émile likes your man very much. They are rivals.”

Katia was reading and her eyebrows raised.

“Even if Émile Moser doesn’t like Julien, that doesn’t mean we cannot use your lover to find out what Julien is searching for.”

Asta, having reached the end of patience with the humans, yapped.

“Alright, darling. Some for you too.” Katia proffered half a pancake with a dab of sour cream to the dog. Then she went back to her phone and found something. “Château Mont Rose re-opened a few months ago.”

“Katia, I will help you if you help me. I am worried what to do about my brother Abdul.”

“What about him?”

“He is visiting and I can’t let him see Émile.”

Katia sat back in her chair for the negotiations. Keeping ladies happy meant giving a little. She had introduced Jawara to Émile Moser, Lausanne’s current head of homicide, knowing he had a penchant for women of dark, exotic complexion. He paid for his exclusivity--full rent and spending money. He was a practicing Catholic with a wife, so marrying Jawara was out of the question.

“Tell your brother your husband doesn’t want guests. You are in your honeymoon stage.”

“My hus—?”

“I am sure Moser will play along, if he should ever get wind, which he won’t.” Katia spooned sour cream onto another crepe and rolled it up.

“I don’t think Émile wants problems.”

“Your brother and lover don’t have to see each other, do they?” Katia speared more half strawberries. “You’ve got Moser’s picture in a frame on the mantel. If Abdul passes by, tell him Émile hates uninvited guests and that he is a very private individual.”

“Abdul will see there aren’t any men’s clothes.”

Asta padded over to the water bowl and then returned to Katia’s feet. He watched his mistress patiently.

“Don’t tell me Abdul will be left alone in your apartment!”

“He is on his way from Geneva. I told him about your travel agency.”

“We haven’t any clients yet.” Katia’s voice came out sharper than she would have liked. Blast it, she knew relatives would come scuttling from all corners! Some girls had stiffer spines than others when it came to dealing with moochers. Priorities were important.

“Be firm, Jawara, like your family was with you when they sent you out in the world as a maid. You owe them nothing.”

Jawara shrugged.

“You are an intelligent woman kept by a powerful man of Lausanne. Protect that.”

“I don’t want to go back to the old life.” Jawara stuffed a wad of crepe and strawberries in her mouth.

“The tour guide business will take off only if we don’t go offering jobs with money I do not have. For what it’s worth, I think Château Mont Rose should *be* on one of the tours. I would love to find out what is being investigated there. Crime lends a place appeal, especially if we can tell the story.” Katia gave another wedge of crepe to the patient dog. Asta’s tail thumped.

“You said that place was closed because of a murder.”

“A teacher died there. I never said it was murder.”

“Émile will tell me what investigation is going on over there if I ask. It can’t be that important or he would be in charge. These crepes are delicious, Katia.”

Katia felt sadness slip away. More the loss to Julien, not tasting her crepes. “Thank you, darling. Would you believe I was a schoolgirl at Château Mont Rose?”

“A boarding school? That must have been nice.”

“I made a few friends, but the headmistress was scary. My roommates cried in their sleep.”

“They were homesick?”

Katia thought so. She remembered dream visions of blood but left that out because some of it came true. The strawberries on Katia’s plate now looked too red.

“We can’t let nightmares control us,” she said in a calm voice, carefully spearing a fruit.

Jawara smiled back with her perfect, pearly white teeth. No wonder Émile doted on her. Natural beauty.

“I promise to help you find out,” the young Senegalese promised. “Because you have been a blessing to me.”