

## The Curse Monger's Daughter

I was thirteen when I saw my mother get shot, up on that hillside down the road and across from our neighbor's trembling cornfields. She'd had me waiting in the passenger seat of her 2001 Honda Civic, cracked oak curse box in my lap, air conditioner blasting across my cheekbones and nose.

"Don't open it, if you know what's good for you," she'd said to me, as she stood on the weedy bank of the road, leaning in through her open door. Cicadas screamed from the dusky woodlands bordering the field Mom had used as the rendezvous point for her transactions many times before. The dawning summer's humidity pressed inward, the air conditioner heaving labored breaths back.

"I know," I'd said softly, eyes pinned to the deck of oracle cards she shuffled, cloth driver's seat her makeshift card table. I never found out what she'd cursed the cards to do—rewrite a future, maybe, end a destiny, breed wealth or love or misfortune for he who'd draw one. It scarcely mattered. When a queen was about to be assassinated, the pawn she had positioned for capture—and the thousands of dollars in profit its loss would make available to seize—were forgotten history.

You might have assumed, with the gilded cards depicting hanged men and long-tongued devils at my left, the box of charred cat bones and formalin-preserved babies' hands on my knees, and Mom's spare pistol lying in the door compartment on my right—for if one of the unsavory-types she'd sold cursed objects to in the past meant to rob the car while she was with

a different client—that by *if you know what's good for you*, she'd meant the artifacts in the box could harm me.

They couldn't. Not on their own.

She tied up the deck with incongruously jaunty gold ribbon, slammed the door to signal her arrival to whomever waited amongst the shadowed trees, and trudged into the twilight meadow, long grass shushing around her like restless courtiers.

I don't know for certain if I actually saw the woman who would become her murderer. Mom's silhouette was hard enough to track as it crested the hill, a fuzzy pocket of black against the growingly night-burnt sky. Any other shape or movement I recall could well have been the low-light imaginings of a bored child, like the crafting of a chair-thrown coat into an intruder at bedtime.

I was squinting at the one silhouette I felt certain I'd followed to its resting spot when the explosion flashed, ten feet to her right, tearing holes in my night vision. The blast erupted a hair after, leaving my ears wailing louder than the insects. It landed in my stomach like the knowledge of a lie unraveling. Deeper, still, it sunk as I blinked and blinked and could no longer find the silhouette.

I only ever came along on Mom's trades because she'd needed as many barriers between her box of wares and potential thieves as possible, so leaving the car for any reason was reprehensible. But I was thirteen, and I knew what the spark of a gun's muzzle looked like, and time tumbled forward, and fear climbed my ribs like ladders until it was clogging my throat and I couldn't breathe.

I threw the box beneath my seat, flung open the door, and ran.

A metallic tang seared the air where I found Mom lying, her right leg quirked at an awkward angle, her torso smudged darker than the sky. Dandelions bowed where she lay.

I know I cried, I know rocks jabbed at my knees where I knelt, but the rest of my memories from that moment didn't cement well, made liquid by shock.

Shock that my mother, brilliant and persistent enough to teach herself not only how to harness magick and pin it to useful objects, but grow that talent into a furtive business, was lying lower than I was.

Shock that my mother, who seemed never to sleep, never to miss the slightest hint of treachery or manipulation when she'd stare at someone with her aquiline eyes, had her face so soft now.

Shock that my mother, queen of my life, could be felled by something as pedestrian as a bullet.

It was almost more expected when she jackknifed awake and clamped a fist around my shirt collar, twisting.

"Momma—" I gasped. I grabbed her wrist between my icy hands.

Her voice was gravelly, fatal. "Myles Rose Herbert, by my dying breath, I swear—you need to avenge me. Avenge me, and never stop until you succeed, or you die."

My eyes stung from tears and sweat, wide and blinking. I was eager to show her that I'd understood, that I would obey. "I will—I will, Momma—I love you—"

Her eyelids fluttered shut. Her grip on my collar loosened.

And as the only parent I'd ever known faded and fell away from me, so did my life.

Mom's final command stuck to my skin like a sheet of sweat, clammy and tight, as if her last breath had taken physical form and become a parasite on my body. When I would rest, remembering it shocked me back to vigilance. When my mind traveled, even to food or bathing, the knowledge of work left to be done returned me to the track it had carved. If I ignored that knowledge, my thoughts somersaulted into panic. *You're running out of time, you're losing, you're failing, you're falling...*

I only knew contentment—or something shaped similarly enough to fill the same hole—when I was scouring Mom's scant records for hints of who her confidential killer might have been. And then, when I had the alias flagged, trying to attach it to a living, mortal person, and that person to a location.

I couldn't tell you what I did the last day I ever went to school. Until that night on the hillside, it had been just another sticky, sodden Tuesday in May. It's an often overlooked and all-too-common tragedy how many memories our minds discard because we hadn't realized they'd be our last. I recall no birthdays, no Christmas Eves, no turnings of years. Even the stretches of time when I grew ill from lack of physical touch, or my gums bled because I'd gone too long without fruit, oozed into one dim, monotone yesterday.

At some point, the house was robbed and the dormant curses Mom had crafted before her death were taken.

I'd heard the thieves in her study and continued scrolling.

Peace has become a folktale I soothe myself with like a suffering crone waits for Heaven. Sometimes I realize, with unbearable guilt, that ending my mother's murderer has become as much for myself as for Mom. By taking her from me, the villain killed me too.

Today I am twenty-three.

Adelaide Devonte's house is about what you would expect from a woman accustomed to buying—or taking—artifacts designed to cheat the world: an elegantly restored British colonial, white paint glowing with light from the sinking mountain sun. The porch, dusty and stained russet, groans as I take the steps. I see my mother's face in my mind's eye as I knock, cicadas gasping in the woodlands. The invisible cattle prod that lives jabbed between my shoulder blades twists deeper, its fire matching my always-burning skin, my always-racing heart.

An old man opens the door. He is drying his hands on a checkered dish towel. "Can I help you?"

"Is Adelaide Devonte here?" My voice sounds to my ear like someone's I've never met.

The movements of his hands slow. "Oh, dear—I'm so sorry. Addie passed a couple of years ago, now. Were you a friend?"

For two breaths, all I can hear is the cicadas.

The pistol in my waistband sears my hip, made hot by my own flesh. I ignore the traitorous feelings his sympathetic tone stirs in me—the longing for hugs, shared tears, a listening ear—and scramble for a new play, a save that might catch the pieces of my life that are falling away from me all over again. But I can't think of one, can't visualize anything except the panic rising in my throat and the twisting black and white towel.

When it spirals into the old man's palms and comes to a stop, I meet his gaze. Something has changed in his expression. "Oh—you're one of her...someone she shared a hobby with. Aren't you?"

My voice is throaty. "A hobby?"

"You work for Montague or Elizabeth or one of the others who was always giving her dangerous things."

*Elizabeth.* My mother's name jolts me like a spear to the stomach. I haven't heard it said aloud for a decade, and now it's as if someone has invaded my mind—a place that's become more real to me than reality.

"She killed her." I'm speaking before I can choose my words, emotions bubbling up between them. "Adelaide killed my mother in front of me."

The man doesn't look surprised, only wary, and perhaps a bit rueful as he waits beyond the threshold. "It was a chancy game, Addie played. She'd buy up whatever she could from those spell crafters and sell it for more. Or use it herself, if she thought the profit would be greater that way. I'd wondered if she hadn't always played fair, toward the end..."

*Hadn't always played fair* is an insultingly soft euphemism for *robbed and murdered*.

"I'm sorry about your mother," he adds. I think he means it, as much as someone removed from the narrative can. "Maybe you'll be happy to know that it was someone Addie bartered with who got her in the end, too."

I don't feel happy. I feel deader than I ever have. The closure I've climbed towards all of my adult life has been swept away, not with a bang, but a horrible silence, as if the last ten years have been one long inward breath, and the ability to exhale has been taken from me forever.

I pivot and fumble down the steps, intent to run until I think of what to do now—what substitute could possibly end this insatiable, anxiety-ridden hunger that lives in me—but the man calls out.

“Forgive me—it’s not my business. But if your mother is dead, who’s cursed you now?”

I turn, barely able to match his stare, and rasp, “What does that mean?”

“I’ve seen Addie hurt enough people to know that look. I can see it behind the windows of your eyes. You’ve been cursed.”

“You’re mistaken.”

But even as I say it, the continents of my mind are shifting.

Mom had been so prepared when she grabbed my collar and gargled that final request which still plagues me. The wild, stabbing look in her eyes hadn’t been that of a loving mother bidding her daughter farewell; it had been that of a monarch deploying her last line of defense. The look hadn’t been unfamiliar to me. She had always been the queen of my life. But now, that preparedness—that extra second of swiftness with which she’d spoken, the eloquent words she’d chosen even as she bled out—is making me wonder.

Had Elizabeth Herbert been gifted enough to craft a curse with only her words? Gifted enough to attach it not to a sack of bleached bones or pillar candle or deck of cards, but to a living person?

Yes. She most definitely had been.

Had that been my role in her game all along? A child soldier kept idling in the wings, hidden so far up her sleeve as not to realize I’d been there at all? The secret gambit for her

worst-case ending? Insurance that a woman who played with fire would, even dead, get the final capture?

For the first time, I see my grayscale life in color. The magnetized way my thoughts cling to revenge, my agonizing, ever-onward drive, my eternal fever, my red-rimmed eyes, my daily panic attacks...none of it has been of my own making.

The person I live to avenge was the one who dragged me to Hell alongside her.

I don't remember falling to my knees or pinching my collar to corners of my eyes as I cried, but when the man sets a heavy hand on my shoulder, that's where I am. The cicadas are wailing.

"I never knew much about my wife's possessions," he says, "but maybe we can look through them together. Maybe there's something she found in her life that could free you."

*Found.* Another soft euphemism. The sort we reserve for the villains we've loved.

The low-slung sun is hot and ginger on my cheeks. For a moment, my mind goes to the pistol at my hip. It seems almost to have its own little heartbeat.

Without answering, I stand and slip from his consoling touch. His gaze is heavy on my shoulders as I pull the gun from my waistband and set it on the white shell drive. It stays where I left it as I trace a more naïve girl's footprints back to my rusted Honda Civic, down the road, parked in the shushing, swaying grass.

I may never be reprieved of my mother's curse. But I *am* free now.