

"A BRILLIANT DEBUT, FULL OF EVERYTHING I LOVE."

—SARAH J. MAAS, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

Serpent

Dove

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HARPER TEEN
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

To my mom, *who loves books*,
to my dad, *who gave me the confidence to write them*,
and to RJ, *who still hasn't read this one*

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Part I

Un malheur ne vient jamais seul.
Misfortune never arrives alone.
—French proverb

Th Bellerose

Lou

There's something haunting about a body touched by magic. Most people first noticed the smell: not the rot of decay, but a cloying sweetness in their noses, a sharp taste on their tongues. Rare individuals also sensed a tingle in the air. A lingering aura on the corpse's skin. As if the magic itself was still present somehow, watching and waiting.

Alive.

Of course, those stupid enough to talk about such things ended up on the stake.

Thirteen bodies had been found throughout Belterra over the past year —more than double the amount of years prior. Though the Church did its best to conceal the mysterious circumstances of each death, all had been buried in closed caskets.

“There he is.” Coco motioned to a man in the corner. Though candlelight bathed half of his face in shadow, there was no mistaking the gold brocade on his coat or the heavy insignia around his neck. He sat rigid in his chair, clearly uncomfortable, as a scantily-clad woman draped herself across his plump midsection. I couldn’t help but grin.

Only Madame Labelle would leave an aristocrat such as Pierre Tremblay waiting in the bowels of a brothel.

“Come on.” Coco motioned toward a table in the opposite corner. “Babette should be here soon.”

“What sort of pompous ass wears *brocade* while mourning?” I asked.

Coco glanced at Tremblay over her shoulder and smirked. “The sort of pompous ass with money.”

His daughter, Filippa, had been the seventh body found.

After her disappearance in the dead of night, the aristocracy had been shaken when she'd reappeared—throat slashed—at the edge of L'Eau Mélancolique. But that wasn't the worst of it. Rumors had crawled through the kingdom about her silver hair and wrinkled skin, her cloudy eyes and gnarled fingers. At twenty-four, she'd been transformed into a hag. Tremblay's peers simply couldn't understand it. She'd had no known enemies, no vendettas against her to warrant such violence.

But while *Filippa* might've had no enemies, her pompous ass of a father had accumulated plenty while trafficking magical objects.

His daughter's death had been a warning: one did not exploit the witches without consequence.

"Bonjour, messieurs." A honey-haired courtesan approached us, batting her lashes hopefully. I cackled at the brazen way she eyed Coco. Even disguised as a man, Coco was striking. Though scars marred the rich brown skin of her hands—she covered them with gloves—her face remained smooth, and her black eyes sparkled even in the semidarkness. “Can I tempt you to join me?”

“Sorry, darling.” Adopting my smarmiest voice, I patted the courtesan’s hand the way I’d seen other men do. “But we’re spoken for this morning. Mademoiselle Babette will be joining us shortly.”

She pouted for only a second before moving on to our neighbor, who eagerly accepted her invitation.

“Do you think he has it on him?” Coco scrutinized Tremblay from the top of his bald head to the bottom of his polished shoes, lingering on his unadorned fingers. “Babette could’ve been lying. This could be a trap.”

“Babette might be a liar, but she isn’t stupid. She won’t sell us out before we pay her.” I watched the other courtesans with morbid fascination. With cinched waists and overflowing bosoms, they danced lithely amongst the patrons as if their corsets weren’t slowly suffocating them.

To be fair, however, many of them weren’t wearing corsets. Or anything at all.

“You’re right.” Coco dug our coin pouch from her coat and threw it on the table. “It’ll be after.”

“Ah, *mon amour*, you wound me.” Babette materialized beside us, grinning and flicking the brim of my hat. Unlike her peers, she swathed as much of her pale skin as possible with crimson silk. Thick, white makeup covered the rest—and her scars. They snaked up her arms and chest in a

similar pattern to Coco's. "And for ten more golden *couronnes*, I would never *dream* of betraying you."

"Good morning, Babette." Chuckling, I propped a foot on the table and leaned back on my chair's hind legs. "You know, it's uncanny the way you always appear within seconds of our money. Can you smell it?" I turned to Coco, whose lips twitched in an effort not to grin. "It's like she can smell it."

"*Bonjour*, Louise." Babette kissed my cheek before leaning toward Coco and lowering her voice. "Cosette, you look ravishing, as usual."

Coco rolled her eyes. "You're late."

"My apologies." Babette inclined her head with a saccharine smile. "But I did not recognize you. I will never understand why such beautiful women insist on masquerading as men—"

"Unaccompanied women attract too much attention. You know that." I drummed my fingers against the tabletop with practiced ease, forcing a grin. "Any one of us could be a witch."

"Bah!" She winked conspiratorially. "Only a fool would mistake two as charming as you for such wretched, violent creatures."

"Of course." I nodded, tugging my hat even lower. While Coco's and Babette's scars revealed their true natures, Dames Blanches could move through society virtually undetected. The russet-skinned woman on top of Tremblay could be one. Or the honey-haired courtesan who'd just disappeared up the stairs. "But the flames come first with the Church. Questions second. It's a dangerous time to be female."

"Not here." Babette spread her arms wide, lips curling upward. "Here, we are safe. Here, we are cherished. My mistress's offer still stands—"

"Your mistress would burn you—and us—if she knew the truth." I returned my attention to Tremblay, whose obvious wealth had attracted two more courtesans. He politely rebuffed their attempts to undo his trousers. "We're here for him."

Coco upended our coin pouch on the table. "Ten golden *couronnes*, as promised."

Babette sniffed and lifted her nose in the air. "Hmm . . . I seem to remember twenty."

"What?" My chair plummeted back to the ground with a bang. The patrons nearest us blinked in our direction, but I ignored them. "We agreed on *ten*."

“That was before you hurt my feelings.”

“Damn it, Babette.” Coco snatched our coin away before Babette could touch it. “Do you know how long it takes us to save that kind of money?”

I struggled to keep my voice even. “We don’t even know if Tremblay *has* the ring.”

Babette merely shrugged and extended her palm. “It is not my fault you insist on cutting purses in the street like common criminals. You would earn thrice that sum in a single night here at the Bellerose, but you are too proud.”

Coco took a deep breath, hands curling into fists on the table. “Look, we’re sorry we offended your delicate sensibilities, but we agreed on ten. We can’t afford—”

“I can hear the coin in your pocket, Cosette.”

I stared at Babette incredulously. “You *are* a goddamned hound.”

Her eyes flashed. “Come now, I invite you here at my own personal risk to eavesdrop on my mistress’s business with Monsieur Tremblay, yet you insult me like I’m a—”

At that precise moment, however, a tall, middle-aged woman glided down the staircase. A deep emerald gown accentuated her flaming hair and hourglass figure. Tremblay lurched to his feet at her appearance, and the courtesans around us—including Babette—swept into deep curtsies.

It was rather odd, watching naked women curtsy.

Grasping Tremblay’s arms with a wide smile, Madame Labelle kissed both his cheeks and murmured something I couldn’t hear. Panic spiked through me as she looped her arm through his and led him back across the room toward the stairs.

Babette watched us out of the corner of her eye. “Decide quickly, *mes amours*. My mistress is a busy woman. Her business with Monsieur Tremblay will not take long.”

I glared at her, resisting the urge to wrap my hands around her pretty neck and squeeze. “Can you at least tell us what your mistress is buying? She must’ve told you *something*. Is it the ring? Does Tremblay have it?”

She grinned like a cat with cream. “Perhaps . . . for another ten *couronnes*.”

Coco and I shared a black look. If Babette wasn’t careful, she’d soon learn just how *wretched* and *violent* we could be.

The Bellerose boasted twelve luxury parlors for its courtesans to entertain guests, but Babette led us to none of these. Instead, she opened an unmarked thirteenth door at the end of the corridor and ushered us inside.

“Welcome, *mes amours*, to the eyes and ears of the Bellerose.”

Blinking, I waited for my eyes to adjust to the darkness of this new, narrower corridor. Twelve windows—rectangular, large, and spaced at regular intervals along one wall—let in a subtle glow of light. Upon closer inspection, however, I realized they weren’t windows at all, but portraits.

I traced a finger down the nose of the one nearest me: a beautiful woman with luscious curves and an alluring smile. “Who are they?”

“Famed courtesans of years past.” Babette paused to admire the woman with a wistful expression. “My portrait will replace hers someday.”

Frowning, I leaned closer to inspect the woman in question. Her image was mirrored, somehow, her colors muted, as if this were the back of the painting. And . . . holy hell.

Two golden latches covered her eyes.

“Are those *peepholes*?” Coco asked incredulously, moving closer. “What kind of macabre freak show is this, Babette?”

“Shhh!” Babette lifted a hasty finger to her lips. “The eyes and *ears*, remember? *Ears*. You must whisper in this place.”

I didn’t want to imagine the purpose of such an architectural feature. I *did*, however, want to imagine a very long bath when I returned home to the theater. There would be scrubbing. Vigorous scrubbing. I could only pray my eyeballs survived it.

Before I could voice my disgust, two shadows moved in my periphery. I whirled, hand flying to the knife in my boot, before the shadows took shape. I stilled as two horribly familiar, horribly unpleasant men leered at me.

Andre and Grue.

I glowered at Babette, knife still clenched in my fist. “What are *they* doing here?”

At the sound of my voice, Andre leaned forward, blinking slowly in the darkness. “Is that . . . ?”

Grue searched my face, skipping over my mustache and lingering on my dark brows and turquoise eyes, freckled nose and suntanned skin. An evil smile split his face. His front tooth was chipped. And yellow. “Hello, Lou Lou.”

Ignoring him, I glared pointedly at Babette. “This wasn’t part of the deal.”

“Oh, relax, Louise. They’re working.” She flung herself into one of the wooden chairs they’d just vacated. “My mistress hired them as security.”

“Security?” Coco scoffed, reaching into her coat for her own knife. Andre bared his teeth. “Since when is voyeurism considered security?”

“If ever we feel uncomfortable with a client, all we do is knock twice, and these lovely gentlemen intervene.” Babette pointed lazily toward the portraits with her foot, revealing a pale, scarred ankle. “They are doors, *mon amour*. Immediate access.”

Madame Labelle was an idiot. It was the only explanation for such . . . well, idiocy.

Two of the stupidest thieves I’d ever known, Andre and Grue infringed constantly on our territory in East End. Wherever we went, they followed—usually two steps behind—and wherever *they* went, the constabulary inevitably did too. Big and ugly and loud, the two lacked the subtlety and skill necessary to thrive in East End. And the brains.

I dreaded to think what they would do with *immediate access* to anything. Especially sex and violence. And those were perhaps the *least* of the vices happening within these brothel walls, if this business transaction served as any example.

“Do not worry.” As if reading my thoughts, Babette cast the two a small smile. “My mistress will kill them if they leak information. Isn’t that right, *messieurs*? ”

Their grins vanished, and I finally noted the discoloration around their eyes. Bruises. I still didn’t lower my knife. “And what keeps them from leaking information *to* your mistress?”

“Well . . .” Babette rose to her feet, sweeping past us to a portrait down the corridor. She lifted a hand to the small golden button next to it. “I suppose that depends on what you’re willing to give them.”

“How about I give *all* of you a knife in the—”

“Ah, ah, ah!” Babette pressed the button as I advanced, knife raised, and the golden latches over the courtesan’s eyes flipped open. Madame Labelle’s and Tremblay’s muffled voices filled the corridor.

“Think carefully, *mon amour*,” Babette whispered. “Your precious ring could be in the very next room. Come, see for yourself.” She stepped aside, finger still pressing the button, allowing me to stand in front of the portrait.

Muttering a curse, I stood on my tiptoes to see through the courtesan's eyes.

Tremblay wore a path through the plush floral carpet of the parlor. He looked paler here in this pastel room—where the morning sun bathed everything in soft, golden light—and sweat beaded along his forehead. Licking his lips nervously, he glanced back at Madame Labelle, who watched him from a chaise longue by the door. Even sitting, she exuded regal grace, neck straight and hands clasped.

“Do calm yourself, Monsieur Tremblay. I assure you I will obtain the necessary funds within the week. A fortnight at most.”

He shook his head curtly. “Too long.”

“One might argue it is not nearly long enough for your asking price. Only the king could afford such an astronomical sum, and he has no use for magic rings.”

Heart lurching to my throat, I pulled away to look at Coco. She scowled and dug in her coat for more *couronnes*. Andre and Grue pocketed them with gleeful smirks.

Promising myself I would skin them alive after I stole the ring, I returned my attention to the parlor.

“And—and if I were to tell you I have another buyer in place?” Tremblay asked.

“I would call you a liar, Monsieur Tremblay. You could hardly continue boasting possession of your wares after what happened to your daughter.”

Tremblay whirled to face her. “Do not speak of my daughter.”

Smoothing her skirts, Madame Labelle ignored him completely. “Indeed, I’m rather surprised you’re still in the magical black market at all. You do have another daughter, don’t you?” When he didn’t answer, her smile grew small and cruel. Triumphant. “The witches are vicious. If they learn you possess the ring, their wrath on your remaining family will be . . . unpleasant.”

Face purpling, he took a step toward her. “I do not appreciate your implication.”

“Then appreciate my threat, *monsieur*. Do not cross me, or it will be the last thing you ever do.”

Smothering a snort, I glanced again at Coco, who now shook with silent laughter. Babette glared at us. Magical rings aside, this conversation

might've been worth forty *couronnes*. Even the theater paled in comparison to these melodramatics.

“Now, tell me,” Madame Labelle purred, “do you have another buyer?”

“*Putain.*” He glared at her for several long seconds before grudgingly shaking his head. “No, I do not have another buyer. I’ve spent *months* renouncing all ties with my former contacts—purging all inventory—yet this ring . . .” He swallowed hard, and the heat in his expression flickered out. “I fear to speak of it to anyone, lest the demons discover I have it.”

“You were unwise to tout any of their items.”

Tremblay didn’t answer. His eyes remained distant, haunted, as if he were seeing something we couldn’t. My throat constricted inexplicably. Oblivious to his torment, Madame Labelle continued ruthlessly. “If you hadn’t, perhaps dear Filippa would still be with us—”

His head snapped up at his daughter’s name, and his eyes—no longer haunted—glinted with fierce purpose. “I will see the demons burn for what they did to her.”

“How foolish of you.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I make it my business to know the business of my enemies, *monsieur*.” She rose gracefully to her feet, and he stumbled back a half step. “As they are now also your enemies, I must offer a piece of advice: ’tis dangerous to meddle in the affairs of witches. Forget your vengeance. Forget everything you’ve learned about this world of shadows and magic. You are wildly outmatched and woefully inadequate in the face of these women. Death is the kindest of their torments—a gift bestowed only to those who have earned it. One would think you’d have learned that with dear Filippa.”

His mouth twisted, and he straightened to his full height, spluttering angrily. Madame Labelle still loomed over him by several inches. “Y-You cross the line.”

Madame Labelle didn’t shrink away from him. Instead, she ran a hand down the bodice of her gown, utterly unfazed, and withdrew a fan from the folds of her skirt. A knife peeked out from its spine.

“I see the pleasantries are over. Right, then. Let us get down to business.” Spreading the device in a single flourish, she fanned it between them. Tremblay eyed the knife point warily and conceded a step. “If you wish me to relieve you of the ring, I will do so here and now—for five thousand gold *couronnes* less than your asking price.”

An odd choking noise escaped his throat. “You’re mad—”

“If not,” she continued, voice hardening, “you will leave this place with a noose around your daughter’s neck. Her name is Célie, yes? La Dame des Sorcières will delight in draining her youth, in drinking the glow from her skin, the gleam from her hair. She will be unrecognizable by the time the witches finish with her. Empty. Broken. Just like Filippa.”

“You—you—” Tremblay’s eyes bulged, and a vein appeared on his shiny forehead. “*Fille de pute!* You cannot do this to me. You *cannot*—”

“Come now, *monsieur*, I do not have all day. The prince has returned from Amandine, and I do not want to miss the festivities.”

His chin jutted obstinately. “I—I do not have it with me.”

Damn it. Disappointment crashed through me, bitter and sharp. Coco muttered a curse.

“I do not believe you.” Striding to the window across the room, Madame Labelle peered down. “Ah, Monsieur Tremblay, how could a gentleman such as yourself leave your daughter to wait outside a brothel? Such easy prey.”

Sweating profusely now, Tremblay hastened to turn out his pockets. “I swear I don’t have it! Look, look!” I pressed my face closer as he shoved the contents of his pockets toward her: an embroidered hand cloth, a silver pocket watch, and a fistful of copper *couronnes*. But no ring. “Please, leave my daughter alone! She is not involved in this!”

He made such a pitiful sight that I might’ve felt sorry for him—if he hadn’t just dashed all my plans. As it were, however, the sight of his trembling limbs and ashen face filled me with vindictive pleasure.

Madame Labelle seemed to share my sentiment. She sighed theatrically, dropping her hand from the window, and—curiously—turned to look directly at the portrait I stood behind. Tumbling backward, I landed squarely on my ass and bit back a curse.

“What is it?” Coco whispered, crouching beside me. Babette released the button with a frown.

“Shhhh!” I waved my hands wildly, motioning toward the parlor. *I think*—I mouthed the words, not daring to speak—*she saw me*.

Coco’s eyes flew open in alarm.

We all froze as her voice drifted closer, muted but audible through the thin wall. “Pray tell me, *monsieur* . . . where is it, then?”

Holy hell. Coco and I locked eyes incredulously. Though I didn't dare return to the portrait, I pressed closer to the wall, breath hot and uncomfortable against my own face. *Answer her*, I pleaded silently. *Tell us*.

Miraculously, Tremblay obliged, his vehement reply more dulcet than the sweetest of music. "It's locked away in my townhouse, you *salope ignorante*—"

"That will do, Monsieur Tremblay." As their parlor door clicked open, I could almost see her smile. It matched my own. "I hope for your daughter's sake you aren't lying. I will arrive at your townhouse at dawn with your coin. Do not keep me waiting."