

Chapter One

"Mom, I wet the bed." The small, shamed voice and the little hand that went with it tugged Louise Hardin out of a deep sleep. She opened one groggy eye to discover her daughter Melissa standing at her bedside in the darkened room. Behind her, the alarm clock glowed the time: one a.m.

"Mom." Missy's hand tugged once more at the long sleeve of Louise's pale green nylon nightgown.

"Oh, Missy, no! Not again." Louise's whisper was despairing as she rolled out of bed, careful not to disturb her husband, Brock, who slumbered peacefully beside her. Brock had to get up early, at quarter to seven, to be at the office by eight. As he said, the rest of them could sleep all day if they chose, but he had to earn a living. Besides, he hated the fact that Missy sometimes still wet the bed. He was a pediatrician, he knew Missy should be over wetting the bed by now, and he tended to take her frequent accidents personally.

Consequently, Louise, Missy, and her ten-year-old sister, Heidi, conspired to conceal Missy's accidents whenever possible.

"I'm sorry, Mom," Missy offered in a tiny voice when they gained the relative safety of the hallway outside the bedroom. The blue shag carpet felt soft and warm beneath Louise's bare feet. Through the hall window, left uncurtained because it was small and high and on the second floor, Louise could see pinpricks of tiny stars and a wan sickle moon drifting against the black sky. "At least this time I dreamed I was on the potty. It seemed so real! And then I was all wet, and I woke up and I wasn't on the potty at all."

"All your dreams seem so real." If Louise's voice was just a tad dry, she couldn't help it. She was really, really tired, and this was getting to be almost a nightly occurrence. As a seven-year-old, Missy was getting her up at night almost as much as she had when she was a baby.

Light glowed around the partially closed door of the hall bathroom, illuminating the path to Missy's bedroom, which was at the far end of the hall, past Heidi's bedroom and a smaller guest bedroom. Louise had started leaving the light on at night because, in addition to wetting her bed, Missy had suddenly become afraid of the dark. She had nightmares about monsters hiding in her room and watching her as she slept. Sometimes she woke up screaming, and Louise would jump from bed like she had been shot and race down the hall to find her daughter huddled in the center of her bed, in a ball, with the covers pulled over her head, crying her eyes out and gasping something that made no sense. Inevitably, Louise ended up bringing Missy into bed with her and Brock, a practice of which he strongly disapproved. That, Brock informed her, was

undoubtedly a large part of Missy's problem. Louise treated her like a baby, rewarding her misdeeds by giving her attention (which was what Brock said she wanted all along) when Missy should have been disciplined instead. Louise knew that Brock probably knew best — as he frequently pointed out, he was the expert — but she could not find it in her heart to punish her seven-year-old daughter for being afraid of the dark. Or for wetting the bed. Or, as Brock said, for nearly anything at all.

The ammonia like smell of urine struck Louise in the face as soon as she stepped inside Missy's room. She sighed. Missy's hand twitched in hers.

"I'm really sorry, Mom," Missy offered again.

Without a word, Louise let go of Missy's hand, closed the door, turned on the light, and crossed to the chest to extract a clean nightgown from a drawer. When she turned around, nightgown in hand, she was frowning. Maybe Brock was right, she thought. Maybe she should try being a little tougher on Missy. She was really becoming tired of getting up in the middle of almost every single night.

Accustomed to the ritual, Missy had already pulled her wet nightgown off and was in the act of dropping it on the floor. Lips thinning, Louise moved to her daughter's side and tugged the dry nightgown over Missy's head. As the gown fell into place, she reached around behind Missy's neck to free the long dark brown braid of her daughter's hair. When Missy glanced quickly up at her, her big hazel eyes questioning, Louise gave the braid a small tug.

"You can help me change the sheets," she said, with more sternness than was usual for her.

"Are you mad at me, Mom?" Missy asked humbly as the two of them worked together to strip the wet sheets from the bed. Louise's heart smote her. Missy was so very little, after all. And she was small for her age. She'd been born six weeks premature, and Louise had often thought that her early arrival might account for some of Missy's problems. Her body had just not yet matured as much as that of most seven-year-olds. Brock, of course, said that was nonsense.

Damn Brock.

"No, baby, I'm not mad at you." Her task made easier by the vinyl cover that saved the mattress from total ruin, Louise carefully tucked in the corners of the clean sheets that were kept, along with spare blankets, in a trunk at the foot of Missy's bed. She smoothed a pink wool blanket over the sheets and pulled back a corner. "Hop in."

"Don't tell Daddy," Missy said, obeying.

"I won't." It was a ritual, these words. Some part of Louise felt it was wrong to promise to keep something a secret from Missy's father, but the larger, practical part didn't want to

listen to Brock's lectures if he discovered that Missy had wet the bed again. She didn't want Missy to have to listen to them, either. No matter whether Brock was the expert or not.

Louise tucked the clean, dry bedclothes around her daughter as Missy snuggled onto her side, a small smile curving her lips as her cheek burrowed deep into the pillow with its tiny white hearts on a deep pink background.

"Good night, baby." Louise brushed her lips across the warmth of her daughter's exposed cheek, and straightened.

"I love you, Mommy." Missy's voice was already sleepy, and her eyelashes were beginning to droop.

"I love you, too, Miss Mouse. Now go back to sleep." Louise gathered up the wet bedding and nightgown.

"Leave the bathroom light on."

"I will," Louise promised.

After opening the door and flicking off the light, Louise paused for a moment in the doorway to look back at her daughter with a faint, wry smile. So much for discipline, she thought. But Missy was only seven. ... Lying there in her little white bed, which Louise had hand-painted herself with the colorful butterflies that were Missy's favorite creature, Missy looked no bigger than a minute. She would grow out of this bed-wetting phase one of these days, Louise consoled herself. It would be something to laugh about when she was grown....

"See you in the morning," Louise whispered, turning away. She headed toward the basement, meaning to put the sheets in to wash and thus leave no trace of the night's misdeeds for Brock to discover.

What Louise didn't know was that, concealed in Missy's closet behind a double rack of neatly pressed outfits and a mountain of stuffed animals, a man listened and waited. He'd thought about running for it, when the child had gotten out of bed and gone for her mother. But he'd been afraid that he wouldn't get away in time, and indeed the little girl and the woman had returned within minutes. If he had left his hiding place, he would have been caught. During the few minutes the mother had been in the room, he'd sweated bullets as he listened to their exchange. All she had to do was open the closet door — but she didn't.

Now he and his little sweetie pie were alone again.

His heartbeat quickened as he waited, very patiently, for the mother to return to her room. When she did, he waited even longer, listening to the soft, light rhythm of the

child's breathing.

Finally, he eased open the closet door.

The next morning, when Louise went to rouse Missy for her ten a.m. play date, her daughter was stretched out in bed as neatly as could be, lying on her back with the covers pulled up under her chin.

"Time to get up, sleepyhead," Louise said, laughing because Missy never slept late and, since she had, this might signal the beginning of a whole new phase that did not include bed-wetting. Playfully she jerked the covers down.

In that moment she knew, and her laughter died, leaving her smile to deflate like a punctured balloon. Hoping against hope that she was mistaken, praying to all the gods that had ever existed in any universe that she was wrong, she grabbed her daughter by the arms.

Missy's body was cold. It was stiff, too. Rigor mortis had already set in.

The child was dead in her bed.

The next week, this banner headline appeared in the New Orleans Times-Picayune: "Prominent Baton Rouge Pediatrician Charged with Murdering Daughter, 7, for Wetting Bed."

The dateline was May 6, 1969.

Chapter Two

Ghosts. They were everywhere on that steamy summer's night. Their white misty shapes hovered over the old graveyard that stood sentinel on the bluff beside the lake, played hide-and-seek behind the Spanish moss that dripped from the twisted branches of the bald cypresses, stretched heavenward above the inky surface of the water. They whispered together, their words falling like drops of water through the mist, almost drowned out by the other, more corporeal sounds of the night. Run away. Go. Run away was what they said. Whether the ghosts were real or the product of atmosphere and imagination, though, who knew? And what difference, really, did it make?

It was hot, still, although it was some ten minutes past one a.m. on August 19, 1999, which was a Friday night, or, rather, a Saturday morning. Hot with the thick, damp kind of heat that always lay like a blanket over Point Coupee Parish in August. The kind of heat that curled your hair or made it go limp, depending on what kind of hair you had. The kind of heat that made women "dewy" and men sweat, that exacerbated tempers

and passions and bred clouds of mosquitoes and carpets of the slimy green floating plants known as duckweed.

LaAngelle Plantation heat. Courtesy of the swampy Louisiana low country to the south, the Atchafalaya River to the west, and the mighty Mississippi to the east. It came with its own feel, its own smell, its own taste.

She was come home at last, Olivia Morrison thought, inhaling the indefinable aroma of decay, swamp water, and vegetation run amok that she remembered from her earliest childhood. The knowledge both exhilarated and frightened her. Because the truth was that this was, and was not, her home.

“Are we almost there, Mom?” The tired little voice at her elbow was barely audible over the night sounds around them.

“Almost.” Olivia glanced down at her eight-year-old daughter with mixed tenderness and concern. Sara looked dead on her feet, her sturdy little body drooping like a wilted flower. Her thick-lashed brown eyes were dark-shadowed and huge with fatigue. Her upturned face was pale. Tendrils of jaw-length coffee-brown hair, having been pushed back by an impatient hand once too often, curled and clung to the moist skin of her neck and forehead. The yellow and white gingham sundress that had been so pretty and crisp that morning in Houston was now as limp-looking as the child herself. Her dusty black ballerina flats — thriftily bought big to allow for growth — slipped off her heels with every step to slap against the spongy ground. The lace-trimmed white anklets she wore with them were grimy with dirt. They’d walked from the bus stop at New Roads, a distance of perhaps five miles, because nobody had answered the telephone at the Big House when Olivia called, and she didn’t have the money for a taxi.

Not that she would have had much chance of rousting out Ponce Lennig and his beat-up Mercury anyway, Olivia thought, lifting strands of shoulder-length coffee-brown hair away from her own moist neck. LaAngelle’s only taxi service had always been erratic at best, and Ponce had always turned off his phone promptly at six p.m. He didn’t believe in working nights, he said.

Maybe Ponce didn’t have the taxi service anymore. Maybe there was a new, modern taxi service — or none at all. Not that it mattered, since she was down to her last five dollars and change.

Ponce, if apprised of their circumstances, would have gladly given them a free ride out to the house, but Olivia would have had a hard time confessing to him or anyone else just how broke she was. Only to save Sara a five-mile hike could she have made herself do so. Once upon a time, as Olivia Chenier, spoiled and wild and the youngest of the golden Archer clan, she had been as glamorous and above their touch as a movie star to the people of the town.

Once upon a time. A long time ago. Now she was a dental office manager, barely

scraping by from paycheck to paycheck. How the mighty are fallen.

No one but Aunt Callie knew she and Sara were coming, and Aunt Callie didn't know precisely when. Olivia couldn't blame any of the family for not being on hand when she called to fetch her and Sara home.

She hadn't seen them, any of them, for nine years.

With a twinge of anxiety, she wondered how they would react to her return. With something short of the proverbial killing of the fatted calf, she guessed. Her hand tightened around Sara's.

"I think I'm getting a blister on my heel," Sara complained. "I told you these shoes were too big."

Olivia focused on Sara again. "I have a Band-Aid in my purse."

"I hate Band-Aids."

"I know." It was all Olivia could do to suppress a sigh. Sara was not usually whiny, or grumpy, but she was rapidly becoming both. And who could blame her? The child had been traveling since seven that morning, first by car and then by bus and then on foot. "Listen, baby, if we keep walking up this path, just a little bit farther, we'll come to some stepping stones, and when we reach the end of them we'll go up some steps to the top of a bluff, and you'll be able to see the house from there."

Sara's gaze swept their surroundings.

"It's spooky here." She shivered despite the heat.