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Midnight Bayou

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Extract

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Prologue

Death, with all its cruel beauty, lived in the bayou. Its shadows ran deep. Cloaked by them, a whisper in the marsh grass or rushes, in the tangled trap of the kudzu, meant life, or fresh death. Its breath was thick and green, and its eyes gleamed yellow in the dark.

Silent as a snake, its river swam a sinuous line – black water under a fat white moon where the cypress knees broke the surface like bones piercing skin.

Through the dark, moon-dappled water, the long, knobby length of an alligator carved with barely a ripple. Like a secret, its threat was silent. When it struck, its tail whipping a triumphant slice through the water, when it clamped the unwary muskrat in its killing jaws, the bayou echoed with a single short scream.

And the gator sank deep to the muddy bottom with its prey.

Others had known the cruel, silent depths of that river. Knew, even in the vicious summer heat, it was cold, cold.

Vast with secrets, the bayou was never quite still. In the

night, under a high hunter's moon," death was busy. Mosquitoes, voracious vampires of the swamp, whined in a jubilant cloud of greed. Players of the marsh music, they blended with the buzzes, hums and drips that were punctuated by the shocked squeals of the hunted.

In the high limbs of a live oak, shadowed by moss and leaves, an owl hooted its two mournful notes. Alerted, a marsh rabbit ran for his life.

A breeze stirred the air, then was gone, like the single sigh of a ghost.

The owl swooped from its perch with a swift spread of wings.

Near the river, while the owl dived and the rabbit died, an old gray house with a swaying dock slept in shadows. Beyond, rising over a long, lush spread of grass, a great white manor stood watchful in the moonlight.

Between them, teeming with life, vigorous with death, the bayou laid its line.

Chapter One

Manet Hall, Louisiana
December 30, 1899

The baby was crying. Abigail heard it in dreams, the soft, unsettled whimper, the stirring of tiny limbs under soft blankets. She felt the first pangs of hunger, a yearning in the belly, almost as if the child were still inside her. Her milk came down before she was fully awake.

She rose quickly and without fuss. It gave her such pleasure – that overfull sensation in her breasts, the tenderness of them. The purpose of them. Her baby needed and she would provide.

She crossed to the *recamier*, lifted the white robe draped over its back. She drew in the scent of the hothouse lilies – her favorite – spearing out of a crystal vase that had been a wedding present.

Before Lucian, she'd been content to tuck wildflowers into bottles.

If Lucian had been home, he would have woken as well.

Though she would have smiled, have stroked a hand over his silky blond hair as she told him to stay, to sleep, he would have wandered up to the nursery before she'd finished Marie Rose's midnight feeding.

She missed him – another ache in the belly. But as she slipped into her night wrapper, she remembered he would be back the next day. She would start watching for him in the morning, waiting to see him come galloping down the *allée* of oaks.

No matter what anyone thought or said, she would run out to meet him. Her heart would leap, oh, it always leaped, when he sprang down from his horse and lifted her off her feet into his arms.

And at the New Year's ball, they would dance.

She hummed to herself as she lit a candle, shielding it with her hand as she moved to the bedroom door, out into the corridor of the great house where she had once been servant and was now, well, if not daughter of the house at least the wife of its son.

The nursery was on the third floor of the family wing. That was a battle she'd fought with Lucian's mother, and lost. Josephine Manet had definite rules about behavior, domestic arrangements, traditions. Madame Josephine, Abigail thought as she moved quickly and quietly past the other bedroom doors, had definite ideas on everything. Certainly that a three-month-old baby belonged in the nursery, under the care of a nursemaid, and not in a cradle tucked into the corner of her parents' bedroom.

Candlelight flickered and flew against the walls as Abigail climbed the narrowing stairs. At least she'd managed to keep Marie Rose with her for six weeks. And

had used the cradle that was part of her own family's traditions. It had been carved by her *grand-père*. Her own mother had slept in it, then had tucked Abigail in it seventeen years later.

Marie Rose had spent her first nights in that old cradle, a tiny angel with her doting and nervous parents close at hand.

Her daughter would respect her father's family and their ways. But Abigail was determined that her child would also respect her mother's family, and learn their ways.

Josephine had complained about the baby, about the homemade cradle, so constantly that she and Lucian had given in. It was, Lucian said, the way water wears at rock. It never ceases, so the rock gives way or wears down.

The baby spent her nights in the nursery now, in the crib made in France, where Manet babies had slept for a century.

It was a proper if not cozy arrangement, Abby comforted herself. Her *petite* Rose was a Manet. She would be a lady.

And as Madame Josephine had pointed out, again and again, other members of the household were not to have their sleep disturbed by fretful cries. However such matters were done in the bayou, here in Manet Hall, children were tended in the nursery.

How her lips curled when she said it. Bayou – as if it were a word to be spoken only in brothels and bars.

It didn't matter that Madame Josephine hated her, that Monsieur Henri ignored her. It didn't matter that Julian looked at her the way no man should look at his brother's wife.

Lucian loved her.

Nor did it matter that Marie Rose slept in the nursery. Whether they were separated by a floor or a continent, she felt Marie Rose's needs as she felt her own. The bond was so strong, so true, it could never be broken.

Madame Josephine may win battles, but Abigail knew she herself had won the war. She had Lucian and Marie Rose.

There were candles glowing in the nursery. Claudine, the nursemaid, didn't trust the gaslight. She already held Marie Rose and was trying to quiet her with a sugar tit, but the baby's fists were shaking, little balls of rage.

'Such a temper she has.' Abigail set the candle down and was laughing as she crossed the room, her arms already outstretched.

'Knows what she wants, and when she wants it.' Claudine, a pretty Cajun with sleepy dark eyes, gave the baby a quick cuddle, then passed her off. 'She hardly made a fuss yet. Don't know how you hear her way off downstairs.'

'I hear her in my heart. There now, *bébé. Maman's* here.'

'Diaper's wet.'

'I'll change her.' Abigail rubbed her cheek on the baby's and smiled. Claudine was a friend – a battle won. Having her established in the nursery, in the household, gave Abigail comfort and the companionship none of Lucian's family would offer her.

'Go on back to bed. Once she's nursed, she'll sleep till morning.'

'Good as gold, she is.' Claudine brushed fingertips over Marie Rose's curly hair. 'If you don't need me, maybe I'll take a walk down to the river. Jasper, he's gonna be there.'

Her dark eyes lit. 'I told him maybe, if I can get away, I come down around midnight.'

'You oughta make that boy marry you, *chère*.'

'Oh, I'm gonna. Maybe I run down for an hour or two, if you don't mind, Abby.'

'I don't mind, but you be careful you don't catch nothing more than some crawfish. Anything more,' she corrected as she prepared to change Marie Rose's soiled linen.

'Don't you worry. I'll be back before two.' She started out through the connecting door and glanced back. 'Abby? You ever think, when we were kids, that you'd be mistress of this house one day?'

'I'm not mistress here.' She tickled the baby's toes and had Marie Rose gurgling. 'And the one who is'll probably live to a hundred and ten off of spite just to make sure I never am.'

'If anybody could, it'd be that one. But you will be, one day. You fell into the luck, Abby, and it looks real fine on you.'

Alone with the baby, Abby tickled and cooed. She powdered and smoothed, then tidily fastened the fresh diaper. When Marie Rose was tucked into a fresh gown and swaddled, Abby settled in the rocker, bared her breast for that tiny, hungry mouth. Those first greedy tugs, the answering pull in her womb, made her sigh. Yes, she'd fallen into the luck. Because Lucian Manet, the heir of Manet Hall, the shining knight of every fairy tale, had looked at her. And loved.

She bent her head to watch the baby nurse. Marie Rose's eyes were wide open, fixed on her mother's face. A tiny crease of concentration formed between her eyebrows.

Oh, she had such hope those eyes would stay blue, like Lucian's. The baby's hair was dark like her own. Dark and curling, but her skin was milk white – again like her papa's rather than the deeper tone, the dusky gold of her Cajun mama's.

She would have the best of both of them, Abby thought. She would have the best of everything.

It wasn't only the money, the grand house, the social position, though she wanted that for her children now that she had tasted it herself. It was the acceptance, the learning, the *knowing* you belonged in such a place. Her daughter, and all the children who came after, would read and write, would speak proper English, proper French, in fine voices.

No one would ever look down on them.

'You'll be a lady,' Abigail murmured, stroking the baby's cheek as Marie Rose's hand kneaded her breast as if to hurry the milk along. 'An *educated* lady with your papa's sweet heart and your mama's good sense. Papa'll be home tomorrow. It's the very last day of a whole century, and you have your whole life to live in it.'

Her voice was quiet, a singsong rhythm to lull both of them.

'It's so exciting, Rosie, my Rosie. We're going to have a grand ball tomorrow night. I have a new gown. It's blue, like your eyes. Like your papa's eyes. Did I tell you I fell in love with his eyes first? So beautiful. So kind. When he came back to Manet Hall from the university, he looked like a prince coming home to his castle. Oh, my heart just pounded so.'

She leaned back, rocking in the fluttering light of the candles.

She thought of the New Year's celebration the next evening, and how she would dance with Lucian, how her gown would sweep and swirl as they waltzed.

How she would make him proud.

And she remembered the first time they had waltzed.

In the spring, with the air heavy with perfume from the flowers, and the house alight like a palace. She'd sneaked into the garden, away from her duties, because she'd wanted to see it so much. The way the gleaming white hall with its balusters like black lace stood against the starry sky, the way the windows flamed. Music had spilled out of those windows, out of the gallery doors where guests had stepped out for air.

She'd imagined herself inside the ballroom, whirling, whirling, to the music. And so had whirled in the shadows of the garden. And, whirling, had seen Lucian watching her on the path.

Her own fairy tale, Abby thought. The prince taking Cinderella's hand and drawing her into a dance moments before midnight struck. She'd had no glass slipper, no pumpkin coach, but the night had turned into magic.

She could still hear the way the music had floated out through the balcony doors, over the air, into the garden.

'*After the ball is over, after the break of morn ...*'

She sang the refrain quietly, shifting the baby to her other breast.

'*After the dancers leaving, after the stars are gone ...*'

They had danced, to that lovely, sad song in the moonlit garden with the house a regal white and gold shadow behind them. Her in her simple cotton dress, and Lucian in his handsome evening clothes. And as such things were

possible in fairy tales, they fell in love during that lovely, sad song.

Oh, she knew it had started before that night. For her it had begun with her first glimpse of him, astride the chestnut mare he'd ridden from New Orleans to the plantation. The way the sun had beamed through the leaves and the moss on the live oaks along the *allée*, surrounding him like angel wings. His twin had ridden beside him – Julian – but she'd seen only Lucian.

She'd been in the house only a few weeks then, taken on as an undermaid and doing her best to please Monsieur and Madame Manet so she might keep her position and the wages earned.

He'd spoken to her – kindly, correctly – if they passed each other in the house. But she'd sensed him watching her. Not the way Julian watched, not with hot eyes and a smirk twisting his lips. But, she liked to think now, with a kind of longing.

In the weeks that went by she would come upon him often. He'd sought her out. She knew that now, prized that now, as he'd confessed it to her on their wedding night.

But it had really begun the evening of the ball. After the song had ended, he'd held her, just a moment longer. Then he bowed, as a gentleman bows to a lady. He kissed her hand.

Then, just as she thought it was over, that the magic would dim, he tucked the hand he'd kissed into the crook of his arm. Began to walk with her, to talk with her. The weather, the flowers, the gossip of the household.

As if they were friends, Abby thought now with a smile. As if it were the most natural thing in the world for

Lucian Manet to take a turn in the garden with Abigail Rouse.

They'd walked in the garden many nights after that. Inside the house, where others could see, they remained master and servant. But all through that heady spring they walked the garden paths as young lovers, telling each other of hopes, of dreams, of sorrows and joys.

On her seventeenth birthday he brought her a gift, wrapped in silver paper with a bright blue bow. The enameled watch was a pretty circle dangling from the golden wings of a brooch. Time flew, he told her as he pinned the watch to the faded cotton of her dress, when they were together. And he would rather have his life wing by than spend it apart from her.

He'd gotten down on one knee and asked her to be his wife.

It could never be. Oh, she'd tried to tell him through the tears. He was beyond her reach, and he could have anyone.

She remembered now how he'd laughed, how the joy had burst over his beautiful face. How could he be beyond her reach when she had his hand in hers even now? And if he could have anyone, then he would have her.

'So now we have each other, and you,' Abby whispered and shifted the drowsing baby to her shoulder. 'And if his family hates me for it, what does it matter? I make him happy.'

She turned her face into the soft curve of the baby's neck. 'I'm learning to speak as they speak, to dress as they dress. I will never think as they think, but for Lucian, I behave as they behave, at least when it shows.'

Content, she rubbed the baby's back and continued to

rock. But when she heard the heavy footsteps on the stairs, the stumbling climb, she rose quickly. Her arms tightened in a circle of protection around the baby as she turned toward the crib.

She heard Julian come through the door and knew without seeing he would be drunk. He was nearly always drunk or on his way to becoming so.

Abby didn't speak. She lay the baby in the crib, and when Marie Rose whimpered restlessly, stroked her quiet again.

'Where's the nursemaid?' he demanded.

Still, Abby didn't turn. 'I don't want you in here when you've been drinking.'

'Giving orders now?' His voice was slurred, his balance impaired. But he was thinking clearly enough. Liquor, he'd always believed, helped clarify the mind.

And his was clarified when it came to his brother's wife. If Lucian had a thing – and what was a woman but a thing? – Julian wanted it.

She was small, almost delicate of build. But she had good strong legs. He could see the shape of them where the firelight in the nursery grate shimmered through her thin nightclothes. Those legs would wrap around him as easily as they did his brother.

Her breasts were high and full, fuller now since she'd had the whelp. He'd gotten his hands on them once, and she'd slapped him for it. As if she had a say in who touched her.

He closed the door at his back. The whore he'd bought that night had only whetted his appetite. It was time to sate it.

'Where's the other bayou slut?'

Abby's hand fisted at her side. She turned now, guarding the crib with her body. He looked so like Lucian, but there was a hardness in him Lucian lacked. A darkness.

She wondered if it was true, what her *grand-mère* said. That with twins, sometimes traits get divvied up in the womb. One gets the good, the other the bad.

She didn't know if Julian had come into the world already spoiled. But she knew he was dangerous when drunk. It was time he learned she was dangerous as well.

'Claudine is my friend, and you have no right to speak of her that way. Get out. You have no right to come in here and insult me. This time Lucian will hear of it.'

She saw his gaze slide down from her face, watched lust come into his eyes. Quickly, she tugged her wrapper over the breast still partially exposed from nursing. 'You're disgusting. *Cochon*! To come in a child's room with your wicked thoughts for your brother's wife.'

'Brother's whore.' He thought he could smell her anger and her fear now. A heady perfume. 'You'd have spread your legs for me if I'd been born fifteen minutes sooner. But you wouldn't have stolen my name the way you stole his.'

Her chin came up. 'I don't even see you. No one does. You're nothing beside him. A shadow, and one that stinks of whiskey and the brothel.'

She wanted to run. He frightened her, had always frightened her on a deep, primal level. But she wouldn't risk leaving him with the baby. 'When I tell Lucian of this, he'll send you away.'

'He has no power here, and we all know it.' He came closer, easing his way like a hunter through the woods. 'My

mother holds the power in this house. I'm her favorite. Timing at birth doesn't change that.'

'He *will* send you away.' Tears stung the back of her throat because she knew Julian was right. It was Josephine who reigned in Manet Hall.

'Lucian did me a favor marrying you.' His voice was a lazy drawl now, almost conversational. He knew she had nowhere to run. 'She's already cut him out of her will. Oh, he'll get the house, she can't change that, but I'll get her money. And it's her money that runs this place.'

'Take the money, take the house.' She flung out her hands, dismissing them, and him. 'Take it all. And go to hell with it.'

'He's weak. My sainted brother. Saints always are, under all the piety.'

'He's a man, so much more a man than you.'

She'd hoped to make him angry, angry enough to strike her and storm out. Instead he laughed, low and quiet, and edged closer.

When she saw the intent in his eyes, she opened her mouth to scream. His hand whipped out, gripped a hank of the dark hair that curled to her waist. And yanking had her scream gurgling into a gasp. His free hand circled her throat, squeezed.

'I always take what's Lucian's. Even his whores.'

She beat at him, slapped, bit. And when she could draw in air, screamed. He tore at her wrapper, pawed at her breasts. In the crib, the baby began to wail.

Fueled by the sound of her child's distress, Abby clawed her way free. She spun, stumbled over the torn hem of her nightgown. Her hand closed over the fireplace

poker. She swung wildly, ramming it hard against Julian's shoulder.

Howling in pain, he fell back against the hearth, and she flew toward the crib.

She had to get the baby. To get the baby and run.

He caught her sleeve, and she screamed again as the material ripped. Even as she reached down to snatch her daughter from the crib, he dragged her back. He struck her, slicing the back of his hand over her cheek and knocking her back into a table. A candle fell to the floor and guttered out in its own wax.

'Bitch! Whore!'

He was mad. She could see it now in the feral gleam in his eyes, the drunken flush on his cheeks. In that instant fear turned to terror.

'He'll kill you for this. My Lucian will kill you.' She tried to gain her feet, but he hit her again, using his fist this time so the pain radiated from her face, through her body. Dazed, she began to crawl toward the crib. There was blood in her mouth, sweet and warm.

My baby. Sweet God, don't let him hurt my baby.

His weight was on her – and the stench of him. She bucked, called for help. The sound of the baby's furious screams merged with hers.

'Don't! Don't! You damn yourself.'

But as he yanked up the skirt of her nightgown, she knew no amount of pleading, no amount of struggle, would stop him. He would debase her, soil her, because of who she was. Because she was Lucian's.

'This is what you want.' He drove himself into her, and the thrill of power spurted through him like black wine. Her

face was white with fear and shock, and raw from the blows of his hands. Helpless, he thought, as he pounded out his raging envy. 'This is what all of you want. Cajun whores.'

Thrust after violent thrust, he raped her. The thrill of forcing himself into her spumed through him until his breathing turned to short bursts grunted between clenched teeth.

She was weeping now, huge choking sobs. But screaming, too. Somehow screaming as he hammered his fury, his jealousy, his disgust into her.

As the great clock began to chime midnight, he closed his hands around her throat. 'Shut up. Damn you.' He rammed her head against the floor, squeezed harder. And still the screaming pierced his brain.

Abby heard it, too. Dimly. The baby's frantic cries pealed through her head along with the slow, formal bongs of the midnight hour. She slapped, weak protests against the hands that cut off her air, tried to shut her body off from the unspeakable invasion.

Help me. Mother of Jesus. Help me. Help my baby.

Her vision dimmed. Her heels drummed wildly on the floor as she convulsed.

The last thing she heard was her crying daughter. The last thing she thought was, *Lucian.*

The door of the nursery burst open. Josephine Manet stood just inside the nursery. She summed up the scene quickly. Coldly.

'Julian.'

His hands still vised around Abby's throat, he looked up. If his mother saw madness in his eyes, she chose to ignore it. With her gilt hair neatly braided for the night,

her robe sternly buttoned to the neck, she stepped over, stared down.

Abby's eyes were wide and staring. There was a trickle of blood at the corner of her mouth, and bruises blooming along her cheeks.

Dispassionately, she leaned down, laid her fingers against Abby's throat.

'She's dead,' Josephine announced and moved quickly to the connecting door. She opened it, glanced into the maid's room. Then closed it, locked it.

She stood for a moment, her back against it, her hand at her own throat as she thought of what could come. Disgrace, ruin, scandal.

'It was ... an accident.' His hands began to shake as they slid away from Abby's throat. The whiskey was whirling in his head now, clouding it. It churned in his belly, sickening it.

He could see the marks on her skin, dark and deep and damning. 'She ... tried to seduce me, then, she attacked ...'

She crossed the room again, her slippers clicking on wood. Crouching down, Josephine slapped him, one hard crack of flesh on flesh. 'Quiet. Be quiet and do exactly as I say. I won't lose another son to this creature. Take her down to her bedroom. Go out through the gallery and stay there until I come.'

'It was her fault.'

'Yes. Now she's paid for it. Take her down, Julian. And be quick.'

'They'll ...' A single tear gathered in the corner of his eye and spilled over. 'They'll hang me. I have to get away.'

'No. No, they won't hang you.' She brought his head to her shoulder, stroking his hair over the body of her daughter-in-law. 'No, my sweet, they won't hang you. Do what Mama says now. Carry her to the bedroom and wait for me. Everything's going to be all right. Everything's going to be as it should be. I promise.'

'I don't want to touch her.'

'Julian!' The crooning tone snapped into icy command. 'Do as I say. Immediately.'

She rose, walked over to the crib, where the baby's wails had turned to miserable whimpers. In the heat of the moment, she considered simply laying her hand over the child's mouth and nose. Hardly different than drowning a bag of kittens.

And yet . . .

The child had her son's blood in her, and therefore her own. She could despise it, but she couldn't destroy it. 'Go to sleep,' she said. 'We'll decide what to do about you later.'

As her son carried the girl he'd raped and murdered from the room, Josephine began to set the nursery to rights again. She picked up the candle, scrubbed at the cooling wax until she could see no trace.

She replaced the fireplace poker and, using the ruin of Abby's robe, wiped up the splatters of blood. She did it all efficiently, turning her mind away from what had caused the damage to the room, keeping it firmly fixed on what needed to be done to save her son.

When she was certain all was as it should be, she unlocked the door again, left her now-sleeping grandchild alone.

In the morning, she would fire the nursemaid for dereliction of duty. She would have her out of Manet Hall before Lucian returned to find his wife missing.

The girl had brought it on herself, Josephine thought. No good ever came from trying to rise above your station in life. There was an order to things, and a reason for that order. If the girl hadn't bewitched Lucian – for surely there was some local witchery involved – she would still be alive.

The family had suffered enough scandal. The elopement. Oh, the embarrassment of it! Of having to hold your head high when your firstborn son ran off with a penniless, barefoot female who'd grown up in a shack in the swamp.

Then the sour taste of the pretense that followed. It was essential to save face, even after such a blow. And hadn't she done all that could be done to see that creature was dressed as befitted the family Manet?

Silk purses, sow's ears, she thought. What good were Paris fashions when the girl had only to open her mouth and sound of the swamp? For pity's sake, she'd been a servant.

Josephine stepped into the bedroom, shut the door at her back, and stared at the bed where her son's dead wife lay staring up at the blue silk canopy.

Now, she thought, Abigail Rouse was simply a problem to be solved.

Julian huddled in a chair, his head in his hands. 'Stop screaming,' he muttered. 'Stop the screaming.'

Josephine marched to him, clamped her hands on his shoulders. 'Do you want them to come for you?' she demanded. 'Do you want to drag the family through disgrace? To be hanged like a common thief?'

'It wasn't my fault. She enticed me. Then she attacked me. Look. Look.' He turned his head. 'See how she clawed my face?'

'Yes.' For a moment, just for a moment, Josephine wavered. The heart inside the symbol she'd become reared up in protest against the horror of the act all women fear.

Whatever she was, she'd loved Lucian. Whatever she was, she'd been raped and murdered within feet of her own child's crib.

Julian forced her, struck her, defiled her. Killed her.

Drunk and mad, he'd killed his brother's wife. God's pity.

Then she shoved it viciously aside.

The girl was dead. Her son was not.

'You bought a prostitute tonight. Don't turn away from me,' she snapped. 'I'm not ignorant of the things men do. Did you buy a woman?'

'Yes, Mama.'

She nodded briskly. 'Then it was the whore who scratched you, should anyone have the temerity to ask. You were never in the nursery tonight.' She cupped his face in her hands to keep his eyes level with hers. And her fingers dug into his cheeks as she spoke in low, clear tones. 'What reason would you have to go there? You went out, for drink and women and, having your fill of both, came home and went to bed. Is that clear?'

'But, how will we explain – '

'We'll have nothing to explain. I've told you what you did tonight. Repeat it.'

'I – I went into town.' He licked his lips. Swallowed. 'I

drank, then I went to a brothel. I came home and went to bed.'

'That's right. That's right.' She stroked his scored cheek. 'Now we're going to pack some of her things – some clothes, some jewelry. We'll do it quickly, as she did it quickly when she decided to run off with a man she'd been seeing in secret. A man who might very well be the father of that child upstairs.'

'What man?'

Josephine let out a long sigh. He was the child of her heart, but she often despaired of his brain. 'Never mind, Julian. You know nothing of it. Here.' She went to the chifforobe, chose a long black velvet cloak. 'Wrap her in this. Hurry. Do it!' she said in a tone that had him getting to his feet.

His stomach pitched, and his hands trembled, but he wrapped the body in velvet as best he could while his mother stuffed things in a hatbox and a train case.

In her rush she dropped a brooch of gold wings with a small enameled watch dangling from it. The toe of her slipper struck it so that it skittered into a corner.

'We'll take her into the swamp. We'll have to go on foot, and quickly. There are some old paving bricks in the garden shed. We can weigh her down with them.'

And the gators, she thought, the gators and fish would do the rest.

'Even if she's found, it's away from here. The man she ran away with killed her.' She dabbed her face with the handkerchief in the pocket of her robe, smoothed a hand over her long, gilded braid. 'That's what people will believe if she's found. We need to get her away from here, away from Manet Hall. Quickly.'

She was beginning to feel a little mad herself.

There was moonlight. She told herself there was moonlight because fate understood what she was doing, and why. She could hear her son's rapid breathing, and the sounds of the night. The frogs, the insects, the night birds all merging together into one thick note.

It was the end of a century, the beginning of the new. She would rid herself of this aberration to her world and start this new century, this new era, clean and strong.

There was a chill in the air, made raw with wet. But she felt hot, almost burning hot as she trudged away from the house, laden with the bags she'd packed and weighed down. The muscles of her arms, of her legs, protested, but she marched like a soldier.

Once, just once, she thought she felt a brush against her cheek, like the breath of a ghost. The spirit of a dead girl who trailed beside her, accusing, damning, cursing her for eternity.

Fear only made her stronger.

'Here.' She stopped and peered out over the water. 'Lay her down.'

Julian obeyed, then rose quickly, turned his back, covered his face with his hands. 'I can't do this. Mama, I can't. I'm sick. Sick.'

He tumbled toward the water, retching, weeping.

Useless boy, she thought, mildly annoyed. Men could never handle a crisis. It took a woman, the cold blood and clear mind of a female.

Josephine opened the cloak, laid bricks over the body. Sweat began to pour down her face, but she approached the grisly task as she would any other. With ruthless efficiency.

She took the rope out of the hatbox, carefully tied hanks around the cloaked body, top, bottom, middle. Using another, she looped the line through the handles of the luggage, knotted it tight.

She glanced over now to see Julian watching her, his face white as bone. 'You'll have to help. I can't get her into the water alone. She's too heavy now.'

'I was drunk.'

'That's correct, Julian. You were drunk. Now you're sober enough to deal with the consequences. Help me get her into the water.'

He felt his legs buckle and give with each step, like a puppet's. The body slid into the water almost soundlessly. There was a quiet plop, a kind of gurgle, then it was gone. Ripples spread on the surface, shimmered in the moonlight, then smoothed away again.

'She's out of our lives,' Josephine stated calmly. 'Soon, she'll be like those ripples. Like she never was. See that you clean your boots thoroughly, Julian. Don't give them to a servant.'

She slid her arm through his, smiled, though her smile was just a little wild. 'We need to get back, get some rest. Tomorrow's a very busy day.'