

Chapter One "...and he snatched the newborn baby out of the arms of the midwife and threw it into the roaring fire!" Belinda Lawrence gasped in horror and stood stock still. A footsore group of American tourists walking behind, unprepared for this sudden impediment to their excursion, bumped into her and muttering dark anti-Parisian crudities, discontentedly continued their way across the Pont Marie. Mark Sallinger turned back to his astonished fiancé. He smiled. "Did I shock you?" Belinda moved to him and linked her arm through his. "Mark, that's a dreadful thing to say. Tossing a baby into a fire! You have a wicked mind." They continued their way over the bridge towards the Ile St Louis. "But it's true, or at least the legend claims it is," said Mark, as they turned into the Rue St Louis en L'île and meandered past the small shops, patisseries and boutique hotels. "Well don't keep me in suspense, what's the full story?" said Belinda, "although I'm not so sure I want to hear it." "Rubbish," said Mark, as he smiled at her, "you can't wait for the gory details." "Get on with it." "Well as I said, it was a dark and stormy night and —" "— and the rain fell in torrents. Yes, I know, so —" "But it was a dark and stormy night," said Mark defensively, "and if you don't be quiet, I won't tell you. As I said, it was in London, and there was a storm, and the year was somewhere about 1554, or thereabouts when an old midwife was woken up by someone knocking on the door. A man elbowed his way in and ordered the woman to come with him. He rushed her to a coach, and they drove off into the night. Soon London was far behind them, and although the woman could not see much, because of the dark, she knew they were in the country." "Well if they were outside London, it would be a fair bet they'd be in the country," said Belinda teasingly. Mark purposely ignored her interruption. "Finally the coach drove through the gateway to a large country house and the old woman was ushered into a gloomy bedroom, the only light came from some flickering candles and a blazing fire in the fireplace. On the bed, a young woman was in labour. The midwife was told to save the woman even if it meant the child died. The baby was born, and mother and child were doing well. But as the midwife was about to hand over the baby to its mother, the child was pulled from her arms. Then, as she watched in horror, the man hurled it into the roaring fire. In shock, the old woman was led away, a bag of coins given to her and a glass of wine." Belinda gave a shiver. "I should think she'd need a drink after that experience." "She was driven back to London and within a few days she was dead." "Poisoned? The wine?" said Belinda. Mark shrugged. "Possibly. But the interesting thing about this story is that before she died, she revealed the name of the woman who had given birth. Elizabeth." Belinda looked at him. "Elizabeth I?" "Well it certainly wasn't Elizabeth II," replied Mark mockingly. Belinda smiled and gave him a dig in the ribs with her elbow. A folktale, she thought to herself, but the image of the baby and the fire disturbed her. So absorbed with this fiction (for she wanted it to be fiction; to think otherwise would be too ghastly) she failed to notice the woman who exited from a nearby pharmacy and brushed past her. The woman joined a man who was waiting at a café. He rose to meet her and they hurried off onto the Pont Saint-Louis. Belinda and Mark reached the end of the street and turned onto the Quai d'Orléans where their apartment was. The tiny rickety elevator carried them up and deposited them at the door of Mark's sister's apartment: Patricia and her husband had moved to New York for a month and Belinda and Mark had the use of it for a romantic Parisian holiday. Mark headed straight to the study and the computer; even a holiday, no matter how romantic, could stop the economic wheels of his business affairs. In the kitchen, Belinda poured a glass of orange juice. "An email from mother," called Mark, "says she expects us tomorrow and not to be late." Belinda walked to the study. "I wouldn't dare be. Not with your mother." Mark smiled as he switched off the computer. "Oh come on, she's not that bad. A bit overpowering, I admit, but underneath —" "Underneath she's a dictator," said Belinda with a smile. Belinda's relationship with her soon-to-be mother-in-law was an uneasy one, mainly because she knew that Melba, Lady Sallinger, as she now labelled herself, was of the old school and deemed her son should have married 'in his class' and not cohabit with a colonial. Not that she put it in those terms to Belinda's face,

but it was often the subtext in their conversations. Mark reached for his phone. "I'll get the car to collect us in the morning at, what? Say 8.00 am?" "The ferry leaves St Marlo at noon. Better make it 7.00," said Belinda, "we don't want to miss it and have to face your mother's wrath." She smiled and as Mark phoned to book the car she walked to the window. Below her flowed the Seine and, seemingly floating in the river, the Île de la Cité and the east end of Notre Dame with its fine display of flying buttresses. Beyond, the Latin Quarter and on the horizon the Panthéon, housing the remains of distinguished French citizens from Voltaire to Victor Hugo. Belinda smiled as she recalled, as a young tourist, her first visit to Paris and now, she was engaged, her future husband had a title and consequently she was to be, Lady Sallinger. Not for the first time she considered the path her life had taken in the intervening ten years, from Australian teenage backpacker; to property owner when her murdered Great Aunt left her a cottage in Somerset; her friendship with the older Hazel Whitby and through her, an introduction into the world of buying and selling antiques. She wondered how the next few days would be. The invitation from Melba to join her at her house on the island of Guernsey had come, more or less as a command, to plan their wedding. The fact her parents and Hazel Whitby were to be fellow guests provided some comfort for Belinda. "Car booked. Hadn't we better pack?" Mark's question interrupted her thoughts, and she turned to the bedroom and began to sort out clothing. "Just what is this house your mother has?" "On Guernsey? An old Tudor house father bought some years ago. One of his companies initially bought it as an investment; had some idea of turning it into a boutique hotel, but time went on and they never got around to doing anything with it, so the old boy took it off their hands at a knock-down price, crafty old bugger. When he died, mother inherited it, and she has some crazy scheme about restoring it and retiring there. "By the way, her email says we are to expect two additional guests. Some priest my mother argues theology with. Mother has a fixation with Rome and has been known to reduce the Holy See to tears. It's rumoured the Pope has been heard to plead, 'will no one rid me of this troublesome battle-axe?' And a writer, talking of troublesome; a woman doing research on the Nazi occupation of the island. Can't see those two providing much entertainment." Belinda gave a murmur of acknowledgement and busied herself with packing. Her thoughts were scattered; the prospect of time spent with his mother, would they get on? A Tudor house to explore; the freshness of the island of Guernsey off the coast of France. An unexpected image flashed into her mind. Mark's tale of the midwife dragged from her bed in the middle of the night. The baby thrown into the fire. Belinda shivered. But the image stayed with her – like a horror movie. Repeating...repeating...