

CHAPTER ONE

Clutching a hideous jade statuette in her hand, Eldelaide Crawson strolled nonchalantly toward her husband. He was seated at his writing table, tapping his lavender fountain pen against his lower lip, his eyes fixed on the sheet of twenty-bond paper in front of him. He didn't look up as his wife approached; didn't notice she was holding one hand behind her back.

"Eldelaide," he said. "If a woman were scaling the apex of her passions, would she be more likely to say *Ooh* or *Ahh*?"

Eldelaide stopped abruptly, her murderous mindset discombobulated by Barrett's question.

"Scaling the apex of her passions?" she said.

"Yes, that's right."

"And what, pray tell, does that mean, exactly?"

He regarded her with his watery blue eyes, and his thin lips curved into a tolerant smile. "Her climax, my dear. Would the average woman go *ooh* or *ahh* or perhaps utter some other exclamation?"

Eldelaide replied in a frosty tone: "I'm afraid I wouldn't know, Barrett. I'm not an average woman. And I really couldn't say what sounds I used to make when I scaled the apex of my own passions, for it was so long ago."

One of Barrett's carefully trimmed eyebrows arched. "Oh come now. You're not quite old enough to be losing your memory just yet."

"Not *quite* old enough?"

"Besides, I'm not asking what sounds you personally would make. I'm asking what most women would do."

"And why do you want this information?"

He waved a slim hand at the piece of paper. "My latest poem is all about the sounds of physical love. *Auditations Amorous* is the working title. I already have the bodily noises -- the slurps and squishes and gasps and grunts and squeaks and creaks..."

"Your lovers squeak and creak? Where's this poem set, in an old folks' home?"

"It's the bedsprings that squeak and creak, Eldelaide," he said wearily. "But never mind that. I need the words people utter during their climaxes. I have the man's response already -- *as his procreative urge / swells to its crescendo / his passion starts its surge / and he trumpets forth his bellow*. I think 'bellow' fits nicely. But I need the woman's response. Women don't bellow, of

course. Sometimes they shriek, but I want something less animalistic. The word *ooh* can be rhymed more easily than *ahh*, but I don't want to take the easy way out."

"Sorry. I can't help you."

"Oh come now. Surely when you women get together you talk about such things."

"Do we?"

"Well ... don't you?"

"Are you speaking of harlots in some bawdy house? I would know nothing of that. As for me and my friends, we most certainly do not discuss such personal matters."

"Oh. Well you're no help, then."

He set down his pen, then reached for his teacup and brought it to his lips. He took a sip, held the cup toward his wife.

"I'm empty. Fetch me some more tea, would you? Oolong, of course. You know the way I like it."

"With absinthe and butter," she said tonelessly.

"A tablespoon of absinthe and a teaspoon of butter."

He held the cup a little higher. She did not take it.

"Why don't you ring for Lisanne?" she said. "Fetching your tea is her job."

"Why should that poor girl have to scurry all the way up here to find out what I want and then go all the way back down to the kitchen to fetch it when you're already here? Come on, be a good girl. I need to keep the creative juices flowing."

Eldelaide took the teacup. It was a lovely thing, over a hundred years old, with gold trim on the rim and hummingbirds on the sides. Imported from Japan, the cup was an exquisite example of Kenzan craftsmanship and cost nearly three hundred pounds.

She remembered the day Barrett brought it home. She'd been delighted at first -- so nice of him to remember her birthday, for once, and to buy such an expensive and charming gift.

"What do you think of it?" he'd asked.

"Oh, it's lovely, Barrett!" she'd replied.

"I saw it sitting in the window of that little antique shop on Headingley Lane and I just couldn't resist."

She reached for it, but he turned away, heading for the stairs leading up to his study atop the tower.

"It will look lovely on my writing table," he muttered.

And that's when she realized the truth: He hadn't remembered her birthday. He'd bought it for himself.

Her face reddening, she'd blurted out: "Don't you think it's a bit sissy, a grown man drinking out of a teacup with little birdies on the sides?"

He paused on the stairs, looking at her over his shoulder. "Sissy? My dear, your knowledge of ornithology is woefully inadequate. There is nothing sissy about the hummingbird."

And with that he'd continued up the stairs, gazing lovingly at his cup...

The memory of that exchange reignited Eldelaide's fury and she hurled the teacup across the room. It struck a bust of Percy Bysshe Shelley and burst into a thousand pieces that sprayed onto the carpeting, landing in a roughly fan-like shape -- a fitting continuation of the Japanese motif.

For a few moments, the only sound in the room was Eldelaide's ragged breathing, until an astonished Barrett finally found his voice.

"Merciful heavens, Eldelaide, if you must get out of sorts during your monthly madness, I do wish you'd confine yourself to hurling non-breakable objects. Or better yet, quaff some sort of palliative. That teacup cost nearly three hundred pounds!"

She replied through clenched teeth: "A non-breakable object. Is that what you want? Very well, Barrett, I happen to have one right here. Have a look at it!"

She took her right arm from behind her back and held up the jade statuette, clutched in her white knuckled hand.

"What an intriguing statuette," he said, his displeasure giving way to delight. "It looks rather bestial. But I can't see the head very well. Set it down on the desk so I can get a better look."

"Oh, you'll get a better look, alright!"

She raised the statuette high above her head, her grip tightening, her chest tightening even more. She could already see his skull cracking open like an egg, his brains running out like gray yolks -- all those precious rhymes and well-wrought couplets oozing onto his blotter. All she had to do was slam the statuette into his head. Perhaps more than once. As many times as it took.

That's all she had to do. And she would do it ...

Yes, she would do it ...

"Oh Eldelaide," he said in a pitying tone, "I don't wish to look at the base, I wish to see the head. Please set it down on the desk."

She would do it ... now!

She brought her arm down, but somehow it moved far slower than she intended, and the statuette came nowhere near Barrett's head, and she found herself placing it upright on the desk and letting go and clasping her hands together and squeezing them tight to quell the tremors coursing through her fingers.

Oblivious to his narrow escape from death, Barrett moved the statuette closer to his glowstone lamp and eyed the monstrous carved face.

"What a delightfully grotesque little fellow," he said.

The statuette stood about eight inches tall and depicted the ancient god Thulchulu, with his bulbous head and parrot-like beak and six malevolent eyes and a crescent mouth filled with fangs. His hair consisted of writhing snakes, and his body had six octopoidal limbs, ending in webbed, six-fingered hands.

"Where did you get it, Eldelaide?" Barrett said.

She struggled to form words in a mouth gone dry. "Mother. She thought it would be the perfect thing to give you."

"Ah. I should have known. I'm so lucky she disapproves of me. I'd much rather receive a gift like this than some crocheted knickknack effusing bromides about hearth and home. Yes, this will definitely inspire me. What a provocative face. Quite striking. Yes, quite striking indeed."

"Striking?" Eldelaide muttered. "How I wish!"

"What?"

"Nothing, Barrett. Nothing at all."

She turned around and stormed off, as Barrett picked up his pen and resumed writing, barely noticing her departure.

Moniga Keene swung the door open and poked her head out. She had oddly colored eyes -- one black, one gray -- and they were too big for her pinched face. Her nose contained only one nostril -- the other one had been melted shut during a botched alchemy-school experiment. Her long, scraggly hair was thundercloud gray, with a wide midnight streak in the middle. Her

scrawny frame was clad in a black flannel robe, and a heavy brass chain hung from her turkey neck, ending in an ebony cabochon bearing a blasphemous glyph.

"You fouled it up, didn't you?" she said.

Eldelaide averted her gaze. "I'm afraid so, mother."

The old woman sighed and swung her bedroom door wide. "Get in here."

Eldelaide entered. The room was dimly lit by a guttering black candle ensconced atop a crystal skull sitting on a hexagonal table covered with a black cloth. Sandalwood incense cloyed the air. Eldelaide felt something brush against her leg; she looked down, assuming it was Moniga's one-eyed black cat, Ackles, but there was nothing there.

"Well," Moniga said. "What went wrong?"

"How did you know something went wrong?"

"Thulchulu clued me in. He's angry. Says you insulted him. Wouldn't give any details. How could you possibly mess up something so simple?"

Eldelaide began kneading her hands. "Well you see, it was like this. I was all set to bash Barrett's head in, I truly was, but then I ... I just couldn't go through with it."

Moniga gaped. "You were going to hit him? With Thulchulu?"

"Of course. Why are you looking at me like that? Isn't that what you told me to do?"

"No, I told you to give the statuette to Barrett, not clobber him with it."

"Uh ... isn't that the same thing?"

"Hell no!"

"Sure it is."

"Uh, no it's not."

"Sure it is. When gangsters in the movies are about to cut loose on somebody with Tommy guns, they say *give it to him*."

"No, they say *let him have it*. Big difference."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. Besides, I'm not a gangster."

"Alright, so I misunderstood. But how could I kill Barrett with the statuette if I didn't strike him with it?"

Moniga rolled her eyes. "Thulchulu is a god of death. One touch of his mighty finger would've snuffed the life right out of that worthless hubby of yours, and there would've been no

traces left behind for the coppers to glom onto. It would've been clean and simple and elegant. Why would you want to do something crude like blunt-force trauma?"

"How was I supposed to know Thulchulu was a death god? You should have told me."

Moniga grit her teeth. "Why do you think a mistress of the dark arts would give you a statuette to kill your husband if there wasn't some sort of magic inside it? Hell, if you wanted to bash Barrett's head in, you could've used a fireplace poker or a shovel or a frying pan."

"I know that. I assumed the statuette had some sort of glamour spell inside it."

"A glamour? What good would that do?"

"I thought it would cloud the minds of the police so they wouldn't suspect me."

"Hell, girl, there isn't a glamour in the world strong enough for that. If a man dies, and he's married, the coppers always suspect the wife. They have no imagination and they're lazy to boot. When in doubt, blame the spouse, that's their motto. Good thing you couldn't go through with it. You would've stuck your fool head squarely in the noose."

"Well no harm done. We can try again."

Moniga shook her head. "Too late. Thulchulu has walked out on us."

"Why?"

"Because he's a death god, not a common ruffian. You demeaned him."

"But I didn't actually strike Barrett. I only thought about doing it."

"And Thulchulu read your thoughts. He said you were a rude wench and he had a good mind to burn our house down around our ears. I managed to calm him down, but he's gone for good."

"He's not inside the statuette any more?"

"No, he has departed from that sacred vessel, and from this house as well. He says he'll never aid a mortal again as long as he lives. And since he's immortal, that's one helluva long time."

"Humph. Touchy little thing, isn't he? Can't you just command him to come back?"

"You don't command gods, daughter dear. Even long-forgotten ones."

"What if I personally apologized to him and asked his forgiveness?"

"He's not the forgiving sort. He'll never serve us now. We'll have to find another way to kill your husband."

Eldelaide walked toward the window, gazing out at the moon-bathed grounds. After a few moments she spoke again. "No, I think I'll go back to my original plan. This murder business is too risky."

"What!"

Eldelaide turned to face her stepmother. "I want you to make me a love spell, like I asked you for in the first place. I never should've let you talk me out of it."

Moniga scuttled over to the window. "I told you before and I'm telling you now. You don't cast a love spell on a fellow you're already married to! You shouldn't have to do that! It's degrading!"

"I'd rather be degraded than hanged for murder."

"Ech! You sound like your father. If you had *my* blood running through your veins, *step*-daughter, you wouldn't talk like that! Where's your fighting spirit?"

"I've got plenty of fighting spirit. But I've also got common sense."

"Ha! If you had common sense you wouldn't have married that loser in the first place!"

"He used to be different."

"Don't give me that. You knew what he was like but you married him anyway. You figured you could change him into the man you wanted. It didn't work. It never does. It's time to cut your losses."

"There's always divorce."

"Pah! Do you want to settle for some monthly pittance -- assuming you get anything at all? Do you really want to live in some hovel somewhere when you can have all this for yourself?" She waved a hand through the air, but her gesture encompassed far more than her own stuffy, cluttered room. "You've got the grandest house in Yorkshire Wolds, and gourmet food by the truckload, and a Rolls Royce and a Bentley, and a tasty chauffeur to drive them, and jewels and fancy clothes and trips to Paris and Venice twice a year. Think of how grand your life could be if you weren't tied down to that dried-up husk of a man!"

"I could marry again. I'll just cast my net a little farther this time. I have experience now. I know more about men."

Moniga put her hands on her hips. "Cast your net, eh? And what'll you use for bait, eh? You think middle-aged divorcees are welcome in high society? Not a chance, unless their own blood is bluer than the Caribbean, and yours isn't. And high society is where the big fish swim."

"Lots of middle class men have money. Maybe not as much, but enough to live comfortably. And middle class men don't care about things like bloodlines and divorce."

"Aye, but they care about looks."

"I'm still attractive."

"Compared to who? You think you can compete with all those wet-assed fortune-hunting wenches fresh out of finishing school? You gave your best years to Barrett. You're past your prime." The old woman's eyes took on a wicked gleam. "But if you had money of your own, if you were a wealthy widow -- ah, that changes everything. Then you could marry for love. And you wouldn't have to settle for some farty old lawyer or some pudgy shopkeeper either. Hell, you'd have every strapping young hunk in Yorkshire lining up to give you a bounce. You could sample them all and pick out the one you want. Or more than one!"

"That's disgusting, mother."

Moniga threw up her hands. "Alright. Fine. If you want to spend the rest of your life as a doormat, be my guest. But don't come to me bellyaching every time Barrett wipes his muddy boots all over you." She gestured angrily at the door. "Get out. Go back to your room and cry yourself to sleep!"

Eldelaide folded her arms over her chest. "I'm not going anywhere until you make me a love spell."

"I won't do it."

"Won't ... or can't?"

Moniga just stared at her.

"I thought so," Eldelaide said. "You don't know how, do you?"

The old woman shrugged. "Love spells just don't interest me."

Eldelaide smirked. She knew only too well what her stepmother's interests were. In fact, her cluttered room was full of clues to her character. There were no lovely flowers in vases to brighten the decor, no books of romantic poetry to inspire her, no paintings of mountains or meadows to warm her heart. Instead, there was a collection of stuffed bats mounted on a cork board attached to one wall, and the flower pots contained mandrake roots -- twisted tubers resembling miniature zombies rising from little round graves -- and the pictures hanging from the wall were Hieronymus Bosch prints depicting souls in torment. Her shelves held jars of magical ingredients, but not the kind used for love potions and good luck charms; these jars contained

noxious herbs and malevolent plants, nasty powders and glowering amulets. And the bookshelves spoke volumes about Moniga's mindset. Instead of works like *The Joy of Magic* and *Suzique's Sunshine Spells*, there were blasphemous tomes like the *Directorium Diabolos*, the *New Hexford Witchonary* and the infamous *Ensorclopedia Satanica*. Even the books she read for pleasure were revealing -- *The Unexpurgated Poe*, *The Banned Stories of H.P. Lovecraft*, *The Repressed Journals of the Marquis De Sade*, *The Wit & Wisdom of Emperor Caligula*, *The Turn of the Thumbscrew* by Torquemada. And on another shelf were stacks of her favorite magazines - *True Torture Tales*, *Murders Monthly*, and *Corpse Illustrated*.

Clearly, Moniga had no aptitude for love spells; Eldelaide would have to look elsewhere. And that presented a problem, because most of the witches in Yorkshire were attending the annual Coven Convention, a month-long event in Saxony. There were a few solo practitioners around -- people who, like Moniga, had never taken the Wand Exam and refused to join the Sisterhood. But who could Eldelaide trust with such a delicate matter? She couldn't go to just anyone. She needed someone reliable and discreet who wouldn't spread gossip about Eldelaide Crawson's failing marriage.

No, if Eldelaide wanted a trustworthy witch, she'd just have to wait for the convention to end, when the licensed practitioners returned home. But she didn't want to wait that long. She couldn't bear it. Not another month, not another day.

"Alright, mother," she said forlornly. "Never mind the love spell. Make me another death curse."

Moniga looked at her like she was an idiot. "Just like that, eh? For your information, ancient statuettes imbued with the spirits of death gods aren't something you buy at a flea market in Harrogate, two for a pence. I only had the one, and you wasted it. And I doubt I'll find another one anytime soon."

"Do you really need a god to make a death curse work? Can't you just use your own willpower?"

"You make it sound as easy as whipping up a figgy pudding. Death curses are a lot of work if you make one from scratch. It's a lot easier to ask a spirit for help, preferably someone of divine lineage."

"So find another deity. Surely Thulchulu isn't the only death god roaming the cosmos."

"Oh, there are others. Plenty of others. But they don't just drop what they're doing and come running every time some mortal snaps her fingers. A vessel must be prepared for them, a sanctified place for their spirit to dwell while it's on the mortal plane. If that isn't done, the god will feel insulted. I could carve one from jade, if I had some jade, but it would take too long, so I'll probably work in wicker. But it will still take a little time."

Eldelaide spun on her heel and marched toward the door. "Well I'm tired of waiting. I'm going to push Barrett down the stairs and claim it was an accident. If I cry convincingly enough, I'm sure the police will believe me."

Moniga scurried to her side and seized her arm. "Don't be a ninny, girl! You can't guarantee a man will die by falling down the stairs. What if he lives through it?"

"I'll finish him off with a candlestick or something. And I'll tell the police he hit his head on the banister or something."

"No copper will fall for that. They'll unravel that story in no time and you'll be off to the gallows so fast it'll make your head spin. And then I'll be the laughingstock of Yorkshire. Everybody will point their fingers at me and say, 'There goes Moniga Keene, the one with the crazy stepdaughter who got herself hanged.'"

"That's all you care about, isn't it? Your own hide!"

"Damn right! Now you listen to me. There's other ways to kill a husband. Smart ways. Undetectable ways. Granted, a death curse is the best way, but since you're in such an all fired hurry, I've got another little remedy you can try."

Moniga let go of Eldelaide and trotted over to her shelves. She grabbed something, brought it back.

"This should do the trick," she said, handing Eldelaide a small, rectangular bottle. It looked very old and was only half full; the dark brown liquid inside had an oily sheen to it. The tarnished brass cap bore a fleur-de-lis emblem on the top and the label was so faded the words were illegible.

"What is it?" Eldelaide said. "A potion?"

"A poison, made from nightberries and moondrops. Put a dash in Barrett's tea tonight and your troubles will be over. It stops the heart instantly and leaves no trace. Everyone will think he had a coronary."

"Won't he taste it in his tea? He's got a very delicate palate, you know."

"Nope. And even if he does, it'll be too late. The first sip will be enough to kill him."

"Why didn't you give me this in the first place? It sounds a lot more reliable than some temperamental death god."

"But not as interesting. Hundreds of women murder their husbands with poisons every year. That's so trite. Ah, but a cursed statuette? Now that shows you have style and originality."

"I'm not interested in originality, only efficacy."

Eldelaide walked to the door and opened it, then glanced at Moniga over her shoulder.

"Wish me luck, mother."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Wishing for luck is a kind of magic. The kind I'm not good at. My Talent lies along different lines."

Eldelaide sighed. "It was just a figure of speech, mother. Goodnight."

After Eldelaide walked out and closed the door, Ackles slunk out of the shadows and came to Moniga's side, gazing up at her intently. The witch crouched down and scratched his head.

"Yes," Moniga said. "I know."

"Feeling better, my dear?" Barrett said as Eldelaide strolled into his study.

Eldelaide forced a smile. "Much." She came closer. "I'm sorry I broke your teacup, darling. I've been out of sorts lately."

"Oh, that's quite alright. *Such is the monthly madness / the distemper a woman can't hide / a squall that swamps all gladness / born on the menstrual tide.*"

She cringed. It was a quote from one of his stupider poems, *Ode to the Ovary*.

"I took a palliative," she said. "And now I'm my old self again. And to make amends, I've brought you the tea you asked for."

She held up the teacup. It was a pretty one, pale lavender with larks on the side. But not nearly as lovely as the rare antique she'd busted.

"I've already had my fill," he said. "After your little outburst I rang for Lisanne after all, and she fetched me a cuppa. Most refreshing."

Eldelaide glanced into the cup on the desk. "But it's empty now. You need a refill."

"No, I shan't be wanting a third cup. Not this late. You know how too much tea affects me. I'd be hopping in and out of bed all night, and I wouldn't want to disturb your sleep."

Of course not. Gods forbid I'd do anything in bed but sleep.

She pouted her lips. "But I made it especially for you."

"Well drink it yourself."

"I don't like it like this."

"Then toss it out. It's only tea."

"You're still angry with me, aren't you? That's why you don't want my peace offering."

"Certainly not. I'm just full, that's all."

"Full of anger, you mean."

"I am not angry."

"Prove it. Take a sip. It's important to me. Come on, one sip isn't going to kill you."

He sighed wearily. "Oh very well. If you insist."

He took the teacup and brought it toward his lips, and Eldelaide's pulse quickened. There would be no slip-ups this time. She was watching her husband's final moments on earth.

He stopped, with the cup only a half-inch from his mouth. He sniffed. Grimaced. "Oh my. This seems a bit off."

"Really? Off in what way?"

"It's just ... off. You must have made it wrong." He held the cup at arm's length. She took it, brought it up to her own nose.

"It smells fine to me," she said, truthfully.

"Well it isn't. Take it away."

"But..."

"Take it away, Eldelaide. Before I get cross."

Eldelaide wanted to toss the tea into his imperious face. She wanted to hurl the cup across the room and watch it shatter, and pretend it was Barrett's skull. She wanted to stomp over to the door, fling it open and slam it behind her. But she forced herself to remain calm. She strolled to the door, opened it slowly and shut it noiselessly behind her. Only when she had descended to the bottom of the tower did she begin to stomp, muttering obscenities as she stormed through the house, heading for the south wing. When she got to the master bedroom she entered the

bathroom and dumped the tea into the sink, then stood there, still cussing, as she watched the brown liquid swirl down the drain.

When the last gurgle subsided, she left the bathroom, donned her nightgown and climbed into bed. Anger seethed inside her, yet she tried her best to relax and fall asleep. She didn't want to be awake when Barrett turned in; didn't want to hear the rustling sounds as he removed his clothing, nor feel the slight dip of the mattress as he got into bed, or see the room plunge into darkness as he switched off the lamp. Those things had excited her long ago, when they filled her with delicious anticipation of the lovemaking to come, but nowadays they were a prelude to nothing, and she was tired of waiting in vain for his hands to reach for her body, his mouth to seek out her lips -- only to hear the sound of snores instead.

Yes, it was better to fall asleep now, and dream pleasant dreams -- of Barrett Crawson, stretched out, eyes closed ... not in bed, but a coffin.