

Prologue

Mortal Ruin

When the normally innocuous radio station she always listened to while she was working suddenly started pumping out Mortal Ruin's first big hit, 'Dead as My Love', Chloe Lyon was in the kitchen area of her small flat, carefully brushing a thick coating of richly scented dark criollo couverture chocolate into moulds, to make the last batch of hollow angels before Christmas.

That seemed pretty appropriate, because a hollow angel was what Raffy Sinclair had proved himself to be, but it meant that it was a couple of minutes before she had a hand free to reach across and snap down the off button. By then they'd moved on to Eric Clapton's 'Tears in Heaven', so it was becoming obvious that the guest on *Desert Island Discs* (she'd missed the start) had much happier memories of 1992 than Chloe did. In fact, she'd take a bet on the next song being Whitney Houston and 'I Will Always Love You', and that really *would* finish her off.

But the music carried on playing in her head even after the radio was silenced and it was already too late to suppress

the memories. The dark, viciously searing tide of anger and pain at Raffy's betrayal was rushing in as sharply as if it had all happened yesterday and she was once again that love-struck nineteen-year-old, thinking she'd found a kind of magic more potent than any of her grandfather's chants, charms and incantations.

She'd loved that Clapton song, though Raffy'd teased her that it was mawkish. But then, as well as being keen on Nirvana, he'd had a worrying penchant for Megadeath and older bands like Iron Maiden, Judas Priest and Black Sabbath, all of which influenced the lyrics he wrote for his own band, Mortal Ruin. This obsession with the dark side was part of the reason why she'd never mentioned her grandfather to him – he might have been *too* interested had he known about her connection with Gregory Warlock.

But actually, there had simply not been enough time to explore their family and backgrounds, since they'd met and fallen in love at the start of her first university term and those few weeks spent intently engrossed in each other encompassed the whole span of their relationship.

It wasn't surprising that *she'd* loved *him* at first sight – he was tall and handsome, with long black curling hair, a pale, translucent skin and eyes the greeny-blue of the Caribbean Sea in a holiday brochure – but he'd seemed as transfixed as she was . . . And anyway, the Tarot cards, when she consulted them, had told her that change was coming and she would meet her soul mate, so she'd naturally assumed he was the one.

Big mistake.

She hadn't believed it was the end, even after that final argument on the last night of term, when he'd told her he and the other three Mortal Ruin band members had

decided to gamble their futures on a recording contract and he'd asked her to go with him, rather than head home for the holidays as she'd intended. She hadn't explained why she absolutely *had* to go home either, though she might have done if she hadn't been so angry – or if he had been capable of talking about anything other than Mortal Ruin by that point.

If only she'd known she wouldn't be going back for the next term . . . If only they hadn't had that final, bitter argument, so she never even gave him her home address . . . There was a whole series of ifs, but they probably wouldn't have made any difference in the end, because he turned out to be *so* not the man she'd thought he was.

A hollow angel: dark and handsome on the outside, an emotional void within. A Lucifer echoing with false promises.

Of course, she hadn't known that then. Looking after Jake, her baby half-brother, while waiting for her mother to come back from her latest fling, she'd had plenty of time to worry about what would happen when Raffy finally got her letter. She'd sent it via her former roommate, Rachel, to hand to him when he came to his senses and went back to look for her. Because, despite their last argument, she'd been quite sure of his love and that somehow they would find a way of being together, of working things out. He'd told her he loved her often enough . . .

Even in her darkest moments she'd believed that, right up to the day she received the note from Rachel, telling her that Raffy had returned briefly at the start of the new term and she had given him the letter, but after reading it he'd simply crumpled it up and shoved it in his pocket without comment.

She hadn't needed the tear-stained confession on the next page to know how easily and quickly he had replaced her, or how little she meant to him. Out of sight, out of mind.

It was not so easy for her to forget him, when his music seemed to be out there everywhere, assailing her at unexpected moments, but eventually her searing anger had cauterised the wounds and given her a certain measure of immunity.

So why now was she sitting at the kitchen table weeping hot, scalding tears?

Saltwater and chocolate are *never* a good combination.

Chapter One

There Must Be an Angel

You know those routines most people have, the ones they fall into automatically when they wake up? Well, until a few years ago, my morning rota had ‘read Tarot cards’ neatly sandwiched between ‘brush teeth’ and ‘breakfast’.

It was just the way I was brought up, and nothing to do with magic – or not the sort my grandfather practises, where the effects of his rites are so hit-and-miss that most positive results are probably sheer coincidence, like the way the sales of my Chocolate Wishes went stratospheric right after he gave me part of an ancient Mayan charm to say over the melting pot. Fluke . . . I thought. I have to confess that I’ve never been entirely sure.

But really, apart from the novelty value of the concept, my success was probably more the result of my having finally perfected both my technique and the quality of my moulded chocolate, mostly by trial, error and experimentation – and the really good thing about working with chocolate is that you can eat your mistakes.

What originally sparked the whole thing off was coming

across a two-part metal Easter egg mould at a jumble sale when my half-brother, Jake, was a small boy. I made lots of little chocolate eggs and put messages inside them from the Easter Bunny, then hid them all over the flat and courtyard for him and his friends to find.

And while I was making them I started thinking about fortune cookies, which are fun, but not really that good to eat. And from there it was just a short bunny hop to creating a line of hollow chocolate shapes containing ‘Wishes’ as an after-dinner novelty and selling them in boxes of six or twelve.

The ‘Wishes’ are encouraging thoughts or suggestions, inspired by the Angel card readings that have replaced my earlier devotion to the Tarot, and I’m positive that each person will automatically pick the appropriate Chocolate Wish from the box – their own guardian angel will see to that!

It was all very amateur at first, but now the Wishes come in printed sheets and the boxes are also specially made to hold and protect the chocolates in transit, because most of my orders come through the internet, via my website, or by word of mouth.

Nowadays I favour mainly criollo couverture chocolate, the best and most expensive kind, which not only tastes delicious but has a superior gloss and good ‘snap’. I temper it in the machine Jake christened the Bath and then, with an outsize pastry brush, coat specially made polycarbon moulds in the shape of angels or winged hearts until I have a thick enough shell. When they’re cold, I ‘glue’ the two halves together with a little more chocolate – but before I do that, I put in the ‘Wish’.

And I am so much happier since I began to read the Angel cards instead of the Tarot! They never seemed to

come out right when I read them for myself and I often wonder if my future would have been different if I hadn't always looked for signs and portents before I did anything. Do we make our own futures, or do our futures make us?

Granny, who was of gypsy descent and taught me how to read the cards in the first place, said they only showed what *might* be the future, should the present course be held to; but I'm not so sure. She would have approved of the Angel cards, though, which is more than my grandfather (whom Jake and I call Grumps, for obvious reasons) and Zillah, who is Granny's cousin, do.

But I truly believe in angels and have done from being a small child when Granny, who despite her Tarot reading was deeply religious, assured me that the winged figure I glimpsed one night really *was* a celestial visitor, rather than a figment of my imagination. (And my friend Poppy saw it too, I do have a witness!)

Why an angel should appear to an unbaptised and ungodly child of sin is anyone's guess, unless it was my own personal guardian angel making an early appearance in my life, to counter Grumps' influence and set my feet on the right path. But if so, she hasn't visited me since in that form, though sometimes I can hear the soft susurrations of wings and feel a comforting presence that is almost, but not quite, visible. And the Angel cards . . . maybe she guided me to those too?

Granny died when I was twelve, but she too did her best to counter Grumps' influence, flatly forbidding any kind of baptismal ceremony involving his coven, or involvement in its rites until I had reached the age where I could make a considered decision for myself – a resounding 'No way!' She had already done the same for my mother, though

unfortunately without instilling in her any alternative moral code.

That February morning, when I shuffled the pack of silky smooth Angel cards and laid them out on the kitchen table, they predicted change, but at least they also assured me that everything would work out all right in the end, which was a great improvement on coming face to face with the Hanging Man or Death over the breakfast cereal and trying to interpret the reading as something a little less doom-laden than the initial impression.

Rituals completed, I went to wake Jake up, which took quite some effort since, at eighteen, he could sleep for Britain. I made sure he ate something before he set off for sixth form college, dressed all in black, from dyed hair to big, metal-studded boots, a cheery sight for his teachers on a Monday morning.

When he'd gone – with a cheeky 'Goodbye, Mum!' just to wind me up – I checked my emails for incoming Chocolate Wishes orders and printed them out, before going through to the main part of the house to see what Grumps was up to. Our flat was over the garages, so the door led onto the upper landing, and was rarely shut, unless Jake was playing loud music.

In the kitchen Zillah was sitting at the table over the remnants of her breakfast, drinking loose-leaf Yorkshire tea and smoking a thin, lumpy, roll-up cigarette. As usual, she was dressed in a bunchy skirt, two layers of cardigans with the bottom one worn back to front, a huge flowered pinny over the whole ensemble and her hair tied up in a clashing scarf, turban-fashion. Grumps says she was bitten by Carmen Miranda in her youth and after I Googled the name, I suspect he is right. Today's dangly red earrings

made her look as if she had hooked a pair of cherries over each ear, so the fruit motif was definitely there.

She looked up – small, dark, with skin not so much wrinkled as folded around her black, bird-bright eyes – and smiled, revealing several glinting gold teeth. ‘Read your tea leaves?’ she offered hospitably.

‘No, thanks, Zillah, not just now. I’m running late, it took me ages to get Jake up and on his way. But I’ve brought you another jar of my chocolate and ginger spread, because yesterday you said you’d almost run out.’

‘Extra sweet?’

‘Extra sweet,’ I agreed, putting the jar down on the table.

It’s really just a ganache of grated cacao and boiled double cream, with a little finely chopped preserved ginger added for zing. It doesn’t keep long, though the way Zillah lards it onto her toast means it doesn’t have to.

Zillah turned up on the doorstep the day after Granny died. She’d read the news in the cards and come to burn her cousin’s caravan – metaphorically speaking, anyway, because she’d had to make do with burning Granny’s clothes and personal possessions on the garden bonfire instead.

Grumps seemed unsurprised by Zillah’s sudden appearance, as if he’d been expecting her, which maybe he had, and his purported magical skills aren’t a *complete* figment of his imagination. She’d never given any suggestion of remaining with us permanently, yet here she still was several years later, cooking, cleaning and caring for us, in her slap-dash way.

She handed me the fresh cup of tea she’d just poured out, put two Jammie Dodger biscuits on the saucer and said, ‘Take this in to the Wizard of Oz then, will you, love?’

‘Grumps is up to something, isn’t he?’ I asked, accepting

the cup, because although he is taciturn and secretive at the best of times, I could still tell. I only hoped he wasn't about to try some great summoning ceremony with his coven, because on past form all they were likely to call up was double pneumonia.

Zillah tapped the side of her nose with the fingers holding her cigarette and a thin snake of ash fell into her empty cup. I hoped it wouldn't muddle her future.

In the study Grumps was indeed sitting at his desk over a grimoire open at a particularly juicy spell, which he was probably considering trying out when the weather improved. (The coven practised their rites in an oak grove, skyclad, and none of them was getting any younger.)

His long, silver hair was parted in the middle and a circlet held it off a face notable for a pair of piercing grey eyes and a hawk-like nose. His midnight-blue velvet robe was rubbed on the elbows, so that he bore more resemblance to a down-at-heel John Dee than a Gandalf, but it was a look that went down well with the readers of the beyond Dennis Wheatley novels he wrote as Gregory Warlock. Sales had been in the doldrums for many years, apart from a small band of devotees, but they were suddenly having a renewed vogue and his entire backlist was about to be reprinted in their original, very lurid covers.

Grumps is one of those annoying people who need very little sleep, so that by the time I pop in to see him in the mornings, he usually has achieved quite a heap of handwritten manuscript. There are often lots of letters too, because he corresponds with equally nutty people all over the globe, and since his handwriting is appalling I take everything away and type it up on my computer.

When I was younger there was a time when I thought

Grumps was a complete charlatan. You can imagine what it was like growing up in a small town like Merchester, with a relative who both looked and proclaimed himself with every utterance to be totally, barking mad. For example, his eccentric clothing, the ghastly novels and his definitive book on the magical significance of ley lines. (Leys are straight lines that link landmarks and sites of historical and magical importance.) Add to all that the rumours of secret and risqué rites in remote woodland, and you will begin to see my point.

Yet as I grew older I came to realise that he believed completely in what and who he was and then it ceased to bother me any more: if he wasn't embarrassed by it, then neither was I.

Now I picked my way towards the desk through a sea of unfurled maps that covered the carpet, each crisscrossed with red and blue lines showing both established and possible new ley lines. The crackling noise as I inadvertently trod on one drew Grumps' attention to my presence.

'Ah, Chloe – I believe I have found the solution to my financial problems,' he announced in his plummy, public-school-educated voice, looking distinctly pleased with himself. He is distantly related to lots of terribly grand people, none of whom has spoken to him since he chose his bride from a fortune-telling booth at the end of a Lancashire pier, at a time when one simply didn't *do* that kind of thing.

'Oh, good,' I said encouragingly, putting his tea down on the one empty spot among the clutter on his desk.

'Yes, it came to me and I acted upon it, once the clouds of confusion sent by Another to conceal it from my knowledge were suddenly dispelled.'

Grumps has a private income, but he'd settled Mum's huge debts six years before, after her last, permanent, vanishing trick. Besides, his investments weren't paying out in the way they used to and even the recent four-book contract his agent had secured wouldn't be enough to cover the bills and still enable him to purchase rare books and artefacts in the manner he seemed to think was his birthright. Even now his desk was littered with auction catalogues sporting bright Post-it notes marking things that interested him.

'Great,' I said cautiously, because Grumps' good ideas, like his spells, have a marked tendency to backfire or fizzle to nothing. 'Did Zillah read the cards for you and spot something nice?'

'She did, and foresaw change.'

'She always does. You'd think we lived in a sort of psychic whirlpool.'

'Well, change there certainly *will* be, because I am selling the house and we are moving to Sticklepond.'

I'd started gathering up the loose sheets of paper inscribed in a sloping hand, which were the latest chapter of *Satan's Child*. Now I stopped and stared at him. 'We're moving? But how can that help?' Then the penny dropped. 'Oh, I *see*. You mean you and Zillah are downsizing to a small cottage? That's a good idea, because now that sales of Chocolate Wishes have taken off in a big way through the internet, I can easily afford to make a home for Jake on my own.'

'No, no,' he said impatiently, 'I am not downsizing – the opposite, in fact – and there will be room for us all. An estate agent recently approached me with an advantageous offer for this house from someone who has taken a fancy

to it, just at the very moment when I happened upon an advertisement for the Old Smithy in Sticklepond, which a friend had sent me, and which had somehow got mixed up among some other papers. It became apparent to me that this was a *sign*, and I therefore moved quickly.'

He pushed the grimoire aside and handed me a leaflet that had been underneath. It pictured a low, barn-like building, set longways onto the road, with a small ancient cottage at one side and a larger Victorian house at the other, like mismatched bookends.

'It's Miss Frinton's Doll Museum!' I said, recognising it instantly, because it's not only just up the road from Marked Pages, the second-hand bookshop run by my friend Felix, but almost opposite the pub where I meet up with him and Poppy two or three times a week.

'It *was*, though of course not for some time – it has lain empty. I knew it was for sale prior to this, of course, I just hadn't realised its significance.' He indicated the larger house with a bony finger adorned with a substantial and oddly designed silver ring. 'This is the main residence, where the Misses Frinton lived. There would be abundant room for my library and for Zillah to have her own sitting room, as she has here. The front room of the small cottage at the other end of the building was the doll's hospital – and I thought it would be ideal for your chocolate business, with enough room for you and Jake to live behind it, although it needs a little updating.'

'When estate agents say that, it usually means it's semi-derelict.' I wished there were photographs of the interior of the cottage as well as the house in the leaflet.

'Not derelict, just neglected. It used to be rented out, so there is a kitchen extension with a bathroom over it

and two bedrooms. It is larger than your current accommodation.’

‘It could hardly be smaller,’ I said, though of course without Mum we had more space, especially since I’d packed up all her belongings and stacked the boxes in Grumps’ attic on the first anniversary of her disappearance. But since *Chocolate Wishes* had taken off, I really needed a separate workshop.

‘The cottage also has a walled garden behind it,’ he added slyly, because he knew I longed for a garden of my own. Here we just had a gravelled courtyard and although I did grow lots of things in tubs and pots and in my tiny greenhouse, including herbs both for cooking and for Grumps’ rites, salad vegetables, strawberries and a small fig tree, there were limitations . . . especially for my cherished and constantly growing collection of scented geraniums, currently over-wintering on every available windowledge in the flat.

I was sold.

‘The cottage is linked to the main house via the Smithy Barn, the former doll museum, and my intention is to open a museum of my own there,’ Grumps explained, ‘one dedicated to the study of witchcraft and paganism. I will be able to display my collection and increase my income, thus killing two birds with one stone.’

‘Well, goodness knows, you have enough artefacts to stock *ten* museums, Grumps!’ I exclaimed. ‘But you surely wouldn’t run it yourself? I can’t see you selling tickets to a stream of visitors!’

‘I fail to see why not,’ he said testily. ‘I will open only in the afternoons, from two till four, and can have my desk in one corner and let visitors roam freely, while I

get on with my work. Zillah has said she will also take a hand.'

'But if you don't keep an eye on the visitors, half your collection will vanish!'

'Oh, I think not: I will put up placards pointing out that any thieves will be cursed. In fact, I might have it printed on the back of the tickets.'

'That should go down well,' I said drily.

'It will serve: they will ignore the warning at their peril. I shall have signed copies of my books for sale too, of course, both fiction and non-fiction.'

After my first surprise, the idea began to grow on me. 'Do you know, I think you might be right and it would be quite a money-spinner, because since that Shakespeare connection was discovered at Winter's End, hordes of tourists come to Sticklepond. At least one café and a couple of gift shops have opened in the village lately, and passing trade at Felix's bookshop is much better. There's a strong witchcraft history in the area too.'

'Precisely! And besides,' he added as a clincher, 'the Old Smithy is on the junction of two important ley lines; *that* was what was so cunningly obscured from my vision by the malevolence of Another. There may even be a third – I am working on it.'

'I expect the conjunction of the ley lines was a major selling point the estate agents managed to miss,' I said, ignoring the second mention of a mysterious and malevolent opponent, which was probably just a figment of his imagination.

He gave me a severe look over the top of his half-moon glasses. 'Its unique position imbues it with magical energy, my dear Chloe, and since the museum area is large,

my coven may meet there with no diminution of power. Rheumatism has affected one or two of them,' he added more prosaically, 'and they have suggested we move to an indoor venue.'

'Yes, I can see that the museum would be ideal, provided you put up good, thick curtains,' I agreed absently, still turning over the whole idea of the move in my mind. 'What about Jake, though? He has to be able to get to sixth form college and he isn't going to want to move away from his friends, is he?'

Though now I came to think of it, a fresh start in a new village might be a good idea for my horribly lively brother. He's outgrown his childish pranks, but will still forever be 'that imp of Satan' to those inhabitants of Merchester who've been his victims.

'Jake may borrow my car and drive himself to school until he has taken his final examinations, and then of course he will be off to university,' Grumps said. 'He likes the old Saab for some reason. In the holidays, he can help me in the museum and I will pay him.'

Grumps seemed to have it all thought out.

I looked down again at the leaflet. A cottage of my own with a garden, separated from my grandfather by the width of a museum, and with room for my Chocolate Wishes business, sounded like bliss . . .

'So, have you actually seen the property and made an offer for it, Grumps?'

'Yes, of course – and the people who want to buy this house have also been to view it, though you were out at the time. I thought I would wait until everything was signed and sealed before I told you.'

'I certainly didn't see this coming!'

‘If you *will* read Angel cards instead of the Tarot . . . Angel cards – pah!’

‘They seem to work for me, Grumps.’

‘Not, apparently, very well: Zillah saw the changes coming and she has already decided on her rooms in the new house.’

If Zillah knew and approved, then really, there was no more to be said: it looked like the Lyons were on the move.

A thought struck me. ‘When Mum finally decides to stop playing dead and comes back, how will she find us?’

‘Like a bad penny,’ he said bleakly.