

Merlin's Prophecy

*A child of two mighty clans
Endowed with dangerous power
Will unleash a deadly force
At the appointed hour.*

*Once fifty pairs of ancestors
Have seen the light o' the moon
Death shall swing his glinting scythe
And many meet their doom.*

*For the once-triumphant father's line
The fatal bell now tolls
From the bank to the dam of victory
The daughter's fire rolls.*

*Hunted by followers of the cross
Now fathers their sons offend
Brothers kill brothers in mortal strife
Their reign brought to an end.*

*Two ancient clans once ruled the world
Between them they conquered all
But only one clan will be left
When the final judgement falls.*

Chapter 1

“What am I doing here again?” I had to shout to get Megan to hear me over all the noise.

She rolled her eyes. “Come on, Caroline, chill out. It won’t hurt you to enjoy yourself a bit.”

“If you say so.” Only I wasn’t enjoying myself. Quite the opposite, actually. The blaring ‘90s music, the flashing lights, the stale air, the crowds of people... A group of lads standing next to us downed another shot of tequila, all perfectly in sync. One of them licked the salt from a girl’s cleavage – she was holding the slice of lemon between her teeth. The club smelt of cigarette smoke and perfume and sweat, all mixed together into a nauseating stench. It was all starting to get a bit much for me, but Megan would never understand that. She was a party girl through and through – the complete opposite of me.

“Yeah! I mean, when did you last go out?”

“I’m out nearly every weekend,” I protested.

“Shifts at the *Hound Dog* don’t count.”

I shrugged, but Megan was already otherwise engaged. She was staring at a boy making his way up to the bar. “Look – don’t you think he’s hot? We have a few classes together, and I keep seeing him at parties. I told you about him and his friend. Henry? Harry? Something like that.”

I sneaked a glance at him. It was true, he was quite hot. Dark skin, short brown hair and deep brown eyes. He caught us looking at him, smiled and came over.

“Hi – we know each other from college, don’t we?” he asked, looking at Megan. He too had to shout at the top of his voice. You couldn’t really have a proper conversation in this place – though presumably not many people came here to chat.

Megan gave a seductive smile and flicked her jet-black hair over her shoulder. “I’m Megan. And you’re... Henry, isn’t it?”

“Henri,” he corrected her, pronouncing the name the French way.

“Henri?” I asked with interest. “Are you French?”

He laughed. “My family’s from Haiti and Jamaica. And you? Brazilian?”

It wasn’t the first time I’d been asked that question. Megan, who was more the peaches-and-cream type, had always envied me my Brazilian looks – my golden-brown skin, chocolate-brown eyes and dark brown hair. But I still didn’t have an answer ready. I ignored the empty feeling inside me, and tried to smile. “Just plain old British. I’m Caroline – nice to meet you.”

“Caroline’s my flatmate,” Megan explained.

At that moment two girls came stumbling up to the bar, and one of them lost her balance. The beer sloshed out of her glass and went all over my shoes. The girl didn’t even seem to notice, just went on giggling.

“We managed to grab a table,” said Henri. “Do you want to come and sit with us? It’s a bit quieter over there.”

“Great,” said Megan, without asking me. To be fair there wasn’t really much I could have said without looking like a total killjoy. But the throbbing pain in my head was getting worse. I could tell I wasn’t going to be able to stick it out much longer. My heart had started beating way too fast, in time with the pounding bass.

“Drink?” Henri looked from Megan to me.

I shook my head and pointed to my glass of coke, which was still three-quarters full.

But Megan quickly downed what was left of her cocktail. “I’ll have another caipirinha.”

“Good choice.” Henri winked at her and, having finally managed to get the bartender’s attention, ordered the drinks.

Even at its busiest the *Hound Dog* was never as packed this club on a student night. Thank goodness, otherwise I would’ve had to look for a new job.

Once the bartender had finally finished making the caipirinha, the beer and the Cuba Libre, Megan and I followed Henri back to his table. I tried to avoid getting elbowed and kicked as we worked our way through the crowd, but in vain.

Megan turned to face me. “Henry has a really hot friend – I reckon he might be your type.” I rolled my eyes, and not only because Megan was still pronouncing Henri’s name the English way. I’d never met this friend, but after what Megan had told me about the parties I’d heard enough to know he wasn’t my type. “Do you mean that Ashley guy, or whatever his name was? No thanks.”

Despite the noise, I heard her heave a deep sigh. “You don’t have to *marry* him, you know. It might just do you good to have a bit of fun for once. And trust me, Ash is the perfect guy for that. There he is, up there.” She tilted her head towards the raised area at the back of the club where the tables were.

I followed her eyes and saw a blonde girl in a tight dress with red fingernails, flirting hard with the guy opposite her. She was standing facing him, leaning forwards. If her dress had been any lower-cut she would have fallen out of it – but at least this way we got a good view of him. He wasn’t bad looking. His jeans, white T-shirt and leather jacket accentuated his toned body. He was exactly the type of guy most girls fell for. Most girls.

His shaggy mop of dark blonde hair fell into his eyes, and he was tall and athletic. Now he was smiling at the blonde girl and speaking to her, with a bold glance at her cleavage. He stood up, put an arm round her, then looked over at us. His eyes locked onto me, and he stared at me for so long that I started to feel uncomfortable. Then he spoke to the blonde girl, without taking his eyes off me. She looked disappointed, and came stalking past us on her high heels. The guy kept looking at me as we approached the table, but I was determined not to be the first to look away. Now I could see the dimple in his chin, and his outrageously blue eyes – as blue as a lake in winter. I'd hardly ever seen such a vivid colour.

Henri slid his friend's Cuba Libre across the table. "Ladies, this is my mate Ash. Ash, you remember Megan? And this is her friend Caroline. Take a seat."

Megan nabbed the chair next to Henri. The two of them were already flirting like crazy before I'd even sat down next to Ash. I let out a sigh and rubbed my temples. I had the beginnings of a full-on migraine, and there was nothing I could do now to stop it.

"Not having a great night so far, then?"

I rolled my eyes. "And let me guess: you're about to change all that?"

He leaned across the table. "Probably not. I'm the kind of guy who breaks your heart the morning after."

At least he was honest. I didn't like players, but I grinned nevertheless. For a while all we could hear was Megan and Henri's flirting, and of course the deafeningly loud music. Whigfield's *Saturday Night* faded into *I Like To Move It*, and the crowd went wild. And now a light show had started up in time with the music. Smoke billowed through the low-ceilinged room, making the air even harder to breathe than before. Colourful spotlight beams played over the crowd.

Ash grimaced. "This is basically torture. This music was already shit in the nineties."

"True. Though I think the light show is worse."

Ash grinned. "Yeah, and all this noise is just *horrendous*."

I rolled my eyes again. Then we both reached for our drinks at almost exactly the same time. We accidentally reached for the same glass, though he was drinking rum and coke and I just had plain coke. Our fingers touched. And an electric shock ran through me: sparks flew into the air, blue and purple. What was going on? Now I was seeing sparks that weren't even there – or were they part of the light show? I snatched my hand back. It felt weird. For a moment Ash had looked as surprised as me – now he was looking at me intently. At last he slid my glass across the table to me and reached for his own. I took a big sip. Ash kept glancing at me, looking

pensive. What was he thinking, I wondered? Though to be honest, I didn't really care. I rubbed my temples. What was happening? It wasn't unusual for me to get headaches – which was why I normally avoided parties like this – but this one was even worse than usual. For a second or two the throbbing behind my eyes was so intense that I felt sick. It must be these stupid lights (which were completely unnecessary anyway. The students were so pissed they would've been losing their shit regardless, light show or no light show).

Henri stood up and took Megan's hand. I wrinkled my brow, and a stabbing pain shot through me like lightning. Note to self: frowning was a bad idea. Where was Megan going? I'd only come to this party because of her. But she just gave me a little wave before disappearing into the crowd with Henri.

Ash nodded towards the dancefloor. "What do you reckon – shall we have a dance?"

I ignored the pain in my head. "Let's just cut to the chase, shall we? You don't really want to dance, and I don't want to sleep with you."

Ash laughed softly. He leaned closer to me and looked into my eyes, far too deep for my liking. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Hey, have you got something in your eye – it's just you keep blinking all the time?"

He sat back abruptly, then stared thoughtfully at me for a few moments with his arms folded. I sipped my coke and pretended not to notice.

"Why did you come, if you didn't want to?" Ash asked eventually.

"I've been asking myself the same question," I sighed. "Megan talked me into it. You know – you'll enjoy it once you get there and all that."

He raised his eyebrows. "Seems to be working out well for you."

"I'm just not the clubbing type," I replied with a shrug. The light show had finally finished, and but now there was strobe lighting instead. My headache was almost unbearable. "Do you know where Megan is?"

We both scanned the crowd for Megan and Henri. At last I spotted them, kissing energetically. Oh, brilliant. This was all I needed. I closed my eyes, but I still couldn't block out the strobe lights. Slowly I got to my feet.

"I wouldn't disturb them if I were you," said Ash in an amused voice.

"I'll be back in a minute," I muttered. I staggered, and banged my hip against the table. Oh, great – now Ash was definitely going to think I was pissed. Well, what the hell. Let him think what he wanted.

"You're a bit pale. Are you okay?" he asked, his tone serious now.

"I'm fine," I replied, and started battling my way through the crowd towards the

toilets. Of course that was the moment the DJ decided to put on *Cotton Eye Joe*. A few bright sparks had somehow managed to link arms in spite of the crush, and were skipping around the floor. A couple of them crashed into me, laughing. It was all I could do to stay upright.

As if in a trance, I headed for the toilets. The queue for the ladies was horrifyingly long, but I must have looked so ill that the other girls let me push in front of them without a word of protest. I entered the white-tiled bathroom. The air in here was almost worse than on the dancefloor. That typical toilet smell mingled with the scent of super-sweet perfume. A group of giggling girls was standing by the sinks, painting their lips various shades of pink.

I felt so sick I was afraid I might throw up there and then. Luckily, at that moment someone came out of a cubicle. I stumbled inside, closed the door behind me with the last of my strength, and vomited into the less-than-clean toilet bowl.

Breathing heavily, I leaned back against the door and wiped the sweat off my forehead with the back of my hand. I didn't understand it. My migraines were never normally this bad.

One of the girls wrinkled her nose in disgust when I came staggering out of the cubicle a minute later and splashed my face with cold water.

"Maybe try not getting so pissed next time," she said. It was the blonde girl who'd been flirting with Ash just now.

"Do you know her, Amber?" asked a girl with brown hair.

Amber pulled a face. "No, thank goodness." Then she left the room with her friend, shaking her head as she went.

I blocked out everything around me and stared into the grimy mirror above the sink. Despite my dark complexion I looked extremely pale, like a zombie or something. I didn't care, though. I still felt terrible. I had to get home and take my migraine pills. However, my legs almost gave way beneath me when I tried to make for the door. I didn't like to admit it, but I needed help. How was I going to get back to Megan? Then, all of a sudden, I heard a pleasantly deep voice.

"It's okay, ladies, I just need to check on my friend quickly. Ignore me."

Ash! I didn't want him to see me like this, but it was too late – he was already walking towards me and placing a hand on my lower back. Our eyes met in the mirror.

"What's the matter, Caroline? You look really ill." His flirty tone of a few minutes before was completely gone – now his voice sounded grave and concerned.

"Migraine," I moaned through gritted teeth. "Can you get Megan?"

But Ash had already placed my arm across his shoulders. “It’ll take too long to find her. She and Henri have gone off to find a quiet corner somewhere. I’ll take you home.”

“But...”

“No buts. Come on.”

He steered me gently out of the toilets. Some of the girls cast sceptical glances at me, as if wondering what a guy like Ash was doing with a girl like me. I would have liked to say something to them, but I didn’t have the strength.

In the entrance hallway of the club, Ash deposited me on an uncomfortable wooden bench. “Did you have a coat? Is the cloakroom ticket in here?” He held up his arm, with my black bag swinging from it.

“I didn’t bring a coat.”

Ash thought for a moment. “Wait here a second.”

I nodded, and focused on my breathing. During a migraine attack I usually started to feel at least slightly better once I’d thrown up, but that didn’t seem to be the case today. I still felt nauseous, and my head felt like it was about to explode.

A few minutes later Ash was back. Without a word he handed me a glass of water. I sipped it gratefully as he helped me on with his coat. It smelt of leather and of him – luckily he wasn’t wearing any cologne, just a hint of aftershave. He positioned my arm around his shoulders again, and this time I didn’t protest. Then he led me outside into the crisp night air. It did me good to cool down, and the thudding beat of the music finally grew quieter.

We left the club behind us, but a few yards further on there were some smokers standing around. The tobacco smoke filled my nostrils and the nausea returned. Just in time, I lurched towards a bush a few feet away and threw up again. Someone – it must have been Ash – held my hair out of my face. Then he handed me a tissue. If I hadn’t been feeling so awful I would have been dying of embarrassment. I hadn’t felt this helpless in a long time. “Sorry,” I murmured.

“Hadn’t I better take you to hospital?” he asked.

I shook my head weakly. When I had a migraine, nothing and no-one could help me – I was at the mercy of the pain. I’d tried everything: different types of tea, peppermint oil, massages. Nothing stopped it, not even headache tablets or special migraine pills. They just made it a bit more bearable. Once the migraine was in full swing, all I could do was shut myself up in a darkened room and wait for it to be over. I hated it. At those moments I couldn’t think or feel anything – apart from the pain in my head.

Ash sighed. “Okay. Where do you live? Shall I call us a taxi?”

"Arlington Road," I replied feebly.

My road wasn't far from Camden High Street, where we were now. So Ash said, "Can you walk? Shall I carry you?"

I gulped back another wave of nausea. "No way," I grunted. Even if it meant crawling home on my belly, I was not going to let Ash carry me. I didn't really even want him near me. "Go back to that girl you were chatting up. I can manage."

He sniffed and placed my arm around his shoulders again without comment. Then he helped me through the dark streets of London, which were still full of students and other revellers even though it was long past midnight. It was really only a few minutes' walk to mine and Megan's flat, but it felt like an eternity.

"House number?" Ash enquired.

I pointed to a house a few steps further on, its bottom half painted white and its top half of bare light brown brick. With my last ounce of strength I grabbed the wrought-iron railing and heaved myself up the four steps to the purple front door. Ash had already opened my bag, but I took it off him and rummaged around for my keys. It was dark – the closest street lamps were a few feet away – so I couldn't find the keyhole at first. Nausea welled up in me again, and I had to hold onto the door frame. Gently but firmly Ash took the key out of my hand and unlocked the door. The bright light in the hallway came on automatically, and I winced. Ash helped me up the steep stairs and unlocked the door of our first-floor flat. He guided me carefully inside, leaving the light off. That was nice of him. In the darkness I felt my way along the corridor to the door of my bedroom.

"Thanks," I said to Ash, but I wasn't getting rid of him that easily.

He helped me over to the bed and, despite my protests, slipped off my trainers and the leather jacket and covered me up with the duvet. Then he disappeared, and I waited to hear the door of the flat bang shut, but instead I heard him shuffling about in the corridor and then in the kitchen. A minute later he came back into the room. He put a glass of water on my bedside table and closed the midnight-blue curtains at the window, blocking out the light of the moon and the street lamps. Now it was almost pitch black in my room.

"Will you be okay on your own?" he asked.

My eyes hadn't adjusted to the darkness yet, so I couldn't even see his silhouette, but he must have been standing close to my bed. "I'm always okay on my own," I replied, but then I added a quiet little "Thank you."

He hesitated for a moment, I could feel it. "You still owe me a dance. Take care, Caroline."

I heard his footsteps walking away, my bedroom door closing softly, and finally the front door clicking shut. With a sigh I groped for my tablets, which I always kept on my bedside table, swallowed one and sank weakly into the pillow. The bedlinen smelt overpoweringly of lavender. Megan had used the fabric softener again, despite me telling her time and time again that I couldn't stand the smell.

I closed my eyes, everything around me started to spin, and the blood pounded in my head. And at last, after what felt like hours, I slowly drifted off to sleep.

* * *

"Ah, there you are," a man said. "Did you see anything?"

He was sitting in a big armchair in a sort of parlour with a red carpeted floor, paintings on the walls and an open fireplace. From the high ceiling hung an unlit chandelier. The man was wearing a wine-red cloak with the hood pulled down so far over his face that not even his eyes were visible. Judging by his voice, however, he must be quite old – though it sounded faint, as if heard through a thick fog.

Someone sat down opposite him on the sofa. This new person was only visible from behind. He was wearing not a cloak but a white T-shirt, so you could clearly see his athletic figure and dark blonde hair. He seemed to be a young man. Now he shook his head.

"Nothing out of the ordinary, anyway. One of the Lecourt clan was at the party."

"Perhaps the signature we saw is his." This was a third man speaking, although he was nowhere to be seen. He must be standing by the fireplace.

"It's possible," replied the older man. "But I think it's unlikely. Or else why has our system never sounded the alarm before? We must keep our eyes peeled, in any event."

* * *

I sat bolt upright. It must be the middle of the night. The dream was gradually fading away, but it had been clearer this time than ever before. Especially that familiar male voice...

I heard the flat door close, and someone giggling softly. That must be what had woken me. Megan was home – and clearly not alone, because she was whispering to someone. Henri?

But before I could properly grasp the thought, I was fast asleep again.