

Prologue

In the 1780s, Arthur Poole sailed across the Atlantic, a young man with great ambition. His journey took him to the rocky, sea-lashed coast of Maine, and this new world he embraced as his own.

He worked and he learned and he thrived.

This young man of ambition and vision built ships, and built the beginnings of a business. To enrich and expand that business, he, shrewdly, married for money and position.

In time, like flowers in a fallow field, love bloomed there.

With an eye toward the generations to come, he built his business to last. And above that rolling, thrashing sea, he built a grand house, and one to last, with stone and cladded walls, and turrets rising, with massive entrance doors of the finest mahogany.

With his love of the sea, he added a widow's walk, and often stood there himself, watching his ships sail the fickle Atlantic waters.

His children drew their first breaths inside those walls, and played in the gardens, raced the wide halls, wandered the nearby woods, learned to ride, learned to sail.

Arthur Poole considered himself a successful man, not only a successful businessman, a man who'd risen from poverty to riches who lived on the cliffs above a village that bore his name. But a successful husband and father. A family man.

The family man held great pride in his children, and in the firstborn of his twin sons, who'd courted and won the heart of a lovely (and wealthy) woman.

Collin Poole would marry Astrid Grandville not for advancement, nor money, nor social position, but for love.

On the last day of his life, Arthur Poole rode into his woods in the brisk fall air with his mind, as it often was, on the future. Wedding plans—the most beautiful and elegant wedding Poole's Bay had ever seen—entertained him. He thought of expanding the manor, making more room for the grandchildren to come.

But he would not attend his son's wedding. He would never see his grandchildren. On that brisk fall day, he fell victim to the dark magic of a mad witch who coveted what he had.

Not the family, not the business, not even his wealth. The manor.

Hester Dobbs would stop at nothing, certainly not murder, to become the mistress of Poole Manor.

And all who knew and loved Arthur Poole grieved what they believed to be a tragic accident, a fall from his horse.

When his death failed to give Hester Dobbs her desire, she murdered Astrid Grandville Poole on her wedding day.

And with that vicious slaying, with Poole blood on her hands, on her tongue, with Astrid's wedding ring now on her own finger, she laid a curse on the manor, on the future.

A bride in each generation of Pooles would die in the manor, and by her hand.

While she escaped the hangman's rope, she in her madness returned to the manor. On a night when the clock struck three, and the moon sailed full over the water, she sealed her curse with her own blood.

And leapt from the seawall to the unforgiving water below.

For more than two centuries, the manor stood, stone, wood, glass, watching the great sea. Inside its walls, it witnessed generations of first breaths and last breaths. As Arthur Poole had imagined, the manor grew and held his grandchildren, and their children, and theirs for generations.

And each generation knew tragedy. One bride lost to the twisted lusts of Hester Dobbs.

Until there were seven lost brides, and seven rings on the hands of the witch who killed them.

So within those walls, their spirits remained, as did Dobbs, as did others who either chose to stay or had yet to find their way beyond those walls.

There they walked, and they worked, and they watched.

And they waited for the one who could break the curse.

She came, a woman of Poole blood who'd known nothing of that family connection. She'd known nothing of her father's brother, his twin, or the heartless scheme to separate them after their mother fell victim to Dobbs's curse following their birth.

Nor did she know anything of ghosts or curses or the part she had to play.

But she learned.

She came to the manor alone—though she wouldn't remain alone—to learn of this newly discovered part of her family, to learn their history, to uncover how and why her father had been taken away from his brother.

How was it, though he'd never been to the manor before his own tragic death, that he, an artist, sketched it? How, though he'd never known of his twin, had he drawn a mirror framed with predators where he and a boy who looked like him stood on either side of the glass?

And as she learned, she walked and worked.

When the mirror called to her, she stepped through the glass. She witnessed the death of seven brides, and grieved for them. She witnessed the theft of seven wedding rings, and swore to retrieve them.

With what she'd once believed impossible now her reality, Sonya MacTavish understood the rings were the key to breaking the curse and forever banishing Hester Dobbs from the manor.

For all those who'd come before her, for the house she'd made her home, for those seven lost brides, she vowed to stay and hunt and fight.

Even as death woke all around her.

Chapter One

The dead filled the manor, but not as the spirits Sonya had grown used to, even fond of. They filled it now with blood and broken bodies, with agony and despair.

She felt their pain and their fear as her own as she looked down at Astrid Poole and the spreading red stain on her white dress. As she looked up at the first Collin Poole's body swaying above his bride from the noose he'd fashioned through his grief.

And beside the first bride, the last, as Johanna Poole's broken and bloodied body lay at the base of the stairs. And beside her, his hand over hers, the last Collin Poole, the husband who'd outlived her by decades before falling to his death down that same grand staircase.

Though he'd lived longer, grown older, Sonya saw her father in that face. Now grief, instant and fresh, joined the pain and fear.

Needing the life, the warmth, she gripped Trey's hand. "It's Collin. It's my father's twin."

"Yeah, just the way I found him."

To Oliver Doyle III—lawyer and lover—Collin Poole had been family. Remembering that, Sonya put her arms around him.

"I'm sorry. So sorry." Then she squeezed her eyes tight. "God, God, can you hear them? Can you hear all of them?"

"I hear them. Owen." He turned to his friend and Sonya's Poole cousin.

"Hard to hear anything else, unless you add in the dogs howling."

"Put me down." Cleo gave Owen's chest a nudge so he set her on her feet. "I dropped a glass. None of us are wearing shoes, so watch where you step."

She moved to Sonya, took her closest friend's hand and found it as icy as her own.

"I'll clean it up."

At Owen's words, Cleo shot him a fierce look. "Don't you go anywhere. Don't you dare."

"We have to stop it." Unable to help herself, Sonya pressed her hands over her ears.

"She's torturing them. We have to stop it."

"Fear feeds her," Cleo reminded the rest. "I'm really trying not to give her a goddamn crumb, but . . ." She trailed off, looked up the staircase. "Oh Jesus."

Johanna stood, as did the shadowy figure with her. Even with the din, they heard the snap as her head jerked. Her lifeless body tumbled down the stairs as it had on her wedding day.

"She's killing them again. All of them. Everyone's dying again. We have to stop it," Sonya said. "Fuck fear." And her anger burned out fear as she swiped tears from her face. "She's making them feel it again, tormenting them to scare us."

Even as she spoke, the first Collin Poole, the noose around his neck, leaped off the stairs. The rope snapped, and so did his neck.

"Brutal," Owen muttered. "I'm in for a round of fuck fear."

"A circle, join hands," Cleo ordered.

"Why?"

"Look, Owen, I'm an amateur, but unity counts. What did you do when Pye ran off and up to the Gold Room door when that bitch was having another one of her fits?"

"Went after the cat."

"You sang. So, hell, sing. Everybody, sing."

"You want us to sing?"

She shrugged at Trey. "It's better than standing here just watching and hearing all this. Clover uses music to communicate with us, so what the hell."

"What are we singing?" Owen wanted to know, and took a firm hold on her hand and on Sonya's as Astrid Poole, a hand pressed to the bleeding wound, staggered down the steps.

"I can't think of every damn thing."

"Are we pissed?" Trey demanded, and let that fury ride as the man he'd loved like a second father tumbled down the steps.

"Damn right." Tears might've fallen, but Sonya repeated, "Damn right we're pissed."

"Then try this." He lifted his voice over the cries, the weeping, the howling. "Keep you in the dark, you know they all pretend."

His voice, which had once led a high school garage band, rang true as Owen's joined it.

Digging for lyrics, Sonya came in on the verse with Cleo. "Send in your skeletons."

It sure as hell fit the moment, she thought as they sang words of defiance and challenge. Words with no fear.

Lights flickered on and off; doors slammed. But slowly, gradually, the sounds of torment lessened.

When they reached the bridge, and she sang about being the hand that would "*take you down*," she meant it.

By the time they finished, the house had gone quiet. No one lay at the base of the stairs; no one swayed from a rope above them.

"Foo Fighters." Owen gave Trey a fist bump. "Inspired choice."

"I figured 'The Pretender' was a solid choice because that's all Dobbs is. A pretender trying to be mistress of the manor." He brought Sonya's hand to his lips. "You okay, cutie?"

"I will be." Since Yoda pawed at her legs, she bent down to pet him. "You had a time of it, didn't you? All you guys had a hell of a time."

"So did my girl," Cleo said as the black cat wound between her legs, then Owen's. "They all might want a little fresh air. I could use it myself."

"Just leave the door open," Sonya suggested, "let the air in. I'll clean up the glass."

"I've got it," Trey told her. "Stick with Cleo."

"As Sonya herded Yoda, Trey's Mookie, Owen's Jones outside with Cleo and the cat, Trey walked back to the kitchen for a broom. When he returned, Owen stood looking down where they'd seen Collin.

"You saw him fall."

Owen nodded. "Yeah. I had this sick feeling maybe he'd just taken the leap, tired of living without Johanna. Or worse, that Dobbs did it to him."

"He tripped. I had the same sick feeling, but he tripped. He was half-asleep it looked like, not real steady."

"He'd had that cold deal for a few days."

"Yeah, so not real steady. But something startled him. I think he saw—"

"Johanna," Owen finished. "At the bottom of the stairs. Whether he really saw her, or imagined it, remembered finding her that way, it unbalanced him just enough."

"I don't think it was Dobbs. He just lost his footing, and he went down."

"He had his hand over hers. When we saw him just now. I don't think he did it on purpose, but I think he was okay with it. Dobbs made a mistake showing us that, because I feel better about it. Believing he just lost his footing, but he was okay with it."

"We're going to beat her, Owen."

"Oh, fucking-A right we are." Now he grinned. "I've got plenty of songs in me."

Clover, the sixth bride and Sonya's grandmother, chimed in with Rihanna's "Don't Stop the Music."

"You got it, babe. And on that note, I want breakfast. I've got to get up in an hour anyway." Owen glanced toward the open door. "What are the odds of talking Cleo into making some predawn omelets?"

"You tell me. You're the one sleeping with her."

"I give it fifty-fifty, and I bump that up if I have coffee waiting."

Trey carried the broom and the dustpan of broken glass back to the kitchen. "Make the coffee," he advised. "Everyone needs time to settle. This was different from knowing we've got a house full of ghosts. It was seeing them die, hearing it, feeling it."

"Dobbs is quiet now. It had to cost her a lot of energy to pull that off."

"She wanted to hurt them. Everyone in this house, alive or dead, wants her out. The only way we know of is to find the rings. Take them back. Break the curse, get her gone."

"And Sonya's seen all seven brides now. How they died."

"Exactly. It's going to get worse from here, Owen." He sat at the kitchen island, shoved a hand through his tousled black hair. "We can't be here twenty-four seven. But they both live here, work here."

With the coffee going, Owen got out eggs, cheese, bacon. If he couldn't talk Cleo into making breakfast, he'd toss some together.

"I get the worry. I've got it, too. But truth?" He looked at his lifelong friend across the counter. "I don't know any two women—hell, people—who can handle it better than they can."

"When the mirror shows up, it doesn't give her a choice. Sonya has to go through."

"And you can't go with her." Owen, Poole-green eyes steady, handed Trey a mug of coffee. "I can, if I'm here. But you and Cleo, you have to wait on this side. That's a tough swallow for a guy whose nature, and skill set, has him helping people and fixing things."

"It's goddamn hard to take it on faith you'll come back through again."

"Here's the thing." Owen got his own coffee. "Considering it's framed in predators, it looks like it could eat you alive, but you gotta figure it's on our side, or why show Sonya what she needs to know to get that bitch out of here?"

"I tell myself that. Like I tell myself, from what we know or believe, Collin and Sonya's father used it to communicate with each other. Maybe they never knew exactly how or why."

"Sonya's dad probably never did, but Collin had to figure it out after your dad did the genealogy. Once he knew he'd had a twin taken away, given up for adoption, he had to figure it out."

"And by the time he did, and decided to contact Andrew MacTavish, MacTavish was dead."

"So here we are," Owen added. "Collin leaves the manor to his brother's only child. You fall for her. She gets her pal to move in with her, and I fall for her. There's a kind of symmetry going. I don't know what the hell it means, but, man, it's going."

He heard the sound of dogs racing through the house.

"Let's see if she's fallen enough for me to make those omelets."

Until she'd followed Sonya in the move from Boston to Maine, the only times Cleopatra Fabares recalled seeing the sun rise was after an all-nighter—work or play.

As for cooking breakfast—or anything else—that fell into the pretty-much-never area of her life.

But that was then, this was now.

She'd taken up Sonya's offer of moving in, of making Collin Poole's turret art studio her own without a second thought. But with the caveat she would also be in charge of the food shopping and cooking.

That posed a long, wide learning curve for the Louisiana-born artist and illustrator, but—surprise—she learned. And more, she enjoyed it.

And since the three a.m. wake-up call, and all that followed, stirred up her appetite, Owen didn't have to work hard to persuade her to make omelets.

She bundled up her mass of burnt honey curls, sent Owen out to the herb garden for parsley and tarragon. And got to work.

It gave her something to do—and more, gave Sonya more time to smooth out.

Her friend still held a lot of anger, and Cleo was all for the mad. But Sonya also looked a bit pale yet, and her deep green eyes showed a fatigue that came from more, far more, than interrupted sleep.

She carried the load, and while the rest of them could help, did help, they couldn't take it from her.

This helped, Cleo thought. Not just food, but the company, the routine. Trey and Sonya feeding the pets, Owen getting out plates and flatware.

Just the movement, the life—and the unity—helped.

When the oven timer dinged, Sonya walked over to take out the bacon. Trey put bread in the toaster—and watched Sonya.

Afraid she'll break, Cleo thought as she slid the third of four omelets onto a platter and put it in the warmer.

But she won't.

Any more than he or Owen would after witnessing a man they'd loved and respected die.

None of them would break.

When the last pat of butter she melted in the skillet began to foam, she poured in the egg-cheese-and-herb mixture.

"I think I'm going to paint out back today, do a study of the garden. The wisteria on the pergola."

"You don't need to stay near the house for me, Cleo."

"I can if I want, but what I want is out back. Unless you want to blow off the day and go sail the bay in my beautiful little boat."

"I've got a couple of jobs to juggle in with the Ryder Sports account. No day off for me."

"Next weekend."

Sonya smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Next weekend sounds good."

With the last omelet on the platter along with bacon and toast, they sat together at the table while all four pets caught a predawn nap.

"These look amazing, Cleo."

"You'll convince me of that, Son, if you eat some."

"I will. And I'm sorry I'm being such a drag on everything."

"You're not," Trey objected, and deliberately lifted an omelet from the platter onto her plate.

"I feel like one. I . . . I've seen pictures, and he—Collin—was older when he died than my dad, but still, somehow, I wasn't prepared for how much they looked alike. It had to be worse for you and Owen, but I can't seem to shake that part yet. And we haven't heard anything from Clover since right after it stopped. She always has so much to say, and I'm worried she's—"

As she spoke, the tablet on the kitchen counter rang out with Elton John's "I'm Still Standing."

When tears sprang to Sonya's eyes, Trey reached for her.

"No, no, it's relief. It's exactly what I needed to hear. So are we, Clover." Now she forked off a bite of omelet, sampled it. And when she smiled, meant it. "And this is as amazing as it looks."

They ate while three dogs and a cat slept, while music played on the tablet. By tacit agreement, they didn't talk about what had happened, not yet. The time would come, but for now they let that rest, too.

"You've got a knack, Lafayette." Owen polished off the last of his omelet.

"I believe I do."

"You can give your knack a break tonight. How about I pick up something from the village?" Trey asked.

"Wouldn't hurt my feelings a bit," Cleo told him. "More time to paint, once I decide between a moody watercolor or a dramatic oil."

"How do you decide?" Owen wondered.

"Whim." She slanted him a look out of her amber eyes. "I do enjoy living on a whim."

"I'm glad you're taking the summer to paint for yourself." Sonya leaned back with her coffee. "And you're going to have a big bang of a show at Bay Arts this fall."

"We'll see about that, but it makes me happy. When fall comes, I'll be ready to go back to earning my living and illustrating. Oh, I forgot to tell you, I got the sweetest note from Burt Springer after I sent a copy of his granddaughter's favorite kids' book signed by me and the author."

"He's a sweet man. I really like working with him again. I don't live or work on a whim, but freelancing is taking me to many new places. A year ago, I couldn't have imagined running my own graphic design company."

"And kicking ass at it."

She grinned at Trey. "Yes, I am. I couldn't have imagined it, or imagined living in a big, gorgeous, haunted Victorian on the coast of Maine. Having a favorite cousin," she added with a lift of her coffee mug to Owen. "Or being with you, a third-generation lawyer who'll pick up dinner and tell me I kick ass."

Sonya shook back her hair and sighed. "Nothing Dobbs can do changes any of that. And she's not going to stop us. Cleo's said it before, and it's true. We bring the light and the life to the manor. We're going to keep right on doing that."

"Middle of the year's not too soon to start planning a big, bust-out holiday party at the manor."

Sonya pointed at Cleo. "No, it is not."

"Man, they're going to have us hauling around furniture again." Owen rose. "I'm going to take off, but I'll deal with the dishes first. Molly probably had a rough night, too."

Cleo rose with him, then took his face with its night's worth of stubble in her hands. Kissed him enthusiastically.

"You're more a savory sort of man, Owen, but you got just enough sweetness in there. The sun may be up, but me? I'm going back to bed."

"After a full breakfast and, what was it? Two cups of coffee?"

"Nothing stops Cleo from sleeping when she's ready to sleep," Sonya told Owen.

"Unlike my friend here, who, though it's still shy of six in the morning, will go to work."

"Things to do, people to please."

From the tablet came Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash's "Time's a Wastin'."

"That one ain't about work." On impulse, Owen grabbed Cleo, dipped her, and kissed her, also enthusiastically.

"Well, if that's what you've got in mind."

"I've always got that in mind, but Jones and I also have things to do and people to please."

"Add me to that list." Trey got up. "I'll give Owen a hand before Mookie and I take off. I'll grab a shower and change at my place. I'll be back with dinner. Any requests?"

"Surprise us," Sonya told him.

"Done."

Now she cupped his face, looked into those deep blue eyes. "I could've gotten through it without you, because that's what I need to do. But I'm really glad I didn't have to."

She wrapped her arms around him and held on a moment. "Really glad." She pressed her lips to his. "I'm going to go up, pull myself together, and get to work."

"You'll call if you need me."

"I will."

"I'm going to let Yoda and Pye out for a few minutes before I go back to bed. We'll all be up soon."

Of course all four pets raced out when Cleo opened the door. She stood there a moment. "Looks like a lovely day to paint *en plein air*. She'll be fine," she added, still looking out at the lawn, the garden, the woods beyond. "She's committed to this, and when Sonya's committed, it takes a hell of a lot to shake her off."

She turned back. "It's why she stuck with Brandon even with all her doubts about marrying him. Finding him rolling around naked with her cousin in her own bed?" Cleo snapped her fingers. "Done. She might have forgiven him if he'd been contrite, but she'd never have gone back to him."

"I'm only using that asshole as an illustration so maybe you'll worry a little less. She not only won't give up, but when you push Sonya into a corner? She'll come out swinging. Last night? A mistake."

Cleo pointed up to indicate the Gold Room and Hester Dobbs. "Her very big mistake." "Why is that, especially?" Owen paused as he loaded the dishwasher.

"What she did before, to the seven brides? She has to pay for that. She needs to be stopped. But that happened before. Even though Sonya went through the mirror and saw it all happen, it already happened. Last night? Last night Dobbs hurt those we've all come to care about. That was immediate, that was now."

"She just needed to shake off the sad and find the mad again."

Cleo smiled at Trey. "You know her. I'm just saying this as someone who's known and loved her longer, she won't break. And she won't stop."

"There are times that's just what worries me."

"She needs this house and everything in it—with one exception—as much as this house and everything in it need her. We have the light on our side, and I have to trust that."

"Just do me a favor? Stick close today."

"I can do that. Now, y'all let Yoda and Pye back in before you get on, will you? I'm going to go get the rest of my beauty sleep."

As she walked out, Cleo trailed a finger over Owen's cheek.

Watching her go, Owen shook his head. "That woman's got me, inside and out and back again. And she's right, Trey. Everything she said was right."

"I know it. I'll deal with it. You, too."

"Yeah, me, too. Text me when you're ready to get the food. I'll meet you."

When Sonya came out of a long, hot shower, she found Yoda in the bedroom. A pair of cropped leggings and a roomy T-shirt lay on the neatly made bed.

Gripping the towel around her, Sonya breathed back tears.

"Thanks, Molly. Those are just right for today."

The young Irish housekeeper from so long ago continued to serve. More out of love than duty, Sonya not only felt but truly believed.

As Jack, the boy who'd died in the manor before his tenth birthday, came out to play with Yoda when no one was watching. And Jerome tended to yard work, Eleanor to the plants in the solarium.

Their spirits, and others she couldn't name, continued here, as much a part of Lost Bride Manor as the wood and the glass.

She had a duty to them, and to the seven brides. To Astrid, Catherine, Marianne, Agatha, Lisbeth, Clover, Johanna. For them, even more than for herself and Cleo, she would damn well hold the manor.

It would stay Poole Manor, as it had always been.

For them, she thought as she dressed, she'd stay, she'd work, she'd fight, and she would, somehow, take back the seven stolen rings and break the curse.

If it meant waking at three a.m.—the hour when Hester Dobbs had hurled herself from the cliff wall to seal the curse—then she'd wake at three a.m. If it meant walking through the mirror again and again to witness some horror, then she'd walk through the glass.

And somehow, she'd find a way to take those rings off the fingers of a dead witch.