

*Beyond the moongate
lie the ghosts of her past...*

Garden Of The Moon

Elizabeth Sinclair

Bestselling Author of the Hawks Mountain Series

Prologue

St. Claire's Bayou, Louisiana, 1855

A veil of low-lying, white mist hung over the murky, black waters of St Claire's Bayou. The stink of decaying leaves, trees and the decomposing bodies of dead animals permeated the humid air. A full moon, milky-yellow and so big Sara Wade believed she could touch it, hung like a giant child's ball in the star-studded, black sky. Since she'd been instructed not to bring a lantern because she might be detected, she'd been very relieved when the full moon appeared in the night sky to light her way.

Her grandmother had called the thirteenth moon of a calendar year a *seer's moon*. Gran said that its appearance marked the time of year when the gates between the mortal world and the spirit world opened. Sara would test Gran's theory later. At the moment, she was just grateful that the moon's light served to guide her steps through the swamp.

The moonlight cast an ominous luminescence over the bayou. The unusually bright light sharply defined the eerie shadows of the moss-draped water oaks, turning them to ghostly specters that, when the breeze blew, seemed to sway and hover silently above her. Here and there, Sara could make out cypress knees poking through the misty veil that lay low over the black water, as though they were not tree roots, but were instead arms and legs striving for release from the dark waterways flooding this primeval forest.

As she made her way through the thick growth, the low-hanging Spanish moss, damp with the moisture of a late afternoon rain, slithered over Sara's cheek. She shivered and hugged her shawl closer around her body, but stayed on the path she'd been instructed to follow.

The soggy ground squished beneath her feet. Cold water seeped into her flimsy shoes. Her new, pink satin slippers would be ruined by the time she returned home, and her mother would be furious, but Sara didn't care. She'd made a promise, and using the concealment of the swamp was necessary for it to be fulfilled. Besides, her mother's disapproval over her ruined slippers would be nothing in comparison to the rage she'd rain down on Sara if she knew *why* she'd come into the bayou.

The disembodied animal sounds all around her drew her attention back to her surroundings. The slither of something long and slippery through the mud. The crackle of twigs beneath the weight of an unseen creature of the night. The chirp of tree frogs echoing through the darkness. The low growl of a stalking, hungry beast. The plaintive howl of an animal pierced the bayou night and then moments later was answered by another eerie howl from somewhere in the distant darkness.

Holding up the hem of her gown so as not to trip over it, she pushed her unease from her mind and stepped carefully from one bog to another, balancing herself with her outstretched arm. Something slipped through the swamp beside her. She peered down into water as dark as her father's Creole coffee. A very long, very large, scaly tail skimmed over the surface and then

disappeared beneath the gloomy depths as if unconcerned by her intrusion into its lair.

Not far ahead of her, a halo of yellow lantern light peeked through the tangle of trees. Here and there, glowing red alligator's eyes glared back at her as if trying to warn her away. But Sara pushed on toward the light.

"Miss Sara?" The quivering female voice was barely audible and saturated with fear.

"Yes, Lissie, it's me."

Sara stepped into the circle of light. On the ground, a lantern at her feet, sat a trembling, wide-eyed, black woman. The tracks of recently shed tears glistened on her cheeks. Despite the woman being twice Sara's petite size, her hunched shoulders made her look a lot smaller. Her clothes were soiled and torn, what Sara's father would have called rags and had them thrown away and replaced. The *tignon* covering her dark, curly hair, as the law dictated, had once been red, but now, due to the dirt ground into it, the color appeared more like dark burgundy. Her bare feet were caked with dirt and dried blood.

Sara had seen Lissie working in the neighboring plantation's fields and guessed that her back carried scars from the whip her owner took delight in applying to his slaves, good and bad, to *keep them in line*. Was it any wonder, when the opportunity presented itself, that her husband and son ran? Too bad Lissie had been too sick to go with them.

Thank the good Lord that her own father didn't believe in mistreating his people.

Lissie raised her gaze to Sara. The woman's dark eyes reflected stark fear. Sara had no need to guess what generated the fear. If the woman's owner, Sebastian Dubois, caught Lissie, she'd suffer immeasurably under the whip for being here.

Sara smiled in an attempt at reassurance. "I promise that no one will know about this meeting but you and me."

For a while, Lissie stared into Sara's eyes, as if assessing how much she could be trusted. Seemingly satisfied that Sara spoke the truth, the woman's shoulders relaxed, and some of the fear vanished from her expression. Her dark eyes grew big and hopeful. "Dey says you gots the sight."

Sara sat on a tree stump beside Lissie. "Yes, that's true."

"Can you tell me if my Moses and Noah is alive? Did dey git to freedom?"

Sara laid her hand on Lissie's. "I'll try."

The black woman's skin was cold and clammy, and her hand trembled in Sara's. Lissie's intense worry for her loved ones was almost palatable.

She smiled weakly. "God bless you, missus."

This was a new realm for Sara. She'd never used what her mother sarcastically referred to as her *affliction* like this before. Normally, the ghosts of the earthbound dead simply showed up. She helped them through whatever was holding them here and then sent them into the light. Never having actually summoned a spirit before, Sara prayed she could help bring peace of mind to this troubled woman. That it was the night of a seer's moon might be helpful. Gran always said the spirits were especially communicative on such a night, but, until now, Sara had never had to test it.

With Lissie's hand clutched tightly in hers, Sara closed her eyes and concentrated. Silently, she called out to Moses and Noah. If they were still living, then neither would appear, and she could put Lissie's mind to rest. If they did appear . . . Sara didn't want to think about what that would mean.

For a very long time, Sara focused on Lissie's men. Slowly, the sounds of the swamp blurred, then faded, then ceased completely. A profound silence filled the night. A blanket of warmth enclosed her entire body. Sara became weightless, as if she were floating on a cloud. Shadow and light moved in rainbow-colored flashes behind her closed eyelids.

"Lissie?"

Sara's eyes snapped open. The tall, semi-transparent figure of a black man stood beside Lissie. His clothes were tattered and his eyes glistened with unshed tears. He moved to Lissie's side and laid his hand on her shoulder.

A brilliant smile transformed the black woman's face. "He's here, isn't he?" Lissie looked around. "My Moses is here. Dear Lord, I can feel him."

"Yes, he's standing beside you," Sara said, trying to keep the sorrow from her voice.

Lissie's joy at her husband's appearance had blotted out what it meant. Since Moses' spirit had materialized, that could only mean one thing . . . he was dead.

Moses looked at Sara. His expression had transformed into one of intense sadness, as if he knew what Sara was thinking. "Tell her I didn't make it to Canada, but our Noah did. He's livin' with Lissie's sister."

For a moment, Sara couldn't get her vocal chords to work. Emotion lay in a hard lump in her throat. She'd never before had to tell anyone their loved one had passed on. Finally, she cleared her throat and pressed Lissie's hand. "Moses says that Noah is in Canada with your sister."

Tears rolled down Lissie's face. "Oh, thank the Lord, dey's safe."

Sara swallowed hard and held on tighter to Lissie's hand. "Not both of them. Moses . . . didn't make it."

Lissie stared at Sara for a long moment, the whites of her eyes large and questioning against her dark face. "You means my Moses is—"

Sara nodded. "It's the only way he could be here with you now."

Lissie's plaintive wail echoed through the swamp. Sara had never heard such profound agony. It was as though the woman's soul had broken open and was bleeding her pain into the night. The agonizing sound shimmered over Sara and slammed into her very soul, weighing her down like a huge invisible rock.

Moses gave her an imploring look. "Tell her I's fine, Miss Sara. Tell her I's goin' to glory. Tell her I be waitin' fo her."

Sara repeated his message to his wife. His reassurances seemed to calm Lissie a bit. Now, she simply clutched her middle and rocked back and forth, sobbed quietly, and chanted. "My poor, poor Moses. God rest his soul. God rest his soul."

When Lissie's sobs had quieted to no more than an occasional hiccup, Sara looked to the spirit of the man still standing beside his distraught wife. "She'll be fine now. It's time for you to go

into the light."

Moses looked down at his wife, and then nodded. To their right, a huge circle of blinding white light appeared. Slowly, he turned and walked into it, disappearing from sight. The light closed in on itself and faded away.

Lissie shivered and rubbed her arms. "He's gone, ain't he?"

Sara patted Lissie's hand. "Yes. It was time for him to move on, Lissie."

The words had barely passed Sara's lips when she caught a movement to her left. Fearing they'd been discovered, she jerked around, her mind already scrambling for an explanation that would preclude punishment for either her or Lissie.

But what she saw was not her father or Lissie's owner, but a stranger. This man was not Moses. This man was well-dressed, white and handsome, and looking at her as though he knew her. He was also transparent.

Sara's heartbeat picked up. A myriad of unexpected emotions clogged her throat: peace, love, and a profound sadness. She opened her mouth to ask who he was, but no sound would emerge.

Then he smiled. "I'm waiting," he said, then, like the bayou mist in the light of day, he simply evaporated.

Moongate,
threshold of eternity,
promise forever unbroken.
~ Helen Rosburg

Chapter 1

Harrogate Plantation, St. Lucius Parish, Louisiana, 1855

Sara Wade slipped closer to the edge of the carriage seat. Tension gripped her entire body. Excitement flowed through her like warm, mulled cider on a cold October night. She had waited so long for this day and now that it had finally arrived, she had to pinch herself to make sure it wasn't just another of her wild dreams.

Strange dreams had been a part of Sara's life for as long as she could remember. It wouldn't have surprised her if she suddenly woke up in her bed in her father's house in the Garden District of New Orleans, instead of in the family carriage driving up the long, oak alley to Harrogate Plantation.

Chills rippled through her to the bone. She closed her eyes tightly. *Please, please, don't let that be the case this time.*

"Laws a mercy!" The whispered expletive came from the young black woman seated beside Sara.

Her eyes popped open, and she turned to her maid. "What is it, Raina?"

Sara's father, Preston Wade, had gifted her with Raina the day of his daughter's birth, and the slave, who had been only four years old at the time, had been her devoted personal maid and friend ever since. To leave Raina in New Orleans would have been unthinkable, like leaving part of herself behind. Not to mention that, even though Sara's mother had virtually pushed her out of the house, Patricia Wade would have never allowed Sara this freedom without Raina to stand guard over her mistress' virtue, even though Patricia was certain that, living in the outback of St. Lucius Parish, her daughter would *wither on the vine* before she ever found a suitable husband. Suitable being defined as rich, well-placed, and tolerably good-looking.

But as much as she loved Raina, right now Sara had to fight down the urge to shake the woman for scaring the bejesus out of her for no apparent reason. "Raina, what is it?"

Eye's widening, Raina leaned to the side to see around the large body of Samuel, her father, seated atop the driver's bench. "Dis place makes my skin itch, Miss Sara." Frantically, Raina ran her hands up and down her bare arms.

Sara laughed, and then looked around. Her laughter died in her throat. Drawing her handkerchief from her sleeve, she dabbed at the perspiration on her forehead and top lip, perspiration not entirely a product of the humid, summer, Louisiana weather.

Since she'd been so absorbed in her thoughts, Sara hadn't been paying attention to her surroundings, but now the cause of Raina's alarm became abundantly clear. All along the tunneling oak alley leading to the mansion, the gardens seemed to close in on them. An unexpected spasm of unease coursed through Sara. Had her grandmother's home always been . . . so untamed, so hostile?

Unlike the formality of the grounds outside her father's Garden District home or the Wade's Magnolia Run Plantation just outside New Orleans, the landscaping at Harrogate afforded no sense of order. The careless growth of overgrown foliage seemed to have a mind of its own, as if

cloaking the secrets of the old house from the outside world. Without form or design, the branches of the shrubs had interwoven into a tangled, jungle-like setting, giving the impression that they were hiding some long-held mystery within their shadowed recesses, a mystery to which only they were privy and which they would vigorously guard from intruders.

An inexplicable chill ran down Sara's spine.

Suddenly, doubts buffeted her. Was she capable of running this big house? This plantation? Could she care adequately for all who resided there and who would depend on her? Would her gift prove to be an asset or a hindrance?

Had Sara allowed her mother's disdain for something she couldn't and didn't want to understand to cloud her own judgment, to make her take on more than she could reasonably handle just to slip from beneath her mother's controlling thumb?

She searched her mind for answers.

Sara had inherited the ability to see dead people from her beloved, deceased, paternal grandmother and had long ago accepted it . . . something of which her mother seemed incapable. Sara's *affliction*, as her mother referred to Sara's ability to see and converse with departed souls, had always embarrassed Patricia.

Sara had always loved this old house. Since the reading of her grandmother's will, five long years ago, she'd dreamed of the day she would be able to live permanently in the only place in which she had ever felt she really belonged. However, her mother, a socially-conscious, cold woman, would hear none of it. It just wasn't seemly for a young, single woman to live alone.

Then came the *mishap* at Patricia Wade's lawn party, when her mother had caught Sara talking to a dead person. Patricia had changed her mind overnight. Not only would she allow Sara to go to Harrogate, she'd strongly encouraged it. Sara had Raina packing her trunks before her mother could order tea, all the while trying not to be hurt by her mother's haste to hide her daughter from her society friends.

Affliction. How degrading. How humiliating. Her mother made it sound as though Sara had some horrible, disfiguring disease. When in reality, no one could guess by merely looking at her.

Of course, when her mother's smug, society friends had quizzed Patricia about why she was sending Sara to Harrogate *alone*, Patricia hadn't mentioned the affliction to them. She'd swept the truth under the rug as effortlessly as Raina swept dirt out the door and then her mother had lied through her perfect teeth.

"Since poor Sara's passed a respectable age for marriage, I've given up, trying to find a suitable man for her. I'm afraid her unmarried state has become somewhat of an . . . embarrassment to her father and me. Allowing her to set up her own home at Harrogate in the seclusion of the country is the wisest choice." She'd paused for effect, and then confided, "Perhaps after living alone for a time, my willful daughter will come to her senses and think twice about her lofty requirements for an acceptable suitor and, hopefully, find a husband. Of course, all the men of her age are already spoken for, so perhaps a widower . . ." The words had faded off into a deep, heartfelt sob and a dramatic dab at her eyes with the corner of a white linen handkerchief.

Her mother's friends had nodded in sympathetic, yet sage agreement, and then patted Patricia's shoulder in consolation for having a daughter who would *rain down such embarrassment on her dear mother's head*.

Sara often wondered what they'd think if they knew the real reason her mother was suddenly

shipping her only daughter off to St. Lucius Parish. Enraged at her mother's performance, Sara had been seriously tempted to pop out from behind the door where she'd been eavesdropping on their conversation and telling Mrs. Dubois that her dead husband was smiling at her from over her right shoulder or that Mrs. LeFarge's long-deceased father was scowling down at her from his perch on the mantel.

But Sara had controlled her urge for revenge and kept silent. Divulging her gift would have only labeled her as the freak her mother believed her to be, and that would have afforded her mother more of the attention and sympathy she thrived on. Besides, Sara hadn't wanted to do anything that would have enraged her mother enough to change her mind about allowing the move to Harrogate.

Sometimes Sara wished that she simply had some physical flaw, a twisted limb or a deformed ear. At least she could hide a crippled leg beneath her billowing gown or a missing ear beneath her chestnut curls. Though she had gotten used to seeing dead people long ago, one aspect of Sara's gift was often hard for her to hide, especially when her mother caught her talking to someone that only Sara could see. The dead spirits that sought her out had no discretion about when they'd suddenly appear on the scene.

Her father, on the other hand, had grown up with a mother with the same *affliction*, so none of it seemed strange to him. He'd even developed a bit of the same talent himself, but he'd never told his wife. It had been something he shared with no one but his only daughter.

Sara shook the doubts away. All this reminiscing was just magnifying her anxiety and taking the edge off her excitement. So what if the gardens were a bit wild? It certainly didn't mean anything sinister lurked out there. It had been, after all, five years since the house had been occupied, and the grounds simply needed grooming.

Papa had promised to send her a dozen of Magnolia Run's best gardeners tomorrow. But the thought of slaves from her father's plantation coming the next day didn't really sweep away Sara's unease. Like Raina, she continued to study their surroundings with a wary eye.

The house came into view. Her unease did not ebb. Instead, the closer they got to the sprawling mansion the more intense her anxiety became.

Oaks dripping with amethyst wisteria and ghostly, pearl-gray moss surrounded the house. Stirred by the brisk wind, their gnarled limbs seemed to crouch over the roof like protective, disapproving dowagers taking measure of the intruders in their midst. Blazing, red azaleas and deep crimson, crepe myrtles hemorrhaged their blossoms into the overgrown lawn, spattering the tall grass like droplets of blood. From a tangle of holly shrubs and jasmine vines, marble statuary gowned in sage-green lichen peeked at her like naughty children preparing to do mischief. Even the angry puffs of dust nudged into life from the drive by a stiff breeze off the river seemed to voice the very earth's displeasure at their intrusion.

What of the other times she'd visited her grandmother's home? Had it been like this? No. On those occasions, the house and grounds had always been a welcoming presence in her young life. Now, they seemed to be warning her away. However, in the five years since her grandmother's death, there had been no slaves to keep the place manicured. Logically, the grounds would be wild and overgrown.

But it wasn't just the overgrown vegetation that made Sara's skin crawl. The heavy atmosphere seemed to suck the air from her lungs, as though something dark and evil lurked in the shadows of the trees and bushes, something that had been waiting just for Sara.

I'm waiting. The words the ghost had spoken to her in the bayou played through Sara's mind.

Was *he* here at Harrogate . . . waiting for her?

She drew her shawl closer around her trembling shoulders. Surely she was being foolish. However, the icy fear continued to coil in a tight ball in the pit of her stomach.

Contrary to the inexplicable alarm that had suddenly turned her insides to ice, Sara calmly patted Raina's arm. "It's fine. Just a bit . . . out of hand is all. Samuel will have the men Papa's sending organized in no time, and before you know it, everything will be as beautiful and orderly as when my grandmother was alive."

"Yes, ma'am." Raina didn't sound at all convinced. Her wide-eyed gaze continued to dart over the snarled landscaping and her hands twisted in her lap until Sara thought the woman might remove the skin from them.

Sara shook her morose thoughts loose, and peered eagerly ahead of them. Nothing would spoil this day for her. Nothing. Clearing anything that would dampen this moment from her mind, Sara gazed raptly at the mansion.

Unlike the gardens, the snow-white, antebellum mansion resembled a giant, frosted wedding cake, an image of conformity, order, and balance in the identical wings that extended from either side of the main house. Though the grounds had been far from what she'd expected, in her heart the old house seemed to welcome its new mistress.

Samuel maneuvered the carriage down the drive and then drew the horses up in front of a wide porch flanked by two, sweeping staircases leading to the main level of the home.

Excitement drowned out the anxiety. "Oh, what parties I'll give here." Sara clapped her hands like an excited child. "They'll be just as grand as the ones Gran gave, you'll see." Raina remained silent, obviously still not finding anything about the place to feel good about. "I'll invite all the neighbors to celebrate the reopening of Harrogate, the rebirth of this stately old home."

Raina still didn't reply. She just continued to look around her as if some demon would lunge from the bushes at any moment and devour her.

"Can't you imagine it, Raina?" Sara went on, caught up in her daydream. "Can't you just picture elegant ladies in lovely gowns gliding over the galleries or hurrying down the wrought iron stairs to the veranda?" She giggled. "Maybe some will even sneak into the shadows of the Corinthian columns for a clandestine assignation with their sweethearts, out of the view and hearing of vigilant parents and hovering guardians."

Plans for the future filled her head. Her thoughts bursting with images of her new life, Sara took in the beauty of the house. Closed shutters covered all the windows save one on the second floor portico. She glanced up at the window.

She gasped.

The tall, handsome man from St. Claire's Bayou gazed down at her.

He smiled and nodded as though giving his approval for her to be there.

She blinked and gasped again.

Like a puff of smoke from one of Papa's cigars, the man had vanished.

Chapter 2

"Oh!" Sara cried, half in surprise and half in disappointment that the man had disappeared.

Raina grabbed her mistress' hand. "What?" Her gaze darted from Sara to the house and back. The woman's eyes widened, nearly popping from their sockets.

Raina had already been spooked enough. No reason to add to her upset. Sara just shook her head and patted the chocolate-brown hand clasping one of hers like the jaws of an enraged 'gator. "It's all right. I was just taken aback by the grandeur of the place. I don't recall it being this immense."

The half-lie slid easily from her lips. Oddly, the appearance of the unfamiliar man in the upstairs window hadn't caused her any alarm or discomfort. The words he'd spoken in the bayou echoed through her mind again. *I'm waiting*. His slow smile, in some strange way, had been welcoming, as if he knew she belonged here . . . as if he *had* been waiting for her.

Another shiver washed over her. However, rather than feeling apprehensive, a wild, rising tide of excitement swelled inside her.

Who was he? He couldn't logically be the same man she'd seen in the bayou. It had to have been her imagination that had conjured him. Perhaps he hadn't vanished at all. Perhaps he hadn't been there at all. Or he might have just stepped from her line of vision. But, if it wasn't the bayou stranger, then who was he?

The new overseer perhaps? It wouldn't have surprised her if Papa had hired someone to help manage the plantation. He'd been spoiling her without her mother's knowledge for most of Sara's twenty-seven years. Papa's intervention had been the only reason that Sara hadn't found herself walking down the aisle with that pimply-faced Jason Bannister from River Oaks Plantation. Why the man must have been forty-five if he was a day. When Sara had asked him to leave, her mother had been furious, screaming at her that she'd end up an old maid if she didn't lower her standards. That night, out of sight of Patricia, Sara had hugged Papa fiercely. Just the thought of sharing her wedding night with that *old* man had made her skin crawl.

As the memories raced through her mind once more, Sara continued to stare at Harrogate's upstairs window . . . waiting . . . inexplicably hoping the man would reappear. When he didn't, she consigned the incident to a shadow cast by the towering oak trees or perhaps her excitement about finally coming *home*.

Still, the idea that a stranger, captivating or otherwise, could be wandering around in *her* house brought back a small measure of the creepy unease she'd experienced earlier.

"Samuel?" Sara gently poked Raina's father in the side. "Please go inside and make sure everything is . . . in order?"

With a slow nod, the burly, black man jumped to the ground, climbed the stairs and then entered the house.

To avoid her maid's questioning look, Sara pretended to be absorbed in her surroundings. No need to explain why she'd sent Samuel inside before them. If Raina thought that a strange man lay in wait for them inside the house, wild horses wouldn't get the girl in there.

A few minutes later, Samuel emerged, descended the stairs and grinned. "Looks fine to me, Miss Sara."

"Nothing unusual?" Sara stared hard at him.

"No, ma'am."

"You looked upstairs?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You spectin' something' unusual?" Raina blurted, her hands clasping Sara's in a death grip.

Sara pulled her fingers from Raina's grasp. "No, of course not. I was just being careful. It's not unusual for vagrants to take refuge in these deserted homes, you know. Do you want to go in there and find some vagrant ready to pounce on us?"

"No ma'am."

"Very well. I suggest you pull yourself together and enjoy the moment. Nothing but a wonderful future awaits us inside."

Her explanation seemed to appease Raina. But apprehension and excitement strained at Sara's insides. It had to have been a trick of the light on the glass panes. However, that didn't explain why, when she saw that stranger, her heart had thumped against her chest or give a reason for the warmth that had rushed over her. *That* had not been her imagination.

Samuel cleared his throat. "You ladies gonna git out da buggy or ya gonna sit there and chitchat fo the duration?" Chuckling to himself and shaking his head, Samuel stepped to the side of the carriage. "Fo as much as you gots to say and as long as you been sayin' it, I spects you woulda said it all by now."

The indulgent smile he flashed their way tempered Raina's father's deep-throated, reprimand. Both girls were used to his gentle chiding.

Samuel extended his hand to help Sara to the ground.

She rose, cast a last wary look at the upstairs windows, then gathered her skirts in one hand and took Samuel's supporting hand in the other. Carefully, she stepped to the ground, smoothed the travel wrinkles from her voluminous, hunter-green, traveling gown, and then walked slowly toward the staircase leading up to the first floor veranda.

Her heart beat out a frantic rhythm against her rib cage. She was about to enter her own home. Sara Madeline Wade's home.

The inside of Harrogate, with the exception of the white dustcovers draped over the furniture, was just as Sara remembered it. The harpsichord, the one at which she and her grandmother Alice had sat and warbled off-key Christmas carols, still filled the large, bay windows overlooking the veranda. The settee, where she'd fallen asleep in her grandmother's arms while Alice had related stories of her courtship with Ezra Wade, still dominated the center of the room. Though dusty and in need of laundering, the drapes that puddled on the cypress floor still provided a perfect place for a young girl to hide from a frantic maid at bedtime. Wonderful memories of a happy childhood filled every nook and corner of this magnificent home. All those precious memories, all there, all preserved, all waiting for Sara to come back and remember.

"Laws a mercy. This won't do. No, sir, won't do a'tall." Suddenly animated, her fears forgotten, Raina bustled around the room, a frown creasing her dark brow, her tongue clucking between sentences. With a newfound determination, she whisked sheets from the furniture and balled them in her arms. "Dey knows you was a comin'. House shudda been ready fo the mistress befo she gits here. Jes pure laziness, dat's what it is all right. Pure laziness."

"Papa said the house servants will arrive tomorrow with the gardeners and the field hands he's sending over from Magnolia Run. The only house servants he sent ahead were your mother to cook and her sister Latisha to help her." Raina's mother, Chloe, would have her hands full in the kitchen cooking meals, and, even very pregnant, Latisha could assume some of the burden. With

all the kitchen chores to be done, Sara couldn't ask either of them to do the housework as well. "In the meantime, I can help with this." Sara pulled a sheet from the harpsichord and began folding it, only to have it snatched from her fingers by the irate maid.

"Ain't fo you to do." Raina frowned heavily at her, and then tucked the sheet into the growing pile she hugged against her chest. "Masser Preston should a had dem girls here afore you came. Ain't right fo the lady of the house to come home to dis. Ain't right a'tall."

A smile tugged at Sara's mouth. Even though the two women had been friends for years, when it came to her duties and Sara's station as her mistress and what tasks she would allow her to do, Raina had always drawn a distinct line. Evidently folding furniture covers was not one of the duties allowed.

"Dey's jest some things a lady don't do," the diminutive maid declared hotly. "No, suh." She shook her head firmly, making the brightly-colored *tignon* covering her hair slip down on her forehead. She pushed the coil of material back in place with her forearm.

Raina hated the *tignon*, but the laws in New Orleans required that a Negro's head be covered at all times. Now that they were out of the city, perhaps Sara would allow Raina to forgo the hated head-covering. Of course, when neighbors came to call, that might cause some talk. But did she care? Gran wouldn't have. After all, this was Sara's house now. She'd have to think about that and add it to the many decisions she would be making as mistress of Harrogate.

"Ain't seemly," the maid continued to mumble. "Jes ain't seemly."

Knowing Raina's outraged, mumbled complaints could go on indefinitely, Sara shut her ears to them and wandered over to the harpsichord. The lovingly-cared-for rosewood glowed in the afternoon sunlight like the dark honey Gran's cook used to spread over Sara's warm cornbread. With memories of Gran running as thick as cream through her mind and a strange compulsion driving her, Sara ran her fingertips over the keys. A discordant, high-pitched tinkle filled the air. She continued to run her fingers over the keys. But several keys reacted with a hollow *thump*, as though something prevented the strings from being struck.

She moved to the side, tipped up the lid and peered inside. A gold locket and chain lay coiled on the strings. Sara picked it up and examined the exquisite piece of jewelry. Two engraved roses adorned the front, their stems wrapped around each other so completely that it made it difficult to tell where one ended and the other began. She opened the catch and flipped the heart open. Inside an inscription read . . . *My Love Forever*.

Gran had never worn anything like this. So where had it come from? Perhaps one of her grandmother's many party guests had lost it. Whoever it belonged to, with an inscription like that, it must be a treasured possession. Absently, she clicked it closed, and then tucked it into her dress pocket with the hope of eventually finding its owner.

Hours later, exhausted from an excitement filled, sleepless night, the long carriage ride from New Orleans, and the little work Raina had condescended to allowed her to do, Sara climbed into the large, canopied, custom-made bed that had been her grandmother's prize possession.

After harvesting an ancient oak from somewhere on Harrogate land, the wood had been taken to the plantation carpenter who'd constructed a bed to fit Ezra Wade's abnormally tall frame. As a result, Sara's petite, five-feet-three body could luxuriate in the vastness of the down-filled mattress. After her grandfather had died, Sara had spent many nights here with her grandmother, pretending she was floating miles above the earth on a huge, white cloud.

She smiled contentedly and snuggled down into the feather mattress. The full moon spilled through the tall, bedroom windows, coating everything it touched with a silvery-blue cast. Despite her total exhaustion, Sara found it hard to tamp down her excitement and find sleep. Instead, she lay awake taking in the beautifully appointed room, the large windows, and the carved door frames.

Then her gaze locked onto the portrait of the elegant woman hanging over the fireplace. She'd asked her grandmother who the woman was, but Gran had grown impatient and even a bit nervous and said she had no idea.

From childhood, Sara had always hated the portrait. She'd gotten the insane idea in her young head that the woman in the picture didn't like her. Whenever she'd entered the room, Sara had often imagined the faint smile on the woman's lips turning down in a frown, her eyes assessing and angry.

"She hates me, Gran. I know it."

"Nonsense, my darling girl. How on earth can a painting hate you?" Gran's smile had held all the indulgence she always showed her only granddaughter.

"But just look at the way she keeps staring at me. No matter where I go, she's always watching." Sara had moved about the room to illustrate.

Gran laughed. "Child, her eyes only seem to follow you. Good artists can do that, you know. They can make a portrait's gaze come alive." She'd risen from the end of the bed and taken Sara's hand. "Now, let's you and I go find Matilda and see if her cornbread is out of the oven yet."

With the total dismissal of the subject, they'd left the room, but Sara had never forgotten it and made every attempt, when in her Gran's bedroom, not to look at the painting.

Now, once more the object of attention of those frigid, gray eyes, Sara had trouble accepting Gran's explanation. The chill of the unrelenting stare raced through her. Unable to sleep, Sara slipped from the bed and went to the window overlooking the back lawn.

Below, as though lit from within, the full moon painted the entire landscape with an eerie glow. Her gaze came to rest on a large area in the center of the lawn cordoned off by high shrubs on three sides.

On the third side, a moongate afforded an opening to the garden within. Her grandfather had brought the moongate for her grandmother as a birthday gift after his visit to the Orient. Ten feet tall and almost as wide, the circular gate, fashioned of polished, white marble glowed in the moonlight. On either side, a marble Temple Dog warded off evil from entering the garden. At the top of the circle a small plaque read: *Promise forever unbroken.*

A moongate, Gran had explained to Sara, ensure happiness to all who walked through it to enter the garden. And certainly that had been true in Sara's case. No place had provided her with the deep love and unbridled happiness she'd always experienced in what Gran had dubbed the Garden of the Moon. And, on those rare visits her mother had made to Harrogate, the gazebo in the middle of the garden had been a haven for Sara, a place to escape to where she wouldn't be scrutinized and reprimanded for every move she made.

Above the arch, the wide-open moonflowers turned their snowy faces to the sky and invited the silvery moths to pollinate them. Their sweet scent filled the night air and drifted to Sara through her open window, bringing with it more cherished memories of the hours she and Gran had spent in the garden. It saddened Sara that by morning the flowers would have closed tight and died. Though they enjoyed a short lifespan, Sara knew that when the sun came up again, the garden would be alive with the beauty of the other flowers: magnolias, azaleas, forget-me-nots, roses, wood violets, morning glories, and camellias—all white.

On many occasions, while peeking out her bedroom window, Sara had caught sight of wisps of smoke floating in the garden. The wisps, unlike the specters she'd been used to seeing, had neither substance nor form. Instead of making her apprehensive, however; they brought with them an overwhelming sensation of warmth, contentment and love such as Sara had never known, not even from Gran. The young Sara had no idea how she'd known, but she'd been sure that love lived in that garden. As she stood here now, that love seemed to rise up from the garden and fill her body, pushing away her restiveness.

Finally at peace, eyelids drooping, Sara made her way back to the bed. She pulled the covers over her, but she was still acutely aware of the steely eyes of the portrait boring into her. Tomorrow, she'd find a suitable replacement, and the hated portrait would be consigned to the attic forever. Turning her back on the picture, she pulled the covers over her head.

She could almost hear her grandmother laughing at her foolishness.

A soft chuckle escaped Sara. Lord, but she missed her carefree grandmother and the happy times they'd spent together. Sara took a deep breath and surprisingly detected the faint scent of the cologne her grandmother had specially blended in a French Quarter perfumery still clinging to the room. The scent reminded her of the creamy-white magnolias that bloomed each year throughout the grounds at Harrogate, but most abundantly in the Garden of the Moon. She was glad she'd left the window open to admit their heady scent.

Memories of Gran filled Sara's head. Having adored her grandmother, she was seldom far from Sara's thoughts, but tonight those thoughts were more intense, more persistent. It had to be because she was back at Harrogate. Yes, that had to be it. Sara was home.

With a contented sigh, she closed her eyes and allowed the shroud of sleep to envelope her.

"Sara."

Her name being called softly came from a long way off. She stirred in her sleep and settled more comfortably under the down coverlet.

"Sara."

The side of the mattress dipped, as if someone had sat down beside her.

"Raina?" Sara mumbled through the mist of sleep still fogging her brain and snuggled deeper into the warm bedclothes. "It's too early. Let me sleep for a while."

"No, my darling girl, it's not your Raina. It's me, and you must wake up. I can't stay long."

Sara's ears pricked. Only one person ever called her *my darling girl*. Could it be . . .

Unable to believe the possibility and instantly alert, Sara forced her eyes open and pushed the covers off her head. She blinked several times, but the face smiling lovingly down at her remained as solid and as real as the bed in which Sara lay.

Slowly, she sat up, never allowing her gaze to leave the woman at her side lest she vanish. Anyone else would have been frightened half to death. But then everyone else wasn't like Sara. Hadn't her mother reminded her of that many times over? Sara was used to seeing dead people, and that one had chosen to pay her a nocturnal visit wasn't at all unusual.

What did surprise her was who it was. Sitting beside her, love shining from her blue eyes, her body surrounded by a halo of white light, was Alice Wade, her beloved, dead grandmother.