

Excerpt from UNRAVELED SOULS

Blood everywhere.

The abstract splatter from the violent spray dotted the rose-patterned paper of an unfamiliar drawing room, blending a macabre design with the sedate ordinary. A thick pool of ruby liquid collected under the body of a blond-haired man, a dagger buried to the hilt in his chest, the inlaid jewels on the handle winked in the soft candlelight.

Dead.

Noelle Radliffe woke up, gasping for breath, as sweat drenched her body and molded her white cotton nightgown to her chest. Another dream, another death. She pushed the mop of brown curls out of her face and swung her legs over the side of the bed as her heart pounded. Not for the first time did she wonder why the visions came to her. Every night there was a new scene and a new body. When would it end?

At least she didn't see a ghost, which is what usually followed such a dream. To make sure, she cast a wary glance around her darkened bedroom. Nothing but shadow-drenched furniture met her gaze. Relief chilled her skin as adrenaline spiked through her veins.

As her breathing returned to normal, she left her bed to pad across the room, grabbing a lace-trimmed robe of deep purple silk. Coolness seeped into her bare feet from the polished wooden floor. Even for early May, it seemed spring couldn't quite gain a foothold and shake off the cloying mantle of winter. She threw open the heavy drapes of gold brocade, yanked apart the lace panels, and opened the French doors that led to a tiny patio.

In times of extreme stress, she always sought solace from the garden she lovingly planted each year. Too early in the season for anything but crocuses and the occasional daffodil to survive, it was only a matter of time before she would be able to manipulate the rich soil and create a living work of art. But for now, the darkened patch of green space imparted the necessary calm she needed to continue to live another day, put the horrors of the night behind her. Wrapping the robe about her body, she cinched the sash tight at her waist. A slight sound, no more than a pebble being disturbed against the cobblestone bricks, alerted her to another presence in the garden.

"Elle, are you sick? The sun will not rise for an hour yet. Go to bed."

Noelle smiled, and turned to gaze at her cousin, Kitty. "Unfortunately, my body is in the top of health. It is my mind that refuses to conform to normalcy."

Two years ago, Kitty had moved into the bungalow with Noelle out of concern that stemmed from the death dreams--and Noelle's penchant for talking to ghosts. The girls had concluded that the talent toward sensitivity for paranormal sympathies stemmed from the Radliffe curse, and

vowed to never let anyone, especially the scientific community, know. Thus the need to room together, for accountability if nothing else. If no one ascertained her secret then they could not persecute her in the interest of academic superiority.

"I am not ill, but you already know this."

"I do indeed know."

"Why do you persist on gliding about the house as if you were a ghost as well? This residence is already over capacity in that regard."

"I sensed your distress. Remember when I used to feel what you felt when we were children?" Kitty held a black woolen shawl about her chest. A frown marred her pink rosebud mouth and brought the heavy splash of freckles on her cheeks into sharp relief as she stepped into a patch of moonlight. "I assume a dream brought you to your thinking place?"

"Yes." The sight of Kitty's auburn hair, bound in two thick braids over her shoulders, struck Noelle as amusing. She resembled more of a schoolgirl from the newly opened Holy Cross Catholic School down the street than a woman of twenty-four. She'd almost always worn her hair thus as a child. Some things managed to stay the same, no matter the progress in the world or how far a person travelled. "And more troubling is the fact I have dreamed of this man twice now. Both times he has met with a violent end."

"And once more will herald his death in real life." Kitty shivered and ran her hands up and down her arms. "What will you do?"

"The same thing I have always done." Noelle bent to touch a fingertip to a silky, soft petal of a white crocus. "Be aware of the implication and wait to see if I have a third dream. To do anything else at this point would be premature."

"Perhaps." Kitty worried her bottom lip with smallish teeth. "Did you recognize the man in the dream? Is he handsome? Perhaps you dream of him because he is your future husband."

"I never thought I would see the day when you would fall for silly superstitions such as that. I take the dreams seriously. Old wives tales do not carry the dire implications that my visions do."

"Flying off the handle is not like you, cousin. It is not silly, and many facts lie buried in superstitions. You have told me so often enough." Kitty snickered. "Are you afraid you might indeed dream of a future husband?"

"I will overlook your insult and take it in the spirit of helpfulness you intended." Her cheeks burned at the implication. "I do not look at many physical features. The cause of death is what holds my attention in the dream."

"I'll bet he's handsome." Kitty continued as if Noelle hadn't offered a sharp retort. "Besides, does not the same hold true if you dream something other than death three times it will come true?"

Noelle sighed, glanced at her cousin in some consternation. "I could not say. The only dreams that ever repeat for me are of the gruesome variety."

"Then you must concentrate on the handsome man."

"I did not clearly see his face." She frowned. "Why keep harping on the fact?"

"Then you *do* know him?"

"I'm not sure." Noelle straightened and wrapped her arms around her mid-section. "I have never been able to see his face clearly but there is always a jumble of items around the scene. Books, paperweights, pages filled with heavy black handwriting. He might be a scholar for all I know."

"You do not wish to seek him out because of his supposed profession?"

The shrill call of an early morning bird caused her to jump and her heart to pound, whether from fright or disjointed reminders of the dream, she could not say. "There is no need to seek him out until necessity demands it. I would appear a fool otherwise." Her laugh was little more than a string of varied-pitched notes of bitterness. "My reputation is already ragged enough, do you agree?"

"Not quite. You have just cause to be alarmed. Institutions are not the most pleasant of places to live out your days."

"In that case, you must remember your promise to kill me if that event occurs." Tired of conducting the conversation in the chilly garden, Noelle moved into her bedroom. "I would prefer it if you would use belladonna-laced tea, but I will leave the option to you."

Kitty emitted an unladylike snort. "You desire a death by sleeping when it is that very restorative act which bothers you so much?"

"Yes. The apothecary assures me it is not at all messy and will not hurt."

"And you believe everything old Mr. Dramas tells you?"

"Not everything. I have a brain and know the difference between truth and wives' tales." Her mind conjured an image of the pharmacist she studied under. Short and stooped, the little man retained little of the hair on his head but much of a heavy Italian accent. "But, I think Francine would be put out if she came here to clean up bloodstains." The thought of their outspoken housekeeper scrubbing a stubborn red stain made Noelle smile. She collapsed on the bed and stared at the ceiling. "Perhaps death is not enough of a deterrent to my ghostly friends. I daresay they would continue to drop in for visits in the afterlife."

"Doomed to be haunted." Kitty sank into a wingback chair near the head of the bed. "Instead of hiding your special talent, let the scientific world help. What if one of the men you fear could

help you? They may not banish your sensitivities altogether but they could aid you to accept your gift or at the very least live in some compatibility with it."

"Do I have a choice?" Noelle threw the bedclothes over her face. "Whether professional people know about my problem or not, at the end of the day, I am the one who must live in this world." The covers were yanked off and she stared into the concerned face of her cousin. "Was there something else?"

"No." Kitty patted Noelle's cheek. "Try to sleep, Elle. Maybe you will see things differently once the sun comes up."

"I rather doubt it." She watched Kitty's upside down image as the woman left the bedroom, pulling the door closed behind her. "Nothing will ever be different."