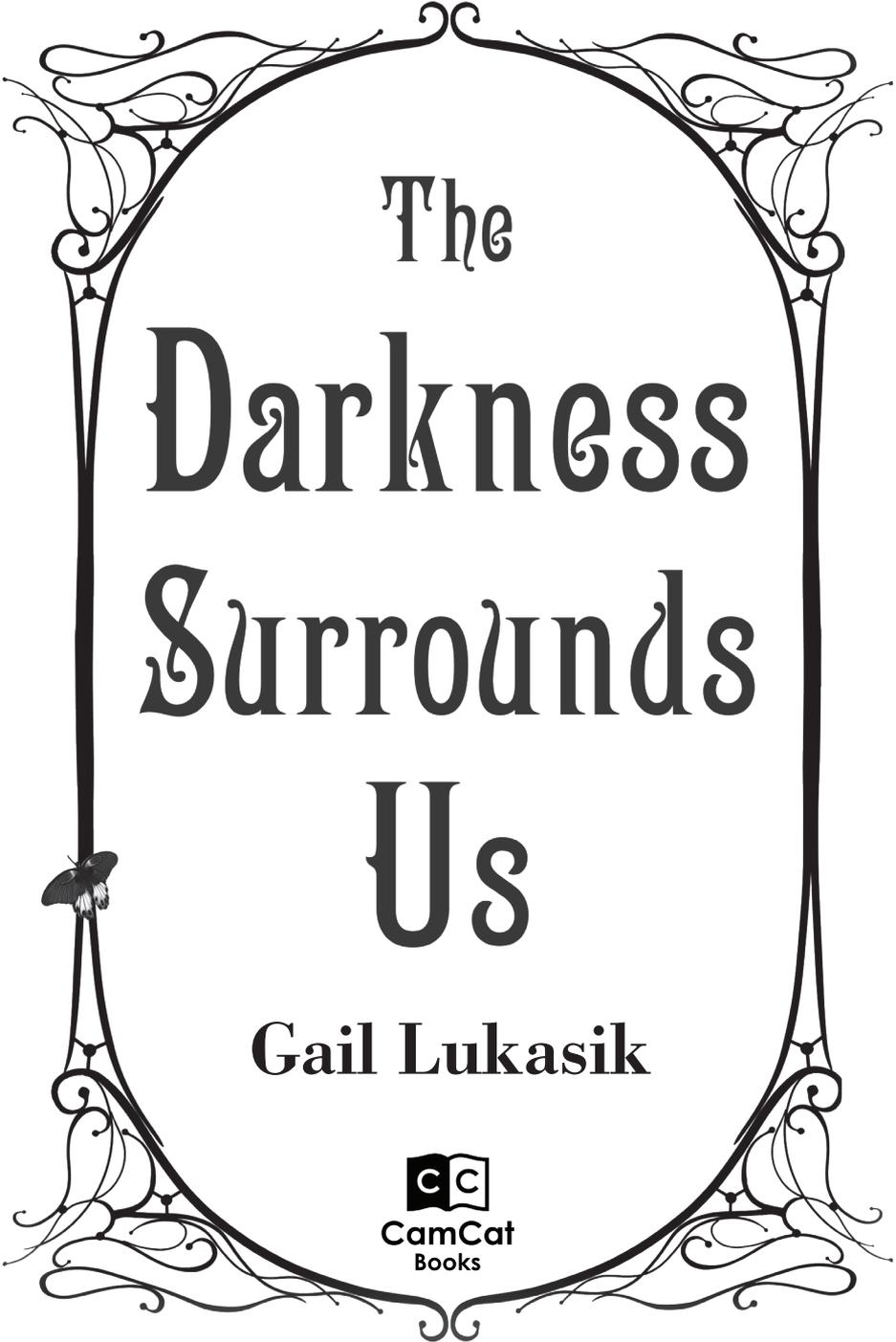


The
Darkness
Surrounds
Us

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*To the healthcare workers and teachers who bravely stood on
the front lines of the Covid-19 pandemic.*

“Dead people always seem to get in the way of the living.”

Helen Sclair, Chicago’s “Cemetery Lady”



PROLOGUE

1918

We are running through the snow. The moon lost among the trees. Black and skeletal, their branches lash my face. But it's the dog I fear the most. His frantic howls coming closer and closer. My mother grips my small hand so tightly it hurts.

Her terror-filled voice keeps saying: "God will protect us. God will protect us."

I stumble and fall. The snow is cold and unforgiving.

When my mother reaches for me, her face is as rigid as stone. It's then I know she's dead.



CHAPTER ONE

November 30, 1918

On the night my mother died, she took her secrets with her. That's what I thought when I found the photograph and the gold pendant she'd hidden in her dresser drawer.

In the photograph, a couple stands side-by-side, stern and resolute. Behind them a small house, too many trees to count. My mother wears a plain, checked dress, hair spun into a tight bun low on her neck, neat white bonnet on her head. The pendant around her neck clashes with her severe clothes. The man wears a white shirt, dark trousers, and looks a little like me—same pale skin and wide-set eyes. I hold his hand and rest my head against his arm. My loose frock looks too big on my small frame. I'm three, maybe four years old.

On the back of the photograph, written in an exuberant hand, are a time and a place, I don't remember.

Harmony, Michigan 1894: Mary, John, and Anna.

Am I Mary or am I Anna? Neither name conjures a memory. And who is this man I seem so close to? Surely not my father.

My mother had told me my father's name was Paul Lester. That he'd died in a factory accident in Chicago before I was

born. There'd been no photographs of him—no likeness to compare myself to. No photographs of any family for that matter.

The man must be my mother's second husband. That's what I told myself. But my mother never spoke of a second husband. I could fathom no reason for her secrecy. And I loved her too much to be angry. But I was sad and confused.

Adding to my confusion was one line, near the bottom of the photograph, so small it's almost illegible.

Our last happy day together before they took John from us.

What happened to this man? And who were the "they" who took him from us?

For months after my mother's death, those questions plagued me, as did the nightmare. Always the same: a cloudless, snowy night, my mother and me running through the woods, her frightened voice saying, "God will protect us."

The nightmare so real, I was beginning to think it might be a memory.

Then the unexpected happened. When I saw the "Help Wanted" ad, I had to answer it. Was it fate?

The ad had been terse.

Needed: nurse and companion. Above going wage. Three months guaranteed. All travel expenses paid. Write to: Mr. William Thiery, Ravenwood Manor, New Harmony, Michigan.

New Harmony, not Harmony. But it was the same place.

I had to apply. It was as if my mother were speaking to me, telling me to go there and find out about her past.

William Thiery's letter offering me the position had been as terse as his ad.

"Take the ferry boat from Charlevoix to New Harmony. Go to The Carp. It's across from the boat dock. Matthew will fetch you," he'd written in his precise hand. No last name. No description. Just Matthew.

The sudden lurch of the ferry boat broke into my thoughts. I picked up my pen, opened my journal, and began to write.

My name is Nellie Lester. I'm twenty-eight years old. I write this aboard the Mersey as it crosses the turbulent lake. It's the 30th of November 1918. The Great War has ended, but the Spanish flu rages on. I've left everything behind—my nursing position on the contagion ward, the Taylor Street apartment where my mother died, and a failed love affair.

It's been twenty-four years since the photograph was taken. Someone on the island must remember my parents. My medical bag is my passport. I've come to deliver the Thiery's baby. I've come to uncover my mother's secrets.



CHAPTER TWO

I don't know if I believe in omens.

But I shuddered when I stepped off the boat and saw the pine coffin and the six men beside it, waiting in the freezing rain. The darkness of their clothes matched the darkness of my thoughts.

Even here I couldn't escape death.

The men took no notice of me as I hurried past them, struggling with my suitcase and medical bag, my boots slipping on the icy dock. I was anxious to find The Carp and escape the sleet and the incessant banging of the fishing boats, which mirrored the thrumming of my heart.

When I reached the end of the dock, my shoulders slumped at the sight of the desolate and forlorn town. St. John's was a scattering of decrepit buildings and houses along a muddy road, anchored by a white church, post office, general store, and The Carp, a moss-covered stone tavern, where I'd been instructed to go.

For a moment I faltered, looking back at the Mersey. The men were boarding the boat, balancing the coffin on their broad shoulders.

I could still change my mind, return to Chicago, and beg the contagion ward matron to give me my job back. After twenty-four

years, did I really believe I could find out who the man in the photograph was and why my mother never spoke of him?

The low moan of the foghorn broke through my thoughts pulling me back to the ramshackle town. If there was even a chance, I had to try. There was nothing for me in Chicago except misery and loneliness.



The Carp was a dingy, shadowy place that smelled of old fires and dampness. I sat at the table nearest the door, nursing a cup of coffee, anxious and worried. Matthew was over two hours late and the coffin bearers were drunk.

Loud and raucous, they huddled near the hearth. With each pitcher of beer, they toasted the dead man, Sam, a fellow logger. Their glances had gone from furtive to leering.

They probably thought I was trade. A prostitute. Why else would a woman sit alone in a bar for hours unless she was selling her goods?

I was the only female in the establishment, except for the barkeeper, a tall sturdy woman as disheveled looking as the tavern, who only emerged from a back room when one of the men called for another pitcher of beer.

Where was Matthew? Had I mistaken the day? I pulled out Mr. Thiery's letter. No, it said November 30. And there was only one ferry that ran from Charlevoix to New Harmony.

"Hey, Bernie, another round," shouted the clean-shaven logger. The other loggers boasted thick mustaches or generous beards. One logger's mustache was waxed and curled up at the ends.

The barkeeper emerged from the back room. Though plain faced like me, her luxurious brown hair glimmered in the shadowy tavern light, unlike my frizzy red mess.

She plopped the pitcher on the table. The clean-shaven logger grabbed her around her waist and pulled her toward him.

“I’m having none of that, Abe.” She swatted him on the head with her dirty rag. He let go. “Now you louts keep it down. There’s a lady present.” She jerked her head in my direction.

“More like trade,” Abe answered.

That set off a volley of bawdy laughter.

Heat flooded my face. I looked away, fidgeting with my spoon.

“Miss,” the barkeeper said, towering over me, holding the empty beer pitcher. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave. I don’t know what you’re about, but you’re upsetting the men. I don’t want any trouble.” She glanced back at the loggers. “They need to let off some steam. One of their friends died yesterday in a logging accident.”

The bitter taste of panic rose into my mouth. “I’m sorry about their friend. But I have nowhere else to go. Matthew was supposed to pick me up hours ago. I don’t know where he is. He’s to take me to the Thiery house.” I was on the verge of tears.

“Ravenwood Manor? Why didn’t you say so?” Her whole demeanor changed from suspicious to friendly. “Let me get you a refill on that coffee?”

Before I could answer, she disappeared into the back room. Suddenly, the room went quiet. I glanced at the drunken men. They were staring at me, smirking. Then they ran their tongues around their lips.

I didn’t think my face could get any redder. Humiliated, I buried my face in my journal, blocking out their drunken laughter. I turned to the drawing of New Harmony that I’d copied from a map hanging on the ferry’s cabin wall.

Kidney shaped and amazingly small, I probably could walk from one end to the other in less than a day. Most of the island was forested. Ravenwood Manor overlooked Lake Michigan. St. John’s was nestled in a cove on Ascension Bay.

Looking at the tiny island surrounded by nothing but water, a wave of claustrophobia washed over me.

The men seemed to have lost interest in me. I closed my journal, letting my thoughts tumble back to my mother.

What had brought her to this desolate island? Had she been so distraught by my father's sudden death, she'd married the man in the photograph and started a new life here?

Whatever her reasons, she would have been thinking of me, wanting a better life for us. I picked up my pen and sketched her face—the dimpled cheeks, broad features, and thick curly hair so black it had a blue sheen.

“How about we go upstairs, honey?”

I'd been so lost in my thoughts that I hadn't noticed the clean-shaven logger standing by my table. His dark eyes traveled my body. I shut my journal and rested my hand on it protectively.

“Did you hear me? I'm inviting you to go upstairs with me for a bit of fun,” he said loudly, drawing hoots and snickers from the inebriated loggers.

“I'm sorry, but I'm expected at Ravenwood.” Why was I apologizing?

He stumbled back, his lascivious expression gone. For a moment he struggled for words. “I wouldn't be caught dead sleeping at Ravenwood. Strange things go on up there.”

His sudden somberness sent a shiver up my spine. “What do you mean? What kind of strange things?”

“Well, for one thing—” He stopped and glanced over his shoulder. “For one thing, no one seems to stay long. If you catch my drift.”

“I don't understand.” Was he implying no one wanted to work for the Thierys? Maybe Mr. Thiery's curt, unwelcoming letter wasn't a sign of a busy man but a sign of an unreasonable and difficult one.

“Stop bothering the woman.” The barkeeper swatted him again with her dirty rag. In her other hand she held the white enamel coffeepot.

“Just making her acquaintance.” He shrugged.

“Get back to your friends and stop your nonsense.”

He slunk away, mumbling under his breath.

As the barkeeper refilled my chipped cup, she said, “Don’t pay any mind to Abe. When he gets drunk, he likes to stir the pot. Nothing strange going on at Ravenwood. It’s just old and creaky, like everything else on this island. I should know.”

She seemed so sincere; I wanted to believe her. “Have you lived here long?”

She took my question as an invitation, put the coffeepot on the splintery table, sat down, and rested her thick arms on the table.

“About twenty years or so. Up until last year my pa and I ran The Carp. Now it’s just me. He’s too infirm.”

Twenty years? She’d come to the island four years after the photograph had been taken. Still, she might know someone on the island who had been here when my mother and I lived here.

I ladled a heaping teaspoon of sugar into my coffee, stirred it slowly as I considered my next question. I didn’t want to appear nosy. But there was an openness about her that made me want to trust her.

“Someone told me the island used to be called Harmony. Do you know why the name was changed to New Harmony?”

“That would be because of Henry Thiery, William Thiery’s uncle. He lived at Ravenwood when he wasn’t in Chicago. I’d tell you to ask him, but he died some years back.” She smiled, revealing two missing lower teeth.

I returned her smile. “Do you know who lived at Ravenwood before Henry Thiery?” I had to be careful. If William Thiery discovered my real reason for coming here, I could be dismissed.

“Can’t say I do.” She looked away toward the men, as though one of them had called her. When she turned back, her soft brown eyes were narrowed with suspicion.

She picked at a splinter. Though chapped and red, her fingers were surprisingly small and delicate. “You should ask Doctor Proctor. He’s our island historian.”

“There’s a doctor on the island?” I blurted. If the island had a doctor, why did William Thiery hire me?

She laughed. “He’s not a real doctor, as such, more of a healer. He’s a newspaperman from Chicago. People go to him with their medical troubles.”

A newspaperman turned healer? I just prayed he wasn’t like the fake healers, who since the pandemic hawked bogus medicines and false hopes.

The barkeeper pressed the splinter back into place with her thumb. “Since we’re asking questions. What’s your business with the Thierys?”

Though I suspected she knew my business with the Thierys, I answered. I really liked the woman and wanted to allay her fears about me. And I could use a friend. “Mr. Thiery hired me to deliver Mrs. Thiery’s baby and care for her afterwards.”

She nodded her head. “That’s what I figured.”

I sensed she was going to say something else but then thought better of it.

“I’m Bernice.” She held out her delicate hand to me. “But everyone calls me Bernie.”

I shook her rough hand, felt the strength of her grip. “Nellie Lester.”

“Nice meeting ya.” She stood, grabbed the coffeepot, and started to walk away, then turned back. “Just some advice. I’d be careful asking too many questions, Nellie. Most islanders aren’t as friendly as me.”

Though she'd delivered her warning kindly, her intention was clear. Outsiders should mind their own business. I felt hurt by her reprimand.

After she returned to the bar, I gazed out the window. The snow had stopped, but the wind was gusty.

I opened my journal and wrote: *Doctor Proctor, Chicago newspaperman, not a real doctor.* Then drew a question mark.

The loud crash of a chair hitting the stone floor startled me. My hand jerked and ink streaked the paper.

Abe was rocking drunkenly on his feet as he jabbed his finger at the logger with the curled mustache sitting across from him. "You're a liar. A damn liar."

The accused man put up his hands defensively. "I'm not saying it's true. I'm only saying that's what Peterman said. He swore he tightened those straps. He thinks someone messed with them."

The man's words enraged Abe even more. "Peterman is looking to put the blame on someone else. A good man is dead because of his carelessness. I'm telling you. He didn't tighten those straps."

The man next to Abe grabbed his arm. "Sit the hell down, will you? If anyone's to blame, it's Thiery; hiring men who know shit about logging and paying us dirt wages. You don't need a crystal ball to see this place is almost logged out."

Abe yanked his arm away. "Yeah, and you don't need a crystal ball to see this place is cursed."

He downed his beer, banged his glass so hard on the table that it shattered, sending shards everywhere. Then he stormed out of the tavern.

I watched him disappear into the dark wondering about the logger's death. Was it due to carelessness, as Abe insisted? Or had someone messed with the straps? If so, why would someone purposely loosen the straps?

The overwhelming smell of whiskey and animal musk pulled me from my musings. I turned around. Looming over me was a powerfully built man with broad shoulders that strained against his black wool jacket. He had the same weathered face and calloused hands of the loggers. But unlike them, his hair was long and unkempt, as was his unruly black beard. His square jaw and crooked nose gave him a combative appearance. His eyes were so deep set, I couldn't see their color. He'd be a hard man to read.

"You Nellie Lester?" he asked impatiently, as if he'd been waiting hours for me.

"Yes. You must be Matthew." I stared at the dried blood on his hands.

"This your gear?" He gestured at my medical bag and suitcase, which rested on the muddy stone floor.

Before I could answer, he scooped up my bag and suitcase and limped toward the door.

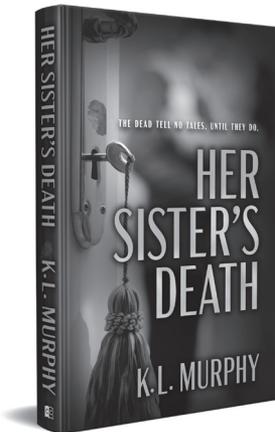
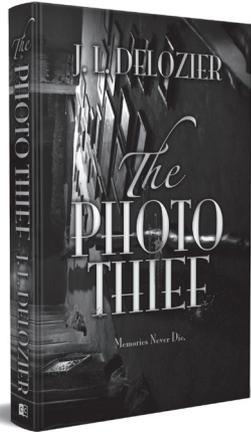
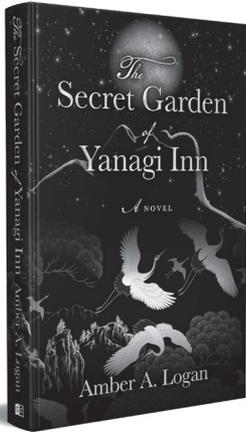
I shoved my journal into my purse, fished out a penny and left it on the table.

The cold air was like a tonic after the tavern's smothering miasma. I hurried toward the horse-drawn wagon.

Then I stopped. In the back of the wagon stood a cur, more wolf than dog. A low growl rumbled from the mammoth creature.

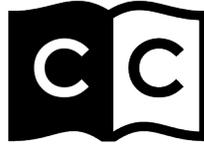
"What you waiting for?" he called, tossing my suitcase and medical bag in the back of the wagon. "He doesn't bite."

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