

The Miller's Curse
(An Excerpt)

By

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Chapter 1

Provence, 1884

Balthazar woke before the knock. He couldn't say what it was that brought him out of sleep. Perhaps the dead stillness, the uneasy silence. Perhaps a first rumbling of thunder in the distance, heard but not registered. Maybe even the midnight bells of the church wafting over the plain from the village above. The usually bright stars were shrouded in cloud. The full moon stayed well hidden, so that no light came into the house. Balthazar tried to breathe, but the air was thick and heavy. The covers moved up and down with Pascale's chest. He caressed her breast through the linen sheet until she turned away, still heaving with the even breath of sleep. Then came the knock. No sound of hooves on the road, no neighing or whinny.

Three loud bangs at the door of the mill below, and a deep bellow:

"Ouvrez ! Ouvrez, pour l'amour de Dieu!"

Pascale turned in the bed.

"Balthazar?"

"Oui, ma cherie. There's someone at the door."

"It's the middle of the night."

"I know."

There was more banging. Balthazar pulled on his housecoat and started down the narrow steps of the mill. The room below shone with the soft glow of the fire's embers.

"J'arrive," he called out. "I'm coming."

He stopped to light a candle in the fire, and then went over to the door. He slid open a small hatch at eye level, but couldn't see anything in the dark. The air outside was still. Not even the leaves rustled.

"For the love of God, open this door!"

"I heard you the first time," Balthazar said, almost to himself.

He slid the little hatch shut, paused a moment to pick up a hatchet near the fire, and removed the bar from the door. He swung it open on its hinges, and saw two figures framed in the doorway. A large man, and a child. It was a girl. He knew before he saw her, although he did not yet know why. He thought afterwards he'd seen her deep blue eyes glaring from beneath her hood, reflected in the firelight. But it was so dark. She was fifteen. Maybe a year more. She pulled back her hood and let it fall to her slim shoulders. Still a girl, not a woman.

"I must tend to the horse," the man said. He turned back towards the road, and the girl stepped inside. Dark black hair framed her face. A sharp nose, and those blue eyes.

"Merci, Monsieur."

Balthazar could hear Pascale shuffling upstairs.

It came all at once. A thunderclap so loud that it bounced off the hill behind the mill and sounded a second time, before the first was quite finished. A wall of rain slammed the mill from above and hammered the roof tiles as though it were a stoning. The panicked neighing of the horse and then its hooves pounding the pavement of the road.

In seconds, Balthazar could hear the water of the stream rushing down the small falls outside, and down the road in front of the house. He ran to close the door. The girl stood motionless, unimpressed, staring into the coals of the fire. Pascale came down the steps and put another log onto the coals. The flames licked upwards. "I am Pascale," she told the girl.

“Juliette.”

She didn't move, other than to bow slightly.

Balthazar stood by the door.

“There is a man, outside.”

The rain hammered on. Occasionally, lightning lit the room, offering a momentary glimpse of the girl's worn cloak and stark features. She was very pretty.

“Perhaps he needs some help with the horse?” Pascale suggested.

The neighing had stopped. There was more thunder in the distance, but the loudest noise by far was the rushing of the water down the creek beside the mill.

Balthazar looked back at Pascale, wanting to ask if she really thought he should go outside. The horse was quiet, but the man was not back. The barn door was right beside the house door. He had not come inside.

Minutes passed. The rain pounded the roof, the road, the trees around the mill.

“Don't be afraid,” Pascale told the girl. Juliette stood tall and motionless. It was as if Pascale was much more afraid than the girl.

“Are you travelling from far?” Balthazar asked her, still holding the door handle, ready to go outside if the rain let up.

“Yes.”

“Where are you going?”

“I'm not sure.”

Pascale took a step towards her husband. “Balthazar, he's still not back. You should go see what is wrong.” He set down the candle on a table near the door, and took his raincoat from a peg on the wall. When he opened the door, the room filled with a rush of wind, and the rain came in a mist several feet into the house. It was bouncing off the cobble stones in front of the mill and filling a steady stream that ran around the

side of the house and out into the courtyard and the road beyond. Another flash of lightning showed the horse standing, immobile, not fifty feet from the house. There was no sign of the man.

Balthazar set out into the rain, closing the door behind him. It was hard to make out anything in the dark, but he could see the shadow of the horse ahead. As he came closer, he could see the horse stood in a pool of water. Something blocked the rain from flowing down the road. Balthazar reached down and did not realize until he felt it what it was.

The man. Already cold from the rain, face down across the road, his cloak nicely filling the spaces between his body and the ground, so that a pool at least six inches deep had formed upstream of him. Balthazar lifted the head and broke the dam, letting the water run down. The body was limp and heavy. He was too big to carry. He pulled a moment at his shoulders. Finally, he felt the cold skin of the neck for a heartbeat. Then he set him down again, and dragged him, feet first, back to the house. The horse followed slowly. It took several minutes to drag the man across the road and the courtyard in front of the mill. Balthazar was drenched to the skin, but his heart beat so quickly that he did not feel cold in the rain. The heat of the night was however washed away. He still struggled to breathe, but now it was because he breathed too quickly, and the air rushed to his head and made him dizzy.

Balthazar leaned against the door with his shoulder and pushed it open. In the softly lit room, he could see Pascale's panicked expression as he dragged the body inside. The girl seemed oddly calm.

"Nom de Dieu, Balthazar! Que c'est-il passé?" Pascale rushed to help him and together they pulled the man to the fire.

"He was in the road. I found him like this."

The girl stood a few feet back. Balthazar watched her eyes as she stood dumbfounded. She looked terrified, but there was something else she felt. He could not

quite make it out. Balthazar knelt beside the man's head now, and wiped it with his rain cloak. His forehead and nose were smashed, and as Balthazar wiped them, the skin filled again with blood.

"The horse," Balthazar said. "He must have kicked him."

The girl still said nothing. Pascale walked over and put her arm around her. It seemed to Balthazar that she held a tree or a log instead of a person. Pascale still held her, offering some solace if any was wanted.

"I'm sorry," Balthazar said to the girl this time. "I don't think there is anything else we can do for him."

"We must bury him," the girl said. "Before anyone finds out."

The voice sent a shiver down Balthazar's spine. Suddenly, the wet cloak was like ice on his skin, heavy and cold. Pascale let the girl go and held his face in her hands.

"Balthazar, are you alright? Balthazar?"

He swallowed hard. Pascale removed his cloak and his nightshirt as well. From the shelf near the fire she took a blanket and tossed it over his shoulders. Then she ran upstairs to fetch him some warm clothes. He sat on the ground naked but for the blanket, next to the dead man. Juliette looked down at him and unexpectedly reached out her hand. As she touched his neck, he felt the warmth of her hand. Her palms were wet with nervous sweat and in her eyes he saw again the terror.

"Monsieur, please. We need to bury him."

"Of course."

"Tonight."

Her grip tightened a little, and Balthazar felt a little uncomfortable, with this strange child holding his neck, her thumb resting on his throat, half-pleading, half-threatening. There was nothing childlike about her glacial eyes. They seemed to see

right through him, past the blanket, past even his skin, into his empty insides. Instead of embarrassed, her eyes left him ashamed and a little afraid.

“Please,” she said.

“Alright, tonight.”