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Opening extract from
Dark of the Moon
A Shipwrecked novel

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Prologue

Hortense lights the final candle and steps away from the altar. Tendrils of incense smoke twist through the darkness like ghostly snakes, filling the air with the scent of sage. She takes a small wooden doll from her pocket and places it in the centre of the altar. A sudden breeze rushes through the trees like a nervous gasp, as if the island itself knows what's about to happen.

As Hortense stares at the doll, an unfamiliar brew of tension and anxiety begins bubbling inside her. She looks up at the crescent moon glowing hazily in the sky. In a few days, it will have disappeared completely. In a few days, the dark of the moon will have arrived, and she can finally finish what she began all those years ago.

Hortense turns and walks over to a wicker basket in the middle of the clearing. She slowly lifts the lid and a serpent's

head appears, its burnished skin gleaming in the candlelight. She takes the serpent from the basket and holds it high above her. It hisses as it arches up to the sky.

‘Papa Labas, bring me your strength!’ Hortense cries. Lowering her arms, she brings the serpent down around her neck. She shivers as its cold skin glides against hers. Then she starts to dance, slowly bending and swaying, until it feels as if she and the snake are one. As she closes her eyes she feels strength rushing into her, hot and urgent like a forest fire.

She places the serpent back into the basket and strides over to the altar. She takes a small, curved knife from her belt and holds it up to the moonlight. Then she picks up the doll – and carefully gouges out its eyes.

Chapter One

I'm drifting in that weird no-man's land between awake and asleep. Cruz's arm is circling my waist, anchoring my body to the sand beneath us, but my mind keeps being sucked under, back into the dream.

There's no fire this time. No choking smoke or screaming baby. This time all I hear is Hortense singing, and all I see is a hazy yellow glow. Then a beautiful girl's face slowly appears, like a Polaroid picture. She has gleaming chestnut skin and dark brown eyes. She's smiling at me, but a tear is trickling down her cheek. She opens her mouth to speak, but before she can say a word a snake slithers out from between her lips, its fangs bared.

I wake with a start, my heart pounding. Cruz pulls me closer.

'Grace,' he whispers in my ear. His voice is husky with sleep.

I allow my body to sink into his, soaking up the warmth, and I start composing a checklist in my head to help bring me back to reality. The singing and the girl and the snake were all just a dream. I'm awake now. Cruz is right next to me. Belle, the Flea and Dan are sleeping on the other side of the palm trees. Everything's okay. Well, as okay as it can be when you've been shipwrecked on a desert island that's possessed by the spirit of a voodoo queen.

An icy sweat erupts on my skin as I think of Hortense. *Get a grip, Grace, I tell myself, don't go losing the plot now.* I think of the boat we found yesterday, and the fact that we'll be leaving in it at first light. But if Hortense can read my mind won't she know what we've got planned? Won't she try and stop us? I lie there, motionless, waiting for her whispered voice in my head. But all I hear are the hisses and creaks from the rainforest and the sound of the waves as they crash on the beach. I haven't heard Hortense's voice or sensed her presence since we rescued Belle yesterday and Hortense tried to lure me to her. Maybe Cruz was right. Maybe I did break the spell by refusing to go to her. Maybe the nightmare really is over.

Cruz grips me tighter, as if he can sense that I'm thinking about him. As his breath whispers through my hair, my skin begins to tingle. Very carefully, I turn over so that I'm facing him. Part of me wishes he would wake up, but another part of me is glad he's asleep. When he's awake I have to ration the

amount I look at him, so that I don't appear too love-struck, but now I can gaze away to my heart's content. I look at the mass of dark curls spilling on to his face, the sharp curve of his cheekbones and the stubble darkening his jaw like a shadow. Then I look at his mouth and the places either side where dimples appear whenever he smiles.

It's hard to believe that the words 'I love you' came from that mouth just a few hours ago. Did he mean it? Can he really love me already? We've only known each other a few days, but so much has happened it's like we've condensed an entire lifetime into them. Once, when I'd been having doubts about my ex-boyfriend, Todd, I asked my mom how you knew when you were in love. She gave me a real sad smile and said, 'Oh, don't worry, sweetpea, you'll know. There's a reason why they call it *falling* in love. It's like stepping off the Empire State Building with your eyes and arms wide open. You know you could end up with your heart all smashed to pieces, but you just don't care.' At the thought of Mom my eyes prickle with tears. How will she be coping now we've been missing so long? *I love you, Mom*, I say loudly in my head. *I love you and I'm gonna be back home real soon*. I pray that through some umbilical-style mother-daughter telepathy, she'll somehow hear me all the way in Los Angeles.

I blink my tears away and look back at Cruz. He looks so peaceful; it's like all the stress of the past few days has drained

away into the sand while he's been asleep. He stirs and moves his face so close to mine our lips brush. My internal, incoming-Cruz radar kicks into action, making my heart pound.

'Hello,' he whispers, pulling me to him.

'Hello,' I whisper back.

His fingers start moving inside my T-shirt, trailing warmth up my spine. Then he moves one hand round so that it's cupping my breast. I can't help letting out a gasp and he instantly stops. I guess he's worried he's gone too far. But he hasn't, he hasn't at all. My lips find his again. If synchronised kissing was an Olympic sport our mouths would be going for gold right now. Cruz rolls on top of me and starts whispering something in Spanish in my ear.

'What does that mean?' I whisper back.

'You are so beautiful,' he whispers, breathlessly.

'Grace, Cruz. Are you guys awake?'

We both freeze at the sound of the Flea's voice. Cruz rolls back on to the sand beside me.

'What's up?' I call, pulling my T-shirt down. In the pale moonlight I can just make out the Flea's thin silhouette peering round the cluster of trees.

'It's Belle.'

My stomach lurches and I start scrambling to my feet.

'What's wrong with her?'

The Flea comes closer. His T-shirt's crumpled and his dark

hair is flat on one side from where he's been sleeping on it. 'She keeps moaning like she's having a really bad nightmare. But I can't wake her.'

I hold my hand out to Cruz to help him up and we hurriedly make our way around the trees to where Dan and Belle are sleeping. I can hear the soft purr of Dan's snores coming from within his cocoon of towels. Next to him Belle is twitching and breathing in shallow gasps. We crouch down around her.

'Belle,' I say in her ear. 'Belle, wake up.'

Belle lets out a low moan, as if she's in pain.

'What's wrong with her?' the Flea says, his voice trembling.

Cruz leans forward and grabs hold of Belle's shoulder.

'Wake up, Belle,' he says, gently shaking her.

Belle frowns but her eyes stay shut.

'Belle, honey, you have to wake up!' the Flea cries.

Dan sits bolt upright, like a horror-flick mummy rising from its tomb. 'Wass going on?' he yells, looking around wildly as if preparing for a fight.

'It's okay, we're just trying to wake Belle,' I explain.

Dan stares at me like I'm nuts. 'What the hell? It's the middle of the night.'

'I know, but she's having some kind of terrible nightmare,' the Flea says.

'I know the feeling,' Dan sighs and slumps back down on to the sand.

The Flea looks at me. ‘Maybe we should sing her favourite song?’

‘Say what?’ Dan mutters.

‘It’s what they do to coma patients to try and bring them round,’ the Flea says. ‘I saw it on an episode of *World’s Worst Diseases* one time. There was this girl who was in a coma after catching alligator AIDS and —’

Dan pokes his head out from under his towel. ‘Catching what?!’

‘Alligator AIDS.’ The Flea frowns at him. ‘It was *World’s Worst Diseases* for chrissakes. Anyways, the girl was, like, a massive Beyoncé fan, so her mom made her a playlist on her iPod and she came round by the very next ad break.’

‘I ain’t singing no “Single Ladies”,’ Dan mutters. ‘She’s probably just wiped out after everything that happened to her. I say we let her sleep.’

I look down at Belle. Her face is glistening with sweat, but when I touch her cheek it’s freezing. ‘I don’t know,’ I say, ‘she’s not looking so great. Let’s try sitting her up.’

Cruz helps me prop Belle into a seated position.

‘What’s that smell?’ Belle murmurs.

The hairs on the back of my neck instantly prickle. ‘What smell?’ I stare down at Belle. Can she smell the same strange scent that I do whenever Hortense is near? I take a deep breath in through my nose, but all I can smell is the humid,

earthy scent of the rainforest.

‘Beau-Belle!’ the Flea says loudly. ‘Come on, honey, you have to wake up.’ He leans forward and starts shaking her.

Belle’s eyes flicker open.

‘Oh, thank God!’ The Flea smothers her in a hug.

Cruz and I sit back and exchange relieved grins.

‘Well, now you guys have woken her, how about we all go back to sleep?’ Dan grunts from beneath his blanket of towels.

Belle frowns. ‘Why’s it so dark?’

‘Because it’s night time,’ Dan sighs. ‘You know? When most normal folk try and get some sleep.’

‘There’s not much of a moon tonight, hon,’ the Flea says, putting his arm round her.

‘But I can’t . . .’ Belle pushes the Flea away and stares around frantically. ‘I can’t see anything!’

The Flea frowns at her. ‘What do you mean?’

Belle starts trembling, her eyes wide with fear. ‘I can’t see a thing. Oh my God! I’ve gone blind!’

Chapter Two

Quick as a flash, Dan is up and out of bed and crouching in front of Belle. ‘What do you mean, you can’t see anything?’

‘Exactly what I said!’ Belle stares at him blankly, looking terrified.

The Flea grabs hold of her hand. ‘It’s me, Jimmy. I’m right here, honey. It’s okay.’ He turns and looks at me, panic-stricken.

I lean forward and take hold of Belle’s other hand. ‘You can’t see anything?’ I look up at the sky. A crescent moon is suspended above us, glowing pearly white. ‘Try looking up. Can you see the moonlight?’

Belle tilts her head back and blinks hard. ‘No.’ Her voice begins to tremble. ‘What’s happened to me?’

I glance at Cruz. He’s frowning. ‘I think maybe it is to do with the trauma you have been through,’ he says to Belle softly.

‘Sometimes our bodies can, you know, shut down when we have had a shock. As a kind of protection.’

Belle shakes her head. ‘That doesn’t make sense.’ She grips on to the Flea’s hand. ‘It doesn’t make sense, does it, Jimmy? How would going blind protect me?’

But the Flea is nodding. ‘He could be right, hon. I’m sure I saw something like this one time on *Real Life Emergency Room*. There was this girl who’d been in a terrible car crash and she became mute because she was so traumatised at –’

‘I just want to see!’ Belle yells, wrenching her hand from his. ‘I just – want – to – see.’ She hunches over and starts to sob.

The Flea stares at her, distraught. ‘I’m sorry. I was only trying to make you feel better.’

Belle just keeps on crying.

I look up to the top of the beach where the dark silhouette of the rainforest looms like a huge open mouth waiting to devour us. Anger floods my body. I leap to my feet.

The Flea frowns at me. ‘What’s up, Gracie?’

But I can’t answer him – not without telling them everything about Hortense and freaking Belle out even more.

‘I have to go do something,’ I say, avoiding eye contact with Cruz. ‘I’ll be right back.’

I start running up the beach, ignoring the others as they call after me. My heart is pounding with fear, but anger forces me to keep going. Belle was abducted and now she’s gone

blind. Jenna, Cariss, Ron and Todd are drifting in a beat-up boat somewhere in the middle of the ocean – and all because of some stupid spell that I somehow managed to trigger. *Why can't you just leave the others alone?* I yell at Hortense in my head. *If I'm the one you want then go ahead and take me. I don't care any more. Just leave the others be.*

'Grace?' Cruz races up the beach behind me and grabs my shoulder. 'What are you doing?'

'I'm going to find her,' I gasp, trying to catch my breath. 'I've got to end this.'

Cruz pulls me round to face him. 'What are you talking about?'

'Hortense.' I lower my voice to a whisper so the others can't hear. 'She must have made Belle go blind. We thought it was over – but it's not. And it won't be until I go to her. I'm the one she wants. I'm the one who triggered her dumb spell.'

Cruz shakes his head. 'No. It is not you. It is not your fault.'

'But Hortense wants *me*. I don't know why . . . but that's why we're all here. That's why we got shipwrecked. She said so. I'm sick of seeing other people get hurt.' I start marching up towards the forest.

Cruz runs in front of me to block my path.

'Get out of the way.' I'm so mad that for a second I actually feel like shoving him.

He shakes his head. 'No.'

‘You have to let me go.’

‘Let you go to *her*? Are you crazy?’ His eyes are filled with concern. ‘I saved your life, remember? And that means that I am responsible for you forever. So, *no can do*.’

I think back to the moment on the boat when I was about to drown and Cruz pulled me to safety. And I think of everything he has done for me since. And my anger starts to fade. Tiredness rushes into its place.

I sigh. ‘Dammit, Cruz! Why d’you have to play that one?’

He starts to smile. ‘Come here.’

I frown at him. ‘What do you mean? I *am* here.’

He opens his arms. ‘I mean right here.’

I step into his arms and, as I do, the insanity of what I was planning hits me. How would tearing into the forest demanding Hortense take me guarantee she’d leave the others alone? How would it give Belle her sight back? How would it bring Jenna and the others to safety? The fact is, I don’t have a clue what Hortense is up to, or what she actually wants.

‘I just want to do something to fix all this,’ I whisper into Cruz’s shoulder.

‘You will.’ Cruz steps back and smiles at me. ‘We all will. Look.’ He points up. Behind the banks of charcoal-coloured cloud, the sky is turning an inky blue. ‘The sun is on its way. As soon as it rises, we’ll be out of here.’

I force myself to nod. I really wish I could believe it would be

so simple. But if Hortense has gone to so much trouble to get me on to the island, is she really going to let me leave without putting up a fight? I sigh and glance back over my shoulder at the rainforest. It's the quietest it's been since we got here, but for some reason this doesn't feel like a good thing. It feels like a calm-before-the-storm thing.

'So, no more running off like a *macaco-de-cheiro*?' Cruz says with a grin.

'Like a what?'

'A *macaco-de-cheiro*. It is a monkey that lives in Costa Rica. They run very fast – just like you.'

'Ah, I see. Okay, no more running off like a macaco de cheerio de whatever.' I grab hold of his hand and we start walking back down the beach. 'But no more reminding me how you saved my life either. It's not fair. How am I ever supposed to win a fight with you if you're gonna pull that one on me all the time?'

Cruz laughs. 'But it is the truth.'

'Cruz!'

'Okay, already.'

I squeeze his hand tight and we make our way back to the others.

'What happened, Gracie?' the Flea says as soon as we get back. 'Why'd you run off like that?'

He and Dan look up at me, Belle looks blindly from side to side.

‘I’m sorry,’ I mumble. ‘I guess I just flipped out.’

Dan gets to his feet and comes and gives me a hug. ‘Been a crazy few days, huh?’

I nod. Just the fact that Dan Charles is hugging me proves how crazy it’s been – we barely said a word to each other back in our old lives at the dance academy. I guess I’d always been a bit wary, given all the rumours about his brother and gangs. But that seems really stupid now. I suppose one good thing about being stuck on this lousy island has been realising that when you judge someone without actually knowing them, you could really be missing out. I look at the Flea stroking Belle’s hair. Another case in point.

Cruz goes over to one of the boxes of food we found on the boat and pulls out a couple of cans. ‘How about we have something to eat since we are awake? We’ll need all our strength for when we set sail.’

‘Good plan.’ The Flea grins. ‘What do you say, m’lady?’ he says to Belle in his fake British accent. ‘Would you care for a hotdog surprise?’

Belle frowns. ‘What’s the surprise?’

‘That it’s not a frickin’ coconut!’ the Flea says, reverting to his native New York twang.

We all laugh and Belle nods and smiles weakly.

The Flea puts his arm round her and hugs her to him. ‘We’ll be getting out of here real soon, sweetie-pie. And then you can

go straight to hospital and they'll figure out what's happened to you and have you right in no time.'

Belle nods again, but I can see tears shining on her face in the moonlight.

As Cruz passes round a can of hotdogs I can't help thinking about the man whose boat we found and whose food we're eating – and it pretty much kills my appetite stone dead. So many horrible things have happened since we got here, but seeing the man throw himself into the canyon right in front of us is almost too dreadful to comprehend. He'd written in his journal that he'd come to the island to see if the legend of Hortense was true – to see if she really did exist. I think of Hortense stumbling after us in the rainforest, her breath rasping like a bitter wind. What had she done to the man to make him so terrified of her – to make him jump to his death rather than face her? I shudder and look up to the sky, willing it to get light.

'I wonder how the others are doing,' the Flea says, staring down the beach at the sea.

I shiver as I follow his gaze. In the darkness the ocean seems to stretch on forever.

'At least there haven't been any more storms,' the Flea says. 'They'll have had a calm night. If they haven't been rescued already.'

My body relaxes a little. If the others have been found then the coast-guard might be on their way to get us right now.

‘I still can’t believe those guys left without us,’ Dan mutters.

Cruz grunts in agreement, no doubt still furious that they took his boat.

‘Well, hey, we’ll all be gone soon too,’ I say, my voice all fake cheery, like I’m doing the voice-over for a commercial.

Nobody replies.

A bird suddenly takes flight from the forest and swoops down over the beach toward the sea. If only I was a bird too. If only I could fly all the way back to LA – back to my mom and dad, and my cat, Tigger. I feel a lump growing in my throat. Cruz puts his arm round me and kisses the top of my head. I take a deep breath and make myself smile up at him. I can’t fall apart now, not when we’re so close to getting out of here.

‘Should we start getting ready?’ the Flea says. ‘So we can leave as soon as the sun comes up?’

Cruz nods and he and Dan get to their feet and head over to the boat. After giving Belle a quick hug, the Flea jumps up and goes to pack his things.

‘I’ll sit with you, Belle,’ I say, noticing that she’s starting to look freaked out again. I shuffle up and put my arm round her. Her shoulder blades feel bony beneath her T-shirt. I think back to the digs Jenna and Cariss made about her being overweight before we left and it makes me feel sick.

‘Why did you run off just now?’ Belle whispers to me.

I try to think of an answer that won’t make me sound like

a fruit loop, and won't totally freak Belle out. 'I don't know. Frustration, I guess. I just wanted to find the person who's behind all the weird stuff that's happened here.'

Belle looks at me, but her eyes are blank. 'The person who took me?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Do you know who it is?'

My face instantly flushes. 'No, of course not.'

'Are you sure?'

'Sure I'm sure.'

Belle looks so stressed. Maybe I ought to tell her what I know – or at least, what I *think* I know about Hortense. But then I see Belle's mom's broken necklace glinting in her hand. And I remember what the Flea told us about her mom being diagnosed with cancer right before we left. I can't tell her anything. It'll just make her even more upset.

'We don't know any more than you,' I tell her. 'When we found you in the volcano whoever had taken you there had gone.'

Belle frowns. She doesn't look all that convinced.

'I'm just going down to the water to wash the sand out of my trainers,' the Flea says, coming over to us. 'You okay, Beau-Belle?'

Belle nods.

'Cool. I won't be long and then I'll help you get your stuff together, 'kay?'

‘Okay.’ As soon as he’s gone, Belle turns back to me. ‘Hold my hand, Grace,’ she whispers.

Still keeping my arm round her, I take hold of her hand and squeeze it tightly. Despite the humidity it’s as cold as ice. ‘You’re gonna be okay,’ I tell her, softly.

She closes her eyes and leans into me. ‘Thank you,’ she sighs.

I glance over at Cruz. He and Dan are engrossed in checking out the sail on the boat.

I’m about to tell Belle what they’re doing when I see the Flea racing back toward us, a look of horror on his face.

‘What is it? What’s wrong?’ I call out to him.

‘What’s happening?’ Belle says, gripping my hand tightly.

‘It’s okay, it’s the Flea,’ I tell her as he gets back to us, gasping for breath. ‘What’s the matter?’

The Flea just stands there, his mouth hanging open, but no words coming out.

‘Hey, what’s up?’ Dan says, coming over with Cruz right behind him.

‘Th-the boat,’ the Flea stammers.

‘It’s okay, Dan and I just checked it again,’ Cruz says.

‘No, not that boat. *The* boat. *Our* boat. *Your* boat – the one the others took,’ the Flea says, looking straight at Cruz.

Cruz instantly looks alarmed. ‘What about it?’

The Flea gulps. ‘It – it’s been washed up on the beach. It’s totally trashed.’