

Chapter One

Her journey began there, on a cold, windy day, with an ominous warning of what was to come. It brought her to a strange, dark place near the edge of the great Lake Superior. The manor, called Cedar Ridge Hills, rose high atop the hill.

She grabbed the keys in the box next to the door. At this late hour, no one would greet her. She was to let herself in and set up her quarters in the western wing on the second floor past the office area.

Thalia Jefferies hoped her journey would open the doors of life, and bind her past with her future. The ornate, French doors unsealed an unfamiliar world with people she never met, people who were only shadows in her imagination, but would soon fill her tomorrows.

It was a dark and frightening place on the crest of a lonely hill. The ghosts of yesterday cautioned her to leave, but Thalia had arrived, and there was no turning back.

The fear of darkness and the unknown was only for the young.

She walked through the desolate corridors of the mysterious, dusky manor. Thalia could hear the brooding calls of the dead trembling in its walls, and singed her unexpressed fears. It was her home now and the outside world fell away into distant shadows.

There were homes with warm, welcoming families in Locke Bay, people with hopes and dreams. Yet, she couldn't feel anything but the dark night as it pressed its gloom on her. It crushed against the windows whispering to her, telling her to escape while she could.

It was a fitful sleep but, at least, the night was over. It was a night touched with a fear Thalia had never known before. The gray light of early morning brought no relief from the heaviness that inhabited the house.

Thalia was enjoying a cup of coffee when a well-dressed man entered the kitchen area.

“Good morning.” He put his hand out to shake hers.

She stood to greet him. “Good morning. Thalia Jefferies, you must be George Greene?”

“That I am. Local expert, docent of a little bit of this and that, and *way* too many stories. Sit, please. Finish your breakfast. I'll pour myself a cup and join you.”

She watched the elderly man as he heated a cinnamon roll and poured coffee into a cup. He sat across from her. “It's good to see you're still here. You lasted much longer than the last curator we hired.”

“Oh?”

“He didn't make it past midnight.”

Thalia laughed. “Well, it is a bit scary up here at the top of the hill. It's an odd and lonely place. I enjoyed the grounds at sunrise this morning. All I could see was the great hulk of Cedar Ridge towering above the mist, a sleeping monster on its crest.”

“I like that, good thing you'll be helping with the tours. In your email, you said you wanted to do some deep, ancestral searching. I know a lot of local history, and would be happy to help.”

“Thank you. I'm really curious about—”

A group of people entered and introductions were made. The museum would open soon. It was reassuring to see the nametags on the employees; she was never very good at remembering names. Faces, yes. Names? No.

Thalia hoped and believed the answers she was looking for might be here—for her father, if not for her own personal curiosity. At the end of each day, she'd wait in the darkness and search the dust of hidden years, surrounded by ghosts of the past and shake away the fears of the present.

Thalia pulled folders out of the filing cabinets, she'd have a lot of work to catch up on and understand. Normally, the director would train her, but Cedar Ridge didn't seem to have one.

She wondered what happened.

Thalia started reading notes from the early 1900s when the Locke family moved to another home away from the cliffs. It'd become a sanatorium for about fifty years before they closed the doors and an order to demolish was aborted. The people of Locke Bay, and the historical society saved the beautiful manor.

Whoever put notes to paper described the dead past with a colorful flourish as they recorded the history of the family. She could picture them as they drifted through the corridors of Locke Manor, now known as Cedar Ridge. The pages of stories settled like dust in its corners. They worried a legacy would be destroyed, yet spurred by hope, they fought to keep the manor in place.

Her search continued as life itself continued. Not only for her but also for everyone else in this strange corner of the world. There was so much history here. Would she find Albert, her long-lost uncle? Would she be able to release her father from the haunted memories of two young children in search of family?

Locke Manor was a sanatorium, a foundling home, hospital, and a place for those whose devils prowled the hidden hollows of fear. People who lived with their own trepidations and their own hopes.

It was of a forgotten time as foundlings and the infirm made their home on the crest of the hill. The great house echoed with their pain.

It was a lonely and frightening place. For Thalia, it was a place of hope. It was a home where the winds of the past would bring the answers to the future.

Patti, one of the tour guides, walked into her office and leaned against the desk. "You know, you've been here for almost a month. Why don't you come into town with us? We're going to a restaurant on the water. It's beautiful in the evening. Something I think you'd like to see."

Thalia smiled. "I think I'd like that. Thank you. Sometimes the mysteries of this place make me feel like it's reached out and touched me and everyone within its walls."

"The longer you stay, the more it will become a part of you. It'll feel like it's closing in on you."

"I think that's called cabin fever."

"Yes, well, you can get it real easy here at Cedar Ridge."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Meet us at six? At the Superior Oyster Bar and Grill?"

Thalia waved as Patti left the office. "Sounds good. Thanks."

She looked around her office. Yes, it'd be easy to get lost in the past. It could become a prison, not only for her but also for others, and anyone driven by fear of the future.

Cedar Ridge sat for over one hundred years in brooding isolation on the crest of its hill. Thalia looked at the shadows of the manor in her rearview mirror.

She was afraid, to leave, and to stay. The great house on the hill carried the dusty smell of fear. The secrets of its past lived within its darkened rooms. They moved through the paneled rooms and corridors seeping down from the walls.

It touched the heart of everyone who entered.

The group sat around the table and gotten quiet when she'd arrived. It immediately put Thalia on guard.

Jacob, the groundskeeper for the museum, pulled out the chair next to him. "Come on. We were just talking about you."

"We want to know why you've stayed," Patti said, before handing her the menu.

"We sure do," Janet piped in. "And, how you can stay at the museum with all its ghosts and legends."

"It's just a house. I don't believe in ghosts."

"You will." Jacob smiled at the waitress who'd approached the table. "Know what you want?"

"Yes."

Patti grabbed some clam cakes. "Aren't you scared?"

Thalia shook her head. "Not really. I mean sometimes it's a bit spooky."

Janet harrumphed, "that's putting it mildly."

Patti flipped her hand outward. "I've stayed there at night. It was terrifying. The night wind battered the hill with the force of a thousand demons. I felt so alone as if there was no town beyond the crest, only the waves, the wind, and the terrible loneliness of fear."

Jacob laughed. "Can you tell she wants to be an author?"

"It's true. The house is surrounded by tension and sometimes it grows so tight, it chokes you."

Thalia was curious. "Why do you work there?"

Patti pulled her hair up. "The daytime is fine. The nights come alive with ghosts of the past. You wouldn't get me near that place at night."

Thalia looked at Janet. "What about you. Do you believe in ghosts?"

Janet chuckled nervously and pointed to her empty wine glass when the waitress came by. "Don't forget I lived there for well over a year."

Jacob took a drink from his mug. "You should find a place in town. Get out of that house before it swallows you."

"Definitely," Patti agreed vehemently. She took a bite of her chocolate cake. "Get out now, while you can."

On the drive back, Thalia couldn't help but hear the ring of truth cast at her feet. The great, dark house on the crest of the hill was alive with ghosts of a past she never knew. Ghosts that drew tight fingers around the present.

Thalia wasn't about to let them sway her determination and would continue her search. There were answers in the dead past at Cedar Ridge. She knew there was a connection between her father and his early life. She would learn what happened to his brother, and where he went. The answers had to be there, somewhere.

She would find them.

Searching the dusty corridors on the third floor, the wind howled against the glass windows. Dark threads of the past tied her to the great house on top of the hill. Her search was endless as the corridors wound about. Each room echoed dark voices of fear. Thalia listened to their murmurs and trembled as she approached the door where the strange voices called.

She looked about the tattered room with its musty, torn furniture, and broken lamps.

There was an odd stillness about the room. Dark voices of fear scolded her in the upper floors of the great house that was now her home.

She opened a chest. It had clothing from a bygone time. Nothing to note, nothing to give her clues to the hidden hollows of the past. She approached a large table, strewn with assorted items, books, and papers.

Grabbing a photo album, she carefully opened it. Dust billowed upward and she sneezed.

She picked up an elaborately decorated fan. She traced the edge. It appeared to be ivory. She opened it and fanned herself. Smiling, she slipped her finger through the ring on the end.

The door slammed behind her. She jumped and dropped her flashlight and the photo album she was inspecting. Moving toward the door, she grasped the knob. She was shut in, locked somehow. She banged on the door, knowing it was useless. She was alone. All had gone home for the night.

A brewing storm buffeted the walls. There was no sound in the house, nothing but the echo of thunder and the whine of the rising wind. The emptiness was alive with an encumbering fear. It was built on a simple, terrifying fact. Thalia was alone.

She tried the door again to no avail. She sat on the floor in dismay. The room was hot and musty. She cooled herself with the ivory, scrimshaw fan until sleep crept into her tired body.

Thalia awakened, stiff and sore. The sun streaked muted rays through the covered windows. She stood and leaned against a bureau, waiting for the dizziness to pass.

Thalia inspected the door. The hinge pins were removable. If she could find something to use to remove them, that'd be a blessing.

Her eyes scanned the room in the sunlight. It looked different, less threatening and spooky. She shook her head. No need to go there. The howling wind was bad enough; she didn't need her imagination making things worse.

The early morning mist rose from Lake Superior at the foot of the hill. Angry spirits out of the dim past seemed to pound against the door, demanding admission.

Her heart raced. Something wasn't quite right.

She put the fan in her pocket and grabbed the flashlight.

Before she attempted to take the door off the hinges, she reached for the handle.

The door swung open.

Here in the hidden crevices of Cedar Ridge was a moment of quiet, even the wind subsided, and the threat of a storm was past.

However, there were other storms to come.

She grabbed the photo album and quickly left the dark crevices of the third floor. Relieved the night was done.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" the voice of an unfamiliar woman demanded.

Thalia slowly turned. "Who are you and how did you get inside the museum?"

The woman had her hair pulled back so tight her face looked pinched and angry. She was in odd garb, a long, dark gray skirt and blouse with a functional apron covering it.

“Your attire is indecent, showing off your legs like that. There are men here, you know.”

Thalia looked down at her dress. It was a conservative sheath dress with a matching jacket. Quite reasonable for business attire. It was a bit dusty from the room, but that shouldn't cause the kind of reaction she was getting from this woman.

Was this one of the apparitions?

“You need to change your clothing immediately. Then, I'll take you to Dr. Huey.”

“Dr. Huey?”

“Yes, the man who runs this sanatorium.”

“Sanatorium?” Thalia stood unmoving, unsure of what she was to do and what was expected.

“Girl, is there something wrong with you? Stop repeating what I'm saying to you with a question.”

The great house sat quietly on its crest and the events unfolding were but a dream, a nightmarish vision from a shattering night confined in a dusty room. It couldn't be real yet, it was almost like a vague memory of a forgotten dream.

Thalia stopped following the commanding woman. “I'm not moving one more step until you tell me who you are and how you got here.”

The woman leaned in closer to her face. “You don't look like an idiot.”

She grabbed Thalia's arm. The woman was surprisingly strong, but Thalia was definitely stronger. She twisted the woman's arm, releasing the grip. “Who are you?”

“My name is Catherine, and I'm the headmistress of the school.”

“School?”

“Yes. Where did you think you were?”

This was no dream. The woman in front of her was real.

Thalia felt lightheaded. She could feel the heat flush her face and a buzzing in her ears.

“Girl, are you well?” The woman grabbed her arm. “Come with me.”