

The title 'MMA and the Undead' is presented in a dark, ink-splattered font. The letters 'MMA' are large and bold, with a rough, hand-painted appearance. Below them, 'and the Undead' is written in a smaller, more fluid script. Several black bat silhouettes are scattered around the text, some flying upwards and others downwards, adding a gothic or horror theme to the design.

MMA and the Undead

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PRAISE FOR MINA AND THE UNDEAD:

‘A dark and thrilling tale of the paranormal set in the nineties in New Orleans. With haunted houses, family secrets and murder galore, this delicious and gruesome tale of the macabre will ignite a whole new generation of vampire fans.’

LAUREN JAMES



‘Brimming full of nostalgia and cinematic atmosphere. I loved this heart-pounding mystery so much, I couldn’t put it down. A thrilling read and a clever new twist on the vampire stories you love.’

LAURA WOOD



‘Set in a world of love, loss and lies – in the heart of New Orleans – McCaw has spun the vampire myth in a way that will engross readers from the very first page.’

C. G. MOORE



For Kev and Nathan

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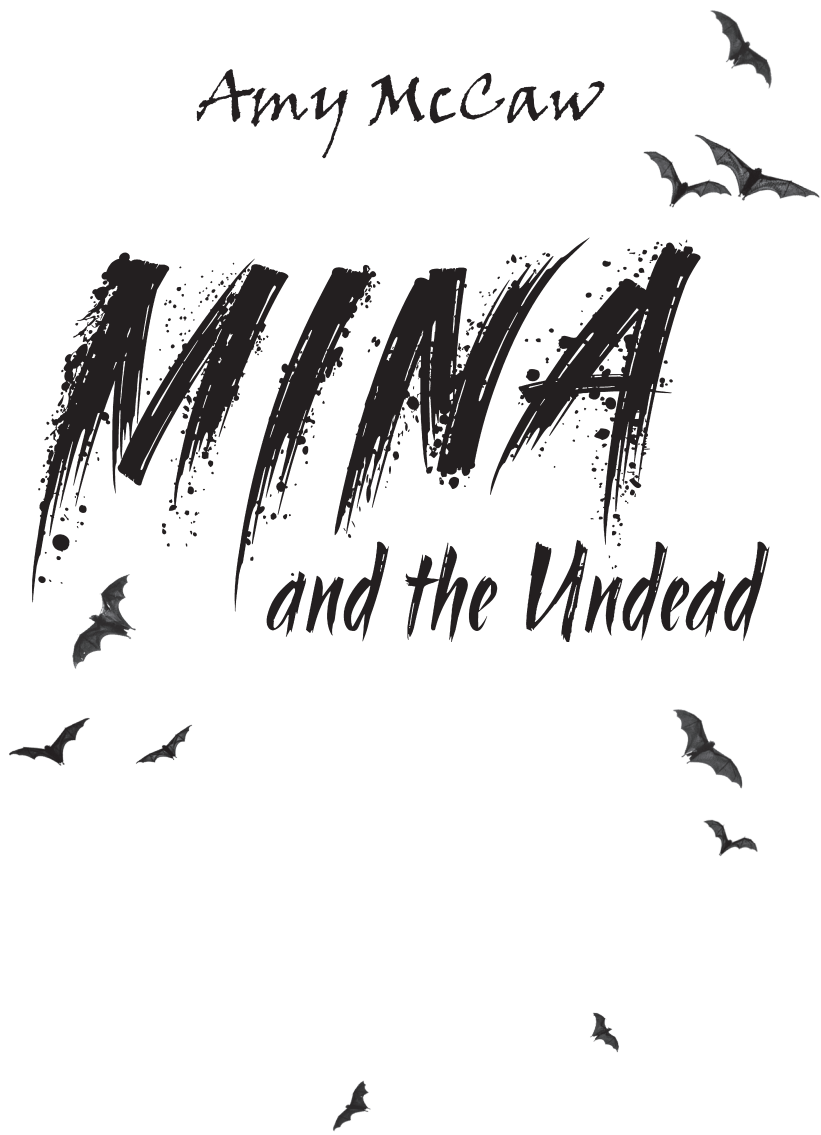
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Amy McCaw

MAMA

and the Undead



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Chapter 1

When I was about six, I went to school dressed as a vampire. It was Halloween, and I spent every break time stalking the Ninja Turtles and plastic-crowned princesses around the playground. Billy White told me vampires weren't real, so I bit him. The pain was real enough. His skin popped as it broke under my teeth, and I felt a mean pulse of pleasure when he screamed. I wondered if he'd get a scar on his neck like my mum. Hers was a silvery line that was hardly noticeable, but it annoyed her when we asked about it. She arrived at school, white-lipped and fuming, but I realised a lot later she was mad at my teacher for making a fuss, not me. I only recognised this as a warning sign when she'd already gone.

It was no surprise that this memory surfaced on my first night in New Orleans, as we walked past a sign that said *Fang Fest '95*.

Excitement held back the worst of the jetlag. We passed a voodoo shop with shrunken heads in the window, bars illuminated with gaudy neon signs and elegant buildings with balconies and thin columns. There were so many things to appreciate, but the heat wasn't one of them. The air was never like this in the north of England, so thick that it felt wet on my skin. I peeled off my flannel shirt and tied it around my waist, where it hung limp in the sticky air.

"It starts in two days," Libby said, light-voiced and animated. It was so easy for her. She'd jetted off to New Orleans for university, and I'd spent almost a year carrying her absence like a stone around my neck.

Despite all of that, she threaded an arm around my waist, and I relaxed against her. My body hadn't got the message about keeping her at a distance, and maybe that was for the best. I wasn't going to let our drama ruin this experience.

Libby stopped us in front of the ugliest building on the street. It nestled between two hotels like a rotten tooth, char-black with windows sliced across by silver bars. At the top was a circular, cloudy window that reminded me of a dead eye. I felt the same delicious anticipation as reading horror in bed with my torch, darkness intruding at the edges of the light.

"So, this is where I work. It's called the Mansion of the Macabre." Libby swept her arms out grandly, pulling off the breeziness until she snatched one hand back to bite the skin around her thumbnail.

"And your job is . . .?"

She shrugged one shoulder, the corners of her mouth forming a playful smile. Our mum did name her after the bloodthirsty Countess Elizabeth Bathory. From the look of this place, maybe

Libby decided to embrace her namesake and got a job in a torture chamber.

“Hey!” a deep voice called from behind us.

In the falling dusk, I made out the guy’s silhouette with its long, angular limbs. As he loped closer, I saw thick hair that curled in all directions. “Mina, this is my roommate, Jared,” Libby said.

“Hey,” I echoed. The new-person nerves rose up my throat, but his easy smile stopped them from choking me. He wasn’t doing the back and forth most people did, noticing the wild, dark hair and even darker eyes that identified us as sisters.

“Roommate?” he asked, heavy brows raised. “How about best buddy, personal chef . . . ?”

“Jared, you know I love you,” Libby said, “but we don’t have time for this. Thandie will skin us alive if we’re late.”

“That’s weirdly specific.” Jared’s hands were never still, first rattling in his pocket and then ruffling the back of his curly head. “I’m glad I got the chance to meet you before . . .” He trailed off like I should’ve been able to finish the sentence. “Are you going on the tour?” His skin was a warm shade of bronze, and he had an intriguing accent that I couldn’t place. I wondered if he was nineteen, like Libby – only two years older than me.

Libby huffed. “She doesn’t know about that yet!”

“Oops,” Jared said, flashing a devilish grin.

I wasn’t sure what a tour, the potentially deadly Thandie and this Mansion of the Macabre had in common.

“So, what kind of tours do you give?” I asked.

A scream came from inside.

Libby leaned heavily on the door to open it, and stampeding kids almost crushed us. We leaped to one side as they shoved

and chatted on their way out. A skinny guy in a butler's tuxedo balanced a severed head on a tray. The rubbery tongue dangled from its mouth.

"Nice one," Libby said.

"Just giving the tourists some light refreshments, ma'am," the guy replied in a mangled British accent. He swung the head from its hair. "Nice to meet you!"

I watched him jog upstairs. "Is he supposed to be English?"

"I've tried to teach him, but he thinks we all speak like the Queen," Libby said.

Jared headed towards the stairs, pausing at the bottom. "I have to get ready, but I'll catch you later."

He set off too fast and tripped halfway up the stairs, catching himself on the wooden banister.

Perching on a chair shaped like a contorted human skeleton, Libby unlaced one glossy, black Doc Marten. While she peered into her boot, I took in the subtle ghoulish touches. The glittering chandelier was an intricate web of bear traps. I brushed my hand over the deceptively plain, grey wallpaper. It felt ridged under my fingertips, and it wasn't until I moved that I understood why. Smoky handprints with tiny palms and delicate fingerprints appeared. Children's hands. There was no natural light, and the endless twilight was fitting. "This place is amazing!"

"It has its perks. I've worked at the mansion since I moved here." It seemed like Libby was about to say more when the door opened. I knew Libby cared about the person before they were visible, from the way the taut lines of her body slackened. Libby leaned in for a quick kiss as the girl stepped into view.

She was taller than Libby, with glowing, dark brown skin and

fine braids that fell past her shoulders. Their hands interlinked as the girl said, “Hey, it’s Mina, right?” Her voice was low, and her accent was one I’d only heard in movies set in New Orleans. “I’m Della. Good to meet you, finally.” She gave me a wide, genuine smile that put tiny dimples in her cheeks.

I liked her, an impulse that didn’t always come easily. My snarky reply that I’d never even heard of her fizzled out. Our baggage wasn’t Della’s fault. “You too,” I said.

“I should get ready too,” Libby said. She passed her eyes back and forth between us. What did she think I’d do?

“Go. We’re good here,” Della said.

Libby raced upstairs, taking them two at a time.

“Have you been on the tour before?” I asked, taking a chance that Della was more forthcoming than my sister.

“Yeah, but I came to meet you.” Her speech sounded so fluid, like ‘meetchu’ was all one word. “Libby told me not to tell you ’bout it, but I will, if you want.”

It was tempting, but I resisted. “That’s OK. I’ll find out soon.”

I was more curious about the two of them. Libby broke up with her long-term girlfriend before she came to New Orleans, leaving them both in pieces. Libby had moved on, and I’d missed it.

“How did you meet?”

Smiling, Della slid a finger and thumb down one braid, pinching it at the end. “At the bar where I work – Empire of the Dead. If you like how creepy the mansion is, you’re gonna love it there.”

I hadn’t quite fit Della and Libby together yet, though their spooky workplaces helped. Della’s outfit was one thing that threw me – slim-fitting, black leggings and a vest top that said ‘French Quarter Mixed Martial Arts Academy’. Back home, Libby’s idea of

exercise was running for the school bus when she was late. That'd happened often enough to keep her in shape.

"Have you been working out?" I asked.

"I do MMA. I go a few times a week, if you ever wanna come with."

"Thanks – that'd be great. Does Libby go with you?" I liked the idea of hitting her in a controlled environment.

"Not yet. I took Jared once, but he said 'sorry' every time he hit me. I told him to stick with weightliftin'."

Stomping footsteps announced Libby before she appeared at the top of the stairs. She'd always walked like the floor made her mad. She wore a fitted tuxedo jacket for a dress, and her hair was frizzed out around her face. Grey make-up lined her cheekbones and eye sockets, casting a sickly hue over her complexion.

"The show's about to start. Are you ready?" Libby skimmed both hands through her messy curls and over her dress.

"I can't wait!" I said as she crossed the hall.

"Pretend you don't know me, and have fun!" She flung the front door open.

Della and I shifted to one side of the hallway as a mismatched group of people entered. Libby collected tickets, and Della watched the group with natural confidence.

Two men in their fifties held hands and whispered while a group of young girls chattered nervously and glanced around them. A few college guys laughed too loud and jostled each other. The last guy to enter stood apart like us. He was about six inches taller than everyone else, with a jawline and resting broody face that Jared Leto would envy.

A chainsaw squealed in the distance and snuffed out the

conversations. Someone shrieked, and my heart threatened to burst out of my chest, *Alien*-style.

“Good evening, everyone.” Libby’s greeting cut through the nervous whispers as she skipped up a few steps to address us. “Welcome to the Mansion of the Macabre. Your horror movie tour will start momentarily. Please keep your hands to yourself, as the actors will do the same. Stay close at all times, and don’t progress without me.”

Upstairs, Libby led us into a cramped, dated bathroom with beige walls, a grubby white sink and a bath shrouded with a stained shower curtain. The lights flickered, and the stench of clogged drains triggered my gag reflex.

We crowded around the sink at Libby’s instruction, our reflection distorted by the speckled mirror. Was this a *Candyman*-themed room? Did Libby have the guts to summon him by saying his name in front of the mirror three times?

Distant children’s laughter drifted up from the plughole. Soon, their giggles became high-pitched and garbled, like a chewed-up cassette. A chill trickled over my skin. I knew this book and movie. We were dealing with a much worse monster than the Candyman.

Thick blood threaded with black clots rose from the plughole until the sink was full. A bubble hiccupped in the middle. I knew there were no children down there but I got a clear picture of tiny faces, stuck like that for ever because he killed them.

It all worked as a diversion.

A clown sprang up behind us with an exuberant chuckle. We burst outwards like shrapnel, bolting for the door. Panting, I made it to the exit and found Della had beaten me there.

The clown leapt in front of our exit, revealing a mouth crammed

with spiky teeth as fine as blades. His eyes were pure white, flat and vacant. Sludgy paint the colour of old bones disguised his skin.

A cloud of balloons drifted over us and he plucked one of the strings, giving a jaunty wave with his knife. He offered us the balloon, which was the same deep crimson as the blood in the sink.

We shrank back. Though this was all pretend, my instinct to run fired up.

Libby stepped between us and the clown. Drawing a slingshot from her pocket, she palmed a silver slug and pulled back the elastic. The clown blinked hard as she aimed right for his head. Hissing, he shambled out of the way, with jerky movements like a video being rewound.

Yanking the door open, Libby ushered us through and slammed it shut. There was no easing us into the horror in this place, and it was exhilarating.

The mansion provided one thrill after another. Freddie Krueger chased us through a foggy dreamscape, knife-hands slashing. We had run-ins with Jason, Pinhead and a cross-dressing Norman Bates. An animatronic Chucky doll jabbed our ankles with a plastic dagger.

Libby slammed the door on Chucky, pretending to gather her composure. “Sorry everyone, I don’t know what happened in there. You may be pleased to know this is our last room.”

The crowd hemmed me in, so I rose to my tiptoes. Artificial candles glowed against the gold wallpaper, which had a pattern like mouths opened in endless screams. We inched forwards, and my feet sank into the carpet.

“This is our most popular exhibit,” Libby began, “the *Interview with the Vampire* room.” My favourite book – the perfect finale.

“Are you here to interview me?” Jared hadn’t made an appearance yet, so that commanding voice had to be his. “Usually, reporters go for my insufferable companion, Louis.”

The crowd shifted, revealing Jared lounging on an opulent four-poster bed, with carved bedposts the shape of lions’ heads. His head was propped up on one hand and his curly hair was slicked down into a side parting. Smudgy black lined his eyes, and white powder obscured his bronze skin. His mouth was red and slick, with fangs sinking into his lower lip.

“The tour is over, Lestat,” Libby said, striding towards the exit.

“He thrives on this,” Della murmured in my ear. All of a sudden, it was heating up in there.

Jared slid off the bed and leaned against the door. This stance showed the full extent of his costume: leather trousers that clung to interesting places and a frilly, white shirt that flopped open to reveal the ridged lines of his powdered chest.

He had Lestat’s confidence down, appraising our group as if he was sorting us into food and playthings. I was happy to be both.

Libby played her part well, positioning herself in front of us with her hands on her hips. Some girls shifted so she wasn’t blocking their view. Monsters with beautiful faces were infinitely intriguing.

“Allow me to play with one and the rest may leave.” Jared licked his wet lips. “I’ll take . . . that one.” He extended his open hand towards me.

The crowd parted to a chorus of mumbles, split between sighs of relief and grumbles of disappointment. Jared’s fingers curled up in preparation for mine. He wasn’t supposed to touch the customers, but I had no complaints.

He took my hand and pulled so hard that I bumped into him. Even though I wasn't a damsel willing to be dragged around, I had no desire to fight this. With a hand around my wrist, he turned me slowly to face the envious girls at the front of the group. Jared's fingers grazed my palm when he released me, and the tingles spread much further than the surface of my skin.

Waiting with Jared behind me was unbearable. Though he didn't touch me, I sensed his warmth, not sure what he was going to do next. It was all part of the act but every one of my muscles tensed, waiting for his touch.

He flipped my hair back and I closed my eyes, torn between embarrassment and wanting. One bold fingertip skimmed the hollow of my throat and I was done. He was playing a part, but I wanted him for real.

Soft breath brushed my neck as his mouth came down.



Chapter 2

Sticky lips skimmed my throat with the feather-light touch of his tongue. Water rained down and red strobes flashed, simulating my spouting blood. It sent squeals through the crowd as the lights cut out. The door closed behind the tour group, and I was left alone in the dark with Jared.

When the lights came on, we were a lot closer than I expected. The hazel-green kaleidoscope of his eyes drew me in. Something hung between us, not yet broken, and Lestat's mischievousness lingered.

"You can thank Thandie," Jared said, removing his plastic fangs. Nothing killed the mood like a string of saliva. "She told me to pull you out."

Touching my neck, my fingers came away syrupy and wet. They smelled like cherries, and I resisted the urge to lick them. "Lucky me."

"We should get down there. She wants to see you."

Chatter greeted us from the bottom of the stairs, where Libby was waving off the last of the tour group. Jared shrank back, and I joined him.

“It kind of ruins the mystique if they see me out here,” Jared said. “I’m supposed to be all mysterious.” He tried to deepen his voice but went too far, ending in a coughing fit.

“It’s best we stay up here then,” I said.

Jared chuckled, clearing his throat. “You’re right. The outfit can only do so much.”

The door slammed shut and Jared set off downstairs, so I escaped admitting what his outfit did for me.

“Thandie first, then you can tell me how great I was,” Libby said, dipping into a lazy curtsy. “I need to get back. Good luck!”

That was the extent of her supportive sisting. She was halfway up the stairs before we knocked on Thandie’s office door.

Thandie sat behind a desk covered with a trove of treasures: a golden idol worthy of Indiana Jones, a wooden mask that had been hacked into the shape of a face and more oddities than I could appreciate.

She wore a midnight-blue, beaded corset that pinched in her already slender waist. A black afro of spiral curls framed her flawless face and brushed her collarbone. Her scrutiny peeled layers off me. “What did you think of my tour?” Her voice was gravel-rough, with an accent similar to Della’s.

My throat was stripped by air stale with old cigarette smoke and burned-out incense. “I’ve never done anything like it – it’s like being immersed in a horror movie. The sets are amazing, and the actors really sold it.” I was conscious of Jared beside me and hoped she wouldn’t ask for specifics.

“How’d she do?” Thandie asked him.

“Great. She didn’t flinch when I pulled her out and played along like a pro.”

It was some consolation that he thought I was acting.

Thandie’s gaze held me in place like a moth with pins driven through the wings. She drummed glossy, black nails on the desk. “Elizabeth asked me to give you a job here but as I said to her, I don’t take applications. I’ll give you one tour to prove you can scare people. Come back tomorrow night.”

“Thanks, I’d love that,” I said, stunned. I’d only just learned that places like this existed, and there was a chance I could get to work here. Even better, Libby tried to arrange it.

Back in the hallway, Jared said, “You didn’t cry. That’s a good first impression.”

After meeting Thandie, I didn’t know if he was joking.

His hair had sprung free into wet-looking curls, and his eyeliner was streaked. Lestat’s slick charm had only lasted so long, which made it easier to hold a conversation with him.

“I have to fix this – there’s another tour in ten minutes.” He gestured at his face, frowning at a red mark on one sleeve. “Will you be OK down here?”

As great as the tour was, I wasn’t ready to go on it again. “I’ll be fine.”

“Later then.”

As Jared ambled upstairs, I retrieved the battered copy of *Interview with the Vampire* from my backpack. Jared crossed paths with Della on the landing, and she jogged down the stairs on light feet. “Well? Did the mansion win you over?”

“Yeah, it got me,” I said.

“Jared keeps tellin’ me to read that. Any good?”

That explained his desire to dress up as Lestat. “It’s amazing! I couldn’t resist rereading it while I’m here.”

“I’ve lived here my whole life – I should check it out. I have to get to work, but I’ll see you soon.” She swung the heavy door open a lot easier than Libby did earlier and waved before it closed.

Finally alone, I sat on the skeleton chair. Shifting around made it no comfier. I wondered whether it was real bone that had been forced into shape.

The spine of my book was so cracked that it fell open at a memorable scene – the terrible hardship when Louis and Lestat had to share a coffin. I flipped to the chapter where Louis’s slaves suspected he’d become a vampire.

I’d only read a few pages when Libby bolted back down. “I’m so late! When I’m done, tell me exactly what you thought.”

The next tour group filled the space around me, but the book drowned them out.

I got so engrossed that I only noticed how stiff I was when Libby and Jared returned three tours later. They were back in ordinary clothes, though Libby still had the make-up on and her hair in a frizz.

I lurched to my feet and discreetly slid the battered book into my bag. I almost got away with it when Jared said, “I take it you’ve read that before.” He’d attempted to remove the make-up, but he missed some black smudges.

“Yeah.” I was conscious of how close Jared was to unearthing his starring role in my Lestat fantasy. “It’s one of my favourites.”

“Mine too,” he said. “I only discovered it when I came here for college. Could be the books never made it big in Honolulu.”

That was the accent I recognised. He was from Hawaii.

Libby wrenched the front door open, and we headed out into the balmy night. “So, what did you think of the tour?”

“I loved it,” I said, “and you made an amazing tour guide.”

“Why, thank you.” She nudged her shoulder against mine. The sisterly contact felt good – natural even.

“I hear Lestat gave a standout performance.” Jared came up on the other side of me as we headed onto the street.

“Stop fishing,” Libby said, saving me before the humiliating truth popped out. “I’m glad you liked it because I was kind of hoping you’d want to work here this summer. With me, I mean.” This was the real Libby, when her sincerity showed. “I meant to give you a heads-up earlier. What did Thandie say?”

“She asked me to try out tomorrow.” I let myself picture the summer in this strange and intriguing place, working at the mansion and wandering the city with Libby.

I’d wanted these things for us before. I shouldn’t get fixated on them, and I found the perfect change of subject. Jared’s t-shirt had an impressionistic print of Brandon Lee from *The Crow* on it, with the recognisable painted face and ragged, black hair. “I like your t-shirt,” I said, not sure why I’d gone shy. I wasn’t great at taking compliments, but I could usually dish them out.

“It’s a good movie,” he said. “Lucas painted it. You’ll meet him when we get back.”

“If he’s there,” Libby added. “He’s a bit of a social butterfly, our Lucas.”

Libby had made a great life here without me in it.

My negativity melted away when we stepped onto Bourbon Street. The city had well and truly woken up. It was so incredible

to think that six months ago I was watching *Interview with the Vampire* in the cinema at home. Finally, I was here.

Neon lights glared against the brewing darkness and people were everywhere. Tourists stumbled in groups, arms around each other's backs and long tubes of fluorescent drinks sloshing over their hands. There were also people begging, pleading with their hands outstretched. Different music blended with the babble of chatter. A raw, soulful song drifted through an open bar front and a saxophone blurted out a flurry of jazz.

Libby linked arms with me, and her skin was sticky against mine. Metal balconies were strung with fairy lights, and potted plants trailed colour over an endless string of bars and shops. A woman passed with a jumble of beads around her neck. She motioned towards the colourful strands, and Libby dragged me onwards. "Remember, some people are only here to con you."

Whitby was a quiet coastal town and the most action we got was lively tourists and greedy seagulls. Here, danger lingered at the fringes of the street. Two men watched passersby with scheming eyes, and a huddle of children separated and slipped among the tourists. I spun my backpack to the front, wrapping my arms around it. This street was a bright jewel that could slice your palm if you gripped too tightly.

Through the spicy food and spilled drinks, I caught a less pleasant scent. "What's that smell?"

"Do you really want to know?" Libby asked. "I think it's a heady mixture of sewers and piss."

"Glad I asked."

A *Fang Fest '95* sign captured my attention. It was strung across the street from two balconies and more signs were tied to street

lights. Eagerness mixed in with anxiety, though I wasn't sure what the festival would entail. Some people on the street gave me a clue, with their black leather, satin in berry hues and splashes of fake blood. At least, I assumed it was fake.

Gradually, the vibrant colours and noises faded. When we reached the quieter streets near Libby's, the darkness gave my imagination plenty of material. I caught shadowy movements down alleys and squat shapes on balconies, imagining evil things, definitely not cats and plants. My mum was all too quick to believe in the supernatural and it ended badly. I should have known better.

An ambulance tore past us, leaving streaks of blue on my retinas and ringing in my ears. "First one I've heard tonight," Libby said.

"Does that happen a lot?" I asked.

"You'll get used to it," Jared said. "424 people were murdered in New Orleans last year." More than one person a day.

"Nice fact," Libby said. "Do you want to add that most of them were seventeen-year-old English girls?"

I didn't need Libby to shield me. The cluster of flashing blue lights down the road filled me with disquiet, along with quite a bit of curiosity. Jared steered us closer to them.

"Can't we just go home and eat popcorn?" Libby complained.

"This place is less than a mile from our house," Jared said. "Don't you wanna find out what happened?"

We reached a huddle of onlookers along a yellow strand of tape. Police officers were spaced out along it, and there was no getting past them.

Further down, an ambulance and several police cars circled an imposing white building with a high wall around it.

We joined the waiting crowd, brought together by our need to discover what was beyond the plastic tape.

Everyone was staring at the large building, with its orderly rows of windows and cross on the roof. Paramedics were moving around with quick efficiency by the gates. They lifted a stretcher into the ambulance, though I couldn't see the condition of the person. I hoped the paramedics got to them fast enough. "What is that place?" I asked.

"It's called the Ursuline Convent," Jared said. "Hey, do you know what happened?"

He directed the question at a short guy staring at the scene, who glowered at Jared. "A girl got mugged."

"Let's go," Libby said. "I'm not standing around to stare at that."

Reluctantly, Jared followed Libby, considering me with a speculative gleam in his eyes. "You're into vampire stories, right? I know a good one about the convent, if you're interested."

"Always," I said.