

I knew it would all go wrong the moment I agreed to teach Nathalie the secret arts. Spread out before me I could see the diminishment of my powers, the battles to come, even the end of that long and wonderful misery called my life. Without trying, her mere presence had placed me under a spell more powerful than any I had ever cast. The spell of hopeless love.

I received my training from Madame Lejeune — just as Nathalie would from me — here on this island, hidden deep within the swamps of Louisiana. That had been a time of fear and anger for me, vastly different from the experience Nathalie seemed to be having now.

I asked her what she wanted to learn. Of all the thoughts she could have had...

*How do you become a bird? Can death be stopped? Can I learn to read minds?*

...I did not expect to hear her say, “What’s your middle name?”

Madame LeJeune’s primary maxim had been, *Hidden names are powerful names. Never let an enemy know everything.*

Love blinds us, though, doesn’t it? I hesitated, wondering what I could possibly gain by having Nathalie distrust me during her tutelage. Hoping I hadn’t waited too long, I lied and said, “Lyndon. The whole thing is Merle Lyndon Boudreaux. Not much of a name is it?”

She scattered flattery my way, as if to soften my self-deprecation, and rambled on about non-magical things to divert from the actual intent of her question. She was clearly playing a serious game. I waited patiently while she chattered.

Finally she asked, “Where will we begin?”

I looked into her eager eyes, wondering what truths I might see there, but realized it didn’t matter. Her demeanor could simply be what it appeared to be, youthful enthusiasm.

Or it could be something else entirely. Time would tell.

I answered. “At the beginning, I suppose.”