

Attorney Olivia Bryant moved to Savannah chasing her interest in ghosts and the nature of true evil. Now she faces evil spawned by a careless man and soured by hatred and resentment. Add a blind, impulsive teenage psychic covetous of her brother's attention and Livia has plenty of otherworldly contact to study.

WHISPERED SECRETS

by Julia K. Childs

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Whispered Secrets

SEQUEL TO
In the Shadow of the Mountain

JULIA K. CHILDS

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Second Edition

PART ONE



River Oaks

1972

CHAPTER ONE

June 15, 1972

Certain the peace she sought lay at the bottom of the Savannah River, she left the house through the back door. The soft grass cushioned her feet as she walked barefoot toward the dock and the waiting rowboat. She stepped down into the little boat, gathered her skirt about her, and sat down on the wooden cross bench. Out she glided, aided by the current and an occasional turn of the oars. Eddies formed and swirled in the water as the boat slipped out almost to the middle of the river. She stood up, and feeling the sun and the breeze on her face, stepped to the edge of the boat and jumped in, feet first. The water was cool as she plummeted downward, and the diaphanous material of her skirt billowed out as she sank, then wrapped itself around her legs. She looked up through the murky depths to see a shaft of sunlight turn the water near the surface an emerald green. She gasped. Unable to swim, water surged in to her open mouth as, for the briefest of moments, instinct kicked in and she fought – but not for long. Dark depths claimed her.

* * *

“Doctah! Doctah!” Priscilla said as she burst into the study. “Miz Celeste is not in her room and the rowboat is floatin’ with nobody in it out on the rivah!”

Dr. Landon jumped up from his desk, sprinted across the wide lawn to the dock, and dove into the river. When he reached the boat, he took a deep breath and dove straight down through the murky water frequented by large gators. He

could only see a foot in front of him. Still he swam, feeling his way, surfacing for air, and diving again and again. He was beginning to despair of ever finding her when he felt the rough bark of a submerged tree, then the material of her skirt. As he moved closer, he could just make out her blonde hair. He grabbed her arm and pulled, but her skirt was caught on the tree limb. Almost out of air and frantic, with all his strength he yanked on the skirt. She floated free and he grabbed her before the current carried her away into the darkness.

He surfaced to find the rowboat floating far out of reach. Towing her along at his side, he made his way towards the shore knowing she had been underwater too long to be alive. The shore was not much further and he struggled, pulling his burden, until George hurried down to the river's edge to help.

"I swam as fast as I could. I'm afraid she's gone," Dr. Landon said, panting as he reached the bank. "I found her underwater. Her skirt hung on a limb," he added, shaking his head as if he wanted to deny the reality of what had happened.

"It's okay, Dr. Landon. It's okay. I knows yo' did yo' best," the gentle, black man said, as he helped pull the lifeless body up on the bank. Dr. Landon climbed out and collapsed next to her. When he regained his breath, he lifted her and they trudged up the manicured lawn, so green and evenly cut, it could have been a golf course.

"I guess she finally accomplished what she set out to do," he said with sadness and a touch of irritation.

"Yessuh, I reckon she did," George answered.

"Oh no! Miz Celeste!" Priscilla cried when the two men entered the kitchen.

"Get a blanket, Priscilla, and spread it on the chaise in the front room. I'm going to put her there."

"Yessuh," she said scurrying off to retrieve a blanket.

He placed the body on the blanket covered chaise. Forty-five years old and as beautiful in death as she had been in life. She was just as pale in death as she was in life, he thought, her skin almost translucent. She was tall and slender and memories

of her as she sat straight and tall at the piano filled his mind. He had fallen in love with her and her music so many years ago.

"Suh? You want to call the police and ambulance?" George said softly, interrupting the doctor's reverie.

"Yes, George. Thanks," he said with a sigh, having momentarily forgotten he wasn't alone. So, I'm a widower now, he thought to himself as he dialed, and the realization felt surreal.

"This is Dr. William Landon at River Oaks. There's been an accident at my home. My wife has drowned. Please send an ambulance." He replaced the receiver and turned to see Priscilla waiting. Her eyes were big and her hands were shaking.

"Priscilla, I need to change clothes and then talk to Bella. Will you please show the police in when they come and let me know when they get here."

"Yessuh".

He climbed the wide staircase to the second floor. The door to Bella's room was closed, and he continued on his way to his room down the hall. After he changed, he paused at Bella's door and wondered if she had any idea what Celeste had planned to do. If she had, she hadn't told him. Bella was six years old and he never knew what he'd find when he went in her room – and not just because she was six. He knocked on her door and stepped into her room. She was sitting on her bed with her doll like any other normal six-year-old, though she was anything but normal.

"I - um - have some bad news Bella Boo," he said, using her pet name.

Before he could reach her where she sat on the bed, she said calmly, "Mommy's dead isn't she".

"Yes," he said, taken aback. "How did you know?"

She said nothing, but turned toward him.

"I know like I always know," she replied. "I felt her walkin' through the house like people do when they're not really here. She's not happy, Daddy."

"I know she wasn't Hon," he said, ignoring the present tense of her statement. How did you know this had happened?"

"I know like I always know. I felt her walk through the house," she repeated as she picked up her favorite doll. She smoothed its hair and arranged its dress, afraid her face might give away the real answer. Her fingers flitted over the doll, becoming her eyes since she could not see.

He felt like a little lost boy in the presence of his preternatural calm daughter. Sensing his feelings, she got up from the bed and made her way to him.

"Don't worry Daddy," she said as she hugged him. "You still have Phillip and me."

He hugged her and waited for her tears to begin, but was not surprised when he pulled away and she was dry-eyed. The ambulance waived its urgent approach.

"I have to go, Bella. As soon as I'm done downstairs, I'll be back. Do you want Priscilla to come sit with you?" he asked, just before he left the room.

"Yes sir. Just for now," she said, returning to her doll.

"Okay. I'll send her up. I love you Bella Boo."

"I love you too, Daddy," she said as he left the room. He would have to call Phillip, who was away on a business trip, and he knew Phillip would not be as unaffected by Celeste's death as Bella seemed to be. He started down the wide stair case to meet the police Priscilla had just let in the front door. The voices of the EMTs and the sound of the gurney as it rolled into the house drifted up the stairs.

"Priscilla," he said when he reached the bottom, "would you please go sit with Bella for a little while."

"Yessuh," she said, reluctantly. "Is she upset Doctah?"

"You know Bella. It doesn't look like it."

He turned to meet the sheriff who had accompanied his deputy. Sheriff Watson stood in the foyer taking in the scene, noting the strange fact that a little girl was not upset about her

mother's death. He didn't usually come out, personally, with his deputy, but this was Dr. Landon and his wife, and the doctor's standing in the community seemed to warrant a visit by the sheriff.

"Good afternoon Sheriff," Dr. Landon said. He led the sheriff into the parlor where EMTs were tending to Celeste.

"What happened?" Sheriff Watson asked, direct and to the point.

"She's been – uh – depressed for years and in and out of the hospital. It doesn't surprise me that she's done this."

"You didn't see her go to the river?" the sheriff asked.

"No. I was in my study working."

"What happened?"

"Priscilla, George's wife, came into the study to get me. She said Celeste was not in her room, and the rowboat was floating empty in the river. I came out of my study and ran down to the river. When I saw the boat, I knew right away what she had done. She couldn't swim. I swam out to the boat and finally located her.

"Dr. Landon. I'm sorry to ask, but how was your relationship with Mrs. Landon?"

Dr. Landon took a deep breath and looked at the sheriff. "I know this is part of what you have to ask. I assure you neither I nor anyone else in this house had anything to do with her death. She suffered from severe depression – and this was not her first suicide attempt."

"You're convinced this was a suicide?"

"Well I certainly don't think it was a homicide," Dr. Landon responded. "Some years ago, after Phillip was born, Celeste over dosed on her medications. I found her and had her hospitalized up state. She was in and out of hospitals several different times for depression, then when Bella was around two, Celeste hung herself in the barn. Luckily, George was able to get to her. I had Celeste put in the hospital again. When she came home, for the next few years, there were no more attempts. She continued to be depressed, though. And

now this time when, unfortunately, she was successful in drowning herself.”

“Did she often go out in the boat alone and maybe this time, fell overboard?” the sheriff asked.

“No, she didn’t go out alone in the boat. Not ever that I know of. I was always with her. I doubt she just fell out of the boat, but I guess it’s within the realm of possibility.”

Dr. Landon took a seat in one of the chairs by the fireplace and looked away when Celeste’s body rolled from the room on the gurney.

“Have a seat Sheriff,” he said, motioning to the other chair. The sheriff sat on the edge of the chair and leaned forward. “You didn’t answer how your relationship has been,” he said.

“Not good - distant. We had separate bedrooms. I tried for a while, but I had to be gone so often between my practice and other ventures I’m involved in. I guess I felt sorry for her – and guilty for being gone so much, but I never asked for a divorce – and neither did she.” He looked down.

“You said you were usually with her when she went out in the boat. Yet, this time she went out alone. Was she capable of rowing the boat, guiding it out into the river?”

“Yes, she knew how to row the boat. As I said, I went with her when she went out, but she liked to row and she often did.”

“You have a son don’t you?” the sheriff asked, changing the subject.

“Yes, Phillip, he’s away on a business trip – and I need to call him. Will we be much longer?”

“No. I think that does it for now,” the sheriff said, rising. “We’ll need to take her to the ME’s office for an autopsy.”

Dr. Landon flinched. He had been present at many autopsies. Images of Celeste’s serene beauty ravaged by drills and saws filled him with sadness.

“Do you know, yet, what funeral home you’ll be using?” the sheriff asked.

“Stanton’s on Bull Street.”

"I'm so sorry for your loss Doc," Sheriff Watson said. "You don't have plans to be out of town do you?"

"No. At least not until after the funeral," he said, staring out the window at the ambulance as it left. "George will show you out."

The sheriff left, escorted by George to the front door. Dr. Landon walked down the hall to his study dreading the call to Phillip.

"Hello?"

"Hi Phillip, its Dad."

"Oh hi Dad! How you doing?"

"I'm okay, but I think you need to get home right away."

"Why? What's wrong? Are you okay? Is Bella okay?" he asked. "We're okay, Phillip," and before he could say anything else, Phillip interrupted.

"It's Mother, isn't it?"

Dr. Landon's hesitation answered his question.

"I'll be there as soon as I can get a flight out."

"Tell them it's a family emergency and you can get a faster flight."

"Dad – she's gone, isn't she."

"Yes Phillip," and for the first time, he cried. It wasn't because of Celeste's death but because of the pain it caused for their son.

"Okay Dad. I'm on my way," he said and hung up.

"Doctah Landon," Priscilla said from the doorway. "Bella's okay. She be playin' with her dolls so I come back downstairs."

"I'll go look in on her," he said, turning toward her and replacing his handkerchief in his pocket. She stood aside as he passed.

"I'm sorry Doctah."

He stopped. "Thank you Priscilla. Let's hope she's in a happier place."

* * *

Upstairs, Bella slid off the bed and moved to the center of the floor. If she concentrated hard enough, she found she could lift herself a few inches from the floor and float there. Her concentration broke when her father knocked on her door, and she landed in a small noisy heap on the rug.

"Bella. Did you fall? Are you okay?"

"I'm okay Daddy. Just tripped."

"I'm going into town for a bit. Do you want to come with me?"

"Yes! Are we going to your office?"

"No. I have some matters to attend to. I need to go to the bank. Can you wait for me in the lobby while I take care of them?"

"Yes sir."

"I'll send Priscilla up to help you dress."

"Why?" she asked.

"Well, because what you're wearing doesn't exactly match."

"Okay," she said, dejected. "Send her up."

He left her room, headed for the stairs. Convinced she had not fallen in her room in spite of her blindness, he continued down the hall. For just that split second when he entered her room, he could have sworn she floated an inch above the floor. Impossible, he told himself as he descended the stairs and reached the first landing. By the time he reached the bottom, his attention was on planning the funeral and the tasks at the bank. It was disconcerting to think that planning his wife's funeral felt more rational than contemplating the behaviors of his daughter.

CHAPTER TWO

Bella sat on her bed and leaned back on the headboard, her favorite stuffed animal clasped to her chest. Finally - Celeste was gone, she thought, refusing to call her 'Mother'. It wasn't that she had no good memories, it was just that she had more of the bad, and there was no part of her that felt sad. She needed a mother and Celeste had never been able to be that and, on more than one occasion, Celeste had been mean to her. Still, she had Phillip and her dad, George, and Priscilla and that was as it should be. Celeste was sick a lot and made everybody in the house feel sad all the time, Bella thought. She knew Celeste had reached the darkest of the dark places because she had not been taking the medicine that made her feel better. Bella didn't try to tell her father. Anything she received, psychically, her father didn't want to hear so she hadn't said anything.

She recalled visiting Celeste's room, the smell of her perfume, the softness of the rug. She was never invited in there. The last time she had ventured in, Celeste snuck up behind her where she was softly touching things on the dressing table. Suddenly, Celeste had grabbed her, slapped her hands and screamed at her to get out of the room. Shoes and whatever was at hand had pelted her as she ran to escape Celeste's wrath. The memory made her purse her lips in anger. People, like bugs, sometimes needed to be squashed, Bella thought. Persuading Celeste that she would be better off dead was not difficult to do. After all, Celeste's mind had big gaps, Bella thought - like Swiss cheese. It was easy to insert thoughts and pictures in the "holes". When Celeste drifted through the house, Bella knew Celeste had followed her instructions, and was no longer with the living.

* * *

For the next few days, Bella played about the house or followed George. Her father was busy finalizing the funeral arrangements Phillip came home and she was glad, but he was so morose, she left him alone.

She practiced floating in her room. In time, she could rise at will and move about, suspended, until she grew tired. Her imaginary friend, who could do many of the same things she could, was her constant companion.

During an intense conversation with her friend, Priscilla knocked on her door.

"Go away! I'm busy!" Bella shouted.

"Now Bella, I can't go away. It's time to get ready for the funeral and yo' daddy said yo' have to take a bath and git dressed. A wooden block flew across the room of its own accord. Priscilla opened the door and the block hit her squarely on the forehead.

"Ow! Yo' hit me in the head with that block, Bella."

"I'm sorry," Bella said in a tone that said she felt no such thing. She considered whether she could float Priscilla the way she did her toys. Maybe out to the balcony?

"You talkin' to yore 'friend'?" Priscilla asked as she entered the room and began to gather underwear and clothes for Bella.

"Yeah. I don't want to go to the funeral," Bella announced.

"Well, you has to, so hustle yore little bustle. I'm goin' to run yo' bath water," she said as she shut the bureau drawer and headed to the bathroom. There was no answer from Bella.

What a spoiled brat Bella could be, Priscilla thought. She ran the bath water and put out a towel. And what chile don't cry when they mama is dead, she asked herself. Doc and Philip loved her and she rarely acted up when they were around. Priscilla examined the knot on her forehead in the bathroom mirror.

"Somethin' ain't right 'bout that chile," she said to the mirror. Bella's reflection appeared in the mirror. Priscilla jumped, certain she had not heard her come down the hall or into the bathroom.

"I heard what you said, Priscilla." Bella stepped into the bathroom. "My teacher said I'm smart and a fey child. I asked Daddy what 'fey' meant. He said it meant - umm - touched, sort of like an elf, and supernatural." She stumbled over the last word. Priscilla stood staring at the child who appeared to guilelessly stare back. The hair on the back of her neck stood up.

"Out of the mouths of babes," she murmured. She reluctantly turned her back on Bella to turn off the water that threatened to overrun the tub. "Do you need help gittin' in?"

"No. I can do it myself."

"Okay. Well I be back in a little while to check on you. I lay out yo' clothes on yo' bed."

She shut the bathroom door, relieved to be back in the hall. Doc and Phillip either treated Bella like a baby or talked to her like an adult. She placed Bella's clothes on her bed then returned to the hall to dust the ornate tables. It could be confusing to a child she decided as she dusted. Bella's behavior was more than confusing parenting or the loss of her mother, though. There had always been something strange about that child. Whatever it is seems to be growing stronger. George dismissed her feelings about Bella. He told her she was imagining things and maybe she was. Even so, she felt uneasy around Bella and decided she'd keep an eye on her when she was nearby.

The bathroom door opened and Bella, wrapped in a towel, stepped out. Priscilla stood by and watched her as she headed down the wide hall. Just before she reached her door, she rose from the floor and floated into her room.

"Oh Lawd!" Priscilla gasped clutching her chest. "Oh Lawd!" She sat down with a thud in a chair next to the table, her breath coming so fast she thought she was having a heart

attack. "Gotta tell George!" she thought, but as soon as she stood up, she realized he'd never believe her. But she'd seen what she'd seen, she was certain.

* * *

In spite of her protestations, Bella found herself in the car with her father and Phillip on the way to the funeral. She sank down in the seat listening to them talk and enjoying the smell of the aftershave her father often used. She thought, again, of Celeste and what it must be like to be where Celeste was. A lot like going to Europe, she decided. Nobody at home could see her when she was gone, but they knew where she was and that she'd be back. It was just a matter of travel and like the equator she'd learned about from her tutor, the imaginary line between life and death was artificial.

"We're here," Dr. Landon said as he wheeled into the church parking lot. "Bella. Please be good and don't wiggle around in the pew. After they talk about your mommy and say prayers, we'll go to the cemetery. Okay?"

"Okay, Daddy," she said, though she knew Celeste was still with them all. Celeste would not stay in the cemetery, Bella was certain.

Phillip took her hand and they entered the church. It was cool inside and Bella sensed the antiquity and the lives of those who had come and gone. She sat next to Phillip and listened to Priscilla, further down the pew, whisper amen and hallelujah to the priest's remarks. The service finally ended, and released from the confines of the church pew, Bella cheerfully climbed into the funeral home's black limousine.

"Daddy, are you okay?" Bella whispered.

"I'm okay, Bella Boo, just sad."

"Is Phillip okay?" she asked, certain she could hear him crying, something she had never before heard her brother do.

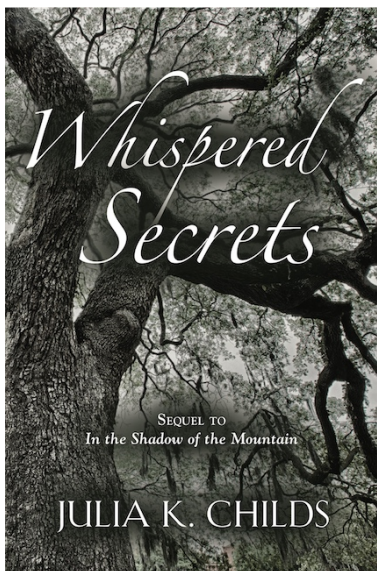
"Phillip's okay, but he's sad too. Are you sad Bella?"

“Yes,” she lied because it seemed that was what she should feel.

The limousine rolled through the gates of Bonaventure Cemetery and wound through a canopy of ancient oaks. Mausoleums, some simple in design, others more intricate, seemed to float in the steam of a heat-soaked rainy day. Bella smelled the rain and heard the patter of raindrops dripping from the oaks as they left the limousine and walked to the mausoleum and the waiting casket. The footsteps of mourners, alive and dead, accompanied them through the cemetery until they all stopped and the priest began to speak. The sounds of sniffing and crying reached her and something else – something dark and depressing, malevolent. She frowned in the direction from which it seemed to come. A wave of loathing returned to her.

She tugged on Phillip’s hand to ask him who was standing around them.

Phillip stooped down. “Bella, not now,” he whispered in her ear. He straightened up and she dropped his hand. Maybe the darkness she felt was coming from someone at the funeral – and maybe not. Uneasy, Bella wondered, could it be Celeste? Whatever or whoever it was had gone, leaving a disturbance in the atmosphere.



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