

Secrets in the Mist

By Anna Lee Huber

Chapter 1

England
1812

I knew that tonight of all nights was not the time to be caught out in the marshes. It was the type of night those of us living amongst the broads and fens of East Anglia had been cautioned about since we were small children. When the mists rose up from the rivers and waterways through the reeds and tall grasses, they obscured the winding marsh paths and blinded us from the danger of the bogs. The shifting banks of fog were as hazy and insubstantial as smoke, and yet impenetrable to the eye, as well as the brightest lantern.

Had I any other choice, I would have remained safely inside, tucked up close to the warmth of the hearth. But tonight Kate needed me. With each passing hour her fever burned hotter, her breathing more labored. I was afraid that if I didn't return with the medicine she so desperately needed she might not last through the night.

So while the mist was still gathering I'd returned home to Penleaf Cottage to fetch what was needed. But before I could set out again, old Mrs. Brittle, our last retainer, had cautioned me about going back out into the marshes in such a fog.

"Be ye daft, lass? Ye canna gey back oot in this."

"I must," I had replied as I filled a basket with sickroom supplies, many of which were Mrs. Brittle's receipts. "Kate's illness is too severe for me to wait until morning."

She hobbled a step closer, leaning her bad hip against the table. "Yer care o' Mistress

Rockland be admirable, but she'd no' wish ye to take such a risk."

"What else am I to do?" I demanded of her. "I cannot ask you to undertake such a journey. And Father—" I broke off, finding it difficult to voice the words. I turned away. "Well, he's certainly not able."

Mrs. Brittle pressed her gnarled, bony hand to my arm. "I ken, lass."

Earlier when I'd removed the empty bottle and the tumbler of cut glass from Father's study, where I'd found him insensible in his favorite chair, Mrs. Brittle had only shaken her head. But this was nothing new to either of us and I ruthlessly pushed it aside.

"There's no one but me," I told her in determination as I reached out to wrap the ends of the cloth I'd used to cushion the basket over the top of its precious contents.

Her leathery face crinkled into even deeper lines as she scowled up at me. "The Lantern Men be walkin' tonight. Mark me."

I turned away with a frown, lest she see the genuine apprehension her words had caused me. I was old enough and educated enough to recognize the legend of the Lantern Men for the fiction it likely was—a story meant to convince curious and unruly children to behave, an anecdote to explain the unexplainable. But I had also seen the lights—the will-o'-the-wisps, as they were called—mysterious glowing balls that sometimes hovered over the marshes, seeming to defy all logic or explanation. It wasn't easy to dismiss them or discount them, and so the tales of the Lantern Men had not lost all their power for me.

I had always avoided the marshes at night, particularly when the fog rose up or when the will-o'-the-wisps were seen glowing in the distance, on the chance that the legend was not so fictitious, but tonight I could not. Kate needed me, needed the medicine I carried, and I would never forgive myself if I let a silly fable keep me from my dearest friend. She was all I had.

"I'll be careful," I told Mrs. Brittle. "I promise."

She harrumphed. "So they all say. And then they ne'er come back. Remember Joseph

Bexfield.”

I scowled, hating how everyone brought up that poor man’s name whenever someone was about to do something they deemed foolish. “How could I forget?”

Her beady black eyes hardened like jet. “There’s no need to be smart. I s’pose ye’ll be takin’ yon lantern, as well.” She nodded to the lamp I had set on the scarred table by the door. “Ye might as weel sing a ballad fer ’em while ye’re at it,” she snapped, touting local legend on what was most likely to draw the Lantern Men towards their next victim.

“Mrs. Brittle,” I protested.

“Go on, then. Tempt fate if ye wish. But dinna say I didna warn ye.” She wagged her finger at me. “And dinna expect me to mourn ye when they find ye face-doon in the marsh like Joseph.” Then she had turned away and hobbled across the room to her little bedchamber off the kitchen and slammed the door.

I paused now and stared at the clouds of white swirling about me and wondered if perhaps I should have listened to her. Or at least decided to take the roads instead. Traveling the carriageways would have taken me nearly twice as long to reach Greenlaws House and forced me to pass through the village, but it surely would have been easier to follow a wide lane of packed earth than a meandering trail through overgrown marsh grasses that was difficult for those not native to the Broads to navigate on even the driest and sunniest of days. I had made the conscious decision to sacrifice safety for speed, but now I doubted the wisdom of that choice.

Taking a deep, calming breath, I realized there was nothing for it but to push onward into the cool, eddy mist. Besides, I was familiar with this particular stretch of marsh path, having traversed it often in the past two decades. I knew its course, its twists and turns, like I knew the plot of my favorite novel. Even when the heavy rains of late spring and autumn altered its course, I knew where it would be diverted. I had not become truly lost in the fens since I was a little girl, and our faithful hound, Matilda, had found me then quickly enough.

I wished Matilda were with me now. Perhaps her sharper senses could have picked up on what I was missing. The mist not only disoriented me visually, with its ever-shifting haze of white that swallowed up what little light my lantern cast, but also audibly. It dampened what little sound there was, masking the ripple and flow of the moving water I would have normally used to help guide me in the dark. I could hear nothing but the sound of my own breathing and an airy chorus of marsh grasses brushing together in the night breeze. It unnerved me to think that a person would have to be standing quite near for me to hear them.

More than once I felt the soles of my kid-leather boots sink into the boggy ground at the edge of the path, reminding me how easy it was to stray from the drier ground at the center. Each squishing step set my heart racing. Twice I stumbled to a stop, confused by my surroundings, and was forced to retrace my steps until I figured out where I'd gone wrong. I began to understand how even the most experienced of wherry men could become lost on such a night.

Proceeding cautiously, I weighed every step and calculated each turn with greater concentration, trying to utilize my other senses. I noted the feel of the ground beneath my feet, and the brush of the marsh grasses against the hem of my cloak. The musty stench of the fens, though muted by the wet banks of fog, served as a sort of guide—the sharp odor of decaying vegetation telling me where the more stagnant bogs lay. My ears strained for the slightest sound of moving water, knowing I should be approaching the stretch of path that ran parallel to a wider offshoot of the River Yare for several hundred yards, separated only by the reeds growing along its banks, before it veered left again. Normally I could hear the ripple of its current long before I reached it, but it wasn't until the trail had already straightened out to follow it that I heard the stream's swell.

I breathed a sigh of relief, knowing I was now more than halfway to my destination. I picked up my pace, anxious to be at my dearest friend's side and out of this swirling nothingness. The air was cooler here, and I shivered in my summer cloak, feeling the cold damp of the fog

begin to penetrate its thin fabric. My arms were too full with the lantern and the basket to try to wrap the cloak tighter around me, and I didn't know that it would have made me warmer anyway. I told myself I only needed to ignore the discomfort for a little while longer.

That's when I saw them. The lights. The will-o'-the-wisps faintly glowing through the fog on my right, as if they hovered over the stream beyond the reeds.

I stumbled to a stop, suddenly panicked and uncertain what to do. For a moment I tried to convince myself they were nothing but a mirage manipulated by the mist. But then they all seemed to turn as one and move towards me. I glanced down at the lantern in my hands and cursed it. I knew—and if I'd forgotten, Mrs. Brittle had warned me—that carrying a lantern was rumored to be one of the things most likely to attract the Lantern Men.

I shook my head at the ridiculousness of entertaining such nonsense. I was certain there was a logical explanation for the lights. But either way, the light from my lantern had alerted whoever was out there to my presence.

I lifted the lantern and fumbled to open the glass panel to blow out the flame, but then hesitated. How would I find my way through the marshes without the light? This fog was too thick for the pale light of the moon to penetrate, and without some source of illumination I was sure to become lost in the haze. What good would escape be if I then stumbled into a bog?

I slammed the panel shut, making the flame flicker, and forced my feet into motion. Whoever wielded the lights was gaining on me now, but if I could just get beyond the turn in the path, the marsh grasses would block most of the light from my lantern, and I hoped the fog would do the rest.

My feet slid on the mist-dampened grass, but I kept moving, with one eye on the path before me and the other on the pursuing lights. My heart leapt sharply against my rib cage as I realized that one light had pulled away from the others, moving to intercept me further along the trail. I bit back a whimper and pushed my feet to move faster, now rushing blindly through the

fog. I knew it was dangerous, that I was as likely to go careening off the path as to be caught, but I couldn't stop myself.

As I approached the end of the straight stretch, I realized I was moving too slowly, that whoever was moving ahead to cut me off was going to catch me. A bolt of pure terror shot through me, seizing the breath in my lungs. I ducked my head and hastened my speed—praying something would impede him, that somehow I would surge past him—only to crash into something solid and immovable. I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound emerged.

I looked up into a pair of dark eyes. The...man...before me had dropped his light source at our feet in order to wrap his hands around my upper arms, throwing his features into shadow. He was swathed in darkness from head to toe, including a voluminous hood, giving me nothing but a glimpse of his sharp eyes as they bored into mine.

I stumbled backwards, surprised when his grip slackened, though he did not release me. He simply continued to study me with his pitch-black eyes, the corners narrowed like a cat's. His gaze unsettled me, though I could not seem to look away no matter how I tried. It was as if something held me immobile, sending tingles of awareness through me. I watched breathlessly as his eyes searched mine, seeming to brush against my skin with just the power of his gaze. I realized then that my hood had fallen back, giving him a clear view of my face and my auburn hair.

Shaken by the realization that he could see all of me while I could see almost nothing of him, I started to lift my lantern, wanting to know just who I was facing, but he would not let me raise my arm. He arched his eyebrows in faint mockery at my futile effort. And that sardonic expression was enough to rouse my good sense. I needed to escape. Now. Before it was too late.

Fortunately, my chance came when a voice behind me shouted, alerting us both to the approach of whoever carried the other lights. The man turned to watch them, and as he did I twisted from his grasp, dashing down the path to the left. I felt his hands grasp at my cloak and I

pushed myself to move faster, heedless of the slick grass beneath my feet.

My heart pounded loudly in my ears, and I felt certain I could feel his fingers reaching for me again, that at any moment he would recapture me, hauling me back against his hard chest. When my foot slipped off the trail into a bog at a sharp turn, soaking my booted foot, I was forced to slow my steps. I risked a glance over my shoulder and was startled to see nothing but the swirling mist.

I inhaled a shaky breath, shocked to find I'd gotten away from them. If the legend was true, no one escaped the Lantern Men. They lured unwary travelers and foolish meddlers alike to their doom in a boggy mire or a watery grave. And yet here I was, alone again in the marsh.

I glanced around me, suddenly afraid they would approach from another direction, but the fens were silent and foggy white.

What did it mean? Why had the cloaked figure let me get away? Was it because he was alone? Would the situation have changed if others had arrived in time to intercept me? I shivered at the thought.

The path I followed continued to lead away from the stream toward Thurlton and Greenlaws House, and I was grateful for the distance it put between me and the Lantern Men. I could think of nothing better to call them. And yet, was that really what they were? He had felt as real and solid to me as any human, and what I could see of his disconcerting dark eyes had not been so different from other men. But, of course, the Lantern Men had always been rumored to be fae-like—ethereal, mischievous spirits akin to humans. Or so Mrs. Brittle believed.

I scowled, irritated at myself. I was being ridiculous. The Lantern Men were a myth, nothing but a bit of superstition. Clearly I had been listening to Mrs. Brittle's stories too often of late if I was actually willing to believe even for a moment that such creatures haunted the marsh.

Of course the figure was human. There was no reasonable alternative. Just because I had not recognized him, even though I knew everyone who lived within five miles of my home, did

not mean he was some mythical being. Perhaps he was a relative of one of the townsfolk, a nephew or cousin recruited to help the local smugglers who plied the Broads. But I had never known the villagers to wear disguises as they went about their illicit trade. And if the man had not been familiar to me, then I was almost certainly unknown to him as well. He couldn't have recognized that I already kept their secrets. So why had he allowed me to escape?

My chest tightened at the memory of his eyes searching mine. The intensity of his gaze seemed to have marked me in some way I didn't understand, but felt to the core of me.

I increased my pace, suddenly glad of the thick walls of fog surrounding me, for if I could not see them, then surely they could not see me. At least, I hoped.

I exhaled in relief as I realized I was nearing the end of the marsh path. I made one last turn to bypass Thurlton village and headed straight toward Greenlaws, where Kate lived with her older brother. Perhaps it was wishful thinking, but I thought the fog was less dense here. It certainly seemed easier to breathe.

Seeing the marsh grasses begin to thin around me, I adjusted the basket of supplies on my arm and lengthened my stride, anxious to escape the fens and everything behind me. I welcomed the slope of open ground rising away from the marsh, even though the muscles in my legs burned from the exertion of the climb.

I was halfway up the hill before I realized I wasn't alone, and by then it was too late to react before the hand closed around my arm.