

BOOK OF MATTHEW:



House of Whispers

Catalina DuBois

BOOK OF MATTHEW: House of Whispers
Copyright © 2017 by Catalina DuBois

Cover art for BOOK OF MATTHEW: House of Whispers Copyright © 2018 by
AFRIna

Contact AFRIna at

<https://selfpubbookcovers.com/AFRIna>

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any
form or by any means without written permission from the author.

Warning: violence, sex, and offensive language.

Critics are saying...

“When a serial killer strikes a Missouri plantation, a slave and her lover discover they must outwit a cunning and devious psychopath in this historical novel. The author successfully balances the romance with a gripping murder mystery that, while violent, is never gratuitous. A complex thriller that offers intense romance and suspense.”

-Kirkus Reviews

“Very, very, very good. It’s not often that I start reading a book and it consumes me right away and forces me to re-prioritize my life for a little while. This is a terrific piece of historical fiction/romantic/thriller/suspense (the first book I’ve ever read like this) and I am at a loss for words to describe the range of emotions I experienced while reading it.”

-Indie Book Reviewers

“Catalina DuBois’s *Book of Matthew: House of Whispers* is a tale of forbidden love that, at times, seems Shakespearean in its delivery. DuBois’s story reads easily and quickly. I didn’t want to put it down. I found myself cheering for the more righteous characters, and hating the more deviant of them. I’d love to read Part II and see where DuBois takes Matthew and Sarah’s journey.”

-Literary Titan

DEDICATION

Brian, you are my strength, courage and inspiration.

Love always,
Catalina

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Tom Jordan and Eastern New Mexico University.

CHAPTER 1:

The Morning Routine

April 19, 1850

Matthew sat up in bed, glancing around his massive chamber. In the bright morning light, his room looked strangely unfamiliar. *I've spent my entire life in this house, but every time I awaken from one of my peculiar dreams it seems as though I don't belong here; I have this feeling of disconnection, of things not being as they should. Gradually reality filters in, my chamber feels less alien to me and a sense of belonging returns.*

Matthew pulled back the covers and climbed out of bed. His bare feet padded across the cold marble floor. His suite was roughly the size of a small house with a furnished sitting area, bathing area, and office. He relieved his bladder in a chamber pot, and then stood before the dresser mirror. He felt the rough stubble on his face and sharpened his straight razor on a strap. Then he decided not to use it and climbed back in bed.

I've already missed breakfast. It's late in the morning. My mother will panic soon and send Sarah, the nurse's apprentice, to check on me. Sarah's come to my chamber every morning since the night I fell ill. Her examination is the best part of my day. God truly has a sense of humor. Why is the only girl I've ever loved the very one I'm forced to live without?

Like clockwork, Sarah walked in with a smooth gliding gate that exuded pure confidence and self-assurance. Elegant is a word rarely used to describe a slave but Sarah carried herself with the grace of a queen.

Her skin was a smooth dark brown. Her eyes were glimmering and reflective like sea washed glass. She was the embodiment of captivating beauty, raw intellect, and pure elegance. Her English was imperfect, like many slaves, but this was not to be mistaken for stupidity. Against every shred of logic, Matthew longed for her touch.

“I see ya not feeling any better,” Sarah announced as she sat on the bed next to him.

Matthew groaned and played the part. Her obsidian eyes darkened with concern. She began removing supplies from her bag and prepared to look him over. She placed a palm on his forehead; he fought the urge to grin.

Sarah informed him, “ya don’t feel warm but I’ll take yo temperature, just in case.”

Matthew nodded. Sarah gave the glass thermometer a few shakes and then placed it under his tongue. She felt the glands just below his ears with her fingertips.

“The swelling has appeared to go down,” she informed him and continued her examination.

A couple weeks ago Matthew’s father, Master Colburn, dismissed him from chores. Matthew had fallen deathly ill. His throat wasn’t only sore; it felt as though he was breathing fire. He burned with fever and his whole body ached, but he was long over his illness. Now he was the picture of perfect health, but that wouldn’t stop him from milking this opportunity for all it was worth.

Sarah removed his thermometer and read it with a puzzled look. “Yo fever is gone. I’m not sure why ya still feel bad. Please stick out yo tongue fo me, young Master Colburn.”

He obliged her with a sigh. Matthew was once proud to be the heir to his father’s vast plantation. Now he found himself questioning their way of life. Hearing that title from anyone made him sigh, but from her, it was like a knife to his heart - a hard stinging slap of reality. *How delusional am I to carry on like this with a girl who calls me master and only touches me out of obligation?*

What was it about Sarah? He yearned to have her in his bed, but he also yearned to have her in his life; to be loved by her. Sarah’s luscious lips parted in a smile as she assured him, “Sir, yo tonsils is no longer red and swollen. I know ya don’t feel better yet, but ya getting there.”

He nodded and anticipated the best part. She informed him dutifully, "I gotta listen to yo chest the old-fashioned way. I'm sorry but as ya already know, I don't have a stethoscope. If yo father would get me one, I wouldn't have to violate ya in this manner."

He assured her in the gruffest voice he could conjure, "I understand. Do what you must."

She placed an ear to his bare chest. Her soft warm cheek grazed his flesh and he melted. She was listening to his breathing and the sound of his heart, but he wished her ear was her lips. If her face felt this heavenly her mouth had to be sinful. He fought the urge to embrace her; yearned to hold her between the sheets and commit unspeakable acts of debauchery.

"Deep breath in," she instructed while Matthew cooperated fully. "Now exhale, and one mo time. Now exhale. Yo chest seem... clear," she said with a puzzled look.

At the conclusion of the examination, Sarah packed her tools as slowly as possible to give herself time to gain a little courage. "Sir," she spoke timidly, which was completely out of character for her.

"Yes Sarah," he replied.

"Ya know, well next week..."

Before she could finish the question he assured her, "I wouldn't miss it for anything in the world."

Sarah smiled happily as she fetched him two pills for pain and a glass of orange juice. She gave a few instructions and wished him well. As she headed for the door she said, "please talk to yo father about the stethoscope, so I ain't gotta bother ya like this again."

"Of course," he fibbed, a smile creeping across his lying lips.

Matthew gathered his nerve and mustered up his courage. "Sarah"

She stopped and spun on her bare heels, as he climbed out of bed. "Yes Sir"

"May I show you something?"

She nodded and followed him across the lofty chamber to his office, delighted that he held her opinion in high regard. *Most days it feels as if Master Matthew is the only one who see me for who I am rather than just what I am.*

Matthew unrolled a large blueprint across his cluttered drafting table. "I'm designing the new courthouse. I've never had a project this

significant. This could launch my career,” he spoke excitedly. “My parents would finally stop forcing medical training down my throat.”

Sarah was so happy for him; she would have hugged him if it was appropriate to do so. She gazed in awe at the meticulously designed building. Her lovely face lit up with a smile. "It's beautiful, remarkable. Is there anything ya can't do?"

He wrapped an arm around the small of her back, leaned forward, and whispered seductively, “I can think of one thing, and unfortunately it’s what I want to do most.”

Sarah shoved him away but her true emotions betrayed her. Her mouth was saying one thing but her eyes were saying another. Her lying protests were soon trapped within her master’s kiss, as he lifted her by her buttocks, and laid her on top of the drafting desk. Protractors and rulers went colliding with the marble floor. His mouth met hers with such intensity she dug her fingers into the broad, muscular, canvas of his back.

Matthew parted her legs with his hips and used all of his weight to subdue his captive, pressing himself even firmer between her legs. She gasped as he began grinding against her; eliciting lustful moans from the woman wrapped in his embrace. She succumbed to his animalistic needs as well as her own. She grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him closer, arching her soft bosom into him to fuel his passion. At last Sarah broke the kiss and gazed up at Matthew’s handsome face, his gorgeous chestnut eyes, and raven tresses. It didn’t seem real to her. She felt like she would wake up at any moment.

Matthew pulled Sarah’s hands above her head before burying his face in her neck. It was all the more exciting to love her in broad daylight while she wore her servant’s gown. It was a defiant slap in his father’s face: a naughty forbidden act he’d spend quite a while in confession for. He ventured under her dress to caress the sweet spot between her legs, and her body trembled beneath him. Matthew smiled ever so slightly before returning his lips to hers. Sarah moved against his fingertips as he rubbed her delicate folds. He untied her pantaloons and pulled them off. She shivered as the cool air hit her bare moist nether regions. She gently licked, nibbled, and sucked his neck from his earlobe down to his collarbone.

Matthew impatiently unlaced the top of her dress, baring her lovely brown breasts. He suckled the firm chocolate nipples sitting atop her

perky mounds, and she gently gripped his locks. She leaned forward and reached down to free his aching manhood, giving it a few strokes with her hand. Matthew took in rapid breaths as Sarah wrapped her legs around his waist. He lowered his hips, positioning himself while pulling aside her dress. She held his firm, manly, torso, preparing herself for the moment they'd collide. Matthew buried his tongue in her waiting mouth, licking and sucking, while she matched the young Englishman.

One of his hands full of Sarah's breast and the other full of himself, he held the blunted tip of his erection so firmly against her womanhood had she flinched she would've no longer been a maiden. Just as he was going to shatter the barrier that had so long separated them, just when he would've caused her to call out "Matthew!" and dig her dark fingers into his white back, and clench his rod so passionately with her hot wet walls that he would gasp and grip the table in order to refrain from hammering her into oblivion; there was a knock on the door that sounded more like thunder. BOOM, BOOM, BOOM. Before Matthew could yell, "get lost!" Emanuel, his father's right-hand man, stormed in with a glare so furious it cast a shadow upon his handsome face.

Annoyed, but still in a daze, Matthew dreamily turned toward the intruder. Sarah sat up on the table and covered herself. Emanuel was outraged but Matthew was in his own world. He barely acknowledged Emanuel's ranting. Matthew turned back to his lovely slave nurse, but she was gone; he looked down to find his pants were not in a heap on the floor, but neatly tied at his waist. Matthew had never even left his bed, never kissed Sarah, and never touched her. Instead of a supple brown breast lightly moistened by his kisses, all Matthew held was the cold glass of orange juice Sarah gave him to wash down two pain pills. Matthew set the pills and the drink on his nightstand and climbed out of bed, his mind clouded by a deep sense of longing and regret.

He walked over to Emanuel, "I'm sorry, what were you saying?"

Emanuel glared angrily. "Matthew Sir, please pardon my intrusion but I've just talked to Sarah. She believes she's failing as a nurse because she can't figure out for the life of her why a man with no symptoms continues to feel ill, but I have!"

"Hey!" Matthew called as Emanuel stalked around his chamber. Emanuel's sand-colored locks danced about a gorgeous ivory face, as he tipped the wastebasket, and poked around at its contents. Emanuel looked

in the drawer of Matthew's nightstand, and finally under the bed.

"I can explain," Matthew swore as Emanuel discovered half a week's worth of pills.

Emanuel exclaimed, "you haven't been sick in three days! How can Aunt Lizzie train Sarah properly if she's treating a healthy man? The time she wasted here could've been spent helping people who actually needed it. This medicine should have gone to those who were ill. I'll have to tell your father the lengths you went to just to avoid your chores."

Matthew fell silent. He knew his father would believe Emanuel over him. Master Colburn had a fondness of Emanuel that Matthew resented at times. "I wasn't avoiding work. You know I'm not lazy."

Emanuel asked with confusion, "then why pretend to be ill, Matthew?"

Matthew took a deep breath. *I feigned sickness to spend a few moments alone with Sarah. I wasted medication and time. You have every right to be angry; but do you know how hard it is to be so close to the one you love and yet so far away? I know it was wrong and I don't condone being deceitful. I'll have to confess my sins later, but the only time she ever touches me is out of duty.*

"Why feign illness, young Master Colburn," Emanuel sternly repeated.

Matthew decided to go with the half-truth, in hope that it would get him somewhere, "the cruelty of this plantation gets to me sometimes. Especially after all that's happened."

Emanuel reflected upon the time a girl died due to the negligence of the overseers. "Say no more. I'll cover for you."

"Thank you." Matthew breathed a sigh of relief and chastised himself. *I have to get past my feelings for Sarah. My father will swear Sarah's corrupted me. He'll never believe I fell for a Negro wench of my own volition. He'll beat her to within an inch of her life and sell her; or worse, he could lynch her!*

"Please don't get that girl killed," Emanuel spoke before turning to leave.

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean," Matthew said with guilt and shame.

Emanuel spoke to the door as he turned the knob, "with all due respect Sir, you know exactly what I mean."

Emanuel left Matthew alone and he felt more alone than ever. Matthew dared to take a final, mournful, glare at his drafting table with an irrational hope this hadn't all been a cruel fantasy; that Sarah would still be sitting there with bare breasts and spread thighs; her dress in a crumpled roll across her middle. Her delicate fingers will be traveling over smooth brown skin glistening with a light sheen of perspiration. Sarah will beckon him with a come hither look, that will have him standing at attention, yearning to be mounted and rode into the sunset, like a thoroughbred stallion.

Matthew looked, blinked, once... twice... thrice... but she wasn't there. His blueprints were still tightly rolled. His protractors, pencils, and rulers still lay on the drafting table. All he was left with was a neat desk and burning questions. Was he wrong to feel the way he did? Did Sarah feel the same way too? With a sigh and a shake of his head, Matthew went on with his morning routine...

CHAPTER 2:

The Perfect Victim

Matthew crept stealthily through the long dark corridor. A glimmer of pale moonlight guided his path. He'd planned his escape for weeks. Even with the extravagant Easter party taking place just two stories below he felt confident that the third floor of his family's mansion would remain abandoned. The stairs creaked and he dashed into an empty guest room. He gasped for air and his heart raced as the clackity-clack of footsteps drew closer to him. He stood in the dark room paralyzed. He peeked through the cracked door watching, waiting to be discovered. At last a chambermaid and a male guest appeared, kissing passionately and embracing one another. The lovers disappeared into a room across the hall from Matthew and slammed the door behind them.

“They must have known this floor would be empty as well.” Matthew laughed to himself and breathed a sigh of relief. *Just a few more feet.*

Matthew reached the parlor at the end of the corridor and quietly entered. The room was filled with a dim, orange, flickering light due to a tiny blaze in the fireplace. There were fancy armchairs and lounges placed about. The walls were lined with framed artwork, elegant tapestries, and bronze candle holders. He dropped to his knees and pulled a rope ladder from its hiding place under a table.

He secured the ladder and glimpsed out the window. “Christ, that’s a long way down.”

Matthew immediately double checked the ladder making sure it was

secured just perfectly. He removed his dress coat and rolled the rope ladder out the window. It streamed down the side of the house like a waterfall and hit the ground with a thump.

He straddled the window pane with one foot outside and the rest of him inside when he heard a voice call out from behind a tall-backed chair, "Where do you think you're going!"

A startled Matthew lost his balance. He was falling backward. The figure rushed to the window and grabbed him by the vest. He was pulled in the parlor to safety.

"Much obliged. I owe you one," Matthew choked out still a bit shaken from the ordeal.

He looked up to find a gentleman, in his late teens. He had sapphire blue eyes and shoulder length brown hair tied back with a black ribbon.

"The name's Phillip, Phillip Arrington III of the Arrington estate," the gentleman stated in a British accent as he shook Matthew's hand.

"I'm Matthew Colburn. Please don't tell anyone you've seen me. I was meeting my friend Sarah. It's a very important night for her and I promised I'd be there."

"You're going to another party aren't you?" Phillip asked excitedly. "I promise not to mention a word of your whereabouts if you take me with you. My family just moved to the States and my parents have been introducing me to their stuffy old friends all night. I ran to your third floor parlor to hide from them."

Matthew judged Phillip's clean-cut appearance. "I'm not sure you'll want to accompany me."

"Anywhere away from here would be great," Phillip assured him.

Matthew hesitantly agreed. He and Phillip were down the rope ladder and through the orchard in a matter of minutes. As they traveled further from the mansion the scattered conversations and smooth, elegant, classical music gradually diminished.

"I'll have my driver prepare the carriage for us," Phillip offered.

Matthew smirked. "No need, we won't be going that far."

"Where is this party anyway?"

"Shhh. We must be cautious not to be seen or heard. We're going to the servants' Spring celebration and I'm not sure we'll be welcome there," Matthew whispered.

Phillip gave Matthew a puzzled look but continued to follow him.

“Your friend’s a slave? No wonder you had to sneak out!”

A new kind of music started to fade in: very fast and rhythmic drumming accompanied by laughter, singing, and an orchestra of man-made instruments. Matthew and Phillip watched in astonishment from a nearby hill. Below was a carnival of wonders, two-hundred people taking a break from their usually bleak existence. The evening sky was illuminated by a humungous fire in the center of the slave quarters, as well as numerous strategically placed torches. Every man, woman, and child was dressed in flesh-baring attire with tribal paintings on their faces and bodies. Most of the people were barefoot. A few were wearing sandals. Small children were running about playing games. Older kids and adults were putting on a variety of entertaining performances. Phillip rose and dusted himself off.

“What are you doing? I told her I’d watch her match from here,” Matthew cautioned.

“They seem to be having a great time; I’m going to join the festivities,” Phillip replied.

Matthew gathered his nerve and headed downhill after him. To his amazement, they were met with warm greetings and friendly smiles. They came across a circle of spectators and walked over to investigate. In the center, was a man balancing on a large ball while juggling three apples. On his far left stood a woman who swallowed three twelve inch swords, one after another. On his far right was a girl balancing on one hand while using the other hand to hold a stick close to her lips and blow flames from her mouth. The crowd cheered and applauded. An intrigued Matthew and Phillip tossed money to the performers and moved on to the next show.

Sarah approached holding a small wicker basket. Her hair was braided and adorned with wooden beads and pink flowers. She’d traded her servant’s gown for a brown leather top that tied around her neck and torso. It revealed her well-shaped midriff and the majority of her back. Her skirt was made of blades of dried grass, which exposed much of her shapely legs. Matthew paused just to take in the vision of her, trying to tattoo this image upon his mind. She set down the basket, ran up, and threw her arms around him. Stunned by her inappropriate action, he stood arms frozen at his sides for a moment before finally returning her embrace. She felt like heaven in his arms; he couldn’t believe he was touching her in this way. Their embrace was so sweet and lasted so long it made Phillip feel as

though he was intruding on their privacy.

"Happy sixteenth birthday, Sarah!" Matthew exclaimed when he, at last, found the breath to speak and the will to break their embrace. "Please allow me to introduce you to Phillip Arrington."

Phillip greeted her, then gave Matthew an impressed nod. "Well I can see why you nearly fell from a third story window for her; she's breathtaking," Phillip commented.

"Thank ya, Sir," Sarah replied then flashed Matthew a concerned glare. "Promise ya be mo careful, young Master Colburn," she scolded him.

"I had to escape somehow, and the third floor had the fewest people," Matthew explained.

The fact that Matthew felt the need to explain himself to a slave caused Phillip to arch a suspicious brow. He'd have questions for Matthew later.

Matthew inquired, "What's in the basket?"

"Some goodies I borrowed from the Easter feast fo Aaron. Ya know he love to eat," Sarah explained lifting the cloth to reveal the contents.

"By the way, have you seen Seth or Aaron?" Matthew asked.

"They both competing tonight. We gotta catch em later. Follow me," Sarah spoke cheerfully. She stopped at a stand and asked two young ladies to paint Matthew and Phillip's faces.

"It was mighty nice of ya to come, Master Matthew. Who's yo friend?" One of the girls inquired.

Before Matthew could open his mouth Phillip had already introduced himself. "Good evening, I'm Phillip Arrington."

He extended a hand to them. This action caused an awkward silence that seemed to span an eternity. They weren't quite sure how to react to this informality. Not many white men will reach out to shake the hand of a slave. It was obvious he wasn't from around here.

"You do shake hands in this bloody country don't you?" Phillip asked jokingly.

"Our apologies Mr. Arrington," the girls said shaking his hand immediately.

"Just Phillip will do. Mr. Arrington is how people address my ancient father," Phillip corrected.

"I'm Mali and this my sista Anna," Mali said.

"Do ya like my artwork? It mean peace and tranquility," Anna said to

Matthew, pulling aside her grass skirt to reveal an intricate painting on a canvas of well-sculpted thigh.

“What about my tribal war symbols?” Mali questioned as she swept her braids aside to show the delicate lines weaved across a nearly bare back.

“They’re... They’re both very nice,” Matthew stammered. Feeling slightly embarrassed, he pretended not to pick up on these blatant advances.

Sarah couldn't help but laugh a little. She often joked that Matthew had to have been a priest in a previous life. He was a devout Catholic who rarely broke rules. The only time he did anything remotely wrong was under her influence. She was always getting him and herself into trouble.

"Yes, those are quite lovely. Would it be possible to see the rest of you; I mean your beautiful artwork?" Phillip added, flirting shamelessly with the young slave girls.

Mali and Anna giggled and whispered something to each other.

“This is a beautiful ring,” Phillip said, using the jewelry as an excuse to hold Mali’s hand.

The ring was simple but Mali loved it: a silver band with an onyx stone in the center. “Thank ya. My pa a blacksmith. He forged it fo my fifteenth birthday,” Mali explained.

Matthew hadn’t known Phillip long, but could already tell a couple things about the young nobleman. *Phillip is no stranger to this sort of attention. In fact, he soaks it up with sponge-like consistency. He's no stranger to breaking rules either.*

“And which tribe will yall be cheering fo this evening?” Mali and Anna chimed in.

Matthew and Phillip gave them an unknowing glance, and Sarah offered them a further explanation. "In Africa, people lived in tribes, like the Apache and Cherokee Indians here in America. There are descendants of many African tribes on this plantation. Each spring we compete against each other here at the festival. Since neither of yall belong to a tribe, yall welcome to be a member of mine. I'm Urhobo."

Matthew and Phillip both shrugged and agreed. Anna and Mali protested, “C’mon be Ashanti like us. Please.”

“Be Urhobo,” Sarah pleaded. “Not that it really matters. The Zulu whoop us every year.”

“Aint that the truth,” Mali chuckled. “Zulus dominate every year.”

“Then perhaps I should be a Zulu,” Matthew jested and everyone laughed.

Matthew looked back and forth between Sarah and the two sisters. He’d had feelings for Sarah as long as he could remember but Anna and Mali had been so kind and inviting. He didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings.

Phillip found a quick solution, “I’ll be Ashanti if Matthew will be Urhobo.”

Everyone was happy with the arrangement. Phillip and Matthew took a seat in front of the stand. Mali and Anna began deftly applying colorful paints to their faces.

“They really pretty,” Sarah said to Anna as she admired her peculiar earrings.

Anna was wearing black stones filed in the shape of arrowheads. Anna spoke as she continued to scribble away on Matthew, “Thank ya. They was a gift from...” Anna paused and sighed. Her voice trailed off. “I’m sure ya know who they was a gift from.”

Sarah shook her head. *Why quit a man and wear his gifts? Anna and Aaron is both my friends so I don’t take sides but they liked each other so much. This split just don’t make sense to me.*

“I’ll try to hurry so yall won’t miss the last two events,” Anna stated.

“What events might those be?” Phillip enquired.

“Last two events left to judge is the arrow battles and the spear fighting competition,” Sarah answered.

“So what competitions went on earlier?” Matthew asked, trying not to move too much.

“All sorts. There been events taking place fo the last two days,” Sarah replied. “Boat races, foot races, dance, art, spell casting, storytelling, ya name it.”

“All set. Save us a dance please,” Mali said as they finished up.

It was inappropriate to dance with men of a different color, but it was just as inappropriate for those men to come to a slave gathering in the first place. Anna didn’t bother to correct her sister because it was clear that Matthew and Phillip weren’t in the mood for anything appropriate.

“We certainly will save you a dance,” Phillip replied and the sisters smiled devilishly.

He and Matthew insisted on paying the girls for their services. Matthew was well aware that every penny was one step closer to freedom for these people. It was all that Matthew could do until the day he inherited the plantation and set them all free. He could only pray that Sarah was not married by then. Sarah gave the girls a nod of appreciation and led Phillip and Matthew in the direction of the arrow battlefield.

“What do you mean *we*? I don’t dance,” Matthew said once Mali and Anna were out of range.

“How can you be born to privilege and not know how to dance?” Phillip questioned.

Matthew answered, “I didn’t say I couldn’t. I said I don’t.”

“Well, tonight you do. You know, I think Anna likes you,” Phillip replied.

Sarah spoke up, unable to control her patronizing tone, “Master Matthew’s saving his self fo marriage, plus he feel that any involvement with a slave would be... I believe the words he used was...”

“Morally reprehensible,” Matthew said, grinning at her with amusement. “However, the real question is why does it bother you so much?”

“It... I mean... It don’t bother me a bit,” Sarah stammered unconvincingly. “Aint none of my business.”

Matthew stopped in his tracks. He stood so close to Sarah his sheer proximity ceased her breath and put a flutter in her stomach. He gazed down at her, his heart pounding at the coconut scent of her homemade body oil. He yearned to reach out and touch her, but couldn’t gauge what her reaction would be. He smirked as he said, “And yet you keep making it your business.”

Her eyes dropped to the ground as she realized how out of line she was, “Apologies Sir.”

“Please don’t do that,” he whispered in her ear.

“Get in yo business?” she whispered back.

“Please don’t turn your eyes from me as if we aren’t friends.”

Sarah nodded, a soft smile creeping upon her face.

Phillip smirked, amused by the unorthodox display. *I suppose America won’t be such a dreadful bore after all.* He asked Matthew, “Do you feel you are above such a relationship?”

Matthew shook his head no. “Quite the opposite actually. I feel we are

all equal in God's eyes; However, my parents own this plantation and every person here. This places me in a major position of authority. That fact alone won't allow for a relationship, only an abuse of power. If you're in a position to take a woman's body without consequence how could her love ever be given to you."

"I see your point, but most men wouldn't care," Phillip replied.

"There lies the difference between Matthew, the patron saint, Colburn and most men," Sarah chimed in.

"Matthew," Phillip said with a slap on the shoulder. "You should've been a priest."

Matthew laughed. "I get that a lot, but I'm not the angel Sarah makes me out to be. I have urges like any other man. In a moment of weakness, I may act on those urges, just not with a slave."

At last, they reached the field. There were 6ft x 4ft wooden walls, and tall stacks of straw placed sporadically. There were twenty males participating: four teams of five. All of them were ages sixteen and up. Matthew's pal Aaron, a handsome dark-skinned boy, was excited to be competing in the men's division. The youth division had never proved much of a challenge for Aaron, so it felt incredible to at last be in the big leagues. All the men were equipped with wooden bows. Their arrows had rubber tips filled with crimson paint. They each wore a bright white smock in order to recognize who was hit.

"Aaron! Aaron! Over here!" Matthew and Sarah bellowed over a myriad of spectators.

Aaron glanced back and forth searching the crowd until he spotted them. First, he looked shocked to see Matthew and then he gave a big grin and a wave. Aaron shot Matthew a look that said, "What in the world are you doing here?"

Matthew answered his silent question by inconspicuously nodding in Sarah's direction.

"Ah ha," said Aaron's next look. "Wish me luck!" Aaron shouted from the arrow battlefield.

The horn blew and the crowd roared. Each team gathered behind a wooden wall and discussed their strategy. When the horn blew a second time the men ran out launching arrows at one another. They ducked behind the bails of straw and the wooden stands, using them for cover. Matthew and Phillip cheered Aaron on as he picked off one opponent after another.

Every time an arrow collided with a player it left a large red splatter on his florescent white smock. The disappointed contender would stomp away from the field.

“He’s amazing,” Matthew told Sarah.

"Yep, he outstanding. That's why he the youngest person to compete on this level. But he ain't a member of our tribe. Aaron's a Zulu, and he's nearly taken out our entire team," Sarah responded laughing. She smiled at her friend/opponent. *Once Aaron took ten lashes fo a girl he ain't even know. This act of chivalry, along with many others, gained him a reputation fo being the estate's dark knight. He only live fo four things: friends, physical activity, food, and his little sista. Aaron got strength and agility far beyond his years but he never allows it to go to his head. He remains as humble and sweet as he is talented.*

More marked men joined the sideline and before long it was down to the last three. Aaron of the Zulu tribe stood alone against two members of Sarah’s tribe, the Urhobo. Aaron hid behind one of the large stacks of straw eyeballing one of his opponents. He aimed and drew back on his bow. It splintered and busted in two, rendering it unusable.

“Aaron! Aaron! Come out; come out where ever ya are!” His opponents taunted him.

They were unable to see him, and yet drawing closer by the second. Aaron discarded the useless bow and cut open a bail of straw. He stuffed an abandoned smock with straw and fastened a piece of twine to it. As soon as his opponents were in position he tossed the decoy toward one of the players. The other player saw a white smock and immediately shot an arrow, but he hit his own teammate. Before the last boy got a chance to reload Aaron grabbed an arrow from his sack. He snuck up behind the boy and tapped him on the back with the red tipped arrow. The boy yelled in anguish as this brought the battle to a close. The crowd went crazy. Phillip, Sarah, and Matthew ran onto the field to congratulate Aaron on his victory. Sarah hugged him and handed over the basket of goodies.

Aaron immediately dug in. “Truffles! Please marry me right now!” he shouted playfully, dropping to one knee in a mock proposal.

They moved along with the crowd as it shifted in the direction of the spear fighting ring, a grassless circle of land surrounded by fiery torches. Matthew, Aaron, and Phillip stayed to cheer on Seth, an attractive nineteen-year-old man, who was battling for the men’s spear fighting title.

Seth, as usual, wasn't the least bit concerned about his match... or much of anything for that matter. He was very pampered by Matthew's parents, and life up to this point had been a breeze for him. His unbreakable confidence along with the favor shown to him by both master and mistress won him the admiration of most ladies and the envy of all men.

Sarah jogged off to get mentally prepared for her third and final match of the evening. She didn't look like much of a fighter, but contrary to her appearance she'd dominated this event in previous years. When she entered the tent her friend Leah and older sister Marlette were waiting to assist her. Leah was the same age as Sarah, pretty, and petite. She was dark with large brown eyes and a beautiful smile. Sarah and Marlette loved Leah for being a loyal friend and one of the kindest people you'd ever meet, but her ability to choose all the wrong men drove Sarah crazy and infuriated Marlette. Then again, it didn't take much to anger Marlette.

"Since Aaron won... again and pushed the Zulu tribe into first place... again the only way we can still win is if ya pull off this next match," Leah stated as Sarah took a seat to have her war paint applied.

Tension rose from the pit of Sarah's stomach. "I think I'm gonna be sick."

"Ya won the last three titles in a row," Marlette assured Sarah while wrapping her hands in order to better grip the spear, minimize sting, and prevent injury.

"Yep, but those was junior titles. I turned sixteen. I'm in women's division. The weapons are real. The competition is fierce," Sarah replied as Leah finished painting the Urhobo war symbols on her face, chest, and arms.

Marlette looked at Sarah with concern and suspicion. "I never seen ya this nervous about a battle. There's something else."

Sarah hesitated a moment and confessed in a whisper, "Sometimes I feel as if I'm being watched."

"Course you being watched. Ya a competitor," Marlette replied.

"No, this is different, colder, and eerie even," Sarah insisted.

Marlette placed a hand on Sarah's shoulder. "Do ya think papa would ever allow anything to happen to ya. I would never allow anything to happen to ya."

A sense of relief enveloped Sarah and her mood lightened. She informed Leah and Marlette, "Anna was batting her lashes at Master

Matthew again. She made him so uncomfortable his face turn bright red.”

Leah and Sarah burst into laughter. Marlette, Sarah's older sibling, was tall and shapely, with emerald green eyes and skin the color of caramel. Marlette didn't laugh at Sarah's story or much of anything for that matter. She just appeared disgusted at Anna's shamelessness. Marlette's lack of a sense of humor, refusal to bend the rules and no bullshit attitude earned her the title *Iron Maiden*. Marlette's biggest challenge in life was keeping her mischievous, impulsive, and defiant to the core, younger sister, in line.

“What is Master Matthew doing here? He don't belong here. I warned ya to stop being so informal with him,” Marlette scolded with furrowed brows.

“Can't ya yell at me tomorrow? It's my birthday,” Sarah whined, sticking out her bottom lip.

Marlette decided to drop the subject... for now. “I got something fo ya. This spear belonged to our granddad. It brought me luck in the ring.” Marlette handed Sarah the long, black, intricately carved weapon.

“I don't feel right taking this. It wasn't made fo me,” Sarah replied.

“If he lived long enough to see ya compete I know he would've made ya one too, so I want ya to have this one,” Marlette insisted.

Sarah hugged her sister and gained a new confidence in regard to her match. She grabbed her spear and the three of them marched to the fighting ring side by side. Sarah, Leah, and Marlette could tell by the colossal amount of celebrating that Seth had done well in the ring. He'd won all of his matches that night, taking first place in the men's fighting division for his tribe, the Ashanti. Marlette beamed with pride. She'd trained him. Seth picked her up and swung her around in an appreciative display of affection.

She threatened as he set her down, “I'll break yo arm if ya touch me like that again.”

“Sorry. I got carried away,” He explained. Her attitude didn't discourage him in the least. Seth knew Marlette better than anyone. He could tell she was happy for him even if no one else could.

“Marlette!” Sarah scolded her mean sister, and then turned to Seth. “Congratulations, ya earned it.”

Those words were music to his ears. No one would be able to say the little rich brat had yet another thing handed to him.

“Be careful. That Isabel don't fight fair,” Leah called out.

Sarah heeded her friend's warning and took a brief look at the

competition to size her up. She entered the circle and kneeled before the shaman facing her opponent. He blessed them and the battle began. The crowd of spectators cheered almost loud enough to drown out the clacking and banging the spears made as they collided. Considering the size of the other woman Sarah was doing a decent job defending herself, but by a few minutes into the match, Leah and Marlette weren't sure if that would be enough. Aaron and Matthew cheered loudly to show support but were also concerned. Seth and Phillip watched the match intently, hoping that one or both fighters would lose an article of clothing. As Sarah wrestled herself free of her opponents grasp the men chanted obnoxiously.

“Shame on all of ya,” Marlette scolded.

Sarah’s spear snapped in two allowing Isabel to land a ferocious hit to her chest. Pain shot rapidly across Sarah’s thorax and she fell to her knees winded. The Shaman blew the horn, stopping the fight. Sarah grabbed both pieces of her broken spear and climbed to her feet still covered in dirt. She walked toward the edge of the circle to grab a replacement. Isabel ignored the horn blow. She took an illegal swing at Sarah, causing a laceration to her left arm. The fighters had one another by the throat before the judges ran in to pull them apart. Seth had to restrain Marlette to prevent big sis from taking matters into her own hands.

"Let me go! She ain't fighting fair!" Marlette shouted.

The crowd booed Isabel for taking such a cheap shot. Sarah returned to her corner to examine her broken spear. “I don’t understand. Our granddaddy carved this spear from one of the strongest types of wood there is.”

“Do you mind if I take a look?” Matthew asked. He had a gift for analyzing the makeup of things. By age fourteen he could repair, design, and build almost anything. “I already see what your problem is. Do you see how most of the surface of the break is smooth and only the very edge on one side is jagged? Someone sawed $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through it and placed the ribbon back around it so you wouldn’t notice.”

“She ruined my grandpa’s spear!” Sarah exclaimed.

"I'd be willing to bet that your backup spears have been sabotaged as well," Matthew continued.

Sarah and Matthew snatched the ribbons off each spear and inspected them. Just as Matthew suspected, they were all damaged. Sarah’s blood boiled. Matthew could see fumes rising off of her. The judges approached

and offered to disqualify Isabel. They'd give Sarah the automatic win.

"No! Continue the fight!" Sarah insisted.

Matthew watched as the uh-oh expression spread across everyone's face.

Aaron turned to him and said, "Probably shouldn't have told her that. She loved her grandpa and he dead now. All she had was that spear. I don't think I ever seen her so furious."

"This isn't going to be pretty," Seth added.

"I can't watch. Tell me when it's over," Leah stated covering her eyes.

The horn blew and Sarah threw the broken spear on the ground.

"Stop! Ya don't have a weapon!" Marlette cried out as Sarah charged into the ring unarmed.

Sarah ducked from the path of Isabel's first swing and jumped over the second. When Isabel ran straight for her Sarah moved aside and relieved Isabel of her weapon. Sarah used the spear she'd confiscated to deliver a combination of violent blows to her opponent. The first two relentless hits devastated Isabel's ribs and abdomen, followed by an even harsher blow to the face. Sarah swung the spear around and struck Isabel behind the knees, sweeping her clear off her feet in the process. Isabel's legs flew high in the air, she landed flat on her back, kicking up a humongous cloud of dirt. When the dust settled Sarah was standing with one foot on Isabel's chest and the blade of the spear at her throat. The Shaman blew the horn and declared Sarah the winner. Immediately after, the judges declared the Urhobo tribe triumphant over all winners of this year's spring festival games, the crowd exploded in an uproar and surged into the fighting ring. They carried Sarah off on their shoulders, loudly chanting a song in their native tongue.

As Sarah's retinue of admirers made off with her, Seth, the Colburns' ward, helped set up the ring of fire for the ceremonial dance. He hoped to have a few dances with the girl he fancied but knew this was unlikely. He was above her station. Because of this, she'd given up on love before it could bloom. Though black, Seth was a free man, an adopted son of the Colburns. This often drove a wedge between him and his people. He was caught between two worlds and often felt like he was being torn in half.

"Do you need help with that?" Seth offered as he saw a familiar face.

"No thanks. I got it," the gentleman replied and continued to push the wheelbarrow.

“You sure?” Seth called as he approached, his helpful nature shining through. “I don’t mind.”

“It’s nothing,” The man insisted with a kind smile. “I’ll dump this load and rest for the evening.”

Seth nodded and jogged away to join Aaron and the others. On the way, he noticed the girl Aaron use to court. Her shoulders heaved as she cried into her hands.

Seth made a detour. “What’s wrong?” he questioned at once.

Anna announced between sniffles and sobs, “I can’t... find my... little sista anywhere.”

In the distance, a malevolent grin spread over the face of the man who was pushing the wheelbarrow. Within minutes he'd managed to lure Mali, charm her, incapacitate her, and abduct her. He stopped for long enough to tuck Mali's limp arm back under the tarp. He licked her blood from the knuckles of the fist he'd used to knock her unconscious. Then he continued his journey while whistling an eerily upbeat tune. *The game of shadows begins...*

The wheelbarrow slowed to a creep as he reached his destination. It seemed forever since his last hunt, forever since his hunger was satisfied. He sharpened the long curved blade of his knife. The steel was cool, but it would soon be warm with blood. He gripped a sturdy rope and smiled at thoughts of his last victim. Visions of the dying girl put his mind in a frenzy and a knot in his pants. *I still feel the heat of her blood, her supple body pressed beneath me as I took her. I'm taunted by the taste of her kiss, the last kiss she ever gave. Now it's time to claim another, a sweet young thing just like the last. Killing her will be so easy. She's a slave, a nobody, the perfect victim...*

CHAPTER 3:

The Ring of Fire

Seth, at last, convinced Anna that Mali likely went home with some boy. Anna laughed and wiped her tears, knowing it was certainly a possibility. Wouldn't be the first time Mali found some cute field hand to share her bed. Anna breathed a sigh of relief and joined a group of dancers to practice her moves. Seth noticed the girl he fancied was among them, but walking into a pack of girls was like charging into a lion's den. A man could get mauled and devoured. He beckoned Leah and breathed a sigh of relief as she sauntered over to him smiling.

"So... ya won first place in the spear," she said coyly.

"You were watching me," Seth joked with a cocky grin. Modesty was never a virtue of his.

Leah huffed and rolled her eyes. "Not bad fo a spoiled houseboy."

"Is that you talking or Marlette?" Seth commented in regard to the out of character jab Leah took at him. "You are sweet and lovely. The ice queen persona doesn't suit you."

Leah rolled her eyes. "Begging yo pardon Sir, but the rest of us gotta go back to being slaves tomorrow. If ya don't mind I'm gonna enjoy what's left of my freedom."

"Sir! Since when am I, Sir?" He caught her hand as she turned to leave. "You weren't calling me Sir when I was removing your panties with my teeth."

Leah clutched his mouth with her hand and whispered nervously,

"Someone gonna hear ya, fool!" She could feel him grinning against her palm and released his mouth from her grasp. "Look, ya cute and all, but I told ya that could only happen once. I fell fo some high-yellow negro above my station befo. It ends in pain. I ain't doing it again."

As he watched her walk away he felt utterly alone. The only reason he trained for that competition was to prove to Leah that there was more to him than a rich boy, with proper speech, and expensive clothing. Countless free ladies were throwing themselves at his feet, and yet he was hung up on a slave girl. Seth sighed with frustration. *Of course, I wanted to bed Leah the moment I laid eyes on her, but it wasn't all I wanted. Matthew was right. I should have waited, but I've never been the waiting type. Now she believes my intentions aren't honorable.* Seth clutched the handcrafted necklace he'd won in the spear fighting competition. He took a deep breath and charged into the lion's den. Leah whipped around with a gasp. Undaunted by all the eyes staring him down, Seth placed the prize in her hand. He could have bought her jewelry, he had plenty of money to do so, but he'd won this for her.

She stood speechless as she realized he'd trained, fought, and conquered for her. Tears filled her eyes as she confessed, "I'm with someone."

"I know," Seth replied with a little smirk. "But he's not me."



Matthew and Phillip entered the plantation infirmary. Its floorboards creaked and groaned beneath their feet. The scent of dried plants, herbs, and roots engulfed them. The infirmary was a rickety structure, dimly lit by candles and kerosene lanterns. It held cabinets and drawers full of bandages, vials, and containers of all shapes and sizes. The walls were lined with shelves of live animals and insects. The furniture included just two beds and a few stools. Sarah sat alone waiting for Aunt Lizzie, the plantation nurse, and midwife.

"Are you alright?" Matthew asked as he and Phillip approached.

"I'll live, even though it don't feel that way." Sarah laughed and rubbed the sore spot on her chest.

"This is for you," Matthew stated as he passed Sarah her birthday

present.

Sarah smiled and opened the elongated black box. "A stethoscope! Thank ya!" *I could hug him if I hadn't already overstepped my boundaries earlier. I don't know what came over me. I was just so stunned to see him.* Sarah could feel her cheeks growing warm with blood as she thought of her previous blunder.

A confused Phillip opened his mouth to question the peculiar gift but soon abandoned the attempt. Shortly after, Marlette and Leah entered the infirmary with Aunt Lizzie, a gray-haired woman of eighty years. She was small, dark-skinned, and maintained a timeless beauty. Though she'd never learned to read or write, she was one of the wisest and most insightful healers in Missouri and Sarah was her protégé.

"Well, this shouldn't need stitches," Aunt Lizzie stated as she cleaned the small cut on Sarah's arm. The old woman waddled over to the Aloe Vera plant on one of the shelves and broke a small piece off. She squeezed the jelled contents onto Sarah's arm and bandaged the cut. "As fo the hit ya took to the chest, I see some bruising and swelling but I doubt anything broken. Apply cold wraps whenever ya can. Ask Marlette to help with yo duties this week. Now I gotta ask everyone but Sarah to leave so I can do her ink."

Phillip, Leah, and Marlette filed outside. Sarah thoughtlessly grabbed Matthew's hand and he stopped in his tracks. She gasped slightly, stunned by her own actions. *I crossed the line again! It's too late to take it back. If I apologize that would only call more attention to what I done.*

"Well alright, I suppose he can stay," Aunt Lizzie responded, shocked by Sarah's boldness.

Sarah lay on her side propped up with a few pillows. Matthew pulled up a stool next to her, silently debating his next move. *I don't wish to offend or be inappropriate but Sarah opened that door. She can't fault me for walking through it.* He took her hand with both of his and Sarah breathed a sigh of relief.

Meanwhile, Phillip was outside watching Leah and Marlette practice their spear fighting techniques.

"What's being done to Sarah?" Phillip asked.

The girls stopped swinging while Marlette explained, "When sixteen summers pass ya by that mean ya all grown up. Ya get a tattoo of yo tribal symbol on yo right ankle as an initiation to adulthood. See, we already got

ours.”

Leah and Marlette showed off their meticulously drawn ankle bands. Then they went back to playing around with the spears.

“Mr. Phillip, do ya have a last name so I can address ya proper like!” Leah shouted over the colliding war instruments.

“Arrington!” Phillip shouted back. “But I’d rather be called Phillip!”

The swinging ceased abruptly and an awkward silence came over the girls. At last Marlette took the initiative to speak, “Phillip Arrington, as in the oldest son of Lord and Lady Arrington?”

“Yes, that would be me,” Phillip answered candidly.

Marlette darted into the infirmary. Phillip and Leah followed her.

"Master Matthew, yo friend is noble! With all due respect Sir, if he get a scratch on him you'll be fine but they'll wanna see us hanged. He gotta go," Marlette demanded.

“He doesn’t want to go back and neither do I,” Matthew snapped.

Marlette appeared shocked at Matthew’s defiance. She gasped at the site of him and Sarah hand in hand. Marlette shook her head disapprovingly. Sarah released his hand at once without having to be told.

“Now do ya see what ya done?” Marlette scolded Sarah.

Sarah shrugged innocently and gave a coy smile.

"Where yo manners gone Marlette? That ain't no way to treat a guest," Aunt Lizzie stated calmly while diligently working on Sarah's tattoo.

“She’s right. This is no way to treat a guest,” Phillip patronized, giving Marlette a playful wink.

“We all need a break from our lives sometime. This don’t seem like the first time this young man pulled such a stunt and it ain’t gone be the last,” Aunt Lizzie said, giving Phillip a respectful nod.

Phillip mouthed the words thank you.



Spring Fest ended with a ceremonial dance. A panel of African drummers set the tempo while other instruments gradually blended in. The first dance would be a provocative serpent routine performed by Sarah, Leah, Marlette, and Anna.

“Where is yo sista!” Marlette whisper-yelled at Anna.

Anna giggled, “Laid up with some boy.”

With a huff and a roll of her eyes, Marlette started their routine, one dancer short. The crowd watched intently as the girls moved seductively with their snakes. It was as if the rest of the world disappeared as Matthew watched Sarah wind her body in rhythm with the beat. The music carried her like a rose petal floating about a summer’s breeze. She was like art in motion. He found himself envious of the lucky bastard his father would eventually force her to wed. The onlookers cheered, applauded, and tossed flowers at the end of the performance. When the second song began everyone grabbed a partner and joined in. Matthew committed to the dance he’d promised Anna earlier. Leah danced with her good friend Aaron, and Sarah danced with Seth. Marlette stood on the sideline and shot the look of death at any man who dared to look her way.

Matthew took Anna’s hands and moved as best he could to the unfamiliar rhythm. He was terrible but she didn’t seem to mind. Matthew whispered in her ear, “So is it working?”

Anna’s brows furrowed with confusion. “I’m not sure what ya mean, Sir.”

“You’ve been flirting with me to make Aaron jealous.” Matthew laughed. “Is it working?”

Anna was mortified. She covered her face with her hands. “I’m so sorry Master Matthew.”

He caught her arm as she fled in humiliation. “It’s alright,” Matthew assured her, pulling her close to conceal her embarrassment and better sell the ruse. Matthew gave her a cunning grin. “Shall we make him even more jealous?”

Anna laughed out loud, a little amazed that her master had a personality. “Why ya helping me?”

“I suppose it’s because I respect you for fighting for your heart’s desire. It takes courage to do so. Most are not so brave.” *I am not so brave.* His words trailed off as he gazed longingly at Sarah. “And I’m helping you because Aaron cares for you. He just has a lot on his plate.”

“If he care fo me, why he end things?” Anna questioned.

"Because he promised his father on his deathbed to one day buy his sister's freedom as well as his own. My father observes the Sabbath. Any slave working Sundays is compensated. Any hours worked before 5am or after 5pm on any day of the week are compensated. Courting takes time

away from earning money and pulls his sister's freedom out of grasp."

Anna nodded, "I understand. There ain't a thing I wouldn't do fo my sista, but I love him, Sir."

"Then don't give up on him," Matthew said with a kiss of her hand as the song ended. He thanked her for the dance and went in search of Sarah.

"Master Matthew!" Anna called after him. When he turned around she said with a smile, "You shouldn't give up neither. She went that way."

Matthew was mortified as he changed course and went after Sarah.

Phillip was a little disappointed to hear that Mali had retired for the evening but he refused to wallow in defeat. On song three Phillip shuffled to the sideline and extended a hand to Marlette.

She looked at the hand with cold indifference. "Ya gonna get us all killed."

Phillip knelt and picked up a broken arrowhead. "Allow me this one dance and I'll leave. Deny me and I'll cut my hand with this blade and tell everyone you were responsible."

"Ya wouldn't dare," Marlette announced with an indignant look.

Phillip placed the blade firmly against his palm. A spot of blood emerged beneath the arrowhead.

"Alright! Alright! One dance," Marlette shouted.

Phillip dropped the arrowhead and grabbed Marlette's hand in triumph.

Marlette huffed and rolled her eyes. *Entitled Bastard.*

Sarah, now chatting on the sideline with Matthew, froze mid-sentence. "Is that?" she stammered pointing at her sister.

"Yes, that would be the Iron Maiden dancing with Phillip. She actually appears to be having a good time too," Matthew answered.

"But how," Sarah pondered.

Matthew shrugged. *I don't know how or why Phillip managed to charm Marlette, but he certainly has a way with people.* Matthew glanced over at Sarah. She was stunning as always but tonight was different. She seemed approachable, less forbidden in a way. Without thinking he extended a hand to her and immediately regretted that move. Sarah took his hand before he could withdraw it. He observed everyone else. *I know how to dance but not like this. Their dances are closer, more provocative, almost sexual. Oh well, when in Rome...*

Matthew pulled Sarah close to him and placed his hands on the smooth

naked skin of her back. Her chest arched and pressed into his, as she took a shocked breath. She looked up into his gorgeous brown eyes, a little in disbelief. *Is this actually happening?* She questioned herself.

“I mean no disrespect... um... It’s just everyone else,” he started.

Sarah smiled and placed her hands around his neck as if silently granting permission. She gently stroked the sensitive skin above his collar and this time he took a breath. They swayed slowly beneath the stars, bathed in the light of the moon.

Seth looked over at Matthew as if to ask, “What are you doing? Don’t you know this is a fast song?”

Matthew smirked, shrugged, and turned his attention back to Sarah. His hands moved gingerly up and down her bare back.

She shivered and told him dreamily, “People will start to whisper.”

“They already do but I’ve told them the truth.”

“And what’s the truth?”

Matthew smiled. “That you’ve sworn a life of celibacy, and that we’re not in love but we’ll always be friends.”

Sarah laid her face on his chest and sighed. *I have sworn a life of celibacy but only because I can’t have freedom and I can’t have you.*



Phillip prepared to leave after that dance as promised. This night was fascinating and exciting. He didn’t want to go but he’d given a headstrong slave girl his word; and for some reason unknown to even him, he actually cared what she thought of him. Phillip and Matthew said their goodbyes and cleaned the tribal paint off their faces.

“Do you mind if I borrow some bandages?” Phillip asked Matthew.

“For what?”

“You’ll see.”

Matthew waited for Phillip to return from the infirmary, wondering what crazy antics he had in store. When Phillip came out with the small wad of bandages, they began their track back to the mansion.

“We’re not headed back that way. By now my parents have stormed the fort looking for me,” Phillip said.

“If we’re not going up the rope ladder, then just what do you suppose

we do: Waltz right in the front door?” Matthew questioned with sarcasm pouring from his vocal cords.

Phillip smirked. “Yes actually.”

“We’re guaranteed to encounter people. I’m a really bad liar!”

“Matthew, ole boy, you’ve got to relax,” Phillip stated, not appearing the least bit concerned.

As they approached the mansion the guests continued pouring from the exits. Numerous horse-drawn carriages lined the circular pathway to chauffeur Missouri's wealthiest and most powerful citizens. Most were overfed and drunk as all hell, fighting to maintain their equilibrium. Matthew stood paralyzed when he spotted his parents conversing with the Arringtons in front of the most expensive carriage on the property. The Arringtons were surrounded by the local press. Several reporters were asking questions. None of it seemed to bother the Arringtons. Their only concern was their son.

“Where have you been!” All four parents shouted in unison.

Phillip’s parents had even thicker British accents than him. They were difficult to understand. Matthew forced the lump down in his throat and struggled to find his words. Unable to think of any decent explanation he decided to go with the truth. *Either way, I'm in a whole mess of trouble. At least this way I'm not committing a sin.*

Before Matthew could confess, Phillip chimed in, “I dropped my champagne glass this evening. I didn’t want to call attention to my lack of grace and clumsiness. I tried to dump the glass into the rubbish bin before anyone noticed, rather than call on servants. I cut my hand, and the good doctor had already had a few too many drinks.” Phillip inconspicuously nudged his head in the direction of the intoxicated Dr. McKinley. Everyone glanced the doctor’s way and the balding Scott fell boarding his stagecoach. A servant rushed to help Dr. McKinley, and Phillip went on to say, “Matthew here was good enough to take me to the nurse on the plantation to be stitched up. Would you like to see?” Phillip bluffed, extending a bandaged fist.

“No that’s quite alright,” Lady Arrington said, holding up a gloved hand. Phillip knew his mother was squeamish and wouldn’t want to see the alleged wound.

“Phillip, get in the stagecoach and stop upsetting your mother,” Lord Arrington ordered.

Phillip grinned at Matthew and boarded the carriage.

“Next time allow servants to attend such matters,” Lady Arrington called after him.

“Thank you for helping our son. It was nice to meet you all,” Lord and Lady Arrington stated as they boarded the stagecoach next.

Master and Mistress Colburn gave their son an approving nod then bid farewell to their other guests. Matthew watched as the Arrington’s elegant black stagecoach disappeared down the gravel path. The moment it was gone Matthew’s thoughts floated right back to Sarah. *She embraced me, held my hand, danced with me beneath the stars, but how will she treat me tomorrow?*



The fire began to die down but the temperature was pleasant and summer like. The night fell silent as the slaves packed up their musical instruments, bows, and spears. They returned to their tiny shacks to rest up for another day of grueling labor in the cotton, tobacco, and sugarcane fields. Without the help of her sister, Anna was unable to disassemble the paint stand. She certainly couldn’t carry it home alone. She would have to come back for it tomorrow. *I’m gonna kill Mali when I see her*, Anna thought as she stayed behind to pack up their supplies by herself. She took her time to put away each item; dragging the task out for as long as possible. *I don’t care if I’m exhausted when I report fo duty tomorrow morning. It’ll be a year until the next festival. I ain’t ready fo this night to end just yet. Nothing to look forward to but another day of back breaking, inhumane work. The magic of the festival is still in the air. I must enjoy it fo as long as I can.*

Anna grabbed as much as she was able to carry and set out on the mile hike to the cabin she shared with her sister. *I remember the day the Colburns had me and my sista ripped from our ma and pa’s arms. Our last owner, Master Miles, hit hard times and went to strike up a deal with the Colburns. Mali and me was devastated the Colburns wanted to take our pa away from us in exchange fo farm equipment and grain. We was relieved when Master Miles told em our pa was a talented blacksmith and far too valuable to be traded. Our relief only lasted a brief period. The*

following day Master Miles gave me and my sista to the Colburns instead. The Colburns had me and Mali work they cotton fields. They hired a free black man as a blacksmith since Master Miles refused to part with my pa. We was bought, sold, and traded like cattle fo farm equipment and grain. Life was never the same after that. Anna stopped in her tracks as she saw Aaron sitting on his porch. He was twirling a stuffed bear in his hands with a furious expression on his face.

“Good evening,” she greeted the boy she used to court. “Was that the prize fo taking first in the arrow battle?”

“Yep,” he said with an irritated tone.

“Yo sista Cassie will love it.”

“I actually won it fo ya,” Aaron confessed.

“We getting back together?” she asked hopefully.

“Nope, just wanted to apologize.”

Anna fumed, “This ‘I love ya but I aint in love with ya’, nonsense has to stop!”

“What’s going on with ya and young Master Colburn!” Aaron questioned with a stern expression.

“Ya aint got no right to ask,” Anna snapped at him. “Not after the way ya ended things.”

His expression softened and so did his tone, “I been a slave all my life, but hurting ya was the hardest thing I ever did. It aint what I wanted, but this how it’s gotta be.”

“Can we just talk fo a bit?” Anna pleaded.

“I don’t wanna wake my sista,” Aaron whispered.

“Then grab a blanket. We’ll go to our old spot.”

He glanced back and forth between Anna and his sleeping sister, torn between a deep since of longing and an even deeper sense of responsibility.

“Fo once in yo life be reckless,” Anna pleaded. “It’s okay to want something fo yoself.”

Aaron entered the dilapidated hovel he called home to retrieve a blanket. Anna left her paints and supplies on the porch. They ventured through the nearby woods to Redwood cliff. They were careful not to stray too far, or else the overseers might’ve assumed they were trying to run away, and brutally punished them. Aaron had always been Mr. Responsible, the plantation’s dark knight. Anna loved this about him but

at times she wished he was a little more free-spirited, like Seth. Tonight she'd gotten her wish.

He'd lain in her arms sending ripples of pleasure throughout her body, as he made love to her with long deep strokes. Now Aaron sat on a thin wool blanket before a cozy campfire. He gazed over the cliff, taking in the magnificent view, with a goofy grin on his face. It was the best night of his life. He wished he'd done all this with her sooner, rather than living in fear of the unknown. Anna lay in just his beige tunic which came down to her knees. She looked so elfin in his clothes. Her head rested upon his strong thigh as she slept like an angel. He gingerly brushed a hand over her soft curls, a little tousled from their rigorous activities. She looked perfect this way: satisfied and sleepy. He could watch her like this for the rest of their lives, but this couldn't be so. She was merely loaned to his plantation and he'd never be able to see her after she returned to her own estate. Instead of fretting over the facts, like he normally would, he caressed her soft skin, praising God for this moment.

She bristled and stirred at his touch, releasing a sleepy yawn as she sat up. "Ain't ya gonna sleep?"

"Nope. If this be my only night with ya, I don't wanna miss a thing," he admitted as he braided his fingers with hers and kissed her knuckles.

She smiled softly, her eyelids still low, her voice shallow and sleepy, "Sleep, Aaron. I don't want ya falling under the lash because ya tired."

"Ya right," He nodded. "I will get some rest. I don't wanna be exhausted when I'm begging Master's permission to marry ya."

Anna couldn't speak. Her very soul filled with joy as she wrapped her arms around him, and placed a lingering kiss upon his lips. Anna's excitement snapped her from her sleepiness as Aaron explained the tough things that he would have to do, "I figure I could beg Master Colburn to keep ya. I'll work even harder to gain his favor if that's what it take."

"If we marry I won't get in yo way," Anna vowed. "I know what ya trying to do fo yo sista. If all ya got fo me is five minutes a week, I'll take it."

An amazed Aaron cupped her cheek and gazed into the lovely green of her eyes. His arms encircled her tunic clad body pouring soft kisses all over her face. He confessed, "I don't know how this gonna work. I'm flying blind but I want it to work. Spend the night with me?"

"People will know what we did," Anna cautioned him.

“I don’t care.”

She nodded and they leisurely strolled back to his cabin. She laid in his embrace until he fell asleep, but she could not spend the night with him. Her reputation would be ruined, just as Mali’s was, plus Anna felt uneasy for some reason. She had to go home and check on Mali. She fought her way out from under a heavy arm without waking him. She knew he needed his rest. She had napped on the cliff, but he hadn’t slept at all until now. The last thing she wanted was for him to prove unproductive tomorrow and get the hell beaten out of him by the overseers. With a gentle peck of his lips, she slipped out of the warm house and into the cool night air.

Anna’s cabin was completely dark when she got home. Not even the lantern on the porch was lit. *Mali must be fast asleep.* Anna opened the door and felt her bare foot splash into something wet. She grabbed some matches and lit a lantern. The house was ransacked. The furniture was turned over and the floor was covered in blood.

“Oh my God! Mali! Mali!” Anna screamed. She followed the crimson river to the bedroom. There Mali lay on her cot, covered in bright red blood. “Mali!” Anna ran into the room.

Mali lay on her side facing the wall and did not respond. Anna grabbed her sister's shoulder. Mali slumped onto her back; she stared up at the ceiling in silence: not blinking, breathing, or moving. She was dead to the world. Anna felt cold all over. She was faint and dizzy. The room began to spin. Her mind and body were entirely overwhelmed. She felt the urges to cry, scream, vomit, and pass out all at the same time. Before Anna could yell for help a strong hand fastened tightly over her mouth...

CHAPTER 4:

Without A Trace

It was 5:00am and the sun had not yet risen. The ringing of the gigantic bell in the slave quarters symbolized another day of duty. Sarah yawned and climbed out of bed. *It's gonna be a very long day.* Still exhausted from the spring festival, she looked around her cabin. Her entire family had already gone to work. She hastily slipped on her black and white servant's dress, pulled back her thick curly hair, and walked toward the big house, passing the mess hall on the way.

More than two-hundred field slaves formed two lines for morning rations. Sarah and her family worked in the house. They ate breakfast at a later time. Sarah entered the mansion and walked directly to the small dining hall. She immediately began setting the table with fine china, crystal ware, and polished silver. The aroma drifting from the kitchen was magnificent. Mable had probably been up since 4:00am preparing breakfast for the Colburns. Sarah glanced at the clock, 5:30am. *The Colburns will be up soon.*

She hurried outside to pick fresh flowers for the centerpiece. After arranging the floral bouquet, she set out everyone's favorite breakfast sides: *strawberry syrup fo Lillian's waffles, whipped cream and sliced fruit fo Mistress Colburn's crapes, salt and pepper fo Master Colburn's biscuits and gravy, and last but not least, butter and raspberry jam fo Matthew's toast. The Colburn's wards, Seth and Emanuel, prefer to get a early start. They have pancakes and sausage brought to em at work.*

Matthew Colburn Sr. entered the dining room moments later.

“Good morning Sir. What can I get fo ya?” Sarah asked the master.

He took his place at the table. “I think I’ll have... the biscuits and gravy.”

Surprise, surprise. Sarah passed him the morning paper. “Excellent choice Sir.”

Master Colburn, a man of thirty-five years, was tall, dark, and handsome. His dark wavy hair complemented his chestnut eyes and lightly tanned complexion. He was stone-faced and serious, and he never ever smiled. He spoke with a heavy southern drawl and had an all work no play mentality.

The mistress, Ariel Colburn, appeared just minutes later, looking radiant as always. She was petite with porcelain skin and silky blonde hair. It was barely 6:00am and she was already so full of life. Unlike her husband, she was a social creature. She found joy in hosting the most lavish parties for Missouri’s rich and powerful. She came from a wealthy family in France and still spoke with an accent. She and her husband were both strong believers in order, tradition, and the separation of the classes. Appearances were everything to the Colburns.

“Good morning. I’ll have the usual,” Mistress Colburn said cheerfully, her large gray eyes sparkling.

“Yes Ma’am,” Sarah replied.

Master Colburn rose as the mistress entered the room, and pulled out her chair. She kissed her husband's cheek and took a seat next to him. Lillian walked in yawning and rubbing her eyes. She was still wearing her nightgown.

Mistress Colburn was appalled. “Lillian you will eat properly or not at all! Go change your clothes at once.”

Lillian stomped back upstairs to her bedroom. She had inherited her mother’s beautiful looks, but none of the mistress’ lady-like charm, grace, and sophistication. Since the moment Lillian could walk she served as a constant source of embarrassment, frustration, and disappointment for her parents.

“Where’s Lillian going?” Matthew asked as he entered the dining room.

“She was sent to her room for coming down in her sleep attire. That girl will never fetch a decent husband, behaving the way she does,” Master

Colburn grumbled.

“Decent husband? She’s twelve,” Matthew protested.

“Twelve or not, she must learn to behave like a proper lady,” Mistress Colburn added.

“Good morning Master Matthew. What will it be?” Sarah asked.

“The same,” Matthew announced with aggravation.

He adored his sister Lillian, but his mother and father were always so hard on her. Matthew had his father’s handsome looks and quiet temperament. He was the strong silent type and usually avoided large crowds, which was why Sarah was so shocked to see him at the festival. Matthew looked at Sarah and she refused to meet his gaze. He fiddled with his napkin amazed by the difference just a few hours had made. *Just yesterday she was in my arms, and now she's addressing me formally and wearing that awful black gown. Of course, it flatters her. What doesn't? But I hate that serving dress none the less. It's an ever-present reminder that she's unattainable. It's as if last night never happened.*

Matthew made his way up two flights of stairs and down a very long corridor to check on his sister. *Poor Lillian is just getting over a terrible bout of sore throat. She got sick just days after me. She probably just wanted to eat one measly meal in peace and comfort with her family, and Ma and Pa acted as if she'd committed murder.*

He knocked thrice. “Lillian, are you alright?”

"She ain't dressed," Lillian's maids called in response to the knock on her door.

The maids fussed with her hair and makeup and yanked the strings of her corset so hard Lillian thought she would lose consciousness. This strangulating garment often left red marks and bruises on her creamy white skin, which was stubborn and refused to tan despite the intense southern heat.

"I said she ain't decent!" Snapped a surly maid at the sound of another knock.

“I don’t care!” yelled the manly voice from the other side of the door.

“Its just my brother,” Lillian assured them with a gasp, barely able to breathe inside the iron grip of her corset. She wheezed, “come in Matthew.”

The maids were appalled but not surprised at Lillian’s brashness. The essentials were well covered but for Lillian to allow a gentleman into her

chamber without being in full dress was highly inappropriate, even if that gentleman was her brother. A chambermaid returned to ripping rogue hairs from Lillian's eyebrows while ignoring her yelps of pain. Another spread a sticky paste derived from honey on each of Lillian's knuckles. The woman laid thin strips of material over the paste and without warning, care, or consideration she ripped the fine blonde hairs from Lillian's hands.

"Owe!" Lillian yelled.

"Would you stop that!" Matthew ordered the maids at the sight of his sister's red puffy eyebrows and fingers. "What little hair exists isn't even noticeable!"

"Sorry, Mistress's orders." A dark-skinned maid grinned delightfully as she ripped the hair from another of Lillian's fingers.

The maids didn't care for the young Colburn girl, in fact, all but Sarah's family thoroughly disliked her. Every time Lillian presented herself in a poor light to her parents it unintentionally made the serving girls responsible for her look bad. They were reprimanded regularly because of Lillian's rather boyish behavior and they embraced any opportunity to cause her pain or discomfort.

"It's alright," Lillian said sheepishly, closing her eyes and breathing away the pain so her brother wouldn't worry. She met Matthew's eyes as she spoke in her country accent, "I'm sorry about breakfast. Ma and Pa are right you know."

"No, they're not," Matthew said sternly. "You are a wonderful person Lillian, and one day some lucky man will love you for who you are and steal you away from your big brother." His voice sounded a little sad at the last bit.

"Never," Lillian happily declared as the maids continued to treat her like some object for display, polishing her up to meet society's and her mother's approval. "I love you, bro."

"Back at you sis." He placed a hand at each side of her face and dropped a brotherly peck on one sore red brow and then the other. She could feel her headache melting away. The look of relief and serenity on her face brought a smile to his. He flexed his bicep. "Now who's my big strong girl?"

She responded with a flex of her own arms. When Matthew was certain Lillian was fine he left her to her daily ritual torture, and he

returned to the dining hall to be ignored by the woman he loved.

As Matthew reclaimed his seat at the table Sarah said, "I'll be right back with yall's breakfast. Should I make a plate fo Miss Lillian?"

Before anyone could respond, the warning bell sounded off. Everyone sprang from their seats. Master Colburn and Matthew ran outside to a cacophony of barking canines. Matthew took a look around. There were armed men with packs of hound dogs searching the property.

"We have two runaways, Sir," one of ten overseers informed Master Colburn.

"Who!" Mr. Colburn demanded.

"The new girls, Anna and Mali, didn't report for 6:00am field duty," the overseer explained.

"They didn't just disappear without a trace!" Master Colburn snapped. "Retrieve them, and deal with them accordingly!"

"Father! Promise me you won't hurt them!" Matthew shouted, knowing that the girls would be flogged until the brink of death.

Master Colburn placed a hand on his son's shoulder. "This is a plantation son. Runaway slaves must be punished, or all the slaves will be taking off. You'll understand when you inherit the property."

Matthew shoved his father away. "I want nothing to do with this place! It's monstrous!"

Matthew ran to the field Aaron worked in, to tell him the awful news. The words came out so fast and panicked that Aaron took a moment to fully register them.

Aaron refused to believe it. He heaved frantically, "She wouldn't have run away, Sir."

"How do you know," Matthew replied. "The two of you haven't been speaking."

"She give herself to me last night," Aaron swore. "She say she wanna be my wife. Not lover, wife! Why would she do that just to leave me?"

Matthew nodded as he recalled just how besotted Anna was with Aaron. They grabbed Seth from the lumberyard, and the three of them set out to find Anna and Mali before the overseers hunted the girls down.



In the hours that followed the disappearance of Anna and Mali, it was back to business as usual on the plantation. Sarah appeared in the doorway of Mr. Colburn's office. He waved her in from behind his massive desk.

"Ya wished to see me, Master?" Sarah asked while trying her best to switch from worried friend mode back to slave mode.

Master Colburn drawled, "Sarah, I have two issues I wish to discuss with you. The first is that my wife's sister Countess A`lice Demoniet, her husband Count Pier Demoniet, and their daughter Francesca, are arriving from France this evening. You'll need to begin preparing rooms for our guests. The count and countess will be leaving the end of this week. Their daughter Francesca will be with us the rest of the summer and she is in need of a chambermaid. Mable may need help in the kitchen also."

Sarah frowned at the very thought of having to help Mable. Mable was pencil thin and black as night. She possessed the smile of a jack-o-lantern which made her speak with a lisp. She was very bossy and condescending with a personality as unattractive as her physical appearance. You'd think that being forced into such a harsh predicament would cause the people to stick together. Sarah was surprised at how often that wasn't the case. Most of the house slaves felt they were superior to the field slaves. Some American born blacks also felt they were better than slaves who came from Africa and vice versa. Mable had always turned her nose up at Sarah's family because Sarah's father was African born.

"Master, wasn't there something else ya wished to talk to me about, Sir?" Sarah enquired.

Mr. Colburn sat back in his large armchair. "Yes actually. Aren't you fifteen years old now?"

"Sixteen, Sir"

"Have you jumped the broom yet?"

"No Sir."

"My ward, Emanuel, wishes to marry and he fancies you. Should I tell him the match is agreeable?"

Sarah paused for a moment and let out a long sigh. She stared wistfully up at the constellations painted on the master's ceiling. *It seem like every other week Master Colburn comes to me and Marlette with another proposal. How many times must we inform the men on this plantation that we will have no one? Even with our decent treatment, we often fantasize about what it would be like to roam free in the distant land our father told*

us all them stories about. Marlette and I felt it would be wrong to subject a innocent child to a life of servitude. We made a pact to never marry, but the suitors keep coming. I can tell Master Colburn's patience is wearing thin with my inability to choose a mate. I live in dread of the day he stops asking and chooses a mate fo me. It's inevitable, but I'll put it off as long as possible.

“Sarah, what should I tell the boy!” Mr. Colburn snapped impatiently.

Sarah hesitated a moment longer. “Tell him I’m sorry but I gotta decline his request.”

“Very well then; send my son in. I need a word with him,” Mr. Colburn ordered sounding somewhat irritated.

Sarah respectfully nodded, “Yes Sir, right away.”

Sarah trotted down the hall to Matthew’s study. His search had proven unproductive and his father ordered his return. Matthew, Aaron, and Seth could only hope the sisters got away safely. That bit of hope was enough to keep Aaron from going insane with worry. Aaron kept hoping Anna might have gotten cold feet at the thought of marriage and ran home to her parents. Naturally, Mali would have followed her older sister. Matthew was sitting behind a desk fighting to stay awake, while a man in his late twenties stood scribbling away on a chalkboard.

Sarah waited in the doorway a few moments before politely interrupting the tutor. “I beg yo pardon, Sir. I must call on Master Matthew. His father wishes to have a word with him.”

The teacher waived his hand. “You’re dismissed for the day. Read chapters eight and nine for tomorrow’s lesson.”

Matthew rose from his seat with a yawn. He put away his textbook: *The Art of Medicine*.

As he joined Sarah in the hallway he said with exasperation, "I really don't want to deal with my father right now but at least I got out of that wretched, boring, medical class early today. That subject is mind-numbing."

The only classes that interested Matthew were math, physics, engineering, and art.

“Good luck with yo father,” Sarah said. She forced a smile and walked down the hall in the opposite direction.

Matthew could tell she was upset and felt bad for his comment about school. *What a stupid thing to say. Sarah would give anything just for the*

opportunity to learn to read and write and here I am taking my education for granted. He approached his father's study, took a deep breath, and knocked twice.

"Come in," called the booming voice from behind the door.

"Father, you wished to see me?" Matthew asked as he made his way into the room.

"I just wanted to tell you to watch the way you behave with the slaves this week. The count and countess will be visiting and they frown on fraternization with servants. Also, Francesca will be staying with us for the summer. Be polite to your cousin and show her around. I'll be out of town on business for a couple of days. You're in charge until I return. That'll be all."

"Yes, Sir." Matthew left the room. He ran downstairs and retreated outside to the barn to suffer through his frustration in seclusion. *The Bible says to honor thy mother and father but there have to be some exceptions to that rule. My cousin Francesca is the most intolerable spoiled brat who ever lived. She's malevolent, vindictive, and bitter to the core. Now I have no choice but to waste my summer on her.*

He entered the barn and started working on Dr. McKinley's stagecoach. Within minutes he was entirely engrossed. Matthew had always loved to repair, design and build things. He desired to be an architect or a structural engineer. Though he had no interest in human anatomy or the study of diseases, his parents wanted him to be a doctor. They hired a teacher to come in four days a week to train him in the art of medicine. Sarah, on the other hand, wanted nothing more than to be a doctor. She spent the majority of her time assisting Aunt Lizzie in the infirmary, helping her mend broken bones, prepare herbal remedies, and many other things. She was a very bright young woman and would have most likely been a doctor had she been born a white male and given the proper schooling.

"I brought ya some cold lemonade Master," Sarah said as she entered the barn.

She was aware his father never had anything nice to say and was rarely in a good mood. This is why she knew exactly where to find Matthew: the same spot he always went to blow off some steam.

He unburied himself from his work for a moment to smile at her and receive the glass. "Thank you, Sarah. I don't mean to be cross but I hate

Francesca and now I'm stuck with her the rest of the summer."

"If it make ya feel any better, I gotta be her maid so I'm stuck with her too. Fo what it's worth, I can't stand her neither," Sarah confessed as she passed him a large bolt that was just out of his reach.

"Sarah, will you run an errand for me?" Matthew asked as he fastened the eight-inch bolt to the stagecoach.

"Yes, of course, Master Matthew."

Matthew fastened the nut even tighter. "Will you go to the forge and bring me a hammer?"

Sarah made her way to the smithy. When she reached the rickety old structure, the door was already open. The place felt like the surface of the sun. The air was sweltering and difficult to breathe. The smell of molten steel invaded her nostrils. She cautiously walked through the dim musty forge in search of the hammer. She admired the lovely bronze candleholders, drawer handles, and decorative daggers that lined the counters and walls. There were times when she forgot that blacksmiths did a lot more than shoe horses. Just then she felt someone grab her arm. A black man, in his late twenties, with a light complexion, stood in front of her. She jerked away as she recognized the man.

He grabbed her again. "Hey gal, my name is..."

"Unhand me!" Sarah interrupted. "I know who ya is! Ya that free Negro the master hired as a blacksmith. Ya tell all the girls around here that you'll buy they freedom so they'll bed ya. My sista warned me about ya."

"All lies, my dear. If ya jump the broom with me I promise to buy yo freedom," the man replied, denying all allegations against him.

He pulled her close in a blatant effort to kiss her. Sarah broke free of his clutches and ran back to the barn with Matthew.

"Sarah, what's the matter?" Matthew asked, noticing she came back out of breath and without the hammer.

Sarah took a moment longer to catch her breath. "There was this man in the forge trying to paw me and kiss on me."

Matthew, eyes red with fury, stomped off to defend her honor. Sarah blocked his path and placed her hand upon his chest to stop him. She could feel his heart pounding beneath her palm. Her eyes pleaded for Matthew not to confront the giant man.

Matthew could feel his anger subsiding at the caress of her hand upon

his chest. "That was Abraham, my father's blacksmith. I'll be sure to inform my father of his behavior. Stay away from him, Sarah. There's something not right about him."

She smiled in response to Matthew being overprotective of her. "Sir, I'm sure he just a harmless pervert. He don't strike me as dangerous."

Matthew's mood lightened as he saw the concern in her eyes. *She doesn't want me getting hurt.* He grinned. "Just forget about the hammer for now and race me to the pond."

Sarah grinned at him and replied sarcastically, "Master Matthew, ya know I always beat ya."

Matthew shook his head thoughtfully. *I love playing games with Sarah. She's one of the few slaves on my father's plantation that won't allow me to win at everything. I usually let her win.* "On your mark, get set go!"

They were off across the meadow with Sarah in the lead as usual and Matthew in a close second. He gradually passed her with the pond now in sight. He stopped just short of the pond when he heard a sharp scream.

He turned around and couldn't see her anywhere. "Sarah!! Are you alright!"

She had completely disappeared. "Matthew!!" He heard her voice but still couldn't see her.

"Where are you, Sarah!"

"I'm alright. Just follow the sound of my voice! I'm down here," Sarah instructed.

At that moment he noticed a hole in the ground by the old weeping willow tree. "Here take my hand. I'll get you out of there."

Sarah looked around a moment and casually replied, "actually I think ya should come down here and take a look. It's a tunnel big enough to stand up in. Let's see where it leads to."

Using the tree roots as stairs, Matthew climbed down into the tunnel with Sarah. They followed the dark musty tunnel until it ended at a large cave. On the outside of the cave, there was a sparkling waterfall that poured into a bowl-shaped body of water. Sarah pulled up her long black dress, to put her feet in the water, and wash off the minor scratches she had attained from the fall. To her surprise the water was unusually warm, bath water warm, due to a natural hot spring that poured into it. Sarah shielded herself as Matthew playfully splashed her with water. She soon

went on the defensive and splashed him mercilessly.

“That’s it!” He declared.

She took off running but was soon snared. He laughingly embraced her from behind with both arms wrapped around her waist.

“Matthew no! Please!” Sarah begged between chuckles as he took her back toward the falls.

Matthew grinned. *She didn’t even notice that she addressed me by name. What I would give to hear her call me Matthew all the time.*

Sarah reasoned with him at the water’s edge, “If ya drag me in you’ll get soaked too.”

Matthew stopped. “I suppose you’re right.”

“Thank ya,” Sarah replied still breathing heavily. “My other gown in the wash tub and I won’t have nothing to change...”

He snatched them back into the water before she could finish her sentence. They went down with a huge splash.

“Matthew,” She screamed playfully once they’d surfaced. Both her laughter and informal address of him was music to his ears. Sarah playfully shoved him in the chest. “I got nothing to wear now! I’ll have to walk around in wet clothes.”

His laughter ceased and he gave her an intense look. “Your dress would dry much faster if you took it off.”

Sarah’s jaw dropped. Matthew’s face burned with embarrassment. “That came out all wrong,” he explained. “I meant to say while you’re not around me.”

Sarah shot him an indignant look, “Ya find me repulsive?”

“No, that’s not what I meant either. I was just saying your dress would dry faster on the clothesline than on your body.”

With great effort, Sarah made her way to the water’s edge. Her gown felt like it weighed a ton.

Matthew called after her, “Where are you going?”

“It was a nice break but I gotta go be a slave now,” Sarah replied with a playful sarcasm he was well accustomed to. “And in a wet gown no less.”

Matthew asked as he climbed out of the water after her, “What should we call this place?”

Sarah took a moment to think. She named it White Water Falls because the constant rolling of the water made it appear more white than blue.



Sarah stopped by the nursery after leaving the falls to face her mother, Violet. Sarah knew at some point she'd have to answer for Matthew's appearance at the spring festival and she had been avoiding the encounter all day. She reached for the doorknob, took a deep breath and walked in. *I may as well get this over with.* The cabin was filled with infants, toddlers, and small children running a-muck. Violet rotated frequently, performing many tasks around the plantation, but the nursery was the only place in which she found joy. Sarah's mother was of average height and slightly heavy set. She had peanut butter tanned skin and large brown eyes. She wore a black and white servant's dress and a black, cotton scarf she kept wrapped around her hair at all times.

Violet had two daughters, Sarah sixteen and Marlette twenty. Her first marriage was to Marlette's father Henry, a tall handsome Mulatto man fifteen years her senior. He died at the young age of thirty-five when he was thrown from a wild stallion while trying to train it for the mistress. Violet later married Sarah's father Samson, an attractive dark-skinned man of average height and muscular build. Samson hadn't been born on the plantation like most of the others. He had been captured from an Island off the coast of Africa. He was brought to the Colburn plantation to work in the sugar cane fields. He held a high position in his tribe back home and he was a very proud man. Although he hated his new home, he treated his family with care and compassion. Samson adopted Marlette as his own and he was very over-protective of his girls.

"Ya do know ya ain't supposed to talk to Matthew and Lillian this week," Violet stated while holding a whining baby in each arm.

"Yes Ma'am, we already been warned."

Violet gasped. "Why on earth is ya all wet!"

"Well um..." Sarah stammered.

Violet put up her hand, "Ya know what, I don't even wanna to hear it." She looked at her daughter with disappointment. "I saw Master Matthew at the festival and I know he was there cause of ya. I understand ya and Matthew been friends since yall was very small, but he a young man now. It's no longer appropriate fo yall to spend so much time together.

He's yo Master. Not yo playmate! I'm sorry ya don't agree but this our way of life. It's just the way things are Sarah."

Sarah mumbled under her breath, "Why I'm the only one that see a problem with the way things are?"

"What ya just say!"

"Matthew say that all men equal in God's eyes!" Sarah announced in frustration.

"Watch yo tongue girl! Ya ain't, nor will ya ever be, Matthew's equal! If he can't make that distinction, it's up to ya to do so. From now on ya will address him properly every time. No calling him by his first name ever. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes Ma'am," Sarah answered in a hushed voice.

Violet shouted in anguish. "What I do in my past life to deserve two insolent daughters! Ya do the exact opposite of everything I tell ya, and Marlette's a damn shrew! Did ya know people calling yo sista the Iron Maiden! That was an ancient device used fo torture and killing!" Sarah snickered a little. "It ain't funny." Violet protested. "I'm yo mother. I ain't saying these things to hurt ya. Yo father has worked very hard to get his position as overseer. I worked very hard to receive my position in the nursery. Ya and Marlette both been blessed with positions in the house. The Colburns been very good to us, and yo behavior could jeopardize everything. When will ya realize the decisions ya make affect us all? Ya ain't a child no mo Sarah."

"I'm sorry. Didn't realize the magnitude of my actions. Won't happen again," Sarah said grudgingly. *Growing up on a plantation teaches ya one skill of survival very early in life: the ability to give a convincing apology even when ya know ya done nothing wrong. I ain't even mad at Momma. Unlike Pa, Momma been a house slave her entire life. The very ideas of freedom and equality are far-fetched to her.*

Violet bought the phony apology, and her mood lightened immediately. "How is yo ink healing?"

"Oh, it's healing really well." Sarah peeled off her soggy bandage to show her mother.

Violet examined the ankle and agreed. "I heard ya turned down another proposal today."

Sarah huffed. *Here we go again.*

Violet placed the now sleeping infants in their bassinets. "Of all the

people on the plantation to turn down, why did it have to be Emanuel? He keep track of the books and handle all the finances on the plantation. I don't agree with what ya and Marlette is doing. Life can be very cold at times and it's a blessing to have someone to share it with. Now it's yo decision and I respect it, but I want ya to know that I love yo father dearly and I never once regretted ya or yo sista. Now run along, I hear the mistress need yo help."

Sarah left the nursery and sped to the big house in the dress she borrowed from another servant. It was too small. She was bursting out of the top, but it would have to do for now. She raced to get everything ready. *Why must they always inform us at the last minute?* It was late in the afternoon and she was extremely pressed for time. Sarah spent the next few hours preparing all the guest quarters. She dusted and cleaned every surface. She changed all the linens and picked fresh flowers to put in each of the chambers. She took exceptional care to make sure every detail was perfect for the guests.



Darkness fell. A black and gold carriage pulled by four white horses approached the Colburn Mansion. A teenage girl with grey eyes, curly blonde locks, and porcelain skin was helped out of the carriage by Seth, who was the master and mistress' pride and joy, and clearly the favorite of all their children. They began raising him after his mother died when he was very young.

"Sarah, show my niece Francesca to her room," Mrs. Colburn urged in her French accent.

"Yes, Mistress." Sarah hurried to the young lady's aid.

Francesca was dressed in an extravagant green gown with gold embroidery and looked about sixteen years old. Her parents climbed out of the carriage next. Within seconds they were surrounded by the local press. A`lice was blonde with grey eyes and a small frame. She was the mistress' identical twin sister. Her husband Pier was of average height and build with red hair and hazel eyes. Both Pier and A`lice were in their early thirties. The Demoniets were smiling and laughing; charming the newspaper editors with witty banter and polite responses. The noble family

came off as pleasant and humble but Sarah knew it was all a ruse for the sake of good publicity. The Demoniets were the rudest people she'd ever been forced to serve. To Sarah, their arrogance was palpable. The thought of waiting on them for only a week, was enough to make her gag.



Francesca rang for Sarah the next morning to help her dress.

“Ya rang for me, Miss?” Sarah asked.

Francesca stopped brushing her long blonde hair a moment and barked orders in her thick French accent, “Fetch me a glass of lemonade, and this time don’t put so much sugar in it. You nearly poisoned it with sugar last night. When you return lay out my pink and white summer dress, and brush my hair into a bun. Make haste! Cousin Matthew is taking me horseback riding.”

When Sarah returned with the glass of lemonade, Francesca sipped it in a manner that would allow her to touch very little of the glass because servants had previously touched it. Sarah finished up Francesca’s hair and laced up her corset. Sarah helped her slip on the pink dress and waited for further instructions.

“I suppose that will be all. You’re dismissed,” Francesca snapped.

Usually, a lady's maid served as an all-day companion and was not dismissed immediately. A maid was more of a friend to her charge than a slave, but Francesca hated Sarah and didn't even attempt to hide her disdain. This left Sarah to ponder day after day how she had wronged Francesca and what more she could do to please her lady. Every attempt Sarah made was a failed one. The maid simply couldn't do anything right in Francesca's eyes. Sarah left the room trying hard to hide the look of frustration on her dark pretty face.

She passed Matthew in the hallway and grumbled, “she all yours now.”

On the way back to the infirmary, a girl ran passed crying.

“Miss Lillian, what’s the matter?” Sarah asked.

Lillian stopped her sniffing. “Francesca won’t play with me. She called me a tom-boy and said ladies of class like her don’t climb trees or play horseshoes. When I asked to go riding with her and Matthew she said

I was too young and I would only slow them down.”

Lillian looked a lot like Francesca, minus four years and the semi-permanent scowl. Unlike Francesca and her mother, Lillian’s hair was straight and black. Her eyes were a simple brown. Sarah bent down to hug the girl and urged her to calm down. Francesca was always hurting Lillian’s feelings and Sarah and was always there to pick up the pieces.

“I’ll take ya riding myself if yo father say it’s alright,” Sarah replied.

Lillian stopped crying and flashed Sarah an angelic grin. “I wish you were my cousin.”

She ran off to play with some of the slave children. Moments after Lillian took off Sarah noticed a small red hound dog digging a hole in a flower bed.

“What ya doing out of yo pen?” Sarah jogged in the direction of the hound puppy. It trotted off playfully. *Oh puppy, I ain’t in the mood to chase ya.* As she drew closer to him she noticed something black dangling from the dog’s mouth. *An arrowhead? No an earring.*

“How did ya get a hold of Anna’s earring, little guy?” She grabbed the puppy and pulled the earring from his mouth.

Sarah let out a horrified scream. The earring was still attached to a petrified ear...

CHAPTER 5:

The Vanishing

Sarah wrapped the severed ear in a white cloth and ran into the mansion. She sped upstairs to the third floor and pounded on the master's door.

“Master Colburn!” When she heard no response, she continued to beat on the door. “Master Colburn!”

Emanuel emerged from his office across the hall. No one knew why he was even considered a slave. He possessed the appearance and proper speech patterns of any other white man, and he ran the entire plantation. He was average height with hair the color of sand. He wore thinly rimmed spectacles over pale blue eyes. He was eighteen-years-old, very well kept, and dressed in the finest clothing. Emanuel was a good looking man, with a lot going for him. There was no wonder Violet was upset over Sarah's refusal to accept his proposal.

“What’s the problem, Sarah!” He shouted, grabbing her shoulders to calm her.

“Something terrible happened to them girls!” She shoved the wad of cloth at Emanuel.

“What’s this?” He asked with a confused look on his face.

“Someone came to this plantation and killed Anna. This her ear. I recognized the earring. Something's telling me Mali didn't make it either.” A wave of nausea swept over Sarah.

Emanuel’s handsome face went pale white. He removed his glasses

and rubbed his eyes in disbelief. “Dear God in Heaven. Please step into my office. Severed body parts aren’t really my thing. So I’ll just take your word for it.”

He set the bundled up ear on his desk without looking at it. Sarah followed Emanuel into his office. She continued to fight down the sick feeling that was rising up in her stomach.

Emanuel passed her his handkerchief, and tried to explain. "Sarah it's truly regrettable what happened to Anna, but this estate is surrounded by woods. Coyotes and wolves live in these parts. Wildcats live in the nearby mountains. Anna could've easily been attacked when she and her sister ran off; and how do you know Mali didn't get away safely?"

Sarah shook her head in disbelief. She was breathing heavily, and tears were streaming down her face. She pointed to the ear. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned from spending so much time in the infirmary, it’s the appearance of human flesh. The surface is smooth and straight at the point of separation. Her ear wasn’t ripped or chewed off by an animal. A precision cut was performed. Someone sliced Anna’s ear clean off. If ya just look right here...” Sarah reached for the cloth containing the ear.

Emanuel put his hand up to stop her. “Once again I’ll take your word for it. Master Colburn left town an hour ago. He won’t be home for a couple of days. Master Matthew should be back from his ride with Francesca soon. I’ll round up the seven overseers and the blacksmith that are working today, and speak with the other three employees tomorrow. Master Matthew and I will hold a meeting in order to decide the best course of action. Wait here. We’ll need to know where and when you found this, as well as any other helpful information you may have. When I return, tell Master Matthew and the overseers everything you told me.”

“Thank you.”

Emanuel’s pale blue eyes filled with compassion. He put a comforting hand on her arm. “It’s going to be alright Sarah. We’ll catch the man who did this.”

Sarah walked out of the room and watched the dashing figure disappear down the hall. Her heart was pounding, and her head was spinning. She leaned against a wall in the hallway and slid down to the floor, to keep from fainting. There she waited for Matthew, Emanuel, Abraham and the overseers to return.

“Sarah, what’s going on?” She heard a man’s voice call from above

her.

Sarah looked up from her seat on the floor to find Frank Welch. He was the first to return. Ole Frank, as the slaves called him, had dusty gray hair and squinty brown eyes. He was short and plump. He had a large belly that hung over his belt and he usually appeared sunburned. Ole Frank was forty years old but looked around fifty. He and his son were the only two overseers that didn't live exclusively on the estate. They stayed four days a week in a cabin on the plantation, and the other three days at a lake house in town.

"Someone attacked one of the girls, so Emanuel called this meeting," Sarah explained.

"That's terrible," Frank said.

He walked in the office and waited for the others. Abraham gave Sarah a lustful glare and a wink as he entered the office moments after Frank. He was fourteen years her senior and still incredibly good looking. He was the largest man on the plantation at 6'6" 265 pounds of pure muscle.

Sarah rolled her eyes. *What a smug jackass.*

Robert Welch, Frank's son, journeyed up the corridor next. Robert passed Sarah without acknowledging her existence and sat in Emanuel's office next to his father. Robert was a younger more attractive version of his father. He was nineteen, with straw-colored hair and a short stocky frame. Robert, like most of the other overseers, was arrogant, cruel, and used the whip far too often. He was nothing like his father Frank.

"Papa," Sarah called as she saw her father, Samson, come up the stairs. She climbed to her feet and hugged him.

"I heard what happened. I'm sorry. Are ya alright?" Samson asked in an African accent.

Sarah nodded and he entered the room with the others. Samson was a handsome man, with the statuesque build that came from more than a decade of field service. His skin was midnight black and his eyes were a mystic gray. Samson and Frank were the only two overseers the slaves did not despise. They were both decent men.

"Shall we wait for the others?" Emanuel asked Matthew as they made their way up the hall.

Matthew stepped into the office. "Show it to me right now."

Emanuel grabbed the wad of cloth from the desk and passed it to Matthew. Matthew took a deep breath and carefully unwrapped the

disturbing package. All the color drained from his face. His brown eyes flared.

He turned to Emanuel and yelled. "This handkerchief is empty! Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on!" Matthew threw the empty handkerchief on the desk.

Sarah stood frozen in shock.

Robert Welch stood up from his seat and asked. "Emanuel, did you actually see the ear?"

Emanuel put his head down. "No, but..."

Robert scoffed, "I'll tell you exactly what's going on! These lazy, spoiled, house niggers have far too much time on their hands. She made up this fictitious claim. She wants us to believe those girls are dead so that we'll no longer pursue her friends."

"You calling my daughter a liar?" Samson asked in his booming voice; his gray eyes narrowed with anger.

Frank Welch stood up. "Quiet, Son." Frank turned to Sarah and asked, "When was the last time you actually saw the ear?"

"In... In the yard befo I wrapped it up, and ran inside," Sarah stuttered.

"So ya haven't un-wrapped it since ya been in the house?" Samson asked.

"No Sir," Sarah replied.

The last four overseers appeared in the doorway and crowded into the room. One was a free black man and the other three were white.

"Is it possible that the ear may have slipped out when you ran in the house?" Matthew asked.

Robert threw his hands up in the air. "This is ridiculous! This bitch is obviously lying! The night those girls ran off their paint stand was left in the middle of the slave quarters. They didn't bother to take it home because they knew they wouldn't be staying. It would've been impossible to run with such a heavy item, so they just left it. Banish Sarah to the tobacco field for two weeks! I promise I'll straighten her out!" Robert stomped across the room and grabbed Sarah by the arm. "I shall see her beaten for her lies, and no food rations for three days!"

"Hands off my daughter!" Samson yelled. He grabbed Robert by the shirt and slammed him onto the desk.

"Papa no!" Sarah screamed.

Frank and the other overseers pulled Samson off of Robert and

restrained him. Robert climbed to his feet with a dazed expression on his face; as if his brain hadn't yet registered, what had happened to him.

Sarah looked on in terror. *My pa already been lashed befo over my momma. Papa threatened Master Colburn's brother, Pete fo trying to force Momma into his bed. When Papa was informed that he would be flogged fo the threat, he smiled and replied. "I guess we both taking a beating today." Papa battered Pete Colburn so badly; he never looked at Momma again. Now pa about to be punished fo protecting me, his own daughter. Only this time his position as overseer is at stake as well.*

"We'll bind him to the whipping post, Sir." One of the overseers informed Matthew as they dragged Samson into the hallway.

Another overseer took off the heavy whip that was coiled around his shoulder. He passed it to Matthew with a nod and an expecting look. The young plantation master knew very well the punishment to be inflicted: a flogging twice that of the norm for assaulting a white man. Sarah's eyes welled up. Her lips quivered. The only thing worse than watching her father brutally beaten, is Matthew being the one wielding the whip.

"Release him," Matthew said. The overseers gasped and stared at Matthew in silence; bewildered expressions covered their faces. "I said release him!" Matthew demanded. The gang of overseers complied right away.

Robert's face turned red with anger. His nostrils flared. His yellow hair matted to his forehead with perspiration. He turned to Matthew. "If you expect to run a successful plantation one day, you would do well to train your slaves how to behave in the presence of white men."

Matthew's eyes narrowed with aggravation. He got right in Robert's face. "If you value your employment here you would do well not to tell me how to train my servants." Matthew turned to the others. "As for the rest of you! You will surrender your whips. There will be no beatings on my watch. Do I make myself clear? If any of you have a problem with the way I do things, there's the door."

"But Sir, if the slaves caught wind of this there would be anarchy! Nothing would get accomplished," explained the free black man, who was as brutal as any white overseer.

"The slaves obey Samson and he almost never uses the lash. He earned their respect by working alongside them and treating them like human beings," Matthew stated.

Robert exclaimed, “But how are his numbers!”

Emanuel interjected, “Better than anyone else’s. His profits are higher and his crops are more bountiful every season.”

There was one loud thump after another as each overseer dropped his whip on the floor. They did this grudgingly with clenched teeth and bitter looks. The whip was a part of their very identity. They felt naked without it.

Matthew addressed the last four overseers who had come upstairs, “I want you four to search the premises. Sarah may have been so scared, she didn’t notice it fall.”

The men nodded and proceeded outside. Samson, Frank, Abraham, and Robert remained.

Matthew turned to Emanuel. “I know you didn’t actually un-wrap the cloth and look in it, but when Sarah passed it to you, did it feel as if there was anything at all in it?”

Emanuel nodded with a look of repulsion, “Yes, there was definitely something ear-shaped in it.”

Matthew addressed the three overseers and the blacksmith, “I’m sorry but you four were the first ones in the office. Help me search them, Emanuel.”

“I understand,” Samson replied as they searched him.

“Whatever it takes to get to the bottom of this,” Frank said while being patted down.

Abraham announced in his usual smartass manner, “If ya gonna play with my balls the least ya can do is buy me a drink first.”

Emanuel finished searching Abraham and replied with a smirk, “That’s exactly what I told your mother.”

“This is insulting. I won’t have it,” Robert announced as Matthew walked in his direction.

“Either you’ll submit to the search or resign,” Matthew informed him.

Robert threw his hands up and Matthew proceeded to search his person. Matthew glanced over at Sarah and said, “He’s clean.”

If there was a killer at least he wasn’t among them. A sense of relief enveloped Matthew. *Maybe Sarah did drop the ear outside.*

“May I go back to work now?” Robert asked sarcastically. “Not all of us have rich daddies.”

Matthew gave a silent wave. Robert, Frank, Abraham, and Samson left

the office.

Sarah walked over to Matthew, her heart filled with joy and relief. “Thank ya fo saving my pa. I’ll never be able to repay ya.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I may still have to suspend him and dock his pay, or else when my father returns...” The outcome was too horrific for Matthew to speak aloud.

“Even still, thank ya,” Sarah replied.

Matthew assured her, “No man should be beaten for showing the most basic of human instincts, the need to protect his own family.”

“But yo father will be furious when he find out what ya did,” Sarah warned.

Matthew smirked, “I certainly hope so. This will teach my father to stop forcing me into this position. I want nothing to do with his work.”

“I swear I ain’t going crazy. I know what I saw,” Sarah insisted.

“I believe you,” Matthew assured her.

Sarah helped Emanuel pick up the mess that her father caused. Several items went crashing to the floor when Samson threw Robert on the desk.

“Sorry about yo things. My pa earns a small pension. I know he’ll replace everything,” Sarah informed him.

Emanuel said with a slight smile, “That won’t be necessary. I actually thought it was amazing the way your father stood up for you. He’s a brave man. The trinkets on my desk mean nothing. Anything of true value to me is in my mother’s cabin. God rest her soul.”

Matthew questioned Emanuel, “Is that why you insist upon resting your head out there when you have a room in the mansion.

Emanuel nodded, “She died when I was a baby. It’s strange how much you can miss a person you never had the opportunity to know.”

“It isn’t strange,” Matthew swore with a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Just don’t forget that blood isn’t everything. We’re your family too.”

Emanuel gave an appreciative smile and placed the last item back on his desk. “You should go to their cabin. If Anna and Mali were kidnapped, there should be signs of a struggle.”



Matthew and Sarah stood in front of Anna and Mali's cabin. They glanced at one another. Both feared the ghastly display that most likely lay on the other side of the door. Sarah gathered her nerve and took a step forward.

Matthew put up an arm to block her. "I'll go first to make sure it's safe."

Sarah listened and waited outside. Matthew pushed in the creaky splintering door, and cautiously entered the cabin. He exited moments later with a shocked look on his face.

"What's wrong Sir?" Sarah demanded.

His troubled expression remained, and he said nothing. Sarah pushed passed him and barged into the cabin.

She walked from room to room. "The place is spotless. The furniture upright. There's no blood, no broken artifacts, no sign of a struggle whatsoever. I was mistaken. They must've run away."

Matthew walked back in the cabin. "That's what concerns me. The place is too clean. I've been out here once to fix the door, and twice more to fix the leaky roof. Anna and Mali were not meticulous tenants. On all three of my visits, the place looked as if a tornado came through. So why would they wait until the night they run away to tidy up the place?"

Sarah looked at him in shock. "Now that ya mention it, they was poor housekeepers. If they was hastily packing they belongings the cabin should be in worse shape, not better."

The bell rang in the slave quarters, signifying break time. The slaves worked from 6am-6pm. They had a break from 12-2pm every day.

"We should probably get going. Seth, Aaron, and Leah are meeting us at White Water Falls for break. If we don't show they'll know something's wrong. I don't want to break Aaron's heart or alarm anyone else until I figure out exactly what's going on." Matthew said as he and Sarah left the cabin and walked toward the tunnel entrance. "If the cabin was messy I would've assumed that maybe they had run away and were later attacked by animals. If there had been signs of a struggle, I would've thought Anna and Mali were abducted by a novice who acted on impulse. Such a criminal would be easy to apprehend. Whoever committed this atrocity knew exactly what he was doing. This whole thing was planned."

A cold shiver rolled down Sarah's spine. She came to a sickening realization as she strolled alongside Matthew. "Whoever did this was no

stranger to this plantation. I find it convenient that the two girls attacked just happened to live all alone. Anna and Mali had no pa or brothers here to protect them. The killer knew that.”

“The killer also knew that, with these girls having no other relatives on this plantation, no one would notice them missing until they failed to report for 6:00am duty. He was well aware that he’d have plenty of time to clean up.”

“Anna and Mali lived in the cabin furthest away from the others. They was attacked just after the Spring Festival, which just happens to be the busiest night of the year.”

“The festival created the perfect diversion.” Matthew sighed. “Not only did the attacker know exactly what he was doing, he was familiar with every aspect of this plantation. The killer works here, and if I don’t stop him he’ll kill again.”

CHAPTER 6:

Game of Shadows

Matthew reached the tunnel entrance and climbed in. Sarah called down to him, "I'm gonna get ya and Seth's lunch from the kitchen and meet yall there."

"Bring enough for everyone," Matthew called up to her.

"If Mable lets me. The only two negroes allowed to eat when you eat are Seth and Emanuel. The rest of us eat twice a day, only." Sarah explained.

"Tell Mable I said you could have the food," Matthew instructed.

Sarah nodded and jogged to the mansion. She entered the kitchen and Mable was nowhere to be seen. *Whew, I'll stuff this picnic basket befo she return.* Sarah packed the basket to the brim.

"What is this!" she heard a voice call out from behind her.

Sarah turned around, surprised to see Francesca standing in the kitchen.

"Are you stupid? I asked specifically for crimson gerberas!" Francesca yelled.

"What's that, Miss?"

"It's a red daisy. You put white daisies in my room." Francesca explained in aggravation, violently waving a handful of white flowers.

Sarah fought to maintain her composure. "Red daisies only grow in Blue Valley. I ain't allowed to travel that far without a pass. The

overseers will assume I'm running away. That's why I picked the white daisies from the orchard."

Mistress Colburn staggered into the kitchen with a glass of wine in hand. Red drops splashed on the floor with each clumsy step. It was barely noon and she was already boozed up. "What's all the commotion about?" she slurred.

"This idiot got me the wrong flowers. I asked for red daisies," Francesca explained.

The mistress dipped the pen in ink and scribbled a few lines on a sheet of paper. "Here's a pass. Show this to any overseer who questions you. You'll be needed here all day, so wait until later tonight to go. Take your sister with you so you won't get lost."

"Yes Ma'am," Sarah replied.

Francesca slammed the flowers in Sarah's chest. "Get it right this time." Then she left the kitchen with the mistress.

Sarah looked thoughtfully at the white flowers for a few seconds before throwing them away. *Christ, all that over a bouquet of flowers.*

The kitchen door swung open once more. Sarah turned to find Till, Anna, and Mali's mother. Till was very dark and thin, with short black hair. She was a beautiful African woman, in her mid-thirties, who spoke with a deep accent. She walked with a slight limp, and wore an ankle brace to support the fallen arch in her right foot. She came periodically from her plantation to deliver milk and other dairy products.

"Where should I put these?" Till asked, referring to the two large containers of milk she was holding.

"I...I'll take em." Sarah stammered.

Till was smiling so brightly. Every ivory tooth displayed as she passed Sarah the milk. "Today I get my girls back. Master Miles went into debt a short while ago, and had to sell my babies. My husband almost worked himself to death to help Master Miles buy em back. We had the money by Easter, but the Master say it'd be the proper thing to wait until after the holiday. He in the next room negotiating Anna and Mali's return now."

Sarah froze. She didn't know what to say. Her eyes filled up with tears. *Dear God she don't know...*



Later that night Sarah and Marlette reached Blue Valley and climbed down from their horses.

“Can’t believe Till came for Anna and Mali today. That’s so tragic. She only missed em by a couple days.” Marlette said, as she picked a handful of red daisies and added them to her basket. “What ya tell her?”

“The same lie I told Aaron,” Sarah confessed as she packed her basket with flowers, “I ain’t have the heart to tell her the truth. What was I supposed to say; yo daughters is missing and likely dead! Till and her husband raised enough profits fo Master Miles to get em back by Easter. If he’d got off his ass and come soon as he had the money, Anna and Mali would be alive right now! I told Till they ran away.”

“How she take it?”

“She expressed sorrow, cause she’d probably never see em again. Yet she was relieved cause all she could offer Anna and Mali was a life of slavery. It was the strangest thing.”

Marlette shuddered when she heard a noise in the distance. She grabbed her lantern and whipped around; glaring in all directions. “Sarah, did ya hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“I could’ve sworn I heard footsteps.”

A cold sensation trickled down Sarah’s spine. “They would wait until the week some crazy person dismembering slave girls, to send us out in the middle of the night.”

“Shhh, I can see a light coming from behind that rock. It’s probably just runaways from a nearby plantation. We should see if they need help.” Marlette said as she held the lantern out in front of her.

She walked in the direction of the noise. Sarah grabbed a second lantern and followed close behind her. As they approached the footsteps grew louder. They began to hear muffled conversations. They worked together to push aside the big boulder, which covered the entrance to a large cave.

“What are ya’ll doing out here!” Marlette demanded.

The cave held a mixture of field slaves from the Colburn plantation and local white kids. There were torches along the walls to light the place. Young women and men were dancing and playing harmonicas, banjos, fiddles, and drums. Most of the young white people were poor, but there were a few from wealthy families that stole enough of their father's whiskey, brandy, and wine to go around. Sarah and Marlette looked around in awe. There was something so incredibly strange about this scene. No one was giving or receiving orders. Everyone was speaking to one another casually. All formalities had been dropped at the entrance. In this place, there was no master and servant, black and white, or rich and poor. There was just a bunch of young people having a great time. The girls paused when approached by a striking young man with a chiseled frame, and eyes like sparkling diamonds. He kissed Marlette's hand and then Sarah's.

"We meet again, Lord Arrington," Marlette said over the music.

"We urge you lovely ladies to stay and have a glass of wine with us. The titles aren't necessary. Just plain Phillip will do," he insisted.

"We would love to, Lord Arrington, but we really must be going," Marlette replied in a snide tone, certain to emphasize Phillip's title. She could tell that he hated it.

"Perhaps another night then," Phillip asked.

Sarah stood back and watched. She found this constant faceoff between Phillip and her sister a little amusing. "We'd love to come back another night," Sarah blurted out, to make things more interesting.

Marlette elbowed Sarah for making such a bold statement, and yanked her out of the cave.

"I'll be looking forward to seeing you again!" Phillip hollered after them as they made their way back to the horses.

Sarah adjusted her horse's saddle, threw one foot in the stirrup, and climbed on. "What ya got against Phillip? He really seem like a nice man."

Marlette boarded her mare and scolded Sarah, "Lord Arrington is a spoiled ass, who takes the privileged life he was born into for granted. I loathe the very sight of that man. Why ya tell him we'll be back? Ya know Papa would kill us both."

"What Papa don't know won't hurt him. Race ya to the stables!"

Sarah took off on her spotted Mustang with Marlette in pursuit.



It was a quarter till noon, and Sarah couldn't wait to fill Matthew in about the previous night's events. She glanced out of the kitchen window and saw him outside chopping wood with Seth and Aaron. She prepared a basket of sandwiches and fresh fruit. She grabbed the basket of food in her left hand. On her right hand, she balanced glasses of lemonade and tea. She carefully backed out of the door, and made her way to the lumber yard. Sarah's friend, Leah, met her halfway. Leah relieved Sarah of the sterling silver tray that held the drinks.

"Thanks. How ya manage to leave the field so early today?" Sarah questioned.

"I was sick as a dog, but I'm feeling better now. Yo pa sent me to the infirmary to see Aunt Lizzie." Leah explained as they continued forward.

The crack of the splitting wood grew louder as Leah and Sarah approached. Matthew, Seth, and Aaron continued to work without noticing the girls. Seth had grown to be very tall, with smoky gray eyes, and caramel brown skin. He had a tiny trail of freckles across a perfect nose and a rock solid physique. He and Emanuel were the most well dressed, well educated, and well-spoken black men Sarah had ever met. Aaron had dark seductive eyes, and skin the color of milk chocolate. He had full sensuous lips, washboard abs and a smile that captivated. Sarah could see why Anna fell head over hills for him, but as always it was the vision of Matthew that stole the breath from Sarah's lungs. His jet black hair was wet with perspiration. It was an April day in Missouri, and the sun was unusually harsh. Most men of class dressed in layers of fancy clothing, and delegated any task having to do with manual labor to their slaves. Matthew, on the other hand, didn't mind doing hard work. He often wore plain black breeches, that were usually covered in sawdust and wood chips. A thin white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows left little to the imagination. Sarah walked slowly; watching Matthew's muscles flex with every swing of the ax. He had evolved into

a striking young man and it was hard for her not to notice sometimes. *Why couldn't we be born the same color? Why does color have to matter anyway?*

She snapped out of her daydream when she heard Leah asking her questions. "Is it true that Seth has a bedroom in the big house?"

Sarah whispered. "Yeah, Seth got a master suite in the mansion. He and Emanuel always been the favorites. Both of em gotta beat the girls off with a stick."

"But Emanuel is Master Colburn right-hand man and he sleep in a shack like the rest of us."

"True, but that's by his own doing, and only cause he misses his ma."

As Sarah drew closer Matthew put down his ax and relieved her of the basket. He thanked her with the same charming smile he'd given her as a boy. Being this close to him allowed her to see the flecks of gold in his chestnut eyes and beads of sweat glistening on his perfectly tanned, well sculpted, body. She sighed. *It would be so much easier fo me if ya was only good looking. Why ya gotta be intelligent, generous, and kind-hearted as well? Why ya gotta be so wonderful?*

"We should eat lunch at the falls again," Matthew suggested.

Everyone agreed, and the five of them walked toward the tunnel entrance. Aaron was quiet and withdrawn. No one blamed him, given what he'd been through.

"Ya won't believe who I saw drinking and fraternizing with slaves," Sarah announced, trying to shake impure thoughts of Matthew from her head.

"Who," Matthew questioned.

"Phillip Arrington was partying in a cave in Blue Valley," Sarah answered.

Matthew laughed. "Why am I not surprised?"

"A lot of noble women and men do more than fraternize with the slaves at night, but during the day they wear masks," Seth added.

"Phillip just doesn't give a damn though. He talks to whoever he wants, whenever he wants. It drives his parents insane," Matthew replied.

They stopped at the tunnel entrance and climbed in, one after another. Aaron held up a lantern and guided the way through the dusky

tunnel.

“I gotta ride into Blue Valley tonight to get Francesca’s stupid red daisies. I can show yall where the cave is.” Sarah offered as they reached White Water Falls.

Matthew nodded, “I’ll meet you in the infirmary at 11:00pm.”



The blistering sunny afternoon had transformed into a cool pleasant evening. Sarah and Leah stood back as Matthew, Seth, and Aaron forced open the entrance to the cave at Blue Valley. Music and light blared from the opening in the cave wall, disturbing the calm silent night. Phillip appeared at the entrance and invited everyone in. The gathering was even bigger than it had been before. It was packed with young women and men, conversing, laughing, dancing, and playing instruments.

“I’m glad all of you could make it out tonight. Have a drink. Make yourselves at home,” Phillip said pointing to the infinite supply of booze.

As Phillip searched the crowd with his eyes Sarah said, “Worry not. The Iron Maiden ain’t here.”

His face darkened with disappointment but he recovered quickly. “Splendid, she won’t rain on our parade then.”

Sarah was unconvinced by his tough act. She grinned at him. “Marlette smile at ya when ya ain’t looking.”

He shrugged his shoulders without care. “A smile could mean absolutely anything or absolutely nothing.”

“True, but Marlette smiles at no one,” Sarah spoke sincerely. “I’m sorry my sista ain’t the type to drape herself across the lap of the man she fancies.”

“If she was I wouldn’t want her.” Phillip grinned with a wink. “The thrill is in the hunt.”

Aaron and Seth walked over to pour themselves a glass of scotch. They were snatched up almost immediately to go dance. Sarah and Leah helped themselves to a glass of red wine. Matthew didn’t have anything to drink. It was against his morals. He found himself being eye-balled by two beautiful young women, one white and the other black. They

conversed with each other until one gained the courage to step forward. A pretty girl, with fair skin, auburn hair, and green eyes asked Matthew to dance. He wanted this to be Sarah but also knew that his love for her may put her in danger one day. He'd heard horror stories of scoundrels seeking revenge against powerful men by raping and even killing their black mistresses, lynching their Mulatto children with impunity. Matthew had already locked horns with his overseer, Robert Welch, on more than one occasion. If anyone found out Matthew's true feelings for Sarah she would have a big red target on her back. He needed for Sarah to move on, but how could he ask this of her when he was incapable of doing so. With a heavy heart, Matthew extended a hand to the pretty girl who'd asked him to dance, and she promptly accepted.

Sarah felt a hint of jealousy when she noticed Matthew disappear for a while. *What am I thinking? I should be happy fo him.* She scolded herself as she poured another glass of wine.

"I need some fresh air. I don't feel so good," Leah said as she made her way to the exit.

Sarah followed her outside. "Ya only had half a glass of wine."

Leah felt better as soon as the night air hit her. She turned to Sarah and confessed. "It ain't the wine. I'm pregnant."

"Congratulations! When ya gonna tell the father?" Sarah asked, excited for her friend.

"He already know. He don't want anything to do with me or the baby. Now he messing with some thirteen-year-old girl named May; lousy pervert." Leah buried her face in her hands and sobbingly confessed the father to be Abraham.

Sarah hugged her, "It'll be alright. I'll ask Emanuel if the mistress got some work around the house fo ya. Ya can't labor in the field all day long anymore. Ya could lose yo baby. I see it happen a lot."

"Is everything alright?" Matthew asked as he wandered out of the cave.

Leah quickly wiped away her tears, straightened herself up, and snapped into servant mode. "Everything fine young Master Colburn."

"How things going with yo friend?" Sarah asked Matthew, trying hard not to sound as frustrated with him as she truly was.

Matthew laughed. "That was Katherine McKinley, Dr. McKinley's

daughter. It was going well at first. She kissed me a few times, and gave me an invitation to her sixteenth birthday party. Then Phillip informed me that she's already betrothed to my uncle, Pete Colburn. She had too many glasses of brandy that's all."

They all had a good laugh at Matthew's misfortune and returned to the party. Sarah wouldn't have laughed quite so free heartedly if she knew the killer was with her that night. In fact, she had been trailed, stalked, and watched from afar for years. At that very moment, the eyes of her greatest admirer were fixed on her. She filled her glass and chatted with Leah entirely unaware of the imminent danger.

I've been patiently waiting for you, Sarah. The killer thought as he blended into the crowd and peered at her from a distance. I orchestrated an attack on two girls just to tide myself over. Mali and Anna couldn't pacify my urges for long. Nothing seems to quench my hunger for you. I have an insatiable lust that only you can gratify. Each passing day I yearn for the touch of your skin and the warmth that follows. Now the time has come to take another in your place, and pleasure myself to thoughts of you. This substitution will suffice for now; but Sarah, my sweet Sarah, I will have you soon enough...



It was nearly noon and Matthew had been missing since breakfast. Sarah could only think of one place he would be. *I'll take his lunch out to the barn. Something obviously bothering him. It's Master Colburn's first day back and he already managed to upset Master Matthew.* She arranged the food and drink on a silver platter. She walked outside to find a blanket of gray clouds stretched across the sky. The humidity was unbearable, yet it refused to rain. She balanced the tray on one hand and pushed open the barn door with the other. There he was at his workbench, just as she suspected.

"I brought ya a bite to eat, Master Matthew," Sarah said as she walked into the barn.

"Please set the tray over there. I wish to be alone right now," Matthew said sternly as he snatched a gray tarp down over what he was

working on.

“What has yo father done now?” Sarah asked with a concerned expression, as she sat the tray of food aside.

“My father isn’t the problem. It’s you!” Matthew replied vehemently.

“What did I do!”

Matthew gave Sarah an unforgiving scowl. “Why didn’t you tell me you were engaged to be married?”

Her concerned expression abruptly changed to one of utter confusion. “I don’t know what ya talking about!” She waved her hands in frustration and bumped the glass of orange juice by accident. It went tumbling to the ground, spilling all of its contents.

Matthew snapped. “I overheard your mother and my father discussing it early this morning. He’s going to buy your freedom. The wedding is in two weeks.”

“Who, Master Matthew? Who am I marrying!”

“Abraham, my father’s blacksmith!” Matthew answered impatiently. He turned his back to her and stormed off in the direction of the big house.

Sarah walked quickly behind him. She almost had to run to keep up. “Please come to Blue Valley tonight. We won’t have another chance to talk unless ya do.”

Matthew paused and drew in one long deep breath, then another to calm himself. “Look, Sarah, I knew we both had to move on at some point. I just thought that when we did, we’d be honest with each other.”

“Please Sir, please don’t go.”

Her cries fell on deaf ears as Matthew continued trudging toward the mansion. Sarah walked back into the barn to clean up the broken glass. A strong wind blew, and the tarp flapped momentarily before sliding off the workbench. She felt that much worse when she caught a glimpse of Matthew’s project. *My grandpa’s spear, Master Matthew fixed it.* Sarah stormed out to the nursery and weaved through the mass of noisy children. She stood before her mother speechless. Violet was beaming. Sarah had never seen her so happy.

“Sarah! I got great news,” Violet said as she reached over and hugged her. “Abraham’s willing to buy yo freedom. It’s official; the

wedding's in two weeks."

"Momma how could ya!" Sarah demanded.

Violet looked up with surprise. "Abraham told me yall was in love. He said ya was too embarrassed to tell me, so ya asked him to do it. I figured ya wouldn't pass up a catch like Emanuel unless there was a better offer on the table."

"I hold nothing but contempt fo that man! Everyone and everything I know and love is here. He gonna take me away to his house in the city, where I will be his prisoner fo the rest of my life!"

"You'll be free. Yo babies will be free. Ain't that what ya wanted?" Violet asked with a confused expression.

Sarah shook her head in anger and disbelief. "I don't consider being bound fo life to a man I loathe the same as freedom. What's the difference between being a slave to the Colburns and a slave to Abraham? My slave status will remain the same. The only thing that'll change is the owner."

"But he swore yall loved each other."

"He a liar mamma. He seduced ya. It's what he do best."

"What have I done?" Violet sat down in a rocking chair. Her eyes filled with tears. She began to sob uncontrollably.

"Why do it look like a funeral in here?" Marlette asked as she walked into the nursery.

"Actually it's a wedding Momma crying over, my wedding to be exact," Sarah explained.

"I thought ya wanted Sarah to marry Emanuel. He a nice man, really smart, and handsome. I don't understand why ya sad Momma," Marlette said as she walked over to console her mother.

Violet explained between heaving sobs, "It ain't Emanuel she betrothed to. Abraham told me they was in love. So I petitioned a marriage from Master Colburn this morning. Abraham put such a hefty offer on the table fo Sarah freedom, that they union became a business deal. It ain't up to me and yo father no mo. Either Abraham or Master Colburn gotta call off the wedding."

Marlette glanced out the window and darted outside without saying a word. She saw Abraham on his way to the smithy, and walked briskly over to him.

“Congratulations. I hear ya marrying my little sista.” Marlette said with her arms outstretched for a hug. Abraham smiled and embraced her. Marlette delivered a swift knee to his groin, and he fell to the ground in the fetal position. “Ya lying bastard! My sista despises ya! My momma is inconsolable! Ya just wait until I tell my pa! He’ll have yo head on a spit fo this!”

Sarah pulled Marlette away and said, “Beating the crap out of him won’t change nothing! Papa can’t know what Abraham done. We must allow Papa to believe this what I want. Abraham ain’t a slave. He work fo the Colburn’s. Papa will lose his job and be strapped to the whipping post fo confronting Abraham.”

“Then what do ya think we should do?” Marlette asked.

Abraham climbed to his feet and dusted himself off.

He threw back his head and laughed. “There’s nothing you can do about it.”



The humidity had grown so heavy by nightfall that it felt as if Sarah was breathing under water. The clouds overhead were so dense that not a single star was visible. It had been a sticky, miserable, day and by evening it still hadn’t rained. She tied up her horse and entered the cave at Blue Valley. She scanned the faces looking for Matthew. He didn’t have lunch at White Water Falls with her and the rest of the crew. He’d spent the majority of the afternoon avoiding her at all costs. She caught a glimpse of Katherine McKinley, the pretty girl with the reddish-brown hair Matthew was dancing with the night before. Katherine was conversing and having a glass of wine with a beautiful young black girl named Sally. Sally was Katherine’s lady’s maid. The two were inseparable.

“Miss McKinley, have ya seen Matthew Colburn?” Sarah called out over the music.

Katherine said with a roll of her eye, “You must be Sarah. He’s been blathering on and on about you all night. I’ll take you to him.” Katherine turned to her maid. “Sally, can you tell Clyde to prepare the carriage. We

really must be going soon.”

Sally nodded and left the cave. Katherine took Sarah by the hand and led her through the crowd. They found Matthew huddled in a corner with a glass of whiskey in hand. Sarah gasped, “Sir, oh my goodness! You’re drunk!”

Matthew took another gulp from his glass and slurred, “It was lovely to find out that you’re in love with this man and you’ve been courting him in secret for two months! You told me you hated Abraham.”

“I do hate him! Even if I love him, why the hell does it matter to ya!” Sarah shouted. She clapped a hand over her mouth in shame. He’d infuriated her to a point that she’d forgotten herself completely, but she had no right to yell at him. She could only hope he wouldn’t remember.

“I love you, Sarah. It just didn’t dawn on me until I was faced with losing you forever.” Matthew admitted. He lost consciousness moments later. Sarah took the glass of whiskey out of his hand. With Katherine's help, she pulled him to his feet.

“I’ll help you get him outside,” Katherine offered. She put Matthew’s arm over her shoulders and Sarah did the same.

“Thank ya,” Sarah said as they dragged him out of the cave. Sarah and Katherine laid him sideways over the mustang.

“You’re a lucky girl. He really does love you.” Katherine said with a slight grin.

“He’s drunk. He would never say anything like that otherwise.” Sarah untied the horse. She rubbed the mustang’s spotted face and it whinnied.

“My mother always said a drunk tongue tells the sober truth. It seems we have something in common. We’re both engaged to complete scoundrels.”

Sarah laughed and led the horse away by the reins. She glanced over her shoulder and called back to Katherine. “Thanks, fo everything, Miss.”

Katherine gave a slight wave and walked in the opposite direction to her carriage. Her driver, Clyde tipped his hat to her and climbed behind the reins. Sally adjusted the luggage strapped to the back of the carriage.

“Everything packed, Miss Katherine,” Sally said with a slap on the large black trunk. “Ya can still go home and get married tomorrow if ya

changed yo mind about leaving."

"Not a chance in hell," Katherine replied vehemently. "Not after knowing what Pete Colburn did to your mother."

Katherine boarded the stagecoach with Sally. There was a small window in the front of the carriage they could see Clyde through. Katherine gave a knock on the window to tell Clyde they were ready. He cracked the whip and the horses began to trot.

"There's still time to drop you off in case you've changed your mind," Katherine said to Sally.

"I belong where ever ya is, Miss Katherine."

"You really must stop calling me Miss. We're going to Canada where we can all be free. We just have one last stop to make. I want to visit my mother's grave for the last time."

Sally pulled out a bottle of champagne. The cork flew across the carriage with a loud pop. Champagne foamed out of the top of the bottle, and she filled two flutes. Sally raised her glass high. "I wanna propose a toast to my best friend Katherine and our freedom."

"To Freedom!" The girls clinked glasses, and drank.

Katherine set aside her champagne flute when she noticed the stagecoach speed past the graveyard.

"Clyde! You passed the cemetery!" Katherine shouted and knocked on the window. Clyde cracked the whip and the horses took off even faster.

"Clyde! Stop this carriage at once!" Sally screamed and beat on the window. Clyde cracked the whip again. The horses were galloping at lightning speed. Sally and Katherine grabbed hold of each other to prevent being tossed all over.

"Stop this carriage at once!" They bellowed.

The carriage was traveling so fast Clyde's suit jacket flapped in the wind like a flag. His hat went flying off of his head and he turned and gave the girls a sinister grin. Sally and Katherine screamed in horror when they realized it wasn't Clyde driving at all. They hit a bump and the girls tumbled onto the floor. Katherine stared up at the large black trunk through the back window of the stagecoach. Blood was beginning to seep from its' seams and hinges. Katherine clung to Sally and wailed in terror as she realized where the real Clyde was...

CHAPTER 7:

The Enemy You Know

Like the other master suites in the big house, Matthew had a bedroom fit for a king: spacious quarters, with a private bathtub, high ceiling, and large arched windows. His bed was enormous; covered with only the finest linens, pillows, and comforters. Matthew hurt all over when he woke up the next morning. He had a massive headache, a rancid taste in his mouth, and almost no recollection of the night before. He sat up in bed with a groan and fought down the wave of nausea that washed over him. He glanced at the clock on the wall. *How did I manage to sleep until noon? I missed Katherine and Uncle Pete's wedding. Why on earth am I naked?*

He scanned his massive bedroom for fallen clothing. He wrapped a sheet around his waist and shuffled over to the window. He peered across the lawn and spotted last night's clothes hanging on the line to dry. *How did I get home last night?* Matthew cleaned himself up and threw on a fresh pair of pants and shirt. He was lathering up his face for a shave when he heard a knock on his bedroom door.

"It's Seth," called the voice from the other side of the door.

"Come in! Just leave the door open and let the breeze blow through. It seems to have finally cooled off," Matthew instructed as Seth entered the room.

"That's because it finally rained. In fact, there was a treacherous

storm last night. There are fallen trees all over town.”

“I must’ve slept right through it,” Matthew said in disbelief.

“It’s good to see you in the land of the living again. Sir, you look like eight miles of rough road.” Seth joked as Matthew swiped his straight razor up and down a leather belt to sharpen it.

“I feel like eight miles of rough road,” Matthew admitted in a gruff voice. He ran the razor over his jaw, taking off a stripe of soap and stubble. He rinsed the razor in a bowl of water, flung off the excess liquid, and repeated the process.

Mable peered in at Seth through Matthew’s doorway. *Now’s my opportunity to wipe that smug little grin off his face.*

Seth straightened his collar in the mirror. “I’m proposing to Leah today. She’s obviously not with what’s-his-name anymore so...”

“Mr. Seth there’s something ya should know,” Mable interrupted from Matthew’s doorway.

“Was anyone talking to her? I sure as hell wasn’t. Were you?” Seth asked Matthew sarcastically.

Matthew laughed and shook his head no.

“What is it, Mable?” Seth asked with utter exasperation.

Mable sauntered into the room. “I just thought you’d wanna to know that yo precious Leah sleeps around. The only reason that girl was moved into the kitchen from the field is cause she big-bellied.”

Anger boiled up from Seth’s toes through the crown of his head. His face grew red with fury. “I know she’s pregnant Mable! I made her that way! Now fix my God damned lunch, and stop wasting my time!”

She looked dumbfounded for a few moments. “My apologies, Mr. Seth. I was just looking out fo ya. I didn’t know ya was the one...” Mable was entirely defeated. She bolted out the door and retreated to the kitchen like a dog that had been kicked in the backside.

“I hate that nosey old bitch!” Seth stomped over to the door and slammed it so hard it nearly came unhinged.

Matthew wiped off his face with a towel. “Congratulations Seth. I didn’t know you and Leah were....”

“We’re not.” Seth slumped onto the bed and fell silent.

“I’m sorry.” Matthew patted Seth on the shoulder.

Seth stood up. “You know what, I don’t care. I love her and I’m

asking her to marry me.”

“Good Luck,” Matthew said with a nod.

Seth stopped short of the door. “I don’t need luck. I’m Seth.” He ran into Matthew’s parents in the hallway. “How was the wedding?”

“The wedding was uneventful,” said Mistress Colburn.

“Ahhh, the typical boring nuptial,” Seth replied.

Master Colburn went on to explain, “No. Uneventful as in there was no event. Katherine McKinley left my oldest brother standing at the altar in front of all our family and friends. Apparently, she packed her belongings and ran off with Dr. McKinley’s money, his stagecoach, four of his horses, and two of his servants.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Seth replied.

Mr. Colburn grumbled, “I warned Pete not to choose a fifteen-year-old girl for a bride. The man’s pushing fifty. He’s so humiliated he’s actually considering moving back to New Orleans.”

“I almost forgot. Today is the day, isn’t it?” Mistress Colburn said, with a smile.

Seth nodded. “Mable tried her very best to ruin things. I can’t deal with her anymore. She went too far this time.”

Mrs. Colburn hugged Seth. “I wish you and Leah the best. Don’t allow Mable to drive a wedge between you.”

Mr. Colburn gave Seth an approving slap on the shoulder. “Go get her.”

Seth found Leah leaned over the kitchen sink, up to her elbows in soap suds. She looked even more beautiful than the last time he saw her. She was dressed in a black house servant’s gown, which was far more flattering than the baggy tan summer dress she formerly wore in the field. The bell rang for noon break and she dried her hands on her apron. She turned to grab the picnic basket when she noticed Seth standing there.

“Where’s Mable?” he asked.

“She went to snatch on a field hand fo sneaking a ham from the smokehouse,” Leah answered.

“That woman thrives on the misery of others. Leave the basket and come with me.”

Leah followed Seth outside. They carefully stepped around the fallen branches until they reached the pond near the infirmary. They walked

out on the dock which had a small boat tied to it. The inside was covered in rose petals. She smiled softly at him. Every assumption she'd made had turned out to be wrong. Seth was so much more than the entitled womanizer Mable made him out to be. Seth helped Leah into the flower-laden vessel. He untied the boat, and then rowed out on the shimmering water. He stopped under a large willow tree, which grew over the pond. Its hair-like branches hung clear down to the water and hid them from the entire plantation.

“Seth there’s something ya need to know,” Leah said nervously, as her heart grew heavy with guilt. *I am a lowly field hand, big with another man’s bastard. Ya deserve better. I’m unworthy of ya.*

Seth interrupted. “Please allow me just five minutes. I know Mable has probably told you all sorts of horrible things about me. Today I’m going to separate fact from fiction. No, I haven’t had numerous affairs with white women. Yes, I slept with one once at a Christmas party. It was a long time ago and I was drunk as all hell.” Leah chuckled and Seth continued. “Yes, the Colburn’s legally adopted me. No, I’m not a slave. I can leave whenever I want. Yes, I am privileged, cocky, even borderline arrogant. I admit to being all these things, but I’m not the whore Mable made me out to be and neither are you. I already know you’re pregnant and I don’t care. I didn’t bring you out here to pry into your past. It’s irrelevant. I only have one important question for you.”

“And that is?” Leah asked.

Seth took both of Leah’s hands in his. He locked his beautiful gray eyes on hers as he asked, “Do you love me? Because if you do nothing else matters.”

Leah’s eyes filled with tears. “Mo than anything in this world.”

“Then marry me,” Seth said with a passionate kiss.



Sarah spent much of her day in the infirmary. She knew Matthew would be at the falls, and she’d been avoiding him all day. Aunt Lizzie was away delivering a baby on another plantation and there were no patients at the moment. She sat on one of the beds confessing her sins to

Marlette in hope of receiving useful advice. Marlette had become a mastermind at cleaning up Sarah's messes. Marlette paced back and forth in front of her. Sarah knew that was a sign her sister was really mad.

"I can't believe ya went back to that place!" Marlette scolded her, referring to the Blue Valley cave. Sarah looked away and Marlette continued. "I warned ya not to spend so much time with Master Matthew, but ya didn't listen to me. Ya never listen to me! Master Matthew ain't the type to take ya against yo will, but ya have to end this. It's already gotten out of hand."

"And how do ya suppose I go about ending it?" Sarah asked.

"What ya done so far?"

"So far all I done is avoid him. I didn't know what else to do."

"Good, that's a start. Now just let him know ya don't feel the same way. Tell him ya don't love him."

Sarah shook her head no. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because it's cruel, and a lie."

Marlette's eyes narrowed with agitation. "Then lie to him! Ya gotten good at doing it to me."

Sarah's eyes filled with tears. "I'm sorry fo lying to ya. I promise to never do it again."

Marlette sat down on the bed and hugged her as she cried. She passed Sarah a tissue and said. "I know ya care fo Master Matthew, but the decisions ya make affect us all. If the master and mistress suspect ya of corrupting their son, they could banish our entire family to the field. Momma and Papa would lose everything they worked fo. The Colburns could have ya sent to another plantation far away. We might never see ya again. Or even worse, they might have ya hanged. If they did that they wouldn't have no choice but to kill me, because I would take them out." Sarah smiled through her tears and Marlette continued. "Now I'm sorry ya think ya love him, but this has to stop."

"I understand," Sarah agreed.

Marlette rose from her seat. "Now I just have to figure out which one of these venomous reptiles or insects to slip into Abraham bunk."

Sarah stood wide-eyed and aghast. She pulled her sister away from the wall of slithering, poisonous animals. "Marlette, ya can't kill him!"

“Well, I can’t think of anything else to stop the wedding.”

Someone knocked on the infirmary door.

“It looks like you have a patient. I should probably go,” Marlette said.

As she walked out a five-year-old slave boy entered the infirmary. He was covered from head to toe in pustules and bumps. Sarah sat the boy on a stool and examined him. She took a bottle from the cabinet and began rubbing the thick pink liquid on the affected areas. She looked up and noticed Matthew standing in the doorway. She shot him a dirty look and focused her attention back on the boy.

Sarah finished administering the medicine and instructed the child, “Tell yo momma to put this lotion on ya once in the morning and once at night. Remember not to scratch. If it don’t clear up in a week or so, come back and see me.”

“Yes, Miss Sarah,” the child replied and went on his way.

“What’s wrong with him?” Matthew asked as he walked into the infirmary and took a seat.

“He’s got the pox.”

“My goodness, small pox!” Matthew questioned, his eyes wild, his thoughts racing.

Sarah removed the scowl from her face and laughed a little. “No Sir, Just the chicken pox. What do ya do with all those medical books? Ya obviously don’t read em.”

“The rare occasion I’m awake in class I doodle on the pages. You can have them if you want. I’ll teach you how to read them.”

“Ya know that’s illegal. Yo father would kill ya,” Sarah warned. “I’m sorry I had to remove yo clothes. Ya puked bourbon all over yourself and me. I had to wash away the evidence before the master and mistress woke up.”

Matthew’s handsome face turned bright red with embarrassment. “I actually came out here to apologize for last night.”

Sarah smirked. *Exactly what are ya sorry fo? Are ya referring to the three times ya called me a liar or the two times ya told me to go to hell? Maybe ya just sorry fo painting my wardrobe with yo dinner.* “Ya the master, Sir. Ya owe me nothing. I gotta get back to work”

“You’re not going to make this easy for me are you?” Matthew asked

with a grin.

Sarah scoffed. “Not a chance, but if ya assist me today all is forgiven.”

Matthew let out a long exasperated breath. *I possess neither the interest nor the stomach for working in such a place, but there’s no way I can admit it. If assisting Sarah for a few hours will earn her forgiveness, it has to be done.* At last, he grudgingly agreed.

At that moment a frantic slave woman appeared with her eight-year-old son in her arms. The woman was horrified. The child was crying and sniffing. Matthew took the boy from her and laid him on one of the beds for Sarah to examine. His right foot was completely dislocated and faced inward.

“How did this happen?” Sarah asked.

The woman grew hysterical and babbled the response in French. The only words Sarah understood were *Robert Welch*.

Sarah turned to Matthew. “She must be Creole. Can ya understand her?”

“Her dialect is very different from my mother’s, but I believe she said Robert Welch struck her son for not working fast enough, and the boy tripped over a fallen tree limb.” Matthew interpreted. “What kind of despicable, pathetic excuse for a man would do this to a child?”

Sarah searched through a cabinet of medicine. “Over half the injuries that come through these doors are caused by overseers. It ain’t just Robert. The enemy ya know can be a treacherous creature.” She grabbed a vile of ether and a piece of cloth and returned to the boy. “Tell his momma I’ll need to sedate him while we set the broken ankle. The pain will be excruciating if I don’t.”

Matthew stopped in the middle of his translation. “What do you mean, *we*?” He peered at the boys grotesquely distorted leg. *I want no part of this.*

“You agreed to assist me,” Sarah reminded him.

She splashed the chemical on the cloth then covered the boy’s nose and mouth. The child struggled momentarily but lost consciousness in a matter of seconds. Then she placed Matthew’s hands on the boy’s lower calf and grabbed hold of the dislocated foot.

She looked at Matthew from the end of the bed and instructed, “On

the count of three, yank back as hard as you can. One, two, three..."

There was a grinding noise and a series of loud nauseating pops, as Sarah forced the bones and joints back into place. She gave Matthew an approving nod and a smile. "Ya did a great job, Sir. See that wasn't so bad. Now, all we gotta do is splint and wrap it."

Matthew battled with his gag reflex. *That was the sickest most horrific thing I've ever witnessed.* He forced a smile for Sarah and lied, "No, it wasn't that bad at all."



Where is Francesca when you need her? Mistress Colburn thought as she sat in the elegant parlor with Phillip Arrington and his fifteen-year-old brother Maxwell. *My niece Francesca is well versed in literature, world history, and the arts. She displays all the proper etiquette of a lady of the French court. She's just who I need to entertain our young noble guests.*

The Demoniets were enjoying an afternoon ride and Master Colburn left briefly on business. This left only Mistress Colburn and her wayward daughter Lillian to entertain the Arrington brothers. Maxwell Arrington was a dashing beau with hazel eyes and hair the color of fire. He took after their mother, and Phillip looked more like their father.

Phillip took a sip from his glass and laid out his proposition, "My father has fallen deathly ill and is not expected to recover. He relinquished his lordship to me for this reason. My mother planned a gathering for tonight to announce the passing of this title. Royalty from all over Europe is expected to show up in a matter of hours. Thanks to last night's storm, there is an enormous oak tree lying in our grand ballroom. This damage will take weeks to repair. You have a reputation for putting together this town's most lavish parties. I thought it would be a smashing idea if you would do me the honor of hosting this evening's event."

The mistress' gray eyes lit up like stars. *This will be the grandest event the state of Missouri's ever seen.* "We'll do it." Mistress Colburn announced, eagerly, barely able to maintain her composure.

Phillip passed Mrs. Colburn the guest list and seating arrangement. "Thank you for extending a hand in our greatest time of need. You will be greatly compensated."

"I'll just pass these on to my head chef," the mistress said delightfully.

Mable sauntered over. She gave Leah a smug grin and casually accepted the guest list.

Mistress Colburn smiled politely at Mable. "Would you mind taking these to Leah? She's our new head cook. You've been sold to the Arringtons. Pack your belongings. You're leaving after the ball."

Mable's eyes grew as big as saucers. She stood in the parlor with her mouth wide open and her brows furrowed.

Mistress Colburn stood up and whispered in Mable's ear. "You've given us many years of service. This is the only reason you're not bound to a whipping post right now. Nobody messes with my children. This includes Seth."

Leah, who was serving refreshments to the guests, almost fainted. *I just started working in the kitchen. I don't know how to coordinate such an event!*

Mable picked her jaw up off the floor, and grudgingly forked over the guest list and seating arrangement.

"Welcome to the house," said Mistress Colburn to Leah.

Maxwell stormed out of the room and Phillip walked out after him.

"Maxwell, you're being rude," Phillip chastised him.

"Our father is dying! I'm sorry I don't feel that's a cause for a bloody celebration," Maxwell said in aggravation.

Phillip gave his brother a supportive hand on the shoulder. "I don't like it any more than you do. I feel this whole idea is rubbish, but it's tradition. You know Mother won't allow this to rest. Let's just get it over with."

"You're right," Maxwell said with a deep breath, and then walked back into the parlor.

"Is everything alright?" asked Mistress Colburn.

"Our father is dying. It's been a long week for him," Phillip answered, knowing that it had been a long week for both of them. Phillip had the ability to be charming and charismatic under any circumstances.

This rare capability was a gift because no one ever knew when he was suffering but was also a curse for the same reason.

“How about adding an item to the menu? It can be anything you desire,” Mistress Colburn offered.

Maxwell pondered for a while. “Deer, my father loved deer. I haven’t eaten it in ages.”

The mistress smiled. “I’ll send my servant Aaron. He’s an accomplished marksman, the best hunter I’ve ever seen.”

Phillip thought for a moment then told Maxwell, “You should accompany him. You always enjoyed hunting with father. It may help take your mind off of things.”

Maxwell agreed and the mistress said, “Lillian, please show young Mr. Arrington to the hunting lodge.”

Lillian felt uncomfortable and out of place. She was actually clean for once, and Mistress Colburn forced her into one of Francesca’s elegant purple gowns. Lillian had no nice gowns of her own. She was hard on dresses and her father refused to continue wasting money on designer gowns for her to destroy.

“Right this way,” Lillian said and led Maxwell up the corridor and down the cement steps.

She walked through the lumber yard and called out, “Aaron! You’ve been summoned for a hunt!”

Aaron dropped his ax and jogged over to Lillian and Maxwell. “What game we hunting?” Aaron asked as they headed toward the lodge. He was eager to take a break from it all. He needed to take his mind off of things.

“Wild bucks, we’ll need two of them to serve the guests this evening,” Maxwell answered.

The hunting lodge was a spacious log cabin, built in the shape of a pyramid. The inside walls were lined with the heads of moose, and bucks. A bearskin rug was stretched in front of an elegant stone fireplace. Various animal hides decorated the backs of the chairs and couches. There was a table designed especially for skinning and filleting. More than thirty rifles stood on display.

“This place is a hunters dream,” Maxwell said as he stepped in and marveled at the structure.

“My brother Matthew designed and constructed it as a gift for our father’s birthday. Aaron made most of these kills and my father made some too,” Lillian told him.

“Ya can change in the room over there, Sir,” Aaron instructed.

Maxwell threw on a green safari shirt with short sleeves and numerous pockets. His tan breeches were the usual hunting style: loose at the thighs and fitting around the lower legs. He wore tall black boots that came clear up to his calves and a safari hat with a brim at the front and back. Maxwell walked out of the room in shock to see Lillian dressed in the same attire he was. She had discarded the beautiful purple dress she was wearing and glanced over the gun rack for the rifle of her choice.

“You couldn’t possibly be coming with us.” Maxwell laughed.

Lillian grinned. "You know when I said that Aaron and my father made the majority of these kills. Well, I made a few of them as well."

Maxwell scoffed. “There’s no way I’m taking a woman hunting.”

Lillian took offense. "I'll bet you two week's allowance that I take down a bigger deer than you do."

“Since only two kills is needed, I’ll serve as yo guide this afternoon,” Aaron said with a respectful nod and led them to the woods.

“How old are you?” Maxwell asked still a little bewildered.

“I’ll be thirteen tomorrow.” Lillian tracked through the woods with the rifle on her shoulder.

"Why is it, I didn't merit an invitation to your coming out party?" Maxwell was a little offended.

Lillian laughed. “I’m not having one.”

Maxwell glared at her with a confused look. “How else will you be introduced into society? How will you meet suitors? How will you marry? How will you settle?”

Lillian grinned. “I never planned upon settling. I want to travel and see the world. I want to hunt the biggest most dangerous game on every continent. You can’t find ammunition around these parts for the kind of beasts I’m going to hunt. I intend to have a life of adventure.”



Sarah had just finished wrapping a splint around the child's foot. The mother sat on a stool at the head of the bed. She blotted her son's forehead with a cool towel and hummed to him as he came to. The child whined and sluggishly moved his head to and fro before opening his eyes. Matthew and Sarah stepped outside for fresh air and gave the mother a moment alone with her child. The sun was beginning to shine again which made the nearby pond shimmer.

Matthew looked over at Sarah. "You have a gift for healing. I was serious when I said that I'll teach you to read and write."

"What if yo father find out?" Sarah questioned.

Matthew bent down, picked up a stone, and skipped it across the pond. "Don't worry about my father. That hypocrite taught Seth and Emanuel to read and write. Seth and Emanuel use to go to class four days a week, same as I. When my mother was sent to Missouri to marry my father she couldn't speak a word of English. Seth's mother was a free Creole woman named Lillian who spoke both English and French fluently. She showed my mother kindness and helped her adjust to life in America. She even posed as an interpreter until my mother picked up the language. They were friends until the woman's untimely death of yellow fever. My mother swore to Lillian on her death bed she would adopt Seth and raise him like her own child. My parents later named my sister after her."

Matthew and Sarah paused when they saw Maxwell Arrington running at full speed toward them. Maxwell heaved to catch his breath, and shouted in a panic, "There's been an accident! Lillian's hurt!"

They ran as fast as their feet would carry them. They found Aaron in the woods kneeling over Lillian's unconscious body. Aaron scrambled frantically to stop the blood from pouring from her head...

CHAPTER 8:

The Maiden Voyage

Lillian regained consciousness hours later. She opened her eyes and glanced around her bedroom. Dr. McKinley examined her while Matthew and Maxwell stood watch. They were all dressed in tuxedos and she was still wearing her hunting clothes. Phillip's party had just begun. She could smell the feast and hear the elegant string instruments all the way upstairs.

Dr. McKinley put on his glasses and inspected the stitches on her forehead. He spoke to Matthew in his gruff Scottish voice, "Your medical studies are paying off. These sutures are perfect. There should be very little scarring."

"Actually my servant, Sarah, stitched her up," Matthew replied.

"Well, she's very talented. I could use an apprentice like her," Dr. McKinley said as he continued his examination. "One pupil is clearly dilated more than the other. She has a minor concussion but she'll be fine in a short while." The doctor began placing his instruments back into his leather bag.

"But there was so much blood."

"Head wounds tend to bleed profusely. She should be back on her feet in a matter of days," Dr. McKinley explained as he rose and walked toward the door.

"Thanks for everything."

“Thanks for working on my stagecoach.” Dr. McKinley left the room.

Lillian sat up in bed with a groan. “What happened?”

Maxwell came over. “You forgot to anchor the butt of the rifle in your shoulder to absorb the recoil. When you aimed and fired, the gun flew back and bonked you on the head.”

Lillian laughed. “Well did I at least get the deer?”

“You gave yourself a concussion and all you’re concerned about is whether or not you got the deer,” Matthew scolded playfully and flexed his bicep. “Who’s my big strong girl?”

Lillian answered with a flex of her arms.

Maxwell replied excitedly, “You got it clean through the heart. It had to have been the largest buck I’ve ever seen. It must’ve had sixteen points on its antlers.”

“Did you get your kill?” Lillian inquired ecstatically.

“Yes, however it wasn’t nearly as grand as yours,” Maxwell assured her.

Mistress Colburn stormed into the bedroom. “Lillian, what have you to say for yourself?”

Lillian grinned. “Venison anyone?”

Matthew and Maxwell laughed hysterically, but the mistress didn’t find Lillian’s remark the least bit amusing.

Matthew pulled Maxwell out of the danger zone and warned the young nobleman, “Believe me, you don’t want to be present for this.”

The men returned to the party while Mistress Colburn berated Lillian. “You put on a ghastly display: running about the forest and making a spectacle of yourself, and what in the world are you doing wearing trousers! This is highly inappropriate. You can see the entire form of your legs and hips! Ladies are not to wear pants!”

Lillian snapped back at her mother, “Would you rather I had gone hunting in a dress, which may have been easily snagged! If the beast had charged me, I mightn’t have gotten away in a big fancy gown.”

“We would’ve rather you not gone hunting at all!” Her father shouted as he entered the room. “You are a girl, Lillian! A girl! How many times must I tell you, you’re a girl!” Master Colburn yelled out in frustration, hoping that if he repeated the words enough they would

finally sink in.



As the end of the night approached, Mistress Colburn and Francesca escorted the Arringtons outside. The gravel plot in front of the mansion was covered in horse-drawn carriages, only this time the passengers climbing aboard were European royalty. They stopped in front of the Arrington's stagecoach.

Lady Arrington was a hefty woman with red curly hair and fair skin. Her paper thin lips parted in a smile. “Your niece is a lovely young woman, Mrs. Colburn, and as always we had a splendid time. It was truly remarkable the way you pulled the whole thing together on such short notice. I hope it wasn’t too much trouble.”

Mrs. Colburn beamed. “It was no trouble at all. It’s been an honor to host your party.”

“Thank you once again, Mrs. Colburn. I’m certain you’ll find the payment agreeable.” Phillip passed the mistress a small black velvet sack. Then he boarded the stagecoach.

Lady Arrington turned to Francesca. “I appreciate the manner in which you kept my youngest son company, the entire evening. I haven’t seen Maxwell smile like that since before his father fell ill.”

Francesca gave Lady Arrington a charming smile. “The pleasure was all mine. I rather enjoyed his company.”

Lady Arrington smiled once more at Francesca before boarding the stagecoach.

Maxwell kissed Francesca’s hand. “I had a lovely time. Thank you.” He turned to Mrs. Colburn and asked, “May I trouble you to return tomorrow afternoon?”

Mistress Colburn smiled. “It would be no trouble at all. You’re always welcome in our home.”

Maxwell climbed into the stagecoach and it pulled away. Francesca watched the carriage disappear with a triumphant grin. *I never cease to amaze myself. I managed to snag an Arrington. I could’ve probably taken the eldest had he not already been betrothed.*



The next day on 12:00pm break Sarah walked through the dim musty tunnel that led to White Water Falls. She was informed that Matthew wouldn't be there so she figured it would be alright to go. *Marlette is right. The decisions I make effect mo than just me. It hurt so bad to deny myself those reading lessons, but it had to be done. If Master Matthew teaches me to read not only will we be spending a lot mo time together, we'll be spending the majority of that time alone. I don't know if I could handle that.*

Sarah reached the cave and carefully weaved her way through it. She could already hear the waterfall rushing. She was beginning to smell the sweet spring flowers. She could hear the song of the birds and the scurrying of squirrels and chipmunks. It was a beautiful place she never tired of visiting. She reached the opening to the falls and climbed out. On a large blanket sat Aaron, Seth, Leah, and much to her surprise, Matthew. Sarah and Matthew looked surprised to see one another. They cast an evil eye on Aaron.

As she joined everyone Aaron said to her, "Yep, I lied to ya, and no I ain't sorry. I waited too long to be with a girl I love and now she run off. I got no one to blame but myself. Please don't make my mistake."

Seth spoke to Matthew with irritation. "Leah and I got engaged the other day and instead of celebrating with a man who's like a brother to me, you were too busy avoiding Sarah. I don't know what happened the other night at Blue Valley nor do I care. All I know is this awkwardness is ending here today."

"Seth," Leah cautioned her betrothed to watch the manner in which he spoke to Matthew.

Matthew was utterly irritated but assured her, "We are family. He's well within his rights."

Seth confessed, "We think you two should just kiss and get it over with. The lack of knowing whether or not there's chemistry is driving you both insane. And you are driving your friends insane."

Sarah laughed. "I don't feel that way about Master Matthew. We've

been close since we was in swaddling clothes.”

Matthew said, “That won’t be necessary. Sarah and I have been pals for a long time, nothing more. I was afraid of losing her as a friend and I overreacted, that’s all.”

Seth raised a suspicious brow at him. “If you have no romantic feelings for her then it should be that much easier to kiss her. You’ve both gotten on my nerves so bad that neither of you is leaving this place today until you do.”

Sarah rolled her eyes. “Well, I hope ya brought an extra blanket cause we spending the night.”

Leah shook her head at Sarah. “Well, there ya have it. Ya obviously like him or ya wouldn’t have made such a big deal out of a kiss.”

Matthew grew irritated. “If I kiss Sarah will you leave us alone?”

“You’ll never hear another word about it,” Seth vowed.

“Fine,” Matthew relented.

Sarah closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then she waited for the inevitable engagement of their mouths. Matthew’s hands slid gently over her back as he wrapped his arms around her. He held her body close to his and at last the moment came. His lips felt like two satin pillows against hers: smooth and soft to the touch. He danced gracefully within her mouth, tempting her, causing her to become even more enamored. In Matthew’s arms nothing else mattered; not her life as a slave nor her engagement to Abraham. For the first time in her life, she was free.

As Matthew released her Seth asked, “Don’t you feel better now that you got it out of your system?”

Matthew didn’t answer. He was lost in his own thoughts. *Why was I stupid enough to kiss Sarah? It only made me want her more. If there wasn’t an audience I could tear off her clothes, and take her; here and now. What the hell am I saying? I can’t have my way with a girl who’s under my authority. That’s rape, not passion. The very thought of it may condemn me to hell. I need to see the priest, confess my sins, and pray for forgiveness.*

“Master Matthew,” Aaron called.

Matthew finally cleared his head and lied, “I feel much better now.”



After break, Seth returned to the lumber yard. He was alone stacking wood when Abraham approached him. Seth noticed the angry expression on Abraham's face and asked. "Is there a problem?"

Abraham got in Seth's face. "Mable say ya trying to steal my woman!"

"I think you have me mistaken for someone else. I'm engaged to be married to Leah."

Abraham gave Seth a forceful shove. "That's who I'm talking about, pretty boy!"

Seth grew impatient and shoved Abraham back. "Last time I checked you were betrothed to Sarah! What Leah and I do is none of your damned business!"

Leah could see the argument heating up. She ran outside to help resolve the confrontation.

"Go back in the house, Leah!" Seth demanded.

Leah ignored the warning. "It's over Abraham! Please just leave us alone."

Abraham narrowed his eyes at Seth. "Ya nothing but a proper talking, proper dressing, Uncle Tom. Ya the master and mistress' bitch. I won't have a spoiled, weak, coward like ya raising my kid."

Seth scoffed and gave Abraham a cocky smirk. "Your kid huh? Are you sure about that?"

Abraham's eyes filled with rage and his nostrils flared. He brought his right fist across the left side of Seth's face sending him hurtling to the ground. Leah screamed and ran to Seth's aide.

Abraham grabbed her by the arm. "Ya played me fo a fool! How long have ya been screwing him! I won't have another man touch ya!"

Seth tackled Abraham to the ground and they rolled and tussled about the lumber yard. They sent fearsome blows to one another's face and torso. Aaron and Matthew came running to the scene. By the time they got there, Seth had nearly choked Abraham unconscious. Abraham's face grew ashen. His lips were beginning to turn blue. Seth was a lot

stronger than Abraham had anticipated. He struggled desperately, pulling at Seth's arms. Matthew and Aaron pried Seth's hands away from Abraham's throat. A badly beaten Abraham rolled onto his side coughing and heaving to catch his breath. Matthew and Aaron grabbed Seth by the arms and dragged him away from the scene of the fight.

Seth hollered out to Abraham. "If you ever come near me, Leah, or our child again, I swear to God you'll never see another day forth!"



An hour after Seth's fight with Abraham, Matthew sat at his cluttered drafting table. Protractors, rulers, and calipers lay in disarray to the left of him. Various instruments for drawing, measuring, and gauging lay scattered to his right. In front of him sat a roll of blueprints. His father had given Seth an advance on a few acres of land. Matthew had been entrusted to design the house, which would be constructed on it. Matthew smiled as he unrolled the blueprints because Seth and Leah granted him total reign of creativity. He jotted down a few calculations and dimensions, then added a couple more lines to the blueprints.

Aaron burst through the door. "Come quick! Robert Welch has yo sista!"

Matthew sped downstairs and out the front door after Aaron. Robert trudged toward the horse-drawn carriage with Lillian tossed over his shoulder.

Lillian screamed and pounded on Robert's back with her fists. "No! I won't do it. No!"

"Drop my sister this instant!" Matthew demanded.

Robert ignored him and kept walking.

Matthew ran down the front steps. "I'll only tell you once more to take your hands off of her!"

"Or you'll do what," Robert snapped.

Matthew reared back and punched Robert in the face.

Robert released Lillian and shouted. "Hey, I'm just following orders!"

"Who's orders!" Matthew demanded.

Robert wiped the spot of blood from the corner of his mouth. “Your parents’.”

At that moment Master and Mistress Colburn appeared on the porch.

Lillian stood before Matthew and pleaded through choked sobs, “Please... don’t allow them... to send me away, Matthew.”

Master Colburn walked over and boomed in his baritone, “She’s going to France with the Count and Countess Demoniet. She’ll learn proper etiquette, and receive an exceptional education.”

His mother called from the porch, “We’re only trying to do what’s best for her. I only pray my sister and brother-in-law will succeed where we have failed. Whether you like it or not she’s going to France!”

Matthew pushed Lillian behind him. “Over my cold rotting corpse! I can’t believe you would ship off your only daughter like a crate of cargo and on her birthday no less. For what? To transform her into another Francesca.”

Master Colburn replied, “You won’t always be around. The moment you lose sight of her, she’s going. She’ll have a safer trip with her aunt and uncle.”

Lillian realized her father was right. She was only postponing the inevitable. She wiped the tears from her face and stepped out from behind her brother. Lillian hugged Matthew and boarded the stagecoach with the Demoniets. Aaron climbed into the chauffeur’s seat and cracked the whip in the air. The horses broke into a trot. As the carriage pulled away Lillian watched her brother through the window. She forced a smile for him and flexed her muscles. Matthew raised an arm and flexed his back. The carriage disappeared and Matthew sat down on the cement stairs defeated.

Master Colburn sat down next to him. “You must think we’re terrible people.”

Matthew didn’t respond. They both rose when they saw the Arrington stagecoach coming toward the mansion. It pulled up in front of the steps and Maxwell Arrington climbed out with a white box.

Mrs. Colburn sauntered down the steps smiling cheerfully. “My niece, Francesca, will be delighted to know you’re here.”

The mistress turned to send one of the servants for Francesca but she was already standing in the doorway.

Francesca walked gracefully down the front steps. "I've been looking forward to your visit."

Maxwell cast a confused glare. "I came here today to call on Lillian."

Dumbfounded expressions covered the faces of Matthew's parents and Francesca.

Matthew led Maxwell to the horse stable. "You just missed her. If you take the Indian trail through the woods you may be able to cross her path before they reach the train station." Matthew quickly saddled a black horse and continued. "Your stagecoach is too large for the trail. You'll have to make the journey horseback."

Maxwell threw his foot in the stirrup and flung himself onto the saddle. He glanced down at Matthew from atop the horse and gave a nod. "Thank you."

Maxwell took off through the slave quarters and reached the forest. He found the trail Matthew mentioned and raced down it. The horse galloped through the forest until the trail ended. Maxwell stopped in the middle of a road. His horse reared up on its hind legs and neighed loudly as Lillian's carriage came barreling down the road. Aaron looked up with surprise and brought the carriage to a screeching halt.

The Demoniets and Lillian climbed out of the carriage, and Maxwell climbed down from his horse.

The Count Demoniet scolded Maxwell, "You stupid boy! You might have gotten yourself killed just now. What have you to say for yourself?"

Maxwell grinned at Lillian and passed her the white box. "Happy Birthday."

Lillian's face lit up with a smile as she threw her arms around him.

"Promise me you'll write," Maxwell said.

"Every day," Lillian replied as she climbed back into the carriage.

Maxwell climbed back on his horse and the stagecoach pulled away once more.

Lillian waved goodbye through the window as her uncle continued to rant. "That boy could've been trampled, and for what, to give you a box of chocolates. You don't even like flowers or chocolates."

Lillian blocked out her uncle's complaints and opened the white box. A small note sat on top of the contents.

Dear Lillian,

You're the most remarkable girl I've ever met. I searched three towns for a gift I thought you would enjoy. I hope you find it to your liking. Happy thirteenth birthday.

Yours truly,

Maxwell Arrington

Lillian set aside the letter and laughed when she saw the contents of the box. *Large game ammunition, Maxwell, I think I love you.*



Sarah stood in the infirmary helping Aunt Lizzie gather her medical supplies. Seth had gotten into a fight with Abraham earlier, and Aunt Lizzie was going to the mansion to examine him.

Sarah closed the bag of supplies. “Are ya sure ya don’t need me to assist ya?”

Aunt Lizzie gave Sarah a pleasant smile. “I need ya to be here in case someone need help. I should only be gone fo a short while.”

Sarah handed her the bag and Aunt Lizzie hobbled out the door. Though Sarah tried to pretend as though nothing had happened between Matthew and her, she still found herself alone in the infirmary thinking about the time she saw him naked and the kiss they had shared by White Water Falls. That passionate kiss that set her lips aflame was still haunting her hours later. The door of the infirmary creaked and her betrothed walked in.

Abraham held up a tiny gold band. “I think ya should be wearing this.”

Sarah snatched it from him and slapped it on her finger. She rolled her eyes. “Ya didn’t have to go through the trouble to buy me a new ring. I could’ve easily borrowed the one ya gave Leah a few months ago. If that one didn’t fit I could’ve certainly used the one ya gave May almost immediately after ya got my friend, Leah, pregnant and left her.”

“Ouch, Love. Why do ya play these games, like ya don’t wanna be

with me when ya know ya do? Ya was probably sitting here thinking about what ya gonna wear to our wedding next week, and fantasizing about the way I'm gonna deflower ya on that sacred night."

He rubbed her arm and moved in to kiss her. Sarah turned away and Abraham settled for a kiss on the cheek as a consolation.

"Could ya at least try to be a little less disgusting?" Sarah snapped. "I don't know what I'm wearing to that godforsaken event but it damn sure won't be white. Please believe someone's already picked this flower, and in the event that ya take my body I'll be certain to call ya by his name."

Abraham stormed out of the infirmary shocked and disgusted.

Leah walked in after he left and closed the door behind her. She glanced at Sarah's hand. "Ah, gold this time, instead of silver. At least he trying to be somewhat original. What did that lousy sack of swine want?"

Sarah sighed. "He just wanted to torment me. I told him I wasn't a virgin and he got furious and left."

Leah laughed. "Abraham really possessive. He can't stand to hear things like that. Earlier today Seth implied that he was bedding me while I was with Abraham."

"How did he take it?" Sarah asked; her mood lightening momentarily.

"They got in a fight, remember?"

"Is Seth alright?"

"Seth is fine. I'm the one that's not alright."

Sarah looked down and noticed the cloth wrapped around Leah's hand. It was saturated with blood.

Leah went on to say, "I cut my hand on a kitchen knife."

Sarah un-wrapped Leah's hand and examined it. "This is pretty nasty. Ya need five or six stitches." Sarah cleaned Leah's laceration and numbed it with a pain remedy derived from cocaine. Sarah began to suture Leah's cut and said, "You've been sleeping with Seth all this time."

Leah laughed. "No, but I'm gonna allow Abraham to think that. Seth and I made love just once befo I ever got with Abraham."

Sarah tied a stitch and began another. "How was it?"

Leah gazed up wistfully. “Seth’s a magician. If I wasn’t in love with him I’d loan him to ya.” Sarah laughed and Leah went on to say. “I wish I could’ve seen the look on Abraham face when ya told him ya weren’t a virgin.”

Sarah sighed and solemnly replied, “The only problem is that I was lying. I never been with a man. I only told Abraham that to get rid of him. I’d hoped he’d be so disturbed by it, that he’d call off the wedding. Of course, he didn’t, stubborn ass. I never felt such a lack of control over my life. I do not wanna give that horrible man my virginity.” Sarah finished the last stitch and wrapped Leah’s hand with gauze.

Leah headed for the door. “Ya know Sarah, there’s still one thing ya have control over. Ya don’t have to allow Abraham to take yo virginity.”



Matthew lay awake in bed unable to rest. *It’s been an awful day. Seth was attacked by Abraham, my parents sent Lillian to France, and I’m in love with a woman I’d be condemned to hell for touching. Who am I kidding? Sarah’s marrying another man in less than a week. I’m already in hell.* His thoughts were interrupted by tapping on his bedroom window. He climbed out of bed and opened the window.

“Sarah? Is everything alright?” Matthew asked as he helped her climb inside.

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t sleep,” she explained.

Matthew pulled a pillow and a blanket off his bed and made a pallet on the floor. “Well, you’re welcome to lay down in here. Take the bed.”

Sarah unlaced the bodice of her servant’s dress and slipped out of it. She let her hair down and climbed into the enormous bed, wearing only a thin silk gown and pantaloons. She lay down on her side and stared out the window at the silver moon and twinkling stars. “Please lay with me, Sir.”

Matthew silently prayed. *God give me the strength to just lie next to her.* He climbed into bed behind Sarah and placed his arm around her waist. She smelled like the sweet oils and fruit extracts she softened her skin and hair with daily. As Matthew lay embracing Sarah between the

sheets he fantasized. *She's wearing next to nothing and her practically bare body feels soft and warm pressed against mine. I'll scoot back a bit so she won't notice how much I truly appreciate this moment.*

Matthew cleared his thoughts. "I have to ask. What has you up in the middle of the night?"

Sarah pulled him back close to her. "All I keep thinking about is what Abraham said about deflowering me. Next week I'm gonna have my maidenhood stolen by a pompous, arrogant, jackass. The very thought of it disturbs me so much I can't sleep at night." She grimaced with disgust. Her eyes filled with tears. "I envision him touching me, feeling me from the inside. It makes me sick." Sarah turned to face her master. "Matthew, will ya do something fo me?"

Matthew smiled at the sound of his name. It rolled off Sarah's tongue so sweetly. He kissed her forehead and answered, "You know I'll do anything you ask of me. Just name it."

Sarah looked him in the eyes, kissed his lips, and whispered, "Make love to me."

Find strength, Matthew. Find strength. He scolded himself. "Sarah, I've loved you my entire life. I find you irresistible and it feels as though I've waited an eternity to hear you say those words but I can't take advantage of you."

"But it's my choice. One of the few I'm blessed to have."

"Sarah, you don't know how bad I yearn to be inside of you right now. But I...I can't."

A blanket of silence fell over the room so heavy they thought they'd suffocate. She placed his hand on her supple breast. "I want this to happen with someone I love."

"You love me?"

Sarah nodded and kissed his lips once more. "Until my dying breath with every fiber of my being."

Matthew snaked his arm around her back, pulling her further up on the bed, and at the fated moment his lips met hers it was like a burst of magic. She softly licked his bottom lip inviting his tongue into her mouth; he slipped in with a muffled "mmm," as if he'd tasted something delicious. His kisses were hungry and breathtaking as he ground between her legs, eliciting lustful moans from the girl he thought was innocent.

He pulled her hands above her head and moved down to cover her neck in soft wet kisses, a gentle cry of his name escaping her lips as her legs at each side of him started to quiver.

“You’re shaking Sarah,” Matthew whispered between lazy kisses. “I thought you wanted this.”

“I do,” she promised her worried best friend and they melted into another steamy kiss.

Their clothes fell like autumn leaves and she caught a glimpse of the magnificent part of him that would soon be a part of her. They lay on their sides facing one another, both a little scared, and neither truly knowing what was supposed to happen next; the sweet hesitation of innocent beginners.

“It’s alright to touch,” he assured her guiding her trembling hand to his shaft, solid as steel in anticipation of her love. It felt so smooth and yet hard at the same time, like velvet over steel. She barely touched his manhood, for fear of holding it too tightly.

“You will not hurt me,” he vowed as if he’d read her mind and it was apparent just how long they’d been friends.

She coached herself as he kissed her softly and sweetly. *I got no reason to fear the love of my Matthew.* Her grip tightened and his mouth gaped in pleasure. She smiled, slightly pleased with herself before they started kissing again. She took his hand and slowly led it to her bare breast, amazed at how enticing such a simple touch could be. He kept his eyes on hers and allowed his hands to do the walking backing away a little to pull down her pantaloons. She lifted her butt a little to assist him as he pulled them off her hips and soon they were in a delicate roll on the floor. He couldn’t resist stealing a peek at the most intimate part of her that would soon be explored by him, and she guided his hand to where she knew he wanted to be but was too nervous to make a move. They explored each other’s bodies, erotic moans and half sentences escaping their lips as they licked, touched, and fondled. Before either of them realized it he was on top of her, the blunted tip of his erection at the barrier that separated friend from lover.

Matthew placed a kiss upon her forehead and whispered, “I love you Sarah and god knows I want this, but it’s not too late to go back to being friends. If you allow me to break this barrier we can never go back.”

She placed her hand on the back of his head and slipped her tongue into his mouth kissing him with such a passion that his hips pushed forward without a command from his brain. His mind whirling, dizzy from lust, and passion and wanton need; she cried out in pain as he tore through her maidenhead and he knew at that point that he'd broken her. Her nails raked across his back as he pushed further inside and once he was fully sheathed in her wet heat he dared look upon her. He froze and didn't move after seeing the shock and pain on her face. Guilt flooded his mind at the thought that something that felt so wonderful to him could cause the woman he loved so much pain.

"Ya won't harm me," Sarah assured him as if she'd read his mind.

My strong Sarah. He smiled and placed his lips upon hers. Lying between her knees, thrusting slowly and ever so gently while their tongues intertwined, he couldn't believe this was happening. Her pain was only brief and now her body yearned for the sensation of him pushing in and out of her with a smooth and steady rhythm. She held him close and gently clawed his back, as he moved back and forth on top of her repeating the words. "I love you, Sarah."

With passion mounting, he fought to keep his wits about him, refrained from pounding her like an animal, but soon her mouth found its way to his earlobe, licking and gingerly nibbling at the sensitive flesh. He gave her just one hard deep thrust as a warning not to push him in such a manner; that he would tear her in half if she didn't stop, but she moaned loudly lustfully and continued what she was doing. His hips were pumping at a faster tempo, each stroke hard and deep. The curls at the base of his desire were tickling the sensitive bud between her legs, driving her mad with erotic need until Matthew heard a sound more beautiful than any music he'd ever heard, and more lovely than any bird in the heavens. It was the sound of his beloved Sarah moaning his name in a breathless wanton tone as her passion rang free. Her womanhood throbbed around him as he continued to thrust, determined to hear that heavenly sound again. He knew her better than anyone and could tell she was embarrassed, and now she was fighting her desires.

He gazed down at her as he drove into her core. "Please don't be ashamed. Let go. Sing my angel. Sing."

Her back arched off the bed as she cried out in climax, the vision of

her so wrought with desire made his mouth gape in ecstasy; his torso convulsing as he delivered his final sporadic thrusts, his warm nectar shooting forth as he collapsed upon her breasts spent.

“I love you, Sarah,” he vowed breathing heavily, slowly pulling out of her sore and swollen womanhood.

She winced in pain and breathed slowly as he removed himself until he was all the way out. “I love ya too, Matthew.”

He smiled and gave her a sweet peck on the lips, so happy she didn't call him master after such an intimate act. They turned onto their sides facing one another both seeing each other a little differently now. He'd shattered the boundaries of friendship when he entered her, made love to her, and filled her with his seed and now she belonged to him, and he belonged to her. Matthew held Sarah in his arms, kissed her peachy smelling hair, wondering how just one act could change his whole world and abundantly grateful that it had.



Matthew was awakened the following morning by a loud tapping at his bedroom door. He immediately rolled over to wake his lover.

“Sarah, get up. We must have overslept,” Matthew whispered as he gently shook her shoulder.

The knocking started again and Mrs. Colburn shouted from the other side of the door, “Matthew Dear, are you feeling well!”

“Just a moment, Mother!” Matthew replied.

Sarah heard the mistress' voice and sprung out of bed.

Mistress Colburn said, “I shall fetch Sarah to bring you some warm chicken broth!”

“Mother I can assure you that won't be necessary!” Matthew said as he and Sarah clumsily scrambled around the room for their clothes.

Sarah began lacing up her bodice. Fear overwhelmed her. Her heart raced as the doorknob began to turn. *I'm gonna be flogged without mercy and sold. I'll never see Matthew again...*

CHAPTER 9:

The Burning

Matthew realized he couldn't get dressed in time. He leaped back into bed and pulled the covers up to his chin. At that very moment, the mistress walked through the door. "Sarah, there you are. I sent for you a moment ago, but as I can see you're already looking after my boy. We're all blessed to have such a dedicated nurse."

Sarah smiled. "Thank ya, Mistress."

Matthew's mother sat on the bed next to him. Her face filled with concern. She put a hand on his forehead to check for a fever. "This is the second time this week you've been sick. I do hope it isn't anything serious."

Sarah assured her, "He'll be fine Ma'am. It's just the change in weather."

Mistress Colburn's concerned expression faded. She rose and said to Matthew. "As soon as you're feeling better your father would like a word with you. Don't forget about Seth's wedding today."

"Yes Mother," Matthew replied.

After the mistress left Sarah and Matthew looked at each other and let out a sigh of relief.

"I promise to see you soon," Matthew said as he kissed Sarah on the forehead and walked briskly to his father's chambers.



An hour after the chat with his father, Matthew sat in the confessional at the Catholic Church. Father Murphy waited on the other side of a divider to hear Matthew's sins. As a Roman Catholic, confession was a common routine for Matthew, but he never stopped dreading it. *Pouring out my sins before this man of God: how embarrassing. At least the old grumpy priest was promoted to bishop and replaced by a younger more relatable man. Father Murphy tries to make this as painless as possible.*

Matthew fumbled with his rosary and cleared his throat. "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been one week since my last confession."

"How have you sinned, my child?"

Matthew took a deep breath and rolled out the list. "I've been an insubordinate son, lied three times, got drunk; I've punched a man in the face, and... committed fornication."

Father Murphy replied in a jovial manner, "Matthew, you're one of my most pious and devout followers. You're usually only here to confess to saying unseemly things about your cousin. It seems this has been a rather busy week for you." Matthew laughed and the priest continued. "What is going on in your life that has you lying, fighting, getting intoxicated, and having premarital sex?"

"I'm in love with a girl who's betrothed to a horrible man. She loves me and asked that I take her virginity to prevent him from doing so."

"If you love her then why don't you marry her?"

"Because she's black, Father Murphy. If we were to marry and have children the law would see our union as illegitimate. If something were to happen to me my white relatives would inherit everything and leave Sarah and our offspring penniless. Our marriage would make no difference in the eyes of the law."

Father Murphy replied, "It makes a difference in the eyes of God."



At sunset, Seth and Leah proclaimed their love for one another in the most elaborate wedding anyone had ever witnessed for two blacks. The master and mistress even attended and gave all the field hands the day off. Matthew and Sarah served as the best man and maid of honor. The wedding was held in the orchard with a multitude of flowers and decorations. The Colburn's also provided an abundance of gourmet food and champagne; enough to serve over 100 guests. As the reception continued well into the night Seth danced with Leah under the stars. Sarah gazed at Matthew from across the orchard. He was having a toast with Aaron.

She thought wistfully to herself. *It's so difficult for me, not to show him affection in front of his parents; especially after all that's happened. It doesn't seem to bother Matthew at all.*

The mistress drunkenly stumbled over to Sarah and giggled. "I need you to grab another case of wine from the cellar."

"Yes Ma'am," Sarah replied, taking the keys.

Sarah tracked across the orchard to the cellar and unlocked it. She swung open the heavy iron double doors and descended the stairs. It was so dark she could barely see her hand in front of her face. She made her way through the darkness in search of a lantern. She shivered at the sound of footsteps behind her. *Get a grip. I'm imagining things.* She scolded herself as her heart began to race. The footsteps continued. She screamed as the cellar doors slammed closed.

A hand covered her mouth and a voice called into her ear, "Sarah, it's just me, Matthew."

"Jesus Christ Matthew! Ya nearly gave me a heart attack!"

Matthew lit the lanterns on the walls which cast the cellar in a soft yellow glow. This illuminated the racks, barrels, and crates of expensive wine. The room was cool and possessed the pleasant scent of vine-ripened grapes.

She hugged Matthew and said, "Ya looked so handsome tonight."

Matthew modestly shook his head no. "It was you who looked

radiant, as always.” He took Sarah’s hand in his. “I’ve been waiting all night to do this. You know this morning when my father wanted to speak with me?” Sarah nodded and Matthew continued, “It was to give me this.”

Matthew pulled a small black case from his pocket. It contained a silver necklace, with a large red ruby in the center of an oval charm.

Sarah said with a puzzled look. “That’s yo mother’s necklace.”

“My mother has a necklace identical to this one. The Colburn family crest is inscribed on the back of the charm. My father had this special made for me to give to the woman I love and intend to marry.”

Matthew got down on one knee and removed the necklace from its case. Sarah's eyes filled with tears and for a brief moment, she found herself unable to breathe.

Matthew gazed up at Sarah and said, "When I woke up next to you this morning I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that God favors me. He sent me his most beautiful angel. Marry me, Sarah. Even if we have to run away together, marry me."

Unable to speak, Sarah nodded her head in agreement. Matthew wrapped the silver ruby necklace around her wrist and kissed her long and deep.

When he released her he asked playfully, “Why are you in the cellar?”

Sarah grinned. “Yo mother sent me after a case of wine, but either she didn’t mention what kind or I forgot. Matthew what’s yo mother’s favorite bottle of wine?”

Matthew laughed. “An open one.”

“That ain’t funny.” Sarah scolded him playfully.

Matthew grabbed a random case of wine and walked Sarah back to the reception. As they approached the party Matthew said, “We’ll need two witnesses. There are only two men, other than Abraham and the overseers, who can leave the plantation at will. There’s Seth, who’s already agreed to do it, and Emanuel. I haven’t talked to Emanuel yet but this whole elopement is riding on his decision.”

Sarah was appalled. "Our marriage is riding on a man who loves me. Emanuel will never agree to this. He proposed to me not long ago and he yo father's right-hand man. How do ya know he can be trusted?"

“Because he’s like a brother to me and he’s a good man. If he truly cares for you he’ll wish for nothing more than your happiness. Besides, I don’t think Emanuel’s hurting for female companionship.”

Matthew set down the case of wine and gave a subtle nod in Emanuel's direction. As usual, Emanuel had been swarmed by a flock of beautiful girls. He and Seth had always been the plantations most sought-after bachelors. Now that Seth was taken Emanuel had to beat girls away with a pointy stick.

Sarah smiled. “Ya right.”

She left to join Leah and Marlette while Matthew walked over to confide in Emanuel.

Matthew waded through the crowd of women that surrounded Emanuel and asked, “May I have a word with you in private?”

Matthew led Emanuel away and the girls sighed with disappointment.

“Is everything alright?” Emanuel asked.

Matthew took a deep breath and confessed, “I’m in love with Sarah. We’re planning to elope. I know that you have feelings for her because you proposed. I didn’t want to ask you to do this but we’re one witness short.”

Emanuel smiled and replied in a jovial manner, “That proposal was your father’s idea, not mine. He wanted me to breed him free labor, that’s all. The woman I desire lies out of my reach. Her name is Marie. The 1/16 black blood which flows through my veins, prohibits me by law from marrying her. Your father was against a union between Marie and me because the slave status of children depends on that of the mother. If I had children with Marie, he would have no rights to them. This is why he tried to fix me up with Sarah instead.”

Matthew breathed a sigh of relief. “Does this mean you’ll help us get married?”

Emanuel’s face grew heavy with concern. “I’ll only do it under the condition that you don’t run away. I understand how you feel, but you don’t know the cruel and inhumane punishments inflicted on runaways. Some of the runaway slaves who are captured have both ankles crushed with a large hammer. Others are stripped naked and flogged until near death. All of them are branded with the letter “**R**” by a red-hot poker

iron. Not much would be done to you, but for Sarah to run away with the master's own son would earn her a punishment far worse than all the others. They could take her life for such an offense. Even if you got away you would be forced to live as fugitives. You would never know when someone would come to capture you and your children. You would never have a moment's peace. Wait until you've saved enough money to buy her freedom, or at least enough to live off of for a while."

"If we stay here my father is going to sell her to Abraham."

Emanuel smirked. "You concern yourself with picking out the right tuxedo. I'll handle your father."

"Thank you for everything," Matthew said, and then walked away.

"And Matthew," Emanuel called out. Matthew turned and Emanuel said, "Congratulations!"

Matthew gave an appreciative nod and returned to the reception.



The following evening Sarah sat in a room in the east wing of the Cathedral putting the finishing touches on her hair and makeup. She stole a satin, cranberry colored gown from Francesca, with a low neckline and a rhinestone embroidered bodice. It was an exact match to the vest under Matthew's Tuxedo. She wore her lustrous, black hair down, straightened with very slight curls at the end.

"Are you ready?" Emanuel called from the other side of the door.

She took Emanuel's arm, and he said, "You look stunning. I'm sorry your father couldn't be here."

Sarah whispered to him as he escorted her to the sanctuary, "Thank ya fo giving me away."

Matthew waited at the front of the church with Seth, anticipating the moment that Sarah would saunter down the aisle.

"Breathe Matthew," Seth instructed in a whisper.

"I could if I knew what was taking so long. Where is she," Matthew questioned impatiently?

Seth snickered. "You've waited sixteen years for this girl and you can't wait a few more minutes?"

At last, she appeared arm in arm with Emanuel. She was breathtaking; an astonishing vision of a goddess in dark red satin. Matthew gave silent reverence to God and beheld his bride.



Sarah and Matthew bathed together under the stars at White Water Falls. The waterfall sparkled and dazzled by the light of the moon. It looked magnificent at this time of night. The cool air and hot water formed the perfect collaboration to put their senses into overdrive. Her body was sore and exhausted from their passionate lovemaking. Sarah realized how late it was and turned toward land. Matthew took her hand and pulled her warm wet body into his.

“It’s our wedding night. Stay a little longer,” Matthew implored her.

Sarah reluctantly pulled away and solemnly replied, “We can’t afford to oversleep again. We may not be so lucky next time.”

He realized she was right and grudgingly climbed out of the water with her. They clothed themselves and ventured back through the cave. They had just reached the surface when they began to smell smoke. Matthew emerged from the tunnel entrance and saw the midnight sky lit up with bright orange flames. The infirmary was completely engulfed and Sarah was running at full speed toward it.

“Sarah, wait!” Matthew hollered. He grabbed her and pulled her away from the burning structure.

“Matthew, Aunt Lizzie in there!” Sarah shouted.

“Ok, I’ll go in and look for her! You go get help!” Matthew pointed her in the direction of another cabin.

Sarah ran from cabin to cabin beating on each door. The slaves and overseers came pouring out of their homes fetching buckets of water from the pond and dousing the harsh untamable flames.

Emanuel and Aaron came running from their cabins and shouted, “Sarah! Where’s Master Matthew!”

Sarah pointed at the burning building with a trembling hand. Just then they heard the thunderous crash of the roof collapsing. The crowd broke into a panic.

“MATTHEW!!!” Sarah screamed and darted toward the fire.

Aaron snared and restrained her. She stood there fighting to free herself and watching in horror as the infirmary burned with the love of her life and her mentor trapped within its walls.

The terrified crowd broke into a cheer as Matthew emerged from the fire with Aunt Lizzie in his arms. Sarah ran over to examine them. Matthew was fine except for a few minor burns, but Aunt Lizzie was completely unconscious. She didn't appear to be badly burned but she had succumbed to the blistering hot smoke. In spite of all Sarah's efforts to save her, she didn't make it. Sarah grew hysterical and Matthew pulled her away.

“She’s gone, Sarah! There’s nothing more you can do for her.”

Sarah broke down and sobbed in Matthew’s arms.



Matthew found Sarah the following morning picking through the charred remains of the infirmary. She gave her best effort to salvage what she could. She thought sadly to herself. *Half of my heart aches fo the beloved teacher I lost, and the other half aches from the site of my favorite place reduced to a smoldering pile of rubble.* It took almost the entire night to extinguish the blaze. Cabins were rickety wooden structures lit by candles and kerosene lanterns. It was a common occurrence for them to catch fire.

Sarah looked up at Matthew with red watery eyes. She wiped the tears from her cheeks and said, “I don’t believe I ever thanked ya fo trying to save Aunt Lizzie.”

Matthew wrapped her in a warm embrace. “I only wish I could’ve gotten to her in time. I know there’s nothing I can do to bring her back but I promise not to rest until I’ve built you a new infirmary.”

Matthew caught a glimpse of a strange eight-inch long bolt. He reached down to retrieve it then turned to Sarah and said, “I’m going to take this bolt to remember this place by, and were going to start over. Aunt Lizzie would want us to move on.”

They began to hear the tune of *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* coming

from the direction of the slave cemetery. Sarah took a deep breath. “It looks like the funeral is starting. I better get a move on.”



Emanuel went to the master’s chambers later that afternoon. Master Colburn was in his office with his older brother Pete. Pete Colburn was an older flabby version of Master Colburn. It wasn’t difficult to tell at some point he’d been a very handsome man, but decades of inactivity, booze, and deep fried southern foods had taken their toll. He was well dressed and spoke with the deepest of southern drawls.

Emanuel cleared his throat. “As your financial advisor, I would recommend you not sell Sarah. With all due respect Sir, if you sell Sarah you’ll lose a valuable asset to the plantation. She’s a talented nurse, midwife, and chambermaid.”

Master Colburn sat back in his chair. “I can’t just pass up a good offer for Sarah because you want to keep her around for yourself.”

Emanuel replied sarcastically, “Yeah, you got me. In light of the recent tragedy, we’ve lost the plantation nurse. No one else is qualified to run the infirmary but Sarah. Have Sarah replace Aunt Lizzie as plantation nurse and midwife. If you sell her, you will only have to purchase another nurse, and they are expensive.”

Master Colburn replied, “Our recent loss does pose a bit of a problem; however, Sarah is getting married in a few days. I already gave her mother and fiancé my word. Besides, how do you know Sarah doesn’t want to be married and receive her freedom?”

Emanuel laughed to himself. “Somehow I don’t believe she’ll mind staying, and there’s something you should know about Sarah’s fiancé, Abraham.”



Master Colburn walked toward the smithy briefly after his chat with Emanuel. Sparks flew as Abraham pounded a red-hot horseshoe against

an anvil. Abraham set aside his hammer when he noticed the master enter the smithy.

“Afternoon Sir,” Abraham said with a tip of his hat.

Without saying a word Master Colburn walked over and socked Abraham in the gut. Abraham folded over and grabbed his abdomen.

As Abraham coughed for air Master Colburn said, “No one attacks my children. This includes Seth. You’re fired.” Master Colburn turned to the overseers. “Escort this man off the premises.”

Abraham tried vigorously to explain himself as the overseer’s hauled him away.



Matthew sat at his drafting desk twirling the eight-inch bolt between his fingers.

Emanuel walked in and announced with a grin, “It’s official. Sarah’s staying.”

Matthew didn’t show nearly the amount of joy Emanuel had expected. “Is everything alright?” Emanuel asked.

Matthew snapped out of his trance. “That fire was no accident. Aunt Lizzie was murdered. I just didn’t have the heart to tell Sarah. She’s already devastated. She and Aunt Lizzie were very close.”

Emanuel’s face went ghost white. “How do you know this? Those cabins often burn down.”

Matthew held up the long black bolt. “Because of this. These particular bolts are only used to build the frames of expensive Scottish stagecoaches. American carriages are made of entirely different materials. There were only two stagecoaches in town imported from Scotland. They both belonged to Dr. McKinley. His daughter Katherine disappeared with one of them. A plantation nurse would have no need for such an item, yet it was found in the burned remains of the infirmary.”

Emanuel listened in horror intrigued by Matthew’s intuitiveness. He glared at Matthew and questioned, “What exactly are you trying to say?”

Matthew set the bolt aside. “Katherine McKinley never made it to Canada. She never made it out of the city. Someone knew she was

planning to run away. He knew that no one would expect foul play for this reason. The scariest part about it all is that this person is stalking Sarah. What did he have to gain by killing a harmless old woman, other than to keep Sarah here? He torched the infirmary and used the fire as an opportunity to get rid of Katherine's stagecoach."

Emanuel spoke with a horrified expression, "Your last teacher was right when he said you were a genius."

Matthew gripped the bolt in anger and spoke scornfully, "Someone murdered all these people, and is stalking my wife. I won't rest until I drive this very bolt through his heart."

CHAPTER 10:

Cemetery Dance

Matthew and Emanuel stood in the slave cemetery over the body of Aunt Lizzie. Emanuel raised a scalpel with a trembling hand and questioned, “Are you sure you don’t want Dr. McKinley to do this?”

Matthew replied, “My father isn’t going to pay the doctor for an examination of any slave; especially a dead one. I won’t have Sarah do it. She was close to the woman, and I never paid attention in medical class. I’m sorry Emanuel, but you’re the only other person here with any medical experience.”

Emanuel looked at Aunt Lizzie’s corpse with disgust. “Did it ever occur to you that I didn’t go into medicine because I’m not fond of cutting into people, especially dead ones?”

“Emanuel please, I just need you to examine her and find out whether or not she died in the fire.”

Emanuel nodded and began the examination. He lifted the dead woman’s lips with a pair of tweezers. “There are bruises and scrapes on the inside of the upper and lower lips, indicative of pressure being applied to the mouth.” Emanuel lifted the eyelids of the corpse and continued. “The right and left eye both display petechia hemorrhaging; a trait common with asphyxiation. Now for the part I really hate.” Emanuel made an incision into the chest of Aunt Lizzie’s dead body.

Matthew walked away. "I'll excuse myself for this part."

After twenty minutes or so, Emanuel walked over to Matthew wiping the blood from his hands. "There was no soot on the inside of her nostrils. Her lungs were pink and expressed no signs of smoke inhalation. My opinion is that she was deceased before the fire ever started. The most likely cause of death appears to be smothering; either with an object such as a pillow or even a hand."

Matthew nodded. "Thank you, Emanuel. You truly are brilliant."

Emanuel said nothing. His eyes rolled back.

"Are you alright?" Matthew called out as Emanuel fainted.



Later that afternoon Dr. McKinley confirmed Emanuel's findings. Master Colburn launched a full-scale investigation. The plantation was crawling with the sheriff, his deputies, and their bloodhounds. Sheriff Briggs was a short gray-haired man with steel-rimmed spectacles and a scruffy mustache. He had already searched the cabins of Abraham and eight of the overseers, including Sarah's father. Matthew, Sheriff Briggs, and the gang of deputies approached the cabin of Frank and Robert Welch. As soon as they opened the door the bloodhounds went mad. The dogs barked hysterically and clawed at the floorboards. Frank Welch watched with a puzzled look on his face as the sheriff's men pried up the wooden planks.

"What do we have here?" One of the deputies asked as he pulled out a metal, bait and tackle box.

The deputy banged the lock on the box with the butt of his gun until it came loose. He opened the box and ghastly expressions covered the faces of everyone watching. Inside laid a tossed salad of dismembered body parts; ears, toes, fingers, even noses. Aaron grew sick as he recognized the ring on one of the fingers belonging to Mali. He knew his precious Anna likely suffered the same fate. Aaron was screaming at the top of his lungs. He charged Robert like a raging bull. It took Seth and three others to restrain him. They dragged Aaron to his cabin before he attacked the murderer of his betrothed and ended up punished or

executed.

Frank Welch's expression changed from disgusted to hurt and disappointed. He backhanded Robert. "You were in the office the day the ear came up missing!"

As the deputies seized Robert Welch he called out, "Father I didn't do this! Have I ever shown a propensity toward slave women!"

Emanuel walked up with the Creole woman whose son Robert injured. She was a tad calmer this time and was able to concentrate well enough to speak English.

Emanuel looked at the sheriff and said, "This is Saphirra. She has the information you need. Go ahead and tell them what you told me, Saphirra."

Tears streamed down Saphirra's face. "Robert Welch raped me and at least three other women. The real reason Robert hurt my son that day, is cause my boy yelled at Robert to get off me."

The sheriff's brows furrowed. "I've heard enough. Take him away."

Robert struggled vigorously as the deputies hauled him away. He hollered out in anguish, "I'll get you for this Matthew! As God is my witness I'll get you!"

Once Robert was out of view, Sheriff Briggs turned to Matthew and said, "Since slaves are not considered people by the constitution the most I can charge Robert with is trespassing on private property for each of the counts of rape. I can charge him with poaching and destruction of private property for each of the counts of murder."

"Poaching!" Matthew yelled in disbelief. "As in the unlawful hunting or killing of animals! Robert murdered numerous people!"

"The law doesn't see it that way," Sheriff Briggs replied. "Slaves are not considered human beings, and you'll need more evidence than a bolt from a carriage to prove he murdered Katherine McKinley. Her own father is convinced she ran away. Katherine left a note in her own handwriting telling him so."

Matthew asked in frustration, "How much time will he get?"

The sheriff answered, "That depends on how long he takes to pay your family the amount in damages owed."

Frank walked over to the sheriff to plead on behalf of his son. "I'll mortgage my home in the city and work for the Colburns for free. Please

don't send my boy to prison. I'll send Robert far away from here, to New Orleans with my wife's family."

Sheriff Briggs looked at Frank Welch with consternation. "Fine, but your son is hereby banished from the state of Missouri. If I ever see that sick son-of-a-bitch set foot on Missouri soil again, I will personally throw away the key to his prison cell."

As the sheriff walked away Matthew just shook his head. *I can't believe they're just going to let Robert go. What if he returns to hurt someone? What if he returns to hurt Sarah?*



Five months passed on the Colburn Plantation. Matthew, with the help of a few others, rebuilt the new infirmary over the entrance to the tunnel. He added a trap door in the floor. This made it easier for Sarah and him to slip away to White Water Falls. Matthew placed Sarah's spear and a framed drawing he'd done of Aunt Lizzie over the doorway of the infirmary. Sarah examined her sister Marlette, who was now five months pregnant.

Sarah's face grew heavy with worry as she told her sister, "There's a complication with yo pregnancy. If ya don't take it easy ya could lose the baby."

Marlette spoke with aggravation, "Ya should try telling Master and Mistress that. Sarah, thank ya fo not telling Momma and Papa."

Sarah laughed. "Ya kept Matthew and my marriage under wraps. I can certainly do the same fo yall. Considering the father of the child, I don't blame ya fo keeping it a secret."

Marlette smiled and returned to the linen room to make repairs to the slaves' tattered clothing and do the Colburns' laundry. Matthew walked through the door as Marlette was leaving. He surprised Sarah with a new book and a colorful assortment of wildflowers. Sarah kissed him and received the gifts.

Matthew sat down on one of the beds. "I have to leave town for a few days."

"I knew these gifts was a bribe. I barely see ya anymore," Sarah

grumbled as she placed the flowers in a vase half filled with water. Sarah sat down and stroked the ruby necklace he'd given her, with a distant look in her eyes. She kept the ruby necklace wrapped around her wrist and worn as a bracelet. It went undetected by Matthew's parents.

Matthew kissed her on the cheek. "Don't be sad. If I land this design project, I can make enough money for us to leave this place."

Sarah smiled with excitement. "Ya mean this the one?"

Matthew nodded his head, yes, and Sarah hugged him. He passed her a roll of bills and instructed, "Put this with the rest."

Sarah hid the money with the rest of the cash Matthew had been saving from his jobs.

He rose from his seat and assured her, "I'll only be gone a few days." Matthew kissed Sarah's, not yet showing, belly. "Take care of my son in my absence."

Sarah laughed. "What makes ya so sure we having a boy? We could be having a girl."

Matthew gave Sarah a big grin as he walked out the door. "I just know it's going to be a boy."



Francesca balled up the letter from her parents and threw it on the floor. "I can't believe they're not coming to get me until spring!" She shouted in anguish. She turned to her new lady's maid. "I am aggravated, and incredibly frustrated. I need to go for a ride. Have Aaron ready the carriage."

"Yes, Miss Francesca." The girl left the room at once.

Francesca's new lady's maid was Aaron's thirteen-year-old half-sister, Cassie. She was a stunning light-skinned beauty with chestnut hair and dark blue eyes. She'd been handpicked by Francesca to come in from the field and replace Sarah. Francesca walked downstairs to the horse-drawn carriage that awaited her. Cassie had already climbed aboard.

As Francesca climbed in the stagecoach Aaron asked, "Miss, is there any way I can take ya fo a ride later? Master Matthew has to be at the train station in a couple of hours."

“Don’t worry. We’re not going far,” Francesca snapped and slammed the door.

Aaron climbed up in the driver’s seat and led the carriage away. They were five miles down the road when Francesca gave a knock on the window. Aaron brought the stagecoach to a stop and climbed down.

He opened the door closest to Francesca and asked. “Is there a problem, Miss?”

Francesca climbed out and informed him, “We’re going for a walk in the woods.”

As Cassie moved to climb out, Francesca added, “Alone.”

Cassie sat back down and Francesca closed the carriage door. Francesca led Aaron away and told him, “We need to talk.”

As they walked through the trees and shrubs Aaron said, “Thank ya fo bringing my sister in from the field. Ya won’t regret yo decision. Cassie will work very hard fo ya.”

Francesca stopped walking with the stagecoach still insight. She turned to Aaron said, “I want you to please me.”

Aaron’s brows furrowed with confusion. “What mo could I do to satisfy ya, Miss?”

Francesca unlatched one of his shirt buttons and lightly touched his chest. Aaron pushed her away. “No! I could be castrated or even hanged fo lying with ya.”

Francesca smirked. “It wasn’t a request Aaron. I can make you.”

“Do to me what ya will but the answer is no. I’ll take fifteen lashes fo insubordination over a hanging any day.”

Francesca stood close to Aaron and whispered in his ear. “I figured you’d say that, but what of your sister? I could accuse her of stealing. Have her whipped and banished to the fields from which she came. You see Aaron, I think you are a beautiful man; strong, exotic. I’ve had my eye on you for quite some time. Did you think it was a coincidence that I specifically chose your sister as my lady’s maid?”

Aaron glanced over at the carriage and saw his sister looking at him through the back window. He waved and gave Cassie a phony smile. Cassie smiled back, completely oblivious of the danger Aaron was in, the danger they were both in.

“I yet mourn my betrothed,” Aaron explained. “Please don’t make

me betray her in this way.”

Francesca huffed and rolled her eyes. *Why would he think I'd care about the plight of a lowly slave!* “Would you put your sister at risk out of loyalty to a dead girl?”

Aaron fumed. He'd always been a knight, and never hit a woman, but he wanted to slap the hell out of this one. He took a deep breath, regained his composure, and gave Francesca the respect she'd so blatantly denied his beloved. "Miss Francesca, ya a beautiful woman. There plenty of rich white men who would be happy to oblige ya. Ya don't have to put my life at risk or hurt my sista. My daddy dead, my ma was sold off long ago, and some monster murdered my lady." His eyes got a little misty. After so much loss there was a gaping canyon in his chest where a heart used to be. "Cassie all I got in the world. Please don't hurt her."

“Rich white men would be inclined to tell others that they’ve had me. My reputation and prospects would be ruined. You have a much greater incentive to keep our relationship a secret. If you don’t lay with me, I will hurt your sister. If you tell anyone you’ve slept with me, you’ll be hanged, and I will hurt your sister. I like Cassie. She’s a sweet girl. Don’t make me hurt her, Aaron.”

Aaron breathed heavily with frustration. “What makes ya think I won’t snap ya skinny little neck and make a run fo it with Cassie? The stagecoach right over there.”

Francesca scoffed. “I am born of noble blood. In the event that I disappear, the president’s own army will hunt you down. I’m sure you don’t want to see your sister beheaded as an accomplice to murder. I’ve played this game with you for long enough. You are my subordinate, and you will please me now.”

“Ya an evil witch, Francesca! How do I know ya won’t hurt Cassie regardless?”

“As long as you do as I say no harm will come to Cassie. I promise to treat your sister with the utmost respect and dignity.”

Aaron walked briskly back to the stagecoach. He opened the door and Cassie asked, “Is everything alright? Did I do something to displease Miss Francesca?”

Aaron assured his sister, “Everything fine. Miss Francesca was telling me how much she like ya, and how glad she is to have brought ya

in from the field. Now, Miss Francesca want me to take her fo a walk in the woods. Stay in the stagecoach until we get back.”

Cassie grinned and nodded. Once they were out of sight, Aaron snatched Francesca by the arm and led her deep into the woods. He pushed her back against a tree, pulled up her dress, and ravaged her body angrily. He took her roughly without an ounce of concern for her comfort or wellbeing.

Francesca whispered in his ear as he devastated her delicate frame, “Oh Aaron, oh Aaron you’re incredible.”

He yelled at her as he continued to pound away, “Shut up! I can do without hearing yo voice.”

Aaron pushed even harder inside of Francesca. He gripped her body tight and groaned passionately as he finished. He shoved her aside and spoke through labored breaths. "I hate ya, ya horrible bitch."

Francesca stood for a few moments breathing heavily. “You’re wonderful when you’re angry. We’ll have to do this again very soon.”

Aaron and Francesca straightened themselves up and walked back to the stagecoach. Francesca climbed in and put her arm around Cassie’s shoulders.

Cassie asked cheerfully, “How was yo walk Miss Francesca?”

Francesca gave Aaron a sly glance. “I enjoyed every minute of it, Cassie. We really must get you out of those bleak rags. I have a beautiful green gown you can have.”

Aaron closed the door and climbed back in the driver’s seat. He snapped the reins and brought the horses to a trot. *At least Francesca will keep her word and treat my sista well. Forgive me, Anna.* When they pulled up in front of the mansion Matthew and Mistress Colburn were standing on the porch.

Matthew called out cheerfully to Aaron as he approached the stagecoach, “I was beginning to think you wouldn’t make it back in time.”

Aaron scowled and didn’t respond. Matthew opened the carriage door and Francesca and Cassie climbed out. Matthew stepped in and closed the door behind him. He gave a knock on the window and Aaron led the carriage away.

As Francesca and Cassie stepped onto the porch Mistress Colburn

asked, "Is everything alright Francesca? You seemed upset when you left."

Francesca smiled thoughtfully. "I went for a walk to relieve my tension. I assure you, dear Aunt, I'm feeling much better now."



The next morning Sarah was awakened by knocking on the infirmary door. Sarah ran to open the door.

Marlette screamed, "Sarah! I been having labor pains most of the night."

Sarah helped Marlette onto one of the beds. She grabbed a pail of water and some fresh towels. Sarah propped a couple pillows under Marlette's back and then began dabbing her sister's head with a moist cloth. Sarah walked over to the cabinets and skimmed over the shelf of anesthetics. She gave Marlette a pain remedy she had learned to mix from the medical books Matthew gave her. After administering the pain reliever, she turned and saw Cassie standing in the doorway.

Sarah asked Cassie, "Are ya having an emergency?"

"No. Miss Francesca has a bruise on her back. I think she must've fallen in the woods today. She want ya to look at it."

Sarah fumed. *Francesca actually want me to examine a bruise at four o'clock in the morning. That bitch is unbelievable.* "Cassie, this is very important. I need ya to ask Master Colburn to send fo the doctor. Marlette's baby trying to arrive four months early."

Cassie's dark blue eyes widened with surprise as she took off out the door. She ran as fast as her feet would carry her to the Master's bedroom. Cassie pushed open the door and shouted, "Master Colburn, ya gotta send fo Dr. McKinley!"

He groggily asked, "What the hell is your problem, Cassie?"

"Marlette in labor. The baby coming too early."

Mr. Colburn yawned and rolled over. He grumbled. "Go wake up Sarah. I'm sure she can handle it."

Cassie could hear Master Colburn snoring and felt it would serve no purpose to argue the point any further. She ran down the hall to persuade

Mistress Colburn next.

The mistress asked in a sleepy voice, “Cassie, what brings you to my bedroom at this hour?”

Cassie explained for a second time, “Marlette child coming far too early! Master Colburn won’t send the carriage fo Dr. McKinley. Ya have to do something.”

Mistress Colburn sat up in her bed. "The master is right. If we called on the doctor every time one of these girls got pregnant we'd go broke. Now go wake, Sarah."

Cassie returned to the infirmary and Sarah could tell by the look on her face that it wasn’t good news.

For fear of her sister's life, Sarah said, “Cassie, tell the Colburn's I'll pay fo it.”

Marlette shook her head no. “I won’t let ya do it! That money is to pay fo yo freedom!”

“We don’t have no choice! If ya don’t see a doctor, ya may lose the baby and yo life. I won’t allow it!”

Marlette hollered out in agony and grabbed Sarah’s arm. “Send for Phillip Arrington!”



By the time Aaron returned with Phillip and Dr. McKinley the sun was up and Sarah had already gotten the situation under control. When Phillip entered the infirmary Sarah was still taking care of Marlette. Samson and Violet were standing in the room with disgruntled expressions. Violet and Samson pushed passed Phillip without saying a word and stormed outside. Samson walked over to the pond, and Violet tracked back to the nursery.

Phillip sat on the bed next to Marlette. “How are you, my love? I wish I could’ve been here sooner.”

Marlette replied with exhaustion, “I’ll live.”

Sarah walked over to Phillip and informed him, “I managed to stop the bleeding this time, but Marlette need to be on bedrest until she give birth. She need round the clock care; an on-call nurse or doctor. The

Colburns ain't gonna to give her that. They will continue to work Marlette until she and yo child are dead.”

Phillip kissed Marlette. “I’ll be back in a moment. I need to speak with your father and the Colburns.”

Phillip walked up to Samson. “I know I should’ve done this a long time ago. For that, I sincerely apologize. I’m in love with your daughter and I want to marry her.”

Samson didn't even look at Phillip. He glared out on the water. “No one even knew she was pregnant! She could've died today!”

“You have every right to be angry with me, but I only wanted to finish building our home in England first. My mother would’ve never allowed Marlette to live at the Arrington Manor here. I didn’t want to ask you for your daughter’s hand without having so much as a home for her to stay in.”

Samson looked at Phillip with respect for the first time. “It’s a damn shame a man gotta purchase his wife and child ain’t it?”

Phillip let out a sigh of relief, “Yes Sir, it truly is.”



Master Colburn was conducting a meeting with Emanuel and four of the overseers when Phillip entered the office. The overseers parted way as Phillip approached the desk Master Colburn sat behind.

Phillip cleared his throat. “I wish to discuss the purchase of four of your servants.”

Master Colburn questioned, “Which four servants do you speak of?”

“Marlette, Sarah, Samson, and Violet.”

Master Colburn sat back in his large armchair with a ponderous look. “Sarah’s not for sale. She’s my money maker. Slave owners from all across these parts bring their servants here to be treated. It’s cheaper for owners to bring their servants here than for them to have a white doctor manage their care. Sarah’s fetched me a pretty penny. Samson’s my best overseer. I can’t let him go either. I may be able to part with Violet and Marlette if the price is right.”

Emanuel fumed with aggravation as he fumbled through the file

cabinet. *This isn't right. I informed Master Colburn that Samson was to be set free years ago. Master Colburn is being offered payment for Samson and he still won't let the man go. Take it easy Emanuel. Don't do anything stupid. To hell with this, I have to say something.*

Emanuel retrieved the file for Samson's family and interrupted the negotiation. "Pardon my interruption, but I must interject. Samson and Violet were inherited slaves. As such, they came with a clause in their contracts." Emanuel threw open the file on Master Colburn's desk. He pointed to a line on one of the pages. "As this article clearly states, both Samson and Violet were to be set free at the age of 35. As of present, they are both 38 years of age."

Master Colburn's face went flush as Phillip said, "If what this man says is true I will have the best lawyers in the country here within the week to comb through all of your files. I'm certain the county magistrate will have copies of all your documents"

Master Colburn replied in a calm manner, "Lord Arrington I can assure you that won't be necessary. I have over 200 slaves on this plantation. It's impossible for me to keep up with all of their documentation. That's why I have Emanuel here. Now that I'm aware of the situation, Violet and Samson are free to go."

Phillip tossed Master Colburn an envelope. "This is for the freedom of Marlette. I'm certain you'll find the payment generous. Notify me if you decide to sell Sarah. Have a nice day Mr. Colburn."

Phillip turned and walked out of the office. Master Colburn sprung up from his seat and stomped over to Emanuel. He gripped Emanuel's throat and slammed him against the wall. Emanuel's face turned dark red as he gasped for air.

Master Colburn pinned him there and yelled, "If you weren't my brother's bastard I would cut your throat for this betrayal!"

Master Colburn released him and Emanuel fell to his knees coughing and choking.

The overseers seized Emanuel. "Should we give him the usual fifteen lashes for insubordination, Sir?"

Master Colburn snapped, "Did you idiots not just hear me say this man is my nephew?"

The overseers dropped Emanuel immediately, "Our apologies Sir."

Emanuel straightened his clothes and let out a sigh of relief; then Master Colburn added, "Give him eight lashes instead."



Emanuel's cabin was small and unremarkable like the others. It was dimly lit and held only a few pieces of raggedy furniture. Several framed photographs decorated the walls. Emanuel lay in agony on the bed in his cabin. His back was brutally sliced open by a whip only moments ago. Sarah sat on the bed next to him. She dipped a towel into a bucket of water and wrung it out. Then she gingerly cleansed Emanuel's wounds. He groaned and flinched in pain every time she touched him.

Sarah stopped. "Some of these wounds so deep they need suturing. I can sedate ya if ya like."

"I never got comfortable with the concept of losing consciousness as the result of some chemical," Emanuel confessed. "It's embarrassing to admit but I always feared I wouldn't wake up. I can handle the pain, just distract me."

Sarah threaded the needle and applied a local anesthetic. "I will never be able to repay ya fo yo actions. What ya did was beyond brave. Thank ya fo freeing my parents."

As Sarah began to close the bloody trenches in Emanuel's back he gripped the sides of his bed. His muscles tensed and his skin grew heavy with perspiration.

He modestly replied, "I only did what I thought to be right."

"Did ya know ya was the master's nephew?"

"No, but it explains a lot."

In order to take Emanuel's mind off the pain, she asked, "If ya could do anything in the world, what would ya do?"

Sarah continued sewing and Emanuel replied, "I can't tell you. You'll laugh."

"Come on, I promise not to make fun."

Emanuel's mood lightened as if he was no longer lying in bed with his flesh torn open. "The first thing I would do is elope with Marie. Then I'd move to France and become a big-time chef. I would open my own

restaurant and serve everyone; from the lowliest of commoners to the royalty of Europe.”

Sarah smiled and set down the needle. She wandered over to the wall and glanced over the pictures. She came across a picture of a beautiful white girl, with light colored hair and dark eyes. “This yo Marie?”

“You’ll have to bring the photo closer. I can’t see that far without my glasses.”

Sarah walked over with the picture and Emanuel answered, “Yes, that’s her.”

Sarah began stitching again. “She’s beautiful.”

“Sometimes I feel I should just give up. I’ll never have her.”

Sarah looked appalled, and vehemently told him, “If ya truly love her ya should never give up! I have faith that things will change one day. The moment they do ya should take her fo yo own. Promise me.”

Emanuel smiled. “I promise not to give up until I take Marie to be my wife.”



Master Colburn’s conscience had gotten the better of him. He paced in the rain for ten minutes in front of Emanuel’s cabin. He gathered his nerve and finally let himself in. Emanuel was still lying on his stomach while Sarah bandaged his wounds.

Master Colburn looked down at Emanuel and stammered, “I...I’m not one to apologize, but I...”

Emanuel glanced up at him. “I know.”

“You know I don’t give favoritism. If Matthew pulled this stunt, I would have whipped his ass too.”

“I know,” Emanuel admitted to himself, *Matthew would’ve gotten it worse.*

Master Colburn added nervously, “Would you like to know which one of my brothers you belong to?”

“What for? Whoever it is obviously didn’t want me.”

Master Colburn turned and walked toward the door. As he gripped the knob he told Emanuel, “For what it’s worth, I wanted you.”



Sarah received a knock at the infirmary door late that night. She glanced through the window to find a rain-drenched Frank Welch.

As she opened the door she asked, “What brings ya in, Ole Frank?”

“I’ve been having this problem with my feet,” Frank answered as he limped through the door.

Sarah instructed him, “Just hop on the bed and remove yo shoes. I’ll take a look at em.”

Sarah pulled up a chair and sat down in front of Frank. She carefully examined each foot and came to a conclusion, “Ya got a mild case of jungle rot. I see it all the time. Usually, this happens to the slaves that work in the cotton and sugar cane fields. The servants are often forced to trudge around in the rain-soaked fields. This results in large blisters on they feet which sometimes become infected.”

Frank gave Sarah a look of bewilderment. “Wow, you sure do know your stuff little lady. I want you to know I had no part in what happened to Emanuel today.”

Sarah nodded. “I know. I never seen ya lash anyone.”

Sarah walked over to the large medicine cabinets. “Give me just a moment and I’ll fetch ya something fo it.” She began sorting through the many containers. “Ah, I finally found it. This’ll fix ya up in no time, Ole Frank.”

Sarah turned around to find Frank naked from the waist down. A sinister expression swept across his face as he lunged in her direction...

CHAPTER 11:

The Flames of Hell

Sarah screamed in horror and dropped the medicine bottle. She ran toward the door and struggled with the knob, but Frank had locked it when she wasn't looking. Frank bolted over and grabbed Sarah from behind with one arm around her waist, and the other hand placed firmly over her mouth to muffle her screams. She swung her fists and feet violently, clawing hitting and even biting her attacker in a ferocious attempt to free herself. Frank pushed Sarah down on the floor. He forced himself on top of her and began to pull up her dress.

He struck her hard and growled, "Stop struggling girl and give yourself to me!"

Sarah could feel her attacker's sweaty swollen flesh pressed tightly against her. She could smell the sour odor of whiskey on his musty breath. Sarah mustered up all the strength in her body and grabbed a piece of the broken medicine vial. She swung the large shard of glass blindly, slicing Frank clear across the left side of his face. Frank bellowed in agony and immediately withdrew. Sarah climbed to her feet and backed against the wall.

Frank gripped his badly bleeding jaw. "I'll get you, you little harlot!"

He walked slowly toward her, and she grabbed a black serpent from its aquarium.

Frank laughed scornfully. "Is that the best you can do, a gardener

snake?”

The serpent lunged and snapped at Frank as Sarah threatened him, “This is a black mamba, one of few animals that escaped the fire. One venomous bite, if left untreated, will kill ya within hours. Two bites will end yo life in minutes. This snake was smuggled in from Africa. I got the only one of its kind, and therefore the only anti-venom. If you take one mo step toward me, I will allow ya to suffer an excruciating horrible death.”

Frank threw on his pants. He darted back to his cabin in the pouring down rain. His shoes were still in his grasp as he ran. Once Frank was out of view, Sarah returned the mamba to its home on the shelf of poisonous reptiles and insects. She’d worked with these venomous animals for so long and been bitten so many times, she’d developed immunity to most of them. Sarah took off to Aaron’s cabin and pounded on the door as hard as she could. Aaron answered the door still in his sleep attire.

“Sarah, come in, ya soaked. What the hell’s going on!” he demanded, noticing the frantic state she was in.

Sarah’s entire body quivered. She was crying hysterically. She finally collected herself and announced, “Frank Welch attacked me!”

Aaron wrapped a dry blanket around Sarah and assured her, “I’ll sleep in the infirmary with ya until Matthew returns.”



The next day Aaron left the infirmary to pick up Matthew from the train station. There were no patients at the moment. Sarah spent half the time studying her medical books, and the other half, trying to repair her ruby necklace. The clasp had been broken the night before in the terrifying scuffle with Frank Welch. Sarah briskly abandoned the effort and closed the necklace in her book when she noticed Francesca standing in the doorway.

Sarah asked in a startled voice, “Miss Francesca! What brings ya out here?”

Francesca gave Sarah a suspicious glare. “I originally came because

you never examined the bruise on my back. Now my only concern is what in God's name you're doing with my Aunt Arial's necklace!"

Before Sarah could choke out a response Francesca snatched the book containing the necklace and slapped her across the face.

Francesca screamed, "You little thief! Are you aware of the penalty for stealing!"

Sarah stumbled over her words, "Miss Francesca, I can assure ya that ain't Mistress Colburn's necklace!"

Francesca's face turned beet red with anger. "Well, I see thievery isn't your only talent. You're also a gifted liar! My uncle Matt Sr. had this necklace custom made. It has the Colburn family crest on the back of it. If this isn't my Aunt Arial's necklace than whose is it! And why is it in your possession!"

Sarah broke down and confessed, "Master Matthew gave it to me. He'll be here soon. If ya don't believe me, please wait and ask him. He'll explain everything."

Francesca ignored Sarah's pleas and marched out to the cotton field in search of an overseer to carryout Sarah's punishment. The penalty for stealing was fifteen lashes.

Francesca called up to a wiry red-haired man on a horse. "I've caught a thief and I need you to discipline her."

"The master and mistress are at a town meeting. Master Matthew isn't back yet either. I don't feel comfortable enforcing such a punishment without prior authorization from one of them."

Francesca heard a voice call from behind her. "I'll do it!"

She glanced back to find Frank Welch, who was more than delighted to crack the whip in Sarah's direction. Sarah was dragged kicking and screaming to the whipping post. She heard the muffled conversations of over 200 slaves. The servants formed an enormous circle around the grassless plot of land where the whippings took place. Anytime a slave was being punished all the servants were required to attend. This practice was enforced to make an example of the person being chastised and to intimidate the watchers. She was stripped naked to the waist and tightly bound to a tall round wooden post. Moments before the punishment took place Sarah caught a glimpse of Frank. The scar on his face looked horrific. *He almost appears to be smiling.*

Frank swung the whip forcefully through the air. Sarah could hear a faint whistling sound just before it made contact with her back. She screamed in anguish as it split the flesh right open. Tears rolled down her cheeks and blood trickled from the wound when she felt the second vicious blow. Within sixty seconds Frank managed to deliver at least three more violent strikes. As Frank reared back to whop Sarah a sixth time Matthew caught his arm. Matthew grabbed Frank by the collar and punched him in the face repeatedly. Frank fell to the ground with blood running from his nose and mouth. Matthew untied Sarah from the whipping post, and she collapsed in his arms.

As Matthew carried her off, Frank called out in his delirium, "I was only following orders!"

Matthew yelled back, "Aaron told me what you did! You were not ordered to come into the infirmary and attack her!"

Frank climbed to his feet and spat out a bloody tooth. "I was ordered to whip her!"

"By who?" Matthew demanded.

"Your cousin Francesca ordered the whipping."



After taking Sarah to the infirmary to be cared for, Matthew stormed to the big house still covered in her blood. He forcefully entered Francesca's room and snatched her up from the cherry wood vanity by both arms. Cassie dropped Francesca's dress and bolted from the room.

Francesca screamed and struggled to free herself. "Matthew let go! You're hurting me!"

"You've pulled some underhanded stunts but this is by far the worst! I gave Sarah that necklace. She's my wife and the mother of my unborn child."

Francesca looked up at Matthew shocked and repulsed by his statement. "I guess the little whore wasn't lying. She told me you gave her the necklace, but I thought even a pathetic hillbilly such as you would have more class than to wed a Nigger wench. You disgust me!"

Matthew glared down at Francesca with pure hate in his eyes. It took

all the strength in his body to restrain from striking her. "If you were a man I'd kick your ass!"

"If you were a man I'd be worried!"

He shook her. "Francesca don't you realize what you've done! You had the woman I love beaten and humiliated for no reason at all!"

An uncaring expression swept across Francesca's face. She nonchalantly shrugged her shoulders without showing the least bit of remorse for her actions. He argued with himself. *Don't do it, Matthew. You can't just hit your cousin as if she were a man.*

At last, he pushed her down on her bed and yelled out in anguish. "You're lucky you're not a man!"

Matthew stormed out of the room to his father's chambers convinced that Francesca possessed neither a soul nor a conscience.

Matthew burst into the office. "Father, please send Francesca back to France before I kill her with my own two hands! And we must have Frank arrested!"

"None of this would've happened if you hadn't been so bold about the affair."

"I fail to see how this is my fault! You told me that I could give the necklace to the woman I love and intend to marry! Whether you like it or not that woman is Sarah!"

Mr. Colburn tried his best to calm Matthew. "Son I understand you may think you like or even love this girl but you can't legally marry her. I know Sarah's a beautiful girl; I may be old but I'm not blind. However, for you to give our family crest to a slave girl would shame not just you but all of us. What in the world were you thinking? And under what charges am I to have Frank arrested? We're a little shorthanded on overseers since Samson left and Charles started a plantation of his own. Besides, from what I hear, it was all a big misunderstanding. Frank told me he came to the infirmary late that night because he had an infection in a very private area. He went to show Sarah and she mistook his actions for an advance."

"If that's what truly happened, how did he get that huge cut and all those scratches!"

"I was told that his mare got spooked by a snake and threw him into a thorn bush."

“That pudgy bastard is lying through his teeth! Are you too blind to see what’s happened here? Frank was the one killing those women all along! He allowed his son to take the fall. Frank was the first one in the office when that ear came up missing. The deputies found those body parts in a cabin he and Robert shared. He’s been stalking Sarah all this time. He torched the infirmary to keep her here!”

“If Frank’s been stalking Sarah all this time, why didn’t he try something a long time ago?”

“Phillip Arrington freed Sarah’s entire family and took them to England and I was out of town. This was the first opportunity Frank had,” Matthew explained.



Matthew awakened late the next morning in the infirmary. He’d spent the night out there to keep a careful watch on Sarah. She was sleeping on her stomach. Tiny spots of blood seeped through her bandages. He kissed her forehead and slipped out without waking her. The beautiful Missouri weather made a wicked turn for the worse. It was late in the morning but the sky was almost black. Matthew walked to the tobacco field under a blanket of gray clouds and heavy rain. *In the heartland of America weather like this only means one thing: a tornado is brewing. I need to round up the field slaves in order to ensure their safety.*

Matthew signaled to Frank Welch, who was mounted high on his horse, to bring in the servants. A stampede of slaves came roaring in. Lightning cracked and lit up the sky for long enough for Matthew to spot Saphirra in the rolling green sea of tobacco. As she walked passed with her child Matthew pulled her aside.

He spoke as calmly as he could to prevent scaring her, “Saphirra, I need you to tell me the truth. I promise you won’t be in trouble. Did Robert Welch ever rape you?”

“No, Robert never showed interest in me or any of the women here, but the man was an abusive tyrant who broke my son’s leg. I ain’t sorry fo what I done.”

Matthew assured her, "I understand."

Saphirra picked up her son and ran to her cabin. Matthew stood in the pouring rain and glared over at Frank Welch. *It's been you killing these people all this time. If I don't stop you no one will.* Matthew gripped the sharpened eight-inch screw and pulled it from his pocket. *I can't allow you to hurt anyone else. I won't allow you to harm Sarah again.* Matthew raised the weapon and honed in on Frank. Matthew snatched Frank Welch off of his steed. Frank fell flat on his back in the mud. Frank threw up his arms to shield himself as Matthew brought his arm down swiftly with the blade. Seth tackled Matthew to the ground. Frank ran for his life and disappeared into the storm.

Seth subdued Matthew and shouted over the violent winds, "He's not worth going to prison over! Think of Sarah! Think of your child!"

Matthew climbed to his feet. "I was thinking of my family! I was thinking of all the families! Frank Welch is a plague upon this earth!"

Seth pulled Matthew toward the mansion. "I know how you feel. If someone hurt Leah I would try to kill him, but I know you would be there to stop me. Frank messed up when he killed Katherine McKinley. That's one murder he will spend the rest of his life in prison for. We've just got to prove it."

Matthew reached the big house and walked straight to his room. He peeled off his wet muddy clothing and threw on a dry set. As Matthew buttoned his shirt he heard rapping on the door.

"Come in!" Matthew shouted in reply to the knocking.

Master Colburn entered the bedroom in an unusually good mood, which confused the hell out of Matthew. His father almost appeared to be smiling. Matthew gave his dad a suspicious glare. *That man never smiles unless he's done something to make my life a living hell. Dear God in heaven, what has he done now?*

"Please state your business. I have work to do," Matthew snapped.

"I just wanted to inform you that Francesca has agreed to marry you."

"I don't recall asking that wicked wretch for her claw in marriage!"

"Your mother and Aunt Alice arranged the wedding many years ago. Why else do you think Francesca's been coming here every summer to get better acquainted with you? Your mother and I thought you

would've asked her yourself by now. We were concerned for a moment that the youngest Arrington was going to steal her out from under you, but she came around."

Matthew pushed past his father and stormed out of the room. He marched up to Francesca and said, "My parents have been asking you for years to marry me! You've never loved me or anyone but yourself for that matter. What has suddenly changed your mind?"

"You carrying on with this Sarah girl would have brought us all disgrace and public humiliation. I'm just doing what's best for everyone, especially you."

"What's best for me is for you to find the highest cliff in Missouri and leap off of it."

Francesca reached for Matthew's hand. "You should be thanking me. My dowry will make you filthy rich. Can't you see this heathen girl has bewitched you? I'm trying to save you, Cousin. I'm simply doing what needs to be done."

Matthew jerked his hand away from Francesca. "Keep your talons to yourself, you damned witch."

Francesca stormed away from Matthew toward the front entrance of the mansion. Aaron and Cassie were standing in the anteroom. Cassie was dressed in an elegant blue gown and fine jewelry supplied by Francesca.

Francesca snapped at them both, "Come now, make haste."

Aaron walked up to Francesca. "Don't ya realize this twister weather?"

"Stop whining, it's just a little rain. This trip can't wait. I need to go to the Cathedral and prepare my soul for marriage."

"Ya don't have a soul! If God wiped out all existence, the desolate black abyss of turmoil and despair that remained would be yo soul, Francesca." She rolled her eyes and Aaron continued, "If ya wanna kill yoself then fine! But ya ain't taking my sista with ya."

Aaron turned to Cassie and ordered, "Go to Miss Francesca room and wait out the storm."

Cassie could tell her brother meant business. She took off up the stairs immediately. Francesca was appalled by Aaron's actions. She scowled at him. "How dare you give orders to my servant! A proper lady

is never to travel alone.”

Aaron scoffed. “I’ll inform ya when I see a lady.”

Francesca slapped him so hard he saw spots. “I’ll see you whipped for your insolence you arrogant black bastard. Now prepare the stagecoach.”

The rain continued to plummet as Aaron pulled the carriage up in front of the mansion. As the driver, Aaron was left outside in the pouring precipitation with the vicious gusts of wind. Francesca would be able to ride inside the carriage well protected from the elements. Francesca walked outside with an open umbrella. She closed it with one swift motion and climbed into her seat. The horses began to trot as Aaron led the stagecoach away. Francesca cast aside her soggy umbrella and pulled out a book to read. Bolts of lightning flashed, and thunder rolled with the force of the gods. The storm shook the stagecoach as it ventured forward. She turned the page and continued to read. The storm grew worse, and it began to rain tree branches. Aaron and Francesca were two miles from the church when the tornado came through...



Aaron woke up in excruciating pain. He was no doctor but could tell his ribs were broken. A stabbing sensation shot across his chest every time he breathed. He found himself doubled over a tree branch several feet in the air. It was dark outside, and the rain was still falling heavily. The crumpled up stagecoach lay a few yards from him. Scraped and bruised, he climbed to the ground and hobbled around in search of Francesca. He spotted her trapped, from the waist down, between two fallen trees. The side of her dress was covered in blood.

Aaron called out to her, “Miss Francesca! Hang in there! I’m coming to help ya!”

She moaned in pain and moved about sluggishly. Aaron grabbed a fallen limb and wedged it between the trees that snared Francesca. He pushed with all his might against the limb in order to force the small tree to roll free. This action intensified his pain so much he bellowed in agony. Aaron paused as he noticed a constant screeching noise. He

looked up and discovered an enormous branch swinging back and forth over them. It was dangling by a thread, threatening to fall at any moment.

Aaron shouted and pulled even harder on the makeshift pry bar, “Miss Francesca ya have to help me or you be crushed!”

Francesca snapped her head up and saw the dangling branch. She desperately pushed on the smaller tree with both hands but it didn’t budge. Her eyes filled with tears and sorrow as she realized she was doomed. Francesca shouted to Aaron. “You have to get out of here! If you don’t leave you’ll die too!”

Aaron climbed on top of the larger tree and wrapped his arms around her torso. In spite of his pain, he pulled on her as hard as he could. “I ain’t leaving! I can pull ya out!”

Francesca pulled Aaron down to her eye level and pressed her trembling lips against his. She put a hand on his cheek and sadly replied, “You can’t free me. You’ll only get yourself killed trying. For the love of God, please just leave.”

Aaron’s face grew distraught, and a hush fell over him. He shook his head in disbelief.

“Go!!!” Francesca shouted, and shoved him away from her.

Tears cascaded down Francesca's face as Aaron disappeared into the darkness. She trembled in horror, sobbing uncontrollably. She placed her hands over her ears to deafen the eerie creak of the giant tree limb swinging overhead. Then she closed her eyes firmly; anticipating the moment she’d be crushed to death. The giant tree limb came tumbling from the sky. It eviscerated everything in its path and killed Francesca instantly.

Francesca stood outside of her former body. She panicked at the sight of just her bloody arm sticking out from underneath the giant piece of wood. The forest around her became engulfed in flames. Francesca did not find herself in front of a divine glow at the end of a majestic corridor. She was in a place of mayhem and destruction. A myriad of tortured souls cried out as they were ripped apart by three headed beasts and flying demons. The fire began to singe her flesh as she realized, *I’m in hell!*

CHAPTER 12:

The Gathering

A winged demon spotted Francesca. It swooped down from the sky and landed ten feet in front of her. The creature was as red as the fire that scorched Francesca's flesh. It possessed long black talons and razor-sharp teeth. The monster had no eyes, only two desolate black pits where eyes should be. Francesca screamed in horror as the demon lunged toward her. She cried out in agony when the monster grabbed her wrist. Its touch was like acid, burned without mercy.

She began to repent for her sins and recite the *23rd Psalm of David*. “The lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the path of righteousness for his name’s sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil: for thou art with me...”

Francesca was seized from her prayer as Aaron limped back to her. She opened her eyes and the vision of hell vanished. She glanced up to discover the limb had not yet fallen.

Francesca shouted through her tears, relieved to see Aaron, “I told you to leave!”

Aaron climbed atop the large tree. “And I told ya I wasn’t leaving! I only ran to the carriage in search of my knife. Be very still. I’m gonna

cut ya out of yo dress.”

Aaron shoved the knife in Francesca's sleeve and sliced the material up to the collar. He repeated the action on the other side. He cut the ribbons to her corset, snatched it off, and threw it on the ground. Then he gripped her upper body once more and pulled hard. Francesca wiggled and squirmed as the dangling branch snapped. It came hurtling from the sky, decimating everything in its path. The ground rumbled and a deafening blast echoed through the forest as the massive limb came crashing down.

Once the earth settled Aaron cried out in triumph, “We made it Miss Francesca!”

He climbed to his feet and extended a hand to her. Francesca looked up at Aaron in a daze and stammered, “You... You... came back.”

She passed out seconds later. Aaron wailed in pain as he lifted Francesca’s unconscious body onto his shoulder. He limped into the darkness in search of refuge.



Francesca regained consciousness hours later. She was lying on the floor, in front of a cozy fireplace. She shed the quilt she was wrapped in and groggily rose to her feet. Francesca promptly retrieved the cover once she realized she was only wearing her silk lingerie. Aaron walked in from the kitchen with two dry logs of wood for the fire.

“Where are we?” Francesca asked.

Aaron arranged the logs on the fire and answered with irritation, “We at the Thompson’s summer villa. It’s fall so they at they home in New York right now. We the only people here.”

Francesca dropped the blanket and walked over to him. She looked into his dark mysterious eyes. “You risked your life to save me: a terrible person who threatened your sister and forced you to do things against your will.”

Francesca leaned forward to kiss Aaron, and he brushed a soft blonde curl away from her face. He leaned close to her and whispered, “Is this the part where ya force me to do something fo ya? For Christ's sake, ya

engaged to my best friend, Miss Francesca. Have ya no conscience?"

Aaron walked away in aggravation and Francesca sadly replied, "I'll never make you do anything ever again. I know it means nothing to you coming from me, but I truly am sorry."

At that moment Aaron heard the sound of trotting horses drawing closer. He took a lantern outside and ran to the end of the gravel path. He flailed his arms wildly and flagged down the passing carriage. As the stagecoach came to a halt, Aaron was relieved to see Matthew and Seth behind the reigns.

"Thank God we've found you!" Seth called down.

"When I saw the carriage obliterated on the side of the road, I feared you might be dead," said Matthew.

Francesca walked up barefoot with a quilt wrapped around her.

As she climbed in the stagecoach Matthew called out angrily, "You're an idiot, Francesca!"

"Go to hell!" She responded.

Seth looked at Aaron and asked, "Where are her clothes?"

As Aaron boarded the carriage he replied, "Long story."



Dr. McKinley finished examining Francesca and left the room. She lay awake in bed running her fingertips over her bandages. Both of her thighs were ridden with contusions. She had a small cut on her left side and an unexplained burn around her wrist. Her thoughts grew heavy as she struggled to rest. *Why must I be threatened with eternal damnation in order to realize right from wrong? I'm going back to that horrible place of fire and death if something doesn't change. I can't believe I told Aaron to leave me. I really must care for him. Not that it matters; he hates me, and for good reason.*

Francesca grabbed a tissue from her nightstand as she began to sob. She heard a tap on her balcony window. She opened the sliding glass doors to find Aaron standing there. He was shirtless but nearly his entire torso was wrapped in bandages.

He scowled and asked. "Where is my sista?"

“She’s sleeping over there on the lounge.” Francesca pulled the wooden divider that cut the room in half. Cassie continued resting on the other side.

Aaron walked into the bedroom and spoke with irritation, “I got something to say.” Francesca moved to apologize and Aaron snapped, “don’t interrupt me. I earned that much. I hate ya fo hurting my friend Sarah! I hate ya fo threatening my sista! And fo nearly getting me KILLED! But what I hate ya fo most of all, is in spite of how much I try to convince myself that I hate ya, I turn right around and make a two-story climb in the middle of the night, with three broken ribs, just to make sure ya alright! Are ya alright!”

Francesca jumped in fear and nodded her head yes. “Just a few bumps and bruises. I’ll be fine.”

Aaron nodded. “I hate the fact that I enjoy our little walks in the woods! I hate the fact that even though ya *never* have anything nice to say, I still look forward to hearing yo voice. I wouldn’t have been able to sleep tonight unless I was certain you’d be fine.” Francesca smiled through her tears and Aaron yelled, “I hate ya for that! I hate that against all logic, reasoning, rational thought, and a general sense of self-preservation, I love ya!”

“You shouldn’t,” Francesca sniffled and backed away from him. “I’m damaged... broken... ruined by a lifetime of court politics and manipulations. A poor parent raises a child to use objects and love people. A noble parent raises a child to use people and love objects.”

“Ya tried to save my life. Ya ain’t as damaged as ya think.”

“My own cousin thinks I am a monster.”

“Then stop being one.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Then I help ya.”

Tears fell from Francesca’s eyes as she whispered, “I love you, Aaron.”

Aaron gently embraced Francesca and gave her a long tender kiss. He never thought he’d feel whole again after all he’d been through, but as he held her in his arms his shattered heart, at last, began to beat.



The following day Till entered the cooking quarters of Arrington Manor. The kitchen was vast with stark white walls. Shining copper and silver colored pots hung from a rack. Mable stood in front of the stove slicing vegetables into a large pot of boiling broth.

Till walked in carrying two large containers of milk. “Where should I put these?”

Mable called out from in front of the stove. “I want ya to divide that milk among those nine small containers on the table.”

Till snapped. “I don’t have time fo this Mable! I have to get to the Colburn Plantation.”

“I thought ya delivered to them on Mondays.”

Till spoke with angst as her eyes filled with tears, “If ya must know, I ain’t going there fo a delivery. My husband has passed. I’m going to see if the Colburns ever found Anna and Mali. I hope the girls got away fo good, but if they didn’t they will at least be able to attend they father’s funeral tomorrow.”

Mable dried her hands on her apron and walked over to Till. She smacked her lips. “You must not a heard.”

“Heard what!” Till demanded with a concerned look.

Mable glanced up at Till and smugly said. “Frank’s boy Robert butchered em and a bunch of other people.”

Till slapped Mable across the face. “Take it back, ya evil old hag!”

Mable rubbed her jaw with a smile. “All they found of Anna was an ear, with a black arrowhead earring.” Till shuddered and shook her head in disbelief. Mable added. “Ahhh ya know the jewelry I speak of. Let’s see if ya can recognize another piece. All they found of Mali was a finger with a silver and onyx ring on it.”

Till's face went flush. She became light-headed. The room began to spin and she collapsed on the floor.



Till's master, Lincoln Miles, took a seat at the end of the dinner table. He read a newspaper while waiting for his family to join him for dinner. Miles was in his forties with thick brown hair sprinkled with gray. He was a wiry man with a full beard and mustache. Atop the dinner table sat five large silver platters, covered by dome lids. Till walked in from the kitchen with a sixth platter. It had been a trying day for her, and she was still forced to serve as if nothing had happened.

Lincoln Miles commented as she sat the platter before him, "I'm starving. I may have to start without them."

"Well ya the boss, Sir," Till replied as she forced a smile for him.

Till lifted the lid off the platter and a black snake shot out. It struck Lincoln Miles on the throat; sinking its' poisonous fangs deep into his flesh. In a matter of seconds, the snake bit him twice more on the face.

As he cried out in agony Till announced vehemently, "Ya got ten minutes to live; so listen and listen well! Ya took my daughters from me! Ya put em in harm's way! Ya promised my husband that if he made ya enough money you'd get em back. In spite of his heart condition, my husband worked himself into the grave fo ya!"

Lincoln's face began to swell with venom and bruise. He writhed in pain. "It isn't my fault Till! Robert Welch killed your girls! Not me! Please call a doctor for Christ's sake."

Till replied with a deranged look in her eyes, "Ya had twice the amount of money you'd need a month before Anna and Mali disappeared. My husband made certain of that. Every week ya had another excuse why ya wouldn't go get my babies, and every week my husband worked harder fo ya. Now he dead and so is they."

Lincoln Miles pleaded as his face grew more swollen and distorted, "I'm sorry Till. I was never in debt. I was trying to bait your husband into raising profits. I didn't know anyone would get hurt!"

Till gave a sinister smile. "Don't be sorry fo my daughters. They got they pa to look after em now. Before ya leave this earth, I just want ya to know that yo family did join ya fo dinner tonight."

Lincoln Miles screamed in horror as Till walked around the table flinging off the lids of the five other platters. The grotesque severed heads of his three sons, his daughter, and his wife stared back at him.

As poison coursed through the veins of Lincoln Miles he swore, “You’ll never get away with this!”

“I never planned to get away.”

Lincoln Miles fell over on the table and foam spewed from his mouth. As he gagged jerked and took his last breath, Till finally found peace. She left the house and went to her cabin. She smashed two kerosene lanterns on the floor and watched as the tiny wooden shack ignited. Till laid down next to the body of her deceased husband and downed a vial of poison. The cabin was in flames in no time.

She rested her head on his chest. “My dear James, I’ll be with ya soon.”



On the other side of town, a multitude of guests gathered for Matthew and Francesca’s engagement dinner. The feast was served in the grand dining hall. Two massive tables sat forty guests each; including Seth, Emanuel, Dr. McKinley and Lady Arrington. Matthew sat at the end of one of the tables, with Francesca to the right of him.

The eighty guests went silent as Matthew stood to make a toast. “First I’d like to thank all of you for coming here in spite of yesterday’s twister.” Matthew held up his glass of white wine and spoke poetically, “I would like to propose a toast to my fiancée, the beautiful Viscountess Francesca Demoniet.” Applause roared from the many guests as Matthew took Francesca by the hand. She rose graciously from her seat and Matthew went on to say, “Francesca reminds me of Greek mythology.”

The women at the tables called out in awe, “Does she remind you of Helen, the face who launched a thousand ships? Or does she remind you of Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty?”

Matthew smiled. “If Hates, lord of the underworld, were to impregnate his three-headed hell beast the offspring would be

Francesca.” The visitors gasped and an awkward silence fell over the room as Matthew continued, “Francesca Demoniet is a vile plague upon humanity, who only revels in the suffering of others. I am most willing to endure a thousand agonizing deaths, before spending the rest of my life bound to this wicked crone. So please enjoy the food and drinks set before you, but as I have previously stated to my parents, there will be no wedding.”

The volume rose abruptly as the visitors gossiped to one another. Francesca’s face turned crimson with humiliation. She bolted from the grand dining hall in anguish and disbelief. Matthew downed his glass of wine and casually sauntered out of the dining area. *That felt good.*

Master and Mistress Colburn marched out after Matthew and snatched him into a private room.

Mistress Colburn slapped her son. “Do you realize you’ve publically humiliated your cousin! And not only that, you’ve shamed your father and me! Why are you so against this union?”

Matthew shot back. “How many times must I tell you? I’m already married! Sarah is pregnant with my child!”

Master Colburn asked casually, “Is that all? If you’re that attached to this girl, then marry Francesca and keep Sarah as a mistress. Take Sarah and your little bastard to France with you. Give them the best of treatment but never claim them as your own. Why the hell do you think we’ve always been so good to Seth?”

Matthew narrowed his eyes at his father, “Seth is your son! You damn hypocrite!”

Master Colburn shot back. “Seth is your mother’s son!”

Matthew shook his head in disbelief. He stared at his mother. “None of this is true! You were sent here twenty years ago to marry Father!”

Matthew’s mother confessed with teary eyes, “I was sent to Missouri twenty years ago to conceal the pregnancy of a bastard black child. I fell in love with your father and decided to stay.”

As Matthew stormed out of the room Master Colburn said to his wife. “Matthew won’t listen to reason. Our family would gain control over Francesca’s fortune if they were to marry. It’s time to do what we talked about.”

Mistress Colburn reluctantly agreed.



Sarah stood in the infirmary packing her things when she noticed the black mamba was missing from its aquarium. She was in the middle of searching for it when Francesca walked in from the party.

Francesca sat on a stool. "We need to talk."

Sarah shot Francesca an evil look. *It's yo fault Matthew and I gotta run away tonight. If it weren't fo ya, his parents would've never found out we were married. They would've forked me over, no problem. Because of ya, Miss Demoniet, I was stripped and beaten and the Colburns have refused to allow Matthew to buy my freedom.* "Ya have some nerve to show yo face here! Ya already stealing my husband! What mo could ya possibly want from me!"

"I know you are running away with my cousin tonight. I only came out here to apologize and give you this." Francesca handed Sarah an envelope full of money and continued. "It's my weekly allowance. I won't gain control of my inheritance until I'm married or my parents have passed away. It's not much, but I hope it helps you."

Sarah stood speechless for a few moments before finally accepting the gift. "I gotta know. What made ya hate me so much? Cassie is yo lady's maid now, and ya don't treat her in the foul manner ya treated me."

Francesca admitted, "I've grown accustomed to being the center of attention. When I came here you were all my cousins could talk about: Sarah's so smart. Sarah's so pretty and nice. Sarah loves kittens. Blah Blah etc.... You always seemed to upstage me. You always outshined me. Even though it was trivial and ridiculous, I hated you for that." Francesca handed Sarah the ruby necklace and said, "I believe this belongs to you. Good luck to you both."

"Thank ya," Sarah replied as Francesca left the infirmary.

Matthew walked in a few minutes later with a bag on his shoulder. He hugged Sarah and said, "It's time. Seth is taking us to the train station."

At that moment a gang of overseers kicked in the door. Four of the

men grabbed Matthew and slapped shackles on his wrists and ankles. The other three grabbed Sarah and administered the heavy chains to her body as well. They were both dragged outside on the lawn in opposite directions. Matthew caught a final glimpse of Sarah as she was forced into a stagecoach and hauled away.



Frank Welch stood in the master's chambers at dusk awaiting further orders.

Master Colburn took a puff from his cigar and let out a cloud of white smoke. He flicked off the excess ash into a glass tray and spoke with mild irritation. "Is the cellar the best you could come up with, Frank?"

"We have Matthew bolted to the wall. I can assure you, Sir, he won't escape."

Master Colburn took another hit from his cigar and released a mist of acrid smoke. He put out the cigar with a twisting motion and laid it against the side of the ashtray. Master Colburn rose from his seat and slammed his palms on the desk. "Do not underestimate the brilliance of my son! Matthew was a child prodigy. His former teacher used to tell me he'd never seen any student like Matthew. He's a genius when it comes to the structure and composition of things. I need to keep him prisoner for at least a few weeks in order to break him. If you don't move him to a more secure destination, I guarantee you, he will break out!"

Frank Welch replied as he left the room, "As you wish, Sir. I'll bring Matthew food and drink for now, and move him tomorrow evening."



The wine cellar, which served as Matthew's prison for the past two days, shut out all light and sound. He sat against the wall with heavy iron cuffs around his wrists. The wrist cuffs were attached to long chains; which were bolted to the brick wall behind him. He scratched the tip of the eight-inch screw against the cold cement floor. *How ironic is it for*

me to be trapped in this place without Sarah, the very place I asked her to marry me? If anything's happened to Sarah my father will rue the day he laid a hand on her. He pushed the bad thoughts aside. *I can't think that way. Sarah's fine. She has to be alright.* Matthew gave the large bolt a half turn and continued to scrape it over the cement. *If I can file this bolt down to just the right size, I may be able to use it as a screwdriver.* Matthew placed the makeshift screwdriver against the groove of a bolt on the wall. *It almost fits, just a little more to go.*

Matthew heard the loud clink of the cellar doors. He quickly placed the tool back in his pocket. The doors swung open, allowing in what little sunlight was left. He shielded his eyes and bellowed for help. The doors flew shut at once. He heard footsteps in the darkness followed by the strike of a match. The cellar began to glow as a torch on the wall was lit. Matthew could now see it was Frank Welch, who had been sent with food and water.

Matthew called out to him, "I should've pierced your black heart when I had the chance!"

Frank kicked the plate over to Matthew without a response. Frank walked back up the stairs and flung open the doors once more. This time Matthew heard the faint sound of a familiar song. The slaves were in the cemetery singing:

*Swing low sweet chariot coming for to carry me home.
Swing low sweet chariot coming for to carry me home.
I looked over Jordan and what did I see?
Coming for to carry me home.
A band of angels coming after me.
Coming for to carry me home.
Swing Low.....*

Matthew sprung to his feet. The chains rattled and clinked, as he yanked vigorously against them. He called up to Frank, "Whose funeral is it!" Frank Welch looked back over his shoulder and gave a sinister smirk. Matthew shouted once more, "Who died, Frank!"

Frank walked out and slammed the doors shut. Matthew scolded himself. *I can't think negatively. Sarah's not dead. She can't be dead.*

Matthew slumped back onto the floor and retrieved his eight inch bolt. He started the filing process again. *Sarah's alive. I know she's alive and I'm going to get out of here and rescue her.* Matthew tried, once more, to gauge the screwdriver he'd made. *Thank God it finally fits.* He struggled to force a screw to turn, and at last, it shifted with a squeak. He quickly unscrewed the first one and went on to the next. *One down seven to go.* In a matter of minutes, Matthew took all eight of the screws out. He rose to his feet in triumph as the chains came unbolted from the walls. The long chains remained cuffed to Matthew's wrists, but at least now he could move about the cellar. He walked over to the crates of wine dragging the heavy shackles behind him. The chains created a trail of sparks as they swept over the floor. He busted open a crate and removed a bottle of wine. Then grabbed the bottle by the neck and smashed it against the wall. *This should serve as a weapon the next time Father sends one of his faithful lackeys. I can wait until someone brings food tomorrow, and break out of here then. But Sarah may not have until tomorrow. I need to figure out a way to get the cellar doors open. They're locked from the outside, but I may be able to maneuver the hinges.* Matthew felt along the hinges of the cellar doors and smiled. *This won't prove difficult at all.* He hid in the shadows of the cellar as the sound of footsteps drew closer. The doors flew open and two intruders descended the stairs. Matthew leaped out of the darkness and took the first intruder hostage.

Matthew held the broken bottle against the man's throat and threatened the other. "Free me now or I'll kill him!"

"It's us, Master Matthew! Let go of Seth!" Aaron yelled.

"I'm so sorry," Matthew vowed and he released Seth.

"How did you manage to find me?" Matthew choked out, relieved to see Aaron and Seth had come to his aid.

Aaron unlocked Matthew's wrist shackles and said, "Frank was acting strange so I followed him and stole his skeleton key when he wasn't looking. I figured he might be after another girl, but low and behold."

Seth added, "I was supposed to take you and Sarah to the train station after the engagement party. When you never showed up, I knew something was terribly wrong."

The three of them emerged from the cellar at night. They brought Matthew to the busted up infirmary to mend his scrapes and bruises. The bag he'd packed had been ripped open, and the contents were strewn about the infirmary. All the money he'd saved to run away had been stolen. Matthew looked around the place and spotted Sarah's Ruby necklace lying on the floor.

Matthew grew hysterical at the sight of it. "Where is Sarah? Is she safe? We've got to find her."

Seth and Aaron bowed their heads and the infirmary became silent.

Matthew yelled as he grew impatient and even more concerned, "You must tell me where she is!"

Seth finally broke the silence. "I'm so sorry. She's gone, Sir. Your father had her burned at the stake for witchcraft. The charge was harboring abortifacient remedies."

The words pierced Matthew's chest like a razor-sharp dagger. It felt as if he'd been stabbed in the heart. He grew sick, confused and unable to breathe. Matthew fell to his knees and gripped her ruby necklace. Tears filled his eyes as he looked up at Seth and Aaron.

Matthew stammered in a shallow voice. "That... funeral I heard... was for Sarah. Wasn't it?"

Seth and Aaron regretfully nodded yes.



Matthew kneeled in front of the mound of unsettled earth where Sarah had been buried. A small wooden cross stuck out of the ground to mark her grave. He pulled the rosary from his pocket and hung it on the cross.

Matthew turned to Aaron and Seth and asked, "Would you mind preparing the carriage? I need a few moments alone. I'll meet you both up front."

They nodded and left him to his thoughts. The moment they were no longer in sight Matthew dashed out of the cemetery. He grabbed a pile of rope and headed for the mansion. He checked his pocket for the bottle of ether he'd just stolen from the infirmary. He gripped the bottle in

anguish. *Abortifacients, my father killed Sarah for harboring abortifacients. I overheard that hypocrite explain to my Catholic mother, that long before I was born many women were raped on this plantation. These women refused to bear the children of their attackers. Many committed suicide. Numerous others died in attempts to self-abort. For these reasons, Father was the one who put the abortifacients in the infirmary. He was losing too much money on the deaths of the rape victims. There have been abortifacients in the infirmary for the past two decades; long before Sarah began working there, years before she was even born.*

Matthew stealthily crept into his bedroom window, then up the stairs to his father's quarters. Master Colburn continued to sleep soundly as Matthew appeared in the doorway. Matthew gave his father a wrathful glare and poured the ether onto a piece of cloth. Matthew quietly entered the room and pressed the cloth firmly over his father's mouth and nose. Master Colburn's eyes went wild. He fought and struggled with all his might but Matthew overpowered him. Within seconds his eyelids grew heavy and fell once more.

Master Colburn regained consciousness minutes later. He was hanging by his feet from his bedroom balcony. One end of the rope was tied securely around his ankles. The other end was tied to his bedpost. He stared down at the ground from a distance and began to panic. He was terrified of heights; a fact only known by his closest relatives.

"Help!" he called out again and again.

Matthew peered down at him from the balcony. "The only crime Sarah was guilty of was loving me!"

"Pull me up, son! Please! Let's talk about this!"

Seth, Aaron, Francesca, and Mistress Colburn ran to Master Colburn's bedroom and struggled to open the locked door. Seth bellowed from the hallway, "Matthew stop! You can't kill your own father!"

Matthew anchored himself and untied the rope from the bedpost. Master Colburn let out a terrified wail as he slipped several feet before Matthew got a good grip on the rope. Aaron kicked in the door. He and Seth ran in.

Francesca and Mistress Colburn appeared behind them, pleading with tear soaked faces. "Please don't do this! He's your Father!"

Matthew gripped the rope tightly. “If anyone comes any closer I’ll drop him!” Everyone froze mid-step as Matthew said, “He murdered my wife! I may have very well been next, had I not been discovered!”

Master Colburn called up, “Matthew! I never meant to hurt you! My intentions, however vile you believe they were, were in the best interest of my only son! That girl had you under her spell! I’m sorry, but Sarah had bewitched you! Would you kill your own father?”

Matthew growled with anger as he released the rope, “You are not my father.”

The onlookers gasped and screamed as Master Colburn went hurtling to the ground.

They bolted downstairs to find Master Colburn lying on the lawn in a pool of blood. He hollered in agony and writhed in pain as they ran to his aide. His arm was severely broken. Splintered white bones pierced through the torn bloody skin.

Matthew trotted up on a black steed and called down to his father. “I knew the fall wouldn’t kill you, you heartless bastard. I had already done the math in my head. Killing you isn’t what Sarah would’ve wanted, and it sure as hell won’t bring her back.”

Master Colburn moaned with an outstretched hand, “Son... Please... I’m sorry.”

Matthew peered down from his horse. “You stopped being my father the day you killed my wife. From this moment forward you’re dead to me. If you come near me again, you’ll be dead to the world.”

The stallion neighed with intensity, its breath fogging the night air as it reared up on its hind legs. Matthew galloped away into the night.

CHAPTER 13:

The Ultimatum

Four months had gone by since the tragic death of Sarah. The weather had grown cold and bitter. The trees bid farewell to their leaves and the ground was covered in a light snow. Aaron pulled the carriage up in front of Seth and Leah's house, a massive two-story home with elegant pillars. Matthew had designed and built it himself. Francesca climbed out of the stagecoach and walked up to the house with Aaron. Leah answered the door holding her four-month-old daughter, Athena.

"It's so nice to see ya," Leah said as she smiled at Aaron and gave him a one-armed hug.

Leah shot Francesca a dirty look and led them both to the parlor where Matthew and Seth were sitting. With no money and nowhere else to go Matthew went to stay with Seth and Leah. As they walked in the room Seth kissed Leah and relieved her of the baby.

Seth greeted Aaron and Francesca, "Please come in, stay awhile."

"I only have a short while. My aunt and uncle don't know I'm here," Francesca explained. "I came to tell you that I overheard Uncle Matthew saying he would repossess your property if you don't tell him where Matthew is." Francesca turned to Matthew and said, "My parents are taking me back to France soon. Marry me, cousin. It will be in name only. We'll gain access to my inheritance. You can leave this place. Rid

yourself of your parents for good.”

Aaron sighed. “I think ya should do it, Sir. If her parents take her back to France unwed I may never see her again.”

As they turned to leave, Francesca told Matthew, “Just give it some thought.”

Matthew nodded and Francesca and Aaron walked out.

Leah walked over to Matthew and cautioned him, “Am I the only one who remembers that woman is the anti-Christ? Don’t marry Francesca, Master Matthew.”

Seth added, “Leah’s right. I just don’t trust Francesca.”

Matthew replied, “You both have shown me more than enough kindness by taking me in when I had nowhere else to go. I won’t put you in a position to lose everything you own.”

Leah replied, “That was an empty threat. Yo father adores Seth.”

Matthew warned, “My father killed Sarah. I wouldn’t put anything past him. You have to think of your family. You and Leah have a daughter now. You have another child on the way.”

Leah glared at Matthew appalled by his statement. “I do not got a child on the way.”

The uh-oh expression spread across Matthew’s face as he confessed, “The men on my father’s side have a strange gift. I don’t know where it came from or why, but we have the ability to tell when women are pregnant.” Leah and Seth laughed. “I’m serious,” Matthew insisted. “I knew Sarah was pregnant before she did. If I touched your waist I could even tell you the sex of the child.”

Leah stopped laughing once she realized Matthew was serious. Matthew touched her belly and said, “You’re having a son.”

Seth laughed again as Leah walked over to the calendar. She flipped the page back and forth counting the days over and over again.

Leah’s eyes widened with surprise as she announced, “Oh my God, I’m late. I’m never late.”

Matthew took Athena and Seth picked Leah up and swung her around. Seth kissed Leah, then turned to Matthew and asked, “How did you do that?”

Matthew smiled. “I don’t know how the men on my father’s side do this. As long as we’re related to the child, we can tell the woman is

pregnant as well as if the baby is a boy or girl.”

The smile faded from Seth’s face as he asked, “Matthew, Sir, how are you related to my child? Please don’t make me kill you.”

Matthew stammered, “No... No, it isn’t like that. I would never touch your wife.”

Leah playfully shoved Seth for being paranoid. Seth glared suspiciously at Matthew and repeated the question slowly, “How are you a blood relative of my child?”

Matthew sighed and released a long breath. He prepared to tell Seth the secret that had plagued his mother and father for two decades. “I probably should have told you this a long time ago but I didn’t know how. Seth, we have the same mother. That’s where you get your gray eyes from. That’s how I knew Leah was pregnant. We’re brothers Seth. Your child is my nephew.”

Seth shook his head in disbelief. “My mother’s name was Lillian! I remember her. She died of yellow fever.”

Leah rubbed Seth’s back to comfort him and Matthew said, “No Seth, your mother’s name is Arial Colburn. Lillian was the woman who adopted you. The reason you were treated well wasn’t just because my mother was friends with Lillian. You were treated well because my mother is your mother.”

Seth rubbed his head and left the room with a distraught look on his face. His perception’s had been shattered. He wasn’t even sure who he was anymore. Athena began to cry and Leah relieved Matthew of the baby.

Matthew felt like a terrible person. “Did I do the right thing?”

“Ya ain’t the one who lied to my husband his entire life.” Leah assured Matthew, “He’ll be fine. Just give him some time.”



Five months after the death of his beloved Sarah Matthew sat alone in a room at the Catholic Church. Down on his luck and out of options he’d reluctantly agreed to wed Francesca. It was just moments before his wedding was to begin and all he could think of was Sarah. *Sarah had*

asked me to run away with her so many times. I always rejected the idea because of the horrific things that would be done to her if we were caught. I only wished for everything to be legal when we left and started a family of our own. Now I wish more than anything we would've just taken our chances with running. Now I'm here marrying my cousin. Why am I the only one on this godforsaken planet who finds the idea of wedding a relative repulsive; especially one who looks just like my sister? It's disgusting. Matthew's racing thoughts were interrupted by Seth knocking on the door.

"Master Matthew, it's time," Seth called from the doorway.

Matthew approached the sanctuary. His mother and father were sitting among many guests. He averted his eyes and refused to acknowledge them. He walked to the front of the cathedral and stood next to Seth. The organ began to play and Matthew waited for Francesca to saunter down the aisle. The guests rose and faced the back of the church as Francesca appeared. She didn't look the least bit happy. The abundance of tears cascading down her face were not of joy, but of extreme emotional distress. She eventually made it down the aisle and stood in front of Matthew. The music ceased and the guests sat back on the pews. Francesca couldn't hear the priest for sake of her own thoughts. *Matthew and I have finally become friends and I know he's not up to this. He's still in love with Sarah, and in some small way, I feel as if I'm betraying them both. I love Aaron more than life itself. He should be the one I marry today, not a grieving cousin who's still broken-hearted over the death of his wife.*

When Father Murphy asked Matthew if he would take Francesca to be his bride, he took her by the hands and leaned close to her. Matthew spoke to her in a voice nearly a whisper, "I am truly sorry, but I will never be able to see a cousin as more than a cousin."

Francesca hugged Matthew and smiled for the first time at her wedding. The guests gasped and rose from their seats as Matthew and Francesca fled the sanctuary. Francesca's parents were outraged. Matthew watched as they ranted in French for about ten minutes then climbed into a stagecoach. Francesca scribbled on a piece of paper and handed it to Matthew.

She whispered to her cousin. "Now that the wedding plans have

fallen through, my parents have no reason to leave me in Missouri. We're boarding a ship for France this afternoon. I know you said that you'd never return to the home of your parents, but please give this letter to Aaron. You're the only one I can trust."

Matthew received the letter. "Don't you still need to return to pack your things?"

Francesca shook her head no. "They're having my belongings mailed."

Matthew walked Francesca to the snow-covered stagecoach where her parents waited. He hugged her and opened the door. The count and countess gave him bitter scowls.

Francesca climbed in and Matthew said, "I truly am sorry."

Francesca smiled. "You have nothing to apologize for. It took me a while, but I finally understand how you felt about her."

Francesca's father slammed the carriage door shut, and Matthew watched as it pulled away.



It had been five months since Matthew had set foot at the Colburn plantation. He stood outside in the cold and knocked on Aaron's door. When Aaron answered Matthew said, "I missed you and Emanuel at the wedding."

"I'm sorry, Sir. I couldn't bring myself to watch. As for Emanuel, he been obsessing over something in his office."

Matthew was all too familiar with Emanuel's ways, "Say no more, I know how he gets when he's buried under work. He doesn't come up for air."

They took a seat at a small table and Matthew pulled the letter from his pocket. "Francesca asked me to give you this. We didn't go through with the wedding, and she had to leave in a hurry."

Aaron passed the note back to Matthew. "I can't read it, Sir."

Matthew opened the letter and began reading it to Aaron.

Dear Aaron,

We always knew it was bound to end at some point, but that doesn't make writing this letter any easier. I would love nothing more than to spend an eternity in your loving embrace; however, we both know this is impossible, for I too am a slave. I am a slave to my title and family name, and must also do as I'm commanded. Even though this is goodbye I want you to know that I am a better person having known you. Please think of me when the stars gleam brightly in the midnight sky and when the sun sets just perfectly behind the far-off hills, for at those very moments I shall surely be thinking of you.

*With all the love that I possess,
Viscountess Francesca Demoniet*

Matthew folded the letter and passed it back to Aaron.

Emanuel barged into the cabin and spoke to Matthew, "I apologize for interrupting, but I heard you were back on the property. I need to talk to you right now." Matthew glared at Emanuel wondering what could possibly have him so worked up. Emanuel explained, "I've been meaning to tell you, but no one has known where you were for the past five months."

"Tell me what?"

Emanuel took a deep breath and rattled out, "your beloved Sarah is alive."

CHAPTER 14:

The Lake House

Matthew shook his head in disbelief. “Is this some sort of sick joke! Her body lies in the slave cemetery as we speak!” Emanuel assured, “I would never play such a cruel prank. I usually handle all the paperwork here, including the mail. Your father had not anticipated that Sarah would know how to read and write. I was sorting the mail as usual when your father walked into my office. He looked down at the pile of letters and abruptly snatched them. All I saw was the name Sarah in the return address.”

“As much as I want to believe she’s alive, Sarah is a very common name. Are you sure it was my wife?”

“Your father frantically shuffled through the letters. He immediately tossed that particular one into the fireplace. Why would he burn a letter without even opening it? From that day forward he insisted on handling all the mail himself.”

“Did you notice a return address?”

“I’m sorry. All I saw was the name Sarah and the abbreviation for Louisiana. There is no corpse in that coffin. There can’t be.”



Matthew was unable to believe what he was hearing without adequate proof. He asked Emanuel to keep Master Colburn busy while he investigated. Matthew grabbed Aaron and Seth and walked out into a blizzard. The three of them proceeded to the cemetery to exhume Sarah's coffin. As they approached the graveyard Matthew realized. *This is going to be an extremely difficult task. It's the middle of January and the ground is frozen solid. The snowstorm is growing worse by the minute.*

The snow was flying wildly, and the wind felt so cold it burned the flesh. In spite of the unforgiving weather conditions, Matthew took the first stab at the icy soil. Seth and Aaron followed his lead. The men chipped away at the frigid mound of earth with picks and shovels. A trench began to form and they shoveled even more vigorously. At last Matthew struck the pine casket with his shovel. They swept the dirt off and started prying out the nails that held the top closed. Matthew climbed even further down into the gaping hole with the coffin. His entire body froze with fear. His muscles tensed up and he grew sick to his stomach. *Do I really want to see what's in this coffin?*

Aaron and Seth could see the state of shock he was in and climbed deeper into the burial plot with him. Seth gave Matthew a reassuring hand on the shoulder and said, "You don't have to do this."

Matthew replied, "I'll never have a moment's peace unless I do. I have to know for certain what happened, even if I never find her."

Matthew gathered his nerve and took a deep breath. They lifted the heavy wooden lid. He gasped in horror at the unsightly, foul-smelling remains. Her body had been burned beyond recognition. All that remained was a charred black corpse. Matthew's heart sank and a single tear rolled down his cheek. He replaced the lid and climbed out of the grave.

"At least now I know," Matthew said with a somber tone.

Aaron flung the lid back open. "Wait! I don't believe this Sarah." He glanced over the body and studied the corpse a bit longer. "I dug graves with my pa for two years. When a person is burned to death they wear wrist and ankle restraints. For this reason the wrists and ankles are the only parts of the body left unburned. Do ya see, Sir?" Aaron pointing to the wrists of the corpse. "The wrists on this body are burned to a crisp. This person wasn't burned at the stake. In fact, the only part of this corpse

left unburned is the right ankle. That ain't an Urhobo tribal tattoo. These markings are of the Ashanti tribe. The only slave women I've ever met from that tribe were Anna and Mali. This is probably their mother, Till."

Matthew turned to Seth and questioned, "that's your tribe, isn't it?"

Seth nodded. "This ink is indeed Ashanti. As a matter of fact, Till always wore a brace on her right ankle. That may be why that's the only part that didn't burn. It was all over the papers. Till went insane. She killed the entire family who owned her and burned herself up inside her cabin. They hanged Mable for inciting the mass murder."

Matthew was entirely overwhelmed. "She's alive. I can't believe Sarah's alive."



Matthew knew that if he interrogated his father Emanuel would be severely punished. At dusk, he went to question the only other man that would have the slightest clue about where to find Sarah; his father's partner in crime, Frank. Matthew raced on his stallion to the cottage of Frank Welch. He climbed down from his steed and pounded loudly on the door. Frank opened the door a crack and tried to slam it closed immediately when he saw Matthew standing there.

Matthew yelled as he barged into the house, "Frank we can do this the easy way or the hard way! Tell me what happened to Sarah!"

Frank grinned. "We tied that little witch to a wooden post and burned her like the heathen she was!"

Matthew punched Frank in the nose causing him to topple onto his kitchen table. He grabbed Frank around the collar and hemmed him up against the wall.

Matthew shouted at Frank, "Let's try this again! What really happened to my wife?"

Frank lay firmly pressed against the wall struggling to breathe. His feet were dangling in the air. Frank finally choked out, "Alright, alright, I'll tell you everything."

Matthew released Frank and he collapsed to the floor gasping for air. After Frank caught his breath he stood up and began confessing to

Matthew, “Your father had her kidnapped the night of you and Francesca’s engagement party. I held her prisoner until I could take her to New Orleans. I sold her to my late wife’s family. Till is the one who is actually buried in Sarah’s grave.”

Matthew asked impatiently, “Where is Sarah now?”

Frank passed Matthew a piece of paper with a trembling hand. “This is the sales receipt. It will have the address on it.”

“Why do you have it?” Matthew demanded.

Frank confessed, “I kept it to blackmail your father with. I told him that if he didn’t pay me a lot of money I would give it to you.”

Matthew stuffed the receipt in his pocket and grabbed Frank around the throat. He spoke to Frank in a menacing tone, “As much as I’d love to squeeze the very life out of you, I won’t. I prayed to God every day I was locked in that cellar that if he would spare Sarah’s life I would live to serve only him. So I can’t kill you.” Matthew released Frank and said, “You’re a pathetic excuse for a human being, and you’ll reap what you sew one day.”

Matthew walked toward the door and Frank pointed a revolver at his back. Frank drew back the hammer of the gun. “You’re a meddler, you know that boy. You couldn’t just leave well enough alone, could you? I’m sorry but you left me no choice. Right now I got your father’s money and dozens of young girls at my disposal. All that will end if you go digging that Sarah girl up from the dead. Your parents will know I said something, and my employment at the Colburn plantation will end.”

Frank grabbed a heavy iron skillet and struck Matthew on the head, rendering him unconscious...



Matthew woke up freezing cold with a splitting headache. It was the middle of the night. He could see the stars stretched out overhead. He lay in a fishing boat with his wrists and ankles tightly bound with rope. Frank boasted as he rowed the boat out on the partially frozen lake. “I’m truly going to enjoy this. It’s been a long time coming. You had my son banished! I’m going to drown you and make it look like a fishing

accident!”

Matthew struggled vigorously against his restraints at the sound of Frank’s heartless words. He caught glimpse of a small fishing knife, but couldn’t quite get to it. Frank grabbed him by the legs and started pushing him over the side of the boat. Matthew wiggled his left foot loose and gave Frank a powerful kick to the chest. Frank flew backward causing the tiny vessel to flip right over.

Matthew’s body nearly went into shock when he went under the icy frigid water. He kicked his feet rapidly until he reached the surface. Matthew managed to capture just one chest full of air before Frank grabbed his head and forced him back under. Matthew fought for his life beneath the surface of the freezing cold water. He felt his body growing weaker and weaker as he began losing consciousness. He took a final swing and felt his exhausted arm graze the small fishing knife.

Matthew grabbed the blade and shoved it into Frank’s thigh. Frank let out a blood-curdling wail and released him right away. Matthew sprung out of the water breathing heavily and threw his still bound arms around Frank’s neck. Frank desperately kicked and splashed around in the lake as Matthew pulled the rope tighter and tighter around his throat. Frank pried at Matthew’s arms as he struggled to breath. Matthew squeezed even tighter. Frank’s eyes bulged and his body went limp.

Matthew released Frank’s lifeless corpse into the lake. It bobbed along the surface of the water face down. Matthew snatched the remaining rope off of his wrists. He used what little strength he had left to swim to shore. He climbed into the driver’s seat of Frank’s carriage, unable to feel any of his appendages. He cracked the whip and brought the horses to a gallop. He rode to the nearest house he could think of.

Matthew reached Seth and Leah’s estate and fell down from the carriage. He crawled up the snow-covered steps and collapsed on the porch.

“Dear God!” Seth cried as he opened the door.

All the color was drained from Matthew’s skin. His lips had taken a blue coloration and his black hair lay covered in ice crystals. *His body is frozen stiff. I can’t tell if Matthew’s dead or alive...*



Matthew regained consciousness the next afternoon in one of Seth's guest rooms. Leah was looking after him. She sat a tray of hot soup on his lap and said, "Ya lucky to be alive, Master Matthew. Dr. McKinley informed us that yo temperature dropped so low yo system went into shock. He could barely detect a pulse."

Matthew stammered, "Frank, he tried to kill me."

"I know ya had to kill him in self-defense. Ya told us all about it in yo delirium. Everyone in town believes Frank went fishing on his day off and drowned after his boat tipped over."

Seth walked into the room holding up a train ticket. He walked over to Matthew grinning. "One first class ticket for New Orleans, Louisiana."

Matthew sprung to life and set the soup aside. He reached for the ticket and Seth said, "First you have to promise me that the next time you go to confront a homicidal maniac you'll take Aaron, Emanuel, and me with you."

"I swear," Matthew called out and grabbed the ticket.

Leah scolded Seth, "Master Matthew nearly died yesterday! He need time to recuperate and regain his strength."

Matthew assured her, "I'm fine. I promise, Leah."

Seth added, "Leah, if you were missing only death could keep me from you. Master Matthew will have plenty of time to rest on the train."



It was the middle of winter and Sarah hadn't seen a single snowflake yet. The weather in New Orleans was similar to an autumn day back in Missouri. It was chilly but nowhere near freezing. The roosters crowed as the sun began to rise. Sarah joined several other servants in the barn. Some were feeding the chickens and collecting the eggs. Others were tending to the horses. Sarah sat on a stool in front of a dairy cow. She placed a metal pail underneath its udders and began to milk the cow. She

sighed with despair. *Of all the people to be sold off to, why did it have to be the grandparents of Robert Welch? This is the very place Robert was banished to. It's the largest plantation I've ever seen, and Robert was out on business the week I arrived. I managed to avoid attracting his attention so far, but I won't be able to elude him forever. Where are ya, Matthew? Why haven't ya come fo me?*

Robert Welch prowled slowly through the barn. Sarah put her head down and continued to work diligently. The ten-year-old girl collecting the eggs trembled with fear at the sight of Robert. Sarah let out a terrified gasp as the child accidentally dropped one of the eggs.

Robert Welch snatched the basket the child was holding. "We don't have money to waste on your incompetence!"

Sarah watched him slap the girl to the ground. *Oh no, Robert's gonna to hurt that poor child if I don't do something.* She kicked over the bucket of milk to create a diversion. To Sarah's misfortune, it worked. Robert abruptly turned his attention from the child and stormed in Sarah's direction.

He snatched her up by the arm and bellowed, "You just wasted an entire gallon of milk!"

Robert paused and looked Sarah over. A cold chill ran down her back and she cringed with fear.

He grinned. "You're a long way from home Sweetheart. I remember you. Your father attacked me." Sarah grew sick to her stomach as Robert pushed her against the wall and felt her up. He whispered in a menacing tone, "You're not my type, but this time I'll make an exception. I'll be seeing you tonight."

Sarah breathed heavily. "I'll be hanged fo cutting yo throat befo I ever allow ya to have me."

Robert brushed off Sarah's threat. "I hope you bring all that fight to the bedroom this evening."

He groped her backside and walked out of the barn.



At nightfall, Sarah cradled her knees and rocked back and forth on

her bed. She shuddered in fear. Her eyes lay fixed on the door of her cabin. She clenched a knife in her fist and anticipated the arrival of Robert Welch. Tears formed in her eyes as she remembered the time she was brutally ambushed by Robert's father, Frank. *Never again*, she vowed. *When he come through the door I'll go straight fo the jugular. I'll kill him and run as far as I can from this place.* Her heart raced as the doorknob turned. The door began to open and Sarah gripped the knife even tighter.

CHAPTER 15:

The House of Cards

Sarah sprang from her bunk and dropped the knife as she realized the intruder was Matthew. She cried tears of joy and relief, as Matthew wrapped her in a long-awaited embrace.

Sarah cried out, "I was beginning to think I'd never see ya again."

"I thought you were dead. My father intercepted your letters." Matthew looked at Sarah's once again flat stomach and enquired, "You're not due for another two months. What happened?"

Sarah explained in a solemn tone, "As it turns out I was right. Laboring twelve hours a day in a field is an excellent way to lose a child. He came too early. I'm sorry Matthew."

Matthew gave her a comforting hug. "Let's get you out of here."

"How much did Robert's Grandparents want fo my freedom?"

"The night you were kidnapped, someone stole all the money we'd saved. I'm an architect. There isn't much work for me during the winter months. I'm going to have to steal you."

Sarah informed him as she gathered her meager belongings, "Robert Welch and three other overseers are standing watch tonight."

Matthew grinned impishly. "I slipped them all sedatives. They're not watching anything but the back of their eyelids."



This was the first time Sarah had left the plantation since she had arrived in New Orleans. It was just after midnight and she was surprised the city was still so alive. Everywhere she turned there were bright lights and music. People were drinking wine and dancing in the streets.

The scent of exotic spices consumed the air almost thick enough to taste. It was as if the city never slept. Matthew brought Sarah back to the casino he'd been staying in. She approached the white two-story building and read the sign above the entrance: *Madam Lafayette's House of Cards*.

Matthew wrapped on the door with the iron knocker. The bouncers, Ashton and Devon, opened the door for them. The bouncers were large imposing men; dressed in vests, button-down shirts, and bow ties. Ashton was dark and Devon was of Creole descent.

Sarah looked around the noisy, packed room. It was filled with blackjack, poker, and roulette tables along with darts, craps, and many other games used for the purpose of gambling. There was a bar at the far west wall and a stage and piano at the far east.

The House of Cards smelled like an agreeable mixture of perfumes, colognes, fine cigars, and pipe tobacco. Most of the customers were male but there were a few ladies willing to try their luck at the roulette tables.

It wasn't long before Matthew was bombarded by a stampede of attractive, scantily clad women. Most of the girls were waitresses and a few were stage performers. They wore satin and ruffled dresses that stopped around mid-thigh. The dresses had plunging necklines and came in a variety of colors.

"How may we be of service to you Monsieur?" The ladies asked flirtatiously.

Matthew replied with a well accustomed but apologetic grin, "As lovely as you all are, I merely require a room with which to spend the night with my wife."

A pretty brunette in a blue dress spoke with disappointment, "Right this way, Sir."

She led Sarah and Matthew upstairs to a small guest room.

The waitress asked from the doorway, “Is there anything I can get for you?”

Matthew said, “Just food and wine for me and my wife. We’ll have whatever tonight’s special is.”

The waitress sprung to life. “Is this the elusive Sarah?”

Matthew grinned and nodded yes.

The waitress smiled with excitement and shook Sarah’s hand. “Hi, I’m Elizabeth. I’ve heard so much about you. I’m charmed to finally make your acquaintance.”

Sarah smiled. “It’s nice to meet ya too.”

Elizabeth walked out and said, “I’ll be right back with your dinner.”

Sarah looked at Matthew and asked, “What did ya tell these people about me?”

“Enough to get them to help me; as it turns out this place serves as a refuge for runaway slaves. It’s part of the underground railroad.”

“Are they gonna help us get to Canada?”

Matthew pulled out two tickets. “Even better, we’re going to France. New Orleans is a French port. It would be much easier to board a ship to France tomorrow, than risk running all the way to Canada.”

Madam Lafayette walked in with a platter of food and drinks. She was a voluptuous, brunette with dark brown eyes. She was in her late forties with a presence that demanded the attention of any room she entered. She took the bowls, plates, and glasses off the platter and set them on a small table by the window.

Matthew put a generous sum of money on the tray, “I do not wish to be served by the lady of the house.”

Madam Lafayette replied, “under normal circumstances, you wouldn't be. I came to inform you that there's been a setback. I was told by one of the customers that blacks are no longer allowed to board a ship without proper documentation. If she stows away on the ship they may take her prisoner or throw her overboard.”



Robert Welch arose from his snooze at 1:00am. He glanced around the poker table. The other overseers were still out cold. He shook each one of them. “Wake the hell up!”

The drowsy men yawned, stretched, and rubbed their exhausted eyes. Poker chips and playing cards fell on the ground as they climbed to their feet. Robert pointed at a short pudgy overseer. “You’re no longer in charge of buying the booze for our poker games. I’ve never had two shots of moonshine knock me on my ass before. Watch my post I have business to tend to.”

The overseers scurried back to work and Robert headed toward Sarah’s cabin. *I’ll teach that little wench a lesson or two.* He opened the door and walked in. The cabin was dark.

Robert unbuckled his belt. “Wake up Sarah. I got something for you, darling.”

Robert unzipped his pants and loomed over the bed. He snatched the covers off to find a couple pillows in the place of Sarah’s body. He punched the wall. “Son-of-a-bitch!”

Robert quickly fastened his clothes and ran into the courtyard. He vigorously sounded the alarm bell. Within minutes the overseers were scouring the property with rifles and hound dogs.

Robert pointed and shouted an order, “You two, prepare the carriage and come with me! We’re going to the House of Cards.”

Robert boarded the stagecoach with two overseers and a ferocious pack of dogs. Robert vowed to the other overseers, “I’ll be damned if I let that Lafayette bitch help another one of my slaves escape!”

Robert’s stagecoach pulled up in front of the House of Cards at 2:00am. The place was still packed. He could hear the stage performers singing all the way outside. Robert and his lieges burst through the door. The angelic voices of the stage performers were interrupted by the blast of gunfire and the barking and snarling of ferocious dogs. The crowd broke into a screaming frenzy.

Elizabeth ran into Matthew and Sarah’s room and warned them, “You have to hide! There are men here looking for Sarah!”

Matthew sprinted toward the door. “I heard a gun go off. Is anyone hurt?”

Elizabeth cut him off mid-way to the entrance. “No one is hurt. They

only shot in the air to get everyone's attention. You must stay in here or you'll lead them straight to Sarah."

Matthew obeyed the warning.

Elizabeth tossed a fat envelope to Matthew and said, "This letter from your cousin came in the mail."

Elizabeth crept back downstairs and watched from the stairwell. Robert was pointing a small silver handgun at Madam Lafayette. He was accompanied by two other men. The man to his left stood holding the chains attached to the vicious pack of canines. The dogs were still barking and growling hysterically. The man to his right was grasping a pile of cast iron shackles.

A hush came over the crowd of screaming on-lookers as Robert shot in the air once more. "Are you still harboring fugitive slaves, Ms. Lafayette?"

Madam Lafayette spoke in an unusually calm manner for a person with a gun pointed in her direction, "Are you still cheating at poker, Mr. Welch? How's your lying thief of an uncle been doing since I fired him? As you already know, I'm running a business here. You'll need to tie your animals up outside."

Robert brushed off her insults. "You know that housing runaways is a crime, Ms. Lafayette."

"I can assure you there is no crime being committed here, but there will be if you don't pack up your thugs and your beasts and hit the road. You have no warrant from the magistrate to search my place of business. I'll only ask you once more to be on your way!"

"We'll leave once we've found what we came for!"

Devon, the bouncer, broke a bottle across Robert's face. Shards of glass flew in all directions. Robert's hands shot straight to his face causing him to drop the revolver. Ashton, the other bouncer, grabbed the gun as it slid across the floor. Ashton pointed it at the man with the dogs.

The man bellowed, "Boy don't you know these animals will rip you limb from limb!"

Ashton replied, "That may be true but not before I put a bullet in your brain. Sir, I'm certain you're not willing to die just to prove how tough your dogs are. I'd suggest you take your animals and get going."

The man ran outside and jumped in the carriage with his dogs. Robert

threw his hands up in the air when Madam Lafayette pulled the rifle from behind the bar. She cycled it and aimed at his chest.

She boasted with a smile, “Looks like mine is bigger than yours, Robert.” She looked over at Ashton and Devon. “Do what you do best.”

The two of them grinned at each other like children who’d received a shiny new toy. The bouncers threw Robert and the other man outside on the ground. The customers came pouring out on the porch to have a good laugh. Robert stood up sweeping himself off. He spat the dirt out of his mouth.

Devon looked over at Ashton and boasted, “I got at least ten feet on that throw. Pay up.”

Ashton handed over a fist full of bills. “Excellent form Devon, and well executed. Bouncing truly is an art.”

As Robert climbed in the carriage and disappeared with his goons, Madam Lafayette scolded the bouncers, “Did you two seriously make a sport out of how far you can toss people?”

Ashton answered in a jovial manner, “Yes, you should try it sometime. It’s a great stress reliever and a whole lot of fun.”

Devon added, “It makes me feel all warm and tingly inside, like Christmas.”

The guests went back to gambling and drinking as if nothing had happened. Matthew and Sarah walked downstairs and helped sit the toppled chairs upright.

Sarah swept the broken glass as Matthew said, “Thank you all for protecting us. We’re very sorry to have brought this problem to your home. We’ll pay for any damage this may have caused.”

Madam Lafayette replied, “I’m an abolitionist. It comes with the territory. We’ve got to put our heads together and come up with a way to get Sarah aboard that ship tomorrow. Robert may be a scoundrel but he’s no simpleton. It’s only a matter of time before he’s back with that warrant.”

Matthew ripped open the letter from Francesca and smiled at the contents. He picked up the heavy iron shackles one of the overseers left behind. “I just may have a plan.”



Robert waited impatiently outside the office of the magistrate. He glanced at his watch every few minutes and questioned the court attendant, "Would you mind seeing if the magistrate will meet with me now?"

The court attendant walked into the office and returned a few moments later. "The magistrate is in a meeting with Commodore Wales. Is there anything I can assist you with, Sir?"

"No, you idiot! Now fetch the magistrate. This is an urgent matter."

The court attendant sneered. "In that case, he'll be with you shortly."

"That's what you said nearly an hour ago!" Robert pushed the attendant aside and interrupted the meeting.

Both men turned and faced the door abruptly as Robert barged through it. The magistrate was in his late fifties, slightly overweight, and wore black court robes. The Commodore was in his early thirties and sat dressed in a gray and blue naval uniform. Both men wore stylish, white wigs.

The magistrate bellowed, "I beg your pardon, Sir!"

Robert walked over. "Please forgive my intrusion, but time is of the essence. I'm requesting a warrant to search the House of Cards in pursuit of a runaway slave."

The magistrate snapped, "Well are you going to give me a name?"

"The girl's name is Sarah Colburn, most recently owned by my grandparents, the Parkers."

The magistrate removed his spectacles from a small black case and searched his cabinet of files. "Let's see, Omar, Pain, here it is Parker." He pulled the file and scanned the list of names. "Are you sure that's the right name?"

"If you can't find her under Colburn try Parker. My grandparents may have renamed her when they took ownership."

The magistrate went over the list once more. "Looks like I found your girl."

Robert let out a sigh of relief.

The magistrate continued, “There’s a note here. It looks as though your grandfather recently removed her from his list of taxable assets. See it says right here, sold to a slave hunter named Matthew Colburn Jr.”

“That was no slave hunter! It was her lover! That slave fornicator thinks he’ll get away with this.”

Robert snatched the file and read it himself. “Brought into custody and sold on January 21, 1851! That was just this morning. You’re this town’s magistrate. How is it possible that you didn’t know?”

The magistrate straightened his robes and replied with a hint of irritation, “I’m a very busy man. My assistant handles all slave transactions. Now if you’ll excuse us we were in the middle of a meeting.”

Robert approached the court attendant with a much better attitude this time. He gave his best attempt to be polite. “You authorized the sale of a slave named Sarah Parker. What direction did she go?”

A snide grin appeared over the attendant’s face. “First you insult me, and now you want my help? You can no longer take her into custody. Mr. Colburn is her legal owner now. What could you possibly still want with her?”

“It’s personal. Me, Colburn, and that little wench of his go way back. I have a vendetta to settle.”

“Why should I help you?”

Robert poured out a small sack of silver coins on the counter.

The court attendant quickly pocketed the bribe. “Colburn requested paperwork to board the *Clara Marie*. Departure time is 2:00pm.”

Robert glanced at his watch, 1:47. He sprinted down the courthouse stairs and shoved an adolescent boy off of his horse. Robert leaped onto the boy’s steed and bolted down the street. The citizens of the busy town leaped in all directions from his path as he raced to the harbor.

Robert reached the docks and climbed down from his horse. He pushed, shoved and waded through the crowd of sailors, travelers, and fishermen. He spotted Sarah and Matthew in line to board the enormous *Clara Marie*. He removed his gun from its holster and charged in their direction. He ran up behind them and pelted Matthew three times with the pistol. Matthew dropped like an anchor faced down on the dock. There was blood all over him. Sarah screamed for help in French and

kneeled to his aid.

Frantic onlookers scattered in all directions as Robert shouted, “Roll over and face me you coward!!”

Matthew didn’t respond. He was obviously unconscious. He didn’t even appear to be breathing. Robert took the heel of his boot and forced Matthew onto his back.

“GOD DAMN IT!” Robert screamed as he realized he’d assaulted the wrong man.

The girl he mistook for Sarah held her poor assaulted fellow in her arms and cursed Robert repeatedly in French. He scanned the crowd. *Finding Sarah and Matthew will be harder than I assumed. The races mix freely in New Orleans. The harbor is crawling with interracial couples.* He took one last glance over the crowd and noticed Madam Lafayette and the entire gang from the house of cards waving up at the ship. He traced an exact line in the direction they were waving at and spotted Sarah onboard waving down at them.

Robert shouted as the first mate prepared to set sail, “Hey! Hey! I have to board this ship!”

The sailor explained, “I’m sorry but you’re too late. This ship is scheduled to leave the New Orleans’ port at 2:00pm. You’ll have to catch the next one.”

Robert argued and tried to push past him. “I’m sure I saw a fugitive aboard this vessel!”

The sailor shoved him back and shouted, “I don’t care if you saw Jesus! You’re not boarding my ship late.”

Robert walked away and desperately searched the hull of the ship for another way in. He spotted an opportunity on the loading dock. He snuck onboard through the cargo area and made his way up on deck. He shoved past the numerous passengers until he spotted Sarah.

Robert pointed the gun at Sarah. “I demand that you tell me where your lover is, heathen!”

“I boarded alone!” Sarah answered.

Robert hurled her onto the floor. “Girl don’t you realized you have no rights! I could put a bullet in your heart right now and all I’d have to do is reimburse Matthew the amount he paid for you! Now you’ve got three seconds to tell me where he is! ONE!”

Sarah's body began to tremble when she heard the unmistakable clink of Robert drawing back the hammer of his firearm. Her thoughts raced. She could barely breathe, but she refused to give up Matthew.

“TWO!”

Her heart pounded forcefully in her chest and she shut her eyes tight as she anticipated the number three: the dreadful number certain to be accompanied by the bullet that would end her life.

“THREE!”

Matthew appeared expeditiously and grabbed the arm aiming the gun. A loud blast pierced the air as the bullet grazed Sarah's shoulder. The two men wrestled and fought over the pistol. It fired again. The second bullet ricocheted off the railing and embedded in the hull of the ship.

Matthew gripped Robert's wrist and slammed his hand against the guardrail until he released the weapon. The gun fell over the side of the railing and was lost to the sea. Robert and Matthew tussled about the ship pelting one another with forceful punches. Robert swung a bottle of wine at Matthew but missed.

Matthew came up and clobbered Robert with one forceful blow after another. Robert stumbled backward holding his arms up over his face. This was a big mistake. It only left his torso unprotected. Matthew landed a brutal punch to Robert's left kidney and he dropped like an anchor. Robert lay curled up panting heavily. He was exhausted, bloody and bruised.

Matthew demanded, “Stand up and fight me like a man!!”

The captain fired once in the air. “That's enough!!”

Robert climbed to his feet, relieved to see the captain. He pointed a finger at Sarah, and choked out through heavy breaths, “This woman is a fugitive.”

The captain glared at Matthew. “May I see your ticket stubs and the paperwork for your servant?”

Matthew complied, and the captain browsed through the wad of papers and stated, “Looks authentic to me.” The captain then turned to Robert. “May I see your ticket stub, Sir?”

Robert fumbled, “Well Sir you see uh... I only ran onboard to pursue this man. He fraudulently persuaded my grandparents to sell him their

runaway slave. That's the only reason he has those papers."

The captain unsheathed his sword and stomped in Sarah's direction. Matthew jumped between them and prepared to defend her. The captain raised his sword high and it flew through the air with a swish. Then he picked up the piece of tablecloth he'd sliced off.

The captain passed Matthew the piece of cloth and instructed, "Tie this around her shoulder to stop the bleeding. It seems the bullet only grazed her. She should be fine."

Matthew nodded and took the cloth.

The captain then turned to Robert. "If you're trying to tell me that you boarded my ship without a ticket, the only fugitive standing here is you. Would you mind reading rule number four of the *Clara Marie*?"

Robert glanced over at the gigantic slate of rules. **#4 All stowaways are to be thrown overboard.**

The captain looked back at Matthew and said, "Would you mind enforcing rule four for me?"

Matthew seized Robert by the vest and launched him over the railing. Robert screamed the whole way down and hit the water with a huge splash.

Ashton watched from the dock and commented to Devon, "That had to be at least fifty feet. It seems we have a new record to beat."

Devon added, "Matthew's technique was flawless."

Madam Lafayette smirked and shook her head disapprovingly at them. The crew from the House of Cards called up as the *Clara Marie* sailed away, "Bon voyage!"

The ship plowed through the sparkling ocean water like tilled soil. Sarah stood at the front of the enormous vessel and peered out on the horizon. She basked in the sensations of the wind in her hair and the spray of the sea on her face.

Matthew said as he embraced her from behind, "I bet you figured Francesca would be the last person on earth who would buy your freedom."

Sarah admitted, "It did come as a shock to me."

"Her parents married her off as soon as they returned to France; granting her full access to her inheritance. Once I had the money all I had to do was slap you in shackles and pretend to be a slave tracker."

Matthew pulled Sarah's engagement gift from his pocket and fastened it around her neck. Sarah gazed out on the dazzling sea and felt the beautiful ruby necklace with her fingertips.

She smiled brightly. "It feels wonderful to finally wear my necklace the way it was meant to be worn. I don't have to hide it anymore."

Matthew gave his wife a long-awaited kiss. "Sarah, we're going to France. We never have to hide anything again."

CHAPTER 16:

The Tragic Homecoming

Matthew and Sarah spent four years in France. Sarah studied medicine, in spite of the prejudices of her male counterparts. Through perseverance, she won them over and was eventually granted the title of doctor. Matthew had built one of Europe's most successful architectural engineering firms. He was twenty years old, and the founder and CEO of *Colburn Designs Inc (CDI)*.

Things had been going well until Matthew received a letter requesting that he come home because his mother was dying of liver cancer. Matthew corresponded, refusing to come home unless his parents freed all the slaves they owned. The mistress grew sicker and even more desperate to see her child. Master and Mistress Colburn emancipated all their slaves in a final effort to make peace with their son.

Matthew and Sarah had taken a ship to America and now sat on a train destined for their hometown. The train rumbled down the tracks. Sarah gazed out the window on a lovely summer day. A blue sky with puffy white clouds stretched overhead. The locomotive came to a screeching stop at a crowded station. Sarah and Matthew stepped off the train delighted to see that Aaron had come to pick them up. Sarah put down her luggage and ran over to hug Aaron.

Matthew called out to him, "I thought you might have fled north with the others."

Aaron commented as he and Matthew loaded the suitcases onto the stagecoach, "I'm one of few who stayed to work for a small salary. My sister Cassie lives with Seth and Leah now. She took a position as their nanny."

Sarah took a seat inside the carriage and Matthew climbed up onto the driving bench with Aaron.

Aaron brought the horses to a trot and Matthew asked, "Which of my relatives have shown up so far?"

"Your sister Lillian was the first here, the Count and Countess Demoniet came earlier this week, and Francesca arrived with her husband, the Marquis Joche La`Cour, yesterday." As the stagecoach ventured forward Aaron grumbled, "I just don't like that La`Cour fellow."

Matthew laughed. "Your dislike may be stemming from the fact that he's sleeping with your former lover."

Aaron stated in his own defense, "It's nothing like that. Me and Francesca had a stupid affair when we were kids. I moved on with my life and so has she."

Matthew teased, "Of course you're over her. That's why you hate a good man for no reason at all. I've been in France with Francesca and the Marquis La`Cour for four years. If you give him a chance, you'll find out he's a really nice person. The people of France love him."

Aaron scowled. "Well, I hate him."

As Aaron pulled the stagecoach in front of the mansion Matthew said, "Sarah's parents returned to the land of Samson's origin. When we leave here we're going to visit them. You should come with us."

Aaron nodded in agreement. Then he climbed down and began to unload the luggage. Matthew stood at the entrance wondering what to expect. *I haven't been home in four years and I didn't leave on the best of terms. My father kidnapped my wife and led me to believe she was dead. I threw my father off of a balcony. I'm a slave owner's son with a black brother and a black wife. My family isn't exactly normal.*

Matthew was shocked to see Master Colburn answer his own front door. All the servants really were gone. Master Colburn's reaction was so strange it nearly startled Sarah. He hugged both Sarah and Matthew so tightly they could barely breathe.

Matthew thought to himself. *What the hell! My father has never hugged me before today. Father always believed that showing affection to a male child would only make the boy weak. Most times he wouldn't even allow my mother to hug me.*

Matthew snapped out of his thoughts as Master Colburn said, "I always knew you two had a thing for each other."

Sarah asked with a look of bewilderment, "You really knew all along?"

Master Colburn laughed. "Of course I knew. You'd have to be an idiot not to know. Why didn't you bring the grandchildren? They could've played with Seth's kids, Athena and Seth Jr."

Matthew stood in stone silence with a confused expression on his face.

Sarah stepped forward and confessed, "We haven't had any luck in that department. I lost a child four years ago and haven't been pregnant since."

Master Colburn gave a disappointed look and led them into the mansion. Matthew whispered to his wife, "Who is this man, and what has he done with the overbearing tyrant formerly known as my father?"

Sarah smirked and shrugged her shoulders.



A couple of hours after Sarah and Matthew settled into their rooms they met the rest of the family in the small dining hall for lunch. Seth and Leah took a seat, overjoyed to find out Leah was pregnant with kid number three. The Count and Countess Demoniet sat at the table in their usual smug demeanor. Francesca sat across from them with her husband, the Marquis Joche La'Cour; who was tall with light blonde hair and cerulean eyes. He was handsome, strong, regal, and filthy rich. There was no wonder Aaron hated him.

Lillian walked in and took a seat at the table. She was now seventeen and had bloomed into a lovely young woman. There was barely a trace of the tomboy she used to be. She now dressed in extravagant gowns. She wore her lustrous black hair in elegant buns adorned with jewels and

feathers.

Master and Mistress Colburn sat at the head of the table. The Mistress had lost a great deal of weight. Her lovely fair skin had transformed to a strange yellow. She was jaundiced, due to her liver failing. She appeared weak and spoke in a frail voice almost a whisper. Coping with his wife's illness had streaked Master Colburn's black hair with gray. The stress had put creases on his forehead and lines in his handsome face. He sat at the table with one of Seth's kids perched on each knee.

Master Colburn fed each of the children an appetizer and asked, "Will someone see what's taking Emanuel so long? My grandkids are hungry."

Sarah excused herself from the dining room. *I've served breakfast countless times on this table and I still don't feel welcome sitting at it.*

Sarah walked into the kitchen surprised to see Emanuel cooking. She hugged him. "Is there anything you don't do around here?"

Emanuel laughed and went back to slicing fresh vegetables. "I'm leaving for Europe soon to open my own restaurant. I always wanted to be a world class chef. The law changed in this county. It now states that one must be at least 1/8 African to be considered black. I'm only 1/16. By the new statute, I've been free for the past six months."

Sarah asked ecstatically, "Does this mean you can marry Marie now?"

Emanuel smiled and nodded yes. He scraped the vegetables off the cutting board into a large salad bowl and tossed the mixed greens. "Marie's coming to dinner tonight if you still want to meet her."

"Of course I want to meet her."

He grinned at Sarah with amazement.

"What?" she enquired.

"You sound so... different."

"I had to assimilate, conform, blend or they would never allow me to become a doctor," she explained. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

Emanuel passed Sarah a porcelain casserole dish. "Would you mind carrying this one? It's filled with cream of mushroom soup. It's the only thing Mistress Colburn will eat lately."

Sarah removed the lid from the dish and took a whiff. She grinned. “It smells delicious. You’re going to be one hell of a chef. Promise me that when you’re a big shot and you own an entire chain of restaurants, you won’t forget to save Matthew and me a table.”

Emanuel laughed and assured her, “You guys will get the best table in the house.”

Emanuel and Sarah brought the serving dishes to the small dining hall and set them on the table. Sarah took a seat next to Matthew while Emanuel served everyone.

The mistress noticed the grim look on her daughter’s face and asked, “Is everything alright?”

Lillian answered, “I’m supposed to have tea with Maxwell and Lady Arrington shortly.”

Mistress Colburn replied, “I don’t see why that’s a bad thing.”

Lillian sighed. “The woman hates me. I overheard her calling me a boorish, distasteful, country girl. I’m not charming like you, Mother.”

Mistress Colburn assured her, “Yes you are. The Lillian Lady Arrington met was an unruly thirteen-year-old child. Let her get to know the lovely young lady you’ve become. She’s certain to love you. As you already know Maxwell will be gone for two months on an African safari. Use that time to get better acquainted with Lady Arrington.”

The Countess Demoniet added, “Your boyish ways may have captured Maxwell’s attention, but that sort of behavior will not be enough to capture his heart. I’ve been around enough royalty to know that when it comes to getting married Maxwell will take the bride of his mother’s choosing. You must listen to your mother. Impress Lady Arrington at all costs.”

Matthew excused himself. *I’m so tired of hearing my mother and aunt brainwash Lillian. She’s just fine the way she is.* He returned to his old bedroom on the first floor and pushed open the door. He froze in shock at the site of his bed. There was a letter stabbed into one of the pillows by a small fishing knife. The color drained from Matthew’s face as he recognized the tool. *Christ, it’s the same knife I shoved into Frank Welch’s thigh in order to stop him from drowning me.* Matthew peered down at the note. A cold chill came over him as he read it:

“I know you murdered my father! I’m coming for you!”



Matthew and Lillian stood watch as the sheriff's deputies searched his room for vital clues.

Sheriff Briggs approached Matthew and said, "Robert Welch was exiled from the state of Missouri. He was warned that in the event of his return he'd spend the rest of his life in prison. I assure you that when we catch Robert that's exactly what he's going to do. I'll leave two of my best deputies on patrol just outside of the mansion."

Sheriff Briggs tipped his hat to Matthew and Lillian and left the room. The deputies filed out after him.

Matthew turned to Lillian and said, "You should get going if you want to make it to the tea on time."

Lillian looked at her brother with concern. "Are you sure you'll be alright?"

Matthew scoffed. "If that coward wants to come after me let him come."

Lillian pleaded with her brother, "Matthew, promise me that if Robert shows up you won't try to be a hero. Let the deputies arrest him, and you should go check on Sarah. She's a little shaken up."

Lillian walked outside and Matthew went to check on his wife. Sarah's room was set up like a laboratory. She brought with her a microscope, several magnifying glasses, and numerous medical books. She was frantically flipping through the pages of one of her medical books when Matthew walked in.

Sarah walked over to him speaking in a hurried, panicked voice, "I can't help but wonder how Robert even knew we would be here. What if he did something to your mother to lure you back here?"

Matthew assured her, "Sarah, my mother is dying from liver cancer. Robert Welch didn't do that to her. She did it to herself. Decades of partying and drinking men twice her size under the table have finally caught up with her."

Sarah continued to speak in a frazzled manner; flailing her arms like a crazy person, "If I can just figure out what Robert's done to your

mother I may be able to save her.”

Matthew embraced his wife and urged her to calm down. He held her close and said, “My mother has cancer. There’s nothing you can do for her. She’s in God’s hands now.”



Lillian arrived at Arrington manor and Maxwell escorted her into the enormous courtyard. Maxwell was now nineteen. He had grown taller and even more handsome in her absence. Lillian now had womanly curves to fill out her elegant blue gown. Lady Arrington sat under a large oak tree with two of her sisters having tea.

Lillian whispered to Maxwell, “I hadn’t prepared to deal with three of them. I feel as if I’m walking into a lion’s den.”

Maxwell kissed Lillian on the cheek. “You don’t have to do this. I don’t care what they think.”

Lillian assured him, “I’ll be fine.”

As they approached Lillian overheard Lady Arrington and her sisters debating over a painting in the anteroom. Lady Arrington and her sisters stopped debating over the author of the painting as Lillian stepped forward.

Lady Arrington took a sip from her teacup and commented in her British accent, “I see much has changed in the last four years, Miss Lillian. You’re actually wearing clean clothes. I half expected you to show up in dirty trousers with a hunting rifle.”

Lady Arrington’s sisters laughed and whispered to one another.

Maxwell took Lillian by the hand and said, “Let’s go, Lillian. You don’t have to take this from them.”

Lady Arrington and her wicked sisters went back to sipping tea and debating over the painting. Lillian retreated with Maxwell but paused after a few steps. Her mother and aunt’s words were all she could think of. *I must impress the mother at all costs.*

Lillian turned to face Lady Arrington and boldly announced, “Actually you’re all incorrect. The painting which hangs in your anteroom is a seventeenth-century portrait of Gerard de Lairesse, painted

by artist Rembrandt van Rijn.”

Maxwell’s mother and aunts were rendered speechless. They all gave Lillian impressed nods.

Lillian went on to say, “you were right about one thing, Lady Arrington. Much has changed in the past four years. I’ve become well versed in literature, music, European history, and the arts. I speak three languages and play several instruments. I assure you that I’m no longer the ‘boorish, distasteful, country girl’ I once was.”

Lady Arrington rose from her seat with a smile. “Would you like me to give you a tour of the palace?”

Maxwell cast a confused glare as Lillian replied, “I would love to be shown around the palace.”

After a lengthy and informative tour of Arrington Palace, Lillian stood on the front porch with Lady Arrington and Maxwell’s Aunts.

Maxwell walked up with a large elongated box topped with a big red bow. He smiled and questioned, “Why are you leaving so soon?”

Lillian replied, “I must go home and prepare for your going away party tonight.”

“I wanted to give you this before all the guests arrive.”

Maxwell held the box as Lillian removed the lid. There was a shiny new rifle inside. Lillian nervously glanced over at Maxwell’s mother and aunts. They were all shaking their heads disapprovingly.

Maxwell went on to explain, “I postponed the safari for weeks in hopes that you would come with me. You said you dreamt of hunting the largest most dangerous game on every continent. Why not start with Africa?”

Lillian glanced back and forth between Maxwell and the wicked trio. At last, she told Maxwell, “ladies of class don’t hunt.”

Lady Arrington gave an approving smile.

Maxwell replied with an appalled look on his face, “you’re Lillian Colburn. The girl who took down the biggest buck I’ve ever seen. You’re the girl who desired a life of adventure, who wanted to travel and see the world. Are you the girl I’ve been writing all these years or not?”

Lillian stood in silence. *I don’t want to be the girl Maxwell toys with while he’s young only to be cast aside for a proper girl later. I must impress the mother at all costs.* Lillian took a deep breath and answered,

“I’m sorry but I’m not that girl anymore.”

Maxwell spoke with agitation, “Well I’m disappointed. I truly loved that girl, but the Count and Countess obviously took that girl to France and killed her. It’s over Lillian.”

Tears formed in Lillian’s eyes as Maxwell stormed away with the long white box.



Night fell and Aaron scaled the tree by Francesca’s bedroom. He climbed onto the balcony and Francesca leaped up from her vanity. She threw open the glass double doors and charged out on the balcony. She stood in front of him shivering; her arms crossed over her chest for warmth. It was a windy night and her curls danced wildly in the breeze.

Francesca scolded him while trying to scream and whisper at the same time, “Jesus Christ Aaron! What are you doing!”

“I just wanted to talk to ya.”

“The middle of the night is hardly an appropriate time for a chat.”

Aaron placed his hands on the small of Francesca’s back and pulled her close to him. He tenderly grazed his lips along her neck. All the chemistry she felt with him years ago consumed her once more. She resisted her desires and walked away to clear her head.

Francesca explained, “Things are different now. I’m a married woman. I can’t just abandon my title and responsibilities and gallivant off to Canada with you. I’m born of noble blood. I have to do what makes my country’s men happy.”

Aaron took her by the hand. “And what about what makes ya happy? If ya can look me in the eyes and tell me that ya love yo husband and ya truly happy, I’ll be able to let ya go.”

Francesca looked down at the floor and stammered, “Well... you see... there are many types of love.”

Aaron smirked. “If ya can’t bring yoself to say that ya love yo husband. At least gain the courage to tell me ya don’t love me.”

Francesca walked into her room and sat on the bed. Aaron followed her and sat next to her.

He lifted her chin and looked into her eyes. Then he asked, “have ya stopped loving me?”

Francesca’s eyes filled with tears. “My husband is a really nice man and...”

“That ain’t what I asked ya. As much as I hate to admit it, I already know yo husband a good man.”

Francesca broke down and confessed, “no Aaron! I never stopped loving you, even for a second. In four years, you never once left my thoughts.”

Aaron wrapped his arms around Francesca and kissed her long and deep. It was a hungry breathtaking embrace, only broken for long enough to get his shirt up and over his head. She shuddered with delight as she ran her fingertips along the smooth hills and valleys of his abs. She moaned wantonly as his large but gentle hands remembered all the right places to touch on her body.

Her husband, Joche La`Cour, watched in stunned silence from the doorway.

Aaron jumped as he caught a glimpse of Francesca’s husband. His heart pounded in his chest as he realized. *I’m gonna be killed...*

CHAPTER 17:

The Dark Secret

As her husband walked into the room, Francesca called out, “Joche, I’m so sorry.”

Joche La’Cour took a deep breath and spoke to his wife, “dinner is almost ready. Please go downstairs. I need to talk to Aaron, man to man.”

Francesca nodded and left the room. Her husband closed the door and walked over to Aaron.

Aaron swallowed hard. “Are ya gonna have me castrated, shot, or hanged?”

Joche looked Aaron over and replied, “if I was going to do any of those things I would’ve already given the orders. I love my wife. We’ve been best friends since the age of six. When we turned fifteen I revealed a terrible secret to her. I confided in Francesca that I have desires, not of the usual persuasion.” Aaron gave Joche a discombobulated glare, and Joche went on to explain, “I desire to lie with men. Out of fear that I would be persecuted, Francesca and I made love. We were under the naïve assumption that it would fix me. It didn’t. To this day that is the only time I’ve ever been with my wife. Upon Francesca’s return to France, we married. The marriage allowed her to gain access to her inheritance. The union also got my parents off my back about settling down with a proper girl.” Aaron sat speechless as Joche continued, “you

can love Francesca in a way that I can't. When you leave to go to that island take her with you." Aaron breathed a sigh of relief and Joche threatened him without losing his regal composure, "Francesca is my best friend and I care about her wellbeing. If I hear that you've made her the least bit unhappy, I'll have you castrated, shot, and then hanged."

Joche gave Aaron a slap on the shoulder and casually walked out of the room.



Matthew walked down the hall and stopped as he heard crying coming from Lillian's room. He let himself in to find Lillian lying on her side with a soggy handkerchief in her fist.

Matthew sat next to Lillian and questioned, "what are you doing here? You're supposed to be at Maxwell's going away party. He's leaving tonight."

Lillian sobbingly replied, "it's over." She wiped her tears with the hanky and asked her brother, "have you ever felt trapped between the person you are and the person you should be?"

"Have you ever considered the possibility that the person you should be is who you already are?" Matthew rose from the bed and announced with irritation, "what have the Count and Countess done to you, Lillian? No sister of mine would ever lay here and just allow this to happen."

Lillian sat up. "I just didn't want to be cast aside one day for a proper girl."

Matthew replied in a frustrated tone, "you've got to stop listening to our mother and aunt! Sarah is my wife and I might have written her five notes in the entirety of our relationship. Men don't like to write! And this man has been writing to you for four years. How could you ever get the impression he wasn't serious about you!"

Lillian smiled through her tears as Matthew stormed over to her closet. He grabbed an arm full of Lillian's expensive dresses and hurled them over the balcony.

Matthew turned to Lillian and scolded, "stop pretending to be someone you're not!"

Lillian grabbed two handfuls of expensive trinkets from her jewelry box. She threw the dazzling jewels over the balcony without a second thought. She smiled happily, “that did feel good.”

Matthew grinned. “Now let’s get you to that party.”

Lillian gave her older brother a big hug. Matthew walked toward the door and Lillian asked sarcastically, “hey genius, what am I supposed to wear now that we’ve thrown out all my nice dresses and jewelry?”

Matthew laughed. “I’m sure you’ll think of something.”



Aaron pulled the stagecoach up in front of Arrington palace. Lillian climbed out and took her brother by the arm. Matthew escorted Lillian up the steps to the ballroom.

A servant at the entrance gave them a funny look and asked, “may I see your invitations?”

Lillian complied, and the servant reluctantly allowed them to pass. They walked through the luxurious anteroom, and Lillian smiled at the Rembrandt painting. Two armed guards thrust open the double doors to the grand ballroom. The smile faded from Lillian's face as she caught sight of the numerous guests; dressed in extravagant evening gowns and expensive tuxedos. She spotted Maxwell across the room surrounded by women. It wasn't long before everyone turned to look at Lillian. She had entered the majestic grand ballroom wearing her safari uniform. Aghast expressions covered the faces of the haughty guests.

Lillian whispered to her brother, “I don’t know if I can do this, Matthew.”

Matthew whispered back, “to hell with these people. Maxwell’s over there. Go get him.”

Lillian grinned and released her brother’s arm. She confidently marched into the party. Over a hundred pairs of condescending eyes were fixed on her. As she made her way across the palace ballroom, even the musicians ceased to play their instruments. An awkward silence fell over the party. The only sound was the colliding of Lillian’s hunting boots against the marble floor.

As Lillian ventured forward the pompous men and women gossiped to one another, “I can’t believe she’s wearing pants.”

“What sort of unruly woman wears trousers?”

“What do you expect from a Colburn? I heard her brother actually married a slave girl.”

Maxwell fished through his retinue of admirers and met Lillian halfway. All eyes were on them. He smiled at her and commented in his British accent, “You make quite an entrance.”

Lillian replied in a jovial manner, “my brother threw away all my evening gowns...Sorry.”

Maxwell took her by the hands. “You never needed them. You look absolutely beautiful, like the day we met.”

Lillian took a deep breath. “I’m still the girl you fell in love with that day. If the offer still stands, I want to leave with you tonight.”

Maxwell wrapped his arms around Lillian and kissed her with such a passion it made everyone watching feel as if they were intruding on their privacy.

He released her and whispered, “Let’s get out of here.”

Lillian and Maxwell walked out of the ballroom hand in hand. Maxwell stopped in the anteroom to shake Matthew’s hand, and Lillian gave her brother a hug goodbye. The three of them exited the palace and jogged down the steps. Matthew smiled at his sister and boarded the stagecoach Aaron was driving.

As Lillian walked away Aaron called down to her, “Be sure to watch out fo the recoil, Miss Lillian!”

Lillian looked back over her shoulder with a grin. “Absolutely!”

Two of Maxwell’s guards finished strapping the safari equipment to the carriage. Both guards were very large and intimidating. One had black hair and blue eyes, the other had blonde hair and green eyes. They boarded the stagecoach behind Maxwell and Lillian.

Maxwell put an arm around Lillian’s shoulders and said, “I’d like to introduce you to the crew. These are my guards, Bortus and Oliver.”

Lillian gave a smile and a wave at the guards as the horses broke into a trot. As the stagecoach ventured forward, Maxwell went onto say, “Bortus, Oliver this is the woman I’ve been telling you about.”

Oliver, the guard with the blonde hair, gave Maxwell an approving

nod. "I'm charmed to make your acquaintance, Miss Lillian."

Bortus, the dark-haired guard, smiled. "It truly is a pleasure to finally meet you, my lady."

As they traveled out onto the road Matthew's stagecoach caught up with theirs. Lillian flashed her brother a big grin and flexed her bicep in the window. Matthew replied with a flex of his arm as his carriage rolled past. Once her brother was out of site Lillian picked up the gift box Maxwell had given her earlier.

She removed the hunting rifle. "It truly is a magnificent firearm."

Lillian's eyebrows furrowed with confusion as she pulled a rolled up piece of paper from the barrel of the gun. It read:

"Will you marry me?"

Lillian glanced up; shocked to find Maxwell holding a ring with a humongous diamond. Lillian hugged him. "Of course I'll marry you."

Maxwell placed the ring on Lillian's finger and kissed her.

Lillian gazed at the enormous rock. "You didn't have to buy such an extravagant ring. I was happy with the hunting rifle."

Maxwell laughed. "Four years ago I lost a wager to a lovely young woman for two week's allowance. It was the least I could do."

Lillian gasped. "This gigantic diamond cost just two weeks of your allowance? Who are you people?"

Maxwell laughed once more. "Lillian, your engagement ring was only one week's allowance."



Back at the mansion, Sarah flipped through another medical book on poisoning. She scanned the page until a passage jumped out at her. *This fungus may cause jaundicing of the skin, liver failure and ultimately death. Biological name: Amanita phalloides. Commonly referred to as the Death Cap; the world's deadliest mushroom.* Sarah sprung to her feet and raced down the hall. She collided with Emanuel in the hallway and almost knocked him over.

Sarah rambled frantically, "The cream of mushroom soup is poisoned! The only reason Master Colburn isn't sick is that he doesn't

eat mushrooms.”

Emanuel looked horrified. “I imported most of the vegetables, spices, and herbs from Europe. Robert Welch must have intercepted one of my shipments, My God, what have I done?”

Sarah assured him, “It’s not your fault.”

“I poisoned my aunt!” He was shaking. He began to panic.

“The very lethal amanita mushroom looks very similar to the straw mushroom, which is commonly used for cooking. Poisonous mushrooms are even known to have a pleasant taste. You couldn’t have known.”

Emanuel pulled himself together as best he could. “Sarah, go inform the deputies of what’s happened! I’ll run downstairs to make sure no one eats the food!”

Sarah took off downstairs and sped up the corridor. She ran outside and spotted one of the deputies. He was posted at the rear entrance under a large tree. The officer was dressed in a law enforcement uniform with a wide brim hat. As Sarah walked over to him, drops of water fell from the tree branches.

She called out to the deputy, “Mistress Colburn has been poisoned!”

The deputy smiled. “Mushrooms, right?”

Sarah looked up in shock. “But how did you know...”

The deputy pointed a revolver at Sarah and threatened, “If you scream I’ll kill you.”

As the man stepped out of the shadows she could see he was no officer. *Christ, it’s Robert Welch.* Sarah froze in terror as another drop of water hit her. She glanced down to see it wasn’t water dripping from the tree at all. Her dress was splattered with blood.

The real deputy was lying on a tree limb above her. His brown eyes were wide open, and flies were buzzing in and out of his mouth. Blood trickled from a deep wound in the man’s throat. Robert struck Sarah with the butt of his gun and knocked her out cold...

CHAPTER 18:

Confessions of a Mad Man

When Sarah opened her eyes she was tied to a bed in the cellar. Each of her limbs was bound to a bedpost. The torches on the walls were lit and she could see Robert Welch looming over her.

Robert slapped Sarah hard. “Do you know where I’ve been the last four years!” Sarah shook her head no, and Robert vehemently announced, “I’ve been in prison serving a sentence for manslaughter! I assaulted the wrong man in pursuit of you and Matthew! I’m going to thoroughly enjoy watching you die.”

Sarah pleaded with him, “You don’t have to hurt me. My husband has money. He’ll pay you whatever you want.”

Robert flashed her a sinister smile. “Your husband and his entire family will be dead soon. Besides, I’m already being paid.” The cellar doors clanged. “Here comes the money now.”

“Who would pay you to hurt me, Robert!” Sarah demanded.

Robert’s only reply was a vile burst of laughter. The heavy iron doors opened and Sarah heard footsteps approaching. Her muscles tightened. Her heart pounded like a hammer, in rhythm with those steps. At last the villain emerged from the darkness.

Sarah called out in shock and confusion, “Emanuel, how could you!”

Robert casually asked, “Do you have the rest of my money,

Emanuel?"

Emanuel reached inside his medical bag. "Yes, it's right here."

Robert walked over and Emanuel pulled a gun from the sack. He'd stuffed a potato on the end of the pistol to muffle the blast.

Robert raised his hands. "No! Please! No!"

Sarah screamed in horror as Emanuel shot Robert in the head. Robert's body slid down the cellar wall, leaving a lumpy red mess on the bricks. A pool of bright red blood grew around him. Emanuel kneeled next to Robert's corpse and put the revolver in his lifeless hand. Sarah trembled in fear as Emanuel walked toward her. She was unable to believe her eyes. She became nauseous and her stomach quivered.

He sat on the bed next to her. "I promised you would meet Marie tonight, and here she is."

Emanuel pulled a mirror from the sack and held it up in front of Sarah.

Sarah stared in bewilderment at her own reflection. "What the hell is going on? Why do you want to kill me?"

Emanuel pulled a document out of the bag with Sarah's full legal name printed on it. He pointed to her middle name and confessed, "I have no intention of killing you. I could never bring myself to harm you. It's you I've been in love with all these years, Sarah *Marie* Colburn. Do you remember that day, four years ago, when Master Colburn informed you of my proposal? That was entirely my idea. I really wanted you to marry me. I assumed you'd come to me in time, but my patience wore thin over the years. Now I'm willing to take you any way I can."

Sarah shook her head in disbelief. "No, there was a picture of a girl in your cabin. I saw it the night I mended your wounds."

Emanuel smiled. "That was an old picture of my mother. I'm in love with you, Sarah. Why else would I take eight lashes to free your parents?"

"You gave me away at my wedding, for Christ's sake!"

Emanuel gingerly brushed a lock of hair from Sarah's face. "I have to admit. That was difficult to endure, but it was the only way to keep you from running away out of fear of marrying Abraham. I knew you'd stay for Matthew. Your husband's original plan was to elope with you. I was the one who tricked him into staying. The night of Seth's wedding I

told Matthew how dangerous it would be to run away with you. I killed the plantation nurse to keep you here.”

Sarah’s eyes filled with tears. “No. Aunt Lizzie died in a fire.”

Emanuel shook his head no. “I’ll let you in on a little secret. I didn’t get out of the field of medicine because I was squeamish or I hated it. I avoided that occupation because the dissecting of human flesh invoked a lust in me that frightened me at first. I fought to control the monster within, but in time I grew to embrace it.”

Tears streamed from Sarah’s eyes. “I knew that Anna’s ear had been surgically removed. You were the first one I showed it to. You stole that ear, to cover your ass! You murdered all those women, you sick bastard!” Sarah struggled and screamed as Emanuel ran his hand up her thigh.

He whispered in her ear, “You’re not jealous are you, Sarah? I imagined myself making love to you every time I took one of them. You said yourself that the killer knows this plantation well. Who knows this estate better than me? I told Matthew you were alive because he’s a brilliant man. I knew he’d find you. Then all I’d have to do is find him. I poisoned his mother in order to lure you here. It worked like a charm.”

Emanuel removed a scalpel from a black case and began cutting the laces to Sarah’s bodice.

Sarah begged him through heavy tears and labored breaths, “Please... Please don’t do this.”

As Emanuel sliced the ribbons he confessed, “Matthew is a smart fellow. He almost caught me years ago. It’s a good thing Robert Welch makes an excellent fall guy. Matthew was hot on my trail. So I planted evidence in Robert’s cabin. Truth be told, Robert didn’t even like women. He was into little boys.”

Sarah suddenly remembered a comment Robert made to her. *You’re not my type, but this time I’ll make an exception.*

Emanuel went on to say, “Robert was a pervert, but no killer. Saphirra confided in me that he tried to rape her son. He broke the kid’s leg in the struggle. A woman will do almost anything to protect her child. When I proposed a plan to get rid of Robert Welch, Saphirra lied for me without a second thought. She made it easy to implicate Robert. Frank Welch had issues with lust as well, but he never killed anyone.”

“Your issue is with me. I swear I’ll leave with you willingly if you

don't kill anyone else. If you have even a modicum of love for me, please don't hurt Matthew."

Emanuel ripped the front of Sarah's dress. "I can't promise you that I won't end his life, because it's unavoidable. But I can promise you that Matthew won't feel any pain. Don't you see, my love? I've been skimming money from Master Colburn for years. I always knew I was a relative of the masters. I used that money to bribe the magistrate into changing the law, which made me a white citizen. After tonight I'll be the closest surviving male heir. I'll inherit everything, and I plan to share it all with you. The sheriff will believe Robert killed everyone and then shot himself. The entire town knows Robert Welch was a severely unhinged individual with a vendetta against the Colburns."

"You'll never get away with this! Master Colburn still has a living brother, Pete."

Emanuel laughed. "You have been gone a long time. Pete Colburn died six months ago. You would be amazed how much a syringe full of air to the jugular resembles a heart attack. Son-of-a-bitch never treated me like a son anyway."

Sarah screamed and struggled vigorously as Emanuel pulled off his shirt. He unbuckled his pants and placed himself on top of her. Sarah's thoughts began to race. *What's most terrifying about Emanuel is that he isn't violently assaulting me. He's so gentle it's almost sickening. He really does love me in some sick twisted way. In his mind, he's not raping me. I have to imagine I'm somewhere else; pray it's all over soon.*

Emanuel kissed Sarah's neck and whispered affectionately in her ear, "I've waited so very long for this moment. If you stop fighting, I promise you'll enjoy it."

Sarah cried out as Emanuel fondled her breast, "So that's it then. Are you just going to rape me? How can you vow to love me and then ravish me against my will!"

Emanuel looked down at her compassionately, "Sarah, please stop crying. We're going to make love, that's all. I've anticipated this night my entire life. I know you want this as much as I do. You're just scared, and I can understand that. I promise I'll be gentle."

Sarah stopped struggling as a disturbing idea came to mind. *I'm going to have to sacrifice myself to save Matthew. As long as Emanuel's*

out here on top of me. He's not in the house killing anyone. Maybe I'll break a sweat and slip out of my restraints. If I can manage to escape, I may be able to stop him. I have to block out the image of Robert's lifeless corpse lying just twenty feet away, and get on with this horrible deed. I'm so sorry Matthew. Please forgive me for what I'm about to do.

Sarah looked into Emanuel's pale blue eyes and whispered, "I love you too."

She kissed him long and deep. When at last they came up for air Emanuel grinned against her lips. "Are you ready?"

Sarah berated herself. *I can't just allow my husband to die for sake of my own pride. I have to endure this violation and buy myself time to escape. I must stall Emanuel at all costs. I love you, Matthew. I'm sorry.* Tears streamed down Sarah's face as she reluctantly nodded her head yes. Emanuel removed his pants and ripped off Sarah's panties. She grew sick to her stomach as Emanuel smelled the panties and played with them.

Sarah pulled herself together and lied convincingly, "I wish I could hold you. Come on Emanuel. It's not as if I can overpower you."

Emanuel pondered over it for a moment or two then cast the panties aside. As he cut Sarah's arm restraints she thought. *It worked like a charm. My arms are free now. As soon as he's finished with me I'll untie my legs. Matthew told me how he was planning to unhinge the cellar doors to free himself. I'll break out of here in the same manner, as soon as Emanuel is gone.*

A wave of nausea washed over Sarah as he climbed back on top of her. She and Matthew had never been with anyone but each other. She coached herself. *I can do this. I have to do this or Matthew will die.* As Emanuel took Sarah by the waist a disgusted look swept over his face. He jumped away from her in shock and sprung off the bed.

Emanuel shook his head in disbelief. "I won't allow you to have another man's child!"

At that moment Sarah realized what had happened. *Emanuel is related to Master Colburn. He has the same gift as Matthew and the other male Colburns. What a hell of a time to find out I'm pregnant.*

Emanuel threw on his clothes and yelled in anger, "I was going to allow your husband to die without pain! I put powerful sedatives in

everyone's dinner, so that I may burn down the house while they slept. Matthew would've died peacefully in his sleep of smoke inhalation." Emanuel grabbed a fist full of smelling salts from his medical bag, "Now I'm going to revive your husband and stab him at least fifty times! As he bleeds out, I'll ravish you in front of his dying eyes!" Emanuel gave Sarah a cold glare. "Once I've killed all the Colburns I'm going to mix you up an abortifacient. And you're going to drink every last drop of it. After you've miscarried Matthew's child I'll plant a seed of my own. You were meant to have my children! Not his!"

Sarah screamed in anger as Emanuel picked up his case of razor-sharp scalpels, "You're a monster! It's inhuman to be so cold! You promised me you wouldn't cause Matthew pain! How could you claim to care for me and then murder my husband before my eyes!"

Emanuel reluctantly set aside his surgical blades and looked down at Sarah with pity. He threw the smelling salts on the ground and growled with frustration, "Matthew is lucky I can't bring myself to break a promise to you. He'll die without pain as I agreed."

Emanuel stepped over the body of Robert Welch and ascended the steps. He exited and padlocked the cellar doors behind him. Sarah quickly untied the restraints from her ankles. She stepped off the bed into a puddle of Robert's blood. As she tiptoed around the corpse she grew extremely ill. *As a doctor, I've seen several people die in front of me, but I've never witnessed anyone murdered. Emanuel just shot Robert without remorse or sympathy.*

She caught a glimpse of the gaping hole in Robert's face. His cold blue eyes stared up at Sarah. Her stomach rolled and quivered. She doubled over and lost her lunch. *I have to be strong.* Sarah wiped her mouth then examined the hinges on the door. *They have half pins like Matthew said.* She searched the cellar for a tool. She found a spoon covered in dust and cobwebs. *Frank Welch brought Matthew food when he was being held hostage. That must be where this spoon came from. I'll use the handle to push the holding pins out of the hinges.*

The first pin came out easily. The second pin proved difficult. Sarah was forced to hold the heavy iron door up with one hand and work the pin loose with the other. She cried out in triumph as the pin finally came out. Then grabbed the door and eased it aside.

Sarah gathered the few smelling salts that didn't land in Robert's blood and exited the cellar. She stealthily crept back to the mansion. She could see through the windows, a fire was started in Master Colburn's office and bedroom. Flames flickered in two other chambers as well. The mansion was filling rapidly with smoke. Sarah was able to see Matthew lying lifeless on his bed. She pushed open the pane of glass and climbed into the room coughing. The smoke burned her eyes as she closed and locked Matthew's bedroom door.

She opened the windows wide for ventilation then walked over to Matthew. *Please still be alive. I pray you haven't already inhaled too much smoke.* Sarah sat next to her husband on the bed and shook him. Tears filled her eyes when he didn't respond. She quickly checked his vitals. *He isn't breathing and his pulse is shallow and weak. He's turning blue from lack of oxygen. Honey, please wake up.* Sarah broke the smelling salt and waved it under Matthew's nose. *For the love of God, come back to me. Matthew, please come back to me!*

His nostrils and lungs filled with ammonia and he sprung to life. He sat up in bed coughing violently. Sarah cried tears of relief and embraced him. Matthew glanced back and forth, disoriented.

"The house is on fire," Sarah told him. "We have to get you out."

She pulled him off the bed and helped him outside on the lawn. The color gradually returned to Matthew's face and he groggily rose to his feet. "I have to go back in. There are still four other people in the house."

Sarah blocked his path. "You should at least go to the hunting lodge and grab a rifle first. Emanuel's gone mad! He's trying to kill everyone and take the property. He was going to rape me until he figured out I was pregnant. He's the one who committed all those atrocities."

Matthew gasped in disbelief at Emanuel's act of betrayal. "By the time I get to the hunting lodge and back Francesca, Joche, and my parents will already be dead. The house is full of smoke. They may only have minutes to live. My father keeps a gun in his room. I'll be fine."

Sarah handed Matthew a few smelling salts. "Break these and wave them underneath your parents' noses. Aaron used to scale a tree to sneak into Francesca's room. I'll climb onto her balcony and pull her out. Joche's room is across the hall. I'll wake him too." Matthew protested and Sarah said, "You won't be able to get to everyone in time. I promise

I'll be careful."

Matthew hugged her and she took off across the lawn. Sarah scaled the tree with very little effort. *Damn, that's a long way down.* She grimaced as she leaped onto the balcony. The room was so black with smoke she couldn't see through the glass doors. She pushed open the doors and the smoke came barreling out.

Sarah crawled into the room and the first person she noticed was Joche lying on the couch. *Thank god they slept in the same room tonight.* She pulled him onto the floor and dragged his unconscious body out on the balcony. She put her cheek to his mouth and smiled when she felt warm breath on her face. *Amen, he's still breathing.* Sarah carefully administered the ammonia tablet. *Come on Joche, you're a big strong man. Wake up for me.* His eyes flashed open at once.

Joche asked through heavy coughs, "Is... Francesca... alright?"

Sarah assured him, "I'm going back for her right now."

Joche rose with a staggering gate. "No, you stay here where it's safe. I'll run in and get her."

Sarah watched anxiously from the balcony as Joche disappeared into the abyss of black smoke. She picked up the smelling salt she used to revive Joche. *I pray there's enough chemical left in this tablet to wake Francesca. It was the last one I had.* Joche burst onto the balcony with Francesca in his arms. He quickly laid her on the marble before Sarah.

Sarah told him, "Francesca's completely cyanotic and she's not breathing. I feel a pulse but it's very shallow."

Sarah waved what was left of the smelling salt under Francesca's nostrils. She didn't respond. Joche's face filled with worry.

Sarah stood up. "I have to get to my room. There are more smelling salts in my medical bag."

He protested, "It's far too dangerous. You could get yourself killed. I'll go in and retrieve the bag for you."

"You won't be able to find my medical bag in all this smoke. I know exactly where it is. I'll be back shortly."

Sarah took a deep breath of fresh air, and then battled through the smoldering room. She entered the hallway and it was blistering hot. The corridor was red with flames. She quickly became light-headed from the heavy smoke. The hall began to spin and she grew dizzy. Sarah scorched

her hand on the fiery wall as she braced herself from falling. She cried out in agony as she choked on the ash. *My room's just a few doors down. I can make it.*

She soldiered on until she reached her destination. Then grabbed her supplies and made an about-face. Sarah battled back through the hall of flames, with the medical bag clutched within her arms. *It feels as if my nose and throat are on fire. There's Francesca's door; just a few... more... steps...* Sarah ventured forward and collapsed in the doorway of Francesca's bedroom. She lay on the floor in a semi-conscious state, unable to move or call for help.

Sarah laid helplessly in the smoke-filled mansion yelping in vain, "Someone... please... help me..."

Her calls went unanswered. Lucky for Sarah, the air closest to the floor was cooler and easier to breathe. She regained an ounce of strength and crawled a few more feet. As Sarah collapsed once more she called out, "Joche! Please get me out of here!"

Joche La`Cour finally heard Sarah's pleas for help. He dashed into the room and quickly pulled her outside. He carefully laid Sarah next to Francesca. "Are you alright?"

"I'll be fine." Sarah dumped out the contents of her medical bag on the balcony. She groggily waived the tablet beneath Francesca's nose to revive her. Francesca opened her eyes and began to cough and gag.

Sarah informed them, "We'll be safe on the balcony for now. Once we're all capable, we can climb down the tree to safety."



When Matthew's mother fell ill she was in need of consolation. His father now slept in the bedroom with her every night to comfort her. Matthew stood a ladder against the house and climbed up onto his parents' balcony. He opened the double glass doors wide to let much of the smoke escape. Then he ventured in. The tapestries and paintings were engulfed in flames. *My chest and eyes still burn like hell, but at least I can see where my parents are.*

He found his father lying in bed with his arms wrapped around

Mistress Colburn. Matthew pulled his mom from his Father's embrace and laid her outside on the balcony. Tears filled his eyes as he checked the pulse in his mother's wrist. *Not only is there no pulse, my mother is as rigid as a board. Rigor mortis has already set in. She probably died hours ago from the poison, before the fire ever started.*

His heart pounded hard in his chest and he began to hyperventilate. *I've got to pull myself together. Father may still be alive. I must keep my wits for long enough to save him.* He returned for his father. He put an ear against Master Colburn's chest. *Thank god there's still a heartbeat. He's still breathing, but barely.* Matthew pulled Master Colburn outside and administered a smelling salt. His mind grew heavy with dread as his father neglected to blink, cough, or move the slightest bit.

Matthew desperately shook Master Colburn. "Wake the hell up! I beg you! Please don't die! I can't lose both parents in one night!"

Matthew frantically administered a second smelling salt that was meant for his mother. He felt relieved as Master Colburn's eyes shot open for a brief moment. But they closed again almost immediately. Matthew looked on, in heart-wrenching desperation, as his father took his final breath.



Emanuel jogged out the back door of the flaming mansion. He had a hefty sack of money and expensive jewelry hanging from his shoulder. He kneeled on the cool wet grass and pulled out a trowel. He began to pick at the earth. *I'll retrieve the last of my fortune from this hole in the ground and rightfully claim the estate tomorrow. Lillian and Seth escaped my grasp but they're inconsequential anyway. The property won't go to Seth because he's black; which makes him illegitimate. The inheritance won't pass to Lillian because she's a woman. Once I've convinced Sarah to love me and forgive me, I'll have everything.*

Emanuel jumped to his feet as he noticed Matthew's bedroom window was open. He ran to the gaping window and peered through the smoke at an empty bed. "Son of a bitch!"

Emanuel dashed back to his belongings. He glanced into the distance

and saw a ladder leading up to Matthew's parents' room. Emanuel smiled bitterly. *Matthew, you're so predictable. You would be foolish enough to go in after your parents, instead of just get the hell out of here.*

Emanuel pulled a razor-sharp machete from his bag and vowed scornfully, "When I'm finished with you, cousin, you'll wish you died in that fire!"



Matthew climbed to his feet, overcome by irrepressible rage. He reentered the fiery chamber and rifled through his father's dresser. *Father always slept with a pistol.* "Where is it!"

He flung entire drawers full of clothes on the floor. The clothing ignited and burst into flames within seconds. He turned over the bedside table and searched the contents. Then he hurled the pillows and mattress off the bed. *What did Father do with his gun!*

Emanuel ran into the blazing room. He lunged at Matthew with the machete. Matthew jumped back and dodged the first few swings. The fourth one sliced him clear across the abdomen.

As Matthew clutched his bleeding stomach Emanuel yelled, "You're a dead man Colburn!"

"Is this little scratch the best you can do, you damned traitor!"

Emanuel sliced forcefully through the air with the enormous blade. Matthew ducked and the machete embedded itself in the dresser. As Emanuel tried to yank it out Matthew sent a brutal punch to his jaw. Matthew followed up with another blow to Emanuel's head and a sock to the stomach.

"You're not so tough now are you!" Matthew shouted as he countered Emanuel's attack. "What can I expect from a pathetic scoundrel who attacks defenseless women!"

Emanuel struck Matthew with a porcelain jewelry box and tackled him to the ground. Emanuel squeezed Matthew's throat and growled scornfully, "After I choke the life out of you, cousin, the first thing I'll do is screw that pretty little wife of yours and piss on your corpse."

Matthew clobbered Emanuel with a board from a broken drawer and

Emanuel fell back. Red hot flames danced all around them as they tussled about the burning bedroom. Fiery planks of wood and ash rained from the ceiling, as they continued to trade violent punches, knees, and kicks. Emanuel hollered out in pain when his sleeve caught fire. As Emanuel frantically waved his arm to put out the flames, Matthew removed the machete from the dresser.

Emanuel pointed a revolver at him. “Drop the blade, Matthew!”

Matthew cast the weapon aside. “Before you kill me you could at least be a man and admit what this is all about!”

“You already know why I’m doing this. Sarah and I were meant to be together, and you stole her out from under me!”

Matthew stood undaunted, and spoke with unwavering fortitude, “You and I both know this isn't really about her. You’re obsessed with me. You’ve been competing with me since we were children. Your pathetic father raped your mother and nine months later there you were. Your mother chose to kill herself rather than look at you. Your disgusting father never stepped forward to raise you. You’ve envied me your entire life because I had a family and you didn't! You don’t just want my wife. You want my inheritance, my birthright, all that I possess.”

Emanuel bitterly confessed, “I always hated you! I tried for years to steal your father's affection. That’s why I strived to be his right-hand man. Medical classes were the only thing you were bad at. So I chose to study medicine. I vowed to show you up, make you look bad. I made it a point to bed every girl who ever liked you; as well as anyone you showed the slightest bit of interest in. If you could have her, I *had* to have her. I raped and murdered Anna and Mali because both of those whores use to throw themselves at you. How dare they choose you over me! I killed Katherine and Sally because I followed you to Blue Valley and saw them flirting with you. You had your tongue down Katherine’s throat. She really had to go!”

Matthew remained intrepid and boldly spoke without fear, “I didn’t really care for any of those girls, which made them expendable to you. The only reason you didn’t kill Sarah is that I love her, which means you're in love with her. My father said something interesting the other day. He said you would have to be an idiot not to have known Sarah and I liked each other, and you're no idiot. You knew I was in love with

Sarah. That's the reason you proposed to her in the first place. All these years I assumed Sarah was the one being stalked when in all actuality it was me. So go ahead and shoot! You'll spend the rest of your life trying to be me, but all you'll ever amount to is a coward with a gun in his hand!"

Emanuel's eyes grew red with hate. His nostrils flared and his brows furrowed with anger. He drew back on the hammer of his firearm, his heart poisoned with contempt and bitterness. "I've lived in your shadow for long enough. Goodbye Matthew."

CHAPTER 19:

The Final Revelation

The blast of gunfire was all but deafening. Matthew glanced up in shock to find his father alive. Master Colburn was standing in the balcony doorway with a smoking pistol in his grip. Emanuel dropped his gun as he realized he'd been shot by Master Colburn. He clutched the gaping wound in his gut, in utter disbelief. A look of sheer terror covered his face, as dark red blood ran between his fingers. He cringed in agony and collapsed. Master Colburn gripped his chest and plummeted to the balcony floor. Matthew retrieved Emanuel's gun and then ran to his father's aid.

Matthew knelt beside his father. "I thought you were dead."

Master Colburn joked in a raspy voice, "Of course you did, son. You were always terrible at your medical studies. You know the last time we were on this balcony together you were throwing me off of it."

Matthew laughed a little. "I should've known that fire was no match for you. You're the strongest man I know."

Master Colburn's expression grew serious. "I need you to listen and listen well. I may not have much time."

Matthew shook his head. "Father, don't talk like that. You're going to be fine."

"I don't have your lungs, son. I've smoked for over two decades. In case I don't leave this balcony there are some things you need to know."

Don't be like me. Tell your wife you love her every day, even if you're angry with her. And support your children in whatever path they choose, even if you may not agree with them. I'm leaving the estate to you. I trust you'll look out for your sister. I promised your mother I would take care of Seth." Master Colburn handed Matthew a folded up piece of paper and instructed. "Give this to your brother. I love you son."

Matthew unfolded the note. It read:

*To my oldest son, Seth,
Your inheritance lies eight paces beneath the stars.
Your Father,
Matthew Colburn Sr.*

Matthew tucked the note away. "Father, what does this mean?"

Master Colburn didn't respond. His dark brown eyes stared blankly into the night.

"Father!" Matthew called vehemently. Again no response.

He listened to his father's chest in despair and anguish. *His heart has ceased to beat. Not a single rhythmic thump to bring me peace of mind.* Matthew gently closed his father's eyes. His heart grew heavy with grief. Consumed by sorrow, he rose to his feet.

He cast a final mournful glare on his deceased parents and prayed, "Dieu vous garde (God keep you) until we meet again."

Matthew reached for the ladder to climb down, and Sarah screamed from Francesca's balcony, "Matthew!! Look out behind you!!"

Matthew made an about-face in time to catch a scalpel to the chest. Matthew staggered back and grasped his wound. Blood streamed down the front of him.

Emanuel gripped his stomach wound and whispered to Matthew, "The bullet I took was a clean shot. I'll survive, but you won't. Any last requests, cousin?"

Matthew choked out in agony, "Would you please... tell... Lucifer who sent you."

Emanuel looked up with surprise as Matthew stabbed the eight-inch bolt into his heart.

Emanuel stared at Matthew and stammered, "You... carried it all

these... years?"

Matthew whispered to Emanuel, "Goodbye, Cousin," Then shoved him off the balcony.

Emanuel plummeted two stories and collided with the ground. Sarah walked around his disfigured corpse and scaled the ladder to get to Matthew. She climbed onto the balcony and Matthew collapsed in her arms.

He looked up at Sarah and said, "Looks like I'll be meeting my parents sooner than I thought."

Tears cascaded from Sarah's eyes. She put pressure on the wound and lied to him, "You're going to be alright. Don't say such things." Sarah kissed her dying husband. "I love you."

Matthew passed Sarah a bloody slip of paper. "Please give this to my brother Seth." She sadly nodded and Matthew continued, "And Sarah?"

"Yes, Matthew," she answered mournfully.

He touched her cheek and whispered, "I love you."

He coughed up blood and his body became still. Sarah held Matthew close until his eyes fell shut.

EPILOGUE:

Alone on an Island Beach

The island of Samson's origin was astonishing. It was a tropical paradise of dormant volcanoes, palm trees, and dazzling waterfalls. Waves crashed on the sandy shore as Sarah walked along the beach. Her heart ached as she glanced at all the happy couples. Aaron and Francesca were peacefully sleeping together in a hammock. Seth and Leah were taking a late afternoon stroll on the beach. And Marlette and Phillip stood watching the sunset over the vast sparkling ocean.

Sarah watched the beautiful sunset alone in deep contemplation. *My father was the prince of his tribe before he was captured and taken into slavery. Now he's king and my mother is his queen. Marlette and I are to be crowned in this evening's ceremony. It hardly seems fair, that after all Matthew and I have been through together, he won't be by my side on this night.* Her eyes filled with tears of sorrow.

Seth walked over and spoke to Sarah, "are you ready? It's almost time, Princess."

Sarah solemnly replied, "Seth, thank you for offering to escort me to the ceremony, but I'll understand if you would like to take your wife instead."

Leah walked up. "That's nonsense, Sarah. I don't mind if Seth goes with you. This is your night. You shouldn't be alone."

Sarah gave an appreciative nod and took Seth's arm. She could already hear the beating of the drums in the distance.

Sarah asked Seth, "did you ever figure out the riddle on that slip of paper?"

Seth smiled. "Eight feet from the back door of the mansion I found a hole where Emanuel had been digging. Inside laid a chest containing a substantial amount of cash."

Sarah paused, mid-step as Matthew approached her. He was shirtless with half of his chest and stomach wrapped in bandages.

Matthew called to the others, "carry on without us. Sarah and I will catch up."

The rest of the couples continued on to the celebration, leaving Sarah and Matthew alone on the beautiful beach. The sunset painted the sky and sea in a breath-taking array of colors. They strolled along the cool wet sand and waves washed over their bare feet.

Sarah smiled at her husband and scolded him, "Matthew! You took a stab wound to the chest less than a month ago. I had to surgically remove a lobe of your left lung in order to save your life. What are you doing out of bed! You should be resting."

Matthew let out a painful laugh. "I've been resting for almost a month. Besides I wouldn't miss this night for anything in the world."

Sarah's eyes filled with concern. "As your doctor, I recommend you return to bed this instant. If that blade had entered one centimeter higher, it would've pierced your heart."

She laughed as Matthew replied, "You're fired, Sarah. You're no longer my doctor. Tonight you're simply my wife."

Matthew wrapped Sarah in a loving embrace and looked deep into her eyes.

While they stood in each other's arms he whispered, "Sarah, you never had anything to worry about. The only one who's ever been capable of piercing my heart is you."

As Matthew and Sarah kissed passionately on the island beach, they knew they would be together for all of eternity, in this life and the next...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Catalina DuBois was born in a small town in Missouri and now lives in Roswell, New Mexico with her husband, Brian, and daughter, Casey. She attended the University of Michigan where she earned Higher Education Awards. DuBois later transferred to Eastern New Mexico University, where she graduated in 2011. She became a published author at the age of eleven when her poem was selected for an anthology. DuBois has received numerous literary awards, including the 2018 Literary Titan Book Award for her first novel *Book of Matthew: House of Whispers*. She is currently doing research for her new novel, *Book of Matthew II: Ancient Evil*

catalinadubois.com

Try this next...



Murder, betrayal, & scandal plague the Colburn family. A curse has shadowed them throughout time. This tale of intrigue follows the Colburns back to where the terror began in New Orleans, Louisiana. Matt Colburn's duty is to protect an aristocrat named Ariel. From the moment they meet, she steals his breath away. They dance and it feels like a brush with destiny, but Ariel has a dreadful secret that endangers the lives of everyone she holds dear, especially Matt. Can he save her or will she become the next victim of the Louisiana Strangler...

PROLOGUE:

THE PECULIAR RUNAWAY

March 27, 1819

Rain streamed down Natalie's face as she cautiously approached the entrance to the lair. She lingered at the door and glanced over both shoulders, to make sure no one had followed her. She gazed lovingly at Matt, the five-year-old boy she'd nurtured since birth. Matt was trembling and his dark brown hair was soaked and blackened by the rain. Natalie sighed mournfully. *He's so frightened. There's such sadness in his eyes.* She gave Matt's hand a little squeeze to reassure him. It was her secret code for you have nothing to fear.

She whispered to the little brown-eyed boy, "things are going to be alright. I promise you."

Matt said nothing back, which wasn't uncommon for him. He almost never spoke for fear of infuriating his legal guardian, Pete. At last, he gave her a silent nod and squeezed her hand back. This was Matt's code for I'm alright now.

Natalie took a deep breath and gave the secret knock on the peeling decrepit door. An old man appeared at the entrance. People called him Moses, a nickname given for all the slaves he'd helped to freedom in years past. His build was frail, and his left eye was a milky gray due to blindness. He possessed skin of ebony and a snow-white cap of hair. Moses took a skeptical glance at Natalie's fair complexion, straight hair, and dark blue eyes. He slammed the door immediately.

Natalie gave the secret knock once more. "I'm not leaving until you

agree to help us!”

Moses reappeared in the doorway and spoke in a somber tone, “Ma’am, I don’t know what ya think this is, but I ain’t in the business of helping white women leave unsuitable husbands. This place once served as a refuge fo runaway slaves. I long since retired, after the white devils burned my eye to teach me a lesson. They left me one good eye so I may watch em murder my wife and chilren.”

Natalie caught the door as he was closing it. “I’m truly sorry about your family, but if this domain was ever a refuge for runaway slaves then I’m in the right place. I’m not a white woman, Sir. I’m an eighth black: an octoroon. By law, I’m subject to the same ill-treatment and brutality as you. Just look around. New Orleans is crawling with white slaves.”

Moses wanted to believe her but she was the most peculiar runaway he’d ever seen. *Even the fairest of slaves don’t dress so lavishly and I know I seen her hanging off a wealthy man’s arm.* “I don’t know what ya trying to pull but I don’t want no part of it.”

“WE ARE GOING TO DIE!” She heaved in the pouring down rain. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed in the distance emphasizing her words. “My husband, as you call him, is going to murder this boy and me if you don’t do something to stop him.”

Moses had no way to tell for certain if Natalie was truly a slave. Even if she wasn’t, at the very least she was the tortured wife of a man who was going to beat her to death. She had fresh purple bruises around her throat accompanied by old, yellow, fading ones. This was a sign of systematic abuse, as was the manner in which she adjusted her collar to hide the evidence of her beating, and last but not least, the shame in her eyes.

Natalie’s heart pounded against her ribcage like a sledgehammer as she anticipated his response. Were the lives of two white devils worth the risk to a man who’d lost so much? Would Moses save them or send them to their doom? These questions burned to the depths of Natalie’s mind and into the pit of her soul, and as she read the expression on his face she knew the answer.

Moses covered his creepy gray eye with a patch. He opened his door and his heart to Natalie. He didn’t know if he’d be able to save this woman, but he was going to give it his all.

Natalie and Matt followed Moses into the house as he hobbled away on his cane. Moses came to an empty kitchen and poured two hot cups of

tea. He passed the steaming cups to Natalie and Matt. Moses took a seat at the table and Natalie sat across from him with little Matt Colburn standing by her side.

“I suppose this yo son,” Moses inquired.

“Sort of,” Natalie replied before taking a sip of the bittersweet tea.

“Well is he yo son or ain’t he?”

Natalie turned to Matt. “Go in the hallway and close the door behind you.” Matt silently obeyed and she went on to explain, “Matt’s parents once owned the Colburn plantation. His father, Master Colburn, died shortly after Matt was conceived. Matt’s mother, Mistress Colburn, died during his birth. This left Pete, the oldest of their four sons, to run the plantation and look after Matt. Just weeks before Matt was born I had lost a child of my own so Pete brought me in from the field to serve as Matt’s wet nurse. I’ve been raising him ever since.” Natalie clenched her fist. “Pete Colburn is a terrible man. He has terrorized me for the past five years. I implore you, Sir, please help us get away.”

Moses shook his head disapprovingly. “What do ya mean by, ‘help us get away’? Ya can’t possibly be thinking of running with this brat. Children make yo chances of escape far less likely. They grow restless, and they can’t travel far by foot. This means ya gotta carry him a good portion of the way, which will slow ya down. The fact that he white only further complicates matters. Ya gonna be charged with kidnapping, which makes me an accessory. I’m sorry but if ya truly want yo freedom ya must leave him behind.”

“I may not have birthed Matt, but he’s my son!” Natalie vehemently proclaimed. “I nursed him. I cared for him when he was sick. I loved and nurtured him his whole life, while his brother, Pete, did nothing but brutalize and torment both of us. I am the only mother Matt knows and I will not leave him at the mercy of Pete Colburn.”

“I don’t give a damn if his brother hurts him, maims him, or kills him! He’ll be one less slave owner! Why would ya risk everything fo that little white demon?”

Tears streamed down Natalie’s face as she noticed Matt standing in the doorway. She beckoned to him and he ran into her arms. She turned to Moses and spoke with sniffling sobs, “I’m all... he has... and I beg you, Sir, to help us. Either we both go or we both stay.”

Moses rubbed his forehead and mulled over his decision. The room

fell silent for what seemed an eternity. At last, the old man nodded. “Ya both go.”

Natalie called out with joy and relief, “thank you so much, Sir. God bless you.” She passed him her meager savings.

“Don’t thank me yet. This ain’t gonna to be easy. Ya can’t just hop a ship out of the country through New Orleans’ port.”

“I’m aware, Sir. The Colburn Plantation is one of the largest in Louisiana and Pete does a lot of importing and exporting of goods. Pete’s on a first name basis with all the ship’s captains, none of which would allow me to board. The entire town believes we’re married.”

“Hell, that’s what I thought.” Moses snickered. His wrinkled face lit up with a smile.

Natalie laughed while wiping her tears. “That’s what Pete thinks as well, but that bastard is not and never has been my husband. He’s wealthy and dashing, but wicked to the core.”

“A beautiful monster,” Moses murmured with a sigh. “I need a few weeks to make arrangements with my old contacts. Ya probably gotta travel to another state in order to find a captain who’ll allow ya onboard without question. Most of the time yall gonna be able to ride in a stagecoach from one contact point to the next, but yall still gonna spend a great deal of time on foot. So be prepared fo it. Meet me here at the same time three weeks from today.”

Natalie humbly and appreciatively kissed the old man’s hands and rose from her seat.

Moses grimaced. “I would offer yall a ride home but it probably wouldn’t be good fo ya to be seen with a well-known abolitionist.”

“We’ll be fine, Sir. Thank you again.” Natalie took Matt’s hand and disappeared down the corridor.

Moses smiled to himself. *No harm in doing one last meaningful deed.*



Natalie closed the bedtime story she was reading after Matt drifted off. She kissed the sleeping child goodnight and crossed the corridor to her chamber.

Natalie dressed in layers of heavy expensive clothing. Undressing was

extremely difficult without her lady's maid who'd been dismissed much earlier so that Natalie could slip away unnoticed. At last, she freed herself from the gown, which formed a crumpled pile on the floor. She stepped out of it and draped it over the lounge.

Natalie sat at the mirrored vanity removing her fine jewelry. All of which had been 'please forgive me' gifts from Pete Colburn. *How ironic, a slave with a slave. I don't believe my maid would betray me but I couldn't take any chances. No wonder Moses assumed I was a white woman. Look what I showed up in. Poor little Matt's come to collect a lot of forgive me presents as well. Most days Pete is like two people trapped in one body: the abusive tyrant and the remorseful sinner. I've come to hate them both. He'll threaten my life and then bring me flowers. He'll slap me and buy me a dress. He'll force me into his bed and give me a diamond necklace. Though I resent these gifts I cannot refuse them, for that would only send Pete into a blind rage.*

Natalie slipped on her nightgown and let down her long mane of sand colored hair. Even though Pete was out of town, she still locked her bedroom door out of habit.

Natalie spun around at the boom of Pete Colburn's voice. "I demand you open this door at once!"

"What are you doing here!" she shouted through the heavy oak barrier.

Pete pounded on the door with his fists. "My informant, Mable, told me you were acting suspicious! I told you I was leaving town to see what you were up to! I followed you to that abolitionist's home! Why are you leaving me? Have I not given you all?"

Natalie cringed at the sound of Matt crying on the other side of the door.

"Mamma Natalie!" Matt sobbed again and again.

She tried her best to sound calm. "Matt, go back to bed sweetie."

Natalie heard Matt's crying gradually fade and she began to feel a little relieved. *He must've gone back to bed, but wait... I don't hear Pete either!* A cold sensation swept over her as the feeling of dread set in. She threw open the door and bolted into the hallway at the sound of Matt's screams. He was nowhere to be seen.

"Matt! Matt!" She frantically checked his bedroom, under the bed, in the closet, no Matt. More screams pierced the night. She shouted through the halls, "you must tell me where you are!"

Natalie soon realized the screams were coming from outside. She ran onto her balcony at once. Her heart stopped at the sight of Pete dangling Matt off the next balcony over. Matt was screaming and flailing three stories in the air. For that moment time stood still. She was frozen, unable to move, speak, or even breathe.

At last words escaped her. "Pull him in before you kill him!"

Her hands flew to her mouth. She nearly fainted as Pete tossed Matt up in the air. Pete caught him by the arm. "How nice of you to join us, Natalie. Matt and I were playing a little game."

"Stop! He's just a boy! Don't you see he's terrified!" She ran to Pete's bedroom door and tried the knob, but it was locked.

She ran back onto the balcony to find Pete yelling at the horrified child. "Cease your whining you little coward! I swear I will make you a man even if it kills you." Pete hollered over Matt's screams, "give me one good reason I shouldn't hurl this little bastard to his death and have you executed for his murder! No one would ever believe you over me!"

Natalie's tears were streaming. "What must I do to make you stop this madness!"

"Prove you still belong to me! I want to hear you say it!"

"Alright! Alright! I belong to you!"

Pete flung Matt onto the marble balcony and disappeared into the room. Natalie ran into the hallway nearly blinded by her tears. She was moving so fast she tripped over her nightgown. She picked herself up and shoved past Pete into the chamber.

Matt was sitting on the balcony, arms locked around his knees. He was trembling and rocking back and forth. Natalie whisked Matt into her arms and carried him back to his bedroom.

"You have ten minutes!" Pete called after her.

Natalie begged the child as she held him to her chest, "say something. Please say something, Matt. I need to know you're alright."

Matt looked up at her with sheer terror still prevalent in his eyes. "Pete's going to hurt you again, isn't he?"

Natalie kissed the boy's forehead. "No Sweetie."

Matt whispered, "Some nights I hear him. I hear him hurting you."

Natalie hugged Matt. "Pete and I are just talking about grownup stuff. No one is getting hurt."

"Then why do I hear you crying?"

Matt's response broke Natalie's heart and rendered her speechless. *He's old enough and smart enough to know what's going on. There is nothing I can say to comfort him.*

Pete appeared in the doorway tapping his watch.

"Allow me a few more minutes!" Natalie shouted. "Don't you see you've made him traumatized!"

"He made me a god damned orphan," Pete growled. "We're nowhere close to even."

"When will you realize your resentment of your brother is both cruel and irrational? Your mother was very late in years when she conceived Matt. It's not his fault she died during his birth."

Pete gave Matt a cold bitter glare. "That merchant of death is not my brother."

Natalie turned to Matt. "Lock the door behind me. No matter what you hear, don't come out until morning."

The door shut. Pete grabbed a fist full of Natalie's hair. He dragged her into the room. He threatened as he slammed the door, "you have no legal right to Matt. If you ever try to run off with him again, I swear I'll hunt you down and have you hanged for his kidnapping. If you run away without him, I'll cut his throat."

Natalie glared around the room searching desperately for anything she could use to defend herself. She'd seen that look in Pete's eyes before: a bone-chilling mixture of insatiable lust and burning hatred. Her heart wrenched. Her spirit broke. There were nothing and no one to stop him...

Matt lay in the room across the corridor. His pillow was soaked with his tears, partly for what was happening, but mostly for his inability to stop it. He pressed his hands tightly over his ears to muffle her cries. It was all he could do. Matt tossed back and forth screaming into the night, "Nooooooooo!!!"

CHAPTER 1:

THE DIAMOND NECKLACE

Matt Colburn sprung straight up in bed. He heaved for air with his hands pressed firmly over his ears. It had been eleven years since that awful night but the dreams still haunted him.

“Shhh shhh it’s alright Matt,” his lover, Lilly, assured him while prying his hands from the sides of his head.

The date was March 31, 1830, and Matt was now a man. He had been with Lilly A`Rue for the past three years. Lilly was a Creole girl, the daughter of a wealthy Frenchman and his black lover.

“I’m sorry I woke you,” Matt said.

“I’m used to it,” Lilly assured him.

She kissed his lips and climbed out of bed as naked as the day she was born. He watched the exotic beauty saunter across his chamber. A cascade of black silk curls danced over her bare back. Her skin was a golden bronze. Her eyes were dark and mysterious, almost the shade of her raven hair. Most girls would search for something to cover themselves before crossing a room naked in broad daylight, but Lilly was bold and free. She hid nothing from Matt. For that reason, he hid nothing from her. She was the only one in the world who knew everything about him. The only one he could come close to letting in.

Matt’s house servants had already prepared a fresh steaming bath for them. Rose petals graced the surface of the water, just as Lilly liked it. She

slipped into the elegant footed tub and reached for a sponge.

Lilly glanced over her shoulder and asked with concern, “you had that dream again didn’t you, the one where your psychotic brother dangled you off the balcony?”

Matt nodded, climbed out of bed, and slipped on his clothes. He was determined not to be like his brother, Pete. He vowed to never force a woman to lay with him. This was why he never felt guilty for making love with Lilly. She was free and belonged to no one, including him.

Matt glanced at the love poem Lilly wrote him with a smile. It literally took him a glance to read it. He was gifted in that way. He could take in pages of information within seconds. He read entire books in ten minutes flat. Matt could recall the contents of a document he’d seen ten years prior for less than ten seconds. His memory was photographic, but he was no good with numbers. Calculations were Pete’s area of expertise.

Lilly examined her neck with the handheld mirror she pulled from the nightstand. “Damn you, Matt! You bruised my neck again. How many times have I told you not to leave your mark on me? You don’t own me, Matt! I’m not one of your god damned slaves!”

Matt laughed and mouthed her words as she said them. He had heard this rant many times before. He knelt next to the tub and replied with a wink, “you weren’t complaining last night when I put them there.”

Lilly gave him a hard poke to the chest. “Just what am I supposed to tell my brothers?”

Matt shrugged. “I don’t know. Tell them you fell.”

“For the second time this week!”

Matt laughed. “It’s not my fault you’re clumsy.”

Water splashed onto the floor as she gave him a playful shove. Matt braced Lilly with a passionate kiss, which ended abruptly. He rose to his feet and she inquired, “You’re not getting in with me?”

Matt informed Lilly as the gut-wrenching feeling of dread chilled his bones, “I’ll return shortly. I feel inclined to check on my mother. Something’s wrong. I just know it.”



In a nearby meadow, the old magistrate examined the bruised and

swollen body of the dead woman. He covered his nose and mouth with a cloth heavily perfumed with eucalyptus. The scented handkerchief was no match for the pungent rotten odor: the aroma of death itself. He pushed his spectacles up on his slender hook nose.

The magistrate's bushy eyebrows furrowed with irritation as he questioned his subordinate, "what do you conclude, Deputy Welch?"

The young officer took a deep breath. *This is my first case as a law enforcement officer. Now is my time to shine.* Deputy Welch confidently informed his superior, "the victim was found naked, face down in a field. The degree of decomposition and insect activity suggest that she died three or four days ago. She's a Caucasian female. Cause of death appears to be a broken neck after a forced sexual encounter. The blood and skin under the victim's fingernails are proof that she fought her attacker. I've declared her death a murder."

Deputy Welch waited for what seemed a year for the magistrate's response. *I pray he is impressed with my findings.*

The old magistrate scowled at the young deputy. "Excellent work officer, but you neglected to notice some vital clues. Her rough callused feet suggest that this woman spent a great deal of time barefoot. Her fingernails are short and her hands un-manicured. There isn't a trace of makeup on the victim's face. This crime was obviously NHI."

"My apologies Sir, I'm not familiar with that phrase," Deputy Welch admitted with a confused look.

"NHI means no humans involved. This woman's hands are covered with calluses and tiny cuts from picking cotton. This is no white woman, just a light-skinned slave. That means her death should be declared poaching or destruction of private property, not murder. Property loss is not your department. This was a gigantic waste of our time."

Deputy Welch sighed with disappointment and mild humiliation.

The magistrate assured his young apprentice, "pass this case on to Reynolds. He handles thefts. You did well, just make sure that there's an actual murder to prosecute before having me summoned to the scene of a crime."

"Yes Sir, I'm sorry to have wasted your time."

As they walked away, the deputy took a final glance at the corpse. There was one detail that just didn't make sense. *Why would a lowly slave woman be wearing such an expensive diamond necklace?"*



Back at the Colburn Estate Natalie sat up in bed with a painful groan. She reluctantly examined herself. Her fingertips were caked with dried blood from the nails she'd broken on Pete. Her thighs were sore and bruised from Pete forcing her legs apart with his knees. All this accompanied the god-awful pain in her belly from being taken so forcefully. It was apparent Pete Colburn had raped her yet again. *I don't even know which time this is. It got too depressing to keep count after the hundredth.* She glanced at the new diamond necklace on her bedside table with disgust. The note inside the box fit the usual format:

I'm so sorry about last night.

-Love Pete

“Ma,” she heard Matt call from the other side of the door.

Natalie quickly stashed the necklace in a drawer and covered her bruised thighs with a blanket. “You may enter, young Master Colburn.”

Matt walked in and sat next to her. She barely recognized her adopted son. He had grown up to be so tall, strong, and handsome.

Matt asked in his deep southern accent, “is everything alright? I’m worried about you, Ma.”

Natalie squeezed Matt’s hand and assured him, “everything is fine. I told you Pete stopped torturing me long ago. How many times must I inform you, young Master Colburn, you are a grown man now. It’s no longer appropriate to call your mammy Mother... nor was it ever appropriate.”

Matt gave her a nod and squeezed her hand back with a grin. “How many times must I inform you that I’m not your master? I’m your son, and I will continue to call you mother.”

Natalie smiled. “Should I have Mable make breakfast for your lover? I know she spent the night again.”

Matt shook his head no. “Lilly isn’t my lover. She’s just a friend.”

Natalie gave her son a suspicious glare and berated him, “truly? Is that why you woke up at damn near noon, reeking of booze after a long night of drinking and lovemaking?” Matt’s face turned bright red with embarrassment as his mother continued, “when will you stop using that

girl and put a ring on her finger? You've been in a relationship with her for three years."

"If you must know, Lilly and I don't have a relationship, just a well understood agreement," Matt explained as his humiliation subsided. "The moment Pete chooses a suitable wife for me Lilly and I will end things. It wouldn't make sense to put a ring on Lilly's finger when the law won't recognize it."

Natalie shook her head disapprovingly. "You're so intelligent and yet know so very little about love. Sometimes when a person loves someone, he or she will accept a lesser relationship. Men will settle for being friends with women they'd rather be romantic with. Women will settle for leisure sexual relationships when they would rather have a commitment. We do this because it's better to have a piece of the one we love than none at all. You're going to break that girl's heart."

Matt stood up in frustration. "Ma, I think you of all people should know there's no such thing as love! It's a fairytale, hokum, complete and utter hogwash! How many times has my brother Pete said he loves you? Hell, how many times has he said he loves us both? Love is just an excuse to treat the people closest to you badly."

Pete stepped into the doorway. "Meet me downstairs little brother. I have a big surprise for you."

Matt glared at Pete with anger and suspicion.

"It's alright, go," Natalie assured him.

Once Matt left, Pete closed the door behind him. He humbly climbed down on his knees at Natalie's bedside. Pete still looked the same as he always had. He was thirty years old but didn't look a day over nineteen. He was a large man with broad shoulders and jet-black hair. His eyes were a pale blue, ice cold, and emotionless.

Pete wrapped his massive hand around Natalie's, and said with a southern drawl, "I don't know what causes me to lose my temper or why I do the things I do. All I can say is that I love you and I'm sorry."

Natalie glared down at Pete with pure contempt. *Women who don't know you find you charming, handsome, and simply irresistible. After all, you are a Colburn, and the Colburns breed generations and generations of beautiful monsters. I know you, Pete Colburn. You are a heartless empty shell of a man. I'm not fooled one bit by your chiseled looks, your wit, or your charm. To me, you look like just what you truly are: pure evil*

manifested in the flesh.

“Will you forgive me, Natalie?” Pete implored her.

Natalie took away her hand. “What I don’t understand is how you can make this same speech a thousand times and still make it sound as genuine as the first. If I didn’t know better, I might actually believe that you mean it.”

Pete slipped back the cover baring Natalie’s naked legs. He began gently kissing the bruises on her thighs. He caressed the tender flesh affectionately, spreading his fingers over her soft skin.

He looked up at her and vowed, “I know you have no cause to believe me, but I will change for you. When was the last time this happened?”

“Six months ago,” Natalie answered with tears in her eyes. “It used to be a lot more often.”

Pete grazed her ear with his lips as he whispered, “you see, I am getting better.”

She broke down and sobbed at his words. *I hate seeing him like this. I want to believe him but I know better. It would be so much easier to hate him if he was evil all the time. Why can’t he just be evil all the time!*

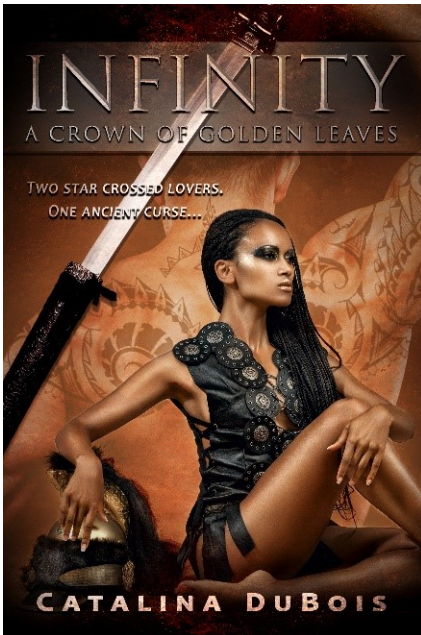
Pete embraced her as she cried, but not in a harsh way. He gingerly stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head. “I’m so sorry, Natalie, so very sorry.”

Desperately torn between Jekyll and Hyde, Natalie spoke into his chest, “I forgive you, Master Colburn. I always do.”

Natalie couldn’t harbor hatred. She just didn’t have it in her. Pete took one of her hands, brought it to his lips and delicately kissed her palm. She met his gaze for just a moment before looking away; refusing to allow herself to be further taken by his false affection. She used her free hand to tug on her bell pull. This summoned her maid to help her dress. It was the subtlest way she could ask Pete to leave.

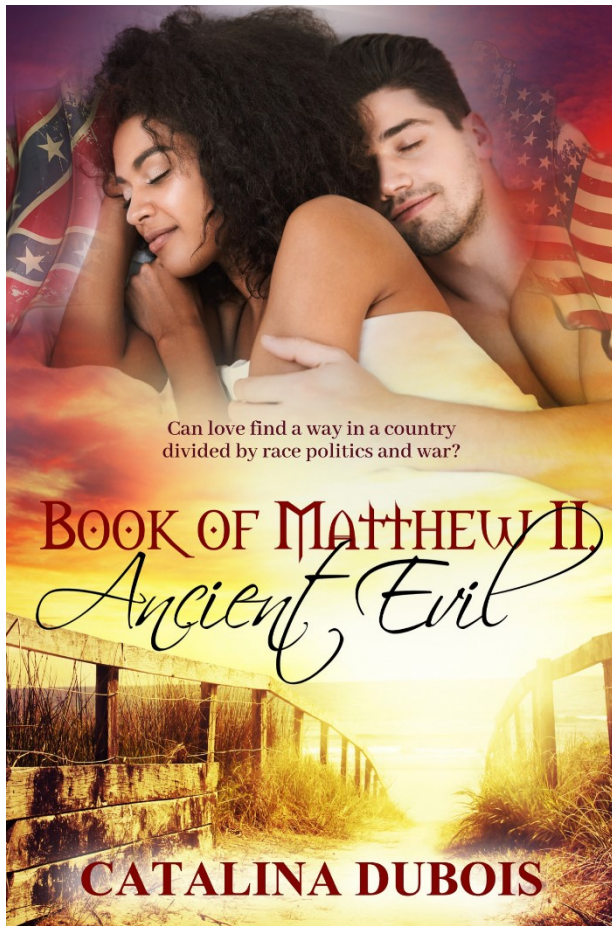
He took the hint and rose to his feet. He gave her a respectful nod, and walked out the door, with thoughts as heavy as anvils. Pete examined his neck in the hallway mirror. *It’s apparent that I attacked Natalie last night, but where did these scratches on my neck come from? They’ve almost completely healed. They’re at least three or four days old...*

Two star crossed lovers. One ancient curse...



Available on barnesandnoble.com

Coming soon...



Matthew and Sarah are at the center of another murder plot as America is ravaged by Civil War. He was a wealthy plantation heir and she was a lowly slave when a forbidden romance sparked between them. This teenage love affair had caused a jealous psychopath to nearly end Matthew's life. Determined to put the past behind him and make the most of his second chance, Matthew enlists in the war. He fights for the freedom of others until the moment he is betrayed, ambushed, and captured. Matthew must discover if this new threat is a repeat of the past or something even darker, an ancient evil...