

REVELATIONS:



*The Colburn Curse*

Catalina DuBois

REVELATIONS: The Colburn Curse  
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**Warning: violence, sex, and offensive language.**

## *Critics are saying...*

“*Revelations* is the extraordinary gateway that the House of Whispers series deserves. Catalina DuBois is a skilled writer who is able to flesh out her characters in a time long past with an authenticity that is as hauntingly engrossing as it is evocative. I loved how the suspense carries throughout, but mostly I enjoyed the better understanding of DuBois' meaty setup to a family saga with all the right elements to keep me turning pages.”

*-Readers' Favorite Reviews*

“*Revelations: The Colburn Curse* contains rich tidbits of various genres, and they all blend flawlessly into one breathtaking piece. DuBois is a master of the plot twist. I was two breaths away from an audible gasp. Having read several other books by the author, I can say this one is, by far, my favorite. When you can finish a book and feel immediately like rereading it, you know you have found a keeper.”

*-Literary Titan*

“This fast-paced narrative is a blend of historical whodunit and romance fiction. It's a tale of intrigue, passion, and betrayal. Unveiling a lot of secrets, this plot-driven novel is engrossing. I just couldn't put it down. The book is full of fascinating twists and turns. Catalina struck a fine balance of love and mystery. The characters are lively and realistic. I could easily relate to them. Pete and Matt, though hardened by life's circumstances, are memorable. Overall, this well-written novel is compelling. It's a pleasurable read.”

*-Online Book Club*

## DEDICATION

Emmanuel, thank you for your hard work on all things tech.

Yours truly,  
Catalina

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Josh and Shatara for inspiring this tale.

## 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

**M**att 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...*



## CHAPTER 2:

### THE COLBURN CURSE

**M**att marveled at the brand new stagecoach Pete bought for him. It was immaculate. The interior was upholstered in fine red velvet. Every part of the carriage glimmered in the afternoon sunlight.

Matt ran his fingers over the beautiful black finish and asked with mild skepticism, “it’s beautiful, Brother, but I must inquire as to the occasion.”

Pete reacted with false shock. “Does one need an occasion to dote upon his favorite brother?”

Matt narrowed his eyes at Pete. *I’m not your favorite brother. I’m just the only one who stuck around. The others grew tired of your reign of tyranny. They married early and got the hell out.* “You only buy me things to make up for wrongdoing. The greater the gift, the greater the offense was against me. Pete, this is the grandest present you’ve ever graced me with. I demand to know! How have you wronged me, Brother?”

Pete laughed. “This stagecoach is to congratulate you.”

“On what,” Matt snapped.

“You’re getting married, little brother!” Pete announced triumphantly. “I found you a suitable wife. Her father is wealthy, and most willing to pay a handsome dowry.”

“Oh...Uh...Um... I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you’ll move to Missouri because that’s what you’re going to have to do.”

Just as Matt was getting ready to respond, he noticed Lilly standing in the doorway. Her mouth was open in shock. Her eyes were filled with tears.

Pete whispered awkwardly as the blank expression covered Matt’s face, “sorry, I didn’t know she was here.”

Pete watched with slight amusement. *Matt has the inability to lie, zero tact, and absolutely no charm. This girl is going to maim him, and yet I can’t look away.*

Lilly stormed across the courtyard.

Matt called after her, “Lilly wait! I haven’t even agreed to do it!”

Lilly stopped. “But you will! I know you, Matt. If it doesn’t make dollars it doesn’t make sense to you.”

Matt grew silent, wishing he could tell Lilly she was wrong, but he knew deep down she was right about him. He did worship money, and he did conform to tradition. “We both knew this had to happen at some point.”

Pete shut his eyes and shook his head. *Bad move little brother. Stop while you’re ahead. You’re only digging yourself in deeper.*

Tears flowed down Lilly’s cheeks. She slapped Matt hard. “You bastard! I knew your brother messed you up, but I had no clue just how badly. When I settled for our little agreement I thought that maybe one day you’d become capable of having human feelings and change your mind. I thought perhaps if I was patient, loving, and understanding enough you might grow something resembling a heart and eventually give it to me. Now here you stand ready to throw away three years on a girl you’ve probably never met. I was so foolish.”

*Yep, you were foolish, and here comes the final nail in the coffin,* Pete chuckled in anticipation of Matt’s damning response.

Matt called after Lilly as she walked away, his jaw still stinging from her slap, “I didn’t think anyone would get hurt! You always seemed so independent! How was I to know you’d get all crazy and emotional on me?”

Lilly stopped midstride and made an about-face. Her nostrils flared

and her eyes reddened like that of a raging bull. The veins on her temples pulsed. “I’ll show you crazy and emotional!” Lilly picked up a fallen tree branch and charged in the direction of Matt’s new stagecoach. She swung with all her might and shattered one of the windows. She swung again and shattered another. “Now that was emotional!”

“Hey!” Pete stormed in her direction, grabbed Lilly by the arm, and reared back to strike her.

Matt shoved his brother and warned, “don’t you dare raise a hand to her! I’ll kill you if you ever hurt her!”

“Calm down, Matt!” Pete said. “I wouldn’t have hurt her! I was just trying to make her stop.”

Lilly made her escape as they argued. Matt took off after her. He had to run to catch up.

He called out with heaving breaths, “I know... you probably hate me... but can I at least give you a ride home?”



Back in the mansion, Mable, Pete’s well-compensated snitch, watched the entire mishap from the kitchen window. She laughed hysterically as the events unfolded. Mable was a black woman in her early thirties. As far as looks went, she was as plain as they come. She had an average face, an average body. She was a perfect five. The only redeeming physical quality she possessed was her smile. She had the smile of an angel, heavenly and divine. Every tooth was a perfect ivory white, straight without being so much as a fraction out of place. Mable knew her goddess-like smile was her only physical asset. She was extremely proud of it, but she only smiled after doing something terrible. She was grinning her head off right now.

Natalie entered the kitchen. “You went and got that girl, didn’t you? You knew what Pete was going to tell Matt, and you wanted to make sure Lilly heard it.”

“Yep,” Mable answered smugly.

Natalie shook her head. “Why Mable? Why are you only happy when others are miserable? You yearn to cause conflict. You live to

cause pain.”

“I ain’t the one who slept with that girl fo three years and then burned her like yesterday’s garbage! Ya shoulda raised him better!”

Most days Natalie didn’t allow the things Mable said and did to get to her, but sometimes it was as if Mable knew exactly how to cut people. Natalie shot back, “I swear you were blessed with a divine gift for being the most godawful, wretched, horrible, scathing bitch who ever lived! You just hate everything.”

Natalie stormed out and slammed the kitchen door. She never had a harsh word to say about anyone. Mable had a talent for bringing out the worst in people.

Mable huffed and returned to her cooking. *The nerve of that cow, blaming me fo Master Matt’s actions. He brought this on himself.*



Lilly sat across from Matt in the horse-drawn carriage as it ventured down the road. She looked out the window avoiding his gaze. Her arms were firmly crossed over her chest. Matt did the wise thing this time and kept quiet, knowing there was nothing he could say to comfort her.

The carriage drew closer to Lilly’s mansion, which was almost as nice as his was. He met her because they grew up in the same social circle.

Blacks and whites weren’t allowed to marry legally in New Orleans, so some wealthy white men would enter an agreement with a black or biracial girl’s father. They would promise to give a lifetime of love and financial support to these girls. The couples would have a wedding ceremony, live in a marriage-like state, and even have their children christened. Lilly was the product of such a relationship. The only problem was that the law didn’t recognize it.

Lilly’s father left her mother after more than twenty years of being practically married. He claimed it was time to have a legitimate heir, and legally married a white girl, young enough to be his granddaughter. Mr. A’Rue now lives with his new wife and two replacement children in Baton Rouge. He never visits Lilly or her brothers, nor does he support



them financially. He left them the estate and they were lucky to get that.

Lilly signaled the carriage to stop a quarter mile from her front door.

Matt stated as the carriage came to a halt, “you’ve been doing that since I returned from school last week. Why can’t I take you all the way to your doorstep?”

“What does it matter?” Lilly replied sounding somewhere between mentally exhausted and completely irritated.

Matt questioned, “your brothers don’t like me, do they? What did I do to fall out of favor with them?”

Lilly informed him in the same somber tone, “my brothers are upset over something Pete did, or rather something they believe you allowed Pete to do.”

Matt’s heart raced. His mind grew overwhelmed with anger and concern for Lilly. He became sick to his stomach and demanded answers. “What happened while I was away at school? What did Pete do?”

Lilly jumped out of the stagecoach. “I don’t want to talk about it!”

“What did Pete do!” Matt followed her up the path to her house.

“You were willing to trade me in for some random girl twenty minutes ago! What the hell do you care?”

“I can’t fathom the thought of you getting hurt. Please tell me he didn’t hurt you.”

“It’s over between us! It doesn’t matter anymore!”

“It matters to me!”

Lilly looked up at him. “You have your brother’s temper. No good will come of telling you.”

“I’m begging you, Lillian. I have to know,” he insisted with a caress of her cheek.

Lilly stopped a few yards shy of her front door. She took a deep breath and told him, “I found out I was pregnant after you left for school.”

“Oh God, I had no idea.” Matt reached for her hand.

She jerked away with tears in her eyes. “I hid it for as long as I could, but I eventually started to show. I had no choice but to inform my brothers. They went to Pete and asked him to send word to you. A couple of weeks later Pete sent his carriage for me. I enquired as to whether or not he’d heard from you. He replied that he would do us both a favor. He

swung a board and hit me across the belly with it. I lost the baby that night. I damn near lost my life.”

The door swung open. Lilly’s four brothers filed out on the porch. The two middle brothers were wielding poker irons. The youngest clutched a machete and a large pile of rope.

Seth, the oldest, aimed a gun at Matt. “I warned your rotten brother to keep you away from my sister.”

Matt’s heart pounded in his chest. He boldly replied as he stared down the barrel of the rifle, “Seth, you know you’ll hang for shooting me.”

“Not if they never find your body. This is a very large estate, Mr. Colburn.”

Lilly stepped in front of Matt and said to her brothers, “it’s over between us. Matt was just leaving.”

At her words, the furious mob filed back into the house.

Seth called back to her, “make it quick. You have a visitor.”

Matt looked into Lilly’s dark eyes and vowed, “I swear to you if I had known what Pete did he wouldn’t be breathing right now.”

“You are the dumbest smart person I’ve ever met!” Lilly replied with total frustration. “How can you be so self-absorbed and emotionally retarded, not to notice when the people closest to you are in pain? You said your mother asked why you didn’t get up until noon but did you even bother to ask her why she was still in bed?”

“What are you trying to say?” Matt reluctantly questioned.

“I’m going to let you in on a little secret, a revelation if you will. Natalie lies to protect your feelings. Pete never stopped raping your mother genius! She just got better at hiding it from you!” Lilly gave him a bitter look. “If you’re too blind to see what’s going on under your own roof, then you’ll never understand what happened to me! You’ll never be able to plead ignorance again, Matt Colburn.”

“Ouch!” Matt shouted as Lilly snatched out a piece of his hair.

She twisted the lock between her fingers with a determined gaze. “I curse you and all your male relatives! From this day forth you will know the lives that you create and therefore destroy!”

Lilly stormed into the house and slammed the door behind her. She screamed at the sight of a shadowy figure in her anteroom.

“Nice to see you too,” the fellow chuckled at her.

He was a striking gentleman, of mixed race.

She tucked Matt’s hair into her bodice and snapped at the man, “well when it rains it pours if it isn’t the wretched ex.”

“Is that any way to greet an old friend,” Kyle asked in a playful manner, before noticing her eyes were red with tears. “Are you alright?”

Lilly rolled her eyes. “I was merely being dumped. While I’m on the subject of selfish bastards who dumped me, what do you want, Kyle?”

“Ouch,” he said with a smirk. “You can’t hate me forever.”

“I can sure as hell try,” she assured him.

“What’s a bastard, Mr. Kyle,” asked a small child.

At that moment, Lilly noticed two little girls peeking out from behind his legs. They looked like ragamuffins: barefoot, with holy dresses, and matted hair all over their heads. Kyle ran an orphanage for needy children and these poor souls were obviously new arrivals. He himself had been the unwanted, half black, heathen child of a rich white girl. He was left on the doorstep of an orphanage and later adopted by rich people. For this reason, unwanted children held a special place in his heart. He could relate to their pain and their loneliness. Despite his parents’ wishes, he never forgot where he came from. He was always looking for a way to give back to his community, and he found it with the orphanage.

Kyle introduced the girls, “This is Mary in the blue, and Margaret is in the red.”

It was a good thing he pointed at each child. Their dresses had turned such a dingy shade of brown the colors were barely discernible. The children had been so poorly kept their hair was beginning to dreadlock in places.

Lilly smiled. She bent down until she was eye level with the little ones. “Would you girls like some cookies?”

They nodded faster than she could finish the question. Lilly led Kyle and the girls into the kitchen.

Lilly prepared a snack for the girls and shot Kyle a dirty look. “Let me guess you’re here because they need dresses.”

As the girls munched on the oatmeal raisin delights, Kyle grinned and reached for a cookie. Lilly smacked his hand hard.

He retreated with an indignant look and answered Lilly's question, "I've found a family who's considering adopting both sisters. I want the girls to look spectacular so they can make an impression. If this meeting works out, I won't have to split them up. I hate splitting up brothers and sisters."

Lilly shook her head. "There are other tailors."

"None as skilled as you."

Lilly grinned involuntarily at his flattery.

Kyle added, "Plus you know I'm on a budget."

"I already know. Other than donations from the Catholic Church, you run the orphanage out of your own pocket, but how do you expect me to earn a living if I keep making clothes for next to nothing?"

As the girls finished their snacks Kyle instructed, "now what do you say?"

"Merci, Mademoiselle Lilly," the little ones chimed in unison.

Those tiny voices melted Lilly's heart and she folded... as usual. "Alright, leave them here so I can get started, but I can't afford to keep doing this."

"I know, thank you so much." Kyle planted a kiss on her hand that sent tingles up her arm.

Lilly shook it off and asked with a grin, "how's my goddaughter?"

Kyle shook his head and let out a long slow breath, "Growing up way too fast. She used to be so much easier. Now everything's a debate. Anytime she doesn't get her way it's the end of the world."

"Saoirse is a teenager, or at least soon to be. It comes with the territory," Lilly assured him. "Speaking of Saoirse's pending birthday, I have a gift for her."

Lilly pulled a circular box from a cabinet. She lifted the lid revealing a dazzling tiara with crystals and gleaming sapphires.

"Ooooo," the little girls commented.

Lilly informed him, "it's for good luck. I wore it to my coming out party. It got me the man I fancied." She gazed at him with a hint of longing, a half smirk appearing on her face. "Even if I didn't get to keep him."

Kyle smiled at her hint, blushed at her flirting, and then his look turned serious. "Lilly, you already know how I feel about parading my

thirteen-year-old daughter like a piece of meat for the most eligible bachelors. I don't like the idea of a coming out party at all, but if I must host one for her, it won't be until she's at least eighteen."

Lilly gasped. "Such a thing is unheard of! Most girls of high social standing are introduced into society by age twelve. You're far too overprotective of her."

Kyle shrugged, not caring the least bit about what society saw as appropriate for his daughter. *I'm always at odds with society over my opinions of how children should be treated. I was ridiculed for saying eight-year-old boys shouldn't be forced to work twelve hours a day. I was further taunted for declaring that twelve-year-old girls shouldn't be forced into arranged marriages. Has the whole world gone mad? Or have I?*

"It's the way things have always been," Lilly insisted.

"I don't care how things have always been. I care about what's right."

Lilly backed down. *There's no way I'm winning this argument, and I don't want to get Kyle up on his soapbox again.* Lilly nodded. "Next time don't show your face around here without bringing my goddaughter."

Kyle agreed and rose from the table with an appreciative smile. "Thank you again."

Lilly took the girls by the hand and watched him walk away. She took a deep breath and gathered her nerve. *It's now or never.* She called after him, "I'll need a favor in return."

He stopped in his tracks, and agreed at once, "absolutely."

Lilly smiled. "Aren't you going to ask me what it is first?"

Kyle dreamily gazed over his shoulder at her. "It doesn't matter. You know I'd do anything for you."



Matt rode in his stagecoach overwhelmed and devastated by all the revelations thrust upon him. He had no clue as to what Lilly's threat meant. He knew that her mother had dabbled in voodoo and hoodoo, but

was there really such a thing as a curse? *Impossible*, he concluded as he rode away. His logical mind just couldn't comprehend it.

Matt checked the barrel of his firearm and then loaded it. He sharpened the blade of his pocket knife to the point of splitting hairs. *Now I see the true reason for my fancy new stagecoach. Lilly already knew why Pete bought it for me. That's why she sought to destroy it.* Matt slipped the blade back into his pocket. He gripped the handle of the gun in fury. *Pete, you are going to pay for what you did! As God is my witness you will pay!*

## CHAPTER 3:

### THE HANGMAN'S NOOSE

**M**att kicked in the door to Pete's office and hurled a knife. It swept through the air, flipping end over end. Pete sprung up. The blade barely missed his face. It embedded in the wall just behind him. Matt stormed in, his gun drawn. Pete dove behind his desk.

"I endured a lifetime of your abuse!" Matt hollered. "All I ever asked is that you do not lay a hand on Lilly! Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

Pete called from underneath the desk, "I didn't lay a hand on her! I laid a board on her, and I paid her to keep quiet about that. I want my money back."

"Wrong answer!" Matt shot the desk Pete was hiding under. The bullet blasted through the wood.

It struck Pete's arm and he howled in pain. "Are you crazy Matt! Would you really kill your own brother!"

Matt reloaded. "You better start praying to whoever it is you pray to!"

Matt closed in on Pete. He now had a clear shot at him. Matt pulled back the hammer, full ready to end Pete's life.

"Give me the gun young Master Colburn!" Natalie called from the doorway.

Matt asked as he gripped the weapon, “after all he’s done you would protect him, Ma!”

“I’m not protecting him. I’m protecting you,” Natalie answered. “I didn’t endure sixteen years of abuse just for you to end up in prison.”

“You should listen to her,” called the voice from under the desk.

“Shut up!” Matt yelled at Pete, before turning to his mother. “So it’s true then. He never stopped abusing you.”

Natalie referred to Matt in a way she hadn’t in many years, “son, I am begging you to put the gun down.”

Matt released a yell of utter frustration and surrendered the firearm.

Pete rose from his hiding place with a hand pressed over his bleeding wound. “forgive me, Brother. I was only trying to do what was best for you. Do you truly believe it in your best interest to have a bastard black child with Lilly?”

“I believe I should’ve had a choice in whether or not I had a child with her! You took that from me,” Matt replied with anger and disdain.

Pete sincerely spoke with a hand on Matt’s shoulder, “I’m sorry, Matt. I truly feel horrible about your baby. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Matt glared at him, still fuming. *I hate seeing Pete like this. It would’ve been so much easier to shoot him if he was a scoundrel all the time.* Matt took a deep breath and grudgingly replied through clenched teeth, “I’m sorry I tried to kill you. Are you injured badly?”

“Just a flesh wound,” Pete assured him.

Natalie chimed in to lighten the mood. “So I hear you’re getting married, young Master Colburn, congratulations.”

Pete added as Natalie tied her handkerchief over his wound, “speaking of which, I never got a chance to tell you her name.”

Matt interrupted in a somber tone, “her name matters not. As long as she’s rich I’m going to marry her.”

Pete was beaming. This was an exceptionally proud moment for him. His little brother had grown up to be as power driven and money hungry as he.

Natalie told Matt, “you don’t seem too happy about this engagement.”

“I had to end things with Lilly today,” Matt admitted. “You were



right, Ma. I broke her heart. I feel terrible.”

Natalie wasn't the type to say I told you so. She only informed her son, “it sounds like Lilly's wasn't the only heart to get broken.” She squeezed his hand. “It will be alright young Master Colburn. I know it hurts right now, but this too shall pass.”

Natalie left the office and Pete asked Matt, “are you sure you don't want to know your fiancée's name?”

“Fine, tell me her name if you must,” Matt grumbled.

Pete announced with excitement, nearly taking a bow, “A'lice Charlevoix.”

Matt replied with shock and confusion, “how in God's name did you pull that off? The Charlevoixs are one of the four wealthiest and most powerful families in France.”

Pete took his long-awaited bow and Matt asked, “what's the catch?”

“Her father merely requires a little favor from you.”

“I knew there was a catch! What does he want?”

Pete passed Matt a sealed letter. “Destroy this as soon as you've read it.”

Matt read the letter in all of five seconds and ripped it up. He tossed it in the garbage. “Absolutely not! I want no part of a sex scandal! You knew better than to even ask.”

“You can and you will! Mr. Charlevoix won't continue to do business with us unless you do! Our profits will plummet 22.09315%! I went through a lot of trouble to find you a bride from such a well-established family! You will show me some appreciation!”

“Brother, I'm not trying to be ungrateful,” Matt humbly explained. “I'm just not sure I can do all this right now.”

Pete called out as Matt walked away, “if you grant me this one favor I'll sign Natalie over to you.”

Matt stopped in his tracks. He'd been trying for years to persuade Pete to free his mother. Matt even offered to buy Natalie from Pete on numerous occasions. Pete refused to part with her until now.

Matt stomped back over to Pete and growled, “I swear to God if you're lying, next time it won't just be a flesh wound!”

“Your mother's freedom, even her life, rests on your decision. What is your answer?”

“You would bank my mother's freedom on this! That's not a choice or a decision! It's a god damned ultimatum!”

“Call it what you wish but her fate rests with you,” Pete replied with an outstretched hand.

Matt reluctantly agreed and shook on it. Pete removed the shreds of letter from the wastebasket.

He passed them to Matt. “I'd feel much better if you burned this. I'll return in a bit. I'm going to the French Embassy.”

“For what manner of business? Those people hate us.” Matt placed the torn-up letter in an ashtray, struck a match, and set it aflame.

Pete grumbled with a scowl, “I have a bone to pick with Ambassador Florian Lafayette. I hate that self-righteous, nigger loving, abolitionist.”



Ambassador Florian Lafayette arose late in the afternoon. He was a charming young man with sapphire eyes and light brown hair. There was a boyish cuteness about him that many women found irresistible. He glanced around his bedroom to find himself in the company of a pretty girl. She was seated at the bar in his room, wearing nothing but a bed sheet.

He smiled and spoke in a heavy French accent, “bonjour.”

She released a beautiful laugh. “Most folks would be shocked to rouse in the presence of a half-dressed stranger.”

“Well, it's not the first time I woke up in the company of an unfamiliar woman. Since I'm not wearing any clothes under these covers, and you're practically naked in my private chamber, I can only assume we had a wonderful evening.”

The girl clutched her sheet with an appalled expression. “We did no such thing.”

“Please accept my sincerest apologies, Mademoiselle. Was I too inebriated to please you? I can make up for that,” Florian offered as he climbed out of bed and slipped on his robe.

The girl bashfully looked away until he was covered. She playfully scolded him, “We didn't make love, Ambassador Lafayette, but yo

indiscriminate bed hopping does amuse me.”

He walked over to the bar and sat on the stool next to her. He poured himself a drink to chase away his hangover. Florian asked with concern, “If we didn’t make love and we’re not about to, I can only assume you’re here because you need my help. Are you a runaway, Mademoiselle?”

The girl sprung up from her seat with tears in her eyes. She cried out as she headed for the door, “I didn’t come here fo help. I came to warn ya. Yo life is in danger! Beware of the officer!”

“Wait!” Florian ran after her. He reached for her arm and gasped in utter disbelief. His hand went right through it. *I’m never drinking absinthe again. I couldn’t have possibly seen what I think I did.*

He sprinted down the hall in pursuit of her and stopped as he heard crying coming from a chamber. He entered the room and spoke to the mysterious woman, “please tell me who you are, Mademoiselle.”

“Ya a good man, Monsieur. Beware of the officer,” she cautioned.

Florian sat on the lounge. “What officer?”

The girl suddenly appeared next to him. She’d made it across the room in a fraction of a second. Florian jumped back. His heart raced.

He stammered, “are... you a ghost?” She nodded and he asked, “am I drunk or just dreaming?”

“Fo sake of yo sanity we’ll just say ya dreaming.”

“So beautiful woman of my dreams, why are you haunting me?”

“Because there’s a man who mean ya no good. He the unholy root of all evil.”

“Am I in danger for being an ambassador or an abolitionist?”

“Both.”

Florian urged the pretty woman in the sheet. “Who means me harm? What happened to you?”

He listened intently as she explained:

As I stood with the noose fastened around my neck, awaiting certain death, all I could find myself thinking was, I’ll never see my true love again. I suppose ya wondering why I had to die at the ripe old age of fifteen. So am I. It’s my fourth most contemplated question behind, why can I see the moon during the day sometimes, why do we need both **C** and **K** in the alphabet when they make the same exact sound, and the question I’ve wondered most often throughout my life is why everyone

can't be equal. Why am I a lesser person because of my African lineage? My name is Shelly and I'm a slave, or rather was a slave until my short vertical descent. Most believe my heart stopped the day I was hanged by the neck until dead. Truth is my heart ceased to beat the moment I laid eyes on him. Time stood still, the world disappeared, and all that remained was his face.

It was an extremely busy day at the auction. I wish I could say everyone was gathering to bid on antiques, but they here to bid on people. As usual, the crowd consists of plantation owners, pompous aristocrats, and perverts here to ogle naked slave women.

A fresh shipment of Africans just came in, and white people are clamoring to buy the sturdiest ones. The Africans are all chained together. A slave trader unshackles a teenage boy, strips him naked, and shoves him onto the block. An auctioneer with a lightning tongue rambles on while spectators poke and prod the boy. They check his teeth, even fondle his genitals. They begin to call out their bids.

Before long the auctioneer slams down the gavel, "Sold to the man in the black vest!"

Now they on to a teenage girl. I hang my head, knowing full well, it'll be my turn to be humiliated at some point. Like always, the slaves are frightened, confused, and utterly destroyed. They got husbands, wives, children, and parents they'll never see again. Like them, I use to cry at these events. Now I feel numb. I been bought and sold so many times the auction fails to devastate me anymo. I lost my ma and pa at my first auction and my brother at my second. I got no one else to lose.

I stand at the auction next to the lady, and I use that term loosely, who owns me. Mistress Gracie has to be the butt ugliest woman I ever seen. She got the figure of a grizzly, and a face meant fo catching flies with her tongue. Mistress Gracie, or as we slaves affectionately call her, Ribbit, usually smells like an unpleasant mixture of whiskey, prunes, and chewing tobacco. Her paper-thin lips twist into a pucker as she spits a thick glob of black saliva. She wipes the remainder from the corner of her mouth with the back of her massive hand. Disgusting! I hate when she does that. She such a damn calamity I can't help but laugh to myself.

She questions me with a furrowed unibrow, "what the hell is so funny? I can't wait to sell your sorry ass and get a less mouthy nigger."

As usual, I got a goofy smile plastered on my face. Normal folks wouldn't find being sold on the auction block to be funny, but I never claimed to be normal. I can find humor in almost anything; one of many traits my mistress hates about me. In fact, I can't recall anything she likes.

Ribbit abandons my thoughts as I see him walking past, the most striking man I ever seen. He got beautiful brown skin over a statuesque body. His eyes so dark and mysterious they could be mistaken for black. A blinding glimmer of sunlight reveals the chocolate brown of them mesmerizing orbs. Our eyes meet and lock together clear until he walks to his seat. His impeccable lips part in a smile and then he turns to his master. I hadn't even noticed I was holding my breath. How could just a passing glance, a chance encounter between strangers have left me breathless? If it wasn't for the heavy chains on my ankles and wrists I could float away.

Ribbit throws back her frog head and laughs, with every one of her brown teeth showing. "Who the hell are you looking at porker? You know very well a man like that would never take an interest in you."

"Ya right, Ma'am. Only men like yo husband would," I announce with a snide grin.

She slaps me so hard my face is stinging. It takes me a while to see straight again, but it's worth it. At least this time I gave her a reason to strike me. When my ears stop ringing I hear his master speak his name. That beautiful name will never leave me, *Malcolm*.

Master Welch, the brute who owns Malcolm, is a tall round man with dusty blond hair. His skin is red and sunburned rather than tan. He stretches out his suspenders and lets out a belch. He tips his gray cowboy hat to me once he sees me looking in that direction. I grow embarrassed and look away.

Malcolm reads Master Welch's lips as he asks, "how will we find you a wife if you won't even look at them?"

Malcolm pulls a notepad and pencil from his pocket and writes, "look how devastated they is. I can't look at these women cause I know they don't wanna be stripped in front of everyone and humiliated. This is very sad."

Master Welch laughs. "The only thing that's sad is the fact that

you're an eighteen-year-old virgin. You should take notes from my oldest son. He's been spanking slave pussy since he was a teenager. I made certain of that. He grew up strong because I was tough on him. Now he's a deputy, an officer of the law." Master Welch beams with pride.

Malcolm explains on paper, "none of the women on our plantation will touch me. They believe I'll give em deaf babies, even though I wasn't born deaf and both my parents can hear. They think I'm a freak."

Master Welch shakes his head, "I know. I would've forced one to marry you by now if it wasn't for the fact that slaves have a lot more children when they choose their own partners. I understand the dilemma you're in, but I'm running a business. So we'll find a girl who doesn't mind that you're deaf, so you can breed me some big strapping lads."

Malcolm sighs at the very thought of being bred like a horse, and his eyes rise to meet mine once again. He watches me as I walk all the way to the auction block.

Master Welch nudges Malcolm. "It looks like we have a winner. I didn't know you liked the voluptuous ones. I pegged you for a man who lusted for skinny girls. You haven't taken your eyes off of her since we arrived. She is a cute little thing isn't she?" As Malcolm goes to object Master Welch says, "Relax, I'm just going to have a chat with her."

Malcolm casts his eyes to the ground as they strip me naked on the block. The bit of respect he shows me is enough to get me through it. I ignore all the spectators and smile as I look at him not looking at me. As I stand in all my glory, Ribbit gives me an evil look.

"Jealous," I ask.

She rolls her beady eyes, and the fast-talking auctioneer goes into his pitch. "Next up is an experienced house servant, a very pretty girl around fifteen. We'll start the bidding at \$100. Can I get one-twenty-five? One-twenty-five in the back. Childbearing hips. Great for breeding. Can I hear one-fifty..."

A man reaches in my mouth and examines my teeth! I fight the urge to bite him. I got no choice but to endure the degradation. It should be over soon. The tooth examiner shouts, "Two-hundred!"

"Two-twenty-five," Yells the man next to him.

A stranger grabs my breast! I nearly throw a punch on reflex, which

woulda got me thrown in the stocks. I feared a pervert had accosted me, but it's merely a pregnant woman checking me for milk. She's out of luck. If I'd been "wet" as they call it that woulda made me more valuable. I coulda breastfed her brat, as well as any orphans on her plantation. The pregnant woman sighs and walks back to her husband. He questions her and she shakes her head no. These whores won't nurse they own babies and they dare to call us lazy.

The bidding continues, "Three-hundred!"

"Three-twenty-five!"

Master Welch wades through the crowd. "I see you watching my boy over yonder. Would the fact that he's deaf and unable to speak offend you?"

It's hard to hold a conversation while trying to cover yo privates, especially when animals is grabbing at ya from all directions. I feel filthy and low, but I bravely address this mountain of a man, "No Sir. Nothing about that man offends me."

"So you'll be able to... to... work with him then?"

"Yes Sir," I promptly assure him, not understanding exactly what he means.

Master Welch grins. Dollar signs appear in his brown eyes. "What can you do?"

Before I can open my mouth Ribbit declares, "my Shelly is a wonderful cook and chambermaid."

Master Welch questions her with one eyebrow cocked, "why are you getting rid of her?"

"I caught my husband fornicating with our last cook," Ribbit whispers. "So I sold the little whore and got this pudgy unspectacular girl. Now I see him eyeballing Shelly. From now on he's just going to have to deal with my cooking. No more female slaves."

Master Welch laughs and bids on me, "Four-hundred!"

"Four- twenty-five," shouts a young married couple.

Master Welch bids again, "Four-fifty!"

The auctioneer calls, "Four-fifty going once. Four-fifty going twice." He slams the gavel, "Sold to the man in the gray hat!"



I arrive at my new plantation an hour later. It's huge and puts me in the mind of a village. The workday just ended and over two-hundred servants is congregating in the slave quarters. Children is running about. Adults is gossiping and trading goods: soap, liquor etc. They all stare as Malcolm walks me to the infirmary, the typical awkward first day. It's time to start over, a new home, new folks, and new challenges.

Malcolm drops me off and quietly tips his hat to me. As he walks away I resist the urge to jump on his back and cling to him. He the only person I'm familiar with and all we shared was a brief introduction. It's amazing how one can be surrounded by many and yet feel utterly alone. I gather my nerve and enter the infirmary. The plantation nurse who runs it is dark and lovely, with black hair sprinkled with gray.

The nurse introduces herself, "welcome, everyone call me Aunt Lizzie."

"I'm Shelly," I inform her as I take a seat on one of the beds.

We make small talk while Aunt Lizzie examines me. She rubs ointment on my wrists and ankles. The shackles just about rubbed em raw. The cool ointment soothes the burning and eases the pain.

Aunt Lizzie happily says, "ya seem like a nice girl. I'm glad Malcolm finally found himself a wife. He really is a great young man."

"Wife! What!"

"I can't believe no one told ya. The main reason ya was brought here is to have babies with Malcolm. Yall due to be married on Sunday."

My mind races with apprehension and I frantically confess, "I think he good looking and all, but I hardly know him! Our wedding three days from now! I thought Master Welch was just asking me if I can work with Malcolm."

Aunt Lizzie begins to laugh hysterically, slapping the counter, and throwing her head back. "Master Welch want ya to work with him alright. Ya gonna be working directly underneath Malcolm."

The nurse stops laughing when she notices how frightened I am. It's the only joke I can recall not laughing at. He gonna break me in, in three



days. I ain't sure I'm ready.

She a real smart lady. It don't take her long to conclude, "Ya never been with a man, have ya?"

"No, Ma'am," I admit with tears in my eyes.

The nurse takes my hand and assures me, "It may hurt a little at first, but it ain't intolerable. Even then it's more so pressure than pain. Making love is something people enjoy doing. It's as natural as eating or breathing. Ya can sleep in the infirmary until yo wedding night."

"Thank ya. Ya very kind."

I'm grateful to her fo taking the time to explain things. I was taken from my folks so early in life no one ever had this talk with me. Just knowing what to expect is a bit of a relief. The door creaks and a lovely woman walks in. She's beautiful with caramel skin and long wavy hair.

She hugs me and exclaims, "Ya as pretty as a picture. I'm Diane, Malcolm's momma. My husband's name is Edward, but everyone calls him Preach. He'll be residing over yall wedding on Sunday."

The tears I fought to hold back begin to fall.

Diane's face fills with concern. "What's wrong, Honey?"

Aunt Lizzie fills her in, "Shelly a little nervous cause her and Malcolm just met."

Diane smiles brightly, takes me by the hands, and sits next to me. Her hazel eyes light up with glee. "I remember feeling the same way when I married Malcolm's father. I was only fifteen and he was twenty-five. We'd just met and I was scared, but there was something about that man. When ya know, ya know."

I hug her and gain a new confidence in my betrothal. I'll soon be blessed with a family, and that's something I ain't had in a while. Diane is the most delightful, upbeat, woman I ever met. She remind me a lot of my own momma, who taught me to always smile and keep my head up. My ma and Diane woulda got along great.

I smile despite my tears and tell Diane, "thank ya fo welcoming me into yo family."



Malcolm's father, Preach, is a large bear of a man, with dark skin, and a booming voice. He approaches Malcolm as he sands away on a partially finished wedding band. He'd been carving it from wood.

Preach says to his frustrated son, "he who finds a wife has found a great thing."

Malcolm signs with agitation, "please spare me the sermon. I barely know this girl. I ain't find a wife. One was purchased fo me."

"From what I hear she was purchased fo ya cause ya couldn't keep yo eyes off her. Ya chose that girl, not Master Welch." Preach assures his son, "Please remember that just cause ya gotta get married don't mean ya can't enjoy it. I was nervous when I married yo ma. I barely knew her, but things worked out."

Malcolm's scowl gradually fades. *My pa does truly love my ma.*

Preach goes on to say, "Malcolm, ya should introduce Shelly to Ashton and Devon."

Malcolm laughs and signs, "ya want her to meet the minions? Is ya trying to scare her off?"

"Son, ya never been sold, but I have. It's the worst feeling ever to end up in a strange place alone. Ya feel alienated."

Malcolm silently interjects, "Pa, I know exactly what it's like to feel alienated. I'm deaf, remember? The boss had to travel abroad to find me a wife cause no one would have me."

"Then ya should know firsthand how important it is to show Shelly she ain't alone."

Malcolm nods and signs, "I ain't even sure what to say to her."

Preach gives his son a proud slap on the shoulder. "When ya go to measure Shelly fo her ring this is what ya tell her..."



Malcolm walks into the infirmary with two small boys around age seven. They absolutely adorable. They remind me of my own brother. He just a little older than them.

Diane beckons them. "Come here, boys. I want yall to meet yo new mamma, Shelly." Diane points to the dark-skinned one. "This is

Ashton.” Then she points to the light-skinned one. “This is Devon.”

The boys chime, “nice to meet ya, Momma Shelly.”

“Nice to meet yall too,” I tell the boys, grinning from ear to ear.

In a matter of hours, I went from being totally alone to being a stepmom. It’s impossible to hide my excitement. The children hug me and run off to play.

Malcolm signs to his mom and she translates for me, “Ashton and Devon was torn from the arms of their mothers on the auction block. My son been looking after em ever since.”

I ask Diane, “how do I tell him he got beautiful children?”

She smiles and informs me, “ya just did. He reads lips very well.”

I look up at Malcolm as he smiles and mouths the words, “thank ya.” Then he signs to his mother, and Diane asks me, “Can ya read Honey?”

They both relieved when I nod yes. Most slaves is illiterate. Malcolm wouldn’t have been taught to read if Master Welch had an easier way of communicating with him. A Catholic nun taught me to read behind Ribbit’s back.

Diane goes on to say, “Malcolm may have to write ya notes until ya pick up his sign language.”

They both smile as I say, “I can’t wait to learn.”

Diane scolds her son, “what is ya doing out here? Ya know ya not supposed to see her until the wedding.”

Malcolm silently assures his mother with a few hand signals, “I just came out here to allow Shelly to meet the boys and measure her finger.”

His mother relays the message, and he sits next to me on the bed. I extend my hand. My heart leaps as Malcolm takes it. The fact that it’s trembling embarrasses me a little. He puts a string around my finger and cuts it to the appropriate length. The nurse gives us a coy smile and drags Malcolm’s momma out of the infirmary.

Diane stops in the doorway. “I’m gonna check on the boys. Don’t worry, I’ll be keeping them Sunday night and any other night yall kids need to be alone.”

The nurse snatches Diane out by her arm, and the door swings shut. We both become embarrassed at his ma’s not so subtle hint. Malcolm puts a hand over his face to hide the rouge emerging in his cheeks. He scribbles a note, passes it to me, and places his soft warm lips on my

cheek. Then he rises and walks toward the door. I read the note after he leaves.

*My lovely Bride to be,*

*I know ya nervous and so am I, but just cause we gotta get married don't mean we can't enjoy it. If yo heart is as warm as yo beautiful smile we gonna be great together. I promise as soon as I learn what makes ya happy, I'll do everything in my power to keep ya that way. Sweet Dreams.*

*Yo Fiancé,*

*Malcolm Welch*

I lied down on the bed and held his note close to my heart. I never had a lover and now I'm someone's fiancée. The feeling is fantastic but overwhelming. It took me forever to get to sleep. I wouldn't have slept at all if I'd known just how much danger I was truly in. My soulless murderer was right under my nose just waiting fo the right moment to strike; the right moment to end my life with impunity. Meeting Malcolm was the best thing to ever happen to me, but it was also the beginning of the end...

## CHAPTER 4:

### BEGINNING OF THE END

I am exhausted and I must report fo duty. It's still dark outside, and I'm so sleepy my eyes burning. I yawn repeatedly on the way to the big house. Now will be my first opportunity to dazzle my new owners. I can't help being nervous.

I enter the kitchen. It's small and cluttered with pots and pans. A twelve-year-old girl passes me a white apron and oven mitts. The girl already retrieved a few pails of clean water fo cooking and washing my hands.

I listen intently as the child informs me, "yo work day will be from 5am-5pm. Monday – Saturday. Anytime ya work past five or on Sundays ya get paid fo it. There's a break at 12pm. The chambermaids serve rations twice a day at 4am and 6pm. Since ya the head chef ya can just eat the white people's leftovers. When ya see what everyone else eats you'll certainly want to. It's alright to fish from the pond or hunt as long as ya ain't mo than an acre away from the slave quarters. If ya travel too far without a pass the overseers assume ya running away." She smiles thoughtfully. "I'm glad ya here to replace me. I know I shoulda appreciated being brought in from the field, but I never see my ma and pa anymo."

"I understand. I lost my family after I was sold," I assure her.

The girl gives me a brief tour of the kitchen and tells me what time to prepare the master's meals. She shows me where the preserves are kept, and points me in the direction of the smokehouse. Then she wishes me luck and leaves.

A beautiful chambermaid walks in wearing a black and white house servant's dress. She in her early twenties, got very fair skin, with a few freckles. She flips her long blonde hair and rambles off a food order with a nasty attitude, "my name is Liberty. I'm the matriarch here. Ya will do what I say exactly as I say it. As long as ya work in the house yo ass belongs to me. Yo position here ain't guaranteed. If Master Welch and his sons don't thoroughly enjoy this meal ya be picking cotton with the lowly field hands."

I roll my eyes and laugh in response to her sad concept of authority. She huffs and walks out the door. I load the old stove with wood, strike a match, and set it aflame. I tie on my apron, wash my hands, and begin to work my magic. I was born to cook. If it was possible I'd have my own restaurant. There ain't nothing like the smell of salty pork, and the sound of pancake batter sizzling in a skillet.

As I prepare the dishes I can't help but wonder about that light skinned chambermaid. Her obvious resemblance to Master Welch is impossible to ignore. Liberty is either his niece or his bastard. Her family ties and fair skin gain her the master's favor. Cause of this she thinks she's better than other slaves. I seen it a million times: classic HNS: House Nigga Syndrome.

The pompous bitch pokes her nose in the door and I call to her, "order up!"

I wait on pins and needles, hoping, praying. After a few minutes, Liberty comes in with a disgruntled look on her face. She beckons and snaps, "Master wishes a word with ya."

Damn it! I knew I shoulda used a pinch less salt in the gravy.

I follow Liberty to the elegant dining hall. Master Welch is sitting with his sons. I met em both the day befo when I first arrived. Deputy Welch is the oldest and looks like his father. Robert is around my age with scarlet hair and freckles. Robert is gorgeous and captivating much like his big brother, but the difference lies in his eyes. Robert's big blue eyes are warm, open, and loving. He seems out of place with this family

of stern orderly men. I let out a sigh of relief. They all smiling, but I can't be too sure of myself. Some tyrants smile while reprimanding others. They find it amusing.

Master Welch rubs his massive gut. "That was the best meal I've ever had. The gravy was perfect."

Whew, thank God. I've heard nothing good about the cotton field. Deputy Welch and Robert shower me with compliments of their own. I modestly thank them. Liberty huffs in frustration.

Master Welch gives a hearty laugh. "If you're as good in the sack as you are in the kitchen Malcolm's a very lucky man."

I chuckle at his inappropriate joke, even though the thought of making love still scares me a little. The smile fades from Deputy Welch's face. He snaps at his father, "you brought her here to marry that freak?" He turns to me. "I feel sorry for you sweetheart. You didn't exactly get the pick of the litter. No other woman will touch Malcolm."

"Then I shall be a very happy bride," I joke with a smile.

Master Welch and Robert laugh, but Deputy Welch grows angry. He storms from the dining hall with his breakfast half finished. What on earth did my betrothed ever do to him?



The day passed at a snail's pace. I had been hoping for just a glimpse of Malcolm but hadn't been so lucky. It's almost noon and I ain't seen him all day. I reach for my oven mitts when I'm certain tonight's dessert is done. German chocolate cake is my specialty.

"Owe!" I been poked by something sharp. My finger is bleeding. I suck my sore digit and shake my left mitt out on the stove. My heart rejoices when I find a red rose and a blood-stained love note, asking me to meet him for break. I smell the rose and kiss the love letter. I flip over a shiny pot and glance at my reflection. I look a total mess, so I quickly fix my hair, and dash out the door.

I ask my predecessor on the way to the pond. "Why didn't ya warn me about that haughty Liberty?"

"I never had a problem with her. In fact, ya the only one I ever seen

her be rude to.”

The girl runs off to be with children her age while I ponder what the hell I coulda done to Liberty? I venture forward. Malcolm is alone at the pond. My heart jumps into my throat. I assumed the children would be with him. That woulda made this meeting less awkward. Since we alone it ain't a meeting. It's a date. Malcolm meets me halfway. He smiles and relieves me of the plentiful basket of goodies I smuggled from the kitchen. He puts an arm around me and walks me to the beautiful shimmering pond.

I set out the smorgasbord of finger sandwiches and fresh fruit. “Where's Ashton and Devon? I brought enough fo all of us. I figure it would be a vacation from the gruel they serve us at ration time.”

Malcolm pulls out a pad of paper and writes, “my ma is keeping the boys right now. It was very thoughtful of ya to bring us treats. The ration food is awful.”

“I assumed Liberty was just another pompous light skinned girl, but I found out that ain't true. I got no clue what I did to offend her.”

Malcolm smiles and jots, “don't mind Liberty. She just jealous cause ya so much mo beautiful than she is.”

“Thank ya, but I just don't see this gorgeous woman ya speak of.”

He quickly scribbles, “then ya ain't looking very hard. I wanna start this marriage out right. So I'll put everything in the open. Liberty and I had a thing, but she would only be with me in secret like she was ashamed of me or something. I grew tired of her and broke it off long ago. Shelly, ya were right in assuming she's a stuck up light skinned girl. Is there anything ya wanna to tell me?”

I'm so ashamed I never had a lover I almost wanna make one up, but I go with the truth. “As pathetic as it sounds. I never been in a relationship.”

He writes, “I'm a preacher's kid. I find yo innocence endearing, not pathetic. I'm a virgin too.”

I tell him in utter disbelief, “ya so good looking. Ya mean to tell me ya and Liberty never...”

He shakes his head no. “She wasn't the one, and I don't believe in sex befo marriage. By the way, thank ya fo the compliment.” He gasps as he notices the bandage on my finger. He writes with concern, “did ya



burn yoself in the kitchen?”

“No, I pricked my finger on a thorn from the rose.”

He kisses my finger and replies with disappointment, “I’m sorry. I was trying to be romantic.”

I touch his handsome face and joke, “I coulda lost a finger and what ya did woulda still been incredibly romantic. I woulda rejoiced and met ya for break with nine fingers.”

He laughs and it’s nice to see he enjoys my sense of humor. Most find my constant joking to be an irritation. I was never serious enough fo the men at my other plantations. They found me a bit childish.

As Malcolm and I sit by the beautiful shimmering pond he takes my hands in his. His beautiful dark eyes lock on mine and he leans in to kiss me. My heart races with anticipation of the moment our lips will meet, but that moment didn’t come. I jump back as Preach clears his throat and wags his finger disapprovingly.

Malcolm gives a coy shrug and his father scolds him, “this young lady ain’t yours to be kissing. Show her respect.”

Malcolm lets out an exasperated breath. He don’t attempt to hide his annoyance.

Preach beckons me. “Come so my wife can teach ya sign language.”

I do as I’m told. Preach is a nice man but I can tell he don’t tolerate nonsense. He reminds me a lot of my own pa. They woulda got along great. I glance back at my angry fiancé and do an imitation of his daddy. I put on a serious face, swell up my chest and flex my muscles. Malcolm snickers and I quickly pull myself together befo Preach catches me mocking him.



After cleaning the kitchen at the end of my work day, I pack up the leftover cake. I leave the big house and stop by the infirmary.

I ask the nurse, “is it alright if I turn in a little later tonight?”

“Is ya sneaking off to see Malcolm, young lady?” She questions me sternly.

She caught me off guard and I stammer, “well you see uh...”

Aunt Lizzie grins. “If ya leave me a slice of that cake I’ll cover fo ya.”

“Thank ya so much.”

I give her a large piece, creep out of the infirmary, and cross the slave quarters. I tap on Malcolm’s door and Ashton answers.

“I brought yall some cake,” I announce as I walk inside.

The chilren rejoice. The cabin is beautifully crafted and cozy. Next to Liberty’s, it’s the nicest one on the property. Most everyone else lives in a hovel with a dirt floor. Like any boy home, it’s a little messy and smells kind of weird. Toys and clothes are strewn about. Malcolm frantically cleans up the clutter. He’s so cute when he’s uncomfortable.

I snicker. “Ya have a beautiful home.”

Malcolm makes a few hand gestures that Ashton translates, “Papa Malcolm says thank ya. He built it his self after me and Devon came here. He left grandma and grandpa’s house to build this place so we could have mo space.”

Devon adds, “papa’s a carpenter. He builds a lot of things, and me and Ashton help.”

“Yall very talented,” I assure the chilren.

“Thank ya. Sorry, the house a mess Momma Shelly,” the boys reply as they help Malcolm tidy up.

“No, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have popped up unannounced. I’ll leave.” I reach for the doorknob.

Malcolm gently takes my hand. He smiles and shakes his head no. Malcolm signs away and Ashton translates, “Papa say this is yo home too. Ya always welcome here.”

I smile and fix everyone a slice of cake. For the first time, I’m sitting at the table with my new family. The children devour their deserts and Malcolm isn’t taking time with his.

Malcolm signs and Devon translates, “Papa Malcolm says it’s really good. He never had it befo.”

“German chocolate,” I ask the chilren.

“No, cake,” Ashton answers.

That’s slavery first hand. One could go an entire lifetime without enjoying the simplest of life’s pleasures, like cake. I can’t wait to show off the little bit of sign language I learned. I silently thank Malcolm with

my hands. He gives me an impressed nod and a grin.

Then I ask the children, “Have yall ever had cake befo?”

Devon answers, “yeah once, but it wasn’t as good as this. When the bad man brought Ashton and me home from the auction he gave us cake and milk.”

“Who’s the bad man?” I ask.

Ashton says, “Deputy Welch. He always yelling and lashing people.”

Malcolm snickers a little. We play cards with the children until bedtime. After putting Devon and Ashton to bed I get that same awkward feeling of being on a date.

I smile bashfully. “It’s getting late I should probably get some sleep.”

We stroll to the infirmary hand in hand. I can tell he’s taken the absolute longest route to get there, but I don’t mind. I never want this walk to end. As we approach the door I feel a little sad. The next two days will be the longest days of my life. Malcolm is so sweet and handsome. I can’t wait to marry him. Diane is right. When ya know, ya know.

I solemnly sign another new word I’ve learned, “Goodnight.”

Without warning, Malcolm takes me in his big strong arms and lays a phenomenal kiss on me. This kiss is mo than passionate and beautiful, it’s familiar. I kissed my husband of twenty years, not my fiancé of twenty hours. My heart stopped the moment I met him because it wasn’t the first time we met. I knew him in another life, another time and God has given him back to me. I stand dizzy from his kiss. He left me breathless. He scribbles a note and passes it to me. My heart smiles as I read it.

*I meant no disrespect, but we shouldn’t have to share our first kiss in front of everyone. It should be kept between the two of us because it’s sacred. I figure I’d lead the first kiss since ya gonna have to lead our first dance. I know it’s proper fo me to lead. I apologize fo my inability to, but I won’t be able to hear the music.*

I assure him, “it’s no problem at all fo me to lead that dance, but don’t ever apologize fo kissing me. Do it whenever you want.”

He gives me a naughty grin and passes me another note. “You’d never get any sleep if I did.”

“Then I shall never slumber,” I vow and place my lips upon his.

He wraps his arms around me and dances gracefully in my mouth. A warm tingle sweeps over my body at the unfamiliar sensation of his tongue massaging mine. It’s a long enticing kiss, but not long enough. He’d never be able to kiss me long enough.

We reluctantly bid farewell, and I watch him walk away. The moment he believes he’s disappeared from my sight he leaps three feet high and pumps his fist in the air. I swallow a giggle until I realize he can’t hear me anyway, and then I allow my laughter to roll out.



Our wedding reception smells of jasmine, finely cooked venison, and liquor distilled from corn and potato skins. The music is fast and rhythmic as folks play banjos, harmonicas, fiddles, and drums. Our wedding is held in the orchard and everyone in the compound showed up. Over two-hundred guests is smiling, laughing, dancing, and bearing homemade gifts. No one is staring judgmentally at us. We may not be perfect, but we perfect fo each other.

Malcolm picks me up and swings me around as we dance well into the evening. He don’t have to tell me how happy he is. I can see it, feel it, and I feel the same exact way. The very night I feared turned out to be the best night of my life until the music ceased.

My smile fades as Liberty makes an announcement, “please put yall hands together and clear the floor fo the father/daughter dance.”

Everyone applauds and clears the floor. They form a large circle around me. Everyone is staring, and I got no pa to dance with. My eyes fill with tears, while Liberty just stands there, clapping with an arrogant smirk on her face. Malcolm storms off to give her a firm talking to. As the two-hundred pairs of eyes fix on me, I never feel so alone in my life. I’m humiliated, and I turn to flee.

Preach takes my hand with a smile. “May I have this dance?”

I stand on my tiptoes and give my father in law a big hug. The musicians slow the music for us, and we begin to sway.

Preach whispers to me as I rest my head on his massive chest, “I know ya miss yo pa. I’m sorry he couldn’t be here, but sometimes family becomes those ya live with.”

I smile and thank him. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Malcolm fighting with Liberty. I grow a little jealous. She can communicate with my husband far better than me. She knows so much sign language he don’t have to read her lips at all. She signs right along with him the entire time. They must’ve been together quite a while. Soon Malcolm walks over to me and silently asks to cut in. Everyone joins us on the floor. Preach walks over to dance with Mrs. Preach. Malcolm gives me a new hand signal I just learned. I recognize it from the first night I snuck off to be with him.

“I’m sorry.”

I assure him, “It’s alright.”

Malcolm pulls me close and kisses me with lips that feel like pillows. I feel like a princess as our bodies move as one under the stars. Liberty watches us for a moment before her eyes begin to water. She snuffles lightly, heaves breathlessly, and buries her crying face in her hands. Liberty runs away with tears streaming down her cheeks. I feel sorrow for her rather than anger. Her childish pride caused her to lose a great man. I’ll never take him for granted.

After a few more songs, the guests begin to disperse. It’s well after midnight. Everyone but Malcolm and I have to work in the morning. Master Welch grants all newlyweds the day off after their wedding to encourage coupling. We walk to our home hand in hand. He sweeps me up in his arms and carries me over the threshold. We both laugh as he lays me on the bed. We’re a little buzzed off homemade hooch. He kisses me, caresses my body, and gently places himself upon me. I can feel him pressed against me. It’s now apparent that making love to Malcolm is going to hurt. I become so scared I’m shaking. I feel dirty like I’m doing something wrong. He stops.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him.

He writes me a note, “It’s alright, I’m nervous too. We can wait until

we know one another better. There's no rush."

"Can ya give me a couple weeks?" I ask.

He smiles. "How about a month? Believe the preacher's kid when I say, knowing we ain't supposed to will do nothing but make us want to."

I laugh. "Thanks. Ya really sweet."

Malcolm writes with concern in his eyes, "I'm nervous about it cause I'm inexperienced and I'm afraid I ain't known ya long enough to please ya, but something completely different is bothering ya. I can feel it in my heart. Ya troubled. Why ya afraid to give yoself to me?"

I look away as my eyes begin to water. Malcolm gently caresses my cheek and lifts my chin until my eyes meet his. I take a deep breath and prepare to tell him the horrible thing that happened to me.

I confess with tears running down my cheeks, "my last master ain't force himself on me, but he would make me do other stuff."

Malcolm rubs my back and urges me to continue.

"Sometimes he would make me rub his thing with my hand," I explain. "I'm sorry I didn't tell ya the other day. I just felt so ashamed. The truth is anything other than kissing makes me feel filthy."

Malcolm hugs me tight and wipes my tears. I can feel how angry he is over what happened to me. He doesn't have to say it. Knowing how much Malcolm cares comforts me.

Once I calm down he writes, "yo last master was a sick bastard. What that pervert did was not yo fault. Ya don't have to fear me. A month from now I will take yo body gently, with absolute love and tenderness. I'll call ya my wife and tell ya I love ya. There'll be nothing filthy or perverse about what we do. It's gonna be biblical."

I smile through my tears. "Biblical huh?"

He laughs and mouths the word, "biblical." Malcolm scribbles on a sheet of paper, "my parents keeping the boys all week. The house feels so empty without em. I kind of miss the minions. Is it alright if we go get em tomorrow?"

"I'll do ya one better, how about tonight?"



Diane answers the door yawning. “What are yall doing here?”

“We came to pick up the boys,” I answer.

We walk in and spot em sleeping on a pallid. I grab Ashton and Malcolm grabs Devon. They both whined a little but didn’t wake up. As we carry the children home, Malcolm glances over and gives me an appreciative nod.

I assure him, “they my boys too.”

Malcolm shifts Devon onto the other shoulder and kisses me sweetly. Our family may not be traditional but it’s ours.

We return home and put the boys to bed. Malcolm turns away as I change into a nightgown. I smile once again as I look at him not looking at me. He so respectful, mature, and secure enough to admit when he nervous or afraid. No other man would ever been that honest. I’m mo than lucky. I’m divinely favored.

I climb into bed and beckon him. I look away as he undresses. I’m so curious it’s difficult not to steal a peak, so I do and I love what I see. He joins me wearing nothing but a soft thin pair of pants. Malcolm holds me close and kisses me goodnight. I fall asleep in his arms wondering why God loves me so much. I never felt so blessed. Hindsight is as clear as a mountain stream. I was entirely unaware of the imminent danger I was in...



My body is so programmed to waking up at such an ungodly hour that sleeping in is rousing at 6am. I think naughty things as I feel him against me. I nestle up closer, but Malcolm becomes embarrassed and backs away.

I turn to face him. “Get back over here. It ain’t the first time I felt it.”

His eyes widen with surprise as if to ask what I mean. I answer his silent question, “I felt ya when we was dancing last night at the reception, and again befo we decided not to make love.”

Malcolm rolled over and wrote, “I’m sorry. It gets difficult to ignore yo beauty, and I’m always like this in the morning.”

I pull him close. “Don’t apologize. I was scared at first, but I’m

starting to like it. It makes me feel pretty like ya desire me.”

He gives me a lustful grin, places his strong body on top of mine, and kisses me passionately. He lied on top of me, kissing me fo quite some time, but it wasn’t long enough. Malcolm would never be able to kiss me long enough.

We used our day off to take the boys fishing at the pond. Malcolm usually fished with em every Sunday. They missed their weekly outing cause of our wedding. We had so much fun at the pond, even caught a few fish. Malcolm cleaned em, and I filleted and fried em. No ration gruel fo us tonight. It’s our first dinner as a family.



We fished with the boys every Sunday over the next few weeks. They’re the light of my life but truly a handful. Ashton always shooting people with his slingshot, and Devon always daring him to. I was relieved that Malcolm and the boys didn’t find my moving in an intrusion. I keep the house clean. Now it always smells of fresh flowers. They appreciate that. I met Malcolm at the pond every day at noon. I learned a lot mo sign language. He almost never has to write notes anymo.

I woke up in the middle of the night when I noticed Malcolm missing. This often happens and it’s so hard fo me to sleep without him. I dress this time and go fo a walk. It’s an extremely warm night. The silver light of the moon makes the pond shimmer. I see Malcolm swimming and he beckons me. I check to make sure no one is watching and then take off my clothes. I dive off the dock and hit the water with a splash. It’s cool and refreshing. He swims over to meet me. The water by the dock is shallow enough to stand up in and barely covers my naked breasts.

I ask him, “do ya often come here in the middle of the night?”

He signs, “it’s getting mo difficult not to have my way with ya. Sometimes I take a cold dip to prevent taking a warm one.”

“Less than a week left,” I assure him while tracing my fingers along the curves and valleys of his muscles.



He signs with embarrassment, “I ain’t sure exactly how to say this. I can understand why ya wouldn’t be ready fo a baby. When the time comes fo us to make love, would ya prefer I... make a timely exit?”

I giggle with embarrassment. “Ya, my husband and the most responsible man I know. Ya a great father to Ashton and Devon. I wouldn’t expect any less fo our own children. I’d be blessed to make a baby with ya.”

Malcolm pulls me so close I can feel his heart beating. We kiss passionately and our wet bodies sliding against one another feels incredible. He touches places on me he never touched befo and I do the same to him. He lifts me and I wrap my legs around his waist. He places his lips upon my neck. My head lolls back in ecstasy as he tickles the delicate skin with his tongue, his lips, and his fingers. He gently pulls me forward to take my mouth again. I burn fo his kisses, ache fo his touch, and there’s nothing filthy about what we doing. He’s my husband and I’m his wife. It feels so beautiful I find myself no longer caring if it’ll hurt. I don’t give a damn if anyone sees us. I want him to have me right here right now, but he pulls away.

“It’s alright, I wanna make love,” I swear to him.

“Me too,” He signs. “But I made a promise to ya.” He kisses me sweetly. “Go home, Shelly. Leave right now.”

I’m so enamored it’s almost painful to leave, but I do as he asks. I know it would destroy him to break a promise to me.



Malcolm returns from his midnight swim all wet, shirtless, and beautiful. His large manly feet track watery footprints over the floorboards as he closes the distance between us. His lips meet mine in a chaste but loving kiss. Then with a few waves of his hands, he apologizes for nearly breaking his promise.

I assure him with a teasing caress of his powerful chest, “I wouldn’t have complained.”

His handsome face brightens with a chuckle, and befo we can nestle into bed I hear a knock at the door. My heart pounds. Whoever could it

be at this time of night? Malcolm and I answer to find his parents. We invite em in, feeling extremely concerned.

Befo I can offer em tea and cookies Diane announces with a gigantic smile, “we so sorry fo the inconvenient hour but this wonderful news couldn’t wait.”

Preach’s usually stoic presence was animated and delightful as he spoke in his baritone, “Deputy Welch just freed yo Ma and me. He even gave us a little land.”

We jump fo joy and hug his parents. We share a pleasant conversation over a spot of tea. I listen in sort of a trance as they invite us to build a home on their property once we get freedom for ourselves. I’m happy but it seems too good to be true. As Malcolm nervously takes my hand I can tell he got the same concerns. We congratulate em and hide our skepticism until their gone.

Malcolm promptly signs to me after his folks leave, “why would a man who hates me free my parents and issue em a land grant, and out of the blue no less? This was no favor. I saved a little money. In a few days, we should make a run fo it. Something wrong. I just know it.”

I’m scared to run away. The very thought of it gives me chills and puts a lump in my throat the size of my fist, but my husband is a pious Christian man. His religion is one of faith. A man must have faith in his god and a woman must have faith in her man. Though I love Malcolm with all my heart, can I trust him with all my soul...



Over the next few days, tension rose between Malcolm and me. We stole moments behind the grain barn and behind the trees at the riverbank. We think about making love all the time. I wake up on this particular morning fighting the urge to climb on top of him. He releases a sleepy groan and covers my face and neck with lazy kisses. Why must everything he do feel so good to me?

I tell him reluctantly, “It’s time to report to work and ya ain’t making it easy fo me.”

He nearly curses as we are forced to leave one another’s embrace but

duty calls. I enter the kitchen and start on breakfast as I always do. That's when I glance out the window. Master Welch and his oldest son are having a really big fight. Anger and bitterness have risen between em. A storm is brewing and I got no clue just how big. The fight turns physical. They start pushing, shoving, and throwing fists.

I bolt to the dining hall. "Master Robert! Yo brother and father is fighting!"

This scarlet haired knight springs from the table and bolts outside. I watch from the kitchen as he and the overseers race to break up the fight. Master Welch's face is swollen and bruised. Deputy Welch got blood pouring from his brow. What could possibly make em do this to each other!

I perform my duties fo the next few hours completely on edge. It seemed to take eternity fo break to arrive. I run into my husband's arms at the sound of the bell.

He holds me fo a while, and then signs, "what's troubling ya?"

"This morning I saw Deputy Welch and his daddy beating the hell out of one another."

Malcolm nods, "I knew something was wrong. White folks fighting among each other is never good for niggas. Soon they start taking they frustration out on the slaves. Black folks get beat, sold, lynched. We packing what we can carry and escaping to freedom this week."

"Malcolm! I don't wanna be a fugitive! Oh my God, they will rain fire and brimstone if we caught!"

He signs with agitation, "I been working night and day to earn the money to free ya!"

I gush at his chivalry, "This why I ain't seen much of ya lately?"

He nods and kisses my cheek sweetly. Then he solemnly signs, "Even with all I do I won't gain the means to buy yo freedom fo nine years. I love ya, Shelly. I can't allow ya to work fo a man who would harm ya just to punish me."

He pulls me into his strong embrace and kisses me with the intensity of a thousand burning suns and I pledge upon my soul in that instant to join hands with this man, clench my eyes, and take a leap of faith...



By dinner time Deputy Welch is acting very strange. I jump and nearly drop the plates as I notice him in the kitchen.

He tells me with a cold expression, “grab a bottle of white wine from the cellar.”

“Yes Sir, right after I serve the appetizers.”

Deputy Welch snatches the plates. “Now!”

I nod and do as I’m told. He’s being so peculiar I don’t wanna get what he gave his father earlier.

By the time I come back the plates are already taken. Deputy Welch returns to the kitchen. My blood turns cold as I see the deranged expression on his face. I smell the nauseating sweet odor of whiskey from clear across the room. Deputy Welch is stinking drunk and in a rotten mood. This don’t bode well fo me.

I shudder as he approaches. I back away slowly and befo I know it my back is against the wall. He stretches out an arm to brace the wall I’m trapped against. Befo I can draw a breath to ask him what he wants, I feel his hand grip my throat. The back of my head collides with the wall hard enough to crack the wood.

I choke back a painful cry knowing that will only get me brutally hurt befo anyone can respond to my scream. My whole being trembles in fear and repulsion as he kneels to sweep up my skirts. With tears streaming down my face, I focus my eyes on the stove, the pans, anything but this monster.

I can feel him breathing on me: hot moist breath on my skin. He’s so close now our bodies nearly touch. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end and tears fill my eyes.

What’s going through his demented mind? Is he gonna to hurt me, rape me...

## CHAPTER 5:

### CRUEL INTENTIONS

Tears flood down my cheeks as Deputy Welch presses his body against mine. He caresses my face and bumps rise on my skin. He grazes my cheek with his lips and rubs my body. My tears pour as I beg him to stop. My feeble pleas fall on deaf ears as he plays beneath my dress. He rubs my thighs, touches me between them, and then smashes his mouth into mine in a rough unpleasant kiss.

With a disgusted grunt, I yank my head sideways, freeing my lips. He claims my neck, kissing the skin just above my collarbone, sucking it almost affectionately, while I fight the urge to vomit.

He thumbs the waistband of my pantaloons and whispers menacingly. “Most days I want to take what’s his because he stole what was mine.”

His hands slide around my hips. He grips the back of me hard and pins me further against the wall. I eyeball a large kitchen knife and reach slowly for it. Then I stop. They’ll hang me for killing this white man, even in self-defense. My face is soaked from my crying. My throat is raw. He’s gonna rape me and ain’t nothing I can do.

“Sir, please don’t do this. Please,” I implore him.

He grins. “Do you fear me, Shelly? Everyone seems to fear me.”

I keep silent. Any answer I give will get my face punched in.

Deputy Welch backs away with a sinister smile. “You’re dismissed.

Take the rest of the evening off.”

I nod and run from the kitchen with tears streaming down my face. I make it home with my sides splitting, gasping to catch my breath. Thank God we running away soon. Malcolm was right. Something is terribly wrong.

I take a deep breath and pull myself together. Deputy Welch was only scaring me cause he was drunk and he dislikes my husband. If he truly wanted to harm me he woulda done so. I won't tell Malcolm what Welch did. That would only infuriate my husband which is exactly what Deputy Welch was trying to accomplish. What cruel intentions Welch has, to mess with Malcolm's head by letting him know that he could take my body anytime he chooses. Welch is trying to bait my husband into attacking him so he'll have an excuse to punish or even kill Malcolm. I refuse to allow that monster to win. I'm safe now, my husband will be home soon, and with the breaking dawn, we'll leave this place forever.

I glance at all the days marked off the calendar with a smile and wipe my tears. Our special night finally arrived, and I'm off early enough to prepare fo it. I already made arrangements fo the girl who used to work in the kitchen to watch the boys. Even if Diane and Preach was still here I wouldn't ask em, cause then they'd know what me and their son was doing. I wanna make this as least awkward as possible. We waited so long fo this night.

I fill the tub, two buckets at a time, with fresh water fo a bath. It takes me numerous trips to the pond but at last the tub is full. I heat the water and pray it stays warm until Malcolm arrives. I freshen up and let my hair down, cause Malcolm loves my hair. I wrap my naked body in a towel and tie a big red ribbon around it. Then I pour him a glass of homemade liquor, light a few candles, and wait fo him to come home.

Malcolm walks through the door and smiles as he sees what I did with the place. He motions with his finger fo me to twirl around. I oblige him with a big smile. He puckers his beautiful lips and whistles. I can feel myself blushing.

He signs, “sorry I'm late. I got so overwhelmed by the week's chaos I forgot about tonight.”

“It's alright.” I help him undress.

He slips into the bath I made for him and I pass him the drink. He

relaxes and allows me to wash his body and massage his muscles. He bites his bottom lip with a lustful glare, and tugs playfully at the bow around my waist.

A silent question springs forth from his hands, “at what point do I get to unwrap the package?”

I assure him, “Whenever ya ready to.”

“I was ready from the moment I saw ya.”

He climbs out of the tub, lies me on the cool sheets, and just looks at me. As I feel him gingerly tugging the ribbon loose, my breathing becomes shallow and rapid. He bites his lip with a smolder in his eyes as he unwraps one side of my towel and then the other. I close my eyes to slow my breathing and I place my hands upon his shoulders guiding him on top of me. His body is warm and moist from the bath. Malcolm runs his fingers through my hair. He gently kisses my lips, my neck, and then my breasts. As he draws my nipple into his warm soothing mouth, I can’t recall a moment in my life I have ever felt so good.

I whisper, “please make love to me.”

Of course, he wouldn’t have heard me even if I’d yelled it. I want him to strip me of my innocence so badly, I can’t help myself. I never felt mo ready. I push him away fo just long enough to say, “I wanna become one with ya. I love ya, Malcolm.”

He smiles and signs, “I love ya, Shelly, and though I have enjoyed having ya as a bride, the time has come to make ya my wife.” Passion’s flames burn throughout my body and my lips quiver in wanton need, but Malcolm wants to be certain, so he signs once mo, “I’m gonna take ya now if that’s alright.”

I nod without fear, and our mouths meet in a smoldering kiss. I hold him close enough to feel his love and his warmth, the beat of his heart, the sound of his breath. I lie beneath him, skin upon skin, never breaking the kiss. I brace myself for the moment my loving husband will claim my body and make us one.

My breath catches in my throat at the feel of his desire sliding into me. My every sense heightens tenfold as his manhood tears through the sensitive veil of my virginity. I gasp out of the kiss. My innocence is forever gone and I am his wife, his lover. He rises up on his elbows to look into my eyes and can tell that I am in pain... quite a bit of pain. He

thumbs away a tear I hadn't realized I'd shed and I feel him shift his hips to withdraw from my sore and tender womanhood. My legs instinctively encircle his back without a command from my brain, and I am breathless again as he slowly resumes his position deep inside of me. I never felt such pain and yet I still don't want this loving connection to end. Is this natural instinct or am I just going crazy?

I adjust my pelvis to become comfortable with him inside of my body. Oh, my God, there is a person inside of my body! The very concept is extremely bizarre and at the same time so very beautiful. After a full minute of him lying as still as possible inside of me, lovingly kissing my face, and running his fingers through my sweat-damp tresses, I start to relax, my muscles give a little, and I find myself grateful for the peculiar wetness that forms between my thighs when we kiss.

Malcolm's eyes innocently gauge my reaction as his hips move back and plunge forward again and again and again. My mouth gapes with pleasure. He is making me feel amazing with every stroke as my hands grip the muscles of his sweat-laden back. I was concerned at first but as Malcolm's eyes drift shut and I hear him moaning and grunting in ecstasy, I realize that our bodies knew exactly what to do even if we didn't. Our flesh loved one another at first sight. It just took thirty wonderful nights for our hearts to catch up.

We sprawl about our marital bed sweating and kissing and mating with the passion of animals, and we are completely and irrevocably in love. I gasp in shock as he rolls us without warning until I am sitting atop him. This position has pushed him even further into me, and I realize that he's surrendered control. I don't know what I'm supposed to do and I feel nervous as his eyes devour my naked body in the candlelight. So I lay forward and rest my head upon his shoulder. His arms lovingly wrap around me and he sweetly kisses my head. His hand gingerly rubs my hair and back as he thrusts gently up into me.

His every in and out motion makes me moan wantonly and pleasure pours over every inch of my body. I never want it to end. I boldly rise and move my hips upon the hard bones of his pelvis. I am free and unafraid. I place my hands on his chest to balance myself as I ride the swing of his hips. His hands are all over me as he bucks upward to meet my movements. His face is locked in a determined glare as he kneads my



breasts with his hands. The pressure rises from deep within me and I beg him to stop. I think he's trying to give me that sinful feeling I had the night we swam together, a feeling that rippled throughout my being and caused my knees to buckle.

"It's okay," he mouths silently.

At his words and the pleasure of our colliding pelvises, I cry out my sin and collapse upon my husband's strong chest. With another roll, he is once more atop me thrusting between my thighs with a desperation I'd never witnessed in him. His strokes become sporadic in depth and speed. I'm not sure what's happening to my Malcolm. He falls upon my breasts gasping. I can feel his heart racing, and his desire is thumping inside of me as if it has a heart of its own. What have I done! I fear he's hurt and I cry his name with concern but of course, he cannot hear me. I hold him close with tears in my eyes hoping, praying that everything is fine.

Once his breathing slows he pulls his manhood out of me, kissing me sensually as he disengages. He rolls onto his back with a lazy smile and a look of utter relief and love. I smile too and breathe a sigh of relief. He's alright. Boys must have a similar reaction to making love as girls. I notice something streaming from the tip of his manhood, which is still erect and thumping. Boys must have a similar wetness too. I blush a dark crimson as passion fades and I recall the manner in which I've behaved: lusty, wanton, and sinful.

He wipes my nectar from his curls with a damp cloth and I likewise freshen myself. He signs with eyes full of concern, "what's wrong, Shelly?"

"I'm embarrassed," I admit with tears in my eyes.

For the first time ever Malcolm curses society for making me feel this way. "Please don't be embarrassed," He signs. "I wanted to please ya."

I pull away from him as my humiliation turns to anger. "Why do it matter if I enjoy it!"

"Because it makes ya happy and I made a vow to do everything in my power to keep ya that way."

Malcolm carefully and lovingly kisses the top of my head, and I can feel my guilt and humiliation melting away with the warmth of his love. My very heart smiles at his words and I raise my face to him. We kiss slowly like we're savoring a delectable dessert. As he releases me I have

that same momentary dizziness of the first kiss we shared. I am once again taken, captivated, bewitched. We lay back in bed dreamily tracing one another's naked skin with our fingertips, smiling, musing, and fawning over each other in a paradise of our own. I rest my head upon the mighty muscular plains of his chest, taking in the sound of his breath, every beat of his powerful heart.

I am shocked senseless as Malcolm makes audible words for the first time since he lost his hearing at the age of twelve. His words are a little distorted but no less meaningful as he places my hand over his pounding heart, "Shelly, my heart beats for ya. I live for ya."

I raise my head from his chest so he can read my lips as I give him the same vow and we wipe away each other's tears of happiness and love. This was the only time I ever saw Malcolm cry.



I open my eyes quite a bit later, a smile flits across my face at the wonderful soreness in my nether regions. It's a beautiful reminder that Malcolm has not only made me a bride but a wife. I reach for my love but my hand falls upon an empty bed and my eyes glance over to find a vase full of fresh cut flowers and a note.

*Shelly,*

*I wanted ya to have something beautiful to look at when ya awakened. How do it feel to at last be a wife? Though I enjoyed being yo groom, nothing felt mo incredible than becoming yo husband tonight. I went to check on Ashton and Devon. I'll be right back.*

*Love Malcolm*

Oh, Malcolm, next time ya yearn for my eyes to awaken to beauty just leave yourself in my bed. I kiss his note and before I can lay it down, before I get a second to smell the beautiful vase of flowers he's left on my bedside table, I hear my front door burst open. Before I can don my clothes and get into the living room, two overseers violate the sanctity of my

marital bedroom with grim expressions on their faces.

I scream and clench the sheet over my naked body. The two men march to the center of the room revealing Deputy Welch in the doorway. The other men stand stiffly, their expressions set as the deputy strides into the room, his boots clonking heavily on my floorboards.

“My husband ain’t here!” I scream.

“We are not here for your husband,” Deputy Welch announces.

Alarm is prevalent in my voice as I cry, “I don’t understand. What business have you with me!”

Deputy Welch ignores my question and flings the drawers from my dresser. The other men grab me and wrap my body in the sheet. My vase of flowers, Malcolm’s gift to me, is knocked to the floor. It explodes into a million shards of glass, scattered petals, and broken stems.

“What are you all looking for!” I scream furiously as he breaks and tramples my things without care.

“Proof,” Deputy Welch finally breathes.

“Proof of what!” I demand.

He bends low to retrieve a small black bag. He walks quickly over to the dresser and turns the bag over, spilling its contents onto the finished wood. There is feathers, dried roots, and glass vials of lavender extract.

Deputy Welch’s lips spread in an unpleasant smile, “Gentlemen, we have our proof.”

“Proof of what!” I demand again as they clap me in irons.

Slaves are spewing from their homes as I’m dragged through to commons.

“You can’t do this!” I scream, fear choking my throat. “I did nothing wrong!”



I’m thrown in what we call the brig. It’s a small prison on the property for runaways, thieves, and otherwise insubordinate slaves. The air is stale. It reeks of mold and old urine. My bunk is a pile of straw which field mice and spiders scamper in and out of. Not that I’d sleep

anyway. Who could possibly sleep while awaiting an execution? I jump to my feet as Malcolm approaches. He kisses me through the bars and wipes my tears.

He signs, "I'll bring ya a dress so ya ain't gotta stand here in a sheet."

I nod and kiss him again. I inform him, "Deputy Welch believes ya stole something from him. Do ya have the slightest idea what he could be talking about?"

Malcolm shrugs with a look even more clueless than my own. Then he signs, "the only thing I can think of is Liberty. They were close befo I started courting her."

"But ain't she his kin?" I promptly question.

"That don't matter to rednecks," Malcolm explains with his hands.

I scream as Deputy Welch walks past, "Sir, what was my offense!"

He don't answer or even look at me. He just keeps walking.

Malcolm runs up and passes him a letter, "Sir, I know ya never liked me. Whatever ya planning to do to my wife, please punish me instead. Shelly is new. I'm certain she ain't mean to offend ya. Whatever she did, please take it out on me."

Malcolm reads Deputy Welch's lips as he says, "my father was poisoned tonight. He's dead. As the cook Shelly is the main one with access to his food."

"I'm sorry about yo father, but my Shelly ain't do it," Malcolm writes.

Malcolm's jaw drops as Deputy Welch says, "I know Shelly didn't kill him. I did, but that doesn't mean I'm willing to spend the rest of my life in prison for it. It's nothing personal but I need you to walk away from this, Malcolm. If you overreact the sheriff and magistrate will start sniffing around. I can't have that. I'm willing to grant your freedom and a nice severance package if you keep your mouth shut."

"I can't!" Malcolm frantically writes. "The authorities gonna kill her fo what ya did!"

"Don't pretend to be emotional," Deputy Welch replies. "I know you've only been married to Shelly a month. You barely know the girl. Hell, my father forced you to marry her. I freed your parents so you'd have faith I was telling you the truth by the time this happened. I'm willing to free you too. Take the money and leave this property a free

man. What could be more important to a slave than freedom?”

Malcolm promptly writes, “my wife! And ya wrong. Yo father ain’t choose her, I did. I married Shelly because my heart demanded me to. I will not watch my wife hang!”

Malcolm storms away. Deputy Welch is approached by one of his overseers. The tall bearded man drawls, “that’s one disgruntled Nigger. We should detain him until after we’ve dealt with that unholy witch who murdered your father.”

Deputy Welch laughs. “Relax I know Malcolm’s not willing to throw away his only shot at freedom and wealth over a girl he barely knows. Who would?”

Deputy Welch’s younger brother Robert stomps over. His eyes are red with anger. The veins on his temples are prevalent.

Robert shouts for the overseer to leave then questions his brother with a skeptical glare, “why did you offer Malcolm freedom? We both know you hate him! What the hell is going on!”

“If Malcolm starts raving about his wife being unjustly put to death, there may be an uprising,” Deputy Welch explains. “We could have a mutiny on our hands. I feel bad for the man, but his wife murdered our father.”

Tears fill Robert’s eyes. “Are you certain Shelly did this? It seems so unlike her.”

Deputy Welch hugs him. “She’s only been with us a month. We don’t know what she’s really like. Check her record. She was only with her last owners a couple of months. They got rid of her for some reason, and right away.”

Robert pleads, “do you have to kill her? Maybe it was self-defense. Maybe father was forcing himself on her. You heard what he said at the breakfast table, about her performance in bed.”

“Even still, Shelly is a slave. She doesn’t have the right to defend herself. I’m sorry Robert but I must uphold the law.”

Robert walks away devastated by his grief. Deputy Welch signals to his overseers. Three of them come jogging over.

He orders, “Arrest my brother. If anyone is going to hinder this execution, it’ll be that big baby.”

“We can’t just arrest Master Robert without charges,” the head

overseer protests.

Deputy Welch growls, "I'm in charge now! Do what the hell I told you before he sets my father's murderer free!"

The overseers seize Robert at once. My neck broke not long after that...



Florian, the French Ambassador, shot up in bed frantically looking around his chamber. "Shelly! Shelly!"

"Who's Shelly," asked a beautiful girl with scarlet red hair and dark green eyes.

She reminded Florian of a lovely rose and appeared around eighteen or nineteen. She was seated at the breakfast nook in his chamber. The pretty young woman was draped in Florian's robe, sipping a cup of tea. Playing cards and articles of clothing were scattered about the table and floor. It was obviously a game of strip poker had gotten way out of hand.

"No one," Florian answered as he shook off the horrible nightmare.

The redhead called out cheerfully in a Scottish accent, "good, I was starting to get jealous. It's about time you woke up. How do you like your tea?"

"Tea is a ridiculous British tradition. I prefer coffee with cream and sugar," Florian said as he sat up in bed. She fixed a cup to his specifications and walked over to him. She passed Florian the steaming hot beverage and sat next to him on the bed.

"Merci Mademoiselle," Florian thanked her in French. He looked around, noticing more than one pair of lady's undergarments. "Where's everyone else?"

The redhead giggled. "It's late in the afternoon. The two married women left long ago."

Florian stated sarcastically with an exasperated breath, "That's so typical. They probably wanted to slip out before the servants or anyone else saw them. I'm sure they'll spend the next few weeks wallowing in regret and self-pity. May I ask you a question, Mademoiselle?"

The redhead calmly took a sip of her tea. "Ask away, Monsieur."

“Why do women beat themselves up so much over something they enjoyed doing?” Florian asked with annoyance in his voice.

She smirked. “Does it look like I’m beating myself up?”

Florian gave the girl an intrigued look. “As a matter of fact, you’re not. I was surprised you were still here.”

“I can go if you’d like.” She started off the bed.

Florian grabbed her hand. “No, don’t leave. I’m sorry I was rude. I’ve had a hell of a night but I’m happy you’re here. Most women wouldn’t have stuck around. They usually get all self-conscious as to what I’ll think of them, and what everyone else will think of them.”

The redhead laughed and boldly declared, “does it look like I give a damn what anyone thinks about me?”

Florian gave an impressed nod. *This girl is amazing.* “I don’t recall everything that happened last night. I feel terrible for having to ask you this but what’s your name beautiful?”

“Nora McKinley, and if you play your cards right I might just remind you of the events you missed.”

*Thank you, God,* Florian prayed. “Well, Nora do you have a date to the Charlevoix Ball?”

“I can’t go with you. You have a bad reputation,” Nora replied solemnly.

Florian stated in his own defense, “but I thought you didn’t care what others thought of you.”

“I don’t but my brother does. Now that my parents are deceased I’m his charge,” Nora sadly explained. “I like you Ambassador Lafayette but my brother will never allow it. At times the genius part of his brain overcomes the human part. He’s kind of a self-righteous tyrant.”

“If I can persuade your brother otherwise will you accompany me then?”

“You would do this for me?” Nora exclaimed, her large green eyes lighting up.

“Absolutely, I’d like to get to know you.”

Nora grinned from ear to ear as she embraced him. Florian pulled Nora down next to him. He untied the robe and caressed her naked body. He asked with a lustful glare, “Now what was that you said about reminding me of what I missed last night?”

At that moment one of Florian's guards knocked on the door. "There's a Monsieur Pete Colburn to see you."

Florian glanced back and forth between the door and the beautiful naked redhead. At last, he grudgingly climbed out of bed and called to the guard, "I'll be down in just a moment."

Nora let out a disappointed sigh and tied the robe back around her.

Florian gave her a peck on the cheek. "I'm sorry but I have to go to work."

"Understandable."

Florian grumbled as he threw on his clothes, "I hate that slave-owning scoundrel." He looked at Nora suspiciously. "You don't own any slaves, do you?"

Nora gave him a disgusted look. "Are you kidding?"

That's when Florian remembered why Nora had captured his attention. Long before last night's naughty, drunken, poker game he and Nora were involved in an in-depth conversation on the evils of slavery. She hated it just as much as he did.

He smiled at her and instructed, "there's money in my bedside table. I want you to go dress shopping with my sister. Spare no expense. I don't care if I have to impress your brother for weeks on end. We're going to the Charlevoix Ball together."

Florian took Nora in his arms and planted an unforgettable kiss on her.

Nora smiled. *Well, I can certainly tell he's French.*

Florian's guard informed him as they entered the hallway, "A young slave woman was found naked, in a field, with a broken neck."

Florian promptly questioned, "was she a very dark skinned voluptuous girl, with thick curly hair? Was her name Shelly?"

The guard shook his head no. "This young woman was very light skinned and thin. She looked like a white woman. Who's this Shelly you speak of?"

"I don't know," Florian answered with dread. *Why are all these women showing up dead, murdered by an officer of the law? And why does this officer want to harm me?*





Florian's chat with Pete Colburn had gone in the usual format. Pete asked for the ambassador to put more restrictions on the French ship captains. Pete requested that these sailors started asking for proper documentation before allowing blacks on board. A lot of slaves had escaped due to Florian's lax regulations on travel. Unbeknownst to Pete, before Florian was ever ambassador he bribed the sailors to look the other way when runaways boarded. Now that Florian was running the show he could make the rules as lax as he saw fit.

This meeting ended in the typical way. Florian told Pete to go to hell in the politest way possible, then showed him the door. Shortly after this talk, Florian tapped on the chamber door of his sister, Embrasia. Embrasia Lafayette was a breathtaking woman, voluptuous in every sense of the word. She possessed dark flowing hair with eyes to match.

"One moment brother," Embrasia called and sprung out of bed.

She turned to her lover and ordered, "under the bed quick!"

Embrasia frantically tossed the man's clothes and the empty bottle of liquor beneath the bed with him. She wrapped herself in a robe and answered the door. Florian walked in and took a skeptical look around the room. He'd found men in his sister's chamber before, under the bed, in the closet, climbing out the window.

At last, he asked, "should I have lunch sent up for your lover?"

"What are you talking about?" Embrasia asked nonchalantly.

Florian replied sarcastically, "I love this game we play Embrasia. You pretend that you don't have lovers, and most days I pretend I believe you, but today I'm not in the mood for it."

At last Florian pointed to a pair of very masculine cufflinks Embrasia neglected to hide. She blushed with embarrassment and buried her face in her hand.

"Walk with me," Florian said.

As they strolled down the hall Embrasia said, "I'm so sorry. What's wrong with me, Brother?"

Florian hugged his sister and assured her, "there's absolutely nothing

wrong with you. If you didn't indulge in carnal pleasures I wouldn't believe you were a Lafayette."

Embrasia laughed. "That's easy for you to say. You and all the other Lafayettes are men. I'm the only girl. I can't get away with the stunts you pull."

Florian quickly grew irritated. His biggest pet peeve was inequality. Regardless of whether it was between blacks and whites or men and women, it just seemed wrong to him.

He replied with aggravation, "I hate this stupid double standard that makes you ashamed to be who you are. So what if you like to drink, smoke, gamble, and have lovers. Who doesn't? I'm three years younger than you and I'm in charge of every decision you make. It doesn't make sense."

"It may not make sense but it's the way things are."

Florian solemnly replied, "why am I the only one who sees a problem with the way things are?"

"What brought you to my chamber in the first place?"

"I need you to take my friend dress shopping. If I play my cards right I just may have a date to the Charlevoix Ball."

Embrasia stamped her foot and questioned playfully, "How did you, the town whore, manage to score a date and I didn't?"

"What about the man cowering in your closet?"

"Actually, he's under the bed, and he already has a date."

"I could throw him a beating and make him take you anyway," Florian offered.

Embrasia laughed and assured her brother, "That won't be necessary. Sometimes it's fun to go to events alone. Then you can meet someone while you're there." She lowered her head in shame. "Florian, why can't I yearn for a simple life with a husband and children like any other woman?"

Florian lifted Embrasia's chin until her eyes met his. "Because you're not any other woman, and thank Christ for that. Marriage is an archaic and overrated ritual. Do you see me running off trying to get hitched? We're a team Embrasia. Why would you ever want to get married and break up the team? Remember our plan."

Embrasia smiled at her brother. They had been planning since they

were teenagers to open their own casino. They wanted to spend the rest of their lives partying, up to their eyeballs in booze and meaningless sex. Their plans went on hold when their father lost his hearing. Florian had to take over as diplomatic ambassador for France. Now the only time their father steps in is if something's extremely wrong. When Florian Sr. visits America heads roll, literally. Now Florian Jr. and Embrasia were just waiting for one of their younger brothers to come of age and take over. Then they'd be free to do what they always wanted.

Embrasia waived her hands across the sky and announced, "That's right *Lafayette Lounge*."

Florian protested, "I thought we agreed to call our casino the *House of Cards*."

"*House of Cards* is a stupid name," Embrasia declared with a disapproving look.

Florian laughed. "Alright, alright, we'll sort the name out later."



Embrasia and Nora went to *Abernathy's Boutique*. It was a large shop with several elegant dresses displayed on manikins. They stood on stands being measured by a tall blond seamstress.

Embrasia asked Nora with excitement, "So what do you like about Florian other than the obvious physical reasons?" Nora looked shocked by the question. Embrasia assured her with a smirk, "It's alright, I know you slept with my brother."

"I'm sorry," Nora said with a hint of embarrassment. Her face turned as scarlet as her hair.

The skinny blond seamstress scoffed, "Don't be. Everyone's slept with her brother."

Embrasia burned with anger as she told the woman, "I'm going to ask you nicely not to insult my brother."

The seamstress rolled her eyes and went back to work. She wrapped the measuring tape around Nora's tiny waist and jotted down another measurement.

Nora told Embrasia with a warm blissful smile, "I like your brother

because he seems like he wants to be with me. Not like he wants to possess me. He didn't judge me because I slept with him. Most hypocritical men would have. So tell me what your brother's type is, short, tall, blond, brunette?"

Before Embrasia could open her mouth, the seamstress cackled. "Florian is a whore. If you have a hole and you walk upright, you're his type."

Embrasia stepped off the stand she was being fitted on. "Nora, let's take our business elsewhere before I rip this woman's hair out."

The seamstress stood undaunted. Nora stepped between Embrasia and the rude woman.

Nora looked up at the tall lanky shopkeeper with a smile and said, "Mrs. Abernathy, you are going to shut that hole in your face and make our dresses, and you are going to create these beautiful gowns for next to nothing."

"I will?" The seamstress snapped.

"Yes you will," Nora replied. "Because if you do not I'm going to tell Mr. Abernathy you weren't really taking care of your sick sister last night. Your baby sister wasn't sick at all. She was helping you bed my lover. You left your cheap earring on his pillow."

Nora flicked the ruby stud at the seamstress. The woman was utterly defeated. She went to gather materials at once.

Nora turned to Embrasia and said, "I'm sorry. I didn't want to say that in front of you, but that woman was being really nasty."

Embrasia gave Nora an impressed nod. "It's quite alright. I know my brother is no angel, but he's not as rotten as she was making him out to be. Don't tell Florian I told you this, but our father's third wife molested Florian for years. As a result, my brother developed a very cavalier attitude toward intimacy, but he's not a bad man. Florian likes to have fun, but he doesn't use women and discard them. Women are more like gifts to him. He's very excited and can't wait to unwrap the package, but that doesn't mean he won't treasure what's inside. He'll be with you as long as you're willing to accept him and give him a chance. To answer your question, my brother doesn't have a physical type. He feels all ladies are beautiful in our own unique ways, but he prefers women who are strong, independent, confident, and honest. He likes women who are

giving, considerate, and not judgmental of others. You're his type."

"Thank you," Nora said with a smile, her mood lightened with Embrasia's reassurance.

"No, thank you for putting that wench in her place. I was this close to shoving my fist down her throat."



Florian strolled outside and sat on the steps of the enormous French embassy. It was three in the afternoon, and yet the first time he'd been outside all day. He waved at the nice black man whom he'd allowed to sell flowers outside the gate.

Florian paused as he heard a sound coming from the hedges. He beckoned to his guards and the three of them went over to investigate. That's when he saw them: the two little black boys and the black man, the unconscious, profusely bleeding, man.

A cold chill swept over Florian. His muscles locked. He couldn't breathe. *How could complete strangers appear in my dreams?*



## CHAPTER 6:

### CHAOS AT THE BALL

The runaways had been hunted down and attacked by dogs the night before. For the most part, the man was able to protect the children. He took the brunt of the attack himself. The boys only attained a few minor bites and scratches. The man, on the other hand, had lost so much blood he'd gone into shock. Had Florian not discovered him he would've died within the hour.

Once the man was stable and the boys had been fed, Florian slipped out of the guest room. He ran into his sister in the hallway. She had returned from shopping with Nora. Embrasia's arms were crossed firmly over her chest. Anger and disapproval displayed on her face. It was obvious to Florian someone had told her the news.

Embrasia called out in frustration, "is this what we do now Florian! We harbor fugitives! Father warned us not to make waves while we're here, and you're making typhoons! You don't even know what this man is wanted for!"

"It's obvious he's wanted for being black!" Florian yelled, "All you have to do to become a fugitive in this wretched country is be born a different color!"

"Brother, like you, I feel slavery is an abomination, but you must choose your battles wisely. This is bigger than one man," Embrasia cautioned.

Florian opened the chamber door so that Embrasia could see the runaway slaves. It broke her heart as she laid eyes on the poor abused people. She knew if she turned them in at the very least the man might be killed.

As the slave children and the black man slept, Florian whispered to his sister, “God doesn’t always give us the luxury of choosing our cause. Sometimes the cause chooses us. These people came to me and I must protect them.”

It had always intrigued Embrasia that even with all her brother’s drinking, gambling, and promiscuity he still believed in god.

“How did they get in?” Embrasia questioned.

“The boys are so small they slipped right between the bars of the gate. During last night’s changing of the guards, the children waited until the opportune moment to open the gate for the man.” Florian continued with angst and irritation, “Remind me to fire my entire security department. Someone could’ve assassinated me.”

Embrasia said with a heavy heart, “I can’t believe they’d been outside in the bushes all night bleeding, exhausted, and starving. What are their names?”

Florian pointed to each one and said, “The light skinned boy’s name is Devon. The dark one is called Ashton. Both boys are around seven years of age. The man’s name is Malcolm and he’s deaf. Like father, Malcolm communicates by reading lips and speaking with his hands.”

Embrasia nodded. “Are the children his?”

“No”

“Then where are their parents,” Embrasia demanded.

Florian shook his head. “You really don’t know much about slavery, do you? These boys have no parents. Like many slaves, Ashton and Devon were torn from the arms of their mothers and sold on the auction block. For blacks, family becomes the people you live with. Malcolm’s been looking after the boys for quite some time. He couldn’t bring himself to leave them behind.”

Embrasia announced in shock, “these slave owners are allowed to just split up families?”

“They can and they often do.”

“I’ll help in any way I can, but what are we going to do?”



Florian solemnly replied, “I don’t know. This embassy is pretty much French soil. They’re safe here, but the moment they step outside the gate, game over.”



*April 14, 1817*

The night was warm and mellow without so much as a breeze to disturb the calm. Matt boarded his stagecoach with Pete. Both were dressed in expensive tuxedos. Natalie was already onboard, dressed in an extravagant blue gown and dazzling jewelry.

Pete had always insisted on having Natalie on his arm at all the biggest social functions. This was the very reason everyone but the county magistrate thought they were married. Pete gave a knock on the window to inform the driver they were ready for departure. Saphirra, a young Creole girl, took the reins. She cracked a long black whip in the air. The horses broke into a trot in the direction of the French Embassy in New Orleans, where the Charlevoix Ball would be held.

Pete kissed Natalie’s hand and asked, “have I told you how stunning you look tonight?”

Natalie smoothly replied, “yes, but frequent reminders are always appreciated.” Natalie couldn’t help but enjoy herself a little. Nights like these were the only times Pete treated her as an equal.

“I swear I’m gonna vomit,” Matt grumbled in response to Pete flirting with his mother.

Pete said to Matt, “you’re going to be filthy rich. The least you could do is look happy about it.”

Matt solemnly replied, “when I agreed to marry one of the Charlevoix twins it hadn’t dawned on me I’d actually have to attend the Charlevoix Ball tonight. I hate parties. Pete, you know I’m shy and awkward at social events.”

Pete informed him, “well there’s no getting out of it. The Charlevoix Ball is the grandest event of the year. It’s held in honor of your fiancée, A’lice, and her twin sister, Arial’s, birthday. Did you bring A’lice’s engagement present?”

Matt lifted the white box so that Pete could see it. It contained a ruby necklace with the Colburn family crest inscribed on the back. Pete had it specially made for Matt to give to his fiancée. This was a tradition that had been passed down for many generations. It was a way of welcoming the girl into the family.

Pete announced with frustration, “Alice is not only rich. She’s well educated, and drop-dead gorgeous. What is your problem, Matt?”

Natalie interjected, “he’s not sure he’s giving that necklace to the right girl.”

Pete replied, “Of course he’s sure. Tell her you’re sure, Matt!”

Matt replied, “It’s hard to believe it’s been two weeks since I last spoke to Lilly. She’s going to be at the ball tonight.”

Pete snapped, “Please tell me this isn’t about her! Get your head together, Matt! If you mess this up I swear I’ll ring your neck!”

Natalie gingerly placed a hand on Pete’s cheek. It soothed him like a savage beast. Natalie turned to Matt and said, “Relax, young Master Colburn, after all that’s happened Lilly probably won’t be there.”

Matt fumed bitterly. *I know Lilly’s going to be there. This is more her social circle than mine. Lilly would take a failure to show as a personal defeat. She’s never been one to back down from a challenge. That’s probably why she chose to love a lost cause like me. Now I’ll have to grin like an idiot and shake her date’s hand, resisting the urge to rip off his arm and beat him with it.*

The horse-drawn carriage pulled in front of the gate to the French Embassy. Matt, Pete, and Natalie climbed out and stood in line to enter the Charlevoix Ball.

“Corsages, beautiful corsages fo da ladies,” called a destitute black man behind a flower stand.

It was apparent to Matt just how different the attitudes of the French were in regard to blacks. Almost every one of the Frenchmen greeted the black man with smiles and purchased corsages for their dates. Almost every one of the American Englishmen peered at the flower salesman with disgust and treated him with contempt and hostility.

“Useless nigger!” Matt heard the belligerent Americans call out.

The flower salesman ignored them and continued to sell his corsages.

Matt called to the man behind the flower stand, “how much for two? I’d like one for my mother and another for my fiancée.”

The man answered in his broken English, “That a be ten cents, Sir.”

The man picked a lovely corsage with blue flowers to match Natalie’s dress and then asked, “What color yo date wear, Sir.”

“Not sure,” Matt admitted with a shrug.

The man nodded and chose a corsage with neutral colors for Matt’s fiancée.

As Matt was paying for the flowers an American shoved him and ordered, “move it along, junior!”

Matt fumed and his brows furrowed in anger. He reared back to punch the tall heavily bearded American who had shoved him.

Pete grabbed Matt’s fist and cautioned, “temper, temper little brother.” Pete turned to the flower salesman and asked, “How much for the entire stand.”

The flower salesman replied with joy and disbelief, “uh...three dollars, Sir.”

Pete passed the poor black man twice the amount and instructed, “now you just pass out these corsages for free to any pretty lady who wants one.”

“Thank ya. Thank ya, Sir,” the flower salesman replied.

Armed guards checked their invitations then thrust open the gates, allowing them to pass. Natalie smiled and gave Pete an impressed nod as he slipped the blue corsage around her wrist. *He really is two people in one.*

“That was mighty decent of you,” Matt told Pete as they entered the courtyard.

Pete lectured Matt, “there are a time and a place for fighting. The Charlevoix Ball is not the place.”

“You got that right,” the bearded American fellow snapped from behind them.

Pete told the American in a most charming manner, “just because I stopped Matt from beating the daylights out of you doesn’t make me your new best friend.” The man gasped in shock as Pete continued. “People like you are the reason American Englishmen are rarely invited to these events. You blatantly wear your bigotry on your sleeve, and quite

frankly I don't give a damn if you do. But if you ever push my little brother again, I will cleave off the hand that offended him."

The bearded fellow briskly retreated. Natalie shook her head and sighed. *Right back to the same old Pete.*

There were well over two-hundred guests in the elegant grand ballroom. Couples waltzed to the melody of a live orchestra. The party smelled like a delightful mixture of gourmet food, expensive perfumes, and fine tobacco. The perimeter of the party was lined with poker tables, roulette tables, and various other games for gambling. Any party hosted by Ambassador Lafayette and his sister Embrasia was bound to have a casino atmosphere.

Pete left with Natalie on his arm as soon as they entered the ball. This left Matt to wander the enormous party alone in search of Alice. He glanced around. Most of the guests spoke French which only gave Matt another reason to miss Lilly. *Her father is a Frenchman. She speaks both French and English fluently. Lilly had always served as my interpreter at events like these. She's the exact opposite of me; graceful and charming in public, so charming she made a klutz like me appear so.*

He grabbed a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and quickly downed the liquid courage. At that moment, Lilly entered the grand ballroom.

Matt called, "Lilly I..."

"Good evening, Mr. Colburn," she replied formally.

"Mr. Colburn?" Matt repeated. "I'm Mr. Colburn now?"

"That is the appropriate manner in which to address a white man in public," Lilly whispered.

Matt snapped, "I'm a white man now!"

Lilly's escort approached, with the smooth confident stride of an Egyptian prince. Kyle put an arm around her and said, "Lilly, are you going to introduce me to your friend?"

"Mr. Colburn, this is my friend Kyle. Kyle this is Matt Colburn, a friend of the family."

Matt fumed. *I've gone from being a lover to a friend of the family! Why do I even care? I'm getting married to an amazing girl. As a matter of fact, I don't give a damn!* Matt grudgingly shook Kyle's hand and

restrained himself as Lilly walked away on another man's arm.

From a distance, Matt heard Kyle ask, "wasn't that your lover?"

"I can assure you Matt Colburn isn't my lover," Lilly explained. "You see we never had a relationship, just a well understood agreement."

Kyle smirked. "In that case may I have this dance?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Lilly replied with a charming grin.

It shocked Matt that he would be so furious at the words Lilly used to define them when he himself had denied their relationship countless times. Matt hadn't even noticed how hard he was gripping his champagne glass. It shattered within his hand. The haughty French men and women gasped and parted way. Pompous watchers uttered nasty comments, only two of which Matt understood.

"Ghastly American."

"Those people are barbarians."

Matt fled the ballroom. It was a blessing he didn't cut himself. *Great, I'm here for ten minutes and I've already managed to make myself look like a bumbling idiot. I knew that name sounded familiar. He's the notorious Kyle, Lilly's first love. Lilly had been promised to him from the beginning. Her parents handpicked him. It had been his decision to break off their engagement, so what the hell does he want with her now!*

Matt ventured outside to cool off and sat on the steps of the French embassy. His nerves were wrecked. He pulled his finest cigar from his lapel and searched frantically for a means to light it.

"Need one of these," Matt heard a voice call from above him.

He looked up to find a black gentleman, in his late thirties holding a box of matches. The man was very dark, clean cut and spoke with a slight French accent.

"Thank you, Sir," Matt said as he stood and accepted the matches. Matt cut the tip off the cigar, struck a match, and puffed hard a few times to light it.

The black man asked, "are you alright, Sir?"

Matt allowed the bittersweet smoke to circulate in his chest a moment. He exhaled with a refreshed look on his face. "I am now."

The black Frenchman said with an outstretched hand, "I do apologize. My country's men can be at times less than cordial to Americans. I'm Joseph."

“Matt Colburn,” Matt replied as he shook the man’s hand.

Joseph joked with a grin, “you’re not upset over that pretty black girl in there, are you?”

“Was it that obvious?” Matt laughed.

Joseph shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. At least your fiancée didn’t see.”

“You know my fiancée?”

Joseph admitted with a nod, “I’ve been in business with your future father in law for quite some time.”

Matt took another puff from his cigar. “How is it I’ve never met you? My brother and I have been doing business with the Charlevoixs for years.”

“America is at most times a harsh environment for blacks, even well-educated wealthy blacks like me. Any dealings with America I usually leave to my partner, Francis Charlevoix.”

Matt all of a sudden noticed how well-dressed Joseph was. *His diamond cufflinks alone must’ve cost a fortune.* Matt took another puff and ranted, “I can see how you would feel out of place in America. Hell, I feel out of place at this party. I don’t speak the language. That ‘pretty black girl’ in there is usually my interpreter, and the worst part is that I probably won’t be able to tell my fiancée apart from her twin sister!”

Joseph laughed and assured Matt, “your fiancée, A’lice, will be wearing a red dress. Her sister, Arial, will be wearing silver. I think you’re alright, Matt Colburn. If you’d like I’ll serve as your interpreter for a while.”

Matt put his cigar out on the bottom of his shoe with a twisting motion. “I would greatly appreciate that, but I’m afraid I’ve already done irreparable damage. I should probably just cut my losses, feign sickness, and go home.”

“Retreat! Retreat!” Joseph teased, “That’s nonsense. Strut back in there with your head held high. I’ll introduce you to some people. You’ll be fine.”

They reentered the ball, taking a leisurely stroll. They slowly and collectively weaved around busy servants, affectionate couples, gossiping ladies, and ambitious businessmen.

Matt said to Joseph, “if you don’t mind me asking, how did you make

your fortune?”

“I was born a piss poor black American. Many years ago, I made money forging freedom papers for runaway slaves.” Joseph took a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and continued. “The slaves would bring me a sample of their master’s handwriting. I would forge papers that looked exactly like their masters wrote them. I eventually earned enough money to buy my freedom, move to France, and start a new life for myself.” Joseph stopped before a craps table and placed a bet. He called an order to the dealer in French, then went on to say. “I started a business with the Charlevoix’s making expensive dishes, crystal punch bowls, custom dinner sets etc... In the last few years, we’ve moved into selling cigars, made with tobacco purchased from your plantation.”

“That’s an incredible story,” Matt said and placed a bet.

Joseph smiled, took a sip from his glass and warned, “You seem captivated by wealth. Ambition isn’t always a bad thing, but be cautious not to lose yourself. There are more important things than money Mr. Colburn.”

Matt laughed. “Like what?”

Joseph’s answer both confused and astounded Matt. “Love, Mr. Colburn. I would give up all I own for the love of a good woman. If you’re as intelligent as I believe you are, you would do the same.”

“I’ll consider myself warned,” Matt replied.

Joseph finished his champagne and passed the glass and a tip to the waiter. He whispered to Matt, “from what I hear you’ll be seeing a lot more of Ariel. Are you staying close to home or traveling?”

“I wouldn’t know anything about that. I’m engaged to A’lice, not Ariel,” Matt lied and gave Joseph a suspicious glance. *How did he find out I’m supposed to be helping Ariel? Why does he know anything about the scandal in Mr. Charlevoix’s letter? They may be partners, even friends, but I know Mr. Charlevoix wouldn’t reveal that secret to him. There’s too much at stake.*

Joseph raised his hands in surrender. “I didn’t mean to offend. I don’t know much about the situation. I heard Ariel is entering art school here. I was merely going to say use that time with her to your advantage. The twins are close. If you can win Ariel’s favor A’lice will be sure to love you.”

“Thank you,” Matt said, his suspicions laid to rest. *Whew Joseph believes she’s visiting for school.*

Joseph asked, “would you like to meet the French Ambassador?”

“Uh...Sure,” Matt stammered unable to believe a black man, not of European descent, would have such grand connections.

It was common for wealthy, mixed race, blacks, like Lilly, to be in the company of the highest in the land; however, Joseph was not of such breeding. Joseph was admittedly, born a piss poor black American. Matt was amazed and inspired by this man’s perseverance, and Matt was glad he stayed at the party. The French people really started to warm up to him after a few introductions made by Joseph. It was apparent to Matt that Joseph was a well-respected man in his adopted nation of France.

Joseph asked Matt, “will you be fine on your own for a while? I have something I need to take care of.”

Matt assured him, “you’ve done more than enough. Thank you, Sir.”

“No, thank you, Mr. Colburn”

“For what?”

Joseph called back as he walked away, “for being the only American Englishman to address me as Sir instead of boy.”

Matt gave an appreciative nod, and Joseph disappeared into the crowd.

“Little brother,” Matt heard a voice call from behind him.

Matt turned around to find his other two brothers, Charles and Daniel. They were just a little younger than Pete. Matt gave both brothers a firm handshake.

“Congratulations, I hear your getting hitched, Matt,” Daniel said.

Charles added, “and to a Charlevoix no less. What kind of spell did you cast to pull that off?”

“That was Pete’s handiwork,” Matt admitted.

Daniel whispered to Matt, “speaking of spells, have you noticed anything strange lately?”

“No, why do you ask?” Matt enquired.

Charles said, “you’d think we were crazy if we told you. So you’ll just have to see for yourself.”

Matt followed his brothers to a remote corner. Charles and Daniel both beckoned their wives.



Charles' wife walked up and asked, "is this little Matt? I barely recognize him."

"Always a pleasure," Matt stated as his sister in law kissed one of his cheeks and then the other.

"Congratulations on your engagement Matt," Daniel's wife said with an embrace.

Daniel instructed Matt, "touch their bellies."

"Well I hardly think that's appropriate," Matt protested with a confused look.

"No, we don't mind. Go right ahead," the women insisted.

Matt cautiously put a hand on each of their tummies. What he felt both frightened and intrigued him. He stumbled backward, nearly falling.

"What the hell is going on!" Matt demanded. "What kind of madness is this!"



## CHAPTER 7:

### ONLY DEATH AWAITS

**A**s the ball continued, Joseph pulled Matt's future sister in law, Ariel, into an empty chamber and questioned, "why not come back to France and marry me?"

Ariel looked up at the handsome, much older, black man and announced, "I have to marry the Viscount Pier Demoniet."

"Pier is bedding your sister and you know it! He has no respect for you, Ariel. What kind of man proposes marriage and continues to lie with your sister!"

Ariel humbly replied, "be that as it may, I'm still required to marry him."

"Even though you're pregnant with my baby?"

Ariel's mouth opened in shock. "How did you find out!"

"I know everything. Your father asked this American boy, Matt Colburn, to stash you deep in the U.S. and look after you for long enough to conceal your pregnancy. Your father is going to give Matt your sister's hand in marriage in exchange for this favor. Because if the nobles found out you were pregnant with a black man's child your reputation would be ruined. You could no longer marry the Viscount Demoniet. You could no longer marry any European royalty."

"Who told you?" Ariel questioned, still in shock.

Joseph took her hands in his. “It doesn’t matter how I found out. All that matters is I love you. I’ll sell my half of the business to your father. We can take the money and move to some remote part of France where no one knows us. We should marry and raise this baby together.”

Before Arial could respond there was a knock.

“Are you ready, Arial? It’s almost time to announce you and A`lice,” called the voice on the other side of the door.

Arial opened the door to find the hostess of the ball, Mademoiselle Embrasia Lafayette. Arial bid farewell to Joseph and followed her hostess to the place where she’d make her grand entrance.

Two American men gossiped about Mademoiselle Lafayette unaware that she knew English. The short portly one whispered, “that is Embrasia Lafayette, sister of Ambassador Florian Lafayette. The woman’s a legend.”

“Why is that?” the tall one enquired.

The short one added, “she drinks, smokes, and gambles harder than any man. She made it to twenty-eight years of age without ever settling down and getting married.”

“That’s unheard of.”

“Mademoiselle Lafayette is impossible to capture, like a unicorn, but if she were capable of being tamed the lucky bastard who did it would be filthy rich. The Lafayettes are loaded.”

The tall man assured the short man, “all women are capable of being captured. They simply must be broken. Watch and learn.”

Embrasia snickered with amusement. *Silly American men.*

“What’s so funny?” Arial asked, unable to understand the foreign tongue the brutes were speaking in.

Embrasia didn’t bother to repeat the conversation. She assured Arial it was nothing because those men were nothing to her.

On the way to the grand ballroom, Arial made a final effort to plead with her future mother in law, the Countess Demoniet, on behalf of her sister. The conversation ended badly, to say the least. Arial stormed away in aggravation with the issue unresolved.



Matt's fiancée, A`lice, sat in a private room with her father waiting to be summoned for her grand entrance. Monsieur Francis Charlevoix was a man in his forties with blond hair and gray eyes like his daughters. He had been wheelchair bound for many years due to a riding accident.

A`lice sat in front of her father and questioned, "why would you have my sister marry Pier when you know that I love him?"

Monsieur Charlevoix replied, "his mother, the Countess Demoniet, caught you two in bed together. She didn't think you were a suitable match for her son after that. She chose Arial because she believes Arial is the more obedient and chaste of the two of you. After all the rumors Countess Demoniet spread amongst the nobles the best match I could get for you is this American boy, Matt Colburn."

"It's not fair," A`lice announced with tears in her eyes.

A`lice's father held her hand and wiped her tears with his handkerchief. He lifted her chin and said, "I know it isn't fair but a nobleman will always take the bride of his mother's choosing. It is imperative that you impress the mother at all costs. You lost the Countess Demoniet's favor. So please make Daddy proud and give this American boy a chance."

A`lice nodded. "I love you, Daddy."

"And I love you, pumpkin."



Matt's heart pounded as he waited for A`lice to enter the grand ballroom with her sister. The Charlevoix twins didn't walk in like everyone else. They floated into the party with phenomenal grace and poise. Pete was right. They were astonishingly beautiful. Matt's mind left Lilly for the first time since the breakup as he beheld his stunning bride to be and her sister. A`lice and Arial were petite like twins often were. They had silken blond locks and large gray eyes. Their lips had

perfect bee sting fullness, pink like the color of a rosebud in May.

The only problem was that he couldn't tell them apart. He coached himself. *Don't panic. Did Joseph say Alice would be wearing the red dress or the silver one? Either way, the odds are fifty/fifty. What the hell.* He prepared to flip a coin. *Heads red, tails silver.*

Matt approached the lovely girl and placed the corsage around her wrist. She took his arm with an angelic smile and thanked him in her lovely accent. Matt grinned. *Whew I picked the right one.* He was further relieved once the count started dancing with the other twin. Matt guided his maiden to the center of the floor. He froze as he took notice of the two-hundred pairs of eyes fixed on them. All felt right again as she circled him. The heat that trailed her wrapped around him like a ribbon, as did her scent. He tried to place the fragrance but could not name it.

They began to waltz to the elegant symphony music. He glanced down at the beauty he was dancing with and gazed into her gorgeous stormy gray eyes. They were the gray of tornado clouds, and they drew him into her with as much force as any twister. He was lost in them, lost in her. Matt had never been a good dancer but with her, it didn't matter. Her eyes anchored his spirit to hers and his body followed along. As long as he gazed into her eyes he knew exactly where his next step would take him. They never spoke one word the entire time they floated over the ballroom floor. They didn't need to. This was a chemistry he'd never felt before. It was as if their very hearts beat as one. Matt dreaded the end of the song. The crowd cheered as Matt and his damsel took their bow hand in hand. He pulled her back into him and leaned forward to utter a few words at last.

His lips grazed her ear and she shivered as he whispered, "thank you for the dance."

She smiled and whispered back to him, "Je Vous en prie".

Her soft golden hair gingerly brushed his cheek in the process. It smelled of sweet jasmine and Matt swooned. *I don't know what she said, but her voice is like honey to my ears.* He watched her beautiful mouth, silently begging for more velvety words.

"Pardon me!"

Matt released her as he heard the Viscount Pier Demoniet's voice.

"Would you mind if I danced with my fiancée this time! Yours

awaits,” the young nobleman snapped while wearing a smile the entire time.

Never once did Pier alert the crowd, though Matt could tell he was fuming. Matt was shocked and confused as he glanced down at the lovely girl dressed in silver. Ariel looked back at Matt and smiled shyly as her fiancée led her away. Matt was mortified, speechless as the girl in the red gown took his arm. They began to dance, and though the twins were supposedly identical, A`lice just did not feel the same in his arms. In fact, no girl had ever felt quite like Ariel.

Matt stammered, “I... I...”

A`lice cut him a look that said don’t even bother.

Matt abandoned his feeble attempt at an apology. “You look pretty.”  
*“Pretty” come on is that the best I could come up with?*

A`lice replied without once ruffling her graceful demeanor, “I’m sure when you agreed to marry me for my father’s money, you assumed I would make things easy for you.” He twirled her around with a shocked expression on his face and she continued in her thick French accent. “I don’t like you, Mr. Colburn. You are an Englishman. The only thing I hate more than an Englishman is a shit mixed American bred Englishman like you. Now I will lay for you and provide you an heir as required, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

Matt was humiliated before one twin and hated by the other. He gracefully dipped A`lice, yearning to drop her on the floor and run away. They took a bow at the end of the dance and applause roared from the crowd.

Matt whispered to A`lice, “I’m sorry I danced with your sister.”

A`lice smiled at last and embraced him. Matt breathed a sigh of relief. *Thank God, she’s forgiving.* He embraced her back. Though she didn’t stir the same fire in him that her sister did, A`lice’s arms still felt nice, her kiss even better, until he realized her affection was merely a crowd-pleasing ruse.

She made her exit as soon as she was able without so much as a glance back. Now alone, he realized he’d been manipulated. *I feel like a performing circus monkey. I’m merely an accessory to this girl: a nice tuxedo to match her gown. I’ll be alone all night until she requires my presence again.*

When the symphony proceeded couples glided over the floor, like nymphs on a frozen pond. Each step and twirl was smooth, fluid, and graceful. Among the many dancing couples were Lilly and Kyle. Matt left the floor as he caught a glimpse of them. He shook his head. *When it rains it pours.*

Lilly whispered to Kyle. “Nice move, walking up putting your arm around me. Were you trying to make him kill you?”

Kyle chuckled. “I was just trying to help you, little miss. If I make him jealous you’ll be back in his arms and out of my hair in no time.”

Lilly rolled her eyes. Kyle was only twenty-seven, but he’d always acted as if he was sooooo much older than her. “It annoys me when you treat me like a child,” Lilly scolded. “I never asked for help. All I asked you for was an escort, which is the least you could do after...” She huffed. “You haven’t changed at all.”

Kyle gave her a slow intense look up and down, “can’t say the same about you.”

“Are you flirting with me,” Lilly snapped.

Kyle smirked. “Is that a problem?”

“Not at all,” Lilly replied smoothly. “I’m a big girl now. I can take anything you dish out. I’m not the same love-struck teenager you refused to marry.”

Kyle replied with a smug grin, “are you still mad at me?”

“To be mad would imply that I feel anything at all. I feel nothing for you.” She smiled angelically and excused herself.

Kyle watched her disappear. He sighed in frustration. *There’s a lot you don’t know, Lilly. I ended things because I loved you.*



As the party continued well into the night Matt snuck off from the crowd. He snatched Lilly into an empty room and gave her a long-awaited kiss.

Lilly pushed him off. “What the hell is wrong with you! We’re both here with other people.”

“I miss you, Lilly. You know how I feel about you,” Matt replied.



“Yes, I know exactly how you feel about me. You think so poorly of me that you made love to me for three years, left me, and proposed to someone else.”

“That’s not fair. It’s more complex than that. The last couple of weeks have been hell for me.”

“You didn’t seem in hell when you were on the floor waltzing with your fiancée.”

Matt replied with aggravation, “do you truly think I was happily dancing the night away with a girl who hates me, while the only girl who ever loved me stood in the arms of another man! Do I look like a happy man right now! Lilly, I need you. Come to Missouri with me.”

Lilly yanked away from Matt. “I see what this is about! You want me to play mistress to some spoiled white girl! Have you no respect for me at all?”

“It’s not like that. I have an important task to complete in Missouri. My mother’s freedom depends on it. My fiancée’s sister, Arial, has a black child in her belly. I am to see to it that this pregnancy stays a secret, but I don’t know enough French to even talk to the girl. I can tell her sister only speaks English well enough to insult me. I need a translator I can trust. Lillian, I respect you far too much to ever ask you to be a mistress to anyone. I merely ask that you be a friend to me.”

Lilly gave him a suspicious glare. “I don’t trust you. Why would you settle for being friends when you know you want more?”

Matt looked into her beautiful dark eyes and caressed her cheek. “For the same reason you settled for a lesser relationship. I would rather have a piece of you than none at all.”

Lilly’s eyes filled with tears as she told him, “I’m sorry. I cannot follow you to Missouri and watch you marry another woman.”

Matt took her hands and pleaded, “if you do this for me I’ll buy your dress shop.”

Lilly was a gifted designer and seamstress. She’d dreamt of having her own shop since she was a girl. Her dream went on the back burner when her father left. Now her family barely made enough to keep the taxes paid on their property.

“I’ll think about it,” Lilly told him with a heavy heart.

“Thank you. I don’t deserve you. If you want to be with that fancy

pants pretty boy then fine, but I'll destroy him if he hurts you like he did before."

Lilly smiled at his misplaced concern. "Of course. I forgot that you're the only one allowed to treat me badly."

Matt's eyes filled with guilt as Lilly walked toward the door.

"I found out what you meant by the curse," Matt blurted out. "I touched the bellies of my sisters-in-law and it was like I was holding their babies in my arms. I could see, feel and hear them. I knew their babies better than they did. How is this sorcery possible?"

"Not everything is meant to be understood Matt Colburn," Lilly solemnly replied without turning around.

Matt walked up to her. "But why, Lilly? Why would you curse us?"

A single tear rolled down Lilly's cheek, and she said in a trembling voice, "because if Pete knew our baby maybe he wouldn't have sought to kill it."

Matt embraced Lilly. "Would you have really been willing to have my baby?"

Lilly kissed him one last forbidden time and then replied, "I would've had ten of your babies."

Lilly released him and returned to the party. Matt's heart sank because he knew when she let him go it was for good this time. He felt as empty and alone as the parlor he was standing in.



After the mishap at the ball with her former lover, friend, or whatever Matt wanted to call himself, Lilly decided to make an early night of it. She sat in the horse-drawn carriage just outside of her house, wrapped in Kyle's strong embrace.

"Maybe if he knew how you felt..." Kyle started.

"Matt knows, and besides, why are you helping me anyway?" Lilly questioned.

"I already said, to get you out of my hair," Kyle joked with a smirk. She snickered and shoved him in the chest. His expression turned serious as he confessed. "I can't stand to see you hurting. Colburn broke your

heart.”

“Not as badly as you did,” she teased meanly.

Lilly turned to him, gazing up into the deep dark pools that were his eyes. She smiled and bit her lip, taken by how concerned he was. This display of tenderness was a pleasant surprise. *Why is he so different tonight, softer, sweeter even?*

Before she realized it her hands were at the back of his neck stroking the silken curls that lay there. By the time she noticed, it was too late to stop. His fingers were already kneading the small of her back.

Lilly whispered to him even though no one else was around, “do you ever think about...”

“How things would be if we’d gotten married,” he finished her thoughts. “Yes, all the time. Why couldn’t you be just a little older?”

“Why couldn’t you forget about my age?”

He leaned in and placed a soft kiss upon her forehead. What would’ve been an innocent embrace from anyone else put her every sense in a frenzy, stirring up a whirlwind of feelings, unlike anything she’d ever felt. He gazed down at the girl who’d grown into such a beautiful woman. She stole his very breath.

“You shouldn’t do that again,” Lilly said, breathing heavier than intended.

“What, this?” Kyle pulled her even closer and placed his soft warm lips on hers.

The sensation that filled them was undeniable and magnetic. The velvet lined stagecoach disappeared, and she found herself lying naked at his mercy. His rippling naked form climbed atop her, spreading her thighs with his hips, placing himself at her threshold. Kyle smiled down at Lilly bringing her hand to his lips to kiss the shining wedding band on her finger, still unable to believe she was his. They would have to be quiet tonight in order not to wake their babies. She gasped as he thrust himself inside, spilling kisses all over her neck and bosom. Her fingers were digging into the muscular canvas of his back as he made sweet and passionate love to her. She wrapped her legs around his strong penetrating form, taking all of him deep within. His strokes were deeper faster as passion mounted. Her soft wanton moans spurred him on until

she cried his name in climax, and his seed shot forth warm and sweet inside her body.

Lilly opened her eyes inside the stagecoach, convulsing and climaxing harder than she ever knew possible. Neither could speak and nobody wanted to. Was she truly meant to be with Matt, or was she just used to him? At the moment she didn't know. How could a simple embrace make her question a three-year relationship? Of only two things she was certain. First, she felt a want, a need, a yearning for Kyle, and second, this scared her more than anything.

She broke their embrace. "I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. You said I shouldn't. I was completely out of line. Forgive me," he implored her.

She nodded and backed away, feeling a little light headed. She leaped from his stagecoach and darted up her front steps. Lilly had a bit of Voodoo magic in her blood, but a kiss had never invoked a vision before tonight. Mere chemistry was not powerful enough to cause such a reaction, only love was. *This doesn't make sense. If Kyle loved me he would have married me.*

Lilly lit a candle and carried it through the dark corridors of her mansion. She was grateful her brothers had not come home from the ball yet. She had a lot to consider.

Lilly sat at the vanity in front of the looking glass: an enchanted mirror given to her by her parents. Her heart sank. *The last thing my parents did together was purchase this mirror for me. Father didn't want to be the bearer of bad news on my birthday, so he went looking for a gift with my mother. He smiled and laughed pretending the entire time to be the happy husband. I thought they were content and so did my mother. It came as a shock to all of us when he bailed a few days later. My mother ended her life. It wasn't long after that the mirror began to talk to me. It was almost as if a piece of my mother's very spirit was embedded within it. My mother had been a powerful voodoo conjure woman in life. Such a strong spirit does not always move on so quickly. She may linger out of regret of taking her own life and leaving her children behind. She may feel she abandoned us just as our father did. This could be what compels her to stay and watch over us. Either way, I will never know for sure why she can't move on.*

Lilly took a deep breath and braced herself. She prepared to ask her a question. In life, her mother possessed the gift of foresight. From time to time her mom had unexplainable premonitions, and she'd maintained this very gift in death.

Lilly stared into the looking glass and said, "Mother, I've never been more confused in my life. Am I meant to go to Missouri with Matt?"

A fog rolled in, displacing the sense of familiarity of Lilly's bedroom. Candles around the chamber suddenly snuffed out, leaving moonbeams as her only light on this eerie night. Steam covered the surface of the looking glass. Lilly watched in awe as a message began to appear on the mirror in steam. She shuddered in fear as she read the warning which displayed before her eyes:

*If you go to Missouri you'll end up with the love of your life. Leave New Orleans with Seth and never come back. Nothing but an excruciating, horrible, death awaits you here...*



## CHAPTER 8: A KILLER EVENING

**B**ack at the party Nora and Ambassador Florian Lafayette walked arm in arm in the ballroom. Florian told her, “I was serious when I said I’d like to get to know you. I like you, Nora.”

“You wouldn’t be saying that if you knew what I was really like,” Nora whispered in response.

“Then enlighten me,” Florian insisted.

Nora nudged her head in the direction of a handsome blond-haired man around her age. “Do you see that young man over there?”

“The one in the blue vest? What about him?”

Nora whispered to Florian, “I find him very attractive. The moment I’m not on a date with you, I’m probably going to spread my thighs for him.”

Florian smiled at Nora, French kissed her, and whispered in her ear, “I’m so hot for you right now. You can lie with him tonight as long as I get to watch. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not into men. I just appreciate a good show.” Nora gasped in shock and Florian laughed. “What’s the matter, Nora? You look surprised. As long as he touches you and not me, I’m all for it.”

“I wasn’t expecting that response. Most men are misogynistic dinosaurs. They want to screw everything that walks while their wives

wait at home cooking dinner, but not you. Don't you know that people will talk if you court a woman who lies with other men?"

Florian grinned once more. "Does it look like I give a damn what anyone thinks about me?"

Nora gave him an impressed nod. *This man is amazing.*

They froze as Nora's brother, Dr. McKinley, stormed in their direction. The doctor was around thirty, a very thin Scottish man, with auburn hair, and freckles.

Dr. McKinley announced to Florian vehemently, "when I agreed to allow my sister to attend the ball with you I was unaware of your reputation as a disgusting sexual deviant! I've gotten an ear full tonight." He turned to Nora and said, "after this evening you're no longer allowed to see Mr. Lafayette." The doctor stormed away.

Nora said to Florian, "the nerve of my brother dictating who I can and can't spend time with. I'm a grown woman."

Florian wrapped her in a comforting embrace. *How wrong for her brother to make a scene and embarrass her like this. He really is a self-righteous tyrant.*

Nora spoke with tears in her eyes, "I know it's the way things are, but why am I the only one who sees a problem with it?"

"You're not the only one," Florian assured her.

Nora wiped her tears on a handkerchief and pulled herself together. "Let's get out of here. There's a place I'd like to show you."

"Are we bringing your friend in the blue vest?"

Nora laughed. "No, this place is just for you."



Florian had managed to elude his bodyguards for long enough to slip away with Nora. Due to Florian being a political target he was never allowed to go anywhere without security.

Nora and Florian stood at the old cannon which sat on display at the shipping docks.

"I wonder if it still fires," Nora enquired.

Florian informed her, "look at the date on it. It's a relic from the



Revolutionary War. I seriously doubt it's functional."

Nora glanced at the wide-open sea, nothing but water for miles and miles. She pointed to the display cannonballs. "Are you willing to test your theory?"

Florian laughed. "Nora, that cannon is so old it would likely blow up in our faces." He took her by the hand and led her away from the cannon. "Why are you so obsessed with explosives anyway?"

Nora winked. "You don't know the half of it."

They walked down the pier hand in hand. "Did you bring me out all this way for a moonlit walk on the beach?" Florian enquired sarcastically.

"Here we are," Nora announced as she climbed onto a large houseboat. The vessel rocked and swayed smoothly with each wave.

Florian followed her on. "I suppose this is the good doctor's boat."

"No, it's mine. This boat is the one thing my parents left for me," Nora informed him.

"I couldn't help but notice you never took the money I gave you to go shopping with. You looked spectacular tonight. Your brother must give you a generous allowance."

Nora scoffed. "Not really."

"Then how could you afford to buy this beautiful gown?"

Nora carefully lit a lantern. "I have a job. The magistrate is paying me to put together the most spectacular 4<sup>th</sup> of July fireworks display the city of New Orleans has ever seen."

Florian was shocked for two reasons. The first was the fact that he'd never courted a woman with a job. Most women, including his sister, weren't allowed to work outside of the home. His father had been extremely strict on Embrasia. The second was the fact that the entire deck was covered in fireworks.

He said with an intrigued and apprehensive look, "you make explosives for a living?"

"Yes, you didn't think my brother got all the brains in the family, did you? Fireworks are merely a means to get money for my true passion. Follow me." Nora playfully led him downstairs to her laboratory.

Florian looked around at all the vials of chemicals, microscopes, and scientific books. He gave her an impressed nod. "You're a chemist."

“Yes, and sometimes I’m a physicist and a biochemist. It just depends on what I’m working on at the moment.”

“You’re a woman of science,” Florian said, still a little surprised.

“Shhh. You’re never supposed to say the words woman and science in the same sentence. It’s blasphemy,” Nora joked. “I would love to go to college and get a degree. I’d specialize in creating state of the art medicines: drugs that cure infectious diseases and lower infant mortality rates.”

“Is your brother going to go for that?”

Nora sadly replied, “of course not. My brother, like most men, doesn’t see the need for a woman to receive an education and work outside the home. He’s unaware of the job I took with the magistrate. There’s something I haven’t told you, Florian.”

He took a deep breath. “Out with it.”

“The ‘good doctor’ and I only came here to treat an American patient. My brother never intended on staying. Upon return to Scotland, he’s going to marry me off to one of his colleagues from the neurological institute.”

“You’re betrothed,” Florian said with a sigh of frustration. “What does your fiancé think of your goals and aspirations?”

“He plans to put them to an end. He’s worse than my brother.”

Florian announced vehemently, “you’re brilliant, Nora. If your gift was developed there’s no doubt you would save countless lives. Men do the same thing to women that we do to black people. The slaves aren’t even allowed to learn to read and write. People keep education from slaves and women because knowledge is power. You can’t just allow your brother and fiancé to push you around like this.”

“Are you saying you would be fine with your wife being a scientist?”

Florian laughed. “Of course. She could blow up half the house every other month if that’s what made her happy.”

Nora spoke with irritation, “Florian, it’s easy for you to say that I should tell my brother to go to hell. You were born the oldest male, the heir of a dynasty. I am a lowly daughter, the youngest at that. My parents left everything to my brother. If he cuts me off how will I eat? Where will I live!”

“With me,” Florian blurted before he could lasso his tongue.

“I beg your pardon. Are you serious?” Nora questioned.

Florian took a moment to collect himself. The very thought of this level of commitment had him sweating like a whore in church. At last, he stammered nervously, “I... I can’t believe I’m saying this but, come live with me, Nora. It’s the only way we can continue to be together. I can’t bear the thought of you being married to such a scoundrel. I can’t bear the thought of you being married to anyone.”

She jumped into Florian’s arms and kissed him passionately.

He announced ecstatically, “we should return to the party! This calls for a celebration!”

“Naughty poker game?” Nora suggested.

“Hell yes.”

“Women against men?”

“You know it.”



Back in the ballroom Pete kissed Natalie’s cheek and said, “Please excuse me for just a moment.”

She nodded and he disappeared into the sea of guests.

Dr. McKinley walked up to Pete and said, “Thanks for the warning about Ambassador Lafayette, and thanks again for accommodating Nora and me during our stay in America.”

“Thank you for traveling all the way here to treat me,” Pete sincerely replied.

“How could I resist with a case as interesting as yours. Are you ready to do the examination?”

“Do you bring your instruments where ever you go?”

“Just about. The way I see it is we can find an empty chamber and get the initial exam over with. We’d be free to enjoy the rest of the party, drink, dance, and have a merry time. Or we could do the exam when we get to your house, but that would require us both to be stone sober the rest of the evening. The choice is yours, Mr. Colburn.”

Pete peered lustfully at the open bar. “Let’s get this out of the way.”

Dr. McKinley grabbed his black bag of medical supplies and met

Pete in an empty chamber. The doctor pulled a clipboard and ink pen from his sack. “First I’d like to start with a few questions. Please refresh my memory about your symptoms.”

“This is strictly confidential, right? You can’t tell anyone, including my brother,” Pete insisted.

“Anything you tell me becomes a doctor-patient secret. I won’t tell anyone without your consent.”

Pete took a deep breath and informed the doctor, “I hear whispers, voices telling me to do awful things. The headaches are unbearable. They get so bad I often vomit. My brother and Natalie don’t know what’s going on. They usually just assume I’m drunk. The voices in my head grow so loud they’re screaming. Violence is all that quiets them, and once it’s over I feel like myself again.”

“When was the first time you heard the voices?” Dr. McKinley asked as he scribbled vigorously on the clipboard.

Pete thought for a moment and then answered, “I was fourteen turning fifteen. Both my parents had died within the year. I was left to take over the family business and raise three brothers, one of them being an infant.”

After Dr. McKinley conducted a thorough examination of Pete he concluded, “it sounds to me like you suffer from an affliction I’m quite familiar with. You have a tumor putting pressure on your prefrontal cortex.”

“Can I get that in English, Doc?”

“You were born with a growth in your brain that shouldn’t have been there. This particular tumor grows at a very slow rate for the first years of your life. It rapidly doubles in size during puberty. Therefore, you didn’t first notice any symptoms until you were a teenager. Stress makes the condition worse. It usually only takes one traumatic event to make the person snap. Like the trauma of losing one’s parents at an early age, and having the weight of the world thrust upon you. You exhibit all the classic symptoms of my other patients but one.”

“And what symptom is that?”

Dr. McKinley announced ecstatically, “what makes your case so interesting is that you still have a conscience, Mr. Colburn. Most people with this particular affliction experience a total loss of conscience. They

feel no remorse or regret for those they harm. They have zero compassion for others. You're the first patient I've met that still feels empathy and guilt."

"I've been searching for someone to fix my head since I was fourteen years old. No one's been able to help. Then I stumbled across an article in a Scottish medical journal, written by a doctor from the most prestigious neurological institute in the world. I gained hope that day that you could treat me, and help me to lead a normal life. Please tell me I'm capable of being cured."

"You're capable of being cured, just not easily. I have to start you on a regimen of medicine that will shrink the tumor and stunt its growth. Then we have to perform surgery."

"Meaning you have to crack open my skull and remove a piece of my brain. I don't think so, Doc," Pete protested.

"It's the only way. Otherwise, the tumor will metastasize."

"Once again in English, Doc?"

"If we do not excise the tumor, the disease will spread to your other organ systems and eventually be the death of you." Dr. McKinley passed Pete a bottle of medicine and instructed, "Take one pill three times a day. As long as you take it easy and avoid stressful situations the voices and the headaches should cease within days. Nausea and vomiting will pass as well."

Pete rose to his feet and pocketed the pills. They strolled back down the hallway and returned to the grand ballroom.

Dr. McKinley gave Pete a comforting hand on the shoulder and said, "you're still a very young man. I see no reason why you wouldn't make a full recovery."

Pete solemnly replied, "Doc, I'd never admit this to anyone else in the world, but the very thought of surgery scares the hell out of me."

"Take your life into perspective. Think of what's important to you. If you can find one thing in your life worth changing for, one thing worth living a full life for, go through with the surgery."

Pete smiled thoughtfully as he watched Matt on the floor dancing with his adopted mother, Natalie. They both looked so happy. Pete informed the doctor, "I think I've found two."

Matt bid his mother farewell as her escort returned to her. He knew

she'd be safe. *Pete would never pull anything in front of this many people. He's all about appearances.* Matt sighed as the feeling of loneliness swept over him. *Lilly is right. We're both here with other people and its time I started acting like it. Maybe Alice will warm up to me once I start putting her first. I'll heed Joseph's advice and be as charming to Ariel as possible in order to win my fiancée's favor.*



Embrasia Lafayette placed a bet at a blackjack table. She rolled her eyes as one of the American men who'd been gossiping about her approach. It was the handsome blond fellow in the blue vest Nora had her eye on earlier. He was tall, with a muscular build. His eyes were chestnut brown.

He fought to find the words in French to ask Embrasia if the seat next to her was taken. She replied in French for him to have a seat if it suited him and told the dealer to hit her. The dealer flipped another card. Embrasia's cards added up to fifteen. The young man continued to struggle with his French while she pretended not to understand him.

After listening to the American brutally murder her native language a bit longer she called out in English, "is this the part where you 'break me' like a prize thoroughbred horse?"

"You speak English," the young man called out in shock and humiliation.

Embrasia told him in a frustrated tone, "I'm the daughter of an ambassador. Why the hell wouldn't I speak English?"

The man sprung up from his seat. "Ma'am I'm so sorry. What I said in the hallway was stupid and arrogant. I'm positively mortified right now."

Embrasia took a sip of her martini and placed another bet. She looked the young man over. *He's a dunce but at least he's good looking.*

As the young man turned to walk away Embrasia ordered, "give me a name and an age before I change my mind."

"Broderick," The man informed her.

Embrasia told the dealer once more to hit her, and then questioned

Broderick with a skeptical glare, “how old are you, junior? You don’t look a day over fifteen.”

He assured her, “I’m a grown man Mademoiselle Lafayette.”

“And how old is that,” she demanded.

“Twenty-one, I swear.”

She grinned mischievously. *I suppose that’s old enough.* Embrasia settled up with the dealer and asked Broderick, “can I interest you in a game of blackjack?”

“We’re already playing blackjack, Mademoiselle,” Broderick said with a confused expression.

Embrasia smiled and slipped him a key with a room number embedded in it. She whispered in his ear, “a private game.”

On the way to meet Embrasia, Broderick ran into the man he was gossiping with. Broderick announced to his cousin Franklin, “I knew the ruse would work like a charm.”

Franklin asked with utter confusion, “you knew she spoke English all along?”

Broderick called out with a sly grin, “of course I knew. She’s the daughter of an ambassador. Why the hell wouldn’t she speak English?”

“But I don’t get it. If you knew she could understand us then why would you choose to insult her?”

Broderick laughed and went on to explain, “compliments only work on women who aren’t used to getting them. Mademoiselle Lafayette has political standing. She’s extremely wealthy, and beautiful beyond compare. Had I complimented her I would’ve merely been one of a hundred other men tonight to kiss her ass. By the end of the hour, she would’ve forgotten my face, and I wouldn’t have received a moment more of her time. By insulting her I insured that I would be the one man she remembered. I knew she would give me more of her time if only to give me a piece of her mind, and that’s the point at which I groveled and kissed her ass.”

“Bravo,” an intrigued Franklin clapped.

“Now if you’ll pardon me, Miss Lafayette awaits.”

Broderick met Embrasia in her chamber. He took a seat at the table and she poured them both a glass of Scotch. He announced as he shuffled the deck, “I found the cards but I can’t seem to find the chips.”

Embrasia laughed as she walked over with the drinks. She sat across from Broderick and gingerly placed her foot in his lap. He watched in stone silence as she hiked up her dress and removed her garter belt.

Embrasia tossed the lacy white garter on the card table and informed Broderick, “I’m a Lafayette. We play for clothes.”



Early the following morning Florian walked outside and sat on the steps as he always did. He sprung to his feet as he saw the guards open the gate. The poor black man selling the flowers sprinted up the courtyard in his direction. Florian’s mind filled with anxiety. The flower salesman had never set foot inside the gates before, despite numerous invitations to do so. Now the destitute black man was running at full speed toward Florian. It was apparent something was wrong, terribly wrong.

The flower salesman stopped before Florian and heaved for air. He announced frantically, “come quick! A French citizen’s been murdered!”



## CHAPTER 9:

### THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

The body wasn't far from the French embassy. It amazed Florian how differently people reacted to horrible situations. The crowd was crying, screaming, fainting, and vomiting. Some were laughing hysterically, but not because they thought it was funny. Their minds just didn't know how else to react. There was total mayhem in the French Quarter.

The putrid smell engulfed Florian as he ventured forward. He couldn't tell much by peering at the rotting corpse swinging from the noose. The dead man looked positively ghastly. His body was left in horrific condition. All Florian could tell was that it was a black man. The face had been nearly beaten off. The corpse was so swollen he barely fit into his dress shirt and suit jacket, crusted and stained with blood.

Florian turned to find a horrified Matt Colburn and Lilly A'Rue. Matt and Lilly were on their way to the embassy to discuss the details of Ariel's stay in Missouri. Lilly fainted in Matt's arms at the sight of the corpse. Matt eased down to the ground with her. He became ghost white and sick to his stomach. Someone had really done a number on this victim. All Matt could recognize was a pair of cufflinks, a pair of expensive diamond cuff links.

Matt released a choked whisper, "oh my God, Joseph."

Joseph was naked from the waist down. His testicles had been removed and stuffed into what was left of his mouth. The sexual nature of the crime made it apparent to Florian and Matt that Joseph must've slept with a white woman. Matt was now certain he knew which one.



Embrasia woke up nestled between her soft warm covers with Broderick. She could tell he'd been up for a while but decided not to wake her. He smiled and kissed her. She kissed him back.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to ask your brother for your hand in marriage," Broderick said.

Embrasia giggled. "If you insist, but it's your funeral."

Broderick asked in shock, "What compelled you to say that?"

"My brother has never allowed anyone to have my hand in marriage."

"That's because I hadn't asked him," Broderick replied confidently.

Embrasia kissed him sweetly. "As a matter of fact, be my guest."

Florian beat on the door. "I need to talk to you, Embrasia!"

"Just a moment, Florian." Embrasia climbed out of bed and threw on her robe.

Broderick announced frantically, "is that your brother! Should I hide?"

Embrasia informed her lover, "My brother always knows when I am lying to him. If you hide he will consider it cowardly. If you're serious about being with me, you'll stay in that bed and stand your ground."

Broderick grabbed his clothes and jumped in the closet anyway. Embrasia rolled her eyes and opened the door. Florian walked in. He immediately saw Broderick's blue neck tie lying on the card table. He didn't bother to mention it. There were many more important issues to address.

He informed his sister, "A French citizen was murdered. He was a black man by the name of Joseph."

Embrasia's hands flew to her mouth in horror. "But why? Joseph was such a nice man."

“Judging by the brutal manner in which he was killed, he had to have slept with a white woman. Joseph was a very close friend of our guests, the Charlevoixs. Please comfort the family while I try to convince the magistrate to conduct an investigation.”

“I’ll be right down,” Embrasia assured her brother.

Florian left and Embrasia closed the door to her chamber. As she freshened up and dressed, her lover stepped out of the closet.

Embrasia informed Broderick, “there’s been a murder. I have to go comfort the Charlevoix family.”

“For what?” Broderick questioned. “This crime was NHI: no humans involved. You heard your brother say this Joseph obviously slept with a white woman. He had it coming.”

Embrasia gasped. “How could you say that! A man was killed, a good man at that!”

Broderick nonchalantly explained, “I don’t understand why you and your brother are getting so worked up over a measly nigger. I own around two-hundred of them myself. I don’t take it hard when one of them dies.”

“You own people,” Embrasia announced in shock.

“I own niggers. There’s a difference.” Broderick corrected her.

Embrasia called out vehemently, “I’m going to have to ask you to leave, Deputy Broderick Welch.”

Broderick protested in shock, “but I slept with you. That makes me...”

“A lot of fun,” Embrasia cut him off and pointed to the door. As he gathered his things she went on to say, “just because you gave me the best four and a half minutes of my life, doesn’t excuse the fact that you’re an awful human being!”

Broderick looked appalled at Embrasia’s insult to his manhood. He ducked as she threw his badge at him. It barely missed his face and struck the wall with a clang.

She shoved his shoes in his chest and demanded, “get out!”



A week had passed since Joseph’s funeral. The magistrate never

ordered a formal investigation of his murder. He wasn't considered a person in America; therefore, what happened to him wasn't considered a murder. He wasn't owned by anyone so it wasn't even deemed property loss. This tragic destruction of life didn't constitute any criminal offense. Even the poor flower salesman was spooked by this heinous crime. He no longer sold flowers at the gate after that day.

Florian sat in a parlor with Broderick Welch wondering why he looked so familiar. Florian glanced behind Broderick and saw his sister. Embrasia was eavesdropping through the partially opened doorway. She was shaking her head disapprovingly with a worried expression on her face.

The sad look in her eyes said, "please for the love of God say no, Florian."

Florian informed Broderick in the politest way possible, "I can't allow you to have my sister's hand. I don't believe Embrasia fancies you."

Broderick replied confidently, "of course she likes me. She's just cross with me. You know how dames are. They'll swear they hate you one minute, then everything will change with a bouquet of flowers and a good bedding."

Florian fumed at the thought of this arrogant boy believing Embrasia could be so easily manipulated. Florian growled in response to the insult on his sister, "listen you pompous little jackass! You are nothing but a plantation owner, little more than a glorified farmer! I could buy and sell you like one of your slaves if I saw fit!"

"But I love Embrasia, Sir. I swear I would worship her all the days of my life." Broderick vowed, changing his tune immediately.

Broderick was unaware his comment would offend the ambassador. Broderick, like a lot of men, felt he was of superior intelligence to women. He naturally assumed Florian felt the same way.

"You don't love or even like my sister," Florian snapped. "You merely want to own her, possess her like one of your Negroes. I won't allow it."

Florian called to the guards, "please show Mr. Welch the door."

As Broderick Welch was escorted off the premises he passed one of the guards a wanted poster. The poster contained a generous award

amount and a badly drawn sketch of Malcolm.

Broderick informed the large intimidating men, “I know you pushover Frenchies usually side with runaways, but if you see this man, turn him in. He disappeared with two small boys and he’s wanted for murder.”



Florian berated his sister as they marched to the dungeon, “How could you just have Malcolm locked up without even hearing his side of the story!”

“I understand you love to believe the best in people but the man is wanted for murder!” Embrasia shouted back.

Florian and Embrasia entered the dungeon: a small jail on the estate of the French Embassy. The dungeon was very dark with only a few rays of sunshine breaking through its barred windows. The structure was made of stone and medieval in appearance. It possessed only a few small prison cells. The purpose of the dungeon was merely to hold prisoners until they were sentenced and placed somewhere permanent. Malcolm rose as he saw Embrasia and Florian nearing his cell. A row of bars separated them.

Embrasia stood directly in front of Malcolm and spoke slowly enough for Malcolm to read her lips, “Broderick claims you murdered a man. Did you?”

Malcolm regretfully told Florian and Embrasia with his hands, “yes it’s true. I killed a man.”

“Please help us understand why,” Embrasia told him.

Florian and Embrasia prepared to take in the silent story. Their own father was deaf. So it hadn’t taken them long to learn to communicate with Malcolm.

Malcolm quietly explained with his hands, “I was a slave carpenter on Broderick’s plantation. Broderick’s father, Master Welch, brought home a young girl from the auction block. Her name was Shelly. She was their cook. Master Welch demanded I take her for my wife and make babies with her. She was uneasy about it and so was I. We only knew

each other three days. Shelly and I decided to get to know one another and put the physical stuff on hold. We agreed to wait a month from the day of our wedding to consummate it. She took great care of Ashton, Devon, and me. She was funny and sweet, and she often snuck us goodies from the kitchen. I quickly grew to like and respect her. My wife and I had nothing but we was happy, just us and the boys. We marked day after day off the calendar. Something we was both apprehensive about in the beginning quickly became something we anticipated mo than anything. We came close to making love a time or two but still continued to wait. Meanwhile, Broderick didn't share the same patience in regard to his inheritance. He poisoned his father to speed up the process. On the night of our consummation, she was snatched and arrested. Broderick blamed my wife fo the murder he'd committed. No one believed her side of the story. She was sentenced without trial to hang. I couldn't bear the sight of her standing on that stool, and them tightening the noose around her neck. I fought to save her life. I killed one overseer in the process, maimed another. Broderick saw what I did to his friends and he took off running like a coward, but not befo he kicked the stool out from under Shelly's feet. She fell and the weight of her body broke her neck instantly. We'd only been married a month. We'd only made love once. I knew I'd be sentenced to die fo the overseer I killed. I returned to my cabin, packed up Devon and Ashton, and made a run fo it. It's next to impossible to run away with chilren, especially when ya don't have a plan. I had to take turns carrying each one. The slave trackers caught up with us befo we even made it out of the city. They turned the dogs on us. By the grace of God, we escaped. I lost so much blood I don't remember much after that. The next thing I recall is waking up in yo guestroom days later."

Embrasia replied as tears filled her eyes, "my apologies. I shouldn't have had you arrested."

Malcolm assured her with a few hand signals, "I understand, better safe than sorry."

Florian grew ill. *I knew I recognized Broderick from somewhere, or shall I say, Deputy Welch. He was the man from the dream, the one Shelly warned me about. That cutthroat murdering scoundrel wants my sister's hand in marriage.*

Florian told Malcolm as he unlocked the gate to his cell, “What you did for your wife is understandable, even admirable. I would kill a man for Nora, and we’re not even married.”

Malcolm replied with a few silent gestures, “with all due respect, Sir, if ya feel that strongly about her maybe yall should be.”



Across town at the A`Rue estate, Lilly slammed another arm full of her brother’s belongings in a suitcase. Out of all five kids, Lilly and Seth were at opposite ends of the spectrum. Lilly looked the most black and Seth looked the most white. His fair skin, green eyes, and straight hair often caused people to do a double take before realizing he was black. Seth grew irritated and dumped the suitcase out on the bed.

Lilly shoved her brother in the chest and screamed, “Seth, you stubborn fool! We must leave New Orleans! Mother warned us!”

Seth shouted back at her, “I am a man of logic! A looking glass cannot talk! Neither can Mother, for she is dead! You’re going to end up like her if you don’t stop messing with this voodoo nonsense!”

Lilly repacked his things. “We’re doomed if we stay. I saw the message with my own two eyes.”

“Lilly, you miss mom. You saw what you wanted to see, but the dead cannot talk, and neither can that damn mirror! Father is gone now and I am the man of this house! I’m not leaving New Orleans and neither are you!”

Matt called from the doorway of the chamber, “may I have a word with the man of the house?”

“What the hell are you doing here?” Seth snapped.

Matt pleaded, “Just hear me out. We were best friends for years, Seth. I would’ve never gotten with your sister had you not vouched for me with your father. You trusted me then. Please trust me now when I say I had no clue what Pete had done to Lilly. It was unfortunate, and I’m sorry it happened, but please don’t risk the lives of both you and your sister because you hate me. I am asking you, the man who was once my best friend, to reconsider. I’m a man of logic just like you, but what if

she's right?"

Seth stood quietly for a moment. "Pete walked up to me and apologized at the Charlevoix Ball. He told me you shot him."

"You shot your brother, Matt!" Lilly exclaimed.

Matt admitted, "I came this close to killing him."

Seth questioned him with a suspicious glare, "Why? Are you in love with my sister?"

Lilly watched intently as Matt told Seth, "come on, you know our relationship was never that serious."

Lilly's face filled with hurt. She turned and walked out of the room.

Seth grinned. "She's gone now, you coward. You can grow a pair of balls and admit the truth. Are you in love with Lilly?"

Matt took a deep breath. "Yes, I am. I was wrong to string her along for three years and I refuse to do it anymore. That's the reason I didn't say it in front of her."

"Yes, that and the fact that you're an emotional cripple."

Matt laughed. "You're right, I am messed up, but if I could've married her I would've. I saw the way your father just left all of you to fend for yourselves. That made me concerned for Lilly and my relationship. I would never leave her, but what if I died? By law, Pete would still be my next of kin. He could and would leave Lilly and our children homeless and penniless. How could I promise to take care of Lilly forever when I'm not certain if I can?"

Seth assured him, "I understand. Don't worry. I won't tell her."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

Seth yelled down from his bedroom window as Lilly was crossing the courtyard, "Lilly! Are you going to at least hug me goodbye!"

Lilly bolted into the mansion. Seth shook Matt's hand and said, "take good care of my sister."

"I will," Matt promised. "Are you sure you're not coming with us?"

"I'll never leave New Orleans. This is my home. Even with Lilly gone I still have three siblings here to look after," Seth explained as Lilly ran up and hugged him. Seth told Matt, "If you're going to pull this off you'll need more than a great interpreter. You'll need a midwife you can trust." Seth dipped a pen in an inkwell, scribbled a few lines on a piece of parchment, and passed the note to Matt. "This is the address of the



Welch plantation. There you will find my great aunt Elizabeth. Everyone knows her by Aunt Lizzie. She is the best nurse in Louisiana, maybe even the country. As such she will cost you a small fortune, but if you buy her from the Welch's you will not regret your decision. Aunt Lizzie is truly gifted in the art of medicine, and she will never betray your confidence."

Matt assured Seth, "I might not have enough money right now, but Mr. Charlevoix should have no problem footing the bill for her. Thank you."

As Matt loaded Lilly's bags on the stagecoach he saw her escort from the ball approach her. Lilly sprung into the man's arms, which both disgusted and infuriated Matt.

Lilly pulled Kyle aside and whispered, "you didn't have to see me off. I don't care what Matt thinks."

"I have a confession to make," Kyle replied. "I didn't come here to annoy him, though I must admit it is a plus. I merely came because I wanted to. Again, I'm sorry about the other night. I don't know..."

Lilly smiled. "It's forgotten. We're friends, right?"

"Always," Kyle promised.

"I'll write you as soon as I arrive," Lilly swore.

"Good, because I'm going to write you every day," Kyle replied.

Lilly hugged him once more, and then boarded the stagecoach with Matt. Though she'd miss her constant feuds with Kyle, she knew they'd never be a couple. *He'll always see me as the little girl, with nappy pigtails, who followed him around. I'll never grow up in his eyes.*

Matt mocked Kyle as the horse-drawn carriage pulled away, "what a sissy. 'I'm going to write you every day.' Listen when I say fellow prefers the company men."

Lilly shook her head and decided not to dignify Matt's pettiness with a response.



Matt and Lilly stood in an elegant parlor in the French embassy.

Lilly informed Matt, "when Ariel comes in you must remember to

signal for me to start the translation and signal for me to stop.”

“I know how a translation works,” Matt snapped with irritation, still a little perturbed about what he’d witnessed earlier.

Lilly smirked with amusement, “testy, are we?”

“What’s going on between you and that dope?” Matt questioned.

Lilly snapped in a whispered tone, “none of your business, that’s what.”

Arial walked in and greeted them both. Lilly began with the translations.

After a while, Matt whispered a joke to Lilly in English, “Francis Charlevoix must feel like father of the year. One daughter is a scathing wretch and the other pregnant by a black man.”

Lilly smirked and translated Matt’s insults into French. Arial grew furious. For a brief moment, Matt thought this tiny French girl might beat him senseless. Arial screamed a few lines of French and stormed out of the room. Matt looked at Lilly almost as if to ask her why she did it.

Lilly answered his silent question with a sarcastic grin, “you didn’t give the signal.”

Matt regretfully asked, “what did Arial say?”

Lilly informed him, “Arial said that the only two men she’s ever loved are God and her father. She would appreciate it if you do not offend either of them.”

“I can’t spend the next six months with two women who hate me. Can we please bury the hatchet?”

“Fine Matt, but you can’t continue being rude. As I recall you left me and you’re engaged to be married. It’s a bit hypocritical.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. Now, will you please help me fix this mess with my fiancée’s sister?”

Matt followed Lilly to the guestroom Arial was staying in. They gave a knock and Arial allowed them both to enter. Arial dumped the candy from her powder blue dish into a wastebasket. She carefully packed the candy dish. She had received it in the mail as a birthday gift from her mother.

Arial spoke a few more lines of French and Lilly translated for her, “Arial says that she’s sorry she got mad at you. She does appreciate all you and Pete are doing for her.”

Matt said to Lilly, “I insulted her and she’s apologizing to me.”

“She’s a sweet girl,” Lilly admitted.

Matt told Lilly, “tell Arial I’m sorry. I was an idiot to say those things about her family.”

Lilly translated Matt’s apology. Arial smiled and passed Lilly two books then said a bunch of lines in French.

Lilly translated and passed the books on to Matt, “Arial say’s her father informed her you like ancient literature. She brought you Homer’s *Iliad* to read on the way to Missouri. She heard Pete has a thing for numbers so she’s giving him what’s called a proof. It’s an original handwritten draft of a math book before it is published. This proof was written by her mother. Arial’s mother is a university professor. At first, the school didn’t want to allow women to attend, let alone teach, but Arial’s mother was persistent. She refused to take no for an answer. They had no choice but to recognize her brilliance. She persevered and won the favor of her male counterparts.”

Matt replied, “she sounds like a hell of a woman. I can’t wait to meet her.”

Lilly informed Matt, “Arial also said what her mother has in book smarts she lacks in human emotion. Her mother left Mr. Charlevoix for another man after his riding accident rendered him unable to perform certain husbandly functions. Arial hasn’t seen her mother in years. Her mom only writes her and Alice for special occasions and holidays.”

Matt looked down at Arial. There was so much sadness in those big gray eyes of hers. He longed to caress her alabaster cheek, to hold her tenderly, and protect her from ever feeling pain again. He tried to convince himself that these protective urges stemmed from the fact that Arial was his betrothed’s sister, but deep down he knew he wasn’t just being a good brother in law. There was something about Arial.

He gazed at the gifts she’d given him. He felt guilty for not thinking to bring her one. He’d just assumed he’d be able to purchase her and Alice flowers from the black man at the gate. Then Ambassador Lafayette informed him that the flower salesman never came around anymore.

“I can’t accept these gifts,” Matt modestly replied.

Lilly informed him, “if you don’t you will insult her... again.”

“How do I say thank you?”

“Merci”

Matt smiled at the pretty blond French girl and said, “Merci, Mademoiselle Charlevoix.”

“Je Vous en prie,” Arial replied with an innocent smile.

Lilly translated, “she says you are welcome.”

Matt excused himself and walked outside to give Arial some time to bid farewell to her family. Matt noticed Pete journeying up the walkway of the courtyard.

Pete fought with his conscience. *How do I tell Matt I've hated him for nothing, blamed him for a killing I committed?*

Pete said nervously, “were you really going to just leave town without saying goodbye?”

“Didn't think you'd notice me gone,” Matt replied sarcastically. Matt passed Pete the proof and informed him, “it's a gift from Arial, written by her mother.”

Pete graciously accepted the book. “Tell her I said thank you.”

“I will,” Matt assured him.

Pete took a deep breath. *The time has come to bare my soul and confess my greatest sin. It's now or never: The Moment of Truth.* “Matt, before you leave I just wanted to confess. You didn't kill our mother. I did.”

## CHAPTER 10:

### THE LOVE TRIANGLE

**M**att shouted, “what on earth are you talking about, Pete!” Pete went on to explain, “Matt, it didn’t surprise me at all when you chose an older woman. Natalie’s older than me. Both Charles and Daniel’s wives are older than them, and our mother was a great deal older than our father. She was an independently wealthy British woman who wanted no part of settling down. The last thing on her mind was courting some piss poor, American, sharecropper, half her age like father. But father was relentless in pursuit of her. He refused to take no for an answer. One day he arrogantly boasted that if she would spend just one night with him she’d be begging him for marriage.”

Matt laughed. “That’s something rude and tactless I would say. Did she slap him?”

Pete laughed and informed Matt, “no, she took him up on his offer. She was convinced that one good bedding would get him over his irritating obsession with her. She was wrong. By the time that strapping young lad was through with her, she was obsessed with him. Like father predicted, they married two weeks later. Father used her dowry to start the Colburn plantation and thus the legend was writ.”

“What does that have to do with her death?” Matt inquired, amused by the story of his parents.

Pete solemnly informed Matt, “At the time of their marriage father

was only fifteen and mother was thirty. By the time you came along, she was way up in years. She had a massive stroke when she went into labor with you. The doctors informed me that you were in distress and you'd suffocate if they didn't remove you immediately. Then they said our mother wasn't stable enough to have surgery so soon after her stroke. If I ordered them to remove you she'd die. If I waited until she was better you'd die. I looked at our poor unconscious mother and thought about how much she loved us all. She knew the risks of bearing a child at her age. Against doctor's orders, she chose not to terminate the pregnancy. Deep down I knew what she would've wanted. I just didn't want to accept it. Finally, I made the decision no fourteen-year-old boy should ever have to make. I told those doctors to save you by any means necessary. You came out underweight, and as blue as a berry, but you survived. Then I brought Natalie in from the field to take care of you. Mother died as a result of my decision. Not because of you."

Matt sadly and humbly replied, "Pete, for what it's worth thank you for saving my life."

Pete passed his little brother an envelope full of cash. "Natalie's raving like a lunatic. Be certain to write her as soon as you arrive in Missouri."

"Just her?" Matt questioned with a hint of irritation.

Pete swallowed his pride and grudgingly said through clenched teeth. "I would appreciate it if you wrote me as well. Good luck Matt, and be careful."



The following morning Pete sat at the breakfast table alone waiting for Natalie. It felt so strange for Matt not to be present. Now that Pete was taking medication regularly he realized he missed his brother. The most shocking revelation of all was that he was in love with a woman he'd abused for sixteen years. Pete looked at his bandaged hand and gained a whole new appreciation for his head chef, Mable.

Natalie gasped as she sat at the table, "is Mable ill! What happened to the food Master Colburn?"

Pete laughed and announced as he waved his bandaged paw, “I thought I’d do something nice for you and cook... Well, I tried to cook.”

Natalie stared in horror at the ghastly smorgasbord. The biscuits were crispy black on the outside and doughy in the middle. The bacon was slimy and undercooked. The pancakes looked as if they’d been scrambled rather than flipped. She couldn’t tell what was going on with the eggs. That’s if she was right in assuming they were eggs.

She smiled at Pete and lied, “I’m sure it’ll be delicious.”

Pete laughed. “You don’t have to eat this poison. Mable’s in the kitchen fixing something edible right now.”

*Thank the good Lord Jesus.* Natalie prayed. “With all due respect, why were you trying to cook, Master Colburn?”

“Sixteen years ago, I showed up at your cabin door with a sick newborn in my arms. I was still a child myself. I had no clue what to do with Matt. You came into my home to take care of what was most precious to me. I never thanked you for that.”

Natalie nervously questioned, “in what manner have you wronged me, Sir? You’re never nice unless you’ve done something awful.”

Pete assured her, “I just want to talk. That’s all.”

“About what,” Natalie asked cautiously.

“Do you remember the first time we kissed?”

“You mean the only time we kissed?” Natalie replied sarcastically. Yes, Sir, it’s hard to forget.”

“You were with another man at the time.” An irrational twinge of jealousy swept over Pete to know that he would never be what Bryson was to her.

“Bryson,” Natalie spoke wistfully, his name rang from her lips like a song. A pleasant grin lit her face at the memory of the slave boy she’d been in love with.



*17 years ago...*

It was just after 6:00pm on the Colburn Plantation and the sun was still blistering hot. Another grueling day in the tobacco, cotton, and

sugarcane fields had come to an end. Exhausted slaves were picking their toddlers and infants up from the nursery. Men were gambling with playing cards, dominoes, and dice. The plantation consisted of mostly black slaves with a handful of poor whites. Blacks referred to these destitute white field hands as 'po bukra' because to aristocrats they were of little more importance than Negroes.

Natalie stretched her aching back. Picking cotton was monotonous and tiresome. When she first arrived her fingers bled, now they were covered in calluses. Natalie walked past two slave women gossiping about how grand it would be to have a cushy position in the mansion. The house servants didn't labor nearly as hard as the field hands. The chambermaids were even given shoes!

Natalie glanced down at her bare feet, which had taken quite a beating. She smiled. *They can keep their house positions for all I care. I'd rather labor hard every day in the fields than smooze up to arrogant white folks from sun up to sun down. House servants turn their noses up at lower ranking slaves. They snitch on their own people and snub anything to do with their heritage. I prefer the fields any day to working with a gaggle of backbiting cutthroats. The field hands have a sense of camaraderie and loyalty. It's true that in the mansion I'd have it easy, but in the field, I have my friends.*

A vast four-hundred field hands were congregating in the slave quarters. Men were trading goods and gambling with dice and playing cards. Women were trading gossip while scrubbing clothes on washboards. Feminine heads turned as a striking young man walked shirtless to the pond. He carried his shirt in one hand and a knapsack in the other. Girls swooned as they watched his muscles dance beneath his sweat-laden skin. He was young, but built like a brick house, firm in stature for his age. He dipped the shirt he'd taken off into the pond water. He wrung it over his face, chest, and back to cool himself.

"So tell us. Is he black or white," asked a pretty white girl with auburn hair and blue eyes.

"We gotta know," asked an equally attractive black girl with short braided hair.

At least eight other teenage girls had surrounded Natalie, prodding her for information on her best friend, Bryson, the boy at the pond.



Natalie, a beautiful Octoroon teen, chuckled at the drooling girls. *They only want to know what race he is because being black makes him off limits to these white girls and being white makes him off limits to the black girls. He has white features but he so tanned no one can tell his race; especially in a place like New Orleans, with all its Creoles and Cajuns: fairer skinned people of African descent, like myself.* Bryson flashed a charming smile at Natalie and waved. She waved back with a grin. *Bryson is no philanderer but he loves the attention from these girls. He'd be perfectly content to let them guess at his ethnicity forever. He's such a shameless flirt.*

Natalie decided to have some fun with them. “Why don’t you ask him? For all you know, he could be married.”

“I could wash these clothes on his stomach,” said a cute dark-skinned girl. “He probably married to some frigid house servant who ain’t giving it to him right. After one night with me, I’d have him jumping backwards over that broom in no time.”

Even Natalie laughed at the girl’s brashness. The other ladies chuckled too. The young slave girl was speaking of a well-known ritual. Slaves jumped forward over a broom to marry and backward over the same broom to divorce.

The blue-eyed white girl scoffed. “You’re assuming he’s black. No man that drop, dead, gorgeous could possibly be a nigger.”

Somewhat irritated by the insult on her people, Natalie told the obnoxious brat, “actually he’s a quadroon.”

The girl gasped and stomped away, repulsed that she’d been drooling over a black man all this time. *I should have known!*

The other white girls sighed with disappointment and followed.

The black girls cheered triumphantly. Natalie grinned and shook her head. She left to meet her friend at the pond still laughing on the inside. *I don't actually know his race. I never cared to ask. The color of a person has never been important to me.*

As Natalie drew closer, a gaggle of black men and white men talked among themselves. Their ages ranged from mid-teens to mid-twenties and they ogled her. A cascade of honey locks framed her lightly tanned face. A perfectly round butt was mounted atop shapely legs that seemed to go on forever.

Even Lance and Michael, the only down to earth overseers, were in on the conversation. Both were very handsome men. Lance possessed wavy auburn hair and piercing eyes. Michael was a man of great stature and solid muscle with orangey-red hair. Both he and Lance were orphans Pete found eating out of his garbage. Pete gave them jobs and they'd been with the Colburns ever since.

Though they were appreciative of Pete, they hated the work. It conflicted with Lance's chivalrous mentality toward women and Michael's caring and empathetic nature. Michael had always been a gentle giant, which Master Colburn found to be a waste. A big strapping boy like him could certainly be of use as his enforcer.

Though they were overseers, Lance and Michael worked alongside the slaves rather than ordering them around from high on their horses. They didn't savagely whip anyone not working fast enough, yet their fields were more bountiful every season. They turned greater profits than the other overseers because slaves respected rather than feared them.

"Are you bedding her," Michael asked.

"I beg yo pardon," Bryson asked with a blank stare.

"Have you uncrossed her legs?" Lance clarified.

"Course not," Bryson swore with an annoyed expression. "Natalie's just a friend."

"Don't take this personally but I'd really love to pound your friend," Lance admitted wistfully.

Michael added, "I would eat marmalade off her ass."

Bryson and the others laughed.

"Bryson," Natalie called out as she reached the pond.

Despite her protests, Bryson wrapped her in a soggy embrace. Then he trapped her in a headlock and gave her noggin a brisk rub with his knuckles.

"Damn you," she exclaimed as she fought to free herself. "You're such a child!"

Bryson laughed as a soaked Natalie stood before him brooding and pouting. His guy friends spoke to her in such a gentlemanly fashion she would've never guessed the perverted things they were saying mere moments earlier.

"Are you alright, Miss?" Michael asked.

“Shall I grab you a towel, Miss?” offered Lance. “We’d hate for you to catch a chill, my lady.”

“Thank you, but I’m fine,” Natalie politely replied. “What sweet young men.”

Bryson shook his head at Natalie. *How could such a smart girl be such a horrible judge of character?* He flung the wet shirt over his shoulder and grabbed his knapsack. He gave her a once over but was subtle about it, smiling to himself as he admired her form. He followed Natalie to their favorite spot, and they chatted while she practiced the violin.

Her first owners were aristocrats, who merely required a companion for their only daughter. They dressed Natalie beautifully and provided an upper-class education for her. They trained her to speak properly and even hired a composer to teach her to play the violin and piano. When Natalie wasn’t traveling abroad with the Spencers, she was entertaining at their lavish dinner parties. The other house slaves grew jealous of Natalie’s fancy clothes, fine speech, and distant travels to lands they’d only seen in their dreams. Though Natalie had never asked for special treatment, her fellow slaves made relentless attempts to sabotage her. Their final coup was successful. Natalie was sold to the Colburns, where she’d been picking cotton in the blistering sun ever since.

“I got a gift fo ya,” Bryson said as he pulled a bottle of champagne and two flutes from his knapsack. “Seventeen summers today, right?”

She smiled at his joke. *Bryson and I were both born on this very day seventeen years ago.* “How can you possibly afford such a gift?”

“Stole it from the cellar of this rich bastard,” Bryson reluctantly explained. “Ya ain’t gotta drink it now. It’s yours to enjoy with whoever ya choose, whenever ya want.”

Natalie smiled and graciously accepted the gift. “Thank you, Bryson, but please don’t do this again. I’d hate to see you strapped to a whipping post for stealing from Pete Colburn. Have you ever met young Master Colburn? I bet he’s a fat, bloated, lazy bastard.”

Bryson laughed. “From what I seen slave girls find the jackass attractive.”

Natalie sighed. “I’d gotten you a gift but decided against giving it to you. What you got me is so much fancier it pales in comparison, and now

I recall you saying a man should never wear more jewelry than his watch and his wedding band.”

“Anything ya got me is fine. Just give it to me,” Bryson said impatiently with a grin.

Natalie shook her head. “No, it's stupid.”

Bryson grinned and wrestled the box from her hands. He pulled the lid off to find two meticulously, woven, leather bracelets.

“I made them,” Natalie explained slightly embarrassed. “They’re friendship bracelets. One is for you.”

“And the other?”

“The other bracelet is for you to give to whomever you choose, whenever you want.”

She grinned as Bryson tied the bracelet around her wrist. “I’m flattered,” she said as she tied the other around his wrist.

“Thank ya. This was a very thoughtful present. I ain’t gonna lie and say I’ll wear this every day. Jewelry is fo women but I will wear this bracelet every year on our birthday.”

“Fair enough.” Natalie hugged him tightly.

“Got anyone in mind to share that champagne with?”

Natalie sighed and shook her head no.

Bryson swept a soft curl from her face as he said, “men are falling all over themselves fo ya and ya won’t even take a chance on one. What’s so horrible bout us, Natalie?”

She sighed. “It isn’t that simple.”

“Have ya ever taken a chance on anyone?” he asked with concern.

“It’s hard to love when one of the house servants who betrayed me at my former estate was my own fiancé.”

“I understand,” Bryson said quietly. “If ya can’t trust the man who vowed to love, honor, and protect ya, then who can ya trust? If I could find him I’d throw him a beating.”

Natalie laughingly thanked him for his chivalry, “I appreciate the offer, but I don’t even hate him. I hate this corrupt system that pits us against each other and forces slaves to take bites from one another just to survive. I blame the disgusting, so-called peculiar institution of slavery.”

Her words hit Bryson hard. Both slavery and the betrayal committed

by Natalie's former lover would result in her never opening her heart again.

Bryson felt utterly defeated. "I should probably get going."

Natalie argued with herself as he walked away. *We're friends. If we cross that line we can never go back... but what if it's just for one night? If only for my birthday I should fight for what I want,* "Bryson wait."

He stopped and made an about-face. "Yessum?"

"Are you coming to the fish fry tonight?" she questioned.

A puzzled expression crossed his handsome face. "Not sure. Why?"

"Because I've realized who I want to share my champagne with," Natalie confessed, and then immediately wished she could take the words back.

Bryson smiled a little in disbelief. "I'll be late cause the Colburns require my assistance tonight. They have some huge ball in the mansion, but if ya can wait fo me..."

She nodded yes before he could finish the question, and felt her cheeks grow warm with blood. He kissed her forehead tenderly, and she smiled as he walked away. *This is the dumbest thing I've ever done, but how long can I go on pretending he didn't stop my heart the moment we met? I wanted to die after being sold to this prison of a plantation. It was Bryson who breathed life into me, gave me a reason to push forward, and a desire to love again.*

Much later that night a few smoldering embers still burned in the fires as slaves retired for the evening. A disappointed Natalie took a solo walk through the slave quarters on that extremely warm night. She wondered with tears in her eyes. *What could've caused him to stand me up?* Her heart leaped as she found him on her front stoop, with their bottle of champagne in hand.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," he spoke sincerely as they ran forward and collided in an embrace. "I'll make it up to ya."

"It's alright," she said as they held each other. "The fields have the same quit time year-round but in the house, you're not released until your charge dismisses you. I know because I worked in the house for years."

They began to stroll back to her hovel hand in hand. Bryson explained, "when I asked to have champagne with ya it was cause I know the wonderful life that was stolen from ya, and I just wanna return a tiny

piece of it fo yo birthday. I wasn't asking ya to drink with me fo... or expecting... its fine if we don't..."

"I want to."

Bryson stopped and looked her dead in the eye. "Are ya sure?"

A shiver rolled up and down his spine as she nodded her head yes. "This can only happen once. Then it's back to friendship."

His lips met hers in a sensual unhurried kiss, that felt like a burst of magic. He swept her up into his arms and carried her over the threshold. He wanted to keep her but if all they had was tonight, that would just have to do. When you love someone you'd rather have a piece of them than none at all. As Bryson lay her on the sheets he was profoundly grateful for this shred of Natalie.

Bryson knows that he and Natalie should wait for marriage, but given all she's been through, there may never be one. Their passion doesn't feel like a sin to him. How could something so pure and true, something done out of mutual love, respect, understanding be wicked and sinful? He would not believe it. He could not believe it.

Natalie was a mystery, a woman who'd lost everything, but harbored no hatred. The first time he saw her she was in shackles, being dragged to this strange new place, as she fought like a raging lion. Her eyes betrayed any essence of tranquility, a golden storm that raged behind widened irises as she watched him with a mixture of fear, curiosity, and anxiety. Her eyes reflected his own lost soul.

Now she bears into him with eyes of wonder and love as she sits with one knee at each side of his sculptured godlike body, throwing back her heavy tresses, as his hips lift from the bed, joining them together. His back rises from the stiff mattress until he is sitting completely erect. His hands glide up and down the soft skin of her beautiful naked back as they make tender and passionate love in the center of her bed.

Bryson's large but gentle hand tangles in Natalie's sandy hair, as he guides her head back and takes her neck with his mouth. His kisses are soft and sweet, but grow needier with every wanton movement of her hips against the solid bones of his pelvis. He begins pushing up into her, ravenously feasting on her neck, giving her lips tantalizing bites, and caressing her soft pink tongue with his own. He moves his steely member lustfully inside of her tight wet tunnel, wondering vaguely exactly how

she could be of less value than the next lady. How could such a lovely, intelligent, and passionate woman be anyone's slave?

Her teeth sink into the salty flesh of his neck causing him to draw in a quickened breath. She nearly ended him but he soon regained control. Her fingernails rake across the vast muscular plain of his back and he delves into her so deeply she cannot breathe for at least five thrusts. When at last she wills her lungs to fill a tear trickles down her lovely cheek.

She knows the man she has given herself to is the perfect combination of tenderness and might, ferocity and empathy. Natalie has lost her heart to this slave boy, and no matter how hard she tries she will never reclaim it. Her supple breasts slide up and down the sweat glistening skin of his powerful chest, her rosy nipples perking with the glorious sensation. Her warm juices seep into the course curls at the base of his desire, as her orgasm washes over her like a mid-April shower.

A profession of love rings from her lips as her body quivers in his powerful arms. He smiles and kisses the side of her face, wishing he can make her do it again but knowing that his time is drawing close. Bryson cradles Natalie against his heart as he releases inside of her, and they hold one another in sweet beautiful silence...

Natalie opened her eyes and nearly died right there of shock. Her heart jumped into her throat as she saw Master Colburn staring furiously through her window, with a gang of overseers at his back.

Natalie asked in a trembling voice, "ww... ww... What does he want with us, Bryson? Why is Master staring at us like that?"

Bryson choked out, "Because he's my father."

Master Colburn bellowed in a voice that would quake Mt. Olympus, "Peter *Bryson* Colburn! Don't even bother to reach for your clothes. It'll be much easier to cut the flesh from your naked back." Master Colburn turned to his goons, "Chain my son and this harlot to the whipping post. If Pete insists on lying with the slaves I may as well treat him like one."





## CHAPTER 11:

### THE DAY LOVE DIED

Slaves came spewing from their homes as Natalie and Pete were dragged through the commons. Master Colburn didn't even allow them to dress first, for the sake of amplifying their humiliation. He was determined to teach them a lesson. Pete found himself wishing he hadn't given Lance and Michael the night off. They would've never allowed this to happen. He was grossly outnumbered without them.

Though Pete had fighting capabilities far beyond his years, Master Colburn had a loaded pistol aimed at Natalie's temple. The Master finessed the trigger, itching to pull it, as he cruelly offered all twelve of his lackeys a turn with her. Natalie's blood turned to ice at his callous words. Her heart pounded forcefully against her breastbone.

"Me first," growled a large burly man, as he shoved the others out of the way.

Pete watched helplessly, fighting against his restraints, begging his father for mercy. Natalie screamed in terror as the monster shoved her to the hard ground. He forced himself upon her naked body. She swung her fists and feet violently, clawing, hitting, and even biting her attacker. She fought with all her might as his fellow goons cheered in anticipation of their own turn. None of them had any incentive to be their most gentle. Would she even survive such a savage attack? Natalie found herself praying for a merciful bullet, a quick and pain-free death; rather than

endure the dishonor and excruciating pain of a violent gang rape.

“Father no!” Pete screamed; a single tear falling from a gray-blue eye. “If you do not allow Natalie to be ravished I’ll do your bidding for the rest of my days. I swear I will honor the Colburn name and run a plantation you will be proud of.”

“Agreed,” Master Colburn said with a satisfied smile.

“Damn it,” the overseer whined in a childish fashion as he was forced to climb off of Natalie.

For the moment Natalie found herself able to breathe again. The scoundrel hadn’t gotten a chance to violate her. Natalie cried out as they carried Pete in the opposite direction, “Bryson!”

“Natalie!” Pete bellowed as they clapped her in irons and threw her in the brig.

The gate clanged shut and an overseer shoved her gown between the bars. Natalie donned it immediately and sat on the floor of her prison cell, rocking anxiously with her arms wrapped around her knees. She anxiously awaited God knows what inhumane punishment. Would Master Colburn hang her, burn her, or merely disfigure her? And what of Bryson, Pete, or whoever the hell he is?

Tears cascaded over Natalie’s cheeks. *It’s now apparent that the big fancy ball the Colburns required his assistance for was merely his own birthday party. How could I have ever allowed myself to be so easily fooled? And why would he do this? Is it not enough for him to take my freedom? Did he have to rob me of my dignity as well?*

Pete stood strapped to a tree slipping in and out of consciousness from the brutal beating he’d sustained. The other overseers stood watch as Master Colburn lashed his son again and again. Master Colburn hit Pete so many times his arm cramped and ached from the swinging. Once Master Colburn could no longer will his exhausted arm to move he took a brief interlude to lecture his son. The solid leather whip felt heavy coiled around the Master’s shoulder as he paced back and forth in a regal and stately manner: chin up, chest out, hands clasped behind his back, a true southern aristocrat.

“I raised you better than this!” Master Colburn bellowed. “These niggers are animals, Pete! Livestock to be bought, sold, and traded! I might as well have caught you pants down with a goddamned mule.”

Master Colburn knew that bedding slaves was like masturbation in many ways. It was something almost everyone did but no one admitted to. Most slave masters would give their sons of only thirteen summers a poor unfortunate slave girl to rape as he wished. Wealthy families couldn't take a chance on their boys impregnating unsuitable white girls and then being forced to marry them. Nor could they run the risks of their sons catching deadly diseases from the harlots in the brothels, but this awareness didn't make Master Colburn any less disgusted with Pete. The only thing Master Colburn hated more than disobedience was black people. The reason for this deep-seated animosity was unknown.

Master Colburn signaled for his overseers to cut Pete down from the mighty oak splattered with his blood. They sawed at Pete's restraints and he fell to the ground like a pile of chains.

He'd been lashed so many times he was delirious. "Father... I swear... Natalie didn't know. This was my fault. Please... Please don't do this to her."

"I'm not going to do a damn thing to her," his father assured him. "You are!"

"What!" Pete exclaimed. The callousness of his father's words smacked him out of his delirium like a cold splash of water to the face. The overseers pulled Pete to his feet.

His father passed him the whip, still dripping with blood. "It's time she learned her place and you would do well to remember yours."

"No!" Pete bellowed. "If there is a modicum of decency in you, you will not have me further betray her!"

"Think wisely son, for if you pass that whip back to me I will beat that witch to death with it," Master Colburn warned. "I know she had to have cast a spell on you. No son of mine would ever fall for such a creature by his own will."

Head down, spirit broken, Pete accepted the tool of Natalie's torture and hobbled painfully toward the whipping post. In order to save her, he had to hurt her...

Later, Aunt Lizzie quietly entered the plantation infirmary. Its floorboards creaked and groaned beneath her feet. Pete lay on his belly in agony, his back brutally sliced open by way of the lash. Aunt Lizzie sighed as she pulled up a stool and sat next to him.

Pete questioned in an exhausted raspy voice, “Where’s Dr. Moore? He’s been treating me since I was in nappies.”

“The doctor delivering a baby, so ya pa sent fo me. I run the infirmary on the Welch Plantation.”

“Is Natalie alright,” Pete questioned with concern, as he recalled being forced to whip her. It sickened Pete to harm her. He had dropped to his knees, doubled over, and vomited when he lashed her at the whipping post.

Aunt Lizzie assured him, “she doing fine. Ya was passed out when I treated her.”

Aunt Lizzie nodded in the direction of the other bed in the infirmary. There Natalie rested on her belly. Dots of dark red blood seeped through the bandages on her back. Aunt Lizzie dipped a towel into a bucket of water and wrung it out. She gingerly cleansed Pete’s wounds as he groaned and flinched in pain.

Aunt Lizzie stopped and offered to sedate him until she finished his sutures. He declined the offer in order to stay alert. His father’s overseers were angry that the Master offered them all a turn with Natalie and then denied them the pleasure of her supple young flesh. Pete had to remain vigilant in case one those lecherous brutes returned to rape or kidnap her.

“You think me a fool, right?” Pete said in despair.

Aunt Lizzie threaded the needle and applied a local anesthetic derived from cocaine, “I’m just a slave nurse. Ain’t my place to judge ya, Sir, but if it makes ya feel better to tell me how ya got yoself into this mess, ya mo than welcome to.”

She began to close the bloody gashes in Pete’s back. His every muscle tensed in response to the agony he was enduring.

Pete confessed while Aunt Lizzie stitched him up, “my friends, Michael and Lance, came to me with letters of resignation. Well, Lance did. Michael can’t write his own name. His paper was blank but I got the point.”

Aunt Lizzie chuckled, tied one stitch, and began another.

“They said they were sick of me living up in my ivory tower and turning a blind eye to the cruelty going on in the fields,” Pete continued. “My father’s overseers were literally working those people to death. I had the authority to change the work hours and the demands on these

people but I had no idea how long of a day was too long. That's when they suggested that I work my own fields for just a week and that would give me further insight. Michael and Lance left for months to travel because they were so burned out on the job. My brothers were staying with our grandparents for the summer, while my parents vacationed in France for a second honeymoon. As the oldest and heir of the plantation, I was left to hold down the fort. I'd never been so alone in my life. All I had to talk to was the house servants, who didn't talk to me, except for the occasional obligatory 'yes Sir' 'more tea Sir' etc... I sat at the end of that long mahogany table eating dinner alone night after night until the monotony and loneliness had driven me to a point of desperation I was willing to work my own fields. The field hands were so inviting and kind, pleasant people with a sense of camaraderie, unlike anything I'd ever seen. I spoke broken English to blend in. The slaves accepted and welcomed me with open arms. That's when I met Natalie. I didn't want her to see me as the devil so I gave her my middle name instead. She invited me for dinner at her tiny cabin. It had been so long since I'd had a real conversation, even longer since I'd eaten supper with pleasant company. She was beautiful and intelligent, with such a big heart. I enjoyed spending time with her and the field slaves, listening to stories, telling jokes at the master's expense. Even after Michael and Lance returned I couldn't bring myself to tell Natalie the truth. How was I to confess to the woman I'd fallen for that I was actually her owner and not her friend, that I was the bane of her existence?"

Natalie stirred in the bed next to him and turned to face Pete? Her eyes welled up with tears as she addressed him in a formal manner for the first time, "Young Master Colburn, did you ever feel guilty, even once?"

"For owning people? Of course."

"No. For lying to me."



Pete shook off the painful memories of a long-ago past. His large shoulders sank forward in defeat as he gazed across the table at Natalie.

*I've taken Natalie countless times against her will over the years and I've only kissed her once. The rapes were never about the sex. I don't enjoy it. It's as if I'm not myself. I'm a ghost watching someone else hurt her, insult her, and scream at her. I'm powerless to stop it. These acts of violence were committed to make the 'demon monkeys' in my brain stop screaming. Many days I black out and lose large blocks of time. It's rare that I remember attacking her, and for that I'm thankful.*

Natalie grinned as she answered his question, “the *only* time we ever kissed was because you lied to me about your name, your age, even your accent was a ruse. Was any of it real?”

Pete pulled up his chair next to hers and took her by the hand. “The fact that we shared a birthday was real. I merely lied about the fact that I was a few years behind you. The way I felt about you was real. My father did the unforgivable by marrying you off a week later. I hated him for that. That night you cried my name as I pleased you was the last time you've ever addressed me informally. Ever since it's been, Master Colburn or Sir. Natalie, will you please call me by name just once? Remind me of that charming older girl who gave me my first kiss.”

Natalie solemnly replied, “Master Colburn, with all due respect, Sir. You know I must decline that request. Your father taught me a valuable lesson: never blur the line. That cursed godforsaken kiss is what put me in this predicament. Had I not thrown myself at you like a whore that night, you probably wouldn't have...” Her voice trailed off and she added vehemently, “there's not a day that goes by I don't regret that kiss!”

“Natalie, kissing a boy you like is not the same as flaunting yourself like a whore. Mable throws herself at me like a whore.” Natalie laughed and Pete continued, “That kiss was the best I've ever felt. You were the only good and wonderful thing in my life. The only thing that makes me feel worse than realizing I've abused you for sixteen years, is finding out you blame yourself for it. I did it because I'm a sick twisted individual, not because you did anything wrong.”

Natalie looked into Pete's pale blue eyes to gauge his sincerity. “My husband just disappeared one day. Be honest, Sir. Did you sell him?”

Pete took a deep breath and confessed, “I was a jealous teenage boy. I sold your husband the moment my father was in the ground, then I lied

to you without a conscience. You know what else? I was only pretending to be sad when you lost your baby. My heart rejoiced at the news of a miscarriage. Even then I couldn't bear the thought of you having another man's child. I won't ask for forgiveness because I don't feel I deserve it, but I'm sorry."

Natalie smiled at Pete, "I wasn't that fond of him anyway. I only married him because your father said I had to."

Pete announced with shock, "you just wanted to see if I'd tell the truth."

"Yes, something like that," Natalie admitted with a sly smirk.

Pete caressed her face and looked into her dark blue eyes. In a moment of weakness, he placed his lips upon hers. Natalie sprung from the table and bolted upstairs. By the time Pete made it to her, she'd locked herself in her chamber.

Pete banged on the door and shouted, "I'm sorry if I scared you! It wasn't my intention! Please come back out."

Pete felt a hint of relief as he saw the door begin to open. Natalie stood before him stark naked.

She was screaming and hitting him on the chest, "Did you come up here to force me, Pete! Go ahead! I'm done cowering in my room night after night! From now on no more locked doors!" She slapped him hard across the face and shoved him forcefully. "Do it! Rape me like you always do!"

Pete pulled her into the chamber and covered her with a blanket. He wrapped his arms around Natalie and sat back on the bed with her. He held her tightly until she calmed down and stopped swinging at him.

He confessed his secret to her, "I'm sick, Natalie. I have a tumor in my brain. Because of it, I've done a lot of things I regret. I'm on medicine now. For the first time in sixteen years, I'm beginning to see things clearly. I'm having surgery in less than six months. If it goes well, I want you to marry me."

"What?" Natalie asked in disbelief, still breathing heavily from her fit.

Pete pulled the most recent diamond necklace from her nightstand. "I've given you a lot of these over the years." He pulled a black box containing a diamond ring from his pocket and asked, "How many of

these have I given you? I know you've taken a lot off of me. I don't deserve you, but I love you."

Natalie gazed in shock at the engagement ring. *Even if anything he says is true, and I doubt that it is, it doesn't change the fact that he's a plantation master. Light skinned or not I'm still a black woman. I can't marry a slave owner.* Natalie told Pete with tears in her eyes, "I'm sorry. I just can't marry an evil, black-hearted, tyrant, that I'm terrified of."

Pete's heart shattered at the words. He felt like he'd been kicked in the chest by a horse. He regretfully assured her, "I understand that you hate me. To be honest, I figured things would go this way, but I knew I'd regret it for the rest of my life if I didn't at least try. Natalie, I can accept the fact that we're over, but may I kiss you goodbye?"

"Do I really have a choice? You own me," Natalie reminded him.

"Yes, you have a choice," Pete assured her. "I only wish that choice is to share a kiss with me."

"I don't understand, Sir. One minute you're driving slaves, and the next you want to wed one. Are you Pete or Bryson? Because if I must say, Master Colburn, I'm confused."

"To be honest, I'm a little bit of both," Pete confessed with a heavy heart. "I was a born and bred southern aristocrat. It would taste a lie to say I didn't condone slavery as a necessary evil. I figured as long as people were decent to their slaves it was alright to own them because they were an inferior people."

She grimaced and shook her head. "That's what I figured."

"But then I worked the fields and saw how bad things were, and then I met you and everything changed. I don't know how I feel anymore. All I know is that I was wrong."

A single glistening teardrop rolled down Natalie's cheek, "You may choose to hold the lash or my heart, but you cannot have them both. We are enemies, Sir. I'm sorry but I do not have a kiss for you."

"I understand." Pete's heart sank as he rose from her bed and walked toward the door.

"However, I do have just one kiss for Bryson." Natalie sprang from her bunk and he wrapped his arms around her, kissing her with every fiber of his being.

Then he left her alone, as promised. She could see him wiping his



tears with the back of his hands as he crossed the threshold. For the second time in his life, Pete found himself yearning to keep her, but profoundly grateful for just a shred of Natalie, just a kiss goodbye.

Natalie ran into the hallway, still covered in a blanket, and called after him, “prove you belong to me, Pete! I want to hear you say it!”

Pete turned and shouted back, “I belong to you! I swear!”

They ran into each other’s arms. He kissed her with all the intensity of the very first time at her cabin.

“I promise not touch you for six months until we are wed,” Pete vowed and dropped a kiss into her hair.

“Agreed,” Natalie smiled against his chest. “I must be the dumbest woman in the world.”

Pete grinned and spoke in a tone dripping with sarcasm, “The words every man wants to hear from his betrothed.” His expression grew serious as he admitted, “I never wanted to be a plantation master. I wanted to be a mathematician. My parents died and I took over the family business to raise my brothers. The youngest is out of the house now and its time I lived my own life. I’m letting all the slaves go.”

Tears of joy filled her eyes and she found herself breathless. “Why didn’t you just tell me that?”

“Because I know how good and unselfish your heart is. I didn’t want you marrying me just because you know it means freedom for the slaves. I want you to marry me only if it’s what you truly want to do. Natalie, we can leave this place and start a new life together.”

Natalie smiled and assured him, “though I have no clue as to why from the moment I saw you I loved you.”

Pete put the ring on Natalie’s finger, held her close, and kissed her deeply.



Two months later at the Embassy, Dr. McKinley stood in the atrium with the French ambassador. Florian signaled for his guards to give them a moment alone.

Dr. McKinley vehemently demanded, “Nora has proved her point

now. Pack her things and send her home.”

Florian informed him, “Nora isn’t here to punish you. When will you realize everything isn’t about you? I would send her home today if I believed you’d serve her best interests.”

Dr. McKinley shouted, “what the hell do you know about my sister’s best interests! I’ve known men like you my entire life! Nora’s merely a plaything to you!”

Before Florian could consider the consequences of his actions he blurted the words, “I love her!”

Embrasia heard the thunderous boom from clear down the corridor. She ran into the atrium to find Florian lying in a pool of his own blood...

## CHAPTER 12:

### VOICES OF EVIL

Florian regained consciousness hours later in his chamber. Embrasia was looking after him.

Florian groggily asked his sister, “What happened?”

Embrasia filled him in, “Nora’s brother smashed you over the head with a vase. You had to have stitches, and you said you loved Nora.”

“Yes, I was definitely hit in the head with a vase.” Florian slowly and carefully sat up in bed.

Embrasia snickered. “Actually, you said you loved her before you were hit. In fact, it’s the reason he struck you.”

“Where’s Dr. McKinley now?”

Embrasia snapped, “In the dungeon of course!”

“But if the doc is in the dungeon and my medic is on vacation who stitched me up?”

“Nora of course. You didn’t think her dreadful brother got all the brains in the family, did you? I had Dr. McKinley arrested. He assaulted not just my brother, but a French diplomat. He’s awaiting trial. He could serve up to ten years in prison.”

Florian rose on unsteady feet and staggered toward the door.

Embrasia asked, “Where are you going?”

“To pardon him, where do you think,” Florian said with irritation.

“But what kind of message does that send?”

“One of forgiveness! Why must you always be out for vengeance, Embrasia!”



Florian and Nora stood hand in hand before the gate of Dr. McKinley’s cell. Florian unlocked the gate and told the doctor, “As a man who’s responsible for a sister I understand your anger. So I’m making the decision to pardon you, not as a government official, but merely as a man. Nora and I have talked. If you’d be willing to send her to college and allow her to marry the man of her choosing I’ll send her home with you.”

The doctor replied, “I will not be humiliated before the board as the brother of one of those unruly women trying to break her way into a man’s field. The study of science is for men! You can keep the disobedient wretch. My sister is a whore, as are you. You’ll be bored with each other in a month.” Nora began to cry as her brother verbally crucified her. “After you throw Nora out and trade her in for another meaningless bedmate, she’ll be begging me to come home. Only then the answer will be no.”

The doctor stormed away, and Nora cried in Florian’s arms, “This is all my fault. You were injured, and my brother nearly went to prison. None of this would’ve happened had I been obedient.”

Florian urged her to calm down. “I am unharmed, and I would have never sent your brother to prison, even if he shot me. None of this is your fault.”

Nora smiled through her tears and confessed, “I didn’t truly want to go home. I just didn’t want to be a burden to you.”

“You’re not. I enjoy seeing you every day.”

Nora nervously told him, “I enjoy seeing you too. I hope it doesn’t scare you, but I love you.”

Florian admitted as they left the dungeon, “Those words do scare me, but not nearly as much as they make me happy. I love you too, Nora.”



Embrasia was glad Nora ended up staying. Embrasia had never really had a close female friend. Most women snubbed her for the things she did, only to sneak off and do the same exact things behind closed doors. Nora never judged Embrasia and they had a great deal in common. Embrasia was outside assisting Nora with another one of her concoctions. Embrasia spotted Malcolm and the boys across the courtyard by the shed. She lifted her goggles on top of her head in order to watch him work.

Embrasia passed Nora a pair of tongs that were just out of her reach and said, “Though Florian never asked Malcolm for a shilling he insists on earning his keep. He’s always fixing or building something. He also helps the servants with their chores. He’s a humble man and a hard worker.”

Nora pulled Embrasia’s safety goggles back over her eyes. Then Nora poured one beaker of solution into a larger one. As the mixture bubbled and fizzled she turned to Embrasia and said, “Oh my God, you are drooling over that black man.”

“Am not,” Embrasia laughingly denied the allegations.

Nora’s big green eyes peering through goggles made her look like a bug. Embrasia laughed at the site of her.

Nora replied, “I know you’re drooling over Malcolm because I am. With the exception of your brother, we have the same exact taste in men. I even admired Broderick at the ball. How was he, by the way?”

“It was over too soon to tell,” Embrasia sighed.

Nora laughed at Embrasia’s unpolished honesty. “Tread cautiously with Malcolm. He lost his wife not even six months ago.”

“That’s true, but he only knew her a month. Is it possible he would still be hurting? Is it possible to fall in love that fast?”

Nora smiled wistfully at thoughts of Florian. “Yes, I believe it’s possible.”



Florian had a private picnic with his sister later in the afternoon. He asked her, “how would you feel if I married Nora?”

Embrasia called out in anger and disbelief, “you can’t possibly be serious! What happened to marriage being an archaic ritual! What about the plan?”

“I love her Embrasia.”

“You’re not in love, Florian! You’re just obsessed with what’s between her legs and too dumb to know the difference! How could you think like this after all the proposals you turned down on my behalf, most of which without my knowledge!”

Embrasia called back as she stormed away, “Congratulations, you just went from being the world’s greatest brother to the world’s biggest hypocrite!”

Florian wanted to go after her but knew it would only make matters worse. Doing nothing was a difficult thing for a fixer like Florian, but he had to give her time.

Embrasia stopped by the shed and asked Malcolm, “would you mind helping me set up my hammock out front in the courtyard. I’m no longer talking to my moronic brother.”

Malcolm signed, “no problem at all, Ma’am.”



It was a beautiful sunny day in the French Quarter, which just happened to be the ritziest neighborhood in New Orleans. Deputy Broderick Welch walked hand in hand with his girlfriend Miranda. She was a rail-thin girl with curly black hair. She was pretty, but not a total knockout like Embrasia.

Unbeknownst to Miranda, Broderick had no real intention of marrying her, despite the fact he’d been with her for many years. Miranda came from a poor family. She lived in a three-bedroom shack

with her parents and seven brothers and sisters. Broderick had his mind set on marrying a rich girl, and not just any rich girl, Mademoiselle Embrasia Lafayette. Embrasia was more than wealthy, she was politically linked.

Broderick yearned for power even more so than wealth. This was why he became a member of law enforcement, to begin with. Even though his sights had always been set on Embrasia, he continued to string Miranda along. When he married Embrasia he intended to have a mistress to lay with, during times when Embrasia was bleeding or big with child.

Broderick grinned. *This works out perfectly. Miranda has been nagging me for weeks to take her on a stroll through the French Quarter. She's very poor and her own neighborhood lies in shambles. She appreciates the escape: the big houses, the beautiful scenery. The French Embassy isn't far from here. I can walk past with Miranda, and make Embrasia jealous. Meanwhile, Miranda naively believes I'm doing something nice for her.*

They approached the gate of the French Embassy. Broderick grew ecstatic when he spotted Embrasia out in the courtyard putting up a hammock. *Today must be my lucky day. Even if she hadn't been around, my plan would've worked, because her servants would've gossiped the news to her. It works out so much more in my favor for Embrasia to see me with another woman in person.*

Miranda smiled at her lover. *Broderick looks so handsome in his law enforcement uniform: crisp and brown with a shiny silver badge. His mother would've been proud of him. God knows I am.*

Broderick made eye contact with Embrasia. He prepared to plant a big kiss on his lover to really drive the point home. That's when he spotted his runaway slave, Malcolm.

Broderick exclaimed, "I should've known the Lafayettes were harboring him!"

"Harboring who? What are you talking about!" Miranda demanded.

Broderick's eyes filled with fury. He pulled out his pistol and aimed at Malcolm's head. Malcolm motioned to surrender in order to prevent anyone else from getting hurt.

Embrasia stopped him and boldly informed Broderick, "This

embassy is as good as French soil. If you send that bullet across this fence you will have created an international incident. I'll be well within my rights to have my guards shoot you on the spot."

Broderick snarled as he kept the gun on Malcolm, "he is my property. I will dispose of him as I see fit."

Broderick's girlfriend Miranda cautioned as she glared at all the guns pointed at them, "we're outnumbered. Just let him go. Why are you always so quick to make your gun go off?"

"That's not the only thing that's quick to go off." Embrasia chuckled.

Miranda looked at her boyfriend with hurt and despair.

Broderick assured her, "she's just saying that to make you jealous. Miss Lafayette is bitter because I spurned her advances at the Charlevoix Ball. I told her I had a woman."

Embrasia rolled her eyes. "You have five seconds to lower your weapon before they turn you into a colander. One, two..."

Broderick lowered his gun and Embrasia warned him, "if you even think about coming back to snipe Malcolm or the children, remove the thought from your head, or it will be your last. If anything happens to them while on this property, the gates of hell its self will open and the entire French government will rain fire and brimstone."

Broderick walked briskly away with his girlfriend.

Miranda naively suggested, "you're an officer. Can't you have the magistrate force her to turn over your slaves?"

Broderick explained, "the Lafayette's have diplomatic immunity. There isn't a crime they can be prosecuted for unless the French government strips them of their diplomacy. Malcolm can't hide out at the embassy forever. He'll slip up one day and when he does, game over."

Miranda stopped in her tracks. "Miss Lafayette is beautiful and wealthy. I can understand how you could be tempted by such a person, but what I can't understand is you lying to me. Dishonesty would be a far greater betrayal than the affair itself. Did you sleep with her?"

Broderick replied, "I swear on my father's grave I never had sex with that woman."





Ashton and Devon sat on a tree limb watching Broderick with his girlfriend.

Ashton pulled money from his pocket and said to Devon, “I bet ya this week’s allowance I can hit the bad man five times in ten seconds.”

“Game on,” Devon stated as he matched Ashton’s wager.

Ashton loaded his slingshot and aimed at Broderick’s face. Embrasia cleared her throat to get the boys’ attention and then wagged her finger disapprovingly. Devon pocketed both his and Ashton’s money with a grin.

Ashton protested and Devon said, “hey ya said you’d hit him five times. I ain’t see ya hit him once.”

“But I ain’t get a chance to,” Ashton said in his own defense.

Devon replied with a smirk, “whether or not you’d get a chance to wasn’t part of the arrangement.”

They both jumped out of the tree and Embrasia scolded them, “did you two seriously make a sport out of how many times you could pelt that man in the face? Must you bet on everything?”

“Yessum”

She sighed and shook her head. “Break is over. Your governess is waiting.”

“Awe do we gotta go back to school today, Mademoiselle Lafayette,” the boys whined.

Malcolm stomped over. Without saying a word, he struck fear in the hearts of Ashton and Devon. The children straightened up at once, apologized for talking back, and returned to class.

Embrasia told Malcolm, “you shouldn’t be so hard on them. All children hate school.”

Malcolm replied with a few hand gestures, “if ya do not instill respect in yo boys early on, they grow up to be spoiled rotten scoundrels who believe their God’s gift to women.”

“Like Broderick?” Embrasia inquired.

“Exactly like Broderick,” Malcolm silently replied.



Later that night Malcolm knocked on Embrasia's chamber door. When she answered he signed to her, "ya had me summoned Ma'am?"

Embrasia invited him in and closed the door behind them. They sat at the card table.

She asked, "do you play poker?"

Malcolm said with a few waves of his hands, "yep, but where are the chips?"

Embrasia laughed, wrapped her arms around his neck, and kissed him. Acting purely on instinct and loneliness, he kissed her back. She unbuttoned his shirt and placed her lips on his chest. He swept her into his arms and placed her on the bed. He climbed on top of her and kissed her again, but thoughts of Shelly tore through his mind and brought tears to his eyes. To make matters worse, he recognized the taste of Embrasia's lips. They possessed the tangy sweet flavor of vine-ripened grapes. Malcolm pulled away and noticed the half empty bottle of wine. He gently pulled her hands away from him, nodded respectfully, and left her chamber.



The following morning Malcolm unveiled a hanging sign he'd made for Florian. The words engraved in the wood said, *House of Cards*.

Florian announced, "you're a hell of a carpenter."

Malcolm silently thanked him for the compliment.

"*House of Cards* is a stupid name!" Embrasia yelled and stormed out of the room.

Florian told Malcolm, "don't mind her. She's mad at me."

"Me too," Malcolm quietly assured him.

Florian questioned, "what did you do?"

Malcolm laughed and signed, "absolutely nothing. That's the problem, Sir. My ma and pa raised me with respect. Why do that make

me the bad guy?”

Florian excused himself and went after his sister. He nudged open the door to Embrasia’s chamber and said, “Any room for the ‘world’s biggest hypocrite?’”

Embrasia asked, “why did you turn away all my suitors only to get engaged yourself?”

“First of all, I’m not engaged. I won’t propose to Nora without your blessing. Second, I knew you wouldn’t have been happy with any of those men.”

“And I suppose that’s because you know me better than I know myself,” Embrasia stated sarcastically.

Florian smiled. “As a matter of fact, I do. Years ago, you lost your virginity to a much older man. You came to me, looked up at me with those big brown eyes of yours and said, ‘I want to marry him. I love him, Florian’. I asked if you were certain beyond the shadow of a doubt that you wanted to take this man’s last name. You swore to me you did. Then I asked what’s his last name?”

Embrasia laughed. “Ronald Westing.”

Florian chuckled. “Yes, you know that now, but you didn’t at the time. So, I told you to have a six-month courtship. If at the end of six months you still wanted to get married, I’d give you my blessing and pay your dowry, but what happened?”

Embrasia smiled and shook her head. “After three months of Ronald ordering me around like his personal servant I got rid of him. Then I thanked you for not allowing me to make the biggest mistake of my life. How did you know he was wrong for me?”

“I knew you didn’t love him,” Florian explained. “You just enjoyed the sex. As a woman, you felt that you had to get married so you’d have an excuse to have more of it. That’s when I told you that if you’re promiscuous that’s fine by me, but I won’t stand by and allow you to ruin your life so you’ll feel less guilty about having your needs met. To this day that’s the longest relationship you’ve ever been in.”

Embrasia said with a hint of embarrassment, “I can’t believe you said it just like that. Then again you always were straightforward and brutally honest with me.”

“And I’m being straightforward and honest when I tell you that I

love Nora.”

Embrasia took a deep breath. “Then marry her. I see no reason why our team can’t pick up a player.”

Florian hugged his sister and thanked her for her support.

Embrasia announced with astonishment, “Nora drinks, gambles, and sleeps around like any man. Florian, you’re marrying me. You are truly a sick twisted individual.”

Florian laughed hysterically. “Have I ever claimed to be otherwise? Is it my fault God gave me the perfect woman for a sister? Nora’s the only one who could measure up. Speaking of extra player’s what’s going on with you and Malcolm?”

Embrasia assured her brother, “absolutely nothing. He hurt my pride that’s all.”

“When Broderick hurt your pride, you took him to your chamber and screwed him. Then again Broderick was a meaningless bedmate. Now Malcolm hurts your pride and you’re furious with him. Are you sure Malcolm didn’t hurt a little more than your pride?”

“I’ve been in the company of lazy, arrogant, rich boys like Broderick my entire life. Then all of a sudden, I met Malcolm. He’s self-sacrificing, hardworking, and humble. How could I not develop feelings?”

Florian gave Embrasia a playful slap on the shoulder. “Don’t take it personally. He still mourns. Give him time.”

Embrasia felt terrible. *It was thoughtless of me to just pounce on him like that.*

Florian added, “today Malcolm gave me this whole spiel about how his parents raised him with respect. He most likely doesn’t believe in sex before marriage. Add this fact to all he’s suffered as of late and your timing couldn’t have been more wrong.”

Embrasia sadly replied, “no wonder he wants nothing to do with me. He’s Mr. Perfect, and I’m a devout heathen.”

Florian excused himself as one of his guards beckoned him.

As they walked down the hall the guard informed him, “There’s a Monsieur Pete Colburn to see you.”

Florian let out an exasperated breath and followed the guard down the corridor. Pete was already sitting in Florian’s office.

Florian entered and took a seat behind the desk. “What can I do for

you, Monsieur Colburn?”

Pete replied, “can we have a moment alone? I have a huge favor to ask of you.”

“You usually do,” Florian replied sarcastically and signaled for his guard to leave.

“I’m great with numbers but I can barely read and write. For this reason, I’ve always had my brother, Matt, to handle my paperwork while I balanced the finances. He can barely count and I’m damn near illiterate. We balanced one another out, but Matt’s moved out of state. All the legal rules and regulations throw me for a loop. To sell a slave or sign one over to someone else is fairly simple. That’s something I could do by myself with minimal effort, but to free a slave is far more complicated. There’s a lot of guidelines.”

Florian enquired with an impressed nod, “are you asking me to prepare documents to free one of your slaves?”

“I’m asking you to prepare documents to free them all, 314 people to be precise. The fact that I’m granting them all a severance package further complicates matters. I’m not familiar with the laws that govern what blacks can and can’t own. I understand that you are a busy man, but even if you could pitch in with a few it would be a tremendous help.”

Florian shook Pete’s hand ecstatically and assured him, “I would be honored to help you. It will take a couple months but, I’ll do all the paperwork for you.”

“Thank you, Ambassador Lafayette.” Pete rose from his seat.

Florian questioned with an impressed look, “why the sudden change of heart?”

Pete grinned. “For one, it was never the life I wanted. For two, I’m getting married and my fiancée disapproves.”

Florian announced with a confused glare, “I thought you were already married. That lovely woman who’s always on your arm, she’s black, isn’t she?”

Pete nodded and said with irritation, “yes, by law she’s black. I tried to get the magistrate to change the law to where if you’re an eighth black or less that makes you a white citizen. He wouldn’t hear of it. New Orleans is crawling with octoroons like my fiancée, Natalie. The magistrate said too many white men would lose their property. The city

would lose a great deal in tax revenue collected on the slaves as well.”

Florian nodded. “I understand. You’re a good man Monsieur Colburn. I’m usually a great judge of character. It’s imperative to be in my line of work. I’m lobbied, petitioned, and lied to all day long. I’ve learned to size people up quickly and accurately, but I must admit you surprised me.”

Pete thanked the ambassador for his help and his compliment, and then headed home.



Later that night Natalie ventured down the hall to Pete’s office. It was well after midnight and he was working late again.

She let herself in and said, “I’ve missed you the last few nights.” Pete explained, “I don’t want to cut 300 people loose with absolutely nothing. If I give them all a decent severance package it’s going to break me. I’ve been running the numbers again and again. I don’t know how we’ll afford to live if I do this.”

Natalie smiled and said, “you’re not taking all our assets into account. Have you included the treasure room into to your calculations?”

Pete asked with utter confusion, “What treasure room?”

Natalie took him by the hand and led him to her chamber. She unlocked the door to a small room connected to her bedroom. She lit a few candles. The entire room shimmered, dazzled, and sparkled. Every surface of the walls and shelves was covered in diamond necklaces. There were even necklaces hanging from the ceiling.

Natalie explained with excitement, “we could auction these off and live comfortably for the rest of our lives.”

Pete didn’t share Natalie’s enthusiasm. The very site of that room made him sick to his stomach.

She continued, “I don’t even know how many there are.”

It only took Pete a matter of seconds to count them all. He grew dizzy and fell backward out of the room. Natalie reached down to help him. He jerked away, climbed to his feet, and backed away from her.

Pete announced with dread and disgust, “There are 1,126 of them.

That means I hurt you 1,126 times.”

Natalie held him and replied, “that’s in the past now. If I can forgive you, you must forgive yourself. You promised me a new life together. Let’s sell these dreadful things and move on.”

Pete silently nodded with a distraught look on his face. Without saying a word, he returned to his office.

Natalie followed him in and closed the door behind them.

She told Pete as he slumped behind his desk, “You haven’t slept next to me in three days. You’re not having second thoughts about the wedding, are you?”

Pete assured her, “I’m looking forward to the wedding, and I enjoy sleeping next to you, but I made a promise not to touch you until we’re wed. I’m a man and I have needs. I can’t keep my promise if I sleep next to you every night.”

Natalie solemnly announced, “you’re stalling because you’re afraid. You’re afraid you can’t make love to me without hurting me. I’m afraid you can’t perform without forcing me. You can’t marry a woman you have the inability to lay with. I can’t marry a man I’m scared to lay with. That only leaves us one option.”

Pete asked with sadness, “are you breaking up with me?”

Natalie sat on Pete’s desk in front of him. She was breathtaking. It had been a long time since he’d really taken the time to look at her. She was like a work art: voluptuous curves curtained by long beautiful hair.

Natalie said with a loving kiss, “our only option is to learn to be intimate. Touch me, Pete.”

She took Pete’s hands and rubbed them on her smooth thighs. His breathing quickened. His heart raced. The sultriness of her voice, the caress of her beautiful body, the very scent of her sweet perfume was enough to make him lie her down and show her just how much he loved her.

Pete looked away from her and said, “Dr. McKinley warned me not to become stressed or excited for a couple more months.”

“Am I making you excited?” Natalie asked innocently as she unbuckled his pants and released him from his cloth prison.

She felt triumphant at this moment. She owned him and they were both aware of that fact. She slowly lowered herself on his lap, and joined

with him. He entered her body out of love rather than a violation. Their union wasn't violent and disgraceful. It was beautiful and sensual.

He held her close and moved gently inside of her; their mouths sealed as one in a passionate kiss. It was one thing to hear that she loved him, but now he could feel it. The feeling was too much for him to bear. This was all so new for him. His mind and body grew overwhelmed.

Pete began to hear his voices, the voices that tell him to do awful things, "hurt her, you'll feel so much better if you do."

This was the part he hated the most. It was as if he stepped outside of himself. He separated into two people, the good Pete and the evil one. As usual, he was watching the evil Pete about to do something extremely violent, and he was powerless to stop it. His lips abandoned their loving kiss. His movements became rough and dispassionate. Pete grabbed a handful of Natalie's hair. He gripped her throat until she gasped for air.

"Kill her," he heard the voices call over and over. "Break her neck!"



## CHAPTER 13:

### THE WALKING DEAD

Natalie loosened Pete's grip on her throat and told him, "You love me. I know you do. You don't have to hurt me." At last, he relaxed his grasp and recovered from his break with reality.

"I'm so sorry," Pete stammered.

She gently pulled his hands away from her. She kissed him and climbed off his lap. "I'm sorry I pushed you. You said you weren't ready."

Natalie returned to her chamber. Pete sat in his office with his voices still whispering to him.

He popped one of his prescription pills and screamed back at the voices for the first time, "shut up! You couldn't make me hurt the woman I love this time. You'll never make me hurt Natalie again. You don't win!"

Then a peaceful silence came over him. All was well again. He'd finally become capable of controlling his anger. Pete sprinted to Natalie's chamber.

He started stripping at the door. "I don't trust myself to bed you yet, but can we cuddle?"

Natalie grinned and removed her gown. She beckoned him and he climbed into bed with her. She rested her head on his chest, taking in the

sound of his breath, and every beat of his heart. She swirled her finger over the peculiar birthmark on his bicep: a crown of laurel leaves, like those worn by Roman gods and emperors. The skin that bore the crown was raised, like a brand from white hot metal.

“I’ve always had this,” Pete confessed. “Accompanied with terrifying nightmares.”

“Of what,” Natalie questioned with concern.

“Of me. Only I wasn’t called Pete. The masses called me Caesar and I was as batshit crazy in that life as I am in this one. I once asked a voodoo conjure woman to explain what it all meant. She started shuffling her tarot cards and flipping them over. She claimed to sense a curse upon me, one as old as time itself. I’d been hexed by a vengeful deity to lose my sanity in every lifetime.”

“You don’t believe her, do you?” Natalie asked with worry prevalent in her voice. “You are not cursed. People get sick, Pete. You just have to fight this.”

Pete nodded and held onto her for dear life as if she’d vanish if he loosened his embrace.

She promised him, “we’ll fight this together.”



Over the next few weeks, intimacy became less and less of a challenge for Natalie and Pete, but they had yet to overcome their greatest obstacle... Mable. Pete slipped out of Natalie’s chamber after another long beautiful night in her arms. While she slept he returned to his chamber, freshened up and headed downstairs. He could already smell the delicious breakfast Mable was preparing for him. The aroma of sausage, eggs, and pancakes enveloped him as he entered the kitchen.

“Smells wonderful,” Pete told Mable as he stole a piece of sausage.

She gave him an unforgiving, bitter look and said, “I’m surprised you’re up in time to eat it while it’s hot. I’ve been making breakfast purely for my health lately.”

Pete could’ve scolded, threatened, or even whipped Mable for her insubordination but that would’ve only made matters worse.

He informed her with enthusiasm as he wolfed down the pork link, “I wanted you to hear this from me. I’m marrying Natalie and freeing all the slaves.”

Mable began to hyperventilate and he urged her to calm down. She didn’t share his enthusiasm.

Mable pleaded, “Please Master Colburn, I beg ya to reconsider. This place is my home. I don’t know what I’ll do. I’m nothing without ya.”

Pete took her by the hands and said, “you don’t need me. You never did. You’re institutionalized. You’ve been in bondage for so long you’re afraid to live any other way, like a prisoner. A master’s informant is the most valuable slave he owns. You’re so confused you’d rather be the highest ranking slave, than an average free black person. Not that you could ever be average. You have a gift for making things delicious and beautiful. You could open your own restaurant, forge your own path. I have nothing but the utmost faith that you can do anything you want. What happened to the strong fearless woman I once knew. When my father was still alive you came to him once with information. Naturally, he went straight to you when he caught wind of a mass walk out. Over twenty slaves were planning to escape at once. You informed my father the first information was on the house but from now on you wouldn’t tell him a thing unless he paid you ten dollars a person. My father was a proud man. He figured he could bully you into telling him. He beat you to within an inch of your life and you still gave him nothing. You looked him in the eye and boldly told him that the worst he could do was kill you. In which case he’d be out \$600 dollars plus \$400 a piece on each of the field hands you’d allow to escape. My father swallowed his pride. He paid whatever you wanted from that day forward. You’re a cutthroat, backstabbing, wretch but I’ve always respected you. You were the only one to ever stand your ground against my father.”

Mable gathered her nerve and asked Pete, “Years ago, ya made love to me once. Why just the once?”

Pete took a deep breath and confessed, “over time, you extorted so much money from my parents. You came to me and made an offer to buy your own freedom. You were of great value to me. I couldn’t let you go. I knew if I refused to free you, you’d just run away. Half the battle is learning your opponent’s weaknesses. I was well aware that I was yours.

I seduced you and made love to you. I told you how much I needed you and begged you to stay. You fell for me, as planned. From that day forward I got for free what my father had always paid for. You lived to serve me. You'd do anything I wanted. I made love to you just the once because that's all it took. I manipulated you. I'm not proud of what I did, but you've got to move on now."

Pete watched with guilt as Mable did something he thought incapable of a cutthroat, backstabbing wretch. She put her face in her hands and cried. It was now clear to Mable the only one he'd ever loved was Natalie. Pete wrapped his arms around Mable. He rubbed her back to comfort her.

As her tears soaked into his shirt she threatened, "I'll tell yo fiancée ya slept with me!"

Pete continued to hold her. "The one bad thing about regaining my sanity is the guilt I feel about lying. I already told Natalie we slept together and she doesn't care. She'd already assumed so because of the way you are with me. You've got nothing on me because I'm honest with her now."

Mable began to cry hysterically. Pete held her even tighter and whispered, "I'm sorry I hurt you, but you have to move on. You never needed me. I needed you."



Embrasia found Florian buried under a ton of paperwork. He'd just finished the last of Pete's documents. Now he was behind with his own tasks. On top of it all, he was planning a huge wedding with Nora. Embrasia could tell Florian was stressed and flustered.

Florian forced a smile for his sister. "How can I help you?"

Embrasia informed him, "Nora sent me to check on you. She's worried and so am I."

"I'll be fine. I'm just behind with my work and this wedding is stressing me out," Florian assured his sister.

Embrasia enquired, "why is the wedding upsetting you? You love Nora. You can't possibly be getting cold feet."

“It’s personal and far too awkward to discuss with one’s sister,” Florian replied.

Embrasia pulled up a chair to Florian’s cluttered desk and declared, “ah, trouble in the bedroom.”

“Yes, something like that,” Florian admitted.

Embrasia assured Florian, “I know I’m nowhere near your level of sexual enlightenment but I’m still the oldest. If you tell me what’s bothering you I’ll give you the best advice I can. You know I’m not going to judge you.”

Florian hesitated a few more moments before confessing, “when Nora and I got engaged we decided to become monogamous. She wants to know for certain any children she bears are mine, and I don’t want to make a bunch of little bastards outside of my marriage. It’s a struggle for Nora and me to carry on a normal relationship. Maybe people like us are forever doomed to have a life without love.”

“That isn’t true,” Embrasia told him vehemently.

Florian admitted, “changing our relationship has been hard. We know it’s the right thing to do but we miss certain aspects of our old relationship.”

“For instance,” Embrasia pushed.

Florian hesitated even longer this time before saying, “Nora enjoyed watching me with other women. I used to watch her with other men.” Embrasia’s jaw dropped in shock as Florian continued, “we make love alone now. It’s nice but it’s not the same. For Nora and me the visual part is as important as the physical. If I’m on top of her I can’t really see her perform as well. I miss being able to sit back and relax with my glass of Scotch and watch Nora put on this beautiful erotic performance just for me. I used to do the same for her. At the end of which, we’d do each other. We miss being able to watch one another make love. What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I be happy with regular sex like any other man?”

“Because you’re not any other man, Florian. There’s not a damn thing wrong with you,” Embrasia assured her brother. “You know you can still watch Nora do things to herself.”

Florian gave an intrigued look. “Embrasia you’re a genius.”

Embrasia pulled Florian up from his chair and demanded, “listen,

my workaholic brother. You are going to take the next twenty-four hours off. You're going to go somewhere special with your bride to be, just the two of you. Don't tell anyone where you're going. I better not see you walk back through these doors until at least this time tomorrow."

Florian laughed. "I appreciate what you're doing but I'm far too behind in my work."

"We both know I'm perfectly capable of carrying on your duties in your absence, even if Father doesn't think so."

Florian agreed, knowing the embassy was in good hands with Embrasia. "I know exactly where I'm going to take Nora, the place where I first realized I loved her."

Embrasia ran down the hall to Malcolm's chamber and ecstatically announced, "I got rid of Florian and Nora. You're the best carpenter I know. I need your help with a surprise for them."

Malcolm grinned and signed to her, "sure, anything fo Ambassador Lafayette."

Embrasia laid out her plan and asked, "do you think it's possible to pull it off in twenty-four hours?"

Malcolm silently informed her, "it's possible but it would cost a fortune."

"Then it's a good thing I have a fortune."

Hours later Malcolm and Embrasia stood back and marveled at their handiwork. With the help of a team of servants, they'd managed to cover Florian's chamber in elegant wall size mirrors. Even the ceiling of the chamber Florian shared with his fiancée was decorated with mirrors. Embrasia pulled out her ruby lipstick and used it to write a message on one of the mirrored walls:

*Now you two perverts will always be able to watch each other make love. Congratulations on your engagement.*

*-Embrasia & Malcolm-*



Ashton sat under a tree with a forlorn look in his eye.

Devon asked as he approached, “are you still upset over your slingshot?”

Ashton replied with sadness, “I haven’t seen it in months. My real dad gave me that slingshot before I was sold away.”

Devon, like many light skinned slaves, had been the result of a rape. He never knew his real father. Times like these made him happy for that. Devon only had one parent to miss, while Ashton had two.

Devon told Ashton, “come on I’ll help you find it.”

Ashton and Devon searched the entire courtyard for the slingshot, under the shrubs, in the flower beds. They searched the shed as well.

Until at last, it dawned on Devon. “The last time I saw you with it was the day we made the bet on how many times you could hit the bad man.”

“That’s right!” Ashton called out ecstatically.

The boys raced across the courtyard to the tree they were sitting in that day. Devon spotted the slingshot on the ground beneath the tree. It was just on the other side of the fence.

“I think I can reach it,” Devon declared as he slipped his tiny arm between the bars of the gate.

He grasped the slingshot triumphantly.

“Run Devon!” Ashton yelled in horror, as he spotted Broderick with three of his fellow officers.

They’d just come from the deputy convention across the way.

In an instant, Broderick got a grip on Devon’s wrist. Ashton anchored his feet in the ground and pulled with all his might on Devon’s other arm. The two boys together were still no match for Broderick’s strength. Devon let out a terrified wail as Broderick snatched him right between the bars.

The guards came running over at the sound of the children’s screams. Within seconds Broderick and his men were facing a firing squad.

Broderick calmly and collectively informed the French guards, “I never once crossed onto French soil to retrieve him. I am an officer of the law and I guarantee you. If you send one bullet across this fence you will have created an international incident. The gates of hell its self will open and the entire American government will rain down upon you! Now

summon Malcolm!”

One of the guards left to retrieve Malcolm. By the time Malcolm and Embrasia arrived at the scene. Devon was standing on the back of a horse. One end of a rope was firmly attached to a tree limb. The other end was fastened around Devon’s tiny neck. Malcolm’s heart pounded at the sight of his boy about to be hanged. It was something of a nightmare. He was facing off with Broderick all over again. The blood coursed so rapidly through Malcolm’s veins his mind began to deceive him. He saw his beloved Shelly standing in Devon’s place with the noose around her neck, the loving wife he failed to save.

Embrasia signaled for her guards to hold fire. The ugly truth was that they weren’t within their rights to shoot this time. The French government wouldn’t have backed them. Firing on the officers would’ve only created a bloodbath with even greater loss of life. The gunfire may also spook the horse, which would end in a strangling or a broken neck for Devon.

Embrasia called to Broderick with tears in her eyes, “you wouldn’t possibly hang a child! No one is that heartless.”

Broderick informed Malcolm with a smirk, “I believe the French would call this *déjà vu*. I swear you will see this little mulatto bastard hang if you don’t turn yourself in.”

Malcolm refused to watch Broderick take another innocent life. *I can’t fail this time, not with Devon*. Tears poured from Embrasia’s eyes as Malcolm waived a white cloth in surrender. He demanded the guards open the gate. Malcolm hugged Ashton and Embrasia goodbye. Ashton refused to let go.

“Papa Malcolm!” He screamed repeatedly.

Embrasia had to pry the poor child away. Malcolm stormed over and freed Devon from the noose.

Devon cried out, “I’m sorry Papa Malcolm.”

Malcolm silently assured the child it wasn’t his fault and hugged him goodbye. Embrasia’s heart shattered as she ripped the screaming hysterical boy away from the only father he’d ever known. She crossed back onto French soil and held both boys in her arms. She couldn’t stop the children from crying any more than she could stop herself.

Embrasia watched helplessly as the law enforcement officers



arrested her friend. She knew they were leading him to his death, and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it.



## CHAPTER 14:

### BY THE LIGHT OF THE MOON

Malcolm silently informed Embrasia, as she stood before the gate of his prison cell, “I’ve been sentenced to hang at 7:00am tomorrow morning.”

Embrasia braced the bars. “Please don’t give up. I’m going to see if I can make a deal with Broderick. There has to be something we can offer him in exchange for your life.”

Malcolm solemnly informed her with a few waves of his hands, “all Broderick wants is to see me die.”

He caressed Embrasia’s tearstained cheek, and she swooned at the sensation. Her eyes drifted shut as she tuned out the noisy prison and focused on his gentle touch.

Embrasia confessed, “I want you to touch me in every way, but this is America, not France. You can’t do it here.”

Malcolm protested in a jovial manner, “I’m going to be executed. They can’t kill me twice.”

As much as her heart ached, she laughed at his inappropriate joke.

Embrasia gave Malcolm a playful shove and scolded him, “that isn’t funny.”

“But it’s true,” he quietly informed her with a chuckle.

Deputy Broderick Welch walked in. Nothing inappropriate was happening, but the way Embrasia gazed at Malcolm was enough to turn

Broderick's stomach. *Why do women keep falling all over themselves for this freak!*

Broderick called from behind Embrasia, "I see someone's been moving in on my territory. Don't worry. Your dirty little secret is safe with me. I'd hate to ruin the reputation of my future wife."

Malcolm's blood boiled at the words of his nemesis.

Broderick turned to Embrasia and said, "I know you came here to negotiate with me, but I don't do business with lowly women. If your brother will give me your hand in marriage and a really hefty dowry, I'll consider letting Malcolm live. You have until 7:00am to produce your brother or this worthless nigger dies."

Malcolm signed a warning to Embrasia, "don't believe him. If ya marry Broderick he'll only make ya his slave and murder me anyway."

Embrasia pleaded with Broderick, "I already told you, no one knows where my brother is. Florian may not be home until much later tomorrow. Please allow us more time."

Broderick shook off Embrasia's request and grinned at Malcolm. "Any last requests? I know what mine would be."

Broderick gave Embrasia a lustful gaze and reached for her. Malcolm grabbed Broderick by the collar and yanked back with all his might. There was a loud metallic ping as Broderick's head collided with the bars. He fell backward and grabbed his face with a painful groan.

Embrasia relayed Malcolm's message, "Malcolm says you are a coward, Broderick! His only request is to have five minutes alone in a room with you. He wants to see how brave you are without this row of bars to protect you."

A cold chill came over Broderick as he looked up at the disgruntled slave. He could see the hatred burning in Malcolm's eyes. Broderick cautiously climbed to his feet and fled the prison.

Embrasia promised her friend, "don't give up. Even if it takes all night, I'll find my brother. Florian will fix this."

Malcolm signed to her, "you can't marry that monster. He's evil."

Embrasia sadly informed him, "I may not have a choice. Those boys need you and I refuse to watch you die."



It was 4:00am and Malcolm was due to be executed in three hours. Embrasia and the guards had searched all night unsuccessfully. No one could find Florian at any of his favorite taverns, restaurants, and hangouts. He and Nora hadn't checked into any of the local hotels either.

Embrasia returned to the prison alone and stormed the fortress. *I want no one else punished for the atrocities I am soon to commit. The execution is still a few hours away. I could've tried a while longer to find Florian, but dawn will break in an hour. If the worst should happen and I can't locate my brother I'll need the cover of night to break Malcolm out of here. I'll be damned if I watch a good man hang.*

There were two uniformed men patrolling in front of Malcolm's cell. Embrasia hid behind a tree and removed a small gun from her garter. She aimed at the first officer, braced herself, and pulled the trigger. The officer plummeted to the ground with a painful wail. Blood poured from the wound in his leg.

As the other deputy reached for his weapon Embrasia called, "I don't want to kill you, but I will! Throw me your guns and the keys to that cell!"

The officers obeyed and she ordered, "both of you, lie on your stomachs with your hands behind your heads."

As the officers sprawled out on the ground Embrasia unlocked the gate to Malcolm's cell. He retrieved the pistols the officers abandoned. Embrasia ordered the deputies into the prison cell and locked the gate behind them.

She assured the officer she had shot in the leg, "I'll send help for you. Keep pressure on the wound for now."

Embrasia and Malcolm fled the prison and entered the nearby woods. The branches snagged and ripped their clothing as they ran blindly through the forest. They forged in the direction of the getaway carriage parked at the west side of the woods.

They traveled for what seemed an eternity before the sun began to rise. Out of breath with their sides cramping, they pushed forward.

Embrasia's blood turned cold and bumps rose on her skin as she heard the faint sound of dogs in the distance. *I'm being hunted like an animal. Now I know what it's like to be a runaway slave. The dogs will catch us soon. We're not going to make it to the stagecoach.*

Embrasia stopped Malcolm as it finally dawned on her where her brother might be.

He read her lips as she said, "Florian told me he was going to take Nora to the place where he first realized he loved her."

Malcolm signed to her with a confused look, "that happened at the embassy with Doctor McKinley."

Embrasia explained, "no, that was just the first time he said he loved her. Florian first realized he loved Nora the night of the Charlevoix Ball. They were on her houseboat. He asked her to move in with him. I can almost guarantee that's where they are." Embrasia pointed in the direction of the docks. "Run to Florian. He's not far from here. He'll be at the docks, on the only pink boat there. He has more influence on the local government than me. He can still fix this."

Malcolm protested leaving her, and she lied to him, "I'm almost to the getaway carriage. I'll meet up with you soon."

Malcolm couldn't hear the ferocious canines. He had no clue of the imminent danger she was in. He kissed her forehead and disappeared into the woods.

Embrasia's heart pounded as the barking and snarling grew closer. She ran as fast as her feet would carry her. A ferocious mutt lunged out of the darkness at her. It got a mouthful of her dress. She screamed in agony as a second dog latched onto her forearm. It tore and ripped at her flesh. Utter panic set in as she spotted the rest of the bloodthirsty pack barreling down on her.

Embrasia dug her thumb and middle finger into the eyes of the beast that sank its teeth in her arm. It let go with a high-pitched yelp. She climbed a tree to escape the rest of the animals that were so hungry for her blood. She gave the dog still attached to her dress a forceful kick. It held fast. Her second kick sent the monster crashing to the ground.

The tree was surrounded by snarling animals. There was no escape. They were jumping and snapping at her feet, barking ferociously.

"Looks like we caught him," she heard an approaching man say.

It was the old magistrate. He gasped as he saw Embrasia in the tree instead of Malcolm.

The magistrate shouted an order to his deputies at once, “Put a leash on these hounds! Did you seriously sick the dogs on the ward of a diplomat! You’re all idiots! These animals could’ve ripped her throat out!”

The magistrate grabbed Broderick Welch by the collar and yelled, “you’ve really put my ass in a sling with this stunt! Take this woman to the medic and cut her loose.”

Broderick told the magistrate in his own defense, “she shot an officer and sprung a fugitive from prison!”

“Neither of which we can prosecute her for without the permission of the French government! They might have given me the authority to arrest Miss Lafayette had you not had her attacked by dogs. You’re never to retaliate on a diplomat without due process,” the magistrate explained and then told Embrasia, “you can come down Miss. It’s safe now.”

She vigorously shook her head no and clung to the tree for dear life. The magistrate pulled the hysterical woman from the tree and covered her with his coat.

Embrasia stammered, “the... the... there’s an injured man at the prison.”

The magistrate assured her, “I know. We’ve taken care of him. He’s going to be fine.”

As the magistrate led her out of the woods he asked, “what will it take to keep this incident from getting back to the French government?”

Embrasia answered with her voice still shaky from the ordeal, “call off the search and pardon Malcolm Welch.”

A gigantic weight lifted from her heart as the magistrate ordered his men to stop pursuing Malcolm.

Embrasia pleaded, “I need a horse. There is somewhere I have to be.”

The magistrate replied, “we’ll have the medic take a look at that arm first. Then we’ll drop you off where ever you want to go.”

She shook her head no. “I’ll be fine. My best friend, Nora, is a doctor in training. I’ll have her look at it.”

As they exited the woods, the magistrate reluctantly loaned Embrasia

the horse. She mounted the steed and raced to the docks.



Florian and Nora stood downstairs in the houseboat with Malcolm. After watching Malcolm frantically explain the morning's events, Florian questioned Nora, "are you capable of sailing this thing?"

She grinned and assured him, "like a naval captain."

Florian instructed, "let's get Malcolm somewhere safe for now. I'll come back and try my best to smooth things over with the local authorities."

Malcolm walked up on deck to weigh anchor and put wind in the sails.

Embrasia galloped down the shoreline on the horse. Her heart smiled as she saw Malcolm up on deck. *Thank God he managed to make it safely to Florian, but it appears as if he's preparing to set sail. Florian probably thinks Malcolm's still a wanted man. I must tell them he's no longer a fugitive. He's been pardoned.* She rode as fast as she could, but she was still a great distance away. *The boat will be gone before I can reach him.*



Franklin Welch rubbed the belly of his sleeping pregnant wife. The Welch's were very poor and stayed in a small beach shack. Deputy Broderick Welch only managed to escape poverty because his father married well. Franklin had also married a rich girl but her parents never approved of him. His in-laws, the Parkers, disowned Franklin's wife for eloping with him. The Parkers refused to pay her dowry and now the newlyweds were expecting a baby. Franklin was a part-time overseer on Broderick's plantation, but that was not enough to support a family. They were in desperate need of money. He kissed his wife and rose to his feet at the sound of banging. He answered the door for his cousin, Broderick.

Broderick snapped from the doorway, "for the hundredth time I'm



not going to loan you any money, Franklin! I've had a very bad day, so you better have another reason for summoning me."

Franklin showed Broderick the reward poster with Malcolm's face on it and asked, "are you still looking for this slave?"

Broderick looked over both shoulders and whispered, "unofficially yes. Do you know where he is?"

Franklin stuck out his hand and told his selfish cousin, "I want the reward money first."

Broderick grudgingly paid his cousin and followed him outside.

Franklin passed Broderick a worn telescope and said, "Malcolm's stealing that pink boat over there."

Broderick glared into the telescope and saw the boat leaving. He dashed toward the dock.

Franklin laughed and called after him, "there's no use. He'll be long gone by the time you get there."

At those words, Broderick stopped at the cannon on display. He loaded it with a sinister grin, aimed for the pink boat.

Franklin ran to his cousin. "What are you doing! Have you gone mad!"

Broderick lit the fuse and the cannon boomed. The cannonball sailed rapidly through the air. Broderick hadn't seen Embrasia dismount her horse and run to the end of the dock.

Malcolm waived from the boat with a smile as he finally noticed Embrasia. He couldn't hear the cannonball whistling toward him. He was entirely unaware of the imminent danger he was in, but Florian and Nora heard it. They raced up on deck just in time to meet it.

The entire vessel exploded before Embrasia's eyes, due to the deck being covered in fireworks. The impact of the blast and the flying debris knocked Embrasia out instantly. She went flying into the ocean, too helpless to save herself from drowning...



## CHAPTER 15:

### THE BETRAYAL

**E**mbrasia woke up in her chamber screaming. She was heaving for air, drenched in sweat. *It was all a dream, a gracious warning from God to keep the boys away from the gate.*

She sprung out of bed and ran onto her balcony. The children were playing happily in the courtyard. She bolted downstairs in her robe, not bothering to get dressed. Embrasia ran outside on the lawn and hugged Ashton and Devon so hard they could barely breathe.

She warned the boys, “stay away from the gate. Whatever you do, stay away from the gate.”

She rose and told the boys to go inside as she noticed Dr. McKinley approaching.

The doctor walked over and asked, “what are you doing out of bed? I came to check on you.”

“For what, I’m fine,” Embrasia told him.

At that moment she reached up and felt the bandage wrapped around her head.

She murmured in utter shock, “but if there was really an explosion that means.”

Doctor McKinley forced Embrasia to sit down on the steps. He sat next to her and said, “I’m sorry but they’re gone. Both Broderick and his cousin Franklin have been arrested for murder.” She shook her head in

disbelief. Tears poured from her eyes as he continued, “I went to the Embassy to make peace with Nora and Florian. I missed my sister and realized how big of an imbecile I’d been. I wanted to be a part of my baby sister’s wedding and a part of her life. When I came to make amends your servants told me she was gone with Florian. I assumed they were on her boat. Nora loved that boat.” Dr. McKinley’s eyes began to well up as he said, “I went to the beach to apologize to them and ask if I could give her away at their wedding. That’s when I saw you standing at the end of the dock. The boat exploded and you went into the water. I dove in after you.”

“No! I don’t believe you!” Embrasia shouted. She jumped up. “I don’t feel like I’ve been in an explosion.”

“That’s because your pain meds haven’t worn off yet. You will,” Dr. McKinley explained.

Embrasia wiped her tears and asked, “then why are the children so happy?”

Dr. McKinley sadly and reluctantly answered, “because no one’s told them yet. They’re still expecting everyone to come home. You’re the closest one to them now. It would be best if they heard it from you.”

Embrasia ran into the embassy, in the direction of her brother’s room. *None of this is true! It’s just too awful to be true! Please be here Florian!* She opened his chamber door only to find an empty room. It was as empty as the hollow he’d left in her heart, which shattered as she pulled up her sleeve and saw her bandaged arm. Every horror came back to her in shocking grisly detail. *The dog bite is real. The prison break was real, and that god-awful explosion was real.* She could see the evidence all too clearly, the truth carved into her skin. Pain consumed her.

She broke down as she read the message she left for her brother, the message Florian would never be able to read. It was written on a gift her brother would never get to see. She screamed in anguish and threw herself on his bed. The pillows and covers still smelled of Florian’s cologne and Nora’s shampoo. She cried until she felt she had no more tears to spare and then cried some more.

She sat up as she heard something collide with the wall. She felt an ice cold sensation on her cheek that sent a shiver down her spine. She

touched the cold spot on her face and heard a muffled whisper. The only word she could make out was Bracey. A nickname Florian hadn't called her since childhood.

"Brother," she called at once. Then just like that, he was gone.



Embrasia ventured into a hotel in town. It was a very large two story white building.

The old woman who owned the place told Embrasia, "thanks for showing up. I think this man is going to kill himself. He hasn't left the room in days. He has no family here. All I found in his laundry was a card from the French Embassy. I figured you might know him. Maybe you can talk some sense into him."

The old woman unlocked the door of the suite. Embrasia gave the woman a respectful nod and entered the chamber. The smell knocked her back a few feet. Doctor McKinley hadn't bathed, shaved or eaten in days. There was almost a week's worth of food piled up on his table untouched. Some of it was beginning to mold.

He looked up for just a moment to say, "please leave me be," and then put his head back down. He rocked back and forth, picking nervously at his overgrown beard.

Embrasia walked over to him. "Killing yourself is not what your sister would've wanted. It sure as hell won't bring her back. You are the only witness to her murder. Those bastards will walk if you don't testify, and Nora told me you came to America to treat a dying man. If you don't save him, who will?"

Dr. McKinley replied, "I don't want to be a doctor anymore. If I couldn't save the life that mattered most to me, what's the point?"

Embrasia assured him, "no one could have saved Nora, but I'd be dead if it wasn't for you. I'm grateful for that. I know why you're doing this to yourself. You're taking this hard because you have unfinished business. You're killing yourself because you never got the chance to ask for Nora's forgiveness, but you never needed to. Nora never stopped loving you. She wasn't even mad at you."

“She hated me,” Dr. McKinley announced in a gruff voice, with tears in his eyes.

Embrasia passed him a small black box. Dr. McKinley opened it to find a tarnished charm on a singed black ribbon. The charm was an ‘M’ for McKinley.

He questioned, “I gave this bracelet to my sister. Where did you get it?”

Embrasia explained, “it was recovered from the wreckage. Even after your falling out, Nora wore this clear up to the moment she died. She never once stopped being your sister. If she hated you, she wouldn’t have kept it.” Embrasia passed Dr. McKinley a few sheets of paper and said, “I ripped these pages from Nora’s journal. Most of her writings were about my brother, but these pages were all about you. Nora didn’t hate you. She was just waiting for you to come around.”

The doctor cried as he read the pages written in his sister’s hand. Every sloppy sentence on the papers was like a sharp dagger to his heart. She blamed herself for their falling out, which hurt him badly, but at least he could take solace in the fact that Nora really did miss him.

Dr. McKinley pulled himself together and rose. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a life to save.”

Embrasia joked, “you might want to bathe first. You reek.”

The doctor laughed for the first time since his sister’s death. “Thank you. You saved my life.”

“Just returning the favor,” Embrasia assured him.



After prepping Pete for surgery, Dr. McKinley slipped out of the room. He approached Natalie, who waited nervously in a nearby chamber.

Dr. McKinley walked up to her with a chart and said, “Mr. Colburn gave me consent to speak with you in regard to his condition. It is imperative that you tell me the truth or the surgery may not go well. Did Mr. Colburn comply with the pre-surgery directions?”

Natalie assured the doctor, “yes, he quit smoking and drinking. He

hasn't eaten since yesterday like you said."

Dr. McKinley nodded. "Drinking, smoking, and many foods can cause a patient to react badly to anesthesia. I need him completely under for this procedure. If you're certain he complied with the restrictions this should be a snap. He's just an average, otherwise healthy, twenty-year-old man."

"Pete's thirty," Natalie corrected him.

A shocked expression covered the doctor's face. He bolted down the corridor and burst into Pete's chamber.

Dr. McKinley yelled to the people assisting him, "don't put him under! We can't perform surgery!"

It was too late. The drugs had already knocked Pete out.



Natalie sprung to her feet as Pete began to regain consciousness. He groggily moved his head to and fro before eventually opening his eyes.

He sat up and asked with a gravelly voice, "how'd the surgery go?"

Natalie explained with a heavy heart, "you couldn't have surgery. You lied to your doctor. Why would you lead him to believe you were twenty?"

Pete turned and put his feet on the floor. He explained to Natalie, "I was desperate. Dr. McKinley wouldn't have even considered performing surgery if he was aware of my true age."

Tears pooled in Natalie's eyes. "There's a reason for that. The disease is far too advanced by your age. That surgery would've killed you."

Pete solemnly replied, "so there's no cure then? I'm never going to get better, and we're never going to get married."

Natalie watched in astonishment as Pete did something she thought incapable of a Colburn man. His ice blue eyes filled with tears. He broke down and cried. She walked over to the bed he sat on. She held Pete's head to her chest and allowed him to let it out.

Natalie assured Pete, "the doctor said as long as you take your medication as prescribed, you can still live for many more years. In a few

more months your moods will be completely stable, but if you take the pills in a manner not prescribed you could send that tumor into hyperdrive. You could die or lose your sanity. There's a delicate balance. You really must be careful." She sternly added, "we're getting married, Pete Colburn. I put up with sixteen years of your crap. Did you think you'd get out of it that easy?"

Pete laughed. "You'll never know just how much I really love you."



Pete stood in the east wing of the church with his driver, Saphirra. She was a young Creole girl who spoke French as a first language. If she wasn't upset or flustered she had no problem speaking English. She had jet black skin and puffy hair that Pete found adorable, but her blue eyes were a strange and beautiful contrast to her African features.

The pretty dark-skinned girl said, "thank you for inviting me. I love weddings."

Pete scoffed. "You're one of the few slaves who can write your name. I was short a witness."

Saphirra playfully questioned, "is that all I am to you, a signature?"

Pete smiled. "No, I wanted you here."

"Was that so hard to say?" She inquired as she straightened his tie.

"It was like pulling teeth," Pete admitted with a grumble.

The young slave girl informed her master, "you're not going to make me hate you, no matter how hard you try."

"Could you try not to impale me," Pete snapped as she pinned the boutonniere to his lapel.

Saphirra shrugged off Pete's sarcasm.

She grinned as she looked him over. "I hope it isn't too bold of me to say, but you look very handsome, Master Colburn."

Pete chastised the girl, "that was entirely too bold. I could have you lashed for that comment."

As Saphirra walked away she called back with a smirk, "I suppose you could have me lashed, but you won't."

Saphirra knew Pete's threat was empty. She was his favorite, next to



Natalie and she was well aware of that fact. Pete followed her into the sanctuary. Saphirra took a seat on the front pew next to the other witness. Pete stood at the front of the chapel with the priest.

At last Natalie appeared. She floated gracefully down the aisle in her wedding gown. Saphirra relieved Natalie of her bouquet, and the happy couple took one another's hands. After a lifetime of obstacles, Pete and Natalie finally stood at the altar. They began to exchange vows. That's when the doors at the rear of the church burst open. Mable sauntered into the sanctuary. Pete became enraged and Natalie urged him to calm down.

The priest gasped as Natalie promptly informed Mable, "if you came here to say that you slept with Pete, you've wasted your time. He informed me you were exceedingly regular."

Mable brushed off Natalie's insult. She told Natalie with the most beautiful angelic grin she'd ever shown, "I didn't come here to object at all. They did."

At that moment an angry mob of slave women surged into the chapel.

One of the women called out, "the groom raped every single one of us!"

"No, no," Natalie shook her head in shock.

She couldn't stand the thought of human suffering. She could cope with the fact that he'd brutalized her, but she couldn't live with what he'd done to all the others.

Natalie turned to Pete and demanded, "say it isn't true."

He sat down on the pew and buried his face in his hands. His silence was confirmation enough. It was the one thing Pete hadn't come clean about, all the other women he'd hurt. *I knew Natalie wouldn't be able to handle that horrible revelation. I figured I could free all the slaves and move off with her before she found out the monster I had truly been. I was wrong.*

Tears cascaded down Natalie's cheeks. She grew sick to her stomach and ran out of the church. She bolted down the chapel steps and leaned against its crumbling foundation. Mable walked over to her with the heavenly smile still plastered on her face. Every ivory tooth was gleaming, perfect, not so much as a fraction out of place.

Mable gloated to Natalie, "I know I just saved you from making the worst mistake of your life, but you don't have to thank me."

“I wasn’t intending to,” Natalie growled as she swung a loose brick and hit Mable in the mouth with it.

Mable went hurtling to the ground. She moaned in agony, spitting out blood and shattered teeth.

Natalie stood over Mable and shouted, “I’ve gotten so sick of that mouth of yours! That mouth that foiled every escape attempt I ever tried to make! That mouth that damn near got my son thrown from a balcony! And last but not least, the mouth that ruined what was supposed to be the best day of my life! I’ve had it with you and your poisonous mouth!”

Saphirra stormed outside with a mob of women behind her. The young girl threw a pail of ashes on Mable. The soot burned Mable’s eyes and nose. It invaded her throat.

As Mable choked and gagged on the senders, Saphirra shouted at the other women, “All of you rallied behind this treacherous woman without having any idea what she was up to! Mable never wanted justice for any of you. Master Colburn was going to marry Miss Natalie and let us all go. These ashes are all that remains of our freedom papers! You all just stood there and watched her burn them, not even knowing what they were. Mable used all of you far worse than Master Colburn ever had. He would’ve freed us all as a wedding gift for Natalie. Now there is no wedding, thanks to Mable.”

What followed was a cacophony of muffled whispers, and gossip. Saphirra was one of the few who could read and write. She knew very well what all those documents were for. She’d placed them on the back seat of the stagecoach for Pete. He was going to drop them off with the county magistrate as soon as he and Natalie left the wedding. Mable stole the papers from the stagecoach during the ceremony and sent everyone’s freedom up in flames. Natalie pulled Saphirra away from Mable. They left the vindictive siren covered in blood, soot, and shattered teeth.

Natalie informed the young girl, “tell Master Colburn I’m sorry but I’ve had enough. I’m leaving.”

“Are you sure, Ma’am,” Saphirra questioned with tears in her eyes.

Natalie regretfully nodded yes. She passed Saphirra the engagement ring and disappeared down the dusty road.



Mable stood strapped to the whipping post, slipping in and out of consciousness. She'd been lashed so many times she was delirious. Her back was covered in gashes, drenched in blood. It looked like hamburger meat. Over three-hundred slaves stood watch and cheered as Pete lashed her again and again. He'd hit her so many times his shoulder cramped from swinging. He'd never whipped a woman before and he despised whipping the men, but Mable had a talent for bringing out the absolute worst in people.

Pete pulled out his gun, once he couldn't will his exhausted arm to swing anymore. *If I can't kill you by way of the lash, this bullet will have to do.*

He walked around to face his betrayer, put the gun against her forehead. His finger finessed the trigger, itching to pull it. *All I had to do was take it easy a few more months. I would've been fine in a few more months, but you just couldn't allow it, Mable. Now the voices are back and they're screaming for your blood, screaming for your death, and I'm happy to oblige them...*



## CHAPTER 16:

### STARK RAVING MAD

“**Y**ou’re not a murderer, Pete!” His brother, Charles, called as he approached.

Pete looked up in shock and recovered from his break with reality.

Pete asked his brother, “what are you doing here?”

Charles answered, “business matters have called me back to New Orleans. I stop by to visit my oldest brother, and you have a gun to a woman’s head!”

Pete informed Charles, “believe me, I would be doing this Judas a favor by shooting her. Do you see all these slaves here? They know Mable burned their freedom papers. They’ll rip her limb from limb the moment my back is turned.”

Charles relieved Pete of his firearm and ordered the crowd, “Show’s over, back to your cabins.”

The disgruntled mob of slaves disbursed. Charles cut Mable down from the whipping post. She collapsed on the ground. The plantation nurse followed him as he carried Mable into the mansion. He laid Mable in a guestroom while the nurse patched her up.

Charles was the only Colburn brother who inherited his father’s golden locks. The others all possessed the raven hair of their mother. Other than that, he was the spitting image of Pete but acted nothing like

him. Charles never wanted any part of slavery. He married a girl from a free state and moved north when he was just a teenager.

Charles returned to his brother and asked, “were you really going to let all these people go?”

Pete informed his brother, “I was going to free everyone as a wedding gift for Natalie. Now thanks to Mable, the documents are destroyed and my fiancée is leaving me. I wish you would’ve just allowed me to kill her.”

Charles shook his head no. “If she’s displeased you then send her away. You don’t have to take her life.”

Pete snapped, “who in their right mind would buy Mable after I covered her in lashes and Natalie knocked out most of her teeth. The teeth are one of the first things examined on the auction block. They are proof of the age and health of a slave, and I’ll be damned if I free her. Why should she receive freedom when no one else will?”

Charles explained, “I’m not saying you should free her. Sign her over to Matt. He’s just starting out. You know he needs the help.”

Pete questioned with aggravation, “how should I know Mable won’t betray our little brother in the same manner she’s betrayed me?”

“Because she’s not in love with Matt,” Charles answered.

Charles walked into the room with Mable after the nurse finished patching her up. She was lying on her stomach. Blood seeped through the bandages on her back.

Charles pulled up a chair next to her. “I never liked you, Mable. You used to snitch to Pete and my father on Daniel and me. I have you to thank for many a beating. My brother’s going to allow you to live because he believes this is the first time you’ve ever betrayed him. But you and I both know that isn’t true. I never told Pete that you were the one who got him and Natalie caught by my father.” A shocked expression covered Mable’s face as Charles said, “yes I’ve always known it was you. Your jealousy damn near got my brother beat to death. Hell, what could I expect? You stabbed your own people in the back. I never trusted you, but you were Pete’s right-hand woman. He put you up on a pedestal. He would’ve bought you your own restaurant. My brother does a lot of bad things, but he’s not a bad man. You’re the only woman I’ve ever seen Pete lash. He was happy being a decent man. The bad part

of him had died until you betrayed him. Why would you go to such great lengths to resurrect his dark side?”

Mable was unable to speak due to Natalie feeding her a brick at the wedding. Mable scribbled on a sheet of paper. The message read: *I did this because the dark side is the part of him that loved me.*

Charles replied with frustration, “I got news for you sweetheart. Pete’s dark side never loved anyone. It was merely using you. The good side is what cared about you, which is the only reason you’re alive right now. This is how this is going to go. I’ve convinced Pete to sign you over to Matt. I believe even someone as wicked as you deserve a second chance. You will serve Matt loyally and respectfully for the rest of your days. If you betray my little brother I will inform Pete of just how he got caught bedding Natalie. After he’s taken his pound of flesh, I’ll personally deliver the bullet Pete promised you earlier. Do we have an understanding?”

Mable nodded respectfully and Charles began to rise from his seat. She tugged on his pant leg as he turned to leave. Mable jotted down a final message. It read: *Thank you for saving my life, Master Colburn.*

He replied, a little impressed by her new-found humility, “you’re welcome, and my name is Charles. I’ve never been anyone’s master.”



Natalie arrived much later than everyone else. She’d walked all the way home to give herself some time to think. She entered the mansion and walked straight to her chamber. She packed a small knapsack of clothes and jewelry. She would grab food on the way out. *I asked him so many times over the years if he’d ever hurt anyone else. The answer was always no. I can’t live with knowing what he’s done, but I feel he at least deserves an explanation.* She stopped before Pete’s chamber and slipped a note under the door.

Pete opened the door with the letter in his hand. Natalie stood before him speechless. There was no soul behind his eyes. Once again they were ice cold and emotionless. The look on his face was enough to raise the hairs on the back of her neck. She’d seen him angry many times before,

but nothing like this. Pete was stark raving mad.

So many voices were rattling around in his head. Dr. McKinley had warned him to take it easy until his moods were completely stable. The doctor said that all it takes is one traumatic event to make the person snap. Seeing the only woman one's ever loved with her bags packed would be enough to break a sane man's heart, but being abandoned by the love of his life would push an already unstable man over the edge.

Pete slapped a hand over Natalie's mouth to muffle her screams. He snatched her into his chamber and locked the door behind them. This was the part he hated the most. He'd stepped outside of himself. He'd separated into two people, the good Pete and the evil one. In his mind he was bound to a chair in the room screaming for the evil Pete to let her go, the malicious demon bearing his own image. There was a set of twins in the chamber, but Natalie was only aware of one of them.

When things were going well the pills were enough to keep the evil one caged. Most times Pete was entirely unaware of him. Now the good Pete had become a prisoner of his own mind. He was screaming for the dark one to stop hurting her.

The dark side gave Pete a sinister look and yelled, "Shut up! Your weakness disappoints me! You take these pills to get rid of me and now you want a favor. I should've killed her the first time she tried to leave us. You were begging me not to, so I raped her instead. I figured that would be enough to show her who's boss. It's not enough anymore. I have to kill her!"

Pete struggled vigorously against his restraints at the sight of Natalie's tears. The dark one struck her hard and she lost consciousness.

Pete pleaded with the dark one, "you don't have to kill her! She loves me! She might forgive me in time, and come back on her own if you just let her go!"

"Not a chance," the dark one vowed.

Pete's heart shattered as he told the dark one, "ravish Natalie if her offense was that great. Take her if you must, but please don't kill her."

The dark one tied a gag over Natalie's mouth. He cuffed Natalie's unconscious body to the headboard and bound her ankles with rope.

The dark one told Pete with utter irritation, "you've gone so soft lately. Matt shot you, and you let him live. You've allowed this woman



to walk all over you. I'm sick of you making me look bad! 'I love you, Natalie. Let's get married, Natalie. We'll free all the niggers, Natalie.' You're weak and pathetic because of her! I've had it! She has to go!"

"Please!! I beg of you! It doesn't have to end this way!" Pete argued.

The dark one growled, "Mable was the only woman I ever cared for! She was cunning, manipulative, and heartless! The perfect woman, but when she crossed us I was willing to put a bullet in her head so what do you think I'm willing to do to this bitch I never even liked!"

Pete's heart raced at the sight of the dark one pulling a knife from his pocket. Pete fought so hard to free himself that the chair he was bound to went crashing to the floor.

He screamed as the monster began to carve Natalie's flesh, "Nooooo!!!"

Pete squirmed frantically while on his side in the turned over chair. *I have to save her! I've got to stop him.* Then, at last, it dawned on Pete. *If the dark one pulled a knife from his pocket that means I have a knife in my pocket.*

Pete wiggled and moved about until the knife fell from his pocket. He gripped the blade and sawed away at his wrist restraints. The threads popped loose. He freed himself and grabbed a bronze candlestick. Pete rushed the dark one and swung with all his might. He caught the dark one in the temple. The lights went out and both of them collapsed on the ground.

Pete woke up an hour later on his chamber floor. He'd recovered from his psychotic break, and there was only one of him again. He ached all over and had no recollection of what happened. He panicked at the sight of blood on his clothes. *God, please let this be my blood. Please say I didn't hurt anyone.*

He pulled himself off the floor and gasped as he saw Natalie bound to the bed. He hurried over to her. She cringed at the very sight of him and released muffled screams.

Pete urged her to calm down. *I've never seen her so frightened of me. I must've done something dreadful.*

He was relieved to see her cuts were only superficial. He'd carved his initials into her forearm. Natalie stopped squirming for long enough for him to unlock her wrist cuffs. She snatched the restraints from her

feet and grabbed the knife off the bed. She gripped it with a trembling hand and backed away slowly.

Pete called to her, "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm sorry for what I've done."

Natalie questioned in fear still wielding the knife, "Prove you're the Pete I love! Where was the first place we ever kissed?"

She asked this because it happened before Pete's dark side ever came along. She figured the demon within him wouldn't know the answer.

Pete replied, "at your cabin on our birthday."

She dropped the knife and cried as she ran over to him.

He wrapped her in his arms. "What did I do? Please tell me what I've done?"

"You don't want to know," she said shaking all over.

"Tell me!" Pete demanded.

She shook her head and shouted, "No!"

She grew frightened as Pete pulled a gun from his nightstand. He tried to give the weapon to Natalie. She refused to take it. Tears streamed down her face as he forced her to hold it.

"If I ever come near you again aim for my heart and pull the trigger," Pete instructed her with a tap of his chest.

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

"Yes, you can and you will," he assured her.

Pete pulled out a document from his bedside table. It was his original ownership paper of Natalie. He'd always kept it separate from the others to keep Matt from getting it. Though Mable had burned all the freedom amendments Pete was still able to sign Natalie over.

He scribbled a few lines on the paper. "I've signed you over to Matt. Don't have Saphirra take you to Missouri. It's too far for the two of you to travel alone. Have one of the men, who are able to protect you, prepare my stagecoach."

Natalie nodded regretfully and asked, "Sir, is it alright if I see my family first in Baton Rouge?"

She had addressed him as Sir, a hard stinging slap of reality, and a knife to the gut. It was over.

Pete looked upon her injured arm in utter shame and disgust. The bloody letters, **PC**, made his stomach roll with guilt. He heaved abruptly

but fought the vomit down. He ripped the sleeve from his shirt with one powerful yank and bandaged Natalie's wound with it.

He informed her with a heavy heart, "I don't care where you go. Just get away from me."

As Natalie backed away with the gun and the document Pete asked, "please forgive me, Natalie."

She sadly replied, "Master Colburn, I always do."

He walked over and kissed her goodbye. She didn't want to let him go. He gently and reluctantly pulled her hands away from the back of his neck.

She cried. "I love you."

"I love you too. That's why you have to go."

He nudged her toward the door and then she was gone. Pete sat back on his bed. He pulled a medicine bottle from his drawer and stared at it. His thoughts grew dark and heavy. *I've failed to protect Natalie so many times over the years. I installed a lock on her door. That didn't work. I had myself committed to an asylum twice. Both times the dark side bribed the guards to let me out. I can't just wait for the pills to stabilize me. That could take months. There's no telling what could happen by then. I don't know how else to protect her.*

Pete ate every single one of the bitter chalky tasting pills. *Natalie will be safe forever once I'm gone...*



## CHAPTER 17:

### THE GUILLOTINE

Saphirra watched in a state of confusion as the stagecoach pulled away. *Why wouldn't Master Colburn have me take her? I hope I haven't displeased him. I better see what I've done wrong.*

Saphirra entered the mansion and walked to Pete's chamber. She tapped lightly on the door and it creaked open.

"Sir!" She screamed as she saw him slumped over on his bed.

He was pale and sweaty. She shook him, and he gurgled something she could not understand.

"HELP!" Saphirra screamed in French as she noticed the empty bottle of pills.

Times of panic made her slip back into her first language. He made a few more incoherent ramblings.

Saphirra assured him in her native tongue, "I'm here, Sir. Don't leave me."



The following afternoon Pete noticed his stagecoach driver, Saphirra, in the doorway. He waved her in as he sat up in his massive bed. Pete felt awful but he had years of experience at pretending he

wasn't sick. He was dying but he wasn't going to show it, especially in front of her.

He patted the spot next to him and Saphirra took a seat. There was no wonder she was the only one of Pete's slaves who came to check on him. Unlike the others, she hadn't been with him long. He hadn't given her a reason to hate him.

Pete's shirt was off, baring a very nicely sculpted chest and stomach. It was apparent he'd spent many years in the field. He was as ripped as any of his slaves. The pretty ebony skinned girl smiled bashfully while sitting next to him on the bed. She'd never been this close to a half-naked man before. Times like these made Saphirra happy she was dark. Her master couldn't tell she was blushing.

Pete playfully scolded her, "don't you have work to do? Why are you hanging around my chamber door?"

Saphirra respectfully informed him, "My apologies Sir, but as yo driver, I ain't got much to do when ya sick. I thought I'd bring yo math book so ya won't get bored."

Pete smiled and accepted the book and the writing utensil. "From what I hear you saved my life. Thank you."

Saphirra humbly replied, "please don't thank me when it was you who saved me first. Don't ya remember how I come to be here? My father was a Protestant pastor and a plantation owner. He conceived me in sin, but instead of punishing himself he punished me. Beat me every chance he got. One night I was catering his poker game. That's when I met ya. You'd taken my daddy fo every dime he had on hand. That's when ya asked him to wager me. He just wagered me like a measly poker chip. I prayed you'd win that hand. As fate would have it, ya did. Ya were between drivers at the time. You'd taken yoself to the game, but by the end of it, ya were too drunk to take yoself home. I helped ya into the stagecoach and drove ya back here. I've been yo driver ever since."

Pete added, "That's right. The morning after the poker game I asked what your name was. You told me Abomination. Then I said 'I know that's what the old reverend calls you, but what's your legal name'. You repeated the same thing. That's when I looked at your paperwork. Sure enough, that mean old scoundrel had named his daughter Abomination. I renamed you Saphirra for your beautiful sapphire blue eyes."

Saphirra looked away and smiled uncontrollably at Pete's flattery. Pete may have wronged a great many others but he'd always been her hero.

She modestly replied, "thank ya, Master Colburn. I really like my name."

"It suits you. You've never been anyone's abomination," He assured her with a smile.

Saphirra nodded respectfully and excused herself as she noticed Dr. McKinley in the doorway.

The doctor walked in and said, "I figured I should come back when you were better able to speak with me. What pills did you overdose on?"

"I don't remember, why?" Pete replied.

The doctor explained, "if it was the anti-psychotic medication, you are in great danger of completely losing your sanity."

Pete told the doctor with a confused look, "didn't you say the reason I'm yellow is that the pills destroyed my liver? I'll be long dead before I go crazy."

Dr. McKinley replied regretfully, "most likely that's true, but in the unlikely event that you do survive, I'll need to know what pills you took."

Pete nodded. "The maids cleaned my room after the incident. They threw away the bottle, but if I find out I'll let you know."

The doctor administered some drugs to make Pete comfortable. It was all he could do for him at this point.

Dr. McKinley informed Pete, "I'm going to stick around for as long as you need me."

"I appreciate it doc," Pete humbly replied.

"It's a good thing Natalie went to visit her parents with a man instead of that young girl."

"Why do you say that?"

Dr. McKinley replied, "didn't you hear about that slave woman they found dead in a field? It was around Easter. She was found wearing nothing but a diamond necklace."

"No I hadn't heard about that," Pete admitted with a sick feeling in his gut.

Pete's mind circled back to the scratches he found on his throat. The

scratches he never had an explanation for. *I questioned all the women who crashed my wedding If I'd hurt them around that time and they said no. My I'm sorry gift of choice is a diamond necklace. I killed that poor woman. I pray I don't recover. If I completely lose my sanity who will I go after next...*



The old magistrate stood before the gate of Broderick and Franklin's prison cell. Broderick looked nothing like his debonair self. His blonde hair was sweaty and matted to his head. His brown eyes had dark circles around them. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept. It's hard to get your beauty rest while confined to a prison awaiting your death. There were a loud swish and boom in the distance.

Franklin had resigned himself to a corner while Broderick pleaded with his former superior, "is there nothing you can do to save me? It was an accident. I didn't know any white people were onboard. I thought Malcolm was stealing the boat."

They looked up at the sound of another swish and boom in the distance.

The magistrate regretfully replied, "witnesses say that you had a prior altercation with the Lafayettes. In fact, you drew your weapon at the French embassy. That calls to motive and premeditation. You assassinated a foreign diplomat. My superiors believe you were trying to bring about war. That's conspiracy and treason."

After another swish and a boom, Broderick said, "so that's it. I'm going to hang!"

The magistrate solemnly informed him, "hell I wish that were so, but the French use the guillotine."

"What!!"

Broderick and Franklin rushed over to the barred window. They had been testing the machine all day. Broderick nearly fainted at the sight of the massive blade swooshing down at the speed of light. His stomach rolled and twisted into knots as the blade slammed down with a boom. It sliced a watermelon clean in half. The front half plopped into a basket,



the basket that would soon be holding Broderick's head. Franklin doubled over and lost his breakfast. He'd been charged as a co-conspirator and as such, cursed to share the same fate as his cousin.

Broderick called to the magistrate, "I can't die like this! No one deserves to die like this!"

"No one deserves to be blown to smithereens either!" Franklin Welch yelled as he wiped his mouth and picked himself up off the ground. "I wish I'd never told you I found that slave. I needed the reward money for my baby. Now I'll never get to see my child grow up."

The magistrate told Broderick with great remorse, "you assassinated the French ambassador. You created an international incident. Your fate is no longer up to me. The French government wants your head. I'm sorry but I have to give it to them."



Embrasia stormed into the prison with Broderick's girlfriend and younger brother. Franklin wouldn't allow his wife to see him. He feared the stress would make her miscarry.

"Embra..." Broderick called and then thought better to address her formally, "Mademoiselle Lafayette."

Embrasia's eyes narrowed and reddened with hate as she growled, "You have some nerve having me summoned after you killed the people I love."

Broderick pleaded with her, "I'm sorry. Please get your father to call off the execution. You're the only one who can help me now."

Embrasia replied snidely, "how can I help? I'm just a lowly woman. My father is a misogynistic ass, like you. He won't listen to me any more than you did."

Broderick said, "Please tell your father I only thought Malcolm was on the boat."

Embrasia's eyes welled up, but she refused to allow a single tear to fall. She would not give that bastard the satisfaction of knowing how much he hurt her.

Embrasia took a moment to collect herself. "You're still missing the

point. You shouldn't have been trying to kill anyone. Your greed and total lack of respect for human life are why you're in this predicament."

Broderick asked with irritation, "If you're not going to help me what did you come here for?"

Embrasia held up a folder. "I came here to offer you the last chance to do something decent. It's too late for you but you can still save your cousin's life."

At that moment Franklin rose from his corner.

He listened intently as Embrasia said, "this folder holds Ashton and Devon's slave records. Sign them over to me so I can free them. I'll give your cousin a full pardon. No execution and no jail time."

Franklin, Miranda, and Broderick's brother, Robert, gasped as Broderick said, "let me get this straight. I go to the guillotine while he goes free. Not a chance in hell."

Robert yelled in frustration and disbelief, "You have a chance to save our cousin's life! Franklin has a wife and a child on the way! Sign the goddamned papers!"

Miranda cried as Broderick said, "if there's nothing in it for me, there's no deal."

A bitter look covered Robert's face as he took the folder from Embrasia.

Broderick called out with a smirk as his little brother scribbled lines on the documents, "those papers aren't legally binding. The magistrate knows I own those slaves, not Robert."

The scarlet-haired young man passed the documents back to Embrasia and spoke with total bitterness, "after Broderick's head falls in that basket everything gets passed down to me, including the boys in question. You can have these papers notarized after the execution. They'll be legally binding then."

"Guard free this man," Embrasia called, pointing to Franklin.

As Franklin walked out of the cell Embrasia asked him, "your name is Frank Welch, right? Do you mind if I call you Frank?"

"Call me whatever you want," Franklin assured her, still in disbelief.

Embrasia went on to say, "my brother believed in god. At a moment like this Florian would say you've been given a second chance at life. Don't dare betray my good grace by wasting it."

Franklin Welch stammered, “Yes Ma’am. I’ll be a good man from now on. I’ll appreciate my wife and raise my child right. I swear to God.”

“Don’t swear to God. You swear to me,” Embrasia growled.

Franklin solemnly vowed, “I swear to you, Ma’am. I will not disgrace the memories of those you lost by leading a treacherous life.”

As Franklin left the prison cell, Broderick charged up to the bars. Broderick scolded his little brother in utter disbelief, “I’m going to die because of you! You’ve allowed my only bargaining chip to just walk right out the door!”

Embrasia and Miranda watched in shock as Robert balled up his fist and sent a brutal punch to Broderick’s face.

As Broderick picked himself up off the ground his little brother announced with tears in his eyes, “our cousin is not a bargaining chip you selfish son of a bitch! You’re not going to die because of me. You’re going to die because of you. It was all a test and you failed miserably. I went to plead with Madam Lafayette and her father on your behalf.”

Embrasia interjected, “that’s when I informed Robert that my brother believed in forgiveness, me & my father... not so much. Even still, had it not been for my brother’s forgiving nature I’d be dead right now. Dr. McKinley was the only one who saw me go into the water that day. If my brother hadn’t pardoned the doctor, he wouldn’t have been around to save my life.”

Miranda told Broderick as tears streamed down her face, “Miss Lafayette and her father told us that if we can prove there’s a shred of decency in you worth saving they’ll call off the execution. You’d spend twenty years in prison but you’d still get out in time to have a life, maybe even a family and children. Robert would’ve taken care of your estate in your absence. All you had to do was sign the papers and save your cousin.”

Robert gave Broderick a bitter scowl and said, “you just couldn’t commit one unselfish act. I can’t believe it took all this for me to realize you really did kill our father. I refused to believe it at first but now it’s so obvious. Then you blamed that innocent girl and hanged her for your treachery.”

Robert stormed off and called back to his caged brother, “in the unlikely event that you have a soul, may God have mercy on it.”

Miranda cried hysterically at the thought of her lover's certain death.

Embrasia shook Miranda and yelled, "this man is not worth your tears!"

Embrasia pulled a blue necktie from her purse and passed it to the young girl.

Broderick's jaw dropped as Embrasia told Miranda, "Broderick left this in my chamber on the card table he made love to me on. Your boyfriend has a birthmark in the shape of a dolphin on his upper thigh. He was too busy proposing marriage the morning after the Charlevoix ball to collect all of his clothes. I do apologize. My disrespect of you was unintentional. He never once mentioned he had someone."

Embrasia turned and walked away. Miranda's face filled with hurt and devastation, followed by pure bitterness and contempt. She gripped the blue necktie in anguish. Broderick's lips were moving but they made no sound.

Miranda was so lost in her own thoughts she couldn't hear her lover's bullshit excuses. *I wanted so badly to go to the Charlevoix ball. Broderick had every excuse why he couldn't take me. I couldn't afford a gown, and he swore he hadn't gained access to his inheritance. He said he was unable to buy me one. At the time I was unaware that was a lie. I knew I'd never be able to raise enough money to buy something suitable to wear in time for the ball. But I at least wanted Broderick to have a good time, even if I couldn't be there. I spent every dime of my meager savings on this custom tie to match his vest, the very tie he so graciously left in another woman's chamber! I've been with him so many years. He's always had excuses as to why we couldn't marry. Then he spends one night with this woman and proposes marriage. I never meant anything to him.*

At last Miranda turned to Broderick and shouted, "I've never been anything to you but a warm wet hole! You murmur other women's names in your sleep! Who the hell is Layla? You know what? I don't give a damn anymore. I hope Miss Lafayette was great. I really do."

Broderick called out, "Layla is ancient history, and Embrasia meant nothing to me! I swear to God!"

"Perhaps you should stop swearing to God and make peace with him," Miranda said solemnly as she walked away.

Broderick called after her, “Miranda, please. You’ve always been there for me. Would you really leave me in my darkest hour? I’m sentenced to die here!”

Miranda stopped in her tracks, turned to Broderick and said, “Yes, and now you’ll be doing it alone.”

As Broderick watched the girl he’d taken for granted walk out of what was left of his life, he had a crushing revelation. *I loved Miranda. I should’ve married her. Why did it take all this, to figure that out?*



It was hours before Broderick’s execution. Spectators were already beginning to gather around the guillotine. Embrasia stormed back into the prison.

She walked up to Broderick and ranted, “you truly are unbelievable. Calling on the sister and friend of the people you killed as your last request. You know I’ll look like an awful heartless human being if I tell you to go to hell. That will disgrace my country’s men and my father, so get on with your final pathetic scheme to save your own neck.”

Broderick smiled and grabbed Embrasia’s hand. He kissed the scar on her forearm from the dog bite.

“I’m sorry,” he said for the first time and actually meant it. “No one else is talking to me. I knew that if I infuriated you, you’d give me more of your time if only to give me a piece of your mind.”

Embrasia asked in shock of his sincerity, “what do you want with me?”

Broderick told Embrasia, “you offered me a chance to do one unselfish act.”

“It won’t save you now,” Embrasia informed him.

Broderick looked down at her and said, “I know. That’s what makes it an unselfish act.” He passed Embrasia a stack of documents and said, “this is my last will and testament. Owning a plantation desensitizes you to human suffering. Before long people become a means to an end. You quickly learn to discount the lives of others. Your father starts by giving you young girls to have your way with. You take them because you know

if you don't, he'll just beat you both. You learn to block out their crying and begging and get on with the rape of these poor unfortunate girls. Many times, they plead for you to take them to avoid a lashing. Oh yeah and the lashings. Your father forces you to lash one slave after another. Eventually, it no longer bothers you because you've told yourself countless times the slaves are less than human to get through with it. You start to believe your own nonsense. Then one day you no longer recognize yourself in the mirror. You have no clue just how you became the monster that you are. My brother is a better man than I, and I want him to stay that way. I'd also like to honor the memories of those who died. That's why I've decided to free all my slaves rather than have Robert inherit them. He'll be angry with me at first but in time he'll understand. My brother needs to know I do indeed have a soul. I shattered his faith in humanity and I must restore it. A boy with no faith easily becomes a man with no conscience. Believe me, I know. I'm freeing the slaves to honor your brother and protect mine."

Embrasia was rendered speechless. She cried as she looked at the over two hundred names in the will, including Ashton and Devon. She knew Florian, Nora, and Malcolm would want freedom for these people rather than another tragic death.

Broderick wiped Embrasia's tears and said, "I have no right to ask anything of you but, if you will please tell my brother I didn't kill our father out of greed. I killed him because I hated what he'd turned me into. Please tell my lover, or rather ex-lover, there is a cigar box in my bottom drawer. Beneath the cigars, she'll find an engagement ring. I bought it only a few months into our courtship. I never gave it to her because my father convinced me she wasn't good enough for me. Now I realize I was never good enough for her. Tell her not to be sentimental. She should sell it. The ring is worth a lot of money. She'll be able to take care of herself and her family. I can't have her go the rest of her life believing I never loved her."

"Tell her yourself, you ass," Miranda called as she entered the prison.

"Miranda!" Broderick exclaimed as she ran up to him.

He hugged her through the bars and called, "you said you wouldn't be here."

She smiled through her tears and told him, “obviously I’m a big fat liar like you.”

Broderick laughed and begged her, “kiss me. It will give me peace.”

She obliged the big fat liar. Embrasia’s heart shattered as she remembered Malcolm caressing her cheek through the bars. They weren’t lovers, merely friends, but Embrasia was content to have even a piece of him. Now she was left with nothing, and forced to witness someone else’s pain. *I can’t kill Broderick after he’s finally showed an ounce of decency. This is not what Florian would’ve wanted.*

“I’m ready,” Broderick called to his fellow deputies.

Four armed men unlocked the gate to his cell and cuffed Broderick’s hands behind his back.

Miranda called, “It’s not time yet!”

“It is if he’s ready,” one of the guards replied.

Broderick told the women, “please don’t beg for my life or make a scene. Leave me my dignity. An ounce of decency doesn’t make up for a lifetime of treachery. I know I deserve to die for the lives I took, especially the poor girl I hanged. I’m at peace with this.”

Tears poured from Miranda’s eyes as he kissed her goodbye.

Broderick told two of the guards, “please restrain them. They shouldn’t have to see my head in a basket.”

Miranda and Embrasia screamed in protest as the guards grabbed them. The officers shoved both women in a prison cell. Embrasia sent a swift and brutal knee to the groin of one of the guards. She escaped before they could lock her in the cell with Miranda.

Embrasia clutched Broderick’s last will and testament. She ran toward the guillotine with the guards hot on her trail. Her thoughts raced in sync with her heart. *I must stop this killing. Florian wouldn’t want more killing. He’d be honored the slaves are going free. Florian didn’t believe in vengeance. He would turn the other cheek. I can’t put another family through the pain I’m in right now. I’d be taking someone’s brother. I’d be taking someone’s lover.*

She narrowly escaped the guards and lost herself in the crowd. She saw Broderick up on the platform, his arms cuffed behind his back. The sun gleaming off the guillotine was almost blinding.

Embrasia saw her father and screamed, “you have to stop this!”

Of course, her dad didn't hear her. He was deaf, like the slave she had fancied. Embrasia finally made it to her father. Her heart stopped at the sound of the sharp metallic swish. She found herself unable to breathe as the humongous blade was rapidly descending...



## CHAPTER 18:

### THE SECRET JOURNAL

**F**lorian Sr. snatched Embrasia, and buried her face in his chest, to block the horrific view, but he couldn't protect his daughter from what she heard. The sound of the blade slicing through Broderick's neck would never leave her. The crack of his severed head falling in the basket would haunt her the rest of her days. She became dizzy and the crowd began to spin. Embrasia fainted in her father's arms.



Embrasia's father had brown hair heavily streaked with gray. He wasn't a big man just average, but he had a presence about him that demanded the attention of any room he entered. He was born to run things, a natural authority figure. For many years he governed his policies and his daughter with an iron fist.

The senior ambassador dabbed Embrasia's forehead with a cool cloth as she came to. She looked up at her daddy. His image was blurry for a few seconds before eventually coming into focus.

As she sat up in bed he signed to her, "my precious daughter, I was so worried about you. Why would you ever come to an execution? It's no place for a woman."

The senior ambassador read Embrasia's lips as she said, "you don't believe anywhere but the home is a place for a woman! You probably wish it was me on that boat instead of Florian. I wish I was like my brother. Maybe you would've loved me as much."

The ambassador's brown eyes welled up but no tears fell.

He shook his head no and signed, "I loved my son, but I love my daughter just as much. I would never trade your life for his. I always knew you were more than capable of running the embassy, but that doesn't mean society agreed. I passed my duties on to Florian because it was just easier that way, not out of lack of faith in you. I never allowed you to behave in the same manner as the rest of us because I wanted to protect you from ridicule. Just because I understood you didn't mean everyone else would."

Embrasia's eyes filled with tears as she admitted to her dad, "I always thought I was a disappointment to you."

Florian Sr. smiled and signed, "I've always been proud of you. You're the only woman I've ever seen race to save her brother's murderer. You're a lot more like Florian than you think."

Embrasia cried as she confessed, "killing that man gave me no peace. At first, I thought it would, but it didn't. He was only twenty-one years old."

Her father signed with agitation, "Broderick may have been only twenty-one but he killed my son, along with a daughter in law I never got to meet! Broderick destroyed the only man capable of stealing my daughter's heart! Yes, Malcolm was a slave, but I know that you cared for him, which means he was special. I feel robbed! Don't you?"

"Yes, of course, but..."

Embrasia was interrupted as her dad signed, "I had to honor the dead."

"Do you think cutting off a man's head honored our dearly departed! I feel more destroyed now than ever," Embrasia told her dad.

Florian Sr. hugged his daughter and kissed her forehead affectionately.

He said with a few hand signals, "I never meant to hurt you. The last thing I wanted to do was inflict more pain. After all Broderick took from us I just assumed you'd want revenge. I figured you'd take solace in his

execution. I'm sorry I've never listened to you, but I'm listening now. What do you feel would give you peace, and honor our lost loved ones?"

"Doing something they all believed in," Embrasia answered wiping her tears.



Embrasia took a deep breath and walked toward the funeral of Broderick Welch. The mourners were gathered in black clothes. The graveyard was full of Broderick's fellow officers and relatives. His girlfriend stood forlornly before the casket. She looked as sad and devastated as any widow. The black netted veil Miranda wore couldn't hide the pain in her eyes. Though Broderick had asked her not to be sentimental, she chose to wear the ring on her right hand rather than sell it. She didn't have to. Robert considered Miranda a sister in law and opted to look out for her.

Embrasia lost her nerve as she laid eyes on the heartbroken relatives. She quickly made an about face. As applause roared from the mourners, she turned back around. They didn't hate her. They were clapping for her. Embrasia became utterly confused as she received smiles and nods of admiration and gratitude.

As she began to walk away Broderick's little brother called, "wait, you don't have to go."

Embrasia told Robert, "I'm sorry, it was entirely inappropriate for me to come. I'll be leaving now."

Robert assured her, "you have every right to be here. One of the deputies Broderick worked with gave the eulogy. He said you tried to save my brother's life. In fact, you gave the officer a pretty harsh knee to the family jewels."

They both laughed a little then Embrasia went on to say, "I didn't mean to intrude on your family's time of mourning. Believe me, I've done a lot of that lately. I merely came here with a message from your brother. Broderick asked me to tell you he didn't kill your father out of greed. He did it because he didn't like the person he'd become. He felt your father was partly responsible for that."

Robert replied, "I already know. I read Broderick's secret journal after he died. My father was fully responsible for the monster he created. Broderick was heir to the estate so my father was a lot worse on him than me. I never knew how tortured my brother was until I read those pages. His writings made me grieve more than this funeral. Did you know my brother didn't mean to hang that slave girl? He grew sick at the thought and changed his mind at the last minute. When Malcolm thought Broderick was tightening the noose, he was actually about to loosen it. Then Broderick turned and saw Malcolm slaughtering the overseers to save his wife. Broderick knew he'd be next. When he turned to run he kicked the stool on accident."

"Now I see why Broderick was so torn up over the death of Shelly," Embrasia said. "He wasn't trying to kill her. In fact, the only two people he tried to kill were your father and Malcolm. Your father abused Broderick. I can see why your brother wanted him dead, but why Malcolm? I must know why Broderick hated Malcolm so much. Malcolm always assumed it was over Liberty, but I think it's more than that."

Robert nodded and confessed, "it's much more than that."

Robert passed Embrasia Broderick's journal and went on to say, "I was going to drop this off at the embassy, in hopes that it would give you some closure. I believe you'll find Broderick's last entry of interest."

"Thank you," Embrasia said as she clutched the journal.

Robert nodded. "Thank you for trying to save my brother. After all the atrocities he committed you still considered him a human being. I hope that journal gives you the revelations you seek."

Embrasia didn't wait until she got home to read. She opened the journal in the stagecoach on the way back to the Embassy. She read the messy handwriting in total disbelief.

*I can't believe Malcolm actually thought I'd hang my own bastard. No one is that heartless. I gave Devon's rope so much slack he could've fallen through the earth and not hanged. I was merely bluffing, but I guess Malcolm wouldn't know that. I fired the overseer who released the dogs on the children. My moral compass doesn't point due north, but even I thought that was*

horrible.

*No one knows Devon's mine. I was thirteen when I sired Devon. Long before Miranda, my father forced me to rape a slave girl. Her name was Layla. We both hated it at first but eventually grew to love it, and each other. My father never meant for me to get attached to the girl. He sold Layla because I loved her. He figured that would interfere with his plans to marry me off to a rich girl.*

*Six years later I saw her at the auction. With a light-skinned mulatto son. Layla told me he was my son. She begged me to bid on them so they wouldn't be separated. At the time my father was still running the show. I had only accompanied him to the auction. I had no money or authority of my own to bid. I knew my father wouldn't buy her when it was his idea to get rid of her in the first place.*

*I regretfully told Layla if she would act as if she didn't know Devon I might at least be able to convince my father to bid on him. I told her I would find her someday when I'm in charge and I'd take care of Devon until then. She made me promise and then told me she loved me. I told her the same.*

*On the auction block, my son was stripped naked, poked and prodded. They checked his teeth even fondled his genitals. I wanted to kill everyone who touched him! That's when I noticed the other boy standing next to my son, a dark-skinned child around his age. That boy was getting the same treatment as Devon. They held hands through it all. Together they endured the degradation. It was then that I realized my son could endure anything if that boy was by his side.*

*The dark-skinned boy's parents had already been sold just minutes before. The child was devastated. He just stood there grasping my son's hand in one of his fists and a worn slingshot in the other. I convinced my father to buy both of them. Then I brought them home.*

*It was the happiest and scariest day of my life. I gave the boys cake and milk. It was my favorite treat as a child. As I suspected they'd never had it. It crushed me to know my son had*

*gone his entire life without the simplest of life's pleasures, like cake. I didn't even know his birthday but I was determined to make up for all that.*

*I was devastated when my father immediately took the boys from me. He gave the children to the best man I know to look after them. Malcolm is a better man than I, but I should've at least been given a chance to raise my own child. It broke my heart when my son called Malcolm papa. Then Devon would turn around and call me the bad man. My son loved Malcolm and Malcolm loved my son. A normal man would be happy about this, but I never claimed to be a normal man.*

*I grew to resent my child's love of his surrogate father, and eventually, I grew to hate his surrogate father! Then Shelly came and they were one big happy family. This annoyed the hell out of me. I found myself yearning to stab Malcolm in the face every time my Devon called him daddy. I found myself wanting to strangle Malcolm every time my own son called me the bad man. I've tried to convince myself I have no logical reason to hate Malcolm, but I still don't hate him any less.*

*I never found the mother of my child, nor did I find Ashton's parents. I knew it was a lost cause before I even started looking, but a promise is a promise.*

*Embrasia closed the journal and tucked it away. Broderick was a deeply disturbed young man who was jealous of Malcolm. He must've felt Malcolm replaced him. As the heir of a plantation, Broderick would never be in a position to openly be a father to Devon, but Malcolm could. Broderick must've resented the hell out of him for that. No wonder the only two people Broderick tried to kill were Malcolm and his dad. He felt they both robbed him of being a father to Devon. Poor Malcolm was killed for being a good man and an even better father.*



Back at the funeral, Broderick's spirit lingered throughout the

cemetery. As he watched all the mourners disperse, he found peace rather than sorrow. *I had no idea this many people cared about me. Even Embrasia showed up after all I'd done to her. I still can't believe she tried to save my life.* Broderick smiled as his brother walked away holding Miranda's hand. *She's in good hands with Robert. He's a far better man than me.*

Broderick spun around at the sound of a woman's voice.

"Normal men would be sad at a funeral."

"Have I ever claimed to be a normal man?" Broderick questioned with a grin as he recognized the girl.

It was his first love and the mother of his son, Layla. She was a beautiful girl, with skin of mahogany, and long braided hair. His heart filled with total happiness as he hugged her tight. The beads at the end of her braids rattled as Broderick swung her around ecstatically.

Then his thoughts grew heavy as it dawned on him. "Layla please tell me you have some extraordinary gift that allows you to communicate with the dead. Please say you're still alive and well."

Layla shook her head no. "I've been dead for years. I got sick just months after we last saw one another at the auction. Pneumonia took me, and I was so worried about our son I passed up my chance to leave this world. I lingered for years, wandering the world lost, trying to find my way home."

Broderick caressed her cheek and vowed, "I never stopped looking for you. I never stopped loving you."

"I never stopped loving you either," she confessed.

"Our son is in good hands," Broderick informed her. "He always had been. I was just too blinded by hatred and jealousy to see it. I wish I'd been grateful to Malcolm rather than resentful. There's nothing like a sudden and violent death to clear things up for me."

Layla questioned Broderick with a concerned look, "if our son is fine, why are you lingering?"

"Because of all the bad things I've done. I'm not in a rush to get to hell," Broderick confessed.

Layla laughed and explained to him, "if you were going to hell, you'd already be there. The truly evil don't linger. If you let go of this life a whole other one awaits us."

Broderick informed Layla, “I’d be willing to go anywhere I can love and be with you openly. I yearn for a chance to marry the woman I love, and raise my own children.”

“I can’t promise you the next life will be any more accepting but life is what you make it,” she informed him.

Broderick took Layla’s hands in his, gave her a long-awaited kiss, and whispered, “I love you.”

There was a bright flash and then they were gone.



Embrasia had looked for Ashton and Devon’s birth parents but had as much luck as Broderick did. *Broderick was right. It is a lost cause. The real parents could be anywhere, but Florian said something interesting. Sometimes family becomes the people you live with, which is why I legally adopted Ashton and Devon. They’re Lafayettes now.*

Embrasia smiled and walked cheerfully up to the white two-story building. She was holding both Ashton and Devon’s hands. She had a spark of life in her that her father hadn’t seen in a long time.

Embrasia smiled brightly and told her dad, “the elderly woman who owns this hotel told me she was ready to retire. She and her late husband never had children. She has no one to pass it down to.”

Ashton and Devon jumped for joy as Embrasia said, “I want to buy this place and open a casino.”

The boys had heard so much gossip over the months they couldn’t help but be excited. A casino was all Florian and Embrasia ever talked about. Ashton and Devon had helped Malcolm create the plaque and the bar for the casino.

Embrasia was happy to see the boys alive again. They’d taken the deaths hard. Devon was the one who reached for the slingshot and Ashton was the one who’d lost it. The children blamed themselves for the tragedy. It took a long time for Embrasia to convince them otherwise.

Ashton announced to Devon ecstatically, “we could be bartenders or blackjack dealers! Maybe even bouncers! We could throw people on their faces!”



“Yeah, we can throw people on their faces!” Devon happily agreed.

Embrasia was appalled at the children’s eagerness to hurt others. She went to chastise them and her father stopped her. The senior ambassador laughed for the first time since his son’s death.

He signed to Embrasia, “They’re just boys. They’ll grow out of it. They’re not really going to be bouncers. I’m glad you’re happy, but how does a casino honor the memory of our dead?”

Her father read her lips as she explained, “this casino will honor Florian, Nora, and Malcolm because it will be a front for the Underground Railroad. I’m going to be an abolitionist like my brother. Broderick’s was just another life cut tragically short. It didn’t bring anyone back. Nor did it heal the gaping wound in my heart. The only thing that had given me a moment’s peace was seeing all the people Broderick freed. I took solace in that because I know all those who died believed in equality. Freeing those people is what they would’ve wanted. It’s what I want.”

Her dad silently warned, “being an abolitionist is extremely dangerous. You should know that after what happened to your brother. I lost my son, Embrasia. Please don’t ask me to bear the loss of my daughter. I’m sorry but I can’t allow you to do this.”

Embrasia protested, “you asked me how I wanted to honor the dead. This is my way of doing it. Please, Daddy, I know this is the only way I’ll find peace.”

Her dad hugged her and nodded with a heavy heart. Then he walked into the hotel to strike up a deal with the owner.

The boys cheered as she told them the plan was a go.

Embrasia waived her hands in front of the large white building and announced, “Lafayette Lounge.”

The children wrinkled their noses in disapproval and protested, “Awe do we have to name it that Madam Lafayette?”

Embrasia recanted and watched the children’s faces light up as she asked, “how about naming it the *House of Cards*?”

The children hugged her triumphantly.

Embrasia laughed. *Why am I the only one who thinks the House of Cards is a stupid name?*



The following morning Embrasia stood before the elegant mirror in her chamber. She carried on the tedious routine required to get ready for the day. Other than the staff, she was alone at the French embassy. Her father, the senior ambassador, was out on business with the magistrate. She'd asked one of her guards to take Ashton and Devon fishing since the boys had informed her they used to go every Sunday.

Embrasia freshened up and spritzed herself with peach perfume. Then she gave the bell-pull a tug and rang for her lady's maids to help her dress. It usually took a while for them to reach her chamber. She was shocked when they instantly appeared. It was apparent they were already on their way.

The maids ran in and announced frantically, "the guards have arrested a gentleman claiming to be Malcolm!"

## CHAPTER 19:

### THE MISSING

**E**mbrasia snapped, “I saw the boat blow up. Some money hungry, untrustworthy, member of my staff has found a look alike! Only those closest to me know Florian and Nora’s bodies were found but not Malcolm’s. This is a very cruel prank!”

The maids pleaded with unwavering persistence, “we really think you should see him, Madam.”

They dressed Embrasia quickly and she hurried to the dungeon. Her heart leaped as she laid eyes on the prisoner. The resemblance was undeniable, but she saw the explosion. *No one could’ve survived that.*

She ranted, “you are truly a piece of work! I have a good mind to…”

Embrasia stopped mid-sentence as the man pulled off a wooden wedding band and passed it to her. She nearly fainted at the sight of it. Tears filled her eyes. She eased herself to the ground.

The man knelt before her and passed her a note:

*I was floating on a large piece of debris when I was picked up by sailors. They patched me up and sold me back into slavery. To say I ran away the first opportunity I had would be a lie. I’m to blame fo yo brother’s death. Fo a long time I didn’t feel I deserved my freedom. Then I realized that choice should be up to you. So here I am. Do to me as ya wish.*

Embrasia shook her head in disbelief and uttered, “this is impossible.

Malcolm is dead. I saw the explosion. If you're really my friend, where did we make love?"

Embrasia watched intently as the man explained in sign language, "that's a trick question. We didn't make love at all. I was still hurting over the death of my wife. I refused to disrespect you or Shelly." Tears poured from Embrasia's eyes as he silently continued, "we kissed and I fled yo chamber. Ya were wearing a red garter and ya smelled like that peach stuff ya wearing right now."

Embrasia sprung to her feet and unlocked the gate to Malcolm's cell.

He joked, "how many times are ya gonna have me arrested, woman?"

Embrasia laughed through her tears and signed back, "this is the last time. I promise."

Malcolm wrapped Embrasia in an embrace and held her for the longest time.

Embrasia spoke with tears of joy and sorrow, "I'm so happy you're home. I never once blamed you for what happened to Florian and Nora. If anything, the fault lies with me. I'm the one who sent you to the docks."

Malcolm shook his head and signed, "please don't do this to yourself. It was an unfortunate and tragic accident."

Embrasia nodded in agreement. Though it was painful to admit, it was time to move on. That's what Florian and Nora would want. Malcolm put an arm around Embrasia's shoulders and they walked out of the dungeon.

Embrasia smiled and asked, "so what do you want to do now that you're back from the dead?"

Malcolm silently informed her with a grin, "first I wanna see my boys. Then we can do whatever ya want."



Meanwhile, the senior ambassador, his assistant, and the magistrate entered the cabin of the dead light-skinned woman, who was discovered in that field. The tiny shack had been ransacked. The furniture was turned

over. Blood and hair were strewn about the floor and bed.

The magistrate complained, “we’re wasting man hours on this. This woman’s death is considered property loss, not murder.”

Florian Sr. promptly signed and his assistant translated, “The Ambassador says that he is here on behalf of the French government, which is not particularly pleased its diplomat was assassinated by one of your citizens, and not just any citizen, your deputy. As a father and a government official, he demands that you investigate this woman’s murder! Or he swears to have your job and the jobs of all your subordinates. If it hadn’t been for your blatant disregard of black people his son would be alive right now.

The magistrate replied in shock, “I’m sorry for your loss but I fail to see how this is my fault!”

The ambassador waived his hands with anger and frustration. “If you’d done your job and investigated Shelly’s situation you would’ve known Broderick killed his own father! You could’ve locked him up before he ever got a chance to blow up Nora’s boat. You were so blinded by your bigotry that you sentenced an innocent girl to hang while allowing your murdering deputy to roam free creating mayhem. Most days I wish your head had gone in the basket right along with that Welch bastard!”

The magistrate swallowed hard as the ambassador’s furious signs were translated into words. He saw the cold glare in the ambassador’s eyes; it caused the court official to take a cautious step back.

The magistrate assured him, “if Shelly was white we would’ve looked further into the matter.”

The ambassador shook his head. “Please answer me this one question. If a person doesn’t care about killing black people how long do you think it’ll take before they start killing white people?”

The old magistrate hung his head. “You’re right. Your son’s death could’ve been prevented, but Broderick is dead now. Why are we still investigating slave murders?”

The ambassador signed and then searched the girl’s belongings for clues, “I don’t believe Broderick killed this woman. He absolutely refused to confess to this murder, even though the law wouldn’t care about it. Why would Broderick admit to every murder but this one?”

The magistrate explained, “Unlike Shelly, this light skinned girl was raped. In order to admit to the murder, he’d have to admit he slept with her. Not only was he bedding this girl he had a relationship with her, a close enough relationship to be buying her diamonds. That’s not exactly a badge of honor around these parts. The boy wanted to die with some dignity. Broderick worked for me. The kid was a natural. He would’ve had a great future in law enforcement. I don’t want to believe he did this but the fact remains. He’s a murderer who was the first to arrive on the scene. He raped and murdered this woman.”

The ambassador signed and then continued to search through the mess. “I read Broderick’s journal from cover to cover. He wrote about a slave girl but not this one. Broderick killed his father because of the abuse. He killed Nora and Florian on accident. He killed Shelly to cover his tracks. Among other reasons, he killed Malcolm for defending Shelly. What was his motive for killing this woman?”

The magistrate questioned, “you want me to find a reason Broderick wanted this woman dead?”

“Or you can find the person who actually killed her,” the ambassador promptly signed.

The plantation master appeared in the doorway with a distraught look on his face. The senior ambassador could tell from the robes he wore that he was a man of the cloth.

The magistrate announced, “I think I’ve got something here. Why would an illiterate woman have a need for an appointment book? Why would she have a need for any of these books?”

The magistrate looked at the old reverend accusingly and said, “she wasn’t illiterate, was she?”

The reverend put his head down as the magistrate questioned him, “why is every other slave on this plantation illiterate but this one? She was your bastard. Is that why you named her Evil Sin?”

The old reverend’s silence was confirmation enough.

The ambassador signed with the aid of his translator, “she was your daughter and you enslaved her! You are truly a piece of work! There’s a special circle of hell for hypocrites like you!”

The magistrate cautioned the ambassador, “stop berating him. He may be able to help us.” He turned to the reverend and asked, “did Evil

Sin have enemies?”

The reverend spoke with his eyes swimming in tears, “of course not. Everyone loved my daughter.”

“And yet she’s dead,” the Ambassador signed. “Everyone loved her but you.”

The reverend grumbled, “just what are you implying?”

“The obvious,” the magistrate interjected.

The reverend yelled in his own defense, “you can’t possibly believe I did this! What kind of man would rape his own daughter?”

“The kind who would enslave and beat her,” the magistrate answered smugly. “I saw her body. Many of her bruises were brownish yellow. They were fading. That didn’t come from the attack, but prolonged abuse. Admit it. You hated her.”

The reverend burst into tears. “I never hated her. I hated myself.” His jaw clenched and his eyes narrowed as sorrow transformed to anger. The reverend’s voice quaked the tiny shack, “Ambassador you say that hell awaits me as if I’m not already there! You know nothing of hell! Be thankful your son left you on good terms! You have no idea what it feels like to never get to say you’re sorry!”

The reverend fled the cabin. He shouted back at the magistrate, “I’m a hypocrite, a sad excuse for a man, and a rotten father, but I did not rape and murder my daughter! Now you find out who did or get the hell off my property!”

The ambassador watched him disappear, amazed the reverend could spew such emotion over a daughter he treated so badly. Florian Sr. recognized his pain, the anger, and frustration of his loss.

“I don’t think he did it,” the ambassador signed.

“Neither do I,” the magistrate added as he looked through the appointment book.

The ambassador signed, “we have to find out who her lover was. He’s the one who did this.”

“How do you know?” The magistrate questioned.

The ambassador explained, “abused girls tend to end up with abusive men, just like daddy. Who’s in the girl’s appointment book? Does a man’s name appear multiple times?”

The magistrate’s jaw dropped as he told the ambassador, “This

appointment book belongs to Matt Colburn! I have to contact the local authorities in Missouri. Either Matt killed this girl or someone who knows him did.”



Up in Missouri, Matt’s brother, Daniel had designed and built Matt an extravagant home of marble, brick and polished stone. He’d been working on it for over a year before Matt ever moved to Missouri. The mansion stood several stories high. It sat on acres and acres of lush green land. Matt’s three older brothers had put forth quite a bit of cash to build the new Colburn Estate.

Arial was rounding her ninth month of pregnancy. Lilly had taught her much of the native language, even though Arial still spoke with a strong French accent. Lilly had managed to teach Matt quite a bit of French as well.

Lilly left Arial’s bedroom and told Matt, “Arial’s having trouble sleeping as usual. She’s crying her eyes out again.”

“Why does she cry all the time,” Matt questioned with frustration. “What’s wrong with her? What’s she hiding?”

“The father of her baby is dead. Not to mention she’s pregnant. The main activity is crying. Maybe you should go talk to her. I’m getting nowhere. I’m this close to putting her in a trance and forcing her to go to sleep.”

“Maybe you should,” Matt suggested.

Lilly rolled her eyes. “Talk to her right now.”

Matt let out an exasperated breath and entered the chamber. Arial was sitting on her bed clutching a soggy ball of tissue. Her belly was so big now you could see it from behind her.

Matt sat next to her on the bed and asked, “what’s the matter Arial? You know you can talk to me about anything.”

Arial confessed through sniffing sobs, “I’ve never been away from home this long. I’m scared Matt, and I feel terrible because I hate this baby. I know I put myself in this predicament, but I just want my life back.”



Matt could tell that wasn't all. There was more to it, but as always, Arial was holding back.

Matt assured, "just hang in there a few more weeks. You'll have your life back soon enough. I know this is probably rude and tactless of me, but why didn't you just have an abortion?"

Arial wiped her tears and explained, "I'm Catholic, and though I don't feel it's appropriate for me to bear a black child, I don't feel it's ethical to kill one either. I'll give up nine months of my life to prevent a baby's death."

Arial grew sad as she looked down at her big round belly. "I've gotten so fat. I've never had more than a twenty-inch waist my entire life."

She started crying hysterically and Matt begged her, "please don't cry. You've put on a few pounds but I'm sure that's normal."

Arial cried even harder.

Matt scolded himself. *God damn it! I'm bad at this.*

He took Arial in his arms and gave her a beautiful sensual kiss. Sparks flew as his lips met hers. He took her very breath away. As he released her she looked at him in shock.

He assured her, "believe me when I say you are beautiful. When you made your entrance at the ball I couldn't breathe. I was paralyzed by the very site of you. All this pregnancy has done is given you a nicer set of tits."

"You truly are tactless," Arial replied, still a little hazy from the most amazing kiss she'd ever had.

Matt caressed her cheek and said, "yes but I'm also honest."

Arial pulled herself together and informed Matt with a smile, "thank you. That was the rudest and sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me. Everything is going to be alright. I'm going to have a beautiful mixed-race girl like my friend Lilly, and that's exactly what I'll name her."

"Now that's the spirit," Matt cheered and gave Arial a comforting embrace.

Matt took a knee, rubbed Arial's humongous belly, and kissed it affectionately. He playfully scolded the unborn baby, "you make your mother cry all the time. You won't allow her to sleep. You've been nothing but trouble, and yet I can't wait to meet you."

“Me too,” Arial admitted smiling uncontrollably. *I love when Matt talks to my belly. Matt is at most times an emotionally detached ass who says all the wrong things. But from time to time he’ll show a different side of himself, a kinder, sweeter, more compassionate side.*

Matt told Arial, “lie down and make yourself comfortable. I’m going to have Lilly sing you to sleep.”

“Will that actually work?” Arial questioned.

Matt assured her, “it always worked for me.”

Matt left and knocked on Lilly’s chamber door.

Matt told Lilly as she opened it, “I need you to put Arial in a trance.”

Lilly protested, “Matt you know I only do that as a last resort. If I put her in a trance I’m the only one who can wake her. If something happens to me she could sleep forever.”

Matt brushed off Lilly’s paranoia and asked, “do you think I’d ever allow anything to happen to you? She isn’t going to get to sleep otherwise. She’s homesick and depressed. She’s scared but won’t tell me who or what she fears. I don’t know how to make her feel safe.”

“Sleep next to her,” Lilly suggested.

“Do you think that’ll work?”

“It always worked for me. I’ve never felt safer than in your arms,” Lilly admitted with a sigh.

Matt looked her over. *My God you’re beautiful. I miss you so much.*

At last, he said, “okay, but I still want you to sing her to sleep.”

They both entered Arial’s chamber. Arial gasped in shock as Matt climbed under the covers with her.

“I beg your pardon,” Arial protested.

Matt told her, “just try to relax. Lilly’s going to sing you to sleep. As soon as you get tired I’ll leave.”

Arial nodded and Matt wrapped his arms around her. She nestled up to his strong warm body and never felt so safe in her life. *A`lice doesn’t realize how lucky she is. I’m so at peace in his arms I feel guilty. I know he’s just trying to make me feel better, but his kiss will haunt me for quite some time. I’m the worst sister in the world.* Arial tried her best not to enjoy the warmth of his embrace and the scent of his cologne.

Lilly began to sing and her voice was like a drug. The very sound of it was so beautiful it was intoxicating, mesmerizing. Arial’s eyelids

became heavy, and she began to drift off. She was in paradise, floating on a bed of clouds in Matt's arms.

Lilly blew out the candles. She excused herself from the chamber laughing. *Matt told Ariel he'd leave as soon as she was tired. It hadn't dawned on him the singing would put him to sleep as well. I can't target people. Any receptive person in earshot of the melody falls into a trance. Ariel's going to panic when she wakes up in bed with her sister's fiancé.*



The next morning Lilly opened Ariel's door and sang the tune to wake them up. Lilly quickly excused herself with a humongous grin on her face.

Lilly counted backward, "five, four, three, two."

"Ahhh!!!!"

As predicted Ariel screamed like someone was killing her. Lilly laughed until her sides ached, then laughed through the pain.

"Real funny," Matt said as he briskly left the chamber.

Lilly walked outside with a grin still plastered to her face. Her smile faded at the sight of the sheriff approaching. She could tell by the morose expression on his face that it wasn't good news. For something small, he would've just sent a deputy. She could see pictures in his hand.

Lilly's heart pounded against her rib cage. A cold sensation swept over her. *It's never a good thing for the sheriff or magistrate to show up in person flashing drawings of people. Someone is hurt or missing, maybe even dead...*



## CHAPTER 20:

### GOD SENT MASTERPIECE

**M**att looked over the drawings of both teenage girls. “I’m sorry, I haven’t seen them. I don’t even know them.” The sheriff replied, “are you sure? They’re Governor Swanson’s daughters. I thought pretty much everyone knew them.”

“I just moved here,” Matt explained.

The sheriff asked with a suspicious glare, “do you have enemies Mr. Colburn?”

“No, of course not,” Matt answered with concern.

The sheriff replied with an even more skeptical look, “every breadcrumb we find in regard to the missing Swanson girls leads straight back to this place. So, either you know more than you’re telling me or someone’s really making an elaborate effort to make you seem guilty.” Matt stood there speechless as the sheriff said, “they found your appointment book in the shack of a dead slave girl. Did it fall from your pocket while you were raping and killing her?”

“I swear I don’t know how it got there! I didn’t kill any slave girl!” Matt vehemently protested.

The sheriff sarcastically replied, “did you get bored killing black girls and decide to up the stakes? For the black woman you murdered that’s a slap on the wrist and a fine, but you’ll hang if you kill these white beauties. You should think real hard about that. I’ll be in touch, Mr.

Colburn.”

The sheriff turned to leave. Matt went back inside with his mind still racing from the interrogation. He decided not to tell Lilly and Arial he was being investigated for kidnapping. Arial was finally out of her depression and Lilly worried far too easily.

Lilly walked up with a concerned expression on her face. “What was all that about?”

“The governor’s daughters are missing. Most likely, the creep just wants money. Why else choose such wealthy prominent targets?”

“That’s awful. Has there been a ransom demand?”

Matt answered, “Not yet. Well, the sheriff didn’t mention one. Until all this gets sorted out I want you and Arial to glue yourselves to me.”

“Now who’s being paranoid?” Lilly commented.

“I’m serious,” Matt snapped.

He walked outside and started splitting wood for the fireplace. It was the beginning of October. The autumns in Missouri weren’t quite as warm as in New Orleans. Matt blasted through the wood and stacked the pieces. He took one mighty swing after another. *The only one I know here is my brother Daniel. Why would someone be trying to set me up? What could I have done in the short time I’ve been here to gain an enemy?*

Matt felt a bit of relief as he declared. *The sheriff is mistaken. This has nothing to do with me. Soon they’ll catch the scoundrel and the Swanson girls will be back home with their parents.*



Matt’s kiss and a good night’s sleep had done wonders for Arial. She was happy and back to creating things in no time. Arial had transformed an upstairs room into her personal art gallery. The entire chamber was decorated with her drawings, sculptures, and paintings. As usual, she was perched on a stool in front of an easel. She rinsed her brush in a jar of cloudy water, flicked off the excess liquid, and chose a new color. Arial blotted the canvas with green as she created another beautiful painting.

Lilly complained in a jovial manner as she entered the gallery, “Hey

DaVinci, why don't you ever draw, paint, or sculpt men? This room's full of vaginas."

Arial glanced around at her gallery of landscapes, still-lives, and nude women. She laughed. "My father never allowed me to have male models, only females. I don't paint men because I don't know how. I never got the practice."

Lilly offered, "why don't you ask Matt? He'll do it. He's comfortable with his body."

Arial had avoided Matt since this morning. She was aware that he only slept next to her so she'd feel safe, and he only kissed her to cheer her up. He was merely being a good friend. Yet she couldn't get either of those things out of her head. For this reason, she feared their next encounter might be awkward.

Arial replied, "I thought Matt was shy."

Lilly rolled her eyes. "Only around people he doesn't know. In the company of women Matt's familiar with, he's the cockiest, insufferable flirt. He'd be flattered if you asked him."

"I...I couldn't," Arial stammered.

Lilly walked onto Arial's balcony and called down to him, "Matt! Matt come here!"

Arial waived her hands nervously. "No, no don't. He's my sister's betrothed."

"All the more reason for him to do you a favor," Lilly replied.

Lilly informed Matt as he jogged upstairs and entered the gallery, "Arial wants to know if you'll pose nude for her. She has no practice drawing men. I'm sick of looking at just tits on the wall."

"Sure, I don't mind," Matt said with a confident shrug.

Boy was Arial right when she assumed their next encounter would be awkward. Arial gave Lilly a please don't abandon me look.

Lilly left the room despite Arial's silent plea. *Unlike Arial, I have an intimate and complicated history with Matt. It just wouldn't be wise or appropriate to stay in the room while he undresses. Matt and I are friends now. If we're going to stay that way I can't blur the line.*

Arial nervously told him, "thanks, Matt. I really appreciate you helping me with my art."

Matt flirted in response to Arial's obvious discomfort, "I'm not

going to hurt you Ariel unless you ask me nicely.”

Arial’s jaw dropped in shock. She quickly set up her easel and grabbed a handful of pencils in a shaky fist.

“Where do you want me?” Matt asked.

Arial instructed him as she readied her art supplies, “close to the window, where the lighting is best.”

Arial finished arranging all her pencils, erasers, and charcoal. She heard a soft thump as Matt’s clothes hit the floor. She glanced up to find Matt standing before her naked. *Well, I can certainly see why he’s comfortable with his body. I’ve got to get my head together and be professional. This man is engaged to my sister.* She cast her eyes to the floor.

Matt called to Ariel sarcastically, “hey Michelangelo, why are you blushing? You act as if you’ve never seen a naked man before. You might actually have to look at me in order to draw me.”

Arial blushed an even brighter shade of red, then covered Matt’s bottom half with a towel.

She sat in front of her easel and stammered nervously, “Um... I think I’ll just do the first sketch from the waist up. That should allow me some time to get used to this.”

Matt agreed and Ariel began to draw him.

“Hold still,” she instructed as she put line after delicate line on the paper.

She’d step back from time to time to look at the portrait, and then make a few more adjustments. Ariel lightened and shaded the picture until Matt’s image began to emerge. At the end of the first drawing, Ariel gathered her nerve and approached Matt. He towered over the tiny French girl.

He looked down at her and blessed her with a glorious smile. “I don’t believe I ever apologized for my mishap at the ball. It was rude of me.”

“You did nothing wrong,” Ariel assured him as she reached for his towel. “Mix-ups are bound to happen. Alice and I look just alike.”

He stood mesmerized. “I wouldn’t say just alike. You’re softer, kinder.”

Arial’s cheeks reddened at Matt’s flattery. She untied his towel with trembling hands. It fell. She gasped as he caught it without using his



hands. Arial had no clue what she could've possibly done to arouse Matt. Though it hadn't been her intention she still felt embarrassed about it. Her hands flew to her mouth. She spun around and cast her eyes back to the floor.

Arial called out in shock and mild humiliation, "Matt! I can't draw you like that!"

"Why not? He just wants to show off for the picture," Matt said with a wink.

Arial scolded him, "This drawing is supposed to look artistic and beautiful, not sexual!"

"And why can't sex be artistic and beautiful? I'm naked in the presence of a pretty girl. What do you expect to happen?" Matt called out in his own defense as he wrapped the towel back around him.

Arial playfully scolded, "I'm nine months pregnant!"

"Which I already confessed, makes your tits nicer," he replied.

Matt forced the naughty thoughts of Arial from his mind and then surrendered his towel to the floor. Arial began to draw him.

He studied the stormy gray of her eyes, the cute pout of her lips. She was truly a work of art, a God sent masterpiece. *I don't feel the least bit guilty about flirting shamelessly in the absence of my betrothed. A`lice had the option of staying in Missouri with Arial. We could've gotten better acquainted, but she refused. A`lice has written her sister several letters over the past five almost six months. She's never taken the time to write me once, though I've written her on quite a few occasions. A`lice never even asks about me in any of the letters she sends to Arial. I haven't been with a woman since I broke up with Lilly six months ago. She was a fantastic lover. I still feel tempted to trespass in Lilly's chamber and take her in the night. I never touch her anymore for she and I are friends now. If we're going to stay that way I can't blur the line, but God knows I want to.*

Arial interrupted Matt's thoughts as she informed him bashfully, "Matt you're doing it again."

"Sorry," Matt told Arial and cleared the erotic images of Lilly from his head.

*How am I not to be aroused by other women when my fiancée won't be with me physically or emotionally? My thoughts of A`lice were*

*adequate to douse my desires for long enough for Arial to draw me a second time. The women are identical but its Arial's soul that makes her more beautiful than her sister. It felt so natural holding Arial in my arms like she was meant to be there. Arial is such a kind and pleasant girl. She only has good things to say about even the worst of people. She reminds me of Lilly in many ways; smart and talented, born to privilege but not spoiled and selfish. Most rich girls expect for everything to be given to them without a second thought of anyone else. But Arial brought me a gift and didn't care that I hadn't gotten her one. I wish I'd known her nine months ago, stolen her heart before the next man did, but now it's too late. It wouldn't make sense to pursue her. She's spoken for, as am I. It's a damn shame I'm more attracted to the twin who's nine months pregnant, than the shapely sister I'm engaged to be married to.*

Matt clothed himself just after Arial finished the full nude drawing of him. He called Lilly in the room and they marveled at the portraits.

"You're so very talented," Lilly told Arial.

Matt added, "It's a remarkable likeness. You're a hell of an artist."

"Merci," Arial modestly thanked them for their compliments.

Matt asked as he put an arm around each of the girls' shoulders, "now who's going to strip for me?"

Both women shoved him. He protested, "well that hardly seems fair."

Lilly shook her head disapprovingly, "in case you've forgotten, you're engaged to Arial's sister, Romeo."

"So... is that a no?" Matt questioned.

"It's a hell no," the girls answered in unison.

Arial turned to Matt and asked, "would you mind taking me to the Cathedral? I need to make confession."

"Meet me downstairs in thirty minutes," Matt informed her. "I'm going to make myself a drink. Do either of you want one?"

"Apple Martini," Lilly replied.

Arial patted her pregnant belly. "After this incident, my sister and I quit drinking."

"I'm sorry I forgot all about that," Matt told her.

Arial replied with a laugh, "don't apologize. It was in A'lice's and my best interest to quit. Alcohol has a hold on us it doesn't have on most

people. We could drink men twice our size under the table and our tolerance for that poison was only getting bigger.”

Once Matt left, Lilly gave Arial a skeptical look and whispered, “why are you running off to confession? Did you do more than draw Matt?”

Arial gasped. “No, I’m going to confession because I said something I didn’t mean about my baby and I... thought something inappropriate.”

Lilly laughed. “Did you have impure thoughts about Matt?”

“Of course not,” Arial answered.

Lilly smirked. “Now you’ll have to add lying to your confession list as well?”

“I’m sorry, Lilly. To be honest, I did have bad thoughts about him. Matt’s very handsome and he... reacted to me. Though it was not my intention to arouse him, it still made me feel beautiful,” Arial confessed.

Lilly assured her friend, “don’t be sorry. You didn’t do anything wrong. I know you want to protect my feelings but I’m not blind. I know Matt’s good looking. Why do you think I left the room?”

Arial took a deep breath and said to Lilly, “deciding who will care for one’s child is a choice no parent should have to make. If I claim this baby and raise it, both I and the child will be persecuted, mocked, and ridiculed. Worst case scenario, it may be deemed an abomination before God and executed. I’ve wanted to ask you this for quite some time. Would you consider adopting my baby?”

Lilly informed Arial, “I’ll do more than consider it. I’d be honored to. You see when Pete killed my baby he also killed my ability to reproduce.”

Lilly’s eyes filled with tears and Arial hugged her.

Arial assured Lilly, “I’m going to give you a beautiful baby girl with your name. Things are going to be alright.”



By dusk, the weather had gotten even cooler. Arial sat several stories high on the platform of the water tower. She wrapped the cozy blanket around her even tighter as she gazed out at the beautiful view. Miles of

the estate became visible. Colorful autumn leaves lied scattered over a lush green blanket of grass. It was a lovely place for a picnic and a private dinner with Matt. Lilly had made Arial some very lovely maternity dresses over the months. Arial made sure to wear her most flattering one tonight. She spritzed herself with the sweet fragrance of pears and apple blossoms.

Arial lit a few candles and waited for Matt to show. *I confessed to the priest for lying to Lilly earlier, but I'd be lying to myself if I go on pretending I don't care for Matt. I left a note in his chamber to meet me here tonight. I don't feel I'm doing my sister an injustice because I know she doesn't love him. A lice deserves to marry someone she loves and so do I. If Matt feels the same way about me would it be fair to allow my sister to marry him? I owe it to all of us to at least find out how he feels. I must come clean about everything, even my darkest secrets.*

Arial's heart leaped as she spotted him on the ground looking around for her.

She called down to him, "I'm up here Matt! Come on up. The view is remarkable. I made a picnic for you."

Even looking up that high made Matt's head spin. He coached himself as he grasped the ladder. *I can do this. Come on I like this girl. She's finally ready to talk. I must find out what's making her so sad. Why is she afraid?*

He took a deep breath, gathered his nerve, and started the treacherous climb. He conquered nine steps before his heart began to race. He was sweating and his mind filled with anxiety. Matt began to feel faint and dizzy. Then nausea came. He sped back down the ladder, resisting the urge to kiss the ground as he met it.

As the sick feeling in his stomach lifted he called up to Arial, "Come down this instant! What part of glue yourself to me, did you not understand? You can't just wander off like this!"

Arial blew out the candles and packed up the picnic she had made perfect for Matt. Her feelings were crushed as she climbed down the ladder. *At least I know how he feels. How stupid of me to believe I had a chance with this man. I'm pregnant with another man's child. He probably thinks I'm a whore. Why would he ever take me seriously?*

Arial reached the ground. Her disappointment was palpable.

Matt could see it, feel it. *Arial's been asking me to take her up there since she arrived. I've come up with excuse after excuse and put it off day after day. The truth is I can't stand being up that high. I'll look like a jerk if I don't tell her why I've blown her off for so long, but I'll look like a coward if I admit that I'm afraid. Now I've ruined any chance of her opening up to me.*

At last Matt relieved Arial of her basket and asked, "what made you climb up there?"

Arial shrugged. "I just wanted to talk to you."

Matt tried to assure her, "I appreciate the picnic. It's just that I promised your father I'd keep you safe. If you fell I couldn't ever face him or myself again. Besides, I think it's going to rain soon."

Arial sadly replied, "It's alright Matt. I think I'll just do a bit of drawing and get some sleep."

It was a good thing they decided to call it a night. Arial and Matt were unaware that they were being watched, followed, and stalked from a distance. The sheriff wasn't wrong. Someone was after Matt, a malicious serpent just waiting to strike...



## CHAPTER 21:

### WHEN DARKNESS FALLS

**A**rial's late-night art session came to an end. She put away her supplies and washed the charcoal from her hands. She sighed as the rain beat against the windows. *So much for my romantic picnic. Matt's weather prediction was correct. It's pouring outside. We would've been drenched.*

She journeyed down the corridor to her chamber. Her heart leaped as she opened the door. Matt had spread out a picnic on her bedroom floor with candles and sparkling grape juice since Arial was determined to never drink again.

Matt called up to her, "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you when you wanted to talk earlier, but I'm here now."

Arial was speechless. All she could do was smile. *Matt looks so handsome in the flickering candlelight. Just when I think he doesn't have a sensitive bone in his body he surprises me with all of this. It's the most romantic thing anyone's ever done for me.*

Arial told Matt as she joined him on the blanket, "thank you. I've never had an indoor picnic before."

Matt gave her a once over and replied with a smirk, "that's a lovely dress by the way. Is it new? It really makes your breasts stand up and say hello."

Arial laughed. *That crude comment would've earned anyone else a*

*slap. But for an emotional cripple like Matt Colburn, I should probably just be thankful he noticed I have a new dress.*

Matt looked at her and prayed. *God, please allow me to go five minutes without offending this girl.* He recanted, “Sorry I guess that was pretty rude. I just meant to say...”

“It’s okay Matt. Thank you for the compliment. It is a new dress. Lilly is very talented.”

Matt breathed a sigh of relief. “What was it you wanted to tell me? It seemed important.”

Arial found herself speechless again. It had taken her all day to gather the courage to ask him up to the tower. Earlier she was prepared to bare her soul. By now she’d lost her nerve.

He was staring at her waiting for a response, so she asked the first thing that came to mind, “why are you so tactless?”

Arial sipped her sparkling juice. The bubbles tickled her nose.

She listened intently as Matt explained, “In truth, I don’t mean to be. I just try to stay honest. I was friends with Lilly’s brother, Seth. Years ago, we were planning to attend this huge masquerade party together. We were going to find girls there, but this gorgeous debutant Seth had been drooling over finally came around. She asked him to the ball, which would’ve left me there without an interpreter. Seth asked his sister Lilly to come along and pose as my translator. I’ve never seen Lilly wear anything more fitting than that goddess costume. Time stood still the moment I laid eyes on her. She was stunningly beautiful, genuinely nice, but a few years older. I took an immediate liking to her. I was only thirteen at the time. She told me she didn’t care for young men then asked how old I was. My mind wanted to say thirteen so badly, but my heart was screaming sixteen. I took one look at that gorgeous Creole girl and sixteen flew out of my mouth. Seth reluctantly covered for me but warned me to tell his sister the truth. I started dating her, then kissing her and eventually making love to her. She was crushed when she found out my true age. She was disgusted with herself for making love with someone so young, and angry with me for lying to her. That day I promised to be honest from now on even if it hurts, and she forgave me.”

Arial asked in response to Matt’s story, “it sounds like you loved Lilly. Why are you marrying my sister?”



Matt answered, “I’m marrying your sister because I’m a man of logic, and that’s the logical choice. I can’t legally marry Lilly. What’s the point of making her a glorified girlfriend?”

Arial thought long and hard. *If I tell him the truth I’ll lose him forever, but Lilly is my friend and so is Matt. I must do the right thing.*

Arial’s heart shattered as she told Matt, “you can legally marry Lilly in France.”

“Really,” Matt questioned ecstatically.

Arial couldn’t breathe. She simply nodded yes as she fought back tears. Matt kissed her cheek, and it rippled through her body like a wave.

“Thank you so much. You’re a great friend, Arial.” Matt sprung to his feet and announced, “if she’ll still have me, I think we’ll just elope here and legalize our union later. Do you mind if I go tell Lilly the good news?”

Arial painfully coughed the words, “go right ahead.”



Arial feigned sickness on the morning of the elopement. She couldn’t bring herself to watch. Matt stood at the front of the church with his brother, Daniel, waiting for Lilly to appear.

Lilly brought her looking glass to the church. She wanted her mother to be a part of the ceremony, if only in spirit. Lilly’s great aunt Lizzie helped her prepare for the ceremony. Aunt Lizzie was Arial’s nurse and soon to be midwife.

Lilly smiled as she touched up her makeup and hair. *I remember the first time I met Kyle. It was at a wedding reception. I was seven and he was fifteen. Even then I liked them older. I followed him around like a lost puppy until he agreed to dance with me. I was so small I had to stand on his feet. Afterward, my daddy sat me on his knee and vowed, “Come hell or high water I’m going to get that man for my baby girl.” Next thing I knew I was promised to Kyle, due to be married once I turned thirteen. That was back when my father kept his promises, back when he loved us. On the most important day of my life, why is Kyle on my mind? I can never trust him again. My heart belongs to Matt now.*

“Are you ready, child,” Aunt Lizzie asked with a pleasant smile.

Lilly took a deep breath and nodded. The nurse’s eyes filled with tears as she looked Lilly over in her wedding gown.

Aunt Lizzie passed her great niece the red and white bouquet and said, “I wish your mother could see you. You’re a vision.”

Lilly was shocked at her great aunt’s sensitivity. Aunt Lizzie was usually sarcastic and very blunt. She didn’t mean to be that way, but spending years upon years in slavery would make anyone grow a tougher skin. Slavery is like a prison in many ways. The weak don’t survive.

“Don’t cry, Aunt Lizzie. You’ll make me cry,” Lilly told her great aunt.

Aunt Lizzie hugged Lilly and said, “I’ll meet you in the sanctuary.”

Lilly took a final glance at the looking glass. *My mother’s prophecy is finally coming true. I can’t believe I’m actually going to end up with the love of my life.*

Lilly pushed aside the nervous feeling in her stomach and walked toward the door. She froze mid-stride as a heat wave washed over the chamber. She turned to face the looking glass all covered in steam.

A message began to display: *Matt is meant to be with Arial.*

Lilly bolted outside at the shocking revelation.

Matt’s head snapped toward the door as he asked his brother, Daniel, “was that my bride to be?”

“I believe so,” Daniel reluctantly answered.

Matt bolted outside and found Lilly on the front steps in her wedding gown. She looked as if she’d had the wind knocked out of her. She clutched her chest, gasping for air.

Matt took her hands. “Its bad luck to see the bride before the wedding.”

Lilly finally caught her breath. “There isn’t going to be a wedding. You’re meant to be with Arial.”

Matt protested, “who the hell told you I was meant to be with Arial?”

“The looking glass,” Lilly admitted with tears in her eyes.”

Matt replied with frustration, “Lilly, since the moment we met I’ve tried to be accepting of your beliefs, but this has gone too far! Arial was the one who told me we could legally marry. We’ve waited three years for this opportunity. Please come back into this church and marry me.”

Lilly looked up at Matt and said, “if you can honestly say you don’t love Arial I’ll smash that mirror to bits and walk down the aisle with you.”

Matt looked away and scratched the back of his head nervously. He stood before Lilly speechless for what seemed an eternity.

At last Lilly broke the silence and demanded, “tell me the truth, Matt! Tell me you don’t love Arial!”

Finally, Matt replied, “do you want me to tell you the truth, or do you want me to say I don’t love Arial?”

His response was like a punch to Lilly’s chest.

She fought to hold back her tears as he continued, “but the way I feel about her hasn’t changed the way I’ve always felt about you. I can’t explain it.”

Lilly took a deep breath and whispered, “not everything is meant to be understood, Matt Colburn.”

“Can you honestly say you’ve never loved two people,” Matt called out in his own defense. “I know you’re still in love with that clown who broke your heart when you were a child.”

“That isn’t true,” Lilly vowed.

“Yes it is,” Matt declared. “I’ve always known. I just took solace in the fact that you loved me too, and prayed you loved me more. I’m sorry for the way I feel about Arial. Please know I never meant for this to happen. The truth is that I care about both of you. I’m torn.”

Lilly’s response was like a punch to Matt’s chest. “Love is one thing, but fate is another. I can’t marry you if you’re meant to be with her. I love you, but it just wouldn’t be right. It would never work. You’ll always be drawn to her.”

Matt felt like the wind had been knocked right out of him. He took a deep breath and nodded in agreement.

It was unfortunate that Lilly took off before the rest of the message appeared on the mirror. Her mother warned: Beware, you’re all in grave danger.



The witnesses had already left but Matt and Lilly still stood on the front steps of the chapel, laughing about their failed wedding.

“So what now,” Matt asked with a grin.

Lilly replied smiling, “I guess I’ll retire this wedding gown and make myself a bridesmaid’s dress.”

Matt questioned, “after all we’ve been through won’t it be difficult to watch me marry another woman?”

“Have you ever known me to back down from a challenge?”

Matt pulled Lilly’s body close to his. He looked into her beautiful dark eyes, part of him wishing the moment would never end. He leaned in and kissed his first love goodbye.

When Matt released Lilly she found Kyle staring with a destroyed expression. Kyle took off without saying a word.

Lilly shrieked, “Oh no, Kyle must think...”

“What are you waiting for? Go get him,” Matt urged.

“Huh,” Lilly asked.

Matt grumbled, “I hate him for everything he means to you, but I respect the fact that you love him. Go.”

Lilly took a deep breath and bounded down the steps. “Kyle, wait!”

Kyle turned around. “I got your letter. I came to stop you, but I’m too late.”

Confusion covered Lilly’s face. “Stop me? I thought you were perfectly content with being friends. What happened to me being too young for you?”

“I thought I was alright with being friends too until I received that letter,” Kyle admitted. “I guess I’ve always seen you as the bratty little girl that use to follow me around with stars in your eyes.”

Lilly snapped, “you have some nerve. I may have been young when you ripped my heart out but I loved you! You just broke off our engagement without the courtesy of an explanation! Did you ever give a damn about me?”

“You can accuse me of being selfish, even an ass, but don’t ever say I didn’t care,” Kyle swore. “I called off our engagement because no thirteen-year-old girl should have to be a bride. I refused to rob you of your youth or steal your innocence. If that makes me a monster then so be it, but I let you go because I cared enough to allow you to grow up. I

loved you then, and I love you now. But none of this matters because you're married."

Lilly gazed up at him dreamily, pleasantly surprised by this revelation. *How could I've been so blind? An advocate for child welfare would've never taken a thirteen-year-old bride. That would've gone against everything he believed in.*

She admitted with a smile, "we didn't go through with it."

"What," Kyle exclaimed staring at her wedding gown. "You could have told me that before I went into that long embarrassing spiel!"

"Yes, but it wouldn't have been as funny," Lilly laughed.

Kyle laughed along with her.

Her expression turned serious as she added, "and I might have never received an explanation for what happened to us. I might have gone on forever believing you didn't love me."

Kyle breathed a sigh of relief and hugged her snugly. "This is the address of the inn I'm staying at. Come by tomorrow so we can talk."

Lilly took the address from Kyle. She kissed his lips and whispered, "I kind of feel like stopping by tonight."

"Are you flirting with me," He asked with a grin.

She smiled back. "Is that a problem?"

"Not at all," he assured her.



Back at the mansion stables Ariel wiped her tears and saddled a horse. The faint grassy smell of straw, hay, and manure filled her nostrils.

She climbed on back of the mare and slowly led it away. *I probably shouldn't be nine months pregnant on the back of a horse, but if I don't get away from here for a while I'll go crazy. I can't wait to have this baby and be done with this place of torment. I'm trying to be a good person but this wedding is ripping my heart out.*

Arial took a small Indian trail through the woods. *Matt showed me this trail when we first arrived. No matter how busy Matt was he would find time to take me, accept today. He's too busy marrying my friend to go for a ride with me. I better get used to taking my afternoon rides alone.*

Arial jumped and looked around at the snap of a twig. She trembled at the sound of a noise coming from the shrubs. Before she could take off on her mare she was overcome by sudden agonizing pain. She'd been struck forcefully with a branch. Arial screamed as she went hurdling down from her horse, landing painfully on her side.

Arial moaned in agony and turned over on all fours. She gripped the bark of the tree next to her and used it to climb back to her feet. She waddled as fast as she could through the forest, calling out for help.

He was hot on her trail. His footfalls grew closer and closer. She panicked with the realization, he was certain to have her soon. Darkness fell as a black sack was snatched over her face.

## CHAPTER 22:

### WRONG END OF A RIFLE

**M**att and Lilly returned from their canceled wedding. Matt poured himself a glass of wine and offered, “would you like some, Lilly? My brother, Daniel, bought this as a wedding gift. We shouldn’t allow it to go to waste.”

“Maybe we should have saved it then,” Lilly told him.

Matt took a drink from his glass. The wine was smooth and delicious. Daniel had spared no expense.

Matt put the cork in his pocket. “I’ll just save the cork for the memories.”

Lilly took a sip from Matt’s glass when she saw how much he was enjoying it.

She smiled and agreed, “that is really good. Pour us all a glass when I return with Arial.”

Matt said as he poured a second glass, “Arial’s probably already left for her afternoon ride. It’s well after twelve. We should probably just wait for her to come back.”

Lilly informed Matt, “Arial was sick this morning. She might have gone late. I’ll go to the stables to see if I can catch her before she leaves. I can’t wait to see the look on her face when you tell her we didn’t go through with the wedding. If I’m right in assuming Arial was willing to let you go because she loves you, then she should be overjoyed. Before

I go, please answer me this one question. Why her?"

Matt lowered his head. "Please know I never meant to hurt you. I like her for a lot of the same reasons I like you. But I love her because of something altogether different. Maybe it's the fact that she went along with the dance and spared me the humiliation of making my blunder public. Or maybe it's the fact that she has a calmness about her, a serenity I've never seen in anyone. She's not the type to rip out my hair and put a curse on my entire family."

Lilly laughed. She shrugged innocently and gave a coy smile.

Matt laughed and continued, "I've never come so close to kissing a complete stranger before, and at crowded ball no less. Lilly, you know I've never been a publicly affectionate man but I would've shoved my tongue down her throat in front of two-hundred people; because when she's in my arms everyone else disappears. For some reason, she just feels right to me. Not for physical reasons or even logical reasons, but something far greater, something incomprehensible. I can't believe I'm saying this but it feels like..."

"Destiny," Lilly completed his thought.

She sighed at the revelation. *The concepts of fate and destiny are farfetched to a logical thinker like Matt. He probably didn't choose her to begin with because he didn't have a logical reason to.*

"We would've made a mistake by getting married. I'm not mad at you," Lilly told him.

Matt breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you for not hating me, Lilly, but I have to know, why Kyle and not me?"

Lilly confessed, "a relationship is like a work of art. Even when you see that it's not turning out right you can't bring yourself to start over. You've put so much time and effort into it that you keep working on the same shoddy painting. The truth is I should've started over with Kyle a long time ago. He's a good man and we have a lot in common. I was just too distracted by you to see it. Sometimes we're so focused on who's in front of us we don't notice who has our back. Regardless of whether I needed a shoulder to cry on, a sympathetic ear, or merely a date to a ball Kyle has always had my back."

"I'll try to be nice to him," Matt grumbled.

Lilly laughed. "You better."



“Promise we’ll always be friends.” Matt sighed.

Lilly kissed his cheek and vowed, “I promise.”

Lilly ventured toward the stables. The horses neighed and whinnied as she entered. Lilly sighed with disappointment as she noticed Arial’s favorite spotted mare was gone. There were fresh droppings in the horse’s stall. *Darn, I must’ve just missed her.* Lilly turned to leave the horse shed. At that moment she was ambushed and tackled to the ground.



Lilly frantically snapped her head to and fro as she regained consciousness. She was being held prisoner in what looked like a castle dungeon or a medieval torture chamber. The walls were composed of human bones and she was barred up in a tiny cell. There were no windows or sunlight, just a few torches on the walls. The place was dank, musty, and cold. It smelled of rich soil.

“Help!” Lilly called repeatedly.

“Don’t bother. No one can hear us,” she heard a voice say.

“Arial!” Lilly exclaimed with tears in her eyes.

The girls hugged one another so tight.

Arial cried. “We’re being held in some sort of underground chamber, a catacomb. We’re going to die, Lilly. I’ll never get to see my baby. I promised you a baby girl, and she’s going to die with me.”

Lilly urged Arial to calm down. Lilly pulled a perfumed hanky from the bodice of her filthy wedding gown. She gingerly wiped Arial’s tears with it. The scent was a sudden and much-appreciated escape from the grimy dungeon that imprisoned them. The girls held one another for warmth and support. The place was frigid and uncomfortable.

Lilly told Arial, “this scoundrel probably just wants money. He saw Matt move into that big fancy mansion. The bastard figured he could use us to squeeze a ransom out of Matt. Why else would anyone want to hurt us?”

“We don’t even know anyone here,” Arial announced with frustration.

“It’s probably the same man who took the governor’s daughters. Did

you get a look at his face?”

“No, he threw a bag over my head. The next thing I knew I was here. How about you?”

Arial hung her head in defeat as Lilly said, “I was ambushed. I never saw him coming.”

Lilly forced a smile for Arial. She patted Arial’s belly and went on to say, “tell little Lilly to just hang in there. We’ll go free as soon as Matt pays the coward. You’re going to meet your baby girl. After you birth her, I’m going to make you a wedding gown that will knock Matt’s socks off.”

“What,” Arial questioned with a discombobulated look.

Lilly assured her, “we couldn’t go through with the wedding. He loves you Arial.”

“Then why has he been putting me off since I’ve been here? Every time I ask him to the water tower or even out on my balcony he’ll...”

A shocked expression covered Arial’s face as Lilly interjected, “Matt wasn’t putting you off. He’s terrified of heights. Matt’s brother used to dangle him off the balcony when he was a child. Most believe it happened just once. I found out this happened every time Pete was angry or annoyed with Matt. Pete would just hold him all those stories in the air and threaten to hurl him to his death.”

“No wonder he was sweating after climbing only nine or ten steps.”

Lilly exclaimed in disbelief, “you got Matt to climb up ten steps? He must really love you.”

“Then why didn’t he tell me?”

Lilly’s eyes filled with tears as she explained to the best of her ability, “there’s a lot you need to know about Matt Colburn. For starters, he will never ever say he loves you to your face. He was raised by a man who would say he loved Matt one minute and beat the hell out of him the next. Pete ruined the word love for Matt. He considers the very mention of love farfetched. Matt will never cry, talk about his feelings, or admit to being scared. He considers these things to be a tremendous show of weakness. He also considers the word love to be a show of weakness. Matt’s not a monster. He just always wants to appear his absolute strongest for you, so you’ll always feel safe and protected. Please remember that just because Matt won’t say he loves you, doesn’t mean

he isn't feeling it inside. Matt's heart is like a heavily guarded fortress, but if you're ever able to conquer it, you'll find it was well worth the battle. He's not the most romantic man, but he'll never lie to you. He'll never cheat on you or betray your trust. He'd travel to hell and back just to put a smile on your face. Loving Matt will be the greatest challenge of your life because he's been severely damaged, but I'd advise you to give it your all, and never give up. Matt's not a perfect man, but he's a damn good one."

Arial nodded and spoke with tears in her eyes, "I know you love him. I feel guilty to take him away. You're my best friend, Lilly. I love both you and Matt. The last thing I want is to gain one of you at the risk of losing the other."

"I promise you'll never lose me," Lilly solemnly vowed. "Please take care of him, Arial."

"If we ever get out of here, I will," Arial promised.

Arial sat quietly for a moment. She was amazed by Lilly's strength. Not just regarding Matt, but in regard to everything going on. Lilly was usually the one who worried about everything and everybody. Now she was the rock, a glimmer of hope in their darkest hour.

Both girls let out terrified screams as their kidnapper entered the cavern. He was large and wore a leather studded mask. The villain unlocked the gate and snatched Lilly up by the arm. Without saying a word, he ripped Arial off of her and locked her back in the cell. The girls were still sluggish from the drugs they'd been given, they couldn't put up much of a fight.

Arial cried and reached frantically through the bars. "Please don't take her away!"

Lilly shouted angrily, "why are you doing this to us! Say something you monster!"

He laughed and covered Lilly's mouth and nose with a cloth heavily saturated with chloroform. She struggled and thrashed about violently as the chemical invaded her airways. When she passed out, he carried her away.

Arial's blood turned ice cold. She shuddered at a frightening revelation. *The most horrifying part of it all was how he never spoke one time. Not while he was kidnapping us or making off with Lilly. He's very*

*smart and he knows we'll recognize his voice. My god in heaven, we know this evil bastard.*



Aunt Lizzie was the first one to leave the elopement and the last to get back to the estate. The nurse had spent many years in servitude. She made certain to enjoy any free time granted to her. *My new master didn't give me a specific time to be home so why rush? I'm to examine Miss Ariel Charlevoix after her afternoon ride. I should be fine as long as I'm back in time fo that.*

Aunt Lizzie entered the small infirmary she resided in, behind the mansion. She grabbed her black bag of medical supplies and ventured toward the big house.

"Miss Charlevoix, Miss Charlevoix," Aunt Lizzie called as she entered the mansion.

*It's too bad the wedding didn't work out fo my niece, but I'm certain Ariel was happy to hear the news. She may have had everyone else fooled, but not me. I've been treating patients fo longer than she's been alive. I know a sick person when I see one. Miss Charlevoix was heartbroken, not ill.*

Aunt Lizzie laughed as she saw Matt passed out on the bar. She glanced at the barely touched bottle of wine. *I would've never guessed a big strong lad like this would be such a lightweight.* She used all her strength to pull Matt off the barstool and gently lower him to the floor. She laid him flat and placed a pillow under his head. *I can't have him fall off the barstool and crack his head open. That would only create mo work fo me.*

Aunt Lizzie journeyed upstairs and knocked on Ariel's chamber door.

"Miss Charlevoix," she called a few times before entering.

"Damn it," Aunt Lizzie called out as she bumped Ariel's table, sending the powder blue candy dish crashing to the floor.

Candy scattered everywhere. The nurse frowned regretfully. *Ariel got this dish from her momma and I've chipped it.*

Aunt Lizzie picked up the broken bowl. She gasped as she examined it, as she saw what it truly was. “Oh my Lord!”

At that moment a strong hand fastened tightly over her mouth.



Matt pulled himself off the floor with a groan. He glanced at his pocket watch. His eyes widened with surprise at how long he'd been out. *Arial and Lilly should've been back by now.*

He went to check upstairs for them but stopped when he noticed Arial's horse roaming the yard by itself. The poor animal was extremely agitated. Matt cautiously approached the horse.

“Shhh Shhh, it's alright.” Matt calmed the horse and rubbed its soft face.

He grew extremely concerned as he walked the horse to the stables. *Arial would never leave her horse out like this. I pray nothing terrible has happened.*

Matt gasped as he entered the horse shed. There was blood everywhere. Matt immediately grabbed the pistol he kept hidden in his pant leg. He locked the horse in the stable and tripped over a book. He picked up the blood-splattered book in utter shock. *This is the proof Arial gave to my brother! What the hell is Pete doing here!*

Matt left the stable at once. *I must find Arial and Lilly. Pete's finally lost it.*

Matt's heart raced as the nurse came hobbling out of the mansion. Her dress was stained with blood. Matt could tell even from this distance she'd been struck a time or two. She was bruised and bleeding, panting for air.

Matt ran up to Aunt Lizzie and demanded, “tell me who hurt you!”

Aunt Lizzie was hysterical. She could barely breathe, let alone talk.

The only words Matt could make out through her labored wheezes were, “he raped me.”

Matt asked reluctantly, “did the man who hurt you look like me, accept bigger with pale blue eyes?”

Aunt Lizzie began to cry hysterically at the description. Matt carried

the nurse to the stagecoach.

He wiped the blood from her brow with his handkerchief and said, “as soon as you’re able to drive, take my carriage to the sheriff. Tell him to send his deputies.”

Aunt Lizzie pulled Matt’s sleeve and heaved the words, “your brother is here.”

“I know,” Matt said as he pried off the raving woman.

At that moment Pete appeared at the back door. Pete ran at Matt with an outstretched gun. Matt took a shot at his brother and missed. Pete continued to charge and let off a round of his own.

Matt was struck in the shoulder. He ducked behind a tree. He’d never been shot before. It burned like hellfire as the bullet ripped through his flesh. Matt couldn’t remember a time he was ever in so much agony. It hurt to breathe but he endured.

Matt reloaded his gun and crept around the stagecoach. He blindsided Pete and tackled him to the ground. Pete’s gun went flying out in front of him. Matt struck his brother forcefully and then climbed to his feet. Pete eyeballed the gun and Matt kicked it even further away.

“Matt, wait, please. Would you kill your own brother?” Pete pleaded.

“I’m sorry,” Matt told his brother remorsefully as he drew back on the hammer of the gun. He closed his eyes and prepared to pull the trigger.

“Stop!” The nurse yelled as she threw her body over Pete’s.

Matt shouted in frustration and disbelief, “why would you protect your rapist!”

Aunt Lizzie informed Matt, “the man who raped me was black!”

At that moment Matt caught the wrong end of a rifle to the face...

## CHAPTER 23:

### THE CATACOMBS

**M**att woke up strapped to a chair in what looked like a torture chamber. His head throbbed from the awful hit he took. He gasped in utter disbelief at Arial's baby's father. Matt watched in horror as Joseph gathered his tools of destruction.

Matt growled at the large black man, "you're supposed to be dead! We buried your body!"

Joseph laughed and explained in his French accent, "you buried the corpse of the flower salesman I killed. I murdered him the night of the Charlevoix Ball and assumed his identity. It was easy. You white bastards think we all look alike!"

Matt announced with anger and horror, "that's why he never came around anymore! The corpse barely fit into that suit. I assumed it was because he was swollen with decomposition."

"No, it was because it wasn't his suit," Joseph smugly announced and walked over to Matt.

Joseph laid out a bone-chilling display of knives, pliers, clamps, and other treacherous instruments Matt couldn't even recognize.

Joseph informed Matt, "I only came here to kidnap Arial. I didn't have a problem with you, but you refused to marry the black girl. You had to move in on my territory!"

Matt called out vehemently, "to hell with you! Arial's never been

anyone's territory!"

Matt hollered in excruciating pain as Joseph dug his thumb in the bullet wound.

Joseph released a sinister laugh. "You're the biggest jackass I've ever met. You shot at your brother when he was just trying to stop me from putting a bullet in the back of your head. I still managed to put a nice wound in your shoulder though."

Matt wailed as Joseph dug into the wound again. Then the monster cracked Matt's shins with a metal rod.

As Matt grimaced in pain, Joseph laughed and said, "I was going to shoot you but this is so much more entertaining. Lilly and Arial believe you're the man of steel, incapable of tears. They think you're the strongest man they've ever met, but I know better! All you slave owning bastards are cowards. You beat up on the powerless to make yourselves look stronger. I'm going to break you like one of your slaves. Once I do, you'll catch the bullet I vowed to give you earlier!" Joseph gave Matt a brutal punch to the ribs "Cry for me, bitch!"

The blow knocked the wind out of Matt. He heaved to catch his breath. When Matt thought he'd gotten the worst of it, Joseph struck him with the metal rod again. As Matt sat being tortured awaiting his pending death, his mind raced with revelations that should've been apparent to him.

Matt boldly said to Joseph, "I assumed because Arial was pregnant by a black man that she was unruly and promiscuous. After getting to know her, nothing in her personality suggested such a thing. The second time we met I insulted Arial. She promptly told me that the only two men she ever loved were God and her father. She never once mentioned you!"

Joseph ripped off Matt's fingernail with a pair of pliers and shouted, "shut up and cry for me!"

Matt breathed heavily in response to the pain but refused to let Joseph break him.

As Joseph ripped out another nail, Matt called, "I... couldn't... understand for the life of me why a girl so obedient to God and her father would ever engage in such a scandalous affair. Once Arial told me she hated her baby. Women don't hate the baby of a man they love. They despise the baby of a man they hate!"



Joseph punched Matt hard in the jaw and shouted, “shut up and cry like the little girl you are!”

Matt laughed. “You hit like a girl! Speaking of girls, Ariel and Alice were alcoholics. As such, Ariel had the tolerance of a lumberjack! She told me how little she drank the evening her baby was conceived. Two glasses of wine have the same effect as water on an alcoholic! Yet she was woozy and couldn’t remember a thing. You drugged her! After she passed out you raped her!”

Matt hollered out as Joseph sliced him across the chest with a knife.

Joseph twirled the knife in front of Matt’s eye and demanded, “go ahead, cry for me! Come on, just a few tears and I’ll end your suffering.”

Matt released an earth-shattering yell as Joseph pierced his arm with a large hook. The screams echoed and resounded from the chamber walls.

Matt announced between panicked breaths, “I’ve... known... pathetic pieces of work like you my entire life. Always obsessed with what you can’t have! As a slave what were your obsessions, Joseph? Freedom, wealth, white women! You attained the first two but had a little trouble with the last, didn’t you! Ariel refused to be your goddamned trophy!”

Joseph punched Matt so hard his ears were ringing. Then he pierced Matt’s arm with another hook.

Joseph growled over Matt’s agonizing wails, “she never loved me! I would’ve given her everything! She would’ve been my ultimate status symbol, a sign I had finally made it, that at last, I was the equal of white men!”

Matt laughed at Joseph and questioned, “is this why you’re trying to prove you’re a bigger man than I? You raped Ariel and gave her a baby. She still wouldn’t love you, even after a lifetime of knowing you. I made her fall for me with one kiss. With one kiss I made her love not just me, but herself and her baby.”

“Quiet or I swear I’ll shoot you!” Joseph called out vehemently.

Matt replied with great fortitude, “go ahead and pull the trigger. You’re never going to break me.”

Joseph put down the knife and picked up the gun. He looked down at Matt with pure hatred and contempt.

Joseph pressed the gun against Matt’s forehead and said, “Goodbye

Mr. Colburn.”

Arial screamed from the cell behind Matt, “Stop!! It’s me you want! You don’t have to hurt him!”

“Arial!” Matt called.

Matt turned his head to and fro to see her, but he couldn’t. She was directly behind him. She’d revived from a sedative Joseph gave her earlier. Pete and Aunt Lizzie were knocked out in the cell right along with her.

Joseph put away the gun and told Matt, “I’ll deal with you later. I lost a fortune when I faked my own death. I have to ransom the governor’s daughters and your precious Lilly. That is after I have my way with them a time or two.”

“Don’t you dare hurt Lilly!” Matt shouted.

Arial began to cry as Joseph said with an evil laugh, “after I do away with my baby’s mother. I think I’ll screw Lilly right on this table in front of you. She gave me quite an elbow to the ribs earlier. I bet she’s an animal in the sack.” Joseph leaned close to Matt and whispered, “What’s wrong? You were laughing your ass off earlier. Tell me, Matt Colburn, is that little Mulatto of yours any good? She had you shattering champagne glasses at a formal ball. I bet she’s fucking fantastic.”

Matt swallowed his pride. “Joseph, you don’t have to hurt any of the girls. Let them go and ransom me. My brothers will pay you a lot of money.”

Joseph smugly replied, “it’s tempting but I think I’ll pass. Thanks to you I’ve come to realize your brother Pete makes a wonderful scapegoat. If you believed he was capable of committing all my atrocities, why wouldn’t everyone else? Yes, I do my homework on anyone I trade with. Did you know your big brother’s been committed to the loony bin twice? That’ll look really bad in court. The families of these women are going to pay any ransom I demand. Then the authorities are going to execute your brother for what I’ve done.”

Arial screamed as Joseph unlocked the gate to her cell, “Matt! I love you!”

Matt called back to her, “hang in there, Arial! Stop sounding like you’re saying goodbye to me!”

“No!!” Matt yelled as Joseph cover Arial’s face with a pungent

smelling cloth.

Matt struggled vigorously to free himself. “Where are you taking her!”

“Somewhere you’ll never have the balls to go,” Joseph announced with a grin.

Matt’s heart shattered at the sight of his beloved, Arial, being carried off to her doom. *Arial probably never told on Joseph because she knew it would get him executed. To her, that would be the same as murder, which she didn’t condone under any circumstances. I am self-absorbed. I should’ve known what Joseph had done to Arial from all her crying, depression, sleepless nights, her total loss of self-worth, and the way she blamed herself for what happened. I’ve watched my adopted mother behave the same way for many years because of Pete. The bashful scared manner in which Arial behaved when she was drawing me suggests that she was probably a virgin before all this happened. She acted as if she’d never seen a naked man, simply because she hadn’t. Arial was never disobedient or promiscuous. She was forgiving to a fault.*

Pete groggily rose and stammered, “I didn’t come here to hurt you, Matt.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” Matt said to his brother.

“Don’t apologize. If I hadn’t been awful to you your whole life, you wouldn’t have assumed I meant you harm.”

Matt assured Pete, “you made me stronger than I ever knew I could be. If it wasn’t for your brutality I wouldn’t have survived Joseph’s torture. He would’ve broken me. I would’ve cried in response to the pain, and he would’ve shot me a moment later. It’s hard to intimidate a man who’s been getting death threats since he was five.”

Pete confessed as they frantically searched for a means of escape, “I overdosed and tried to kill myself. Saphirra made me regurgitate the pills but by then my liver had sustained massive damage. While lying in bed jaundiced, awaiting liver failure, Saphirra brought me the proof written by Arial’s mother. I began to do the equations to take my mind off my pending death. I noticed a pattern amongst the answers. Arial’s mother had left a terrifying message. I knew I had to survive if only to warn you.”

Matt asked as he tried to wiggle free from his restraints, “How could

she possibly leave a message in a book of numbers?"

Pete explained as he checked the hinges of his cell, "upper-level math has both numbers and letters. The letters are referred to as variables, unknowns. Arial's mother never left Mr. Charlevoix. She was kidnapped by her husband's business partner, Joseph. That proof was a diary of horrible events disguised as a math book. Joseph abducted Arial's mother. He raped and tortured her for a month before finally killing her. Joseph revealed to Arial's mom before she died that he'd drugged Mr. Charlevoix's horse in hope of the animal breaking her husband's neck. The horse threw Mr. Charlevoix and broke his back instead. Joseph didn't figure it to be a total loss. Mr. Charlevoix was paralyzed from the waist down and unable to perform sexually. Joseph figured that would be enough to steal Arial's mother away. When she still refused to leave her husband, Joseph grew furious and abducted her. She's been dead for years."

Matt shook his head in horror, "I found your book in the shed and I thought..."

"When I arrived here I saw a mare running free in the courtyard. I assumed you were outside working. I walked to the stables looking for you and saw all the blood," Pete explained. "Then I ran to the main house to make sure everyone was alright. You were passed out on the floor so I went to find a conscious person to talk to. That's when I found the nurse. She'd been attacked. I carried her downstairs and told her to drive away in the stagecoach. Then I looked outside and saw Joseph about to shoot you."

Aunt Lizzie woke up with a groan. She told the men, "there's... something y'all need to know.... about Miss Charlevoix's candy dish. It had a strange and familiar shape to it. After chipping the blue ceramic coating, I noticed the dish was eggshell white underneath. I also noticed squiggly grooves in it. The human skull ain't one solid bone. Its several plates fused together by tiny joints."

Matt announced with disgust, "Joseph decapitated Arial's mother and made her skull into a candy dish. The sick freak probably got his jollies watching Arial eat from her mother's head all these months. After Joseph decided to kill Arial he wanted his trophy back. He was probably going to steal the candy dish when you walked in."

The nurse added, “when he saw the look of familiarity on my face he jumped out the closet and grabbed me. He threatened that if I don’t keep quiet he’d kill Lilly. I should’ve known something was wrong when my tonics went missing from the infirmary. I just assumed it was a drug seeker who broke in. I should’ve said something. Now that lunatic got my niece.”

Aunt Lizzie began to cry and Matt assured her, “it’s not your fault. Drugs go missing from infirmaries all the time. You had no way of knowing. We’ll get your niece back. I promise.”

Pete said as he shook the gate in frustration, “what I can’t understand is how Arial’s mother was able to continue writing the twins if she’s been dead for three years.”

Matt told Pete, “I think I know how. Joseph used to forge freedom papers for runaway slaves based on one sample of their master’s handwriting. It would be nothing for him to forge a few letters in the hand of a woman whom he worked with for years. Joseph was never in love with Arial. He was stalking her. He’s probably been living amongst us hiding in the shadows the entire time. We’ve got to get out of here Pete. He’s going to kill her.”

Pete instructed Matt, “see if you can scoot that chair over here. We may be able to unbuckle the straps.”

The chair screeched as Matt forcefully attempted to rock it, “I think it’s bolted to the floor.”

Aunt Lizzie asked Matt, “Sir, can ya possibly bump the table next to ya?”

“I’ll try,” Matt replied, as he worked his foot out of his boot. *Thank God, my ankle restraints are just a tiny bit looser.*

The table was next to him and his upper legs were still in restraints. He could barely nudge the table, let alone kick it. The table wobbled just a little. The metal rod rolled off the table and across the floor.

Aunt Lizzie told Pete while reaching for the rod, “Sir, yo arms are longer than mine. Do ya think ya can reach it?”

Pete climbed down on his stomach and reached through the bars. He pulled the rod with the tip of his middle finger.

“Got it,” Pete announced.

The nurse instructed him, “Now see if ya can use that to unbuckle

one of the straps on yo brother's wrists."

Matt assured Pete, "You can do this. All I need is one free hand."

Pete stretched out the rod and picked away at the leather strap. Matt watched with gut-wrenching apprehension. *Please don't drop the metal rod. Whatever you do, don't drop the metal rod. If you do we're all dead.*

Matt nearly jumped for joy as the buckle came loose. He quickly used his free hand to unbuckle the rest of his straps.

Matt grabbed a large sledge hammer from the corner. "Step back."

Pete pulled Aunt Lizzie to the back of the cell and shielded her with his body. Matt swung with all his might at the latch of the cell. He struck it with a resounding bang. He bashed it again and again until its inner workings began to rattle. Matt gave it a mighty kick and the gate flew in.

Pete gasped in horror as Matt grew faint and collapsed on the ground. Pete swept all the instruments off the table with one big swoosh. He whisked his little brother up in his arms. Matt's body was limp and unresponsive. Pete placed him on the table. He put an ear to Matt's blood covered chest. The sound of silence is not always peaceful. At times it can be the most disturbing thing in the world.

Pete's eyes began to well up as he frantically questioned the nurse, "why is there no pulse! Why don't I hear a heartbeat!"

## CHAPTER 24:

### BLESSED HANDS

**A**unt Lizzie rushed over and pulled Matt's hysterical brother away from him.

The nurse checked for a heartbeat. "Yo brother's still alive! There's a pulse, it's just very weak. He lost far too much blood. Swinging that slege hammer took what little strength he had left."

"Is he going to be alright?" Pete questioned as he marched back over.

"If ya allow me to work, maybe." Aunt Lizzie nudged Pete back.

Pete humbly replied, "just tell me what to do. What do you want me to do?"

Matt opened his eyes and groggily told the nurse, "I don't have time to be treated. I have to get to Arial."

Aunt Lizzie informed her young master, "if I don't stop this bleeding you'll be long dead befo ya make it to her. Yo pulse is faint. Yo blood pressure is dropping. You're going into shock, young Master Colburn."

Aunt Lizzie told Pete, "come hold your brother down."

Pete did as he was told.

Aunt Lizzie passed Matt a rolled handkerchief and said, "bite down on this."

Matt squealed as the nurse dug out the bullet with a pair of pliers. Then she cut the tips off the hooks and removed them from Matt's arm. Aunt Lizzie walked over to the torch on the wall and heated the metal

rod until it was red hot. It took all of Pete's power to hold Matt down while she cauterized all the wounds. Pete could smell his brother's flesh cooking. He could hear it searing like meat on a grill. Matt wailed and fought to get off the table. It took more mental strength than physical for Pete to continue to hold his brother down.

Pete shouted at the nurse, "are you almost done! I've never seen my brother in so much pain!"

Aunt Lizzie assured him, "I'm finished."

Matt asked the nurse in his delirium, "are you in cahoots with Joseph? Or is it just torture Matt Colburn night?"

Pete laughed with relief and informed Matt, "You did well. No tears. Crying is for girls."

"Then why are you crying like a little girl?" Matt questioned his brother groggily.

Pete explained, "it's dusty in here. You know my allergies."

The nurse replied with a roll of her eyes and a sarcastic smirk, "of course, Sir, allergies."

Aunt Lizzie grabbed a container of medicine and told Matt, "that dumb ox was so busy stealing my remedies he didn't even know this wasn't a pain reliever. It's adrenaline."

Matt groggily slurred, "it would've been nice if it was an anesthetic. I can certainly use one."

"What's that for?" Pete questioned.

"You'll see," the nurse replied, as Matt downed it.

Matt's heart began to race, pumping blood at over twice the normal rate. Oxygen flooded his muscles and his brain. He sprung to his feet feeling like a new man. He'd never felt so alive.

Matt was breathing rapidly and speaking a million miles per hour, "whew!! That's good stuff! Can I have some more of that?"

"Sure, if ya want me to kill ya," the nurse replied.

Pete promptly informed her, "He's had enough, thank you."

Matt kissed the nurse's hands. "These are blessed hands. You saved my life."

Aunt Lizzie pulled her hands away and replied in her usual smartass manner, "I'm flattered, Sir, but if you're gonna kiss on me, you'll have to spoon me afterward."



Pete laughed as Matt replied, “hell I’ll bed you for saving my life. Pull up your dress and climb on the table.”

The nurse’s jaw dropped in shock. Most owners would have issues with her. Matt Colburn wasn’t one she could make uncomfortable or annoyed. He just didn’t give a damn. The nurse didn’t embarrass easily. In her many years on this earth she’d done it all and seen it all, but Matt’s filthy mouth could humiliate anyone.

Aunt Lizzie chuckled, “maybe I’ll take ya up on yo offer after we save the girls.”

The nurse picked up some red flower petals Joseph tracked in on his boots. She examined and smelled them.

Aunt Lizzie informed the men, “I believe I know where Joseph’s keeping the hostages. These petals are from the red daisy. Red daisies only grow in one place around here, Blue Valley. There’s a cave there.”

Matt instructed, “Pete, follow her to that valley. Rescue Lilly and the governor’s daughters. I’m going after Arial.”

They gathered a few of Joseph’s weapons. Then climbed a flight of stairs and came to a set of metal doors. Both brothers took a run and start and rammed the doors with their shoulders. On the fourth attempt, the barrier flew open. As the three of them ran onto free land they could see that the doors had been barricaded with a plank of wood.

Pete told Matt as they charged in the direction of the hostages, “slow down, Hercules. Do you even know where Arial is?”

“Joseph told me he was taking her somewhere I’d never have the balls to go. He knows I’m afraid of heights,” Matt informed him.

Pete replied, “She could be in any high place then.”

“That’s true but there’s one high place, in particular, Arial asked me to meet her and I refused,” Matt explained. “She was probably going to confess her love to me that night, and confide in me the dreadful circumstances surrounding her pregnancy. I bet Joseph was watching us. That’s how he knows I’m afraid of heights. Joseph’s going to take Arial to the water tower to kill her because that’s the place he feels she betrayed him.”

“Then maybe I should go after her,” Pete suggested. “You know how you are with high places.”

“And you know how you are with high places,” Matt replied.

“You’re not afraid but you’re prone to sudden bouts of unconsciousness. You could fall to your death before ever making it to Arial. I’ll be fine.”

Pete nodded and he and the nurse took off to Blue Valley.



Lilly sat with her wrists and ankles bound. She’d been blindfolded and gagged but she could tell there were others with her. She could hear them crying. *Those poor girls. I can’t even comfort them. I wish my mother had taught me dark magic but she only taught me good spells. If I knew the dark arts I could’ve made his heart explode or his eyes pop out. But wait a minute... maybe I’m not entirely helpless. There is something I can do...*



Pete questioned Aunt Lizzie as they ventured forward, “are you sure we’re going the right way? We seem to be walking in a circle.”

Tears filled her eyes and she began to hyperventilate. Aunt Lizzie regretfully informed Pete, “I never come out here at night befo. We may be lost.”

Pete urged her to calm down and promised, “we’re going to find your niece.”

At that moment the nurse pointed. “what’s that way over there?”

Pete took a look. “It’s a bunch of fireflies. They’re spelling the word ‘HELP’.”

“That’s my girl,” the nurse announced triumphantly.

Pete asked as they raced toward the glowing sign, “how on earth does she do that?”

“I haven’t the slightest clue. I just thank God she can,” Aunt Lizzie admitted.

Pete rolled aside the large boulder that covered the entrance to the cave. Aunt Lizzie untied the two black haired teenage girls. The sisters cried and hugged one another.

Lilly jumped back when Pete removed her blindfold. She shrieked. He assured her, "I'm not here to hurt you. You're safe now."

Pete cut Lilly's arm and leg restraints. Lilly cried tears of relief and embraced the man she thought she would hate forever.



Arial had been on the platform of the water tower but never inside it. She was up to her chest in water, which appeared inky black because it was so dark.

Joseph shouted as he grabbed Arial's hair and dunked her under the water again, "this is where you came to be with him! I demand to know why!"

As he allowed her to surface she desperately sucked the air into her lungs.

After catching her breath she shouted, "Joseph if you kill me you'll kill your child!"

Joseph dunked her under again. "Do you think I give a damn about you or that baby!"

Arial surfaced gasping for air.

Joseph growled, "you'll be lucky if I don't stomp it out of you!"

Arial grew strength she never knew she had in response to that threat. She flailed violently, hitting, punching, and scratching him. "You will not kill my baby! If you didn't want me to have her, you shouldn't have given her to me!"

Joseph hollered in pain as Arial clamped down on his arm. He never knew she could be so vicious. He got her off, but she took a chunk of flesh with her.

He growled, "that's it! You're dead."

Arial fought with all her might as Joseph shoved her under the water. He held her there while she splashed, kicked and flailed. She panicked at the realization. *He's not letting me back up this time. This is it for me...*

All the air escaped Arial's body. Her lungs filled with water. The feeling of panic rapidly diminished. Her limbs grew heavy. Her swings became sluggish, then nonexistent. A peaceful calm swept over her as

she slipped away.

A relieved and pleasant smile creased Joseph's face as he saw Arial bobbing along the surface of the water face down. He pulled Arial's body out of the water and stepped out on the platform. At that moment Matt stabbed Joseph in the face with a knife. Joseph screamed and Arial's body slipped out of his hands. Matt dived to catch her before she rolled over the edge.

Matt panicked at the realization. *Oh my God I'm too late! I'm too late.*

Joseph squealed as he removed the blade from his jaw. He lunged at Matt and tackled him. They both went rolling off the platform. Each man gripped the ledge to keep from falling to his death.

Matt's heart pounded in response to the imminent danger. He'd never been on a tree limb, much less a tower. His mind filled with anxiety and he became faint and dizzy. A wave of nausea swept over him. Matt coached himself as he dangled all those stories in the air. *Now's not the time to get sick. I can puke my guts out after I've killed the scoundrel.*

Matt and Joseph both fought to climb back onto the platform. They struck each other with one blow after another Matt gave Joseph a knee to the stomach and another to the ribs. Joseph collapsed as the wind went out of him.

Matt collapsed right along with him. The adrenaline had worn off and he was in bad shape. Matt was in excruciating pain. He was weak and dizzy from all his blood loss. Each of his limbs felt as if it weighed a ton.

Joseph told Matt with a sinister grin, "you're not the only one who keeps a gun."

Matt looked helplessly up at Joseph as the villain walked toward him with the pistol. Matt used what little strength he had to grasp Arial's cold dead hand.

A single tear fell as Matt whispered, "I love you too, Arial."

Joseph laughed. "I knew I could make you cry, even if I had to kill this bitch to do it. Now you're going to die right along with her."

Joseph aimed for Matt's chest at first, and then pulled the gun up to his head.

"I think I'll ruin that pretty face of yours," Joseph snarled with

bitterness.

Matt took a deep breath and squeezed Arial's hand tight. Then he waited for the fated bullet that would end his life...



## CHAPTER 25:

### LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

Joseph stepped on Arial's chest in triumph. She coughed and spat up the water. She regained consciousness and looked up at him. Her body ran ahead of her mind. Arial snatched Joseph's feet out from under him. He went plummeting and smacked his face on the platform.

Joseph rose to with blood pouring from his nose. That's when he saw Matt now had the gun pointed at him. Joseph raised his hands in defeat, but before he could plead for his life, Matt put a bullet in his throat. Joseph gripped his throat and stumbled backward. He coughed and gagged as dark red blood ran between his fingers. Though his lips moved he couldn't conjure a discernible sound. Matt planted his boot in Joseph's leg and kicked so hard his knee locked. Joseph went sailing off the platform and hit the ground with a muffled crunch.

Arial cried tears of relief as she crawled over to Matt. Her hair was drenched and matted to her head. She flung it out of her eyes so she could see his face. *Thank you, God, I've never been more grateful to see Matt's face. I want to hold him forever and never let him go.*

Matt pulled Arial close to him and said, "you're safe now. He can never hurt you again."

"Matt we've got to find Lilly," Arial announced frantically.

Matt assured her, "Lilly's safe and so are the other girls."

As Arial sat in Matt's arms she told him in a shaky voice, "While I

was out the strangest thing happened. I saw my mother beckoning me toward a light. She was telling me it's alright to come with her."

"Arial that's not strange. Lots of people see a light when they come that close to death, and there's usually a loved one waiting for them," Matt informed her.

Arial explained, "Don't you see, Matt? This was strange because my mother is still alive."

Matt pulled her even closer to him. He was speechless. He didn't know how to tell her the tragic news. *I'm so grateful Arial's alive I can't bear to break her heart. Not after I nearly lost her. Not after all she's been through. How do I tell the woman I love she's been eating candy from her mother's head?*

Matt playfully changed the subject. "I'm sorry it took all this for me to come up here with you."

Arial smiled and assured him, "Better late than never. I've read a hundred romantic books, but I've never had a lover of my own. Is this the part where you take me in your arms, tell me I look absolutely beautiful, and kiss me passionately?"

Matt looked in her beautiful gray eyes and replied, "Arial I'm sorry to disappoint you but this is the part where I take you in my arms, tell you that you look like a drowned rat, and kiss you passionately."

She laughed and wrapped her arms around his neck. Matt pulled Arial's body close to his and kissed her with every fiber of his being.



"They actually expect me to treat my own rapist!" Aunt Lizzie screamed in anguish outside of the prison infirmary.

Matt grabbed her shoulders to calm her down, "I know it's the dumbest law you've ever heard of, but in this state, it's illegal to execute an unhealthy man. The town doctor recently died of old age. Just patch Joseph up so they can hang him, and we can put this whole ordeal behind us."

Tears came to Aunt Lizzie's eyes but she refused to allow any to fall, not for Joseph, not ever.



Her voice cracked as she vehemently proclaimed, “Sir I would rather go to the gallows myself befo suffering the indignity of treating my attacker! I’m just not strong enough to do this.”

Matt put a hand on her dark cheek and gave her a compassionate look, “You have a strength you don’t even know of. You brought me back from the brink of death. Most believe you do what you do because you have to, but I know you. You’re far too strong-willed to blindly follow orders. You heal people because you believe in it. Doctors aren’t the only ones who take an oath to do no harm. So please fix the bastard’s neck so that we may see it broken. Make that scoundrel suffer the indignity of being hanged like the slaves he feels he’s better than.” Matt kissed Aunt Lizzie’s hands. “These are blessed hands, remember?”

Aunt Lizzie nodded humbly and reached for the door of the dilapidated prison infirmary.

Matt offered, “I’ll stay with you the whole time. I won’t allow him to hurt you.”

Aunt Lizzie assured Matt, “Joseph’s shackled to the bed. Even if he wasn’t he wouldn’t be able to harm me. His injuries are far too great. I’ll be fine, Master Colburn.”

Aunt Lizzie picked up her leather medical bag and entered the infirmary. Joseph was groaning on a bunk in the corner. There were no other patients in the building.

Aunt Lizzie pulled up a stool and removed a pair of shears from her bag. She spoke to Joseph in her usual sarcastic manner, “ironic, ain’t it? The last time we met I was the one lying on the bed moaning, not that ya really gave me a reason to.”

She cut off his shirt which was crunchy and stained with blood. She began to feel on his chest. Joseph winced in pain as she examined him. Under the circumstances, she had no incentive to be her most gentle.

She went on to ask, “do ya hit women when ya take em cause it’s the only way we’ll feel something? I’ve never seen such a big man with such small parts.”

Joseph struggled angrily at her words. Even in this fragile condition, his arrogance wouldn’t allow the insult to his manhood. He would’ve strangled her if he was physically capable. At last, he realized trying to fight his nurse was a useless endeavor. He was only causing himself

excruciating pain. He settled down with a spirit as broken as his body.

Aunt Lizzie informed him, “it looks like the fall hurt ya worse than the bullet. Yo nose is broken. Yo skull is fractured in at least two places. Ya got five, hold on... six broken ribs and I ain’t even looked at yo limbs.”

Realizing intimidation no longer worked, Joseph relied on the only talent that remained: his remarkable charm.

Joseph pleaded with a barely understandable wheeze, “if you heal me and help me escape I’ll make you a very rich woman. You don’t have to be a slave anymore. Just patch me up and pronounce me dead. We can both be free.”

Aunt Lizzie picked up the keys to his shackles. The warden had forked them over just in case she needed to move Joseph’s body during treatment. A chance at sweet freedom was so tempting her hands were shaking, palms sweating with anticipation, heart racing. Joseph may have been a lot of bad things, but he could read people like a book. He possessed a keen ability for spotting one’s weaknesses. Ariel’s had been her love for God. Aunt Lizzie’s was her love for freedom.

Joseph wheezed, “come on, you can do it. Unlock the shackles and pronounce me dead. These whites are the enemy. Help your fellow black man.”

Aunt Lizzie threw the keys back in her bag and shouted, “let me tell ya one thing ya manipulative bastard! Ya haven’t been black in years! Ya snubbed yo own people. Ya made yourself rich by purchasing tobacco grown on our backs!”

Aunt Lizzie covered Joseph’s mouth. He released a muffled squeal as she shoved a jagged rib into his side.

Aunt Lizzie informed him flatly, “what Master Colburn don’t realize is that taking an oath to do no harm, at times means not to treat a patient. If I make ya better and ya bribe a guard to free ya befo execution day I will have indirectly harmed all those you’ll hurt later down the road.”

Joseph began to tremble with fear and breathe rapidly. His heart raced and sweat beaded on his forehead as he saw the hatred burning in the nurse’s eyes.

She growled with a bitter scowl, “this is the way this is gonna go. You are going to cry fo me. Once ya do, I’ll end yo suffering...”

## EPILOGUE:

### ROAD TO REDEMPTION

**I**t had been over a month since Joseph's death. He never made it to the gallows, which shocked Lilly. *My great aunt had never lost a patient until Joseph. I suppose there's a first time for everything.*

Lilly shrugged and packed up her new baby. Arial hadn't been able to give Lilly the daughter she promised. Instead, she gave her a beautiful baby boy, with the most amazing set of peepers Lilly had ever seen. Charlevoix grays as Lilly called them. Arial was disappointed that she hadn't kept her vow on the gender of the child. Lilly joked that she'd just have to settle for a goddaughter with her name instead. Then she told Arial and Matt to hop to it. They laughed and said they'd wait awhile. Not everyone was born for parenthood like Lilly.

It was mere days after Matt and Arial left for France. Lilly stood before the looking glass. She read an incantation from her book of spells. She opened the shiny bronze earrings and blew a palm full of ashes at the mirror.

Lilly called to the looking glass, "Marabella A`Rue, show yourself."

Lilly watched in total amazement as her own reflection gradually changed to that of her mother's. Marabella was an exotic, dark-skinned, beauty with dreadlocks adorned with seashells. She appeared as lovely as she did in life, like an island princess or a goddess of the sea.

Lilly picked up her son and felt a pull of destiny: the undeniable force

that occurs when God himself sends someone into your life. It was the very force that frightened her the night Kyle kissed her after the ball.

Lilly brought her baby before the looking glass, and told her mother, "I know you can hear me, even if I can't hear you." Her mother nodded and Lilly went on to say, "since I'm the only one able to see you, I can only assume you're lingering in this world because of me. I'm safe now and your work here is done. I'm leaving my looking glass as a wedding present for Arial and Matt. I pray by moving on with my life this will allow you to move on with your death. I wanted you to meet your grandson before I go. I've named him Seth after my oldest brother."

Marabella's eyes filled with tears and she mouthed the words, "he's beautiful."

Lilly's eyes began to well up as she said, "Mother I know you're not one to give up or back down. I'm aware of just how stubborn you truly are because I'm the same exact way. If you disregard all I ask and continue to linger anyway, please watch over my dear friends, the Colburns."

Glistening teardrops fell from Marabella's eyes as she put her palm on the surface of the looking glass. Lilly placed her hand on the surface of the mirror. For the briefest of moments, the glass became fluid. She could feel her mother's hand. It was ice cold to the point it sent a shiver down Lilly's spine.

They locked fingers for just long enough for the ghost to mouth the word, "goodbye."

Marabella vanished and the glass became solid again. The room filled with humidity. A fog swept over the looking glass. Lilly watched as a final message appeared in the steam: *I love you. Dieu Vous garde.*

Lilly wiped her tears. "I love you too, Mother. God keep you as well."

Lilly walked downstairs with her son. She smiled as she looked at the bundle of joy. *Maybe my brother was never in danger. Perhaps the Seth I was meant to leave New Orleans with was this precious angel in my arms.* Lilly kissed Seth's forehead and walked outside to a beautiful sunny day. Pete loaded Lilly's luggage on his stagecoach. They both climbed in the carriage. Saphirra cracked the long black whip in the air. The horses broke into a trot.

As they traveled down the road Lilly said, “thanks for the ride to my new house in the city. In fact, thank you for my house in the city. You didn’t have to buy me a house, Pete.”

“It’s the least I can do. Nothing will ever make up for the fact that I robbed you of motherhood,” Pete solemnly replied.

Lilly cuddled her son with a smile, “does it look like I’ve been robbed of motherhood? I was never meant to have a child with Matt because I was never meant to be with Matt. Fate knew that. It just took us a while to figure it out.”

They pulled up at Lilly’s new home. It was next to the building Matt had bought for her. She’d soon open it as a dress shop. Pete carried her bags into the house. He set them down and hugged Lilly.

He asked, “are you sure you’ll be alright alone? I really think you and the baby should stay at Matt’s house until your betrothed returns.”

She assured him, “Seth and I will be fine. Kyle will be here with us as soon as he finishes his business in New Orleans.”

Pete told her, “I’m sorry things didn’t work out between you and my brother.”

“Don’t be. I’m not,” Lilly assured him.

Pete walked back outside and waved goodbye to Lilly. She waved back with a smile.

As Pete climbed aboard the driving bench, Saphirra questioned respectfully, “ain’t ya gonna ride inside the coach where it’s cozy, Sir?”

Pete informed her with a smile, “if I did, I wouldn’t have anyone to talk to. It’s a long trip back to New Orleans and I’m out of math equations.”

Saphirra told Pete as she led the stagecoach away, “you’re a great man, Sir. Ya crossed the country to protect yo little brother.”

Pete brushed off her compliment and confessed in a solemn tone, “I wish you didn’t idolize me the way you do. I’m a horrible man. I believe I killed a woman back home. The deputy found her dead in a field...”

Saphirra interjected with tears in her eyes, “she was a light-skinned slave, found wearing nothing but a diamond necklace. Ya didn’t kill that woman, Sir.”

Pete gave Saphirra a confused glare and questioned, “how are you sure I didn’t murder her? I’m not even sure.”

Saphirra explained as a tear rolled down her cheek, “that woman was my sista. We’re both Mulattos. I came out very dark and she came out very light. Joseph was obsessed with white women. Naturally, he was all over my sista due to her appearance. Joseph was charming, handsome and older. He was a man of means. My big sista fell hard fo him. But if Joseph couldn’t have a white woman he wanted the next best thing. My sista was so desperate fo his love and acceptance that she led him to believe she was only a sixteenth black. Joseph was going to buy her freedom and marry her. He gave her that diamond necklace as an engagement present. I was there when he proposed. I never trusted Joseph. I didn’t like his obsession with white women, and he had a jealous streak that made me uneasy. But my big sista was in love with him. When Joseph went to buy her freedom, the old reverend leaked the fact that she was only half white. That wasn’t good enough fo Joseph. That bastard killed my sista and went back to stalking the girl he was previously obsessed with, Miss Arial Charlevoix. The night befo this happened you were kind enough to give me a stack of books. I decided to give a few to my sista for her birthday. While on an errand fo ya I stopped by my old plantation to drop off the books. Yo brother had left his appointment book on the back seat of the carriage. I accidentally grabbed it along with the rest of the pile. Her face lit up as she saw the books. She hugged me and thanked me. It was the last time I saw her alive. On my way home I realized what I’d done. I turned around to retrieve Master Matt’s appointment book. That’s when I found my sista dead in her cabin. I didn’t tell the authorities. I knew they wouldn’t believe me. Even if they did, no one would care about the death of a lowly black woman. I drug my sista’s body to the meadow. I removed her ratty slave clothes, but left the expensive diamond necklace Joseph gave her. He’d bought it at the jeweler in town. I knew there weren’t many black men with the means to purchase such a trinket. Add that to the fact that Joseph spoke with a French accent. I knew he must’ve stuck out like a sore thumb to the jeweler, who would identify Joseph as the purchaser. I really thought that expensive necklace would make my sista look white enough for people to care and lead authorities to Joseph. I told Deputy Broderick Welch I’d found a white woman dead in a field. I never wanted to disgrace my sista by dumping her body, but I knew the

only way anyone would bring her murderer to justice is if they assumed she was white. I wanted the lawmen to catch Joseph and lock him away befo he hurt anyone else.”

Pete put a comforting arm around Saphirra’s shoulders. He assured her, “you didn’t disgrace your sister by trying to bring her murderer to justice. She would be proud of what you did. I am.” Pete sadly went on to say, “I want to believe Joseph killed your sister rather than me. But I had these scratches appear on my neck around the same time your sister was murdered. I asked every one of the women who crashed my wedding if I had hurt them around that time. All of them said no.”

Saphirra’s response broke Pete’s heart. She burst into tears and confessed, “I gave ya the scratches, Master Colburn. Please forgive my defiance. I’d never been with a man befo. I was afraid and ya were hurting me.”

Pete replied with a heavy heart, “I’m relieved to know I didn’t kill your sister. But I’m ashamed to find out I raped an innocent young girl like you. I’m sorry Saphirra.”

She wiped her tears, “I was so frightened and ya were so much stronger than me. I prayed to God ya would stop. It was all I could do. Then all of a sudden ya snapped out of yo angry spell and let me go.” Saphirra smiled at him, “Ya never went through with it, Sir. Ya spared me because deep down ya have a good heart. I didn’t help Mable crash yo wedding because ya never gave me a reason to.”

Pete’s rotten guilty feeling left. *I stopped. By the grace of God, I stopped. There’s still hope for me yet.*

He ordered with a smile, “turn the carriage around. I’m leaving you with my brother, Matt. I’ll drive myself home.”

“But why, Sir? I wanna go home with ya. Ya ain’t gotta sell me because I denied ya. That won’t happen again. I ain’t afraid to make love no more,” Saphirra informed him.

Pete explained to the innocent young girl, “I’m not punishing you, Saphirra. I’m merely keeping you out of harm’s way.”

“Will ya ever come back fo me?” She enquired with disappointment.

“If I ever get myself together, yes,” Pete told the pretty dark-skinned girl with the blue eyes.

As the carriage rumbled down the dirt road she gingerly kissed

Pete's cheek. He didn't punish her for her inappropriate actions. *Its apparent Saphirra has a huge girlish crush on me, but she's too young. After all that happened with Mable, I'll never take advantage of another irrational teenage girl. Hell truly hath no fury like a woman scorned.*

He questioned sternly, "how old are you?"

"Fourteen summers," she answered proudly.

"That's what I thought." Pete chastised her with a sympathetic grin, "don't kiss me again for six or seven years."

"Yes Sir," she said while covering a humongous smile.

Pete took the reins from her and raced back to his brother's home. *The road to redemption begins again.*



### *Later in France*

A misty fog stretched over the cemetery that dreary gray morning. Headstones protruded from the grass like teeth, as far as the eye could see. In addition to headstones were a great number of fancy tombs and statues of angels. This was where France's most prominent citizens lay in eternal rest. Arial put up her umbrella as she felt cold wet drops on her face. She gazed over the graveyard and felt peace rather than sorrow. *My mother is gone but she's not abandoned me. I still feel her warmth, her love, her presence.*

The priest sprinkled dirt on the elegant, pearl casket and continued reading from the bible. Arial and the others dropped roses on the coffin as the pallbearers lowered it into the earth. The funeral of Arial's mother commenced, and the mourners, all dressed in black, began to depart. As they scattered back to their stagecoaches, Arial wandered through the graveyard. She needed an opportunity to reflect. A lot had happened over the last ten months.

Matt left Arial alone for the moment and walked over to his mother. Natalie smiled with pride and straightened her son's tie.

Natalie passed him the long white box and asked, "Are you ready, son?"

He smiled at her informal greeting of him. Matt nervously asked his



mother, “What if I ruin this because I can’t tell Arial I love her? The words get stuck in my throat every time she’s in my presence.”

Natalie squeezed his hand. It was her code for you have nothing to fear. “Arial knows how you feel. She loves you, Matt.”

He gave her a nod and squeezed her hand back. It was his code for I’m alright now. Natalie smiled as Matt walked over to Arial’s father.

Matt said as he approached Mr. Charlevoix, “I’m so very sorry for your loss. I brought an unnecessary pain upon your family. Please forgive what I’ve done. Your daughters could’ve gone on forever believing their mother was alive.”

“And that would’ve been a lie,” Mr. Charlevoix said. He looked up from his wheelchair and assured Matt, “if it wasn’t for you I would’ve gone the rest of my life believing my wife didn’t love me, and that my greatest enemy did. That pain was harder to live with than this funeral. Thanks to you I know the truth, and my daughter is safe. You saved my baby girl’s life and helped my wife to her final resting place. Don’t ever apologize for that. I’m not angry with you. I’m indebted to you.”

Matt nodded respectfully. “I know this is a terrible time, but I’m leaving France today. I won’t have another opportunity to ask. May I have your daughter’s hand?”

Mr. Charlevoix replied with a discombobulated look, “I’ve already given you my daughter’s hand in marriage.”

“The other daughter, Sir,” Matt explained.

Mr. Charlevoix smiled for the first time since receiving news of his wife’s death. “You know Arial bore a child by a black man, and you still want to marry her. You must truly love her.”

“Yes Sir,” Matt admitted.

Mr. Charlevoix said with a respectful nod, “you have my blessing.”



Matt spotted Arial behind a large tomb. She smiled as she noticed him standing there. The rain had passed and the sun was finally beginning to peak out from behind the clouds. He walked over to her and it seemed as if he was bringing the sunshine and warmth with him. She

embraced him and took his hand.

“It’s so hard to pretend I don’t love you,” she said.

Matt replied with hesitation, “I want so bad to say it back but…”

“I know. It’s okay. Maybe in time,” Arial assured him.

He looked into her beautiful gray eyes, smiled, and caressed her cheek. Matt’s smile faded as Arial released one of his hands and pulled the other away from her cheek. She had spotted her betrothed, the Viscount Demoniet.

Matt said with a bit of annoyance, “I broke it off with your sister the moment I set foot on French soil and you’re still wearing that arrogant clown’s ring. When are you going to tell him about us?”

Arial whispered, “I was hoping you’d do that.”

“After the underhanded things you told me he pulled, nothing would make me happier than to walk up to that pompous jackass and inform him you’re leaving him for me. But I think it would be best for you to do it.”

“Why me?” Arial questioned meekly.

“You’re one of the sweetest, most wonderful people I know, but at times you’re too kind. It’s time you learned to stand up to the bad people in your life, starting with that one.”

Arial nodded. “You’re right, Matt.” She took a deep breath and approached the distinguished beau with red hair and hazel eyes.

The Viscount Pier Demoniet embraced her and said, “I’ve been looking everywhere for you. Was that man holding your hand?”

“Yes, he was. I’m leaving you for him,” Arial admitted.

Pier asked with a stunned expression, “Why?”

Arial explained with complete irritation, “I know what you did, Pier. I approached your mother at the ball. I made a final effort to plead with her on behalf of my sister. The Countess told me that when she was young her future mother in law caught her in bed with your father. The woman made your mother’s life a living hell, ruined her reputation, and refused to allow your father to marry her. It took your mother years to earn her way back into the woman’s good graces. For this reason, your mother didn’t judge Alice after she walked in on the two of you. She was devastated, like any mother would be, but after all the pain inflicted by her own mother in law she was determined not to be the same way.

She still holds my sister in high regard. The Countess Demoniet informed me it was entirely your idea to break off your engagement with A`lice. Then you spread rumors about my sister and branded her a whore, so no other man would marry her. I was so furious about the news of your betrayal I just stormed away.”

Pier Demoniet confessed, “alright I`ll admit it. I`ve always been in love with both you and A`lice. I set A`lice and myself up to get caught by my mother. I thought it would be enough to get me out of my engagement, but my mother didn`t care that we`d made love.”

Arial questioned with anger, “if you love my sister, why would you go through such elaborate lengths to end things?”

“A`lice was in love with me. I knew she`d continue to be with me regardless. I was aware that you`d only be with me if we were married. Ending my engagement with A`lice and marrying you was the only way I`d be able to have you both. When I spread the rumors about A`lice I figured I`d be able to keep her all to myself. It backfired. Your father found a match for her far away in America. I was heartbroken that I`d still only have one of you. Please don`t judge me harshly. What man in the world would be able to choose between two beautiful women that he loves?”

“Matt Colburn,” Arial announced vehemently and stormed away.

Pier followed her. “Where are you going?”

“To tell my sister! Where do you think?” Arial snapped.

Viscount Demoniet vowed, “I know what I did was selfish, and I`m sorry. If you don`t tell A`lice I`ll spend the rest of my life making up for it. I swear to worship the very ground she walks on.”

Arial snatched off the engagement ring he`d given her and slapped it in his palm. She pointed in A`lice`s direction and declared, “you better drop to your knees and beg my sister to marry you right now.”

Pier protested, “I can`t. I`m of noble birth and she has a bad reputation.”

“Because of you,” Arial snapped. “I think I`ll just tell her what you`ve done.”

“No please,” Pier pleaded.

Arial stopped and pointed to her sister once more. Pier swallowed his pride and walked over to A`lice. A few minutes later A`lice ran over

and hugged Arial.

A`lice grinned from ear to ear and said, "Arial thank you so much for getting Pier's mother to forgive me."

"Really, did I?" Arial asked sarcastically.

She gave the viscount a snide look. He pleaded with his eyes for her to play along. Arial decided she cared more about her sister's happiness than punishing Pier. She'd never seen A`lice so happy and thought it best not to expose him.

A`lice went on to say, "Pier says the Countess will allow us to marry now. We owe our happiness to you. We'll marry our heir to the first child you bear of opposite sex."

"We will?" The viscount questioned in shock.

"Yes, you will," Arial told him with a confident smirk.

Pier Demoniet announced in defeat, "I suppose it's settled then."

Arial hugged her sister and walked back over to Matt. He smiled as he noticed Arial's engagement ring missing. Matt kissed her empty ring finger and pulled out a ruby necklace.

She asked in shock, "is that your family's crest? It's beautiful, but I half expected it to be wrapped around my sister's neck."

"I couldn't fork it over. I knew we weren't right for each other," Matt admitted with a smirk. "Last spring, I danced with the wrong girl and she turned out to be the right one for me."

Arial laughed and scolded him playfully, "are you seriously going to propose to me in a cemetery, twenty minutes after I buried my mother?"

Matt replied with sarcasm and a shrug of his shoulders, "Have I ever claimed to be a romantic? Is it my fault your ass looks amazing in black?"

"You are truly tactless," Arial declared with a laugh.

Matt smiled. "Yes, but I'm also honest. Will you marry me?"

Tears filled Arial's eyes as she nodded yes. He clasped the ruby necklace around her neck. Arial gingerly caressed the beautiful charm with her fingertips.

She looked up at Matt and asked with total happiness in her heart, "does the Colburn family crest suit me? How do I look?"

Matt took Arial in his arms and declared, "absolutely beautiful."

As their lips met Matt found a final revelation, and for once it was a good one. He now knew beyond the shadow of a doubt the right girl was

wearing the necklace. He could feel every bit of love she possessed for him in that fated kiss they shared. Matt vowed at that very moment. He would live for her, die for her, and even if he'd never be able to tell Arial, he would love her for the rest of his life.

## 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*

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*Try this next...*



Matthaios is a slave and Sara is the bride of a powerful dictator. Can love unite them even as Pharaoh and all of Egypt threaten to tear them asunder...

## PROLOGUE:

### THE FINAL PLEA

*Ancient Egypt, 1806 B.C.*

**M**atthaios clutched his handkerchief with a shaky hand. He used the cloth to dab at the spot of blood at the corner of his mouth. He sucked in sharply through his teeth as pain seared across his face. A raw taste flooded his mouth and Matthaios spat out a bit of blood on the floor of his grimy prison cell.

In his many years as Pharaoh's faithful servant, Matthaios had experienced many of the ruler's personalities. He'd seen bratty Pharaoh, noble Pharaoh, fearless warrior Pharaoh, but never had Matthaios experienced the monster who'd captured and imprisoned him.

The emperor's eyes bore a perilous mixture of fury and disbelief as his fist collided with Matthaios's jaw in one swift punch. Pharaoh ordered the arrest of the servant who'd betrayed him. Of all the women in the world, why did Matthaios have to go for that one?

Matthaios glanced around the torchlit dungeon. The fires glowed against the inky night that poured in through barred windows. He went back to dabbing his tender and busted lip until realizing that his efforts were for naught. He threw the bloodstained rag across the cell. What was the point of fixing his lip just for his neck to be severed at dawn?

Pharaoh strode into the dungeon with a retinue of henchman. The noisy prison suddenly quieted, as if falling under an enchantment. Pharaoh had not come into Matthaios's field of view, but the slave boy knew every time his ruler was near. The air would still around Matthaios as if the world was rearranging itself to accommodate Pharaoh.



Matthaios preemptively took a knee, and as suspected, Pharaoh appeared.

“Your majesty,” Matthaios respectfully greeted the emperor, who had vowed to claim his head.

Pharaoh snapped his fingers and a guard ran forward with a chair. Pharaoh addressed his soldiers, “leave me with the traitor.”

“Yes, Pharaoh,” the guards replied in unison and filed out of the prison.

Pharaoh took a seat before the bars of Matthaios’s prison cell. Matthaios dropped from his knee to sit flat on the floor, careful to remain lower than his sovereign, as was the custom.

Matthaios asked cautiously, “did you read my plea to spare Sara?”

“Yes, and I have denied it.”

Matthaios’s heart sank into his stomach and tears welled up in his eyes. “You don’t have to kill her. You are the all-powerful Pharaoh of Egypt. Squash any rumors of her running away with me and carry on with your life together.”

“To what end?” Pharaoh shook his head. “I cannot have a wife who might be putting any man’s bastards upon my throne. If I can’t trust her to remain loyal to me, how can I trust her to remain loyal to Egypt? Do you have the faintest clue of the bind you have put me in?”

“I know, my lord,” Matthaios spoke humbly with a tone of defeat.

“I’m going to have to kill you,” Pharaoh spoke without emotion as if taking a life was as simple as deciding how to dress in the morning.

“I know, my lord.”

“You have left me no choice.”

“I know, my lord.”

“THEN WHY!” Pharaoh shouted in a voice that could quake heaven and earth.

Matthaios’s eyes lowered in shame. “You demand to know how I could betray my emperor, why I would sentence myself to death over a woman. I would tell you if I had an answer. All I know is from the moment I met her I suddenly became aware of my blood being pulled in and out of my heart, the way the moon directs the tide. I tried to catch my breath, but the more I inhaled, the more I felt consumed...”

## CHAPTER 1:

### IMPENDING DOOM

*Months ago...*

Sara, princess of Nubia, gawked at the shadow on a sundial. She urgently informed her friend, “we must be going. It’s getting late.”

“I implore you, just one more vendor,” cried the spirited Princess Sobek, sister of the Egyptian pharaoh.

“Just one more,” Sara agreed, not that she had much of a choice.

Sobek would have never let it rest. She towed Sara through the sea of elated faces. This friend of Sara’s was nothing like what she’d expected of a princess of Egypt. Sobek had only been in Nubia one night when she convinced Sara they should disguise themselves as commoners, sneak out of the palace, and attend a festival in the lower village.

The sun made its glorious descent below the horizon, bathing the joyous festival in magnificent twilight. There were magic shows, puppeteers, acrobats, and jugglers. Vendors and merchants filled the streets, as far as the eye could see. They sold food, spices, livestock, and fabrics. The scent of sweet desserts and salty meats wafted throughout the kingdom. You could practically taste the air.

Some structures in Nubia were humble. Others soared clear to the heavens, with mighty pillars, and statues of the gods. All were swarming with elated figures, drunk on beer, love, and happiness.

This festival was held to celebrate Wepet Renpet, also known as the

opening of the year, marked by the Nile's annual flood. This Egyptian New Year also served as an assembly period for the Counsel of African Kings. Pharaoh Amenemhat, a former rival of Nubia, would be in attendance this year. Nubia offered a warm welcome to Egypt, a symbol of peace between two nations.

"Why are you in such a rush to leave," Sobek questioned as she moved her body to the beat of African drums. "This festival is incredible!"

"Believe me, you will want to be gone when the Wepet Renpet bells sound. The closest boy in your vicinity is going to kiss you, whether you know him or not!"

Sobek laughed at Sara's paranoia. "I forgot... I will fall down and die if a man kisses me. I should miss the best celebration ever because I'm at risk of a boy kissing me. Egyptian lands are at risk of war, famine, disease, and drought but the worst plague of all is a boy's kiss."

Sara had a good laugh at herself. "When you put it that way, I sound prudish and fearful."

"You are."

"You're not even a little concerned? We have our reputations to protect."

"No one will recognize us, and bystanders will be too occupied with kisses of their own to notice with whom we are engaged."

Princess Sara had skin of smooth mahogany, as was common for a Nubian. Princess Sobek was tanned, like the golden sands of Egypt. Both girls possessed raven hair and eyes of sparkling obsidian. Their beauty earned them lusty gazes as they explored the celebration.

Sara was surprised and a little unnerved at how differently men perceived her when they were unaware of her title. Sobek, on the other hand, soaked up the attention with the consistency of a sponge, a sign that this was not the first time she'd pulled a charade like this.

It was urgent for Sara to leave soon. Her uncle, Myron, King of Nubia, was loaning their castle to every eligible prince of Africa. Sara knew that she should be home entertaining; one of these royals would likely be her future husband, but Sobek was a terrible influence.

"Isn't this the most amazing thing you've ever smelled?" Sara said as she held an exotic spice up to Sobek's nose.

“It is remarkable. What is it called?” Sobek asked with a grin.

The merchant spoke up from behind his stand, “this is a spice known as cinnamon, my lady. The one next to it is called nutmeg.”

“I’ll take them both,” Sara said as the enchanting festival whirled around them.

If nothing else, Sobek knew how to have fun and Gods only knew how much Sara needed that in her life.

Sara closed her eyes and turned her face to the moonlight, breathing in the spicy air. She enjoyed the sensation of a warm breeze as it fluttered the colorful silks of her gown. Sara’s eyes drifted open as the shopkeeper placed the bag in her hand.

“Thank you,” Sara said politely and he told her the same.

“Alright we’ve gone to our last stand,” Sara reminded Sobek. “It’s time to leave. I’m hosting a party.”

“I haven’t even purchased fabrics.”

“Sobek!” Sara shouted with glee as her mischievous friend towed her throughout the celebration.



The royalty of Egypt traveled by camel and chariot, but their hapless slaves were forced to make the entire journey on foot. Pharaoh’s servants were just outside of Nubia. The exhausted slaves took a much-needed respite on the side of the road, while guards doled out soup and beer. Luxuries like beef and wine were reserved for the wealthy.

Matthaios aimlessly picked his food. He kept lifting a spoonful of soup and allowing it to fall back into the bowl in a series of splats. He had no appetite. All he felt was a pull like magnetism calling his soul away from this place, and the harsh iron shackles keeping his body from following his spirit.

He could envision the city ahead, alive with festivity, funny men, and beautiful women. He could taste the tanginess of the wine, the sweetness, and warmth of a freshly baked pie.

The wind shifted and blew dirt into the open wounds on his feet. It stung bitterly. The leather straps of his sandals had chafed his feet

bloody. Heavy manacles had scoured his wrists raw.

Despite these harsh conditions, Matthaïos counted his blessings. *I'm more fortunate than those who labor in the sun building the pyramids of Egypt. Builder slaves fall victim to the lash, malnutrition, treacherous falls, and the desert sun. They don't live very long. I'll be in Nubia shortly, treated to a bath, and serving the brides of Pharaoh.*



The echo of persistent clanging caused Sara to spin abruptly. She collided with a man, much fairer skinned than her. His shackled arms launched out to catch her. Once steady, her eyes trailed up to his face, which bore a half-smirk of a smile. It was the most beautiful smile she'd ever seen.

There was beer pouring from the rooftops like rain. Drunkards were gallivanting. Fistfights were springing up like daisies. The cover of night had transformed a lighthearted festival into chaos, but as Sara gazed into the face of this peculiar slave all seemed perfect.

He removed his rough sword calloused hands from the smooth black skin of her shoulders. He bent to retrieve her sandal. She felt herself exhale as he held her ankle to slip on her shoe.

He rose with her fallen bag of spices. "My lady."

"Thank you," she spoke, nearly breathless as he passed her the bag.

"No, thank you," he insisted. His eyes traced the curves of her face as if trying to brand her image upon his mind.

"For what may I ask?"

"For being the most amazing thing I'll ever get to touch."

"You are entirely too bold, slave," her tone was reprimanding but her smile gave her away.

"Apologies, my lady."

His full glorious smile came out and Sara could feel her stomach flipflop. Her life had been spinning out of control, but in this one perfect moment, all was calm. For the first time in her existence, she knew she was in just the right place at just the right time.

A thunderous BING, BING, BING, echoed throughout the

celebration. The bells were ringing. Tradition demanded a kiss between them.

His smoothness went out the window and he rambled awkwardly, “we don’t have to... I wasn’t expecting...” Matthaios drew in a deep breath and gathered his wits. “Sorry, I get flustered when I’m nervous.”

“Ancient lovers believed a kiss would literally unite their souls because the spirit was said to be carried in one’s breath.” Sara took a deep breath to calm herself. “Sorry, I spout trivia when I’m nervous.”

They chuckled at the absurdity of it all.

Matthaios shook his head with amusement. *What’s one kiss between strangers in the night? The awkward conversation we’re carrying on has lasted longer than the kiss would have.*

Sara just stood there with a bashful smirk. *It’s one kiss of my own volition before being forced into a lifetime of mandatory embraces. I doubt I’ll know my future husband any better than I know this slave.*

Matthaios convinced that no beautiful woman would kiss a man in shackles, politely nodded, “Goodnight, my lady.”

“Goodnight.” Her hope was snuffed out like a suddenly extinguished candle.

They had bid farewell and yet no one moved. They stood in silence, waiting for the other person to walk away. Gazing into his eyes was like falling into the stars, causing Sara to feel weightless and disoriented.

Matthaios looked deeply into her eyes, searching for signs of rejection. When he found that her desire mirrored his own he leaned forward and kissed her softly, a chaste press of his lips to hers, with an answering push of hers to his. This simple embrace was like being hit by a tidal wave. It bore the power of an earthquake and the heat of a volcano. They parted with a slow exhale.

Life carried on around them, but they were trapped in a different moment than the other people in the crowded festival.

Matthaios was violently struck in the face with the heavy handle of a whip, a painful and abrupt end to a wonderful encounter. Sara shrieked in horror.

“I apologize, my lady,” spoke a slave driver with a patch over one eye, a sadistic tyrant known as Osiris. “These slaves are savages. He asked that we stop for a moment, so he may smell the pies, and he

rewards my leniency by harassing a young woman.”

“This was my fault,” Sara spoke hurriedly. Her hands were shaking and her mind was flustered. “I bumped into him. He merely caught me from falling and being trampled by drunkards... and then the bells went off. The servant was only trying to help.”

Sara made certain to pull her hood forward and cast her face in shadow when she addressed the slave driver.

She could not believe it when Matthaïos mouthed the words, “I’m alright.”

He was the one who’d been abused and still he was comforting her. She’d never known a man who would place her needs above his own. Now the one time she met a fellow of such caliber they lived in parallel universes. When his silent words failed to wipe the concern from her face a subtle nod and wink did the trick.

“Very well,” Osiris nodded. “Sorry for the inconvenience, my lady.”

Osiris signaled his guards and they led the single file of slaves away.

Sara stood mesmerized, her mouth slightly parted in a smile. She silently urged Matthaïos. *Look back... glance back just once so I can recall your likeness in my dreams.* And just as if he’d done the impossible and heard her silent plea, he glanced over his shoulder with a smile.



Matthaïos was drawn from his beautiful memory by the sound of a metal plate skidding across the floor of his prison cell. The joyous festival music faded into the tortured cries of sick and dying prisoners. Beauty and décor transformed to dreary gray walls and iron bars. Sara’s delightful scent was replaced by the foul odor of urine and rat droppings.

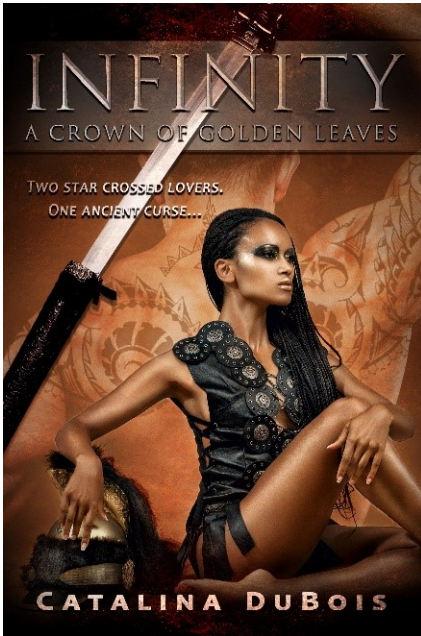
He stared at the food with disgust. *It’s stewed rat or some other diseased rodent with a loaf of moldy bread.* Knowing the food might give him more sickness than strength, Matthaïos ignored his growling belly and pushed the plate aside. *Perhaps I should have eaten it, might have given me a better death than decapitation by the sword of an executioner.*

The furious Pharaoh, sitting just beyond the bars growled with contempt, “what happened next?”

Matthaios confessed, “I walked away on that wonderful night, completely unaware that I had started down a path from which there was no return and the impending doom that would follow. All I knew was from the moment I kissed her half of my heart sang and the other half recognized that I would never be the same again...”

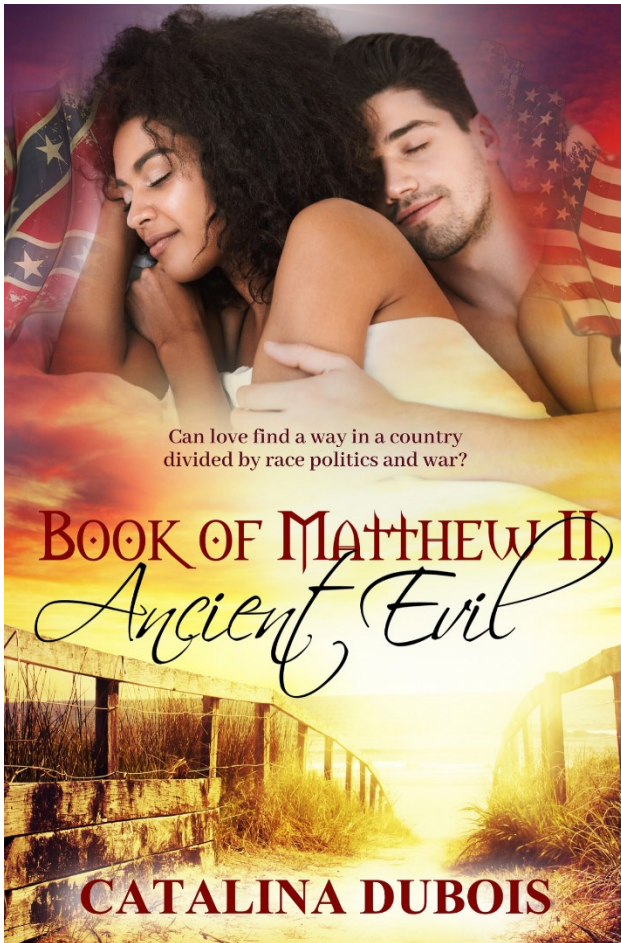


*Two star crossed lovers. One ancient curse...*



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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...