

Prologue

It was nothing political, although it might seem so to some. The scheme was that of any hothead who grows weary and slowly sees the light and ends by devoting himself to the cult of luxury. One very important detail: Everything can be acquired in solitude.

Everything, that is, except character.

My actions were but an act of revenge, of defense, that I may be appreciated.

It begins on the day of my 18th birthday, although there's no one else on earth who could tell you that. I am young, tall, awkward, unsure. I have taken my father's bicycle. Now that he has bought a car, the bike is pretty much mine to use. I don't mind biking much—but I prefer horse riding. I enjoy watching the tall, grassy turf slide past me, spreading over vast meadows, hills, and through lily fields. Together, we splash through small streams and rattle over the washboard of the dirt roads. I am a man on a mission. Together, we come to a stop on the grounds of the old farmhouse, the rotten old building at the edge of the property that the company has never bothered to tear down nor seems to know exists. This suits me fine, of course. As a child, I had played there in the dark cool shadows of aged wood—it was my hideaway, my castle. I slip from the saddle, tossing the reins over a well-worn post, and then walk towards the black, rectangular opening of the farmhouse door.

I blink as I step into the cool interior, adjusting my gaze to the shadows. I see a glimpse of smooth white, of naked skin.

"Close your eyes," she commands. For a moment I comply, but cannot keep my gaze from her for long.

"Close your eyes," she repeats when I look again. She stands and her beauty is before me.

My eyes grow large; I fall to my knees. "Chantal?" I whisper.

She holds her hand out. I kiss it, trembling slightly.

"Ah-ha! You have found me," she blushes and then giggles. "You must be John Marshal. Or . . . Juan Marcinel?" I shudder

with shock that she knows my true name. A knowing smirk appears on her lips. "Fine, I will call you John." She shrugs. "Your friend Seth told me about you."

I stare at her mouth, unable to make eye contact. My hands are clammy at my sides, my heart pounds. "I have changed little since I last saw him," I choke.

Chantal relaxes her face and smiles. "Where are you from?"

"Nowhere of any im-importance," I stutter. "Nor is my family of any importance. I grew up in the factory."

"You are sweating," she notes.

"I'm nervous."

"Nervous? Why?" She opens her eyes widely, and I know I should relax. But I cannot.

"Because I am suddenly blind and deaf," I whisper, wiping my forehead.

Chantal giggles. "I do not believe you!" she teases.

I smile, a glimmer of wit returning to my mind. "It's not your fault, Chantal. Nature has been so kind to you."

"Thank you." She grins and then gestures for me to join her on the low bench that is built into the wall. She kneels before me, and then slowly removes my boots and begins to rub my feet.

"Now, close your eyes," she purrs, unbuttoning her shirt and revealing her small, natural breasts. The glimpse of white blinds me and I can't help but shut my lids. I slump against the wall like a dead man—motionless, my eyes to heaven.

Later, she dresses me carefully, lovingly. I am distracted, staring into space, glancing at my horse, whose eyes were fixed on me knowingly.

"Do you regret it? Is there something wrong?" she asks quietly.

"This is new for me," I acknowledge stiffly. "I am sorry." I reach into my pocket and pull out the handful of cash I had shoved there.

"Is that so?" She waves it away. "Well, now you are an expert. No more worries."

I exhale slowly, and then put the money back in my pocket.

“Are you married?” I ask finally.

“No,” she answers lightly.

I stretch out my arms to her. “Are you engaged to marry?”

She leans against me, her touch light, her presence warming.

“You are sweet and gentle,” she notes, “seductive. And, Master John, seduction is the key to all that you want in life.”

“Is that so?” I ask nonchalantly. But a part of me takes heed.

“What is it that you want?” she asks cryptically.

I shake my head. “I’m not sure.”

“You seem so bright, Master John,” she says, looking up at me with earnest eyes. Her fingers lightly play with the hair at my neck. “Tell me. I’ll not say a word.”

I look inside my own mind and sigh. “Earthly immortality,” I reply.

“But that is impossible!” she teases.

“Glory,” I continue.

“To achieve great praise? Heavenly bliss . . . splendor? Hmm . . .” She purses her lips.

“Yes.” I nod triumphantly.

“The greatest man to achieve glory was Che Guevara,” she says, after a moment’s thought. “You know, he used a very scientific method to achieve his glory.”

“Seduction?” I guess.

Chantal walks to the doorway, and then looks over her shoulder. “Che Guevara is a hero to everyone who knows about him. He started with nothing and he became everything.”

“How did he do it?” I insist.

Chantal smiles as I answer my own question.

“Seduction,” I say quietly.

“I know of no better way,” she sings. “Could you conceive of a better way than that used by the very man who gave us our freedom?”

I wait, and then join her at the doorway.

“Perhaps I’ll be joining the priesthood,” I mention.

She shakes her head as I approach. “Perhaps the military.

No?"

"Perhaps." I nod.

She holds out her hand, and I bring it to my lips. "I do wish you much luck, Master John," she says firmly, her eyes shining. "I would have liked, very much, to see you again. But I am off to the City in three days to be wed to a very wealthy man, and I must retire."

I start in shock, and then concede. "You have found what you want?"

"I had the right mentor." She bats her lashes.

"I apologize. I am still a little confused, Chantal."

Chantal removes a small portrait from her cleavage. It's folded and tattered. She hands it to me. "Have this," she insists.

I look at the portrait of the familiar man, the man whose face is known to so many. It is hand-signed. "Che Guevara," I breathe. "And it's signed. Is it real?"

Chantal nods. "You'll understand. I have no fear that you'll find everything you desire."

At that, she turns from me and whisks out the doorway. "Farewell, John Marshal!" she calls over her shoulder, and then she is around the corner of the house and gone.

And so my fate was set, although even without the portrait I might have eventually found my way. But from that moment on, I had no other direction.

And of course, I never saw Chantal again.

Chapter 1

In the old, beat-down back room of my father's factory—the factory he manages, but does not own—the ancient Father Padric sits in priest robes. The man's face is lined and sagging in places—his hands covered in purple spots. Sometimes I think he couldn't bear to live another year, but then he speaks—his voice is deep and full—and I think that perhaps he'll live forever.

"Hurry, John," he says with quiet authority. "Mr Roman will be here any minute."

I pull the priest robes over my head and then fumble with the Roman collar, my hands shaking. Finally, the clasp comes together and I jolt as the ground begins to shake beneath me—it growls like metal sliding against . . . the bright sheen of a guillotine blade flashes before my inner eye. I gasp and look to Father Padric, who leans unsteadily against his desk. Dust seems to rise up from every surface and dance in the air.

The mounted silver cross behind Father Padric trembles and quakes and then seems to leap from the wall.

"Father!" I cry, and in two swift strides I pull him to my side of the desk.

With a loud, resonating clang the cross plunges into the wood floor, recoils against the wall, and then falls back down, shuddering. We also shake as the earthquake's final tantrum rocks the entire factory.

When the ground is still, Padric sags into my arms. I am amazed by how light he is.

"Are you all right, Father?" I say, my voice trembling still.

"Fine," he wheezes slightly, and then coughs. "You?"

I nod. "*Ita Pater,*" I say quietly, taking comfort in the familiar words.

Padric smiles.

"The earth moves to shut us up, you little cricket. You're always mumbling to yourself like you have a mouth full of cherries." He looks up. "Bookworm," he accuses.

I laugh with him, glad to shake off the last of my fear. His brows suddenly lower.

“But John, do not forget that the Mayor is a strict conservative. Your morals have already been questioned.” He turns and looks directly at me.

“Then what turned their decision in my favor?” I wonder.

Padric looks at me meaningfully. “The time you studied Theology with me,” he says. He steps to me and reaches up to my collar, straightening it. “And because of your background,” he says more quietly, looking me in the eye. “They want someone who will speak Spanish to the children, to open their minds to learning new language.”

I scowl. The past I want to put behind me is now the only way I can step up in this world. What a joke.

“Be careful, now, with that portrait of yours,” he says bluntly.

“Thank you, Father,” I incline my head. “It is always kept safe.”

“I still do not understand why you move always against convention,” he complains. “To allow hypocrisy to grab hold of you will destroy you.”

I study myself in the mirror.

Padric stands straight next to me, his back like a post. “Stand straight,” he commands. “Chin up. The way you carry yourself will show your background. Think to yourself: I am confident. I am strong. I am worthy.”

I mimic Padric’s posture, thinking of the life that stands before me. “And Mrs Roman? What is she like?”

“Oh.” He laughs. “She is a beautiful creature, of the highest moral character and virtue.”

My eyes widen. “Is that so?”

Father Padric looks at me from the corner of his eye. “It is I who suggested your services to her, so do take heed of my good name,” he says gently.

Have six months of your life ever been made miserable by love?

Chapter 2

In the afternoon, my father, a disheveled, poorly-dressed, pathetic shell of a man, storms into his house with a flask in his hand. He hasn't shaved or bathed for days, and the smell compels me to drop the book I was reading and exhale fiercely. Perhaps he guesses the cause, for he marches over to me, grabs the book from the table, and throws it to the ground. He grabs me by the collar, pulls me from my chair, and throws me against the door. I stumble upright and prepare myself for his rage.

"Do not lie! How did you get to know Mrs Roman?" Father screams.

"I have never spoken to her," I say quickly. "I have never even seen her, except in church."

"You have looked at her, have you not? Tell me!" he demands.

"When I am in church, I see no one but God." I lower my head, looking up at him from the top of my eyeballs.

"Mr Roman told me that his wife wanted you over there as a nanny!" he yells, confounded. "Why would anyone want you? You are as stupid as your mother was."

I stare warily, terrified. "Did he mention what I shall receive for my services?" I ask meekly.

My father moans, leans his head against the wall. "400 a week."

My shoulders slump. "I do not wish to be a servant," I whisper.

"Do you think I wanted my son to be a servant?" he roars once more. "Why can't you just work at the factory, like everyone else? You've got to learn to stand in line! Now look at you . . . you think you're better than me, don't you?"

"Why shouldn't I be better than you?" I sneer. "You're disgusting!"

My father's response is to strike me across the face with the back of his fist. I feel an explosion of pain in my cheek and for a moment I am blind.

"That's it, I am through with you! Do not bother this family

ever again. Do you hear me?" he shouts.

"Fuck you!" I scream and then run to the room I share with my brothers, stuffing everything I can call mine into a duffel bag. Fortunately, there is not much.

"You are ungrateful!" my father yells. "I can't wait until Mr Roman sees how ungrateful you are."

Chapter 3

Mr Roman meets me outside the door to his house, where I stand with my duffel bag in hand, staring up at all the windows of the enormous country home. He shakes my hand like a professional, scrutinizing me with dark eyes. "Clyde Roman," he states matter-of-factly. His swift nod brings to his side the man who had answered the door, who comes to stand next to me expectantly.

"John Marshal," I return.

"Come on in, then. Alan can get your bags." Mr Roman looks around expectantly and coughs. "Erm . . . your bag, that is."

Alan sniffs and then follows me as I enter behind Mr Roman.

"I have matters to attend to in my study, John," Mr Roman says with finality. "You may wait for Mrs Roman in the drawing room."

I wonder what a drawing room is, but I don't have to wonder long.

Alan gestures for me to follow him down the main hall and then opens the third door and ushers me in with a wave of his pale hand.

The room is huge. I feel myself dissolving within this glorious room, melting into the soft, suede chairs, disappearing among the statues and candleholders of the mantel. I wonder if I should sit.

Beyond the French window that leads into a vast garden, I glimpse a colorful shadow between the folds of the long, white drapery.