

The Willing Widow

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URSULA LECOEUR

Dedication

To Adelaide Marston Trigg, who always encouraged creative endeavors in her children and grandchildren.

The Willing Widow
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Prologue

New Orleans *August 1878*

Would she get there in time?
Renee left the North Shore hotel within an hour of receiving the telegram with the dreaded news: Her husband Rupert had the fever.

The quarantine station on the Mississippi River south of New Orleans failed; death escalated after mid-July, after the Cuban ships arrived. Anti-Cuban sentiment ran high; the source of the disease was Cuban boats, people said.

Her husband, her father and her uncle all remained in the city to help the needy, fight the disease, and care for the sick and dying. Rupert's letters described the dismal work—draining ditches, burning camphor, delivering medicines and food, performing last offices and burying the dead.

Renee struggled to remain unselfish, tamped out the urge to demand they all evacuate, join her and Aunt Sophie at Madisonville. There was no medicine for yellow fever—only fever powder, which didn't work—and, as the organs began to fail, morphine.

Like the other ladies on the Ponchartrain ferry, Renee covered herself from head to toe in dark dress, dark hat and veil; she

plugged her nose and ears with small bits of cotton, and wore a camphor crystal around her neck. All to evade yellow fever that traveled from person to person, unseen in the air.

Night had fallen when the carriage reached the outskirts of New Orleans. The eerie silence made her shudder. All businesses closed; the familiar sound of streetcars, boats and trains absent; pedestrians nonexistent. An afternoon rain had raised the scent of death and sewage from the deserted streets. Two piles of bodies on a corner of Canal Street, black and white, segregated even in death.

When the coach pulled up to the Soniat house, Renee stifled a sob and struggled to steady her breath. She found Rupert in a darkened room at the end of the first-floor hall. In spite of the poor light, his features betrayed the tell-tale signs. His cheeks were sunken, his skin the color of a coddled egg.

Madame Therese Soniat, his mother, sat beside him, dipping a cloth into a basin of water and dampening his forehead, though he showed no signs he felt it. She looked up as Renee entered the room. "Foolish girl, you should not have come."

Her throat stuck with rising tears, Renee came forward, stared down at Rupert. "Please." She wiped her eyes with her fingers. "Let me sit with him."

Rupert's eyes fluttered open and fixed on her. He clutched at the bed clothes wildly. "Renee?"

She stifled a gasp; his teeth and gums were bloody. Then she felt her father's arm around her shoulders. He put a handkerchief in her hand and when she turned she noticed for the first time two men in dark suits, a doctor and a priest, standing against the wall.

"Father Valdois has already said the Last Rites," her father said in hushed tones as they watched the doctor give Rupert a spoonful of morphine. "We didn't think we should wait."

Renee nodded her approval, even though she could not accept what he said: Rupert would die any minute.

She went around the bed to stand next to her mother-in-law. "Madame," she said. "May I have a moment with him?"

Madame Soniat's mouth tightened. "You don't know how to comfort him."

Renee hung her head; a cry escaped her lips. She pressed the handkerchief to her mouth as tears rolled down her face.

"Madame." She heard her father's voice but did not look up. "You will grant Renee some time alone with her husband."

With a huff, Madame Soniat stood. Renee kept her head down as the people in the room shuffled out after her: the priest, the doctor, her father, a nurse and two others Renee hadn't noticed—was it Monsieur and Madame Voison? What were they doing here? Shouldn't they be upriver at their plantation in Natchez?

She sank into the chair next to Rupert and took his hand. "Rupert, can you hear me?" Sitting so close, she could feel the fever coming off him. She ran the wet cloth across his forehead, choking back tears. "I love you, Rupert. I'm sorry."

"Renee," he said. "I wasn't good enough for you."

She bit her lip.

His eyes closed, his head fell to the side.

Time stopped. She may have sat there crying for five minutes or fifty. Her father came for her and led her into the parlor. The first people she saw were Henri and Marie Voison on a love seat, his hand over hers. Renee didn't speak to them. She went immediately to Madame Soniat to hug her, but the woman turned away and swept from the room.

Stunned at the rebuff, Renee turned toward her father.

"Don't worry, child." A mosquito lit on his temple and he pressed his handkerchief against it, leaving a bloody smear. "Madame Soniat is upset. Let's depart. It's not safe for you here. It's not safe for anyone." Giving a curt nod to the Voisons, he escorted her out.

Six years later...

Chapter One

Renee's first customer of the afternoon dashed from the shop, nearly slamming the bustle of her dress in the door. Sighing, she turned to her assistant. "Madame Voison won't be easy to please."

"A *mal de tête* perhaps," Michelle said with a sniff. "In any case, Madame Voison doesn't have a head for a hat."

"Shush, don't say it too loudly," Renee cautioned, though it was a comment she herself had made on occasion after certain ladies left her millinery.

"I'm sorry, Miss Renee." Michelle lowered her voice. "You've always said there are two kinds of ladies in the world—those with heads for a hat and those without."

"It goes for men as well." Renee nodded toward the French doors that separated her shop from the haberdasher Francois Lanoux, who specialized in men's top hats, bowlers and boaters. Then she picked up her pen and drew a quick portrait of the lady. Madame Voison was blessed with gorgeous skin, creamy-white and lined only faintly, which made her look almost childlike despite her sixty-plus years. Her pointed chin was somewhat severe, but a wide forehead and heavy brows accentuated her eyes—her best feature—icy blue and bright with an intelligence that made Renee curious to know her better.

Michelle gathered the bows, felts, and feathers they'd hastily displayed on the counter and put them in one of the chifforobes behind them. "I wonder if she was having a fit of some kind. Did you see the pulse throbbing in her forehead? She could hardly hold her neck still for me to measure her."

Renee agreed. In the short time Madame Voison had spent in the shop, her eyes, though attractive, had jumped with ... what? Panic? Fear? She pushed the lady's agitated state from her mind and focused on a hat design. With a swift stroke of the pen, she placed different styles beside the sketch of Madame Voison. A wide brim wouldn't suit at all.

Michelle peered over her shoulder.

"Maybe we'll make a bibi for Madame Voison," Renee said. "Those very small hats are coming into fashion in Paris right now. If it's placed high on her head like this"—she pointed to one drawing—"with a chignon strap in back under her hair rather than a chin ribbon to hold it in place, everyone will look up at the beautiful hat and her amazing eyes."

Michelle clapped her hands. "You are a genius, Miss Renee."

A deep male voice shattered the calm of the shop. "I should say you are, Miss, and I've not seen the sketch."

Startled, Renee dropped her pen. A dark-haired gentleman leaned through the doors. For one of Lanoux's customers to peer into her shop and comment on her exchange with her assistant was absolutely unheard of. But that alone didn't account for her breath hitching in her throat, her mind going blank. This gentleman was strikingly handsome, enticingly tall, with prominent cheekbones and rich, dark curls that seemed calculated to offset the etched planes of his face, the aristocratic nose, the strong jaw and ... remarkable eyes.

She jumped from her stool then halted, trapped on the spot. The shop had grown uncomfortably warm.

For once, Michelle, slack-jawed, said nothing.

"I beg your pardon, sir," Renee managed. She dropped her eyes and looked at her sketches, forcing herself to consider something—anything—practical, even as she felt his gaze rove from the hem of her dress, over her hips and breasts, up her neck to her lips. What had this gentleman—obviously a newcomer to New Orleans—overheard? Had he seen Madame Voison, listened to their comments on her nervous state, heard Michelle say she had no head for a hat?

He bowed, a grin spreading across his face, his bright eyes twinkling. "I'm merely noting that you are quite smart to suggest a bibi. I've just come from Paris, and it's quite the fashion for ladies of all ages and visages."

Her skin grew warmer still, and she put a hand against her neck in a vain attempt to calm her racing pulse. Paris? The man had a deeply resonant Irish brogue, a sonorous, caressing voice. Struggling to gain her composure, Renee fixed her eyes on him, noting his high forehead and full lips. "I'm quite sure I don't need your approval." She nodded a curt dismissal, but the man didn't move. "Do you have any particular business in a lady's millinery shop?"

"I might. It's quite possible." He grinned again. "One never knows."

"I think you'd look perfectly ridiculous in a bibi. I suggest you return to Monsieur Lanoux for something more appropriate." She regretted the words as soon as they left her lips. Why was she reacting this way? She didn't want him to leave. And he somehow knew it.

He bowed again, his smile deepening. And didn't move.

"But what if I prefer your expertise? What would you choose for me—that is, if I insisted on purchasing a lady's hat for myself?"

She met his eyes, which were glittering with humor. "For you"—she stood back and blatantly admired his face and hair.

“I’d choose something full-brimmed. It would call attention to your—”

“With ostrich feathers? Something flamboyant?”

“Purple felt, I think.” She stopped herself. Why was this man teasing her?

“What a grand entrance I’d make at the opera.”

Michelle giggled, and Renee couldn’t help smiling. “For the opera, gentlemen in New Orleans generally prefer a beaver top hat.”

“Alas, so staid compared with purple felt. But when in Rome.” He sighed dramatically. “I suppose you’re right. I must see Lanoux.” He bowed once more and retreated to the men’s shop.

Through the thin lace curtain covering the glass doors, Renee watched him in conversation with Lanoux, who now placed felt and beaver prototypes on the counter. The Irishman stood at least a foot taller than the shopkeeper, and an impeccably tailored black suit made his broad shoulders, narrow waist and long legs all the more appealing.

Michelle remained beside her. “*That* gentleman,” she whispered, “has a head for a hat.”

He did, indeed. Her breathing erratic, Renee tore her gaze away and made a show of returning to her sketches, but Michelle, clearly fascinated, watched the scene unfolding next door for some moments before sighing and retreating into the back workroom.

Renee set herself to drawing the bibi in different colors and trims. Every time she turned her head to select another pastel, she glimpsed the man standing at the counter trying on hats—modeling hats—handed to him one by one by Lanoux. Lord, she was no better than Michelle. She was entranced by his astounding head of black curls. Now and then he ran his hand through his hair and turned his head slightly as if he knew he had an audience. He carried himself with an air of confidence that had Lanoux bowing before him.

The shopkeeper began filling out his order form. Any minute, the gentleman would shake hands with Lanoux and leave the premises. A stab of disappointment surprised her with its intensity. She hoped he might step back in and apologize for his earlier interruption. Perhaps *she* should be the one to apologize. She hadn’t been particularly friendly. And now she so wanted to hear that deep, booming voice again, look more closely at his face, at the eyes she believed were blue.

Her front door opened and Madame Genevieve Rapier hurried in. The lady kept Renee busy with constant orders, but today she seemed troubled. First, Madame Voison’s agitation, and now the always congenial Madame Rapier looking upset.

She stood rather than sat at the counter. “Renee, I must tell you something. It’s very odd, but Madame Soniat just stopped me on the street ... well”—she leaned forward and lowered her voice—“she ordered me ... not to buy another hat from your shop.”

“What on earth?” Her voice caught. “Why would she do that?” Her former mother-in-law didn’t approve when Renee went into trade. In five years, she had never set foot in her shop, but to ask other ladies not to? What unmitigated gall!

“I know it’s awkward, dear, but I thought I should tell you.” The lady patted Renee’s hand. “And I assure you, I and most others won’t pay a bit of attention to her.”

Her head swimming in confusion, Renee nodded her thanks, and the lady departed quickly.

Shaking with agitation, Renee crossed the room, thinking to run down the street, find Madame Soniat and confront her, but she stopped at the door. She took a few deep breaths to calm down. She needed to think clearly, not act on impulse. Could this ruin her business? No, she assured herself. She had dozens of customers who didn’t know Madame Soniat, dozens more who wouldn’t care what the lady said. And yet. One way or the other, everybody

in New Orleans knew everybody else. Madame Soniat's prohibition would be all over town before the day ended.

She focused on arranging the hat pins and barrettes that lined a shelf near the front door and made a silent vow not to let Madame Soniat's cruelty disturb her. Desselle Millinery's location next door to a city fixture for gentlemen's hats guaranteed her success. Last spring Francois Lanoux, son of the original owner, invited her to share a joint establishment, something he assured her was the latest attraction in northern cities, where gentlemen and ladies shopped together, but separately.

Flattered, she agreed instantly and took great pleasure in decorating her shop. The rectangular room seemed twice its size in the reflection of Great-Aunt Beatrice's eight-by-ten foot mirror framed in gold-leaf, which covered a large portion of the left wall. A polished rosewood counter ran perpendicular to the mirrored wall. Six black lacquer chairs upholstered in deep pink silk provided comfortable seating for ladies making their selections. Pink toile wallpaper, a Persian carpet of light pinks and deep blues, and a crystal chandelier combined to make Desselle Millinery the most elegant shop in the Quarter. The shop's location on Royal Street near Toulouse was ideal. Business in straw bonnets had been brisk all spring and summer. More than any previous season.

A sudden flash of black taffeta drew her eye to the front window. Surely it was not ... it was. Her pulse jumped in her throat. Her mouth went dry. Madame Soniat stood right outside, exchanging heated words with Madame Voison. What was going on? Blood roared in her ears; she strained to hear the conversation, but couldn't. Madame Soniat raised her parasol in the threatening gesture Renee had seen her use so many times with the servants.

Jumping back, she swiveled—right into the arms of the Irishman. Her chest brushed his arm, her head collided with his shoulder. His breath warmed her cheek, sending shivers up her spine.

Strong hands circled her waist to steady her. "I came to apologize for my earlier intrusion."

Her cheeks burned. Unable to move, she stared at the sensual curves of his lips and inhaled the almond scent of his shaving soap.

His hands moved slowly up her back and his smile deepened. "Does this mean my apology is accepted?"

"I beg your pardon," she stammered, stepping out of his embrace. She glanced over her shoulder. The ladies were gone.

"Did something frighten you?"

"Certainly not." She raised her chin and straightened her back. "You, sir, seem to have a talent for barging into places *and* people." She didn't dare look at him, afraid she might see amusement sparkling in his eyes.

"But I didn't barge into *you*," he corrected. "I simply came over to ask if you would care to give your approval of the hats I've ordered."

She shifted her eyes to meet his. They were blue, astoundingly deep pools of azure, and as she felt herself in danger of getting lost in them, she took another step back and found her voice. "I'm sure you're capable of making your own decisions."

"Then I won't bother you further." He raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "But I will see you again." With that he bowed gracefully and returned to Lanoux's. She watched him shake the shopkeeper's hand and go out the front door. Why had she said no when she wanted to say yes?

That evening, Renee felt the stirrings of blessed relief when she entered the cool, marble-tiled hallway of the home she'd inherited from her father. In the back parlor, Aunt Sophie held up her embroidery hoop—a linen napkin with flowers, white on white, one of a dozen she was making for Renee. "Almost finished."

"It's lovely," Renee said distractedly, kissing her widowed aunt on the cheek. She sank into a chair opposite and stretched her legs out before her in as much of a slouch as her corset allowed. "You will not believe what happened today."

The frown on her aunt's face, Renee knew, signaled displeasure at her unladylike posture. "Do pour us a sherry, Renee, and tell me."

In the six years they had shared this house after both lost their husbands and Renee lost her father—Sophie's brother—in the devastating yellow fever epidemic of 1878, the dark liquid imported from Spain helped the pair through many evenings. Renee went to the cellarette across the room, poured two glasses, and handed one to Aunt Sophie. Each took a hefty swallow and Renee, still breathless, recounted Madame Rapiere's afternoon revelation—that Madame Soniat was endeavoring to keep customers away.

Aunt Sophie put her glass down with a sigh. "I can only assume that Therese Soniat has truly gone out of her mind. Some kind soul should whisk her off to the asylum on the North Shore."

Renee chuckled softly at the thought. Her aunt had a unique way of putting everything in perspective. "Thank heaven the crazy woman's wishes are having little effect. Madame Voison ordered a new hat for opening day of the Cotton Exposition."

Aunt Sophie leaned forward. "She has good reason. Her husband, Henri, is Chairman of the Committee, you know."

Renee arched an eyebrow. "I didn't."

"Just this morning an article in the *Daily Picayune* quoted Henri saying he was confident the city could raise five hundred thousand dollars so the Exposition wouldn't lose its federal funding." Aunt Sophie's soft brown eyes shone. "It's going to be so exciting. There will be visitors from all over the world, and the ladies will be shopping for hats."

For a moment, Renee imagined herself impressing fashionable French women with her own designs. The French had been exporting their style to America for nearly two hundred years. Wouldn't it be wonderful to export some hats to the continent for a change? She stood and made her way to the cellarette to

pour each a fresh glass. "The whole encounter was rather strange." Renee took a sip. "All Madame Voison really wanted today was a promise the hat would be ready in a week."

"Well, your prices won't bother her a bit." Aunt Sophie said. "She's richer than Midas."

Renee paced in front of the sofa. "While Michelle and I were speaking of possible styles, an arrogant Irishman had the audacity to insert himself in the discussion."

Her heart leaped at the memory of the handsome intruder. She recounted her reprimand of him, but stopped there. She didn't tell her aunt she had watched him shamelessly as he'd tried on top hats and bowlers. She certainly didn't tell of Madame Soniat's parasol-wielding episode outside her shop—or falling into his arms. The memory of his hands moving from her waist up her back filled her stomach with giddiness. Was she ill? Could she have caught the cold Michelle said was going around?

"I'm willing to bet you encountered Mr. William Collins. Tall? Dark curly hair?"

Renee was not surprised. Aunt Sophie usually collected all the latest gossip without stirring from the parlor.

"I've been hearing about him all afternoon." Aunt Sophie laughed and took another sip of sherry. "He's been in town less than a week, but Kathleen O'Hara's full of news of him. He's thirty-two years of age, the nephew of Patrick Collins, moved here to learn the business. And he's a bachelor."

Renee smirked. "That would explain her interest." Her heart thundered in her chest. What was *wrong* with her? Was this jealousy? Could she really be jealous of another woman's interest in a man she didn't even know?

"I'll admit Kathleen turns into something of a bloodhound when eligible men appear on the scene. But she does have three daughters, so you can't blame her for wanting to find good Catholic men."

Renee returned to the sofa, took a sip of sherry. Aunt Sophie went on. “You might think about getting to know some unmarried men yourself. And I don’t mean Monsieur Lanoux.”

“He’s my landlord and business associate, that’s all. And I don’t think too many eligible bachelors are interested in a widow.” *Epecially a widow who didn’t produce an heir.* She had been a healthy eighteen-year-old, married six months. She should have been with child when yellow jack killed her husband. Whenever they met, Madame Soniat never missed an opportunity to mention Renee’s failure in this regard, sometimes in mixed company.

Aunt Sophie understood her embarrassment over her childless state. She always offered reassurance when Renee talked of being a widow. “If Rupert hadn’t died, I’m sure you would have had many children by now.”

Not a chance. She forgave her aunt for her words because she didn’t know the entire story. Only Renee and Rupert—an older man, twenty-five years her senior—knew their secret. Now that he was dead and buried, only Renee knew.

She remained silent and Aunt Sophie turned the discussion back to the Collins family, other tidbits from Kathleen O’Hara about the prosperous Collins Cotton Factorage and Mr. William Collins’ new duties there.

Renee gazed at the large, double-hung window, at the lace blowing slightly in the early autumn breeze, and remembered the glimpses of Mr. Collins she stole through similar lace curtains. Her artist’s eye appreciated the perfect symmetry of his face, the lines of his body—he had the build of Adonis—but, added to his physical appearance, which was magnificent, he exuded a warmth she found alluring. “I fear he’ll find this city mighty dull,” she said when Aunt Sophie paused. “When he barged into my shop, he held forth about the styles of ladies’ hats in Paris, where he allowed he’d just spent some time.”

“Oh, our city’s not so dull,” Aunt Sophie countered with a smile. An optimist by nature, her aunt found something good in nearly every happenstance. “And he’ll need someone to show him around.”

“I imagine some young debutantes will clamor for the opportunity,” Renee murmured. Reliving those moments in his arms, the feel of his warm breath on her cheek, the subtle scent of orange and almond that rose from his skin, her breathing quickened and her face grew hot. Aunt Sophie, who missed nothing, gave a delighted little laugh.

Chapter Two

William left Lanoux's shop, the image of the beautiful milliner seared in his mind. He bought a saucer of coffee and chicory from a stand and savored it as he remembered every detail of their brief encounter. He'd noticed things about her he'd never noticed about another woman. Small ears, delicate ear lobes, tasteful garnet earbobs tapping gently against her elegant neck. The way her eyes kept falling on his lips, which caused a delicious blush to rise in her cheeks.

She walked with the gait of a dancer, and, if he had to guess, she had well-turned calves. He wondered how a woman in trade gained such grace, how she'd preserved the long, exquisitely tapered, unblemished hand that held her pen. When she'd turned away from the window and crashed into him, the faint smell of something intoxicating from her skin and hair—an exotic flower he couldn't name—had driven him to distraction. His hands had gone so naturally up the slender slope of her back, and he'd had to fight the urge to pull her against him and press his lips to hers.

What had stopped him? He'd sworn off women—forever. He'd left Ireland to forget a woman and here he was, less than a week in town, desiring one.

Musing thus, he traversed the French Quarter, pleased to see the mix of nationalities—Italian, Greek, French, African, Mexican,

German, Creole, Irish—in a variety of skin shades and dress. All struck him as uncommonly happy, which combined with the recent meeting, made him optimistic about his adopted city. He'd been on the Thames, the Seine, the Danube, the Tigris, the Nile. Of all the rivers he'd stared into during the last six months, none felt as promising as the murky Mississippi.

He caught himself smiling, a smile that evaporated as it occurred to him that she might be married. He stopped dead in the street. No, she couldn't be. He continued walking but the thought gnawed at him. Monsieur Lanoux referred to her as "Miss Renee." But how could she *not* be married? What man wouldn't snap her up as soon as he laid eyes on her?

The crowds he encountered crossing Canal Street brought him further back down to earth. The sky had grown dark cobalt and the wholesale boot, shoe and dry goods establishments along Magazine Street were closing up for the day. He climbed into a mule-drawn streetcar at the corner of St. Joseph. By the time he descended the car at the corner of St. Charles and Napoleon it was after eight, the night air still warm.

Back in Dublin at this time of year, the weather would be day after day of bone-chilling mist, the sky blown-out white, the rain an omnipresent threat. Though it was warmer in New Orleans, humidity and rain were a constant here, too, and Uncle Patrick was obsessed with the weather. In a season of bad rains, the price of cotton fluctuated dramatically.

William walked up the high steps of his uncle's mammoth house, built of huge boulders of sandstone. He'd missed dinner. He swung open the crystal-paned front door without disturbing Guy, the butler. Though he'd been living with his Uncle Patrick for only six days, the two men had quickly adjusted to each other's relaxed domestic scenario, which they shared with Guy, who also served as a household manager; Guy's wife, Julia, the cook; and Noah, the groom and coachman.

Ahead of him in the wide front hallway, a light shone from under the library door, positioned behind the thirty-two-foot double parlor. Knocking softly, he opened it to find his uncle at his writing desk with shirt sleeves rolled up and black cravat untied. He was in his late fifties; his hair was more salt than pepper, and his silk waistcoat fit a little snug around the middle. But his child-like energy and insatiable enthusiasm for two subjects—cotton and family—erased any signs of age on his sun-reddened face.

He looked up as William entered. “I’ve had a letter from your father.”

“It’s out of date, Uncle, I assure you.”

Uncle Patrick raised an eyebrow. “Did you see Lanoux?”

“Yes.” William removed his coat, folded it lengthwise and draped it over the back of the blue velvet couch.

“You ordered the beaver?”

“Yes.”

“Cream satin lining? Black satin band?”

“Yes, yes,” he answered distractedly, thinking of the lady next door. Joking with her about purple felt had been far more delightful than dealing with the haberdasher.

“Well, you’re going to need it for the opera season.”

“I look forward to wearing a fine top hat, Uncle. I love opera.” He hoped the beautiful milliner—Miss Renee, he reminded himself—attended the opera. His blood stirred. “I noticed a fine ladies’ millinery next door to Lanoux.”

“Of course! Owned by Renee Desselle Soniat.”

“Married?” William swallowed against the tumult of excitement waving across his stomach as he waited for an answer.

“Widowed.” Uncle Patrick shook his head slowly. “Her hat designs are exceptional, though of course, when you have a genteel lady going into trade, there are those in society, in one’s own family even, who oppose.”

He didn’t hear the rest. At the news, he was consumed by a sense of his own good fortune, that such an exquisite creature—unmarried—should happen across his path. Widowed was even better. Perhaps he could share her bed without any entanglements.

“I don’t see how it hurts a woman to use her talents,” he said, though he wasn’t really thinking about whether fine ladies should run businesses. He took a deep, satisfied breath. He didn’t care a whit whether Miss Renee’s background were genteel or not. His plans to elope with Effie—a fine Irish *lady*—had been crushed when she failed to show up at the appointed time. He’d waited all night. She’d refused to see him when he’d called the next day. His long held dream of marriage to his childhood sweetheart had been unceremoniously dashed as if she’d tossed his heart against the rocks in the Sea of Galway. So he didn’t have any great faith in gentility itself, and even less in women.

“I agree with you, lad.” Uncle Patrick waved his hand as if to erase an unpleasant scene. “And yet I can’t say I’d like to see Maureen opening a shop.” Then he returned to his original topic. “I’ve had a letter from your father.”

William cut in before his uncle could go further. “I know I gave my father cause for concern with my extensive travels, but I assure you, I can—”

“The letter.” Uncle Patrick silenced him with a raised hand. “Mentioned your recent heartbreak ... some lass named Effie. Refused you, did she?”

William said nothing.

“Now I’m susceptible to a touch of the melancholy myself, especially after my dear Bridget, your aunt, passed. May the heaven be her bed. Pity you didn’t know her.”

Uncle Patrick rose and went to pour himself a brandy. William, rolling up his shirt sleeves, joined him at the mahogany cellarette, embellished with elaborate carved cherubs, and poured himself a glass of Collins Irish Whiskey. He was glad to be well-fortified

for the discussion ahead. He knew from experience that Irishmen were as bad as their wives. They could talk about family till the sun rose.

“The point is, I know how it feels to lose someone you love, but you’re going to have to push forward. You can’t get stuck in the past. Surely you’ve seen by your poor sister, Sarah, the sad directions that an unhealthy passion can take.”

“Uncle,” he began, once they were seated again. “I assure you the letter is old.” He didn’t even want to utter Effie’s name. “I’m delighted to be here. When I set out on my travels, I left the distillery in fine order, in the hands of my second brother Cormac—under Pa, of course. I’ve never had more than a feigned interest in the liquor business. I’m grateful to be here, learning the work. I know I’ll be good at it.”

“You don’t mind dealing with figures, then?”

“It’s my specialty.”

“Good. We’re the financial veins of the cotton industry; most of what a cotton factor does is ledgers and I intend to put you to work right away, you realize. It’s a tortuous chain of financing, but we get three percent of every transaction, so it can be a very lucrative one.” He chuckled, not immodestly. “And your Pa?”

“Liquor’s a stable business, and Pa’s showing no lagging.” William paused to sip the whiskey. “When does Maureen arrive?”

“This Sunday, the fifth.” Uncle Patrick didn’t break his line of thought. “I guess your Pa may have grown a little portly.” He patted his stomach. “I certainly have. Our own Pa tended in that direction.”

“No,” William said, “though he does complain of pains in the hip now and again.”

Both men took a swallow of spirits. Then Uncle Patrick began discoursing on one’s duty to the Church. “You know it would never have worked between you and this Effie,” he said. “The Protestants and the Catholics are too contrary, and faith is as

important as blood. A man—and a woman, for that matter—need both faith and family to carry them through the rough patches in life. A couple without faith *or* family is going to have a hard row to hoe.”

William started to protest, something along the lines of *Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments*, but stopped himself. “I don’t doubt it, Uncle. I can see that now.”

He didn’t dare ask about Renee Desselle Soniat a second time for fear of revealing his intense attraction, which was something he preferred to examine alone. He needn’t have worried. Uncle Patrick turned the discussion away from ladies to the course of training he would undergo as a cotton factor.

First he would learn to sample and grade bales. On this subject, Uncle Patrick was profuse, standing up to pace the room in his enthusiasm, bringing the Collins’ gift for poetics heavily to bear on the topic. “‘Middling’ is the basic grade, the one on which market quotations are based. The term ‘strict’ simply means half-grade. But forget that for now. The main standards are length, which we call *staple*, and color. Here, I just happen to have some examples in my desk.”

William had to smile as his uncle brought out thirteen handfuls of cotton wisps, lined them up along the marble-topped table beside the sofa and asked him to sort them in descending order of quality. He chose the best three and worst three easily, but there were seven in between, and he was distracted by Uncle Patrick’s circling the sofa, shouting out descriptive terms that related to spots and hue—*stained, tinged, luster, bloom, buff colored, creamy, dead white, off color, fair color, dead-bluish white, dingy, yellowish, of reddish or grayish cast*—as well as staple and consistency—*pliability, cling, stringiness, strength*.

As he held each wisp between his thumb and first two fingers, his mind returned to Renee and to the finest grade, highest luster cotton from which her undergarments were likely made. Cotton

petticoat, cotton chemise, cotton drawers. No matter how fine, how soft, how white, the cloth wouldn't compare to the softness of her cheek, her neck, her breasts, the back of her knees, her inner thighs.

Uncle Patrick carried on with further details. Cotton often contained foreign matter—unripe fibers, motes, leaf, dirt, sand—known as “trash,” which could be bright, blackish, pinhead, or peppery, depending on the region where it grew. Collins Factorage channeled cotton from the Coast, the Delta, the Red River Valley, the Texas plains, and everywhere in between.

“I'm grateful you're here, lad,” Patrick added. “My appointment to the Exposition Committee—I'm honored to hold the post, mind you—but it's going to take a great deal of time.” He gazed into his glass. “We're already running behind schedule. There are thirteen of us, but some are involved only as a result of political shenanigans. It's proving difficult to get things done.”

“I have some experience,” William offered. “I supervised the construction of a new distillery. If I can be of any help—”

“You just focus on the factorage,” Patrick said and launched into another portion of his lecture.

By the time they retired for the night, William's head was whirling with cotton. He named the color of his bar of soap on his washstand “good middling,” his pillowcases were “strict middling fair,” and drifting off to sleep, he saw, not sheep jumping a fence, but samples of cotton, high wispy clouds behind his closed eyes.

He put these visions to rest only by picturing the enchanting Miss Renee. For a few brief moments, his fingers had rested on the tops of her hips as his hands circled her waist. Her warm breath had caressed his cheek. He closed his eyes and saw her reddish brown hair, curls across her forehead, her porcelain skin flushed, her deep pink lips parted, her topaz eyes wide with surprise.

What had frightened her? What had she seen that had caused her to jump with nerves? And why couldn't he get the beautiful

milliner out of his mind? He turned these questions over and over as he fell into a space between dreaming and waking that was blasted white with cotton.

He held a petticoat between his thumb and forefinger, pliable but strong cotton, dead white, and lifted it with no effort. Lying on his side, half his body on Renee, half on cool grass, he pushed the garment higher, taking her outer skirt with it, exposing her dainty shoes and silk stockings. He worked his hand upward, along her leg.

Her eyes shut, never saying no, Renee gave a soft moan only when he brushed his fingers on the bare flesh of her thigh above her garter. His lips came down hard on hers.

Opening her mouth for him, Renee welcomed his tongue deep into her, then bit hungrily at his lips. Not releasing him even then, she spread her legs, offering him a clear path into her crotchless drawers. “Touch me.” Her tone was commanding, the same she had used earlier when she suggested he see to his business with Mr. Lanoux. Happy to obey, William gripped her mound with his whole hand, parted her with his fingers, and finally pressed his thumb on her most sensitive spot.

She clutched his shoulders, frantic for more. Following the widow's lead, he rubbed more vigorously with his thumb. She arched her back to meet his hand and nibbled at his lips, even as her hand reached blindly for his waistband.

He woke with a start, his body trembling, his sheets sweaty. Dear God, he hadn't spent thirty minutes total with Renee Desselle. Yet he needed this woman in his bed.

Chapter Three

As more and more orders for fall hats came in, Renee congratulated herself on anticipating the rush. The minute she learned that New Orleans would host the World's Cotton Centennial Exposition, she had placed orders to Europe. From a Paris *plumassier*, ostrich and egret feathers; from a supplier in Nice, yards of grosgrain ribbon in many different colors and widths. From Whitby, England, real jet beads, made from fossilized wood. Some dressmakers and milliners cut corners and used French jet, which was no more than black glass, but not Renee.

Madame Rapier, back in early this morning, wanted three hats the first week in November, giving Renee exactly three weeks. She was in her sixties, Renee guessed, a beautiful silver-haired woman and a great advertisement for Desselle Millinery, especially as she didn't shy away from daring styles, *le dernier cri* from Paris.

Charming, too, she always shared a humorous story. Today was no exception. "I have to tell you, Madame Soniat once said she loved my black straw hat with the high crown *and* she admired my courage to wear it."

The two laughed together, and Renee suspected the lady only mentioned it as a way to assure her that all New Orleans understood how odd and opinionated Madame Soniat could be. And no one would stay away from the millinery because she demanded it.

Alone now, fingering a deep green velvet swatch of Madame Rapier's fabric, Renee pictured the blues and greens of peacock feathers trimming a hat of this color. Bird feathers of any species were the rage; to date she'd avoided peacock because these feathers were twice the price of ostrich. Madame Rapier craved something unique and elegant for the Exposition's opening day. Peacock feathers would more than suffice. She added some figures in her head, pleased with the sizable profit she would make. Indeed, the Exposition was good for business.

When the front door opened, Renee looked up. And started, her pulse jumping. The handsome gentleman from last week, taller than she remembered, strolled in. As he turned to close the door behind him, his expertly-cut tailcoat shifted and the fabric of his trousers molded for a moment to the finely-hewn muscles of his upper thighs. Dear heavens. She'd never noticed such a thing in her life.

He ushered in a petite young lady whose head didn't reach his shoulders. Renee had been so absorbed in the gentleman, she hadn't even *seen* his companion. Her excitement evaporated in an instant.

The lady nodded to Renee as she advanced slowly to the counter. The gentleman charged forward—nothing shy about this man. "Good day. I'd like to buy this lady the finest hat in your shop."

Renee's heart beat wildly to see him so close, just the rosewood countertop separating them. She struggled to make sense of the man's appearance with a beautiful woman. Surely he couldn't be William Collins. Or Aunt Sophie had it wrong. He must have been in town for far longer than two weeks. No man, not even one this handsome, could acquire a mistress much less a young wife in so short a time.

She took a deep breath and spoke in her most professional voice. "Certainly, sir." She glanced at the young lady—"Please sit

down”—and motioned to the chairs at the counter. The lady made herself comfortable in one while the gentleman took another, leaving an empty chair between them.

Unequal to meeting the man’s eyes, Renee turned to the lady. “I have quite a few sample hats, which you may try on, but I like to individualize each hat. I believe a hat must fit the personality of each lady. All Desselle hats are made to order and exclusive. No two are alike.”

“That’s what I’ve been told.” The gentleman’s lips curled in a broad smile. “That’s why we’re here.”

He wore another impeccable three-piece suit, a dark navy, which perfectly complimented his coloring—dark hair, deep blue eyes, a pale face that would have seemed delicate if not for a faint olive undertone and signs that he’d often been outside without his hat.

Renee felt hot and light-headed. What was happening that she couldn’t think straight in her own shop? Again, she focused her attention on the lady. “I always begin by making a sketch. It will take just a few minutes.”

The young lady giggled a little. She was quite beautiful and very young, not far out of the convent school. She wore a simple bonnet of navy blue cotton with a ribbon tie beneath her neck. The fabric—Renee supposed it hand-woven in England—matched her high-necked dress with pearl buttons.

Renee’s pen moved quickly across her sketch pad, delineating the perfect oval face, the well-proportioned nose and mouth. She asked her to remove her bonnet and volumes of dark curls fell past her shoulders, similar in color and texture to the gentleman’s. Her eyes were an intense blue, almost sapphire.

As she worked, she could feel the man studying her, and she became intensely aware of her own pursed lips, of her habit of nibbling a bit on her bottom lip. “There.” Still holding her pen, she pushed the finished sketch pad across the counter for the couple to see.

He leaned close. “That’s a wonderful portrait. I’m very impressed.”

The young lady glowed, clearly pleased to see her beauty reflected in the drawing. “That is quite remarkable, isn’t it, William?”

So he *was* William Collins. Her pen rolled to the floor and, flustered, she came around the counter to pick it up, but the gentleman was quicker. He snatched it up and placed it in front of her. She forced her face into a smile. “From this sketch, I’ll know what sort of hat will suit the young lady best.”

“And what style do you think that would be? We’re totally dependent on your expertise.” He glanced sideways at his companion, who didn’t contradict him.

Renee looked at her. “Do you have a style preference, Miss?”

“Pardon me. Allow me to introduce ourselves. I am William Collins, recently come from Dublin.”

“I believe you said Paris last week,” Renee corrected.

“Ah, yes. I apologize. I should not have intruded.” The young lady’s eyes arched in surprise. He waved his hand. “And this exquisite creature beside me is also a Collins.”

Renee barely managed to nod a greeting to the lady. A chill washed over her, turning her insides to stone. “Renee Desselle. So glad to make your acquaintance.” She turned quickly to the chiffobes behind her to hide her shock. So he had married already. Wouldn’t Mrs. O’Hara be disappointed to hear it? She felt deep humiliation at her foolishness. How could she have let herself think so constantly about this man, whom she didn’t even know?

She pulled out several copies of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, turned and pointed out a few hats she thought would be particularly flattering to Mrs. Collins. Then she brought out her felt prototypes, hoping to guide the discussion to a quick resolution, but Mr. Collins insisted on examining so many styles, colors, materials and trims that Renee grew exasperated. The lady would agree

with Renee that a velvet hat in deep blue—her favorite color, she allowed—would suit her perfectly and Mr. Collins would ask to see five additional colors. They weighed the merits of feathers, ribbons and what she assured them was a very popular trim right now—velvet flowers of many colors and species complete with stems.

The two were a strange pair—friendly, but distant for newlyweds. He touched her shoulder once or twice and made flattering remarks about how pretty she looked in one or another sample hat, but Renee saw no passion in his eyes. What's worse, he seemed to treat his wife in a joking manner—once or twice he called her “Mo”—affectionate but somehow disrespectful. For her part, the wife seemed to enjoy being the center of attention, but she took more interest in hats than in her husband.

Why did a man take a wife half his age? Why did men think a schoolgirl would make them happy? Schoolgirls didn't make men happy. When Renee married, Rupert was forty-three; she, eighteen.

More than an hour and a half passed and Renee struggled to remain courteous. Perhaps this Mr. William Collins had no intention of buying a hat. She glanced pointedly at the clock on the wall more than once. She began to wonder if she could finish with this pair before Madame Voison arrived for her sketch. The appointment had been rescheduled twice and she dared not keep the lady waiting. Michelle, out sick with a head cold, wasn't available.

With the last polite smile she possessed, Renee made her final suggestion: a hat she knew was perfect for the lady who, though married, was nevertheless very young and should not be too flamboyant in a large brim. “We've given this some thought, and I think after all we've discussed that blue is the lady's best color. I think a blue velvet, this one”—she pointed to a swatch on the counter—“is a good fall color. I will make a pork pie hat.”

The lady grimaced, and Renee explained quickly. “It's a terrible name, but it's a flat hat with a low crown and a small rolled brim. Velvet is a soft fabric so I line it with horsehair to maintain the shape. I'll trim it with the velvet flowers I showed you, a mixture of colored flowers—red and pink roses with green stems—and the hat will look beautiful with many dresses and coats.”

“Splendid.” Mrs. Collins clapped her hands. “I do love flowers. Don't you think that's perfect, William?”

He rose, squeezed his wife's shoulders, then leaned so far over the counter that his lips were close to Renee's. “Could I see the French blue fabric one more time, please?”

Stepping back, Renee pushed a handful of swatches down the counter with her left hand. Determined to focus his mind on blue—and blue only—she held the six-inch square out to him in the palm of her right hand. “This one, sir.”

She heard the wife's soft voice. “Yes.”

He ran his fingers across the velvet. Heat shot through her as if no fabric separated them. She drew in her breath quickly but couldn't pull her hand away. Her skin tingled from the nape of her neck to her toes.

“It's quite soft,” Mr. Collins said, keeping his eyes on hers as he slowly withdrew his fingers. “We'd like you to make that up. When will it be ready?”

Taking shallow breaths, Renee fell into the rhythm of long-practiced habit. She brought out her order book from beneath the counter and jotted down the specifics. “One week from today. The cost will be thirty-five dollars. I require a fifteen-dollar deposit.” She paused at the address line on her form. Although she knew perfectly well where his uncle lived, she didn't know this man's domestic arrangement. “If you will give me an address, Mr. Collins, I will have the hat delivered.”

“I'm by this way often. I'll stop by to pick it up myself.”

“Thank you, William,” the young lady gushed. “I know it will be beautiful. I can’t wait to wear it.” Her eyes traveled upward to the gentleman’s. “No one could have a better cousin.”

“Cousin?” Renee choked out, unable to hide her astonishment. “I was under the impression—”

“Miss Collins is my first cousin, Madame. I expect you know my uncle, Patrick Collins. Maureen—”

“Maureen Collins!” Renee interrupted. “I didn’t recognize you. It’s been years, and you’ve grown into a beautiful young lady.” She reached across the counter, took the girl’s hands in hers. “Welcome home.”

“Thank you. I’m so happy to be back.” Maureen giggled nervously.

Turning from the girl, she caught William’s eyes. Her legs trembled. He *knew*. She’d assumed he and his companion were married, and her visible relief announced her attraction to him. She might as well wear a sign around her neck.

She held onto the counter’s underside for support as he put three five-dollar gold coins beside the blue velvet swatch. She gave him a receipt with an unsteady hand.

“Thank you so much for your time. I know my *cousin*,” he grinned as he emphasized the word, “will look beautiful in this hat.”

“One week,” Renee stammered, trying to regain her dignity, though she knew her cheeks were flaming. “The hat will be ready. Let me know if you’d prefer it delivered.”

“Oh, I’ll be here in person. But I hope we meet again before then.” He bowed graciously, held out his arm and escorted Maureen from the shop.

Chapter Four

Stepping out of Desselle Millinery onto the banquette—New Orleans’ term for a sidewalk—Maureen wore an enormous grin that threatened to break into outright laughter, which she fortunately contained while they were still in view through the shop windows. William held her arm tightly at his elbow, applying a warning pressure until they turned the corner onto Iberville.

Then she broke out teasingly. “Heavens, Cousin. Now that I know you are so enthralled by ladies’ hats, I’ll consult you before I leave the house each morning.”

He gave a low chuckle.

“She’s lovely,” Maureen went on. “You know she’s a widow, I presume.”

“Your father mentioned something along those lines,” he said with careful nonchalance.

“She’s several years older than I. But New Orleans is a small town, you’ll find. All the old families know each other. Miss Renee said she didn’t recognize me. I do believe she thought you and I—that *we* were married. And *you* seemed to enjoy letting her think so.”

He felt Maureen eyeing him for a reaction as he guided her around a section of broken slate. She was right, of course. He’d been pleased to see how charming, how hot and flustered Renee

looked when she learned they were cousins, but he remained silent and allowed Maureen's youthful prattle to continue.

"I haven't seen Renee in years. I don't believe she was at Mother's funeral. Maybe she'd had enough of funerals at that point. Having your husband and father die within weeks of each other. Can you imagine? Yellow fever, you know. I don't suppose you have that in Ireland."

"Not anything like here, thank God." William was tempted to ask her about Renee's husband, but Maureen talked much faster than she walked, and he suspected if he let her carry on he would eventually get all the information he sought.

"Papa told me about Effie, you know. I'm sure that can't have been easy, but you're on the other side of the world now. New Orleans has *the* most splendid social season. You'll have a better time at all the balls if you rekindle the flames of romance."

He laughed outright at the phrase. "The *flames* of romance?"

As he pulled her back from the curb to avoid a passing mule cart, she looked up at him, meeting his eyes. "That's very kind of you, Cousin, to offer to pick up my hat." She gave him another mischievous grin. "When you return to the shop, you should invite Miss Renee to the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show."

They stopped at the corner where the Collins carriage waited, Noah at the reins. "The Wild West Show isn't until November."

"I *knew* it!" Maureen tittered with delight. "So you want to see her again sooner. You *need* to see her again. Perhaps your pulse quickens at the very idea."

William was surprised his pulse *did* quicken, that his heart had been racing from the moment he set foot in the shop and it still hadn't abated, but he laughed it off, lest Maureen guess the depths of his desire. He'd seen Miss Renee twice, but she came into his mind continuously, at the least provocation. Her chestnut hair, her sparkling topaz eyes, her scent. When he'd caught her in his arms

that first day, again this afternoon when he'd leaned closer across the counter, her exotic citrusy, flowery smell engulfed him.

He tried to clear his head. What did Maureen, a child of seventeen, know about a pulse quickened by lust? Nothing, he hoped. Maureen pressed his arm with encouragement and kept Noah waiting while she delivered the details he'd been seeking. "I remember meeting her husband, Rupert Soniat. He seemed, well, *old*, a friend of her father, I think. Now I'm not saying there was anything wrong with the match. I'm sure he was very kind and she was sorry when he died but—"

"What?"

Her eyes shone. "I'd be willing to bet she wasn't passionately in love with him."

The pronouncement, however speculative, boosted William's mood further. After helping Maureen into the carriage, he strolled through the fall sunshine to the factorage. A day studying planters' accounts awaited him, but he didn't expect math, however dull, would calm the roiling need that had been his ongoing preoccupation from the moment he laid eyes on the delightful milliner.

He crossed Canal Street into the American sector, where Royal Street became St. Charles Avenue. In this neighborhood, cotton was the only subject. All streets near the Exchange were crowded with speculators, planters, forwarding merchants, bankers, lawyers, blacklegs, skippers of steamers, and other middlemen—all talking of crops, values and market conditions in the slang of the Boston and Liverpool wharves.

He walked a little taller, and though he was certain he wore a smile, he didn't try to suppress it. All seemed right with the world, and he felt an overwhelming benevolence for the many acquaintances and strangers he passed. Though he always had a few coins ready for the beggars around the lunch stalls, today he gave them more than enough for a full meal.

He took a right on Perdido Street—factor’s row—and made his way to the third floor office at Collins Cotton Factorage on the corner of Carondelet. He sat at his desk, his back to the large room where half-dozen clerks worked. This room had twelve-foot ceilings with windows on the north side, northern light being the best for grading cotton. In the middle of the room, a long table was layered with various grades of drying samples.

William’s main task was to write to Emile Colville, owner of the largest cotton harvest they handled. The letter needed to state the following: First, Collins Factorage would no longer store Colville’s three thousand pounds until the price rose; second, the factorage would state the classification and prospects for the bales in local and foreign markets; and third, the factorage had received notice that the Jesuits had expelled Colville’s son Vespasian from the College of the Immaculate Conception—for the fourth and final time. William composed the letter mentally as he used an abacus to calculate commissions on household supplies that Colville had charged against the harvest.

His assistant Fabre perched on a nearby stool, imbibing copious amounts of coffee and lighting one cigarette after another, so it was no wonder the pale green walls were yellowed with tobacco smoke. Fabre was supposed to be scanning the newspapers for the advertisements of freighters on their way from New Orleans to New York, Boston, Baltimore, Providence, Liverpool, or Le Havre. Ship owners needing to fill their holds gave discounts for high volumes of cotton, and jumping on these discounts ensured greater profits to the factorage. The *Daily Picayune* was spread on the table next to Fabre’s notepad, but his eyes weren’t on shipping ads. William could see he was actually reading the highly colorful accounts of yesterday’s arrests for obscene language, indecent exposure, cross-dressing and vagrancy.

William, too, struggled to concentrate. The visit to Desselle Millinery left his heart indomitably light, his body tense with

desire. He pictured the lovely Renee blushing at his emphasis that Maureen was his cousin. He flushed himself even at the memory, and the ledger in front of him lost all meaning. He grew hard at the thought of her beautiful body in her smart cotton dress of alternating light and dark green stripes with its high neck and long sleeves. Its bodice with a line of small pearl buttons emphasized her well-rounded bosom, tiny waist, and luscious hips. His hands had circled that waist last week. Today when he’d placed his hand on the velvet in her palm, he’d felt a jolt of excitement shoot through his body. He needed her touch, her kiss.

Uncle Patrick sat in his large, windowed office that extended the length of the main room, negotiating with brokers from Lowell mills and Charleston commission houses. The rest of the afternoon was booked solid with meetings with lawyers and insurance men, arguably the two most important links in the cotton chain, since they drew up the contracts that insured the extremely-combustible cotton through its many stages of transport—a percentage of which would be deducted from the planter’s yield.

The harvest had shifted into overdrive. William had now worked thirteen days non-stop. As cotton shipments poured into New Orleans, the factorage staff arranged for these to be weighed, pressed, repackaged, stored in warehouses, sheds, and wharves—then shipped. This week’s distressing weather report—heavy rains in the Delta—was already changing the value of next week’s shipment. Furthermore, on the rare occasions that Uncle Patrick offered his opinion on individual price negotiations, he demonstrated an unpredictably soft heart for mixed bales from small growers and peddlers.

Though William loved the challenges of his new job, he was exhausted. Typically at his desk by eight, he spent most mornings writing to planters while another clerk, Neville, graded incoming cotton. Price negotiations, account summaries and working figures took the bulk of the afternoon. Often he labored through

luncheon sorting bills of sale, lading and drayage; or organizing warehouse receipts in ledgers listing each bale by name. Some days he left the factorage only to go down to the street-level hotel for a quick meal, and some evenings he, Fabre, and Neville played whist or lolled about smoking and telling tales as they waited for news from the midnight boats. One or two nights, he'd even slept in the Collins warehouse opposite the wharf.

Maureen's arrival had brought liveliness and fresh spirit to what he now realized had become a rather joyless pattern with Uncle Patrick. William was gratified to see the concern lines on his uncle's forehead smooth over somewhat when she flitted around the house. She'd lived with her Aunt Colleen in Atlanta since her mother's death three years earlier and was now catching up with her friends from Ursuline Academy. Her list of upcoming soirees would test the stamina of a race horse.

With Maureen home, William and Uncle Patrick had made a point of taking at least breakfast in the formal dining room of the St. Charles mansion, which had been fancifully and exquisitely decorated by Patrick's late wife, Bridget. The round dining table with lion's feet and cherub carvings was made of a single cut of cypress. In a three-sided bay, stained-glass windows depicted unicorns and gryphons. At the far end of the room, four carved caryatids—draped female figures in the Grecian style—supported an alabaster mantelpiece. Gilded tea paper on the dining room ceiling reflected the color of the glazed terra-cotta walls. The molding and sconces were twenty-four karat gold doré. A delicate garland in plaster relief circled the silver, bronze and crystal gas-lit chandelier.

Personally, William found the room overwhelming. The opulent décor made it difficult to eat the simple breakfast fare—corn cakes, fig preserves, buttermilk biscuits, gravy, sausages, syrup—and keep up with Maureen's girlish chatter. The Bouchard sisters were particular friends of hers and she regaled William and her father

with daily updates on which sister—Elise? Carine? Arielle or was it Anna?—was mooning over which bachelor—Blaise? Vespasian? Jules? William couldn't keep the names straight. Her other obsession was the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show, scheduled to open its doors in New Orleans in November. It was to offer rope tricks, shooting matches, and a reenactment of a stage-coach robbery.

William understood it must be difficult for her, returning to New Orleans, her mother dead, her father preoccupied and distant. The Bouchard sisters were amusing, no doubt, but he didn't get the impression they were particularly wise. Maureen was at the age of heightened romantic sensibilities and in danger of drowning in them. Since she lacked a mother's advice to help her navigate the upcoming season, William made the private decision to keep close tabs on her, to protect her from making foolish mistakes during her first foray into society.

In return, he'd pick her brain until he knew Renee's complete history. He fancied Maureen would even play the sleuth for him. Surely, if he asked her, she would visit the shop, have a chat with Renee and ascertain the milliner's interest in him.

He quickly pushed that thought away. He didn't need a go-between. He had only to look at Renee's face to know she fancied him. Her dazzling topaz eyes watched his every move, her cheeks flushed a soft pink and once or twice, when she didn't realize he was looking, he'd caught her lips parted in a way that suggested she longed for his kiss as much as he longed for hers.

Chapter Five

Renee made her walk home dazedly, barely aware of the neighbors and scenery. Early evenings were her favorite time; she cherished her walk through the Quarter and today she enjoyed playing a little game, imagining Mr. Collins was watching her, which made her tarry, adding an extra sway to her hips. She passed the bustling cafés and oyster saloons; she passed the single women of all stripes hurrying across the slate of Jackson Square, retreating en masse with their purchases; she passed the couples strolling arm in arm toward restaurants or the vaudeville shows. But she only saw herself—and thought of Mr. Collins admiring her as she walked.

The setting sun created orange and purple patterns in the sky over the tile roofs. Mr. Collins—the Mr. Collins who didn't take his eyes off her for the two hours he shopped for his cousin's hat—hadn't married a young lady just out of the schoolroom. How could she have been so distracted by him that she didn't recognize Maureen? How had she misinterpreted the flirting? He'd very nearly stood on his head to get her attention, and she'd returned it with indifference, the only response appropriate when a married man was forward.

Renee grinned like a fool at the memory of his different tactics—asking to see the fabric swatches a third time—but her elation was followed by a turbulence of regret so strong she

stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. Had she rebuffed him so effectively that she'd lost her chance with him?

Her heart lifted again. He'd said he would pick up Maureen's hat next week. She doubted her ability to withstand seven days and nights without seeing him and yet his last words—that he hoped they would meet again before then—filled her stomach with nerves, even as her chest welled with excitement: Mr. Collins was as attracted to her as she was to him. The realization made her skin tingle, and she stopped to catch her breath in front of Adler's, a shoe store on the corner of Dumaine. What was happening to her? Couldn't she make it home without stopping dead in her tracks or racing down the street?

She stared at the display of ladies' boots in the window. All intended for dress, the shoes featured small heels, though heights and fastenings varied. The green Moroccan leather half-boots with side buttons and curved Louis heels were just what Madame Rapier needed for her Exposition outfit. As she stepped into the recess between the shop's two large windows to get a side view, her eyes wandered to a pair of black half-boots with a bit of black braid and a tassel stitched at the top. She liked side-button boots, and these would be perfect for days at the shop. Perhaps she could figure out a way to remove the offending tassel.

She didn't have to be concerned with the price of fine boots, thank heavens. She had a modest inheritance from her father, a stipend from her departed husband, and she was doing extremely well for herself in business. Even so, she decided against the boots. As she stepped out from the window alcove, she caught sight of Robert Mills, Mr. Lanoux's hatter of many years, a half-block behind her. It was odd for him to be in this part of town at this hour. His wife and children often came to meet him at the end of the day and walk with him to their cottage in the Tremé.

At St. Phillip, Renee stopped to buy a half-dozen pralines for Aunt Sophie. As the *pralinere* took her coins, Renee anticipated

Aunt Sophie's reaction to the tale of William and Maureen Collins, what she was calling in her own mind *the most time-consuming sale in Desselle's history*.

She tucked the candy into her black leather handbag and looked up. Robert lingered across the street, watching her. She turned and nodded toward him in recognition, but he glanced at his shoes, and Renee sensed something amiss. She'd known him for more than a year. What was he doing, pretending not to recognize her?

By now, sunset had given way to a sky swirling with dark purple clouds. A chill crept over her, as the wind blew dry leaves against her skirt. Going left, she quickened her pace. She walked the four more blocks in record time, but Robert matched her step for step. Several times she stopped to look in a shop window, so she could check his whereabouts in the glass's reflection, but the shadows of the gaslights in the street made it difficult to distinguish him from unfamiliar figures. Though she told herself that it was absurd to be unnerved by the man's behavior, she was relieved to step inside her own house and lock the door behind her.

She hurried into the back parlor. Aunt Sophie put down her embroidery and stood. "My dear! Did you run home? Your face is flushed."

Renee hurried into the front parlor, pulled the lace curtain back and peeked out.

"What is it?" Her aunt's voice filled with concern.

"It's Robert Mills, Mr. Lanoux's hatter. See him?" She pointed to the man leaning against the bricks of the house across the street.

Aunt Sophie handed her a glass of water and took her place at the gap in the drapes. "How odd. He's watching the house." She lifted a monocle to her left eye for a second look.

Renee sipped the water. "He followed me all the way home."

"How truly *peculiar*. What does he think he's going to see, watching the two of us? Let's ignore him." Aunt Sophie closed the

velvet drapes across the lace under-curtains. "There. He can't see us. I suspect he'll go on home after a while. Why don't you pour us a sherry?"

Renee went to the cellarette. Estelle, the housekeeper, busied about in the dining room setting the table for dinner. Twice Renee asked her to go to the window and check if a dark-haired man in tan pants and a green shirt was across the street. Yes, he was, each time.

"Maybe he'll go home when he's hungry," Aunt Sophie murmured, a touch of anxiety in her voice.

"I suspect Monsieur Lanoux put him up to this. But Robert is harmless, simple-minded, you know. I'm sure there's just a misunderstanding. I'll talk to Monsieur Lanoux first thing in the morning and put a stop to it."

The pair went into the dining room. They prayed before the meal, Estelle served, and Renee poured them each a glass of claret, their *vin ordinaire*.

"I have some news of the Collins family," Aunt Sophie began.

"Oh?" What had Aunt Sophie heard this time?

The modest meal of beef stew over rice accompanied by a fresh loaf of French bread smelled delicious, but Renee was agitated by Robert's presence and had little appetite. She broke off a piece of bread and waited.

"Patrick Collins is planning a grand coming out for his daughter Maureen. According to Kathleen O'Hara, she arrived by train from Atlanta with three steamer trunks and a hat trunk. With all the Creole families attempting to keep up, there should be some wonderful balls and parties this season."

"The young lady came in the shop this morning."

Aunt Sophie's eyes widened. "And I thought I had the latest news!"

"I'm embarrassed to say I didn't recognize her"—she paused dramatically—"her Cousin William escorted her."

“Ahhh.” Sophie dragged out the syllable. “So William Collins was in the shop yet again?”

“And took almost two hours to select one simple hat,” she said.

“Mr. Collins is interested in far more than a hat, and you know it.” Aunt Sophie took a healthy sip of claret to emphasize her point. “I’m not going to let you hide yourself away in that shop any longer.”

Renee laughed. “He seems to rather like the shop.”

“I’m serious,” Aunt Sophie said, though she joined in the laughter. “It’s time you—we—began accepting invitations.”

Renee imagined herself in a dress with a low bodice, her shoulders bare, her bosoms scarcely covered, William Collins kissing her neck.

But her aunt broke into her thoughts. “I haven’t seen Patrick Collins since his Bridget’s funeral, not to talk to for any length of time, anyway. Three years now.”

Aunt Sophie alone had represented the Desselles at the funeral Mass. Renee had been ill with a cough that day, though not as terribly sick as she’d pretended. She had not wanted to go to that funeral. She had lost her own mother at the age of fifteen and that death remained the most horrible event of Renee’s life.

She pushed the memory aside and smiled at her aunt. “Maureen’s very pretty. And my hat design is stunning. She’ll likely have a dozen suitors within the month. Just as her cousin will have ladies chasing after him.” Renee was unable to resist a jab at Mrs. O’Hara. “We already know at least one matron who’s tracking him.”

Aunt Sophie leaned closer to Renee but didn’t scold. “The word in town is that the young man is good-looking, but I can tell you, if he takes after his uncle, he’s also a good man. There’s kindness in his uncle that you don’t find in men every day.”

Renee nodded. “I know Papa had great respect for him.” From her childhood, she remembered snatches of conversation between her parents about the new cotton factor’s hiring policies. Her father had said Patrick Collins didn’t care what color a man’s skin was or what language he spoke. He paid generously for a day’s work to former slaves, Chinamen and Choctaw Indians. He was incredibly successful as a cotton factor, and he was fair to all.

“You may not know this, Renee, but Patrick Collins and I were quite a couple during my season. He was everything a woman could dream of, smart, handsome, generous, and prepared to ask for my hand.” She sighed. “I suppose it wasn’t meant to be. Before the year was out, I met my James and Patrick met his Bridget.”

“When I first met your uncle,” Aunt Sophie continued with a wistful look at the chandelier’s globes, “I was coming out of the water at Lake Pontchartrain in a bathing dress and there he was. I knew at once I’d met a man like no other. He swept me off my feet.”

“My feelings for Rupert were different than yours for Uncle James,” Renee said, choosing her words carefully. “If I ever meet the right man, I’m not sure I’ll know—” She stopped in mid-sentence, her emotions a chaos after the morning’s meeting with William.

Once again, Aunt Sophie’s face took on a far-away look. “Your stomach flips and your knees weaken when you see him across a room. You can’t breathe when he looks at you directly. And you’re scared he might walk straight over and you’ll have to speak, but you think you’ll die if he doesn’t. You’ll know, Renee, you’ll know.”

Chapter Six

With late hours at the forage, William had missed dinner two nights in a row, but tonight, he made it while a half ham, green beans and a sweet potato pie still graced the sideboard. His uncle and cousin were having dessert—Charlotte Russe and coffee—and he felt the tension the moment he entered the room.

“I thought cornflower, but Anna had her eye on ruby. I only had to picture it to see it was the more elegant choice.” Photography was the rage in Maureen’s set and she constantly urged everyone to *picture it*, whatever it may be. In this case, as far as William could guess, she was talking about satin trim that would play some part in Anna Bouchard’s intimate trousseau.

While he was happy to picture Renee Desselle with or without a lace nightgown, he certainly did not want to picture one of the Bouchard sisters, and Uncle Patrick seemed similarly disinclined. Slack-jawed, his face bleached of color, he seemed to be making no effort to keep up with Maureen’s chatter.

“The wedding is eight days after All Saint’s Day,” she said with significance, “and Miss Lacombe died August 23rd. The invitations have already been engraved. Now some far-flung great-aunt has gotten concerned about the date, digging around to find a Church law that says you have to wait a certain number of days between a funeral, a holy day of obligation, and a wedding. I told Anna not

to worry.” She turned to William. “In New Orleans, we make our own Church laws.”

Heaping ham onto his plate, William chuckled at his cousin’s pluck. Uncle Patrick muttered something, which he didn’t catch.

“Speaking of souls, I’m going to make a special basket for mother,” she went on, “for All Saint’s Day. And we’ll take it to the grave together, right, Papa?”

Uncle Patrick, looking tired, didn’t respond and filling the silence, William murmured that he’d be honored to visit the cemetery with them on All Saint’s. He sat down opposite Maureen and dug into Julia’s delicious pie, which was still warm.

Clearly displeased with her father’s ambivalence, Maureen turned to her favorite subject: Vespasian Colville. “He’s such an excellent shot the Wild West Show offered him a job when they came to town last month to hold auditions. His father said absolutely not. No son of his—”

Without thinking, William cut her off. “Thank God someone in that family has some sense.”

Uncle Patrick stifled a laugh.

Maureen gave William a look that showed she was highly offended. Nevertheless she went on about her plans to hear the *Nocturnes* at a private soiree with two of the three Bouchard sisters, their mother acting as chaperone. She was sure Vespasian would be there because he was a genius in all things musical and had said just yesterday that the invited pianist rendered Chopin exquisitely.

“Well, Vespasian may be knowledgeable on many diverse subjects,” William interjected, “but he doesn’t seem very mature.” Maureen glared at him again, which he ignored. He strongly suspected Vespasian, this master of all things gentlemanly, was a fool or a rakehell, probably both. His dismissal from school four times didn’t speak well for his character, especially since, according to Fabre, the Jesuits were known for extreme liberalism where it concerned the sons of rich planters.

Maureen began to furnish Vespasian's side of the latest expulsion story, something about pilfering Father Loubat's prize whiskey, but William scarcely listened. His mind drifted to Renee, to what she might be doing at this same moment. He pictured—he was adopting Maureen's vocabulary—a well-appointed dining room, Renee lifting a silver spoon to those moist, parted lips. Or was she preparing for bed, removing pins, one by one, until her rich, chestnut hair tumbled down her bare back?

He cleared his throat and refocused on his family.

Uncle Patrick fidgeted, tucking in another spoonful of Charlotte Russe, then settled back into a preoccupied stare. Maureen was raving about Vespasian's appreciation for *Le Mariage de Figaro*, Mozart's opera that would open the season, and William felt weary. He couldn't account for Uncle Patrick's distracted air, and he knew far too much about the inner thoughts and emotional swirls of the Bouchard sisters. Although he'd stretched out the hat-selection process to unheard of lengths, the encounter had been entirely too short. Yet thinking back on it, at the blush that rose to her cheeks when she realized that Maureen was not his wife, the blush that confirmed her attraction to him, he once again felt endowed with a heightened sense of affection for all humanity, especially for his uncle and cousin.

"Perhaps we should have a reception here after the opera," Maureen said, her eyes traveling back and forth between the two men for an answer.

"The opera season is quite some time away," Uncle Patrick said absently. "Do we have to consider this now?"

Annoyed with his uncle's attitude—it was Maureen's coming out season after all—William turned to Maureen. "Maybe you should plan a party at the house in the next few weeks. I've just moved from Ireland, you've just returned from Atlanta, and I'd be honored for an introduction to your friends."

Maureen's eyes brightened with delight. "Oh, I think that's a wonderful idea, don't you, Papa?"

Uncle Patrick nodded slowly. "There will be a formal ball in your honor during the season, but perhaps we *should* have a little something informal to celebrate the fact that you've returned to us, that William's here."

Maureen clapped her hands with excitement. "A party for both of us, William."

Uncle Patrick replied to her effusion with gentle sternness. "Are we agreed on this, then, Maureen? Can I turn this affair over to you? You are hostess of this home now. You'll need to make careful plans and move quickly. We need to fit this in before the season begins properly. Establish a budget and let William hear about it as soon as possible."

"You can trust me, Papa. I'm very good at this sort of thing. In fact, I'm good at all sorts of business. You'd be surprised what I—"

"I'd like to invite Renee Desselle," William announced. When they showed surprise at the interruption, he chuckled. "The party's for me, too, isn't it? Surely I'm allowed one guest."

Uncle Patrick peered over the rim of his glass and actually smiled. "Renee Desselle, eh?"

Maureen spoke. "He's positively besotted, Papa. It's painful to watch."

Uncle Patrick's grin grew. "Of course, William, we'll include her. And her Aunt Sophie as well."

"I haven't had the pleasure of meeting her aunt," William said.

Uncle Patrick slapped the table with real enthusiasm. "She's quite delightful. You must also invite them to tour the Cotton Exposition site. It's not finished by a long way, but there's plenty to see. The crystal palace is well on its way up. Texas shipped three hundred and sixty varieties of grass, which we're trying to keep alive. Dakota shipped carloads of wild animals by train. Of course,

the committee is still in negotiations with Philadelphia over loan of the Liberty Bell.”

William looked at Maureen and saw her annoyance. Exposition details spilled forth from Uncle Patrick. Animated now, he spouted minutiae they'd both heard many times. The Exposition was going to have five thousand electric lights, ten times the number of gaslights in the entire city of New Orleans. The main structure housed thirty-three acres; the Mexican government was sending a brass band. Every state in the union was exhibiting something.

During a rare pause in these details, Maureen directed the conversation again to the topic that was closest to her heart, namely Vespasian. The Wild West Show, Vespasian's great passion, promised a chance to see an Indian Chief.

Uncle Patrick drained his coffee and excused himself. After his departure, William and Maureen sat in silence. William listened for footsteps down the hall and the sound of the library door closing, then put his dessert spoon down with rather too much noise. “You might take an interest in your father's work. At least pretend.”

Tears sprouted from the corners of her eyes. He'd been too harsh. Maureen was so like his younger sister, Sarah, crying over the slightest disturbance.

“I know the Exposition's troubling him,” she whispered. “But I wish he thought of me as more than a daughter to marry off. I remind him of Mother. He barely speaks when I bring her up. That's why I do it, you know,” she said as she rose from the table, “bring her up.”

“Your father needs you, Maureen,” he said, standing also.

She stomped her foot in frustration. He said good-night, turned away and reached for the doorknob, but didn't miss her telling him to go to hell. He closed the door behind him and as he climbed the steps, he heard a crash below—hopefully that bust of

Napoleon that he and Maureen laughed about. They both disliked it intensely.

Pausing on the stairway, he heard an unfamiliar voice coming from the library. “You lack faith, Patrick. You lack faith in the city.” The man's tone was theatrically self-satisfied.

Uncle Patrick exploded. “The subscriptions don't cover it!” There was a long pause, and when he resumed his voice was a touch calmer. “We've been associates for years, Henri. You know that I would never have made it as a cotton factor if I had the slightest aversion to risk. But I won't play craps with the government's money, not to this extent, anyway.”

William found himself trapped on the stairs, having already heard too much of a private conversation, yet eager to hear more.

“Moreland's suggestions are good ones. He was appointed by the President of the United States,” the other man said.

William heard pounding on the desktop, followed by Uncle Patrick's even more heated voice. “Moreland was appointed by *his friends* in the Planters Association. *I* was appointed by the President of the United States, on behalf of the people of New Orleans. And to this day I don't know *who* appointed you chairman, sir.”

The other man grew louder. “The committee chose me, if you recall.”

William backed down the stairs, crossed the hallway and boldly opened the door. He feigned surprise. “Oh, forgive me, Uncle,” he said amiably, “I didn't realize you had a visitor.”

Breathing heavily, Uncle Patrick introduced Henri Voison. William said he would return later, but Voison insisted he stay, claiming to be delighted to meet him. At the cellarette, he poured himself a drink and took a chair.

The visitor's hair was almost blond but receding from his forehead. He was in his sixties, William guessed, yet his face still held the features that must have made him extremely good-looking in his youth. He was a tall man, a bit thick around the neck, yet

he sipped a glass of Collins whiskey with casual elegance, sitting far back on the sofa, his long legs crossed, and one immaculately shod foot swinging slowly back and forth. Uncle Patrick remained quiet during their general conversation about cotton factoring and a few minutes later, Voison made his departure.

Though the man had been perfectly pleasant, William was relieved to see the back of him.

His uncle's loud sigh signaled a similar feeling. He loosened his tie and unbuttoned his shirt collar. "This Exposition was supposed to be a sign that the city is over the troubles that have given it such a sinister reputation. Our charge was to exhibit the culture, manufacture and machinery of cotton. Now Moreland's adding all sorts of horticulture halls, observation towers, electric elevators and electric streetcars, sending envoys to all the countries of Central America to invite them to participate, *and* borrowing money to lend to the Gulf states for their exhibits."

"Isn't that good? I can see benefits to promoting Gulf state industry and fostering trade relations with New Orleans' tropical neighbors."

"It's all fine in theory, but we weren't able to raise the money for this scale of a production, so we've been forced to ask the citizens of New Orleans to buy subscriptions—essentially to make donations. On top of that, we've been borrowing—a lot—from the federal government. And there's no end in sight! Before we even begin building on one extravagance, the committee—all by a majority vote—is borrowing for another—everything is delayed—and the more I ask questions, the less they seem to tell me."

"Can I help? Take a look at the books?"

"You're an enormous help already, William. You have no idea what peace of mind your presence at Collins Factorage brings me. And I know you've been keeping an eye on Maureen. No," Uncle Patrick said wearily, "Voison's handling the accounting."

William loosened his own tie and listened with growing concern as Uncle Patrick continued. "I'm overwhelmed here. I'm beginning to doubt that I want my name on this Exposition and yet I feel I have a duty to President Arthur. I see friends awarding contracts to each other for all these buildings and I suspect there may be some shady dealings, some kickbacks. I'm afraid that's common when there's a lot of government money floating around." He shrugged. "I'm watching for outright thievery, and if I find it going on, the wheelers and dealers will be called to account."

Uncle Patrick took a few more swallows of his whiskey and William drained his own glass. "The city is lucky to have you on the committee. You're an intelligent, honest man."

"Which makes my job that much harder." Uncle Patrick sighed heavily. "Impossible, maybe."

Chapter Seven

Renee arrived early and watched through the curtained doors as Francois Lanoux took down his model hats, brushed a feather duster over them and put them carefully back on their pedestals. She had to admit Lanoux had a good sense for both sales and design. The masculine décor—leather chairs, paneled cypress walls and paintings of Andrew Jackson and ducks swimming in a Louisiana bayou—resembled a gentleman’s club, though her knowledge came solely from their descriptions in novels.

She took a deep breath and marched through the adjoining doors. Monsieur Lanoux’s round face lit up in a broad smile. “Good morning, Miss Renee.” He held the feather duster behind his back and indicated with his free hand that she should sit down.

“No, thank you.” She nodded curtly. “I’ll be brief.”

He put the duster on the counter, came around and stood facing her.

“Yesterday evening, Robert—your hatter—followed me when I left the shop.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Followed?”

“Yes, sir, followed. He followed me down Royal Street, waited outside Adler’s, waited while I bought pralines and continued to follow me home. He kept vigil across the street until at least ten o’clock.”

Lanoux looked dumbfounded. “I can’t imagine.”

Renee was as tall as the shopkeeper. She put her hands on her hips, and looked straight into his beady brown eyes. “Monsieur Lanoux, can you think of any reasonable explanation?”

“I can’t imagine.”

“So you said. But I would appreciate it if you would talk with Robert and ask him *not* to follow me home again.”

Lanoux looked at his shoes. “Yes, yes, of course.” Then he said with a smaller voice, almost under his breath. “Ladies are not safe on the streets.”

Renee heard every word. “What can you possibly mean? I walked back and forth from my previous shop for years. Now I walk from this shop. I’ve never encountered a spot of trouble. I enjoy my walk.”

“There are riffraff in town to build the display halls. For the Exposition. All sorts of day laborers.” He ran a hand nervously over his bald head and rushed on, “Actors and musicians and other undesirables flooding the city. Footpads out, robbing people in the streets in broad daylight.”

“So you asked Robert to be sure I was safe?”

He shook his head vigorously. “I tell you I did not. Robert must have taken it upon himself. But it *is* dangerous out there, Miss Renee. New Orleans and the French Quarter are not what they were.”

Renee suspected he was lying, yet she’d never known him to lie about anything. Perhaps he thought he was doing something noble, but it infuriated her that her *business associate* would decide to protect her. She met his eyes again. “Let me reiterate, sir, I do not need someone to follow me home in the evenings. Is that clear? Please ask Robert to go directly home when he finishes his work. It’s quite safe for me to walk alone; and Robert belongs at home with his family.”

“Miss Renee, I . . .” Lanoux reached forward, his hands landing on her hips. She tried to step back but he held her fixed. He

leaned forward, she turned her head and his wet lips landed on the side of her neck. “I would die ... if anything happened to you. I thought perhaps one day—”

“Monsieur Lanoux!” She clawed at his hands, trying to pry them away from her hips. “Monsieur!” From the corner of her eye, she saw a figure, followed by a face in the adjoining doorway.

“There you are.” The Irishman’s voice resounded in the silent shop.

Lanoux’s arms fell to his sides. He sprung back, turned and bowed, all in one motion. “Mr. Collins.”

“Monsieur Lanoux,” William said with a slight nod. “And Miss Renee. Good morning.”

She went hot all over and took several quick breaths. Angry at Lanoux, embarrassed in front of Mr. Collins, she managed to greet the Irishman with a tilt of her head in his direction. She hurried toward the French doors, the gentleman right behind her. Horrified that he had likely witnessed the entire scene, she took refuge behind the counter, her fingers resting on the morning’s mail, her heart pounding. Had he seen Monsieur Lanoux’s hands on her hips, her attempt to free herself? Or did he think he’d interrupted a lover’s quarrel?

“Miss Renee,” he said, “I’d like to speak to you about Maureen’s hat.”

“Of course.” She bent low to retrieve her drawing from under the counter. She took a little extra time, taking several gulps of breath to gain her composure before rising.

“I hope I’m not being ill-mannered to stop in.”

Her eyes met his. “Not at all. Many clients change their minds about color or trim. Here’s a rendition of Maureen in the hat we discussed.” She placed it on the counter. “You’ll note that the blue velvet brings out her lovely eyes.”

He glanced at the sketch, then looked up at her, a huge smile spread across his face. His eyes were sapphire, too, remarkably

similar to his cousin’s. As she stared into them, she lost her train of thought. She hoped Michelle would come through the front door. No, this was better. She had the man to herself. She cleared her throat. “What did you wish to change, sir? Not the style, I hope.”

With a graceful move of his hand, he pushed back the curl that hung over his left eye and chuckled to himself. She watched him, fascinated but perplexed. What was so amusing?

“My cousin’s hat is not actually my mission here.”

She couldn’t breathe. She wasn’t herself. In the moment, she wasn’t sure *who* she was. She had difficulty swallowing and wasn’t sure she could speak. She couldn’t take her eyes off his mouth. “Oh?”

He smiled. “No, indeed.”

She leaned forward, placing one elbow on the counter. “So you like the style, Mr. Collins,” she said, glancing at Maureen’s likeness once more, “but you’re not here to discuss hats?”

He grinned at her now. “I’m on my way to the Cotton Exchange Building—”

“And my shop is in your path?”

“A little detour.”

She locked eyes with him and giggled—a soft, feminine little sound she wasn’t sure she’d ever made in her life. Was this flirting? It wasn’t hard at all. She moved in a little closer and breathed in his delicious scent, almonds, fine wool, something citrusy, and something alluringly male. “So just what is your mission this morning, sir?”

“I came to ask you to dine with me Saturday evening.”

A tremor of excitement raced through her. There was no reason in the world why she shouldn’t accept Mr. Collins’ invitation, but her mind searched for an excuse. She had too much work to do with orders for the Exposition; she was certain to have a head cold because Michelle had one yesterday, yet she heard herself agreeing. “I’d be honored, Mr. Collins.” Her voice came out as

a throaty whisper. She licked her lower lip. “We might discuss Parisian hats. You seem quite the expert.”

“My primary interest is the milliner.” His eyes sparkled. “I believe you have an aunt who can act as a chaperone?”

So his cousin filled him in on all the details of her life.

The last thing she wanted was to share William Collins with Aunt Sophie. “I’m a widow and in America—in New Orleans, anyway—widows do as they please.” As the words fell from her mouth, she cringed. *Widows do as they please. A lady who did as she pleased?* Throw in the fact that prostitutes often said they were milliners when asked their trade. Renee had just suggested she was available for sexual favors.

“Excellent.” His full lips turned up; his smile was sly, but she saw the edge of his mouth tremble in anticipation. She had the impulse to rise on tiptoes, stretch across the counter and, press her lips against his. Shocked by her thought, her face went hot but she didn’t drop her eyes.

His expression turned suddenly serious. “I’m sorry I blundered into a private conversation.” He nodded meaningfully toward Lanoux’s shop.

So he *had* seen.

He looked at her for some moments until the pause grew uncomfortable.

She raised her chin. “Monsieur Lanoux believes New Orleans and the Quarter are unsafe these days with all the foreigners in town for the Exposition. He cautioned me that it’s unsafe to walk home unescorted.”

“You seem perfectly able to put one foot in front of the other,” he said without a trace of humor.

“I believe I am.”

The doorbell clanged as Michelle entered the shop. William gave a slight bow. “Eight o’clock, then. I’ll call for you at your home.”

Michelle raised her eyebrows but waited until he was safely gone before remarking, “Irishman wanting to talk hats again?”

Renee acknowledged the comment with a little laugh, but her mind was uneasy. The last thing she wanted was for William to think she had a romantic interest in Monsieur Lanoux.



William walked from the milliner’s, his pleasure at being near Renee all but erased by the image of Monsieur Lanoux’s ferret-like nose so close to her long, delicate neck. Though the deep blush on her cheeks and the way her narrow shoulders rose and fell with her rapid breathing were adorable to behold, the cause of her consternation—Monsieur Lanoux’s kiss—turned William’s stomach. Even as he walked through the lively bustle of the Royal Street morning shopping—the only time respectable Creole ladies appeared, according to Fabre—he took no notice. He could see nothing but Monsieur Lanoux’s hands on the back of her hips. A longing to have his own hands in the same position dried his mouth with its intensity.

Aiming toward the factorage, he fought his feelings of jealousy and anger. He had no claim to Renee, no right to feel so savagely. She was, after all, a widow, who’d lived with her husband for six months before his death. Renee Desselle Soniat. Technically, he supposed she should be called Madame Soniat. Yet she had reverted to her maiden name with Desselle Millinery, so he supposed Maureen was correct in her belief that Renee had not been passionately in love with Rupert.

By the clock at Citizens Bank, he was twenty minutes late. Her shop was nowhere near the Cotton Exchange Building, a fact she well knew.

Clearly she’d been embarrassed when he’d interrupted her with Monsieur Lanoux, but that might have been simply feigned

feminine modesty. Her offhand remark—that widows in New Orleans did what they pleased—caused a twist of desire in his chest. If she gave favors to Lanoux, why not give favors to him? Lanoux was middle-aged, stout and bald. Surely she couldn't be physically attracted to him. As for Lanoux, William couldn't blame him. It was perfectly natural for the man to have designs on his beautiful business associate. Both were talented, prosperous, with adjoining shops; nothing could be more convenient than joining households.

Renee's pastel drawing of Maureen perfectly captured his lively cousin from her bright eyes to her pert little mouth. He wondered if the lady milliner's artistic abilities led her into the hat business for pleasure more than profit. Or did her precarious finances necessitate it after her husband's death? The answer held a deeper understanding of her sentiments for this Lanoux character. Perhaps she was on the verge of marriage to him. Dear Lord, he couldn't allow that. But why not? He'd vowed to remain a bachelor forever.

Chapter Eight

On Friday afternoon Madame Voison swooped into the shop like a bird of prey, shouting that she hoped her hat was ready and that it was as becoming as promised. Michelle slipped into the workroom as Renee greeted their customer with an offer of a chair and a glass of sherry.

"No thank you," she snapped. "I'm in a hurry." She looked over her shoulder as if she expected someone, then placed her purse on the counter with a trembling hand.

Renee turned and Michelle handed her a Desselle Millinery box made of black and white striped cardboard with elegant gold letters printed on the top. A braided gold rope, strung through holes in the top and bottom, held the box together. Renee placed the hatbox on the counter in front of Madame Voison, untied the braid, removed the lid, and carefully pulled back the tissue paper that covered the hat.

"Oh!" Madame Voison clapped in delight. "It's lovely."

A compliment from this woman. How rare. She lifted the hat from the box. "Would you like to try it on?"

"I'm in a hurry," she repeated, glancing behind her again.

Renee preferred to see her finished hats on her customers before they left the shop. Especially this one. Madame Voison had canceled three appointments for a sketch so she'd done her best with the quick drawing she'd made from memory. She'd never

picked her fabric or trim. Her only direction in a note: a black hat. But Renee knew better than to try to coax this woman into anything. “As you wish.”

A moment later, Madame Voison, her eyes fixed on the hat, changed her mind. “Yes, actually, I would like to see it on.”

The lady removed the hat she wore, a dark brown felt with a large brim and high crown—so wrong for her—and leaned her head forward. Placing the new hat right on top of her head and pulling the elastic under the knot of braided hair at the nape of Madame Voison’s neck, Renee instructed: “Wear it like this—the way I’m putting it on you right now—or far more elegant—you may choose a pin from my selection of fine hat pins. There, that is very becoming, Madame.”

The small black felt bibi with a band of deep red gros-grain ribbon and one small ostrich plume dyed red to match looked very good on the large woman. Just as Renee had envisioned, the hat brought the spectator’s eyes upward to Madame Voison’s lovely gray hair and to her pale blue eyes—and away from her pointed chin. Her customer stood, turned sideways and preened in the floor-to-ceiling mirror on the left wall. Without a word Renee produced a silver hand mirror. She sat down again and, turning slightly in her chair, admired the back view of the hat.

Meanwhile, Renee fetched a tray of a dozen hat pins from the display shelf. As she did so, she crossed the very spot where she had turned into William’s arms. She remembered his steadying hands on her waist and felt a flutter of anticipation about their dinner tomorrow evening. She’d never had dinner with any man alone—other than Rupert or a family member.

She placed the pins on the counter. “One of these beautiful pins will hold the hat firmly in position on your head.”

Madame Voison picked a pin with an 18k gold stem and a head of pearls and jet beads. “This one I believe.”

“Perfect with your hat.” The prices were clearly marked on each and the lady had chosen the most expensive one.

Handling the sharp-pointed pin deftly, Renee poked it into the hat just a little back of the center at such an angle that it gathered some hair without piercing the scalp. Madame Voison picked up the hand mirror again and admired the hat pin. “I believe I will have that glass of sherry after all, Renee.”

It was rather familiar of this lady to use her Christian name in a business situation, but she and Madame Voison had been on a first-name basis when Renee was Rupert’s wife. The lady had visited the house frequently to play cards or have tea with Madame Soniat. She and her husband had been at the Soniat house the evening Rupert died.

She poured a generous glassful of sherry from the decanter she kept under the counter, and Madame Voison took several swallows. She peered behind her once more, then turned back to Renee and whispered, “Everywhere I go, there’s someone watching me. For two weeks now. Someone has been following me.”

Madame Voison was being followed?

In spite of her talk with Monsieur Lanoux, Robert had followed Renee home a second night; she couldn’t imagine being followed for two weeks. Part of her wanted to hug the lady, a fellow victim of some male’s protective nature. Instead she poured herself a glass of sherry, came around and took the chair next to Madame Voison. “That’s very odd, Madame. Do you know the person watching you?”

“A man with reddish-brown hair. A businessman by his clothes. I’ve never seen him in my life.”

“Perhaps your husband or one of your brothers hired someone to ... look after you, to be sure you’re safe.”

Madame Voison barely raised her voice but her panic was evident. “And not inform me? If my husband or my brothers thought I needed protection, they would tell me they’d hired someone.”

Renee's alarm grew. If a relative had not assigned the red-haired man to follow the lady, then who had?

"My husband says I'm imagining it." Madame Voison took several more sips of sherry.

"I'm sure you're not, Madame Voison," Renee assured her. She had known Robert was behind her within a few blocks. "Actually several ladies have told me similar stories," she improvised. "It seems the gentlemen of New Orleans are troubled by the strangers the Exposition has brought to town. They don't believe we ladies can take care of ourselves and are paying people to watch over us. I heard such a story just this morning."

"Really?" Madame Voison seemed dubious. She drank the last of her sherry, but her hands were still unsteady. Renee poured her another glass. She took a swallow quickly. "I think there's more to it than that." Her voice became haughty. "Henri, my husband, is the Chairman of the Exposition Committee, you know. There's a lot of money involved in this spectacle. The state of Louisiana and the federal government are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars."

Renee nodded. "And many citizens have bought subscriptions."

"More money still. As Chairman, it's Henri's job to write all the checks to contractors and laborers. I've overheard him in his study at night arguing with members of the committee about cost overruns, the number of workers and so forth. I worry ... I worry that all the financial transactions may not be above board."

Renee read the *Daily Picayune* most mornings and the newspaper had editorialized recently that huge sums of money were going toward extravagant buildings and exhibits, but had given no hint of impropriety. "I'm quite sure Monsieur Voison knows what he's doing," she said diplomatically, though, in truth, she'd never cared for the man.

Madame Voison pursed her lips as if she might cry, then took another sip of sherry. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Renee did. Madame Voison believed someone was skimming government money. What she didn't understand was why she was telling her. The lady had many friends, three brothers. Why not confide in them? Surely she was not hinting that her own husband was embezzling funds from the Exposition? The ladies of New Orleans stood by their husbands, *especially* if they were involved in illegal activities.

When Madame Voison next spoke, her voice was so soft Renee strained to hear her. "I don't believe Henri is stealing, but I think some of his associates are. I'm worried one of them hired someone to watch me because I know what's going on."

Renee's stomach churned. This was nothing like her suspicion that Monsieur Lanoux asked Robert to watch out for her, a woman for whom he harbored inappropriate feelings. If someone stealing Exposition funds feared Madame Voison were wise to him, he might have her followed. He was no doubt hearing of her trips to the hat shop, the dressmaker, to a friend's house for a game of whist, to Mass on Sunday, all the innocent forays of a wealthy New Orleans lady. But if he thought she intended to reveal something to the police, he might ... harm her.

Renee's heart beat faster, but she tried to calm the lady, choosing her words carefully. "I really think it's most likely, Madame, that the man following you was hired by one of your male relatives. But if you'd like me to see what I can find out about the other possibility, I will try." She thought of asking William Collins to help but discarded the idea. He hadn't been in town long enough to investigate such matters. But Patrick Collins was also on the Exposition committee. If there were illegal dealings, he might suspect who was involved, which might lead Madame Voison to the person following her.

"I know a trustworthy businessman," she said, "who may be willing to make some discreet inquiries for me."

As she contemplated the idea, her confidence grew. Patrick Collins knew everybody on the wharves and everyone on the

plantations for miles up the river. She was well aware of her father's admiration for his business practices. Aunt Sophie had said just the other night what a good man he was, particularly of his willingness to help people in need.

"That would be good of you, Renee."

Madame Voison expressed the desire to wear the new hat home, but not the expensive hat pin. Renee removed the pin, secured it in a slender cypress box stamped Desselle Millinery in gold lettering and handed it to Madame Voison, who put it away in her handbag. Then she placed the old hat in the box, covered it with tissue paper, tied it up and placed it on the counter. Still, Madame Voison made no move to leave the shop.

"If you'd feel more comfortable, I'll show you out through the back garden," Renee suggested. "Do you have a carriage and driver?"

"I took a cab this morning."

"And you'll be safe in a cab getting home."

"Thank you, Renee, for listening. And for making the hat."

Madame Voison followed her through the workroom, through the courtyard and out the back gate, which opened on Bourbon Street.

"If anyone comes in asking for you, I'll say you left thirty minutes ago," she whispered. In a normal voice, she said good-bye. "I'm so pleased you like your hat, Madame Voison. Do come back soon."

When she returned to the workroom, the surprised look on Michelle's face meant she was eager for explanation of the lady's lengthy visit and unusual departure.

Renee shrugged. "The hat was magical. It transformed her from ... I don't know"—she started to say harpy, but thought that too unkind—"an unpleasant lady to an interesting conversationalist. We talked about the Exposition's impact on business in the city."

Renee stood by Michelle, admiring her stitches on a hat band. "You're doing a fine job."

The compliment didn't stop Michelle's questions. "And leaving through the courtyard?"

"She saw an acquaintance on Royal and wanted to avoid her."

Michelle shook her head. "That's peculiar, but then the Voisons are an odd lot."

"Why do you say that?"

"One of my friends at Café Bienville has a sister who's a hairdresser and hears everything. It's said that Monsieur Henri's been practicing voodoo."

Stunned, Renee stared at Michelle for a moment. "Really? He is?"

Michelle shrugged. "So it's said."

From time to time, many New Orleanians consulted with the priestesses—they were expert herbalists—but the notion of Henri Voison, a prominent attorney, at a voodoo ceremony was patently absurd.

Dismissing the rumor, Renee returned to the front counter, her thoughts darting in a thousand directions, her stomach knotted with anxiety. The hairs rose on the nape of her neck. Both she and Madame Voison were being followed. Was this happening to other ladies? If not, what was the connection between Madame Voison and her, that they would both suffer this harassment? For the first time since she sat at Rupert's deathbed, she was terrified, facing the world all alone. She put her fist in her mouth to stifle a sob.

Chapter Nine

Chaos erupted at the factorage Friday afternoon. One of their biggest clients—Louis Poché—had sent his cotton, which William had graded below standard. Poché’s poor crop struck a blow, but he assumed Emile Colville’s huge harvest would make up for it. The debt against Poché’s crop was high enough that William wanted Uncle Patrick’s opinion before he started haggling with Liverpool via telegraph.

When Uncle Patrick finally returned from his tour of the docks and warehouses, William hurried into his office. “There are a thousand bales of fair Red River Valley on the open market. It would be a nice package to send to Lowell or Le Havre, grouped with the Poché blend.”

“Poché’s is that bad? Damn.”

“My quote would be four eighty-three, and Fabre rates it even lower,” William answered. “We could offer three hundred for the Red River and sell for eleven hundred.”

Uncle Patrick paused, staring beady-eyed at his feet a little too long, long enough for William to notice that his uncle’s linen shirt had lost its crispness, that his skin sagged under his eyes. Without a word, he stepped from this office into the grading room and rubbed his thumbs against his fingers, signaling Hennessey, his personal secretary, to put a cotton sample in his hand. Pulling it apart, Uncle Patrick opened its snowy thatch to the north skylight

and studied it. After a minute, he held out the fibers to Hennessey, who replaced them with a fresh handkerchief.

A runner handed Uncle Patrick a note. “Offer two-hundred to start.” He sidestepped William to return to his office. “We can always go up.”

“I’ll bid two twenty,” William said to his back. “Otherwise we’ll miss it.”

Uncle Patrick turned around, a smile on his face. Reaching out, he patted William on the shoulder. “You’re a natural, son.” Then he donned his hat, said he would be attending to Exposition matters the rest of the afternoon and left.

William returned to his desk feeling pleased, especially since his uncle had bestowed the compliment in front of Hennessey and all the clerks. Every day he learned something new and the more confident he became, the more he loved the business. The highly speculative nature of dealing in crops excited him. And the commissions the factorage charged—commissions on storage, sale, insurance, shipping and countless personal matters, transactions that planters couldn’t navigate from the distance of the country, especially since they were buying against future profits on a crop—fluctuated in tempo with the price of cotton. In his family’s whiskey business, one predictable day followed another.

Moments later, to answer one of Fabre’s questions, William unlocked his uncle’s office, and went to the heavy wooden file cabinet on the wall near the window. He put his hand on a document—last year’s prices in Liverpool in October—and turned toward the window just in time to see a woman on the street below take Uncle Patrick’s arm and walk with him down the block. On her head, a dark gray hat contrasted with the red undercurrents in her chestnut hair. Only the elegant line of her back was visible, but if he had to place a bet on it, he’d swear the woman was Renee Desselle. This lady was just the right height, a head

shorter than Uncle Patrick. He noted the trim waist and the sensual curves of her hips and derriere.

His heart assaulted his chest. My God, was she seeing Uncle Patrick? Did she like older men? Or was he just so taken with the milliner he couldn't think straight? He'd completely forgotten the reason for coming into the office, and he didn't care to remember. He needed inside information about Renee, the enchanting widow who seemed to turn up regularly in other men's arms.

He knew only one person who could answer his questions: Maureen. One thing he'd learned about his cousin in a very short time: She possessed a remarkable knowledge of New Orleans families for generations back—the inside story on everyone. Information he considered fairly irrelevant until now.

It was a long evening and after eleven when William descended the streetcar at Napoleon and made his weary way to the house—only to find no companionship. Maureen was out with the Bouchards and Uncle Patrick was already in bed. In the upstairs sitting room, he poured a large glass of Collins Irish whiskey, which Uncle Patrick ordered by the case from the family distillery. He picked up the new book by Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, read one page and then let his mind drift to Effie.

He had been sure when he left home that no woman could ever compare to her, that if he couldn't make Effie his wife, he would have no other. But why should losing Effie condemn him to a bachelor's lonely life? He could see Renee's smile, the flecks of lit gold in her topaz eyes, her full cherry lips. He could no longer picture Effie's facial features in detail.

And yet he couldn't trust Renee. There was something guarded about her, as if she were hiding something. She was by turns wonderfully sensual and then almost stiff with fear and anxiety. Was she a widow who did as she pleased or merely a cock tease?

He awoke to the sound of Maureen's feet on the stairs. She breezed into the room. "Howdy," she said in her best Western twang. She had a gift for theatrics, no doubt about it.

It was one in the morning by the mantel clock. He started to ask her if she'd been drinking but controlled himself. "How was your evening, Cousin? Did you see Vespasian as you'd hoped?"

"I did, and he gave me a picture." She pulled a photograph from her purse, kissed it and handed it to him.

The young man had been blessed with perfect features—high forehead, teasing eyes, straight nose, full lips. "A handsome lad." The compliment clearly pleased her.

"Elise is in love with you, you know." She dropped into an armchair opposite the sofa.

He knew Elise was a Bouchard sister but had no idea which one. "I'm flattered, but speaking of ladies, I want to hear more about Renee Desselle. Would you care for a glass of lemonade, or a cup of tea?"

"I'll have what you're having," she said with an eye on his glass. "Isn't she a little old?"

"Miss Renee? Hardly."

"Then don't tell *me* Vespasian is too young."

"Immature, I believe I said. There's a difference." He rose and poured her about an eighth of an inch of whiskey.

She reached for the glass triumphantly. "You ought to at least get to know Elise." She brought the glass to her lips and then moved it away, apparently not pleased as the smell hit her.

William sat back and took a swallow of his own drink. "Sip it slowly," he ordered. "Miss Renee's husband left her penniless?"

"Why do you say that?"

"She's in business."

"Which she seems to enjoy." She took a sip. "Rupert Desselle left her some stipend, but the will *was* odd, now that you mention it." She held onto her glass, but didn't take another drink.

“Madame Soniat, she was Rupert’s mother, still alive, and a real”—she lowered her voice to a whisper—“bitch.”

“Maureen Collins, I didn’t hear that.”

She rolled her eyes. “I learned to talk like that at the convent school.”

“Don’t let your father hear it.”

She sighed impatiently. “I’m not an idiot, Cousin. But if gentlemen can use such words, I don’t see why ladies can’t.”

William ignored the invitation to argue proprieties. “What about Madame Soniat?”

“She inherited almost everything from her son: the sugar estate, the plantation house *and* the Chartres Street house in the city. Renee lives in the house she inherited from her father, who was Sophie Desselle O’Brien’s brother.”

William’s head was aswirl. He reached over, took the glass from her hand, drained what little it contained and put it on the table.

She clapped her hands delightedly. “You’re in love!”

“I should go to bed,” he said, but didn’t get up. “How long has he been dead?”

“I don’t know.” She was quiet for a minute and he didn’t interrupt her thoughts. “Five or six years, I’d guess. And I’m sure the husband was a decent man, which makes it strange that he didn’t leave at least one house to Renee.”

He stood and went to the cellarette for another drink.

“You probably don’t know this, but Madame Soniat’s father, Alphonse Benoit, once owned our factorage—Collins Cotton Factorage.”

William swiveled to face her. “Madame Soniat’s father once owned the factorage?” He hadn’t expected this connection.

Maureen leaned forward in her chair. “You live in New Orleans now, so you should hear all this. It’s a tangled web, our family’s connection with the Soniat and Benoit. Alphonse used

to pad his good cotton with poor grades, twigs, all sorts of things. His business began to fail. At some point, he committed suicide. Shot himself, I believe.”

“And that left Madame Soniat and who? Her mother? Other siblings?”

“Her mother, Madame Benoit, and she also had a brother, Alphonse, killed at Shiloh. Or so the story went. Missing in action, but there was always the faint suggestion that he deserted.”

He nodded, though he was almost completely lost. She continued. “The mother sold the factorage to Papa. Papa says he paid way more than he should have for it, considering the state of the warehouses. I think the widow and her daughter struggled, but Therese was quite a belle and she married into the wealthy Soniat family. An infamously unhappy union.”

“What a sad tale.”

“That’s the crazy family Renee Desselle married into.” She paused for a moment, her eyes on his face. “Ah, Cousin, why don’t you just admit you’re in love?”

He sipped his whiskey.

“I want you to be happy, Cousin.” Her eyes brightened as she set forth a proposal. “I’ll learn everything I can about Renee, but I’d like you to take an interest in Vespasian.”

He accepted the agreement. He could force himself to be cordial to Vespasian in return for information.

“I’ll tell you one thing: Renee is not in business because she’s desperate. It’s not as if she’s selling cereal. But there is an air of sadness about her, and no wonder. For her husband not to leave her much of anything? She could have been with child the day Rupert died for all he knew. She wasn’t. Madame Soniat has been known to insult her over the fact. In public.”

“That’s horrendous,” William murmured, his thoughts recoiling at the notion of Renee with child after making love with Rupert. It disturbed him to think that another man, any other

man, had had her in his bed, had taken her, spilled his seed inside her.

Maureen yawned but rattled on. "Rupert had been married before but that ended in tragedy. The first wife, I think she was a Gaudet from Natchez, had a son who died a few hours after birth. I can't remember the wife's Christian name. She died herself a day or two later. At the time, Rupert was off in Virginia fighting the war; Madame Soniat was up the country at the plantation with his wife for the birth. Rupert waited many, many years before marrying Renee."

Any man with blood in his veins would be attracted to Renee's body. "I know why *he* married *her*," he said.

His young cousin smiled slyly.

"But why would *she* marry him? A man so much older?"

"I don't know," Maureen said, a touch of exasperation in her voice. "Maybe she was extremely fond of him. Maybe her father pressured her into it. Her mother died when she was fourteen or fifteen. Maybe her father was trying to get her off his hands."

William was silent for some moments, feeling an ache of sympathy for Renee. Now he could easily imagine how she'd come by the straight set of her shoulders and her efficient shopkeeper's manner. He understood why she wore conservative, though beautifully cut, clothing. Did this strange past explain the fear and the defiance he'd glimpsed in those soft eyes? Or was it something else?

When he next looked up, Maureen was fast asleep, her head at an uncomfortable angle against the back of the couch, her jaw slack like a baby's. He roused her and they both stumbled off to bed.

Chapter Ten

As they entered Antoine's, Renee placed her hand lightly on his offered arm. William covered her hand with his and although they both wore gloves, he felt the fine bones in her delicate fingers, felt the warmth of her hand.

He wished they were entering a ballroom, where he could anticipate the pleasure of wrapping his arm around her and pulling her close as they waltzed. Though the restaurant was dimly lit by the flickering gas globes suspended from the ceiling, they would be separated by the sparkling dining accoutrements: a white linen tablecloth, candles, china, water goblets, wine glasses and silverware. He would have to wait hours before he could hold her in his arms.

They followed the maître d' across the crowded dining room to a table for two by a window. "Antoine's is a feast for the eyes as well as the palate," she murmured.

He leaned close and inhaled her scent, that delightful floral he couldn't place. Gardenia? Jasmine? The scent seemed to hold as many mysteries as she did, mysteries he was determined to unravel.

When he made reservations, he requested the waiter Andre, per his uncle's instructions. As soon as William seated Renee, he took a chair opposite. A portly, white-haired man appeared. Bowing, the waiter introduced himself and promised to take care of their

every desire. William wished that were possible. “My uncle advised me to put my complete trust in you. We’ll start with champagne.”

Renee’s eyes followed his hands as he removed his gloves and put them in his coat pocket. He detected a slight tremble as she slipped her own gloves off. Her fingers, long and delicate, ended in short, perfectly rounded nails. Was she nervous? He was. Practiced from boyhood, the gentleman’s mien of cool composure in every circumstance stood him well tonight. He was confident his outward appearance belied his anxious state. He wanted to charm her, dazzle her, enthrall her. He wanted her to enjoy him—his company—so thoroughly that she’d be eager to spend much more intimate hours with him in the future.

He brought his eyes upward from her hands to her face and locked eyes. “You do me a great honor this evening, Miss Renee, though it’s a little odd to have no choice in the meal.”

She tilted her head and her eyes sparkled. “It’s your first time?” She nodded toward the table beside them where three gentlemen peered at menus, hand-written on parchment paper. “Only out-of-towners use the menu,” she said in a hushed voice. She seemed grateful for a conversation topic and went on to assure him he was in good hands. For more than forty years, native New Orleanians had trusted the chef and his staff to offer them a fine meal.

He nodded dutifully at the right moments, but was unable to keep his eyes on her face. The bodice of her dress attracted him like a magnet. Every so often his gaze swept down from her eyes to her lips to her neck to the luscious creamy skin of her décolletage, not truly visible due to the lace overlay, which served to make the gown modest and all the more tantalizing than a display of bare flesh. An emerald green hat—another god-forsaken bibi—sat atop a mass of chestnut curls. Above all, he wanted to take the hat off, see her hair in full, and imagine running his hands through it.

“I’ve never known a soul who was disappointed.”

Andre poured champagne. He clicked his glass with hers, and they both took a sip.

“We’ve actually spoken very little about anything other than hats. While your expertise on the subject is admirable, Mr. Collins, I suspect you’re more interested in cotton fibers than felt.”

His stomach clenched at her formal address. She was valiantly trying to make conversation, which he found charming, especially since he hadn’t been able to utter a single worthwhile remark, so overwhelmed was he by her beauty. He wanted to fall at her knees.

“Why did you choose New Orleans? Our exceptional weather?” With another lovely smile, she motioned toward the window. Outside, a fine mist hung in the October night air.

He laughed. “To tell the truth—”

“Please do,” she interrupted, leaning forward.

His mouth went dry as the soft curves of her bosom shifted under the lace. He took another sip of champagne. “I was tired of the liquor business and eager to try my hand at something new.”

“That’s what all the ladies are saying at the French Market.”

“Ah ... Am I worthy subject of gossip?”

“The nephew of Patrick Collins? You doubt it?”

He didn’t, but would never say so. “I suppose any new hire at Collins Factorage might pass for news.”

“Especially a bachelor from Ireland.”

His heart seemed to be beating in his ears. “To answer your question—” Could he dare hope Renee saw their night together as a beginning? “I love the uncertainties of cotton, the changing market prices.”

“You didn’t mind leaving your country?”

His thoughts flashed to Effie. “I’m looking forward to a new life here.”

Her eyes studied him closely over the rim of her glass. Did she guess he’d been jilted? He looked out the window for a few moments. “I’m seeking a challenge.”

Renee drained her glass. “And you’ve found it at a cotton factorage?”

“I found it at a certain milliner’s shop. But until tonight, I doubted I was successful.” He signaled Andre to pour more champagne.

Her eyes sparkled. “What makes you think you’re successful tonight?”

“I have the good fortune of spending several hours with the most beautiful lady in Louisiana. For a gentleman, that epitomizes success.”

“Really, Mr. Collins. This is not my first exposure to Irish blarney.”

He loved the wine’s effect on her. The straight-backed, efficient shopkeeper relaxed into the satin chair. She didn’t slouch, but he could see her body lose its tension. “I might have misled you about my notion of success with a lady. It goes beyond merely dining, but my appreciation of your beauty was no exaggeration.”

She accepted his compliment with a smile, but returned to her original topic. “And I guess you’ve found a challenge, too, in the cotton business?”

“My uncle believes in quick training. I can’t cross paths with him that he’s not grilling me on cotton grades. He spreads them out on his desk.”

He began to pantomime feeling the fibers, holding them up to the light. She laughed a little too loudly and several ladies nearby turned and stared. William didn’t care. He continued what he called “tales from the factorage” and she laughed delightedly. How wonderful to be out with a lady who didn’t worry overmuch about proprieties. Effie would have asked him to behave.

Andre interrupted with their appetizers. “*Potage Tortue au Sherry* for the lady. *Huitres Bourguignonne* for you, sir.” Beside their bowls, he placed a linen napkin circling a small loaf. Hungry, William tore the bread with his fingers, alternating tastes of it with

his oyster stew, commenting between spoonfuls that he loved oysters any which way—raw, fried or in soups. “These are the best I’ve ever tasted.”

He enjoyed watching her savor her turtle soup. She touched the spoon to her lower lip and tilted it forward into her mouth slowly. Swallowed without a sound. He wanted to slide his tongue across those lips. He cleared his throat. “It’s good?”

“Delicious. Tastes like chicken laced with sherry.”

“Is it impertinent to beg for a sample?”

“It’s terribly improper.” She giggled softly. “Be my guest.” She lifted her bowl toward him and he gave her his empty one. She waited a moment. “What do you think?”

He took a second taste before answering. “Like everything else in this city, including you, it’s magnificent.”

“Do stop, sir. Such talk will go to my head.”

He wanted the wine to go to her head. Andre glided noiselessly to the table again, removing the soup bowls and placing *Cotelettes d’Agneau Grilles* in front of Renee and *Filet de Truite Amandine* at William’s place. Side dishes of *Pommes de Terre Soufflés* and *Epinards Sauce Crème* filled the table.

Renee’s eyes crinkled in a wide smile. “Shall we share?”

Her suggestion delighted him. In his experience, sharing food was an intimacy only spouses enjoyed. Renee boldly lifted a chop from her plate to his. He ordered a white wine, not bubbly, for himself and a red for Renee, which sent Andre scurrying away. He then cut a piece of fish, speared it and handed her his fork. She brought it to her mouth, took the fish’s flesh between her lips and glanced up.

“Would you like another taste?” He wanted to feed her the rich trout, piece by piece.

Her cheeks flushed a delightful pale pink. She seemed to recall herself, shook her head no. Abruptly, she turned the talk to tariffs, of all things.

Had he been too familiar? Her eyes turned downward to her plate; she put all her attention on cutting her lamb chop. Her Aunt Sophie, she said, was livid because President Arthur wanted to lower tariffs. "She wants American industry to be protected."

He jumped in, noting that view was unusual for a Southerner.

"She believes American cotton needs to be sold to American mills, not British mills. She doesn't have much use for the British. Her husband was Irish. O'Brien."

Chuckling, he leaned forward and whispered, "So the Desselles speak to the Irish and even marry them?" What was he saying? He didn't want to marry her, merely get to know her. He felt a twinge of guilt. Was he deceiving her or himself?

Her cheeks scarlet now, she took another sip of wine. When she put the glass down, he reached across the table and gently rested his hand on hers. She didn't pull it away.

Surely her desire matched his. The silence, their hands together, gave him courage. "I believe I might have seen a vision yesterday afternoon, so I must ask. Were you at the factorage? Out in front? Talking with my uncle?"

"Yes," she said. "I asked for his help in a matter concerning a lady he knows."

William leaned closer still and squeezed her hand. "Can I be of service as well?"

He wasn't sure what he expected her to say, but what he heard surprised him. She explained Madame Voison's predicament. "I thought your uncle could ask questions of someone he trusts on the Exposition Committee, while I go down and talk to some people on the wharves."

"Absolutely not." His voice was loud and once again several diners looked up and glared at them. "You can't go down to the docks. It would be very dangerous."

Her body stiffened. She pulled her hand from his and placed it in her lap. "Mr. Collins, I'm quite capable of handling myself,

as I told Monsieur Lanoux the other day—on the streets, on the wharves, anywhere. I've lived in this city all my life and know most everyone and their families. Besides that, I'm able to fight quite well."

The thought of Renee, tall for a woman, but small-boned and slender, fighting off a ruffian, alarmed him. He admired her feistiness, but feared her confidence was misplaced.

She went on. "My cousin Sean, Aunt Sophie's son, taught me when we were young."

"I suspect you're good, very good ... in a fight," he said in a low voice, letting his comment hang in the air. He hoped she was better at kissing than fighting. "But please let me do some investigating for you. I'm already a familiar presence on the docks, supervising the loading and unloading of ships. The workers there are a rough bunch and they aren't free with information."

While Andre cleared their plates, Renee licked her bottom lip and he felt certain he could read her mind. She understood he didn't want her on the docks and she was willing to hand off the task rather than argue about it. "Madame Voison will be grateful if you can learn who is following her or who's paying someone to follow her."

He nodded his acceptance of the job.

Renee sat up straighter, which thrust her breasts toward him. He hardened instantly. She met his eyes. "I can't let this matter drop before saying that women are much more capable than society allows." She hesitated for a moment, her lips slightly parted. "I didn't mention earlier, but these past few days Monsieur Lanoux's hatter, Robert, has followed me home."

His whole body tensed. What nerve! Angry, he said exactly what he thought. "If Monsieur Lanoux directed Robert to follow you, I can only assume that Lanoux has an interest in a certain beautiful milliner that has nothing to do with business."

"We have a business association, nothing more," she said firmly.

“What right does he have to have you followed?”

Andre interrupted with their coffee and departed quickly.

She poured cream in her cup, gracefully handled the sugar tongs to drop in a lump of sugar, and stirred. “I asked Monsieur Lanoux exactly that. He denied having anything to do with it, and I’ve never known him to lie.”

He took her hand again and squeezed, suddenly feeling anxious for the safety of the beautiful, headstrong milliner. If Monsieur Lanoux didn’t order Robert to follow her, then who did?

From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a figure on St. Louis Street. He gripped her hand harder and tilted his head toward the window. “Is that Robert standing across the street?”

She turned her head. He heard her quick intake of breath, and he caught her cup with his left hand before it could clatter in the saucer.

Andre appeared yet again and William scrawled his name on the bottom of the check. Outside, he signaled for a cab. To evade Robert, he ordered the driver around Jackson Square, then down Canal Street, before they made their way back to her home on Burgundy. They sat side by side in the small, dark coach. He took her hand tightly in his. He wanted to encircle her shoulders with his hands, pull her against his chest, and kiss her until dawn. Or at least remove that infernal hat, perched forward on her head, balancing there with the help of a hat pin. Dear God, he was so aroused he was scarcely able to think.

He felt Renee’s warm body beside him, only their hands touching. The silk of her gown was cut low enough to reveal the luscious curves of her breasts, but the lace hid the pearl-toned skin. Her modesty taunted him. He wanted to lift the hem of that dress and explore the mysteries behind each layer of clothing. At the very least he wanted to grab her by the hips and pull her onto his lap, feel her lush bottom on his legs.

He scarcely breathed. She wanted a kiss, he was sure of it. And he would kiss her—but not in the cab.

He offered his arm and led her up the front steps. He followed her into the front hall, leaving the door ajar. “I must compliment you on your bibi,” he said with a gesture toward her head. “It’s most becoming.”

“You certainly know your hats, sir.” She took a deep breath. “Thank you for a delightful dinner.” She paused as if she might speak again, but did not.

He’d never been more certain in his life that a lady wanted a kiss. He stepped forward, took her cheeks in his hands and tilted her face upward. He lowered his lips to hers, brushing them softly. She closed her eyes. Her lips didn’t move.

“Kiss me, Renee,” he whispered hoarsely. “Let me kiss you.” He caught her shoulders in a tight grasp, pulled her body against his, then bent his head again. This time he pressed his lips hard against hers. He licked playfully across her lower lip with his tongue. Her lips quivered slightly, but she didn’t respond. Pulling back, he whispered, “Open your mouth.”

She parted her lips hesitantly and his tongue found hers. My God, at last. Now rock hard, he pushed deeper into her mouth. With closed eyes, she trembled and edged her body against his, molding her chest to his. With his arms around her waist, he pressed his lower body into her skirt, but she stood still as if frozen in place, her arms at her side. Ending his kiss abruptly, he nuzzled against her ear. “Thank you for joining me for dinner. Good night.”

With that, he forced himself to back away, step through the doorway and descend the steps. He watched her standing motionless until the cab turned the corner.

Chapter Eleven

From Renee's doorstep, the carriage took William through the Quarter toward Canal Street, where he planned to catch the streetcar up St. Charles to Uncle Patrick's. He stared out the window, his mind on Renee's beautiful topaz eyes. He'd held her hand, felt her heat in the cab, smelled her luscious scent. At the front door, he'd recognized the nervous expectation in her eyes. She'd wanted his kisses—of that he was sure. Yet she'd not responded with the passion he'd expected. He'd had to ask her—practically order her—to open her mouth. She was an experienced widow, but her kisses were chaste. Was she sharing her more passionate kisses with another suitor?

He felt suddenly and violently jealous of her dead husband, Rupert Soniat. Who was this Rupert—really—this dead man, this husband? Had she loved him? Disturbed by the thought of another man making love to Renee, his mind flew to Effie. He had told Effie his love was undying. And yet, after his travels on the Continent and three weeks in New Orleans, five years of his love for Effie had become little more than a smudge on the windowpane of his life. He had no shred of loyalty to Effie holding him back. But was Renee's loyalty to a dead husband holding her back? Was she still in love with him?

Having no answers to these questions, he turned his mind to more pressing concerns. Renee was being followed by Robert,

the hatter. Madame Voison was being followed by a businessman with reddish hair. Was someone following Maureen? Should he hire someone to watch her? Uncle Patrick had asked him to keep an eye on her and except for buying her a hat—for his own selfish reasons—and waiting up to talk to her last night—again for his own selfish reasons—he'd been too busy.

In recent days, he'd had only a few minutes alone with his cousin, and all she talked about was her love for Vespasian, about whom William had already heard plenty. It took little imagination to figure where that young man was on nights when he wasn't with Maureen and the Bouchard sisters. And what of the red-haired "businessman" following Madame Voison? William had a pretty good idea where to find him, too.

On an impulse, he raised the roof flap and asked the driver to stop at Collins Factorage. He climbed the marble steps to the second floor, where he found Fabre hunched over the ledgers with red-rimmed eyes—not an unusual sight even on Saturday night. Fabre was often tardy and openly spent several hours, both in the morning and in the afternoon, idling over the classifieds in the *Daily Picayune*, the *New Orleans Times*, the *City Item*, the *Mascot*. Often Fabre would read aloud the ads for livestock sales, domestic trade, and bail bondsmen as well as the listings of personal supplications or prayers of thanksgiving to the saints.

Fabre made up the time by staying late working commissions in the quiet office and because William found the files impeccable in the morning, he overlooked the days when Fabre appeared reeking of spirits and shaving soap, having not slept. William had come to tolerate Fabre's eccentric work schedule and even respect his patterns. On several occasions—after he'd finally persuaded Uncle Patrick to leave for the night—William and Fabre had toiled long hours without either of them speaking or moving—except to take rotations of coffee cups and saucers down to the coffeehouse in the street-level hotel for hot coffee with chicory.

Tonight William had enjoyed quite a bit of good wine at Antoine's and was in no mood for coffee or work. He came straight to the point. "Fabre, if I wanted to hire a ruffian to handle a task—"

Fabre looked up in alarm and then mumbled something into his ledger.

"I'm not saying I do, but I'd find such a person where? On Gallatine Street?"

Fabre shrugged. "I suppose."

"Are you planning to enjoy ... some entertainment tonight, Fabre?"

The clerk gave him an uncomfortable smile.

"You needn't be alarmed by my asking, Fabre. I'd be delighted if you took me along."

"Take you along?"

William stood over the man's shoulder. "Haven't we been cooped up in this godforsaken factorage long enough? My God," he grabbed hair on both sides of his temple, "I feel like the only thing between my two ears is white puffs. And," he said, putting his hat on and tossing Fabre his bowler, "I need something stronger than coffee to sweep them out."

Fabre was a tall man, with darkish skin, long ears and slender bones. He came from Cajun country, a family of fur trappers. In his early twenties and smart as a whip, he was destined for a better life in the city. He understood Fabre's reluctance to escort him to the dark corners of the city: William was technically his boss, and Fabre couldn't afford to lose his job.

As they walked toward the carriage stand, William recalled some of the tourist advertisements he'd seen promoting the Exposition. "Isn't this supposed to be an exotic city? Where are the dancing girls? Where are the craps tables I keep hearing about? Where are the quarters of the loose dark women I see in all the drawings?"

Fabre gaped at him. "That's not as open as it used to be," he said flatly.

Realizing that Fabre assumed he was seeking forbidden intimacies with a dark woman, William quickly altered his companion's view. "I'm just curious to see the sights, not to actually partake." The young man visibly relaxed. "And I'm paying tonight."

William held the cab door open and gestured for Fabre to climb up. "Let's go to as many places as we can in a single night, as many neighborhoods, what do you say? Make it a combination tour—a few of your favorite night stops, combined with some of New Orleans' most infamous."

Fabre spoke to the driver in a French too quick and nuanced for William to pick up, so he leaned back in his seat and turned his head to the window, enjoying the sense of striking off into the night toward what he knew not, a feeling he loved, traveling to unknown places. The lingering memory of the tops of Renee's breasts, glimpsed through the lace panel of her dress, enflamed his imagination for the spectacles that awaited him: dancing ladies perhaps, bare breasts, thighs, nipples—and though he wanted to get drunk, to let his cares go to the winds, he couldn't take it too far. He had several important goals for this tour.

Fabre's first establishment was full of respectable old men—grandfathers, really—all of whom greeted Fabre with a kiss on each cheek, then gazed at him as if they hadn't seen him in a lifetime. The place was tame—just like in the Irish pubs, not a woman to be seen, the men apt to fall to sleep mid-speech, or worse, take control of the conversation to rail against the Republicans and let the spittle fly. Fabre pretended he frequented the place, but William didn't buy it. To be social, he played a hand of whist, bought the gentlemen a round and then beckoned Fabre to follow him out.

Back in the carriage, William gave orders to the driver before Fabre could protest. "Franklin Street."

“I generally avoid that street in the evenings,” Fabre insisted, which William didn’t believe. He clasped the young man’s forearm and attempted to reassure him. “You’re going to help me for a couple of hours. Don’t worry, Fabre. Patrick Collins will never hear of it.”

“A man can see some shocking things in New Orleans.” Fabre grimaced. “Some visitors get fooled by the good time and wind up in trouble.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

William paid the driver, asked him to wait, then followed Fabre down a banquette obviously well-trod by him, for he got nods and waves from the cardsharps and shell-game players along the way. William, who’d mainly encountered Europeans and Arabs in his travels, found the variety of men and women intoxicating. Skin color varied from white to brown to black and everyone wore colorful frocks, one more outlandish than the next. Behind the riot of color and laughter, every visible woman was sexually available to some degree, though some of them, William guessed from their height, were men dressed as women.

The mid-October night was chilly, but not chilly enough to persuade the crowds on Franklin Street to cover up. “They call that taking an air bath,” Fabre said, nodding at a nude white man careening toward them, stumbling now and again on a loose slate. “Technically it’s against the law, but no one cares. Women do it too.”

William didn’t raise an eyebrow. He’s seen plenty of nudity in Paris, but he had not encountered this level of public drunkenness anywhere on earth. Everyone standing was unsteady on his or her feet and here and there, the bodies of both men and women were stretched across the banquette, passed out in each other’s arms, their soft, regular snores reeking of spirits. The flow of pleasure seekers, carrying tumblers of beer or glasses filled to the brim with

wine, merely stepped over the unfortunate souls who had enjoyed too many libations.

Fabre led him into one of the larger gambling houses near the corner and as William was taking in the scene around him, Fabre, as if by magnetism, sidled up to a monte table. William spoke to him, but he seemed not to hear, so he bought a glass of claret and took it outside.

One by one, William visited all the establishments on the street, dozens of gaming hells, taverns, cock-pits, and coffeehouses of the lowest order. Various polkas from the open doorways competed with each other for volume. Ladies of the demi-monde openly beckoned to him from the wrought-iron galleries above or from open doorways at street level, where skirts swished upward and men reached for the buttons of their breeches as they accepted offers.

He’d seen tugging in public in the back alleys of London’s disreputable districts, but tonight a glimpse of a whore’s bare thighs heightened his raging desire for Renee. He hardened at the prospect of taking her against a wall. He could easily imagine it, almost feel her legs around his waist, his hands on the wall on either side of her, his manhood pressing into her. No. She was a lady accustomed to soft beds and satin sheets for lovemaking. But how was it that she didn’t know how to kiss? What would it take to unleash her desire, make her display her hunger for him?

Forcing himself to ignore the bare breasts of harlots and the laryngitic whispers of cardsharps, William moved as methodically and rapidly as possible. He was noticed, he knew, but he walked too fast, too soberly, and with too much purpose for anyone to waste time on him. The bar maids, beer jerkers and dancers wore cheap, dusty clothes, old calico mostly, old homespun or muslin, fussed up with ribbons and dyed feathers. He sidestepped brawlers, drunkards and piles of rotting trash.

After at least an hour, his feet weary, he sat down in one of the last cabarets on the block, drank a glass of Cuban rum and watched a graceful negro man in short pants and vest dance with a young gentleman. Indeed, the gentlemen of his own class were easy to spot; there were clusters of them milling about, but so far William hadn't found the young gentleman he was looking for. There were also enough businessmen who might qualify as footpads—but none with reddish hair.

Returning to Fabre, William detached him from the monte table and settled him into their waiting carriage. "It's always about this hour," Fabre said, slurring his words slightly, "that I'm seeking my bed."

"I'd like to stop at the famous Gallatine Street, if you don't mind," William said.

"I appreciate your interest in local customs, sir," Fabre said between hiccups, "but anything that's going to happen tonight has already happened."

"I want to see the people who can't stop."

"It'll be dawn in an hour," Fabre said disapprovingly. "Your uncle will be expecting us at the factorage not long after."

"Tomorrow's Sunday."

"During harvest, we work"—he hiccupped again—"on Sundays."

Fabre was right and he looked so spent William was inclined to let him go home, but then he thought better of it. He didn't want to have to repeat this tour a second night. "Can you direct me to an establishment where young gentlemen go?"

"Young gentlemen don't go to Gallatine Street. At least those with any sense don't. I assure you, you won't find whatever you're looking for on Gallatine."

"One more stop, Fabre."

Once again, they stepped down from the carriage and, at William's insistence, visited cabarets, female spectacular

performances, pool halls, theatres, ballrooms, oyster bars, beer halls, brothels, pleasure gardens, and concert halls on the square blocks between North Peters and Decatur Streets, bound by Ursuline and Barracks.

Inside one cabaret, the women danced can-can, schottische and clodoche, all in some degree of nudity. The intermittent acts were black-faced comedians and Mexican contortionists. Scanning the crowd, William thought about his younger sister, Sarah, not because the dancers looked anything like her, but because some of the handsome rakes who enjoyed this entertainment reminded him of her husband.

Outside again, each gaslight revealed no more than a mist-filled cone directly below it. In the alleyways between buildings, couples engaged in noisy intercourse. Fabre kept his eyes on his shoes as he walked, but William glanced into the shadows from time to time. The usual position seemed to be the woman's back against the wall, her arms around his neck, her bare legs encircling his waist, the man's trousers at his ankles, the man's bare behind exposed to view as he pounded inside her.

In one case, the nude woman faced the wall, a half-clad man entering her from behind, one of his hands on her breast, the other between her legs. Her breasts shook with his thrusts; he moaned with pleasure. Once again, the flagrant display of intimacy aroused him. He ached for Renee, put himself in the rutting man's body, Renee in the woman's. He could almost feel his hand exploring the damp folds between her legs, his hand cupping the soft, round weight of her breast.

Inside the next dance hall, a young redheaded girl, wearing see-through lace drawers and a corset which revealed her rouge-reddened nipples, shimmied to fast-paced piano music. Buxom, but not pretty, the young girl raised her legs in high, crotch-revealing kicks that produced a shower of coins from her appreciative audience of hooting men. Though he was aroused

by the various sights, it saddened him to see women reduced to earning a living dancing this way, or worse, selling their bodies to men in an alley.

A whoop from the crowd startled him. He swiveled to see a young gentleman join the redheaded dancing girl on stage. He began casting his tie, jacket and waistcoat into the audience.

Fabre gasped. "Is that Vespasian Colville?" Several heads snapped toward them.

William gave the clerk a slight nod. With his dark hair and eyebrows, high cheekbones and pale olive skin, the young man matched Maureen's photograph. Long arms, long legs, a graceful sway to his hips and an unaffected flirtation with his partner as he stepped in time, Vespasian danced well. But would he give up his wild, pleasure-seeking ways if he married Maureen?

They turned their backs from the stage toward the bar and William ordered coffee with a shot of whiskey for both of them. Fabre seized his mug when it arrived. "That's why we've been on this tour? Vespasian Colville?"

William said nothing.

"You really *are* training to be a cotton factor!" He drank the hot coffee down and slammed the mug on the bar. "What are you doing? Spying for his planter-father?"

William spoke in a low voice. "I've heard he's a rake. I wanted to see with my own eyes." What he didn't say was that his cousin Maureen talked of Vespasian night and day. And William had known too many seemingly-respectable men who had habits that didn't make their wives happy after the marriage. Unfortunately young ladies like Maureen never knew the extent of these men's escapades until too late.

"And you've seen enough, haven't you?"

"I'm not one to pass judgment on any man. I just know I wouldn't want someone like that," he nodded at young Vespasian, whose bare torso was flushed pink in the candlelight, "in my family."

"Who would? But I suspect Vespasian's wealth and property will carry the day with some fine young lady. God help her, whoever she may be," Fabre added with wisdom beyond his years.

William left it there. He knew that all too well. Sarah had been just as determined as Maureen to throw her future away on a spineless scoundrel. The bartender put a glass of straight whiskey in front of him and he drank. Looking back again, he saw a second young man on the stage stripping to the waist. "Do you know the lad beside Colville?"

"The younger Voison boy. Jules, I think his name is." Fabre nodded toward a young man standing in the corner. "That other one is Blaize Grima."

A few minutes later, one of Fabre's childhood friends approached and offered to buy them both a drink. Seeing Fabre relax for the first time all night, William declined and left the establishment. He asked their carriage to wait for Fabre—the least he could do was pay his way home.

Walking with a careful yet quick stride, he crossed the Quarter at a diagonal, aiming for Royal Street where cabs waited outside the St. Louis Hotel. Exhausted, he considered sleeping there, but waved for a carriage instead. Despite his plan to be a cool observer, he was suddenly dizzy. He'd been careful about how much he drank. Had he been drugged? He reached into his waistcoat pocket for his watch fob and realized—slowly—that the chain had been cut. He stared at his own empty hand in the lamplight.

Chapter Twelve

Every profile at the shop door gave Renee a start; every shadowy man through the curtains of Lanoux's shop made her heart leap. Maureen Collins' finished hat sat in the workroom in a Desselle Millinery box. She recalled their dinner at Antoine's and the taste of his kiss, the taste of his tongue in her mouth, and her breath caught at the memory. She wanted to see him with a desperation that alarmed her. But, she told herself, he was a busy man. The factorage demanded his entire attention during harvest. How foolish to think William would rush over here the day the hat was ready. It wasn't as if Maureen needed the hat immediately. What had Aunt Sophie said? She had arrived on the train from Atlanta with three steamer trunks and a hat trunk.

The bells at St. Louis Cathedral tolled four. Still no William. She longed to look into those deep blue eyes, hear the husky brogue, breathe in his faint almond scent. To distract herself, she took up her most unpleasant task, writing out bills. Many families who had been wealthy before the war barely kept up appearances now, so Renee extended credit without interest to loyal customers. Some women ordered one hat every other year and took several months to pay for it. Others brought in old hats at the start of a season and selected new trim, which they sewed on themselves.

Renee often charged a Confederate widow less for grosgrain ribbon than she paid for it herself or made a hat inexpensively

for a matron whose husband never seemed to be able to find steady work. No one except Michelle ever questioned the practice. And her assistant understood perfectly once Renee explained her intention of making her hats affordable to those who needed them. "A beautiful hat puts a smile on a lady's face and we all have days when we need a lift," she told her.

After the bills, Renee whiled away the last hours sketching Madame Voison, developing two new daring styles. Both hats sat far back on the head, had low crowns and little or no brim. One was to be a brilliant purple felt, which would set off the lady's skin tones. For the second, she envisioned green felt with an Alsatian bow—not in front, which was typical of these wide grosgrain bows—but in the back. In both sketches, she drew the hat pin Madame Voison had purchased, a design made by a local jeweler from Renee's sketch.

As she worked, she pondered the lady's suspicion that she was being followed. Renee had shared this with Aunt Sophie, and neither could fathom her reason for selecting Renee as a confidante. Aunt Sophie had complimented Renee on her choice for help in the investigation, however, saying she was right to take the matter to Patrick Collins. And as of Saturday night, to William.

Pushing the sketchbook aside, she glanced again at the clock. It was nearly six, her usual closing time. Monsieur Lanoux's shop was already dark. She went into the workroom where Michelle was bustling about, putting her tools and fabrics in order at the end of the day.

"Good afternoon, ladies." William's voice filled the front room and seemed to shake the shelves in the workroom. Michelle jerked her head in his direction. "He's here," she whispered. "I told you he'd come at the end of the day—to have time alone with you."

Renee stopped to glance in the mirror over the workbench and smooth an errant curl into place before she stepped to the counter and greeted him. "Good evening, Mr. Collins. I believe you've come for Miss Maureen's hat."

He bowed. “I have, Miss Renee, and for a chat with you if I may be so bold.”

The sight of him sent a thrill up her spine. “Maureen’s hat is ready, as promised.”

Michelle, in her own hat, handbag over her arm, placed the hatbox on the counter, exchanged pleasantries with William for a few minutes, wished a good-night to them both and went out the front door.

Feeling his eyes on her, Renee pulled the hat from the protective tissue, placed her fist in the crown and held it aloft, turning her wrist so he could admire it.

“Oh. Now that’s a beautiful one.” As he spoke, he brought his own fist into the hat’s crown, encircling her hand with his. Her mouth went dry. His voice was husky and slow. “You were absolutely right about the velvet flowers. I know Maureen will love this.”

Their eyes locked. Desire ... was it desire she saw there? Her legs trembled, which was ridiculous. She couldn’t control her emotions—or her body—when he looked at her like this. “I know it’ll be becoming,” she whispered, her own voice gravelly.

He dropped his fist to the counter and she placed the hat carefully in its box. They went through the motions of exchanging money, and while she wrote a receipt, she noticed him studying the sketches of Madame Voison she’d left on the counter.

“These hats you’ve drawn are very handsome on this lady.”

“You don’t recognize her? It’s Madame Voison. It was my design for her hat that brought you into my shop in the first place. Remember?”

His brow creased as he examined the drawings more closely. “I’ve never laid eyes on her, but I confess when I saw you through the door”—he gestured toward Lanoux’s—“I decided not to leave until I met you. But more importantly, tell me, is this the very woman being followed?”

“It is. Do you have any news?”

“I’m sorry to say not yet, though I’ve begun to do a bit of asking around.”

She sighed. “I’m certain something will turn up.” She lifted a man’s black leather satchel to the countertop and slipped in the drawings. “I’m bringing these home to see what Aunt Sophie thinks of the hats.”

“Which brings me to my reason for coming at the close of day.” William leaned forward, fastened the satchel for her, and lifted it to his side of the counter. “I thought to escort you home.”

All thoughts of Madame Voison vanished. Her mood soared, and she matched his boldness with her own. “If I allow you to walk me home, sir, you must come in for a brandy or sherry. I don’t suppose you drink sherry?”

“Not if I can help it. Your offer of brandy is very appealing.” His eyes twinkled and he cocked his head to one side, sending a dark curl down his forehead. “I’m free of the factorage tonight. I wish to prolong the evening to any length you’re willing.”

She stifled a gasp. Could he mean he wanted to come to her bed? Surely not. Her imagination was running away with her. The heat of her body, and oh, heavens, the ache deep in her stomach told her she lusted for him. She’d read about lust. But she’d never lusted—not for Rupert, not for any man—until William.

He looked at her curiously. She suspected he could read her thoughts, and her insides melted. An urge to reach out and touch his face overwhelmed her, but she forced herself to keep both hands on the counter.

William grinned, crossed the room and turned the sign on the front door from OUVERT to FERME. She went into the workroom to retrieve her handbag and hat. She heard a step behind her. He stood so close she felt his warm breath on her neck, felt the heat of his body. When she turned, she would be in his arms.

“Renee, look at me.”

Trembling, she faced him. As he had done Saturday night, William put his hands on her cheeks and brought his lips to hers. He began not with an actual kiss, but with his tongue sliding slowly along her lower lip and then her upper. The pressure, the moisture from his tongue ignited a fire that spread from her center up to her scalp and down to her toes. She shivered with need.

William pulled away and quirked an eyebrow. "You will recall, Miss Renee," he whispered, "I showed you how we kiss where I come from."

She parted her lips and his tongue found hers. His taste filled her senses as he explored her mouth. Could she do the same to him? Was it all right? He seemed to read her mind.

"Your turn," he murmured.

Renee let her tongue lead her. She went deep, felt his teeth, his tongue, licked his lips while her hand found the back of his neck, playing with the thick, soft curls. Panting, she broke away, swallowed and tried to regain her composure. "I ... my hat," she stammered, pointing to the small-brimmed black felt on the hat rack beside the round table and two chairs.

"Would this pork pie be yours, Miss Renee?" He bowed and handed it to her.

Glancing in the mirror, she saw an unfamiliar face. Fuschia cheeks, swollen lips, too-bright eyes. She adjusted her hat with shaking hands. She turned toward him. "Should we take our walk now?" Her tremulous voice betrayed her.

"Not just yet." This time his hands circled her waist drawing her close. Renee closed her eyes when her breasts pressed hard against his firm chest. He ran one hand up and down her back, never lessening his tight grip with the other. He planted feathery kisses up her neck to her jawline.

Renee clutched his shoulders. He kissed her deeply while his hands slid down her back and cupped her bottom. Stunned at the intimacy, she stepped back from his embrace.

His voice growled low. "We better go have that brandy."

Renee staggered back another step, her face burning with embarrassment, but her body humming with a delicious tension. "I think perhaps after that ... I should have a brandy too."

He took the hatbox and satchel in one hand and offered her his other arm. Outside, dusk had settled in and the gaslights illuminated the slate banquette and the intricate iron railings adorning the buildings. William moved his arm, and Renee with it, closer to his body, and her heart swelled from the contact.

"I do wonder how you will explain your need for strong spirits tonight to Aunt Sophie," he teased.

"Oh, just you wait. I believe I can manage that."

"Let's make a wager, Miss Renee. I will bet you another kiss that Aunt Sophie objects. And no sneaking. You must boldly say, 'I'll have brandy this evening instead of sherry.'"

"Those exact words?"

"Something very close."

"You have a bet, sir." Confident this was no contest, she continued playfully, "Let me be sure I understand. If Aunt Sophie forbids the brandy, you get to kiss me again. And if she allows it, what do I get?"

"*You* get to kiss me."

She giggled. "I assure you, sir, you'll lose this bet. I'm quite familiar with brandy. My school friends and I were not above sneaking into our fathers' cellarettes for a taste here and there."

"I am shocked, Miss Renee. And to think I believed only young men engaged in such pranks." He pulled her even closer to his side. "But I assure *you*, this is a bet I'm happy to lose."

She loved bantering with him as they walked together. Feeling both happy and safe with him beside her, Renee thought how foolish Monsieur Lanoux was to ask Robert to follow her home. And how ridiculous it was of him to deny it. She turned her head to check for the hatter. As usual, Robert hung back a block or so.

William glanced behind him. "There's a bit of comfort in his presence, you know."

Renee started to say she didn't need a protector but decided against it. She refused to let Robert spoil the evening.



Aunt Sophie, in the back parlor, seemed pleased to meet him. The look between the ladies led him to believe he'd been a topic of conversation more than once in recent weeks.

The family resemblance was striking. Her hair was a shade darker than Renee's chestnut, her eyes darker than Renee's topaz, closer to pale brown.

He stood in front of the fire while Renee poured drinks at the cellarette. First she served Aunt Sophie, who reached for the one glass of sherry from the tray, then William, who took one of the brandy snifters. She placed the tray on the table beside her aunt's chair and, in plain view, picked up the second snifter.

"You know, Aunt Sophie, the ladies of New Orleans have taken to drinking brandy with gentlemen at dinner, or anytime actually," she said. "Monsieur Lanoux tells me most ladies who accompany their husbands to his shop partake of the brandy he offers. And believe me, he is very free with the snifter."

Her aunt looked mildly amused. "Is that so?"

"Yes, perhaps I'm behind the times serving sherry to ladies. I thought I'd try brandy this evening instead. Would you care for some?"

"None for me, dear. Just the sherry."

Renee sat on the sofa and William now took a chair opposite Aunt Sophie, who simply offered advice. "Slowly is all I advise, dear."

Laughing out loud, William covered his outburst with a raised glass and a nod first to Aunt Sophie and then to Renee: "To ladies

who enjoy good spirits." He paused. "Not an inane sentiment, I hope."

Renee flashed him a smile, put the glass to her mouth, then licked her bottom lip with her tongue. Clearly emboldened by the first taste, she took a real sip.

How delightful. He owed her a kiss. The memory of their minutes together in the shop warmed his blood. It was all he could do to sit still and not race across the room and kiss her hungrily. Renee's blushing cheeks told him her thoughts were similar.

"I believe you're enjoying that brandy, Renee," Aunt Sophie remarked.

"I am. There's no reason in the world why ladies should be denied such pleasures, don't you agree, Mr. Collins?"

Under the liquor's influence, the efficient shopkeeper smiled and laughed easily, tantalizing him with her words and movements. "I believe gentlemen who deny ladies pleasure are very selfish." He paused, glancing from one lady to the other. "Have you thought of smoking cigars, Miss Renee?"

Aunt Sophie grimaced, shook her head and tsk-tsked all at once. "I suppose it will come to that one day, women smoking cigarettes and cigars. But I do hope not. It's such a horrid habit. I should think women wouldn't want to get the smell of smoke on their clothes."

"Or their hats," Renee added.

With one eye on Renee, William engaged Aunt Sophie in a conversation about tariffs. She was intelligent, well-informed, and he hoped Renee was pleased to see the two of them getting along so well. When she brought out the sketches of Madame Voison in new hat styles, Aunt Sophie declared the designs inspired. The conversation turned then to the lady's troubles and William asked if he might have the drawings to aid his investigation.

Renee folded them carefully, handed them to him, and he put them in his coat pocket. He accepted another drink when Renee offered and stood at the mantle, admiring her figure as she poured.

“I believe I’ll abandon the brandy,” she said with a wink to William.

“A wise decision, dear.” Aunt Sophie took a dainty sip from her refilled glass. “I don’t believe there’s any spirit better than sherry to soften a lady’s worries.”

William attempted to amuse them by championing the cause of whiskey, particularly Collins Irish Whiskey, as the ideal drink for both ladies and gentlemen.

The door knocker drowned out the ladies’ laughter, and they all exchanged a confused glance at the disturbance. Estelle went to the front door to answer it. A woman’s shrill voice echoed in the hall. Renee’s brow furrowed and she jumped to her feet. “I think it’s Madame—”

Just then, Madame Voison rushed into the parlor out of breath, her face deathly pale. “I didn’t know where else to go. Renee, Sophie, the man following—”

William shot across the room. From the hall, he called back: “He’s outside?”

“Yes,” she wailed.

It was the last thing William heard as he dashed through the front door. In the light of the street lamp, he spotted a red-haired man in a suit loitering on the banquette across the street. He charged toward him. The man turned and fled, taking an alley to his right. The man’s shoes hit the slate pavement and William followed the sound, his only clue in the dark passageways. From alley to street and into an alley again, the man stayed just out of reach.

Then in one leap, William grabbed his legs from under him. He crashed to the ground face-first. William sat on his back and pulled out the knife he carried in his boot. He held it close to the man’s neck. “Following the lady, aren’t you?”

“What lady?”

William touched the blade against the man’s skin just below the ear.

“Stop,” he sputtered. “I’ll tell you.”

“Who put you up to this, following the lady all the time?”

“Smiley.”

“Smiley who?”

“Just Smiley,” the man gasped. “Scars on each cheek.”

Some description. “He pays you?”

“Yeah, I tell Smiley . . . where she’s been.”

The man shook with fear, and William believed he was telling the truth. “Where do you meet Smiley?”

“He finds me.”

He jabbed the blade just hard enough to bring blood to the man’s neck. “Where would *I* meet Smiley?”

“Wharves, Gallatine Street, out St. Charles.”

“The Exposition site?”

The man nodded, his cheek scraping the pavement. “Ask around. Everybody knows Smiley.”

William stood, releasing his hold. “Get the hell out of here. And don’t go near the lady again or you’ll hear from me.”

The man crawled away, tried to stand, stumbled once, regained his footing and ran.

Chapter Thirteen

Late Thursday afternoon, Renee's sketches of Marie Voison in his inside coat pocket, William took a cab to the Exposition site to look for Smiley. Though he'd heard Uncle Patrick's lament about delays, what he found here—electric streetcars without electricity, an observation tower leaning dangerously toward the river—shocked him. Was Uncle Patrick aware of the state of things?

The foundation and walls for the main building were in place, but engineers were clearly having difficulty designing a roof for such a large structure. Junked electrical material had been left in the rain beside an enormous steel honeycomb with an elaborate sign that read "Horticultural Hall." So far, the hall had no glass. Nearby, huge stone blocks of indeterminate function lay on their sides near rectangular shafts of what he guessed would become elevators. As he walked the grounds, he saw the railway lines leading to the Exposition were barely underway. Docks to receive visitors arriving by steamboat didn't look fit to support the weight of a dog, much less the throngs of visitors the Exposition needed to meet its debts.

Parts of exhibits from other states and countries littered the outbuildings. A large iron ore rock labeled "Alabama" sat on top of a mound of sand, unopened crates with shipping labels in Spanish—the Mexican exhibit, no doubt—piled nearby. Meanwhile

livestock—chickens, goats, and cows—sauntered around the rubble, eating what little remained of the grasses sent from Texas. Ragged workers hauled materials to and fro or lounged on stacks of lumber, waiting for instructions from their foremen. William approached dozens of these men asking how to find Smiley, but despite handing out a few coins, he got insolent shrugs, threatening looks and guarded eyes in response.

Not believing for a second the Exposition would be ready on time and discouraged that no one admitted to knowing Smiley, he retraced his steps, demanding to know from each group the name of the foreman. Most feigned ignorance but he did get a name or two, which he jotted down in a notebook. His frustration grew. Now more concerned about the future of the Exposition than about locating Smiley, he wandered for some time taking notes on every instance of idle disorganization he encountered. As he made a final lap around the unfinished exhibits, he felt angry eyes on the back of his head. Of course the workers were hostile. They preferred to be paid to do nothing, but it wouldn't stand; it simply wasn't right. Palpably aware of the lack of welcome, he finally determined it was time to head home.

He glanced at his new watch, bought to replace the one stolen on Gallatine Street. It was ten minutes past six when he left the site. He was in no particular rush to arrive back at the Collins house, where Maureen and Uncle Patrick were almost certainly reviewing details of the impending garden party. What had started as an informal welcome party had spun out of control. He'd not been around for much of the planning between Maureen and the Bouchard sisters, and, only after the fact, had he heard about Uncle Patrick's latest ostentations: the white peacocks, for instance, or the gazebo. If it pleased Maureen, Uncle Patrick would have rented a lake so they could offer boating.

He recalled that when the term *garden party* had first been mentioned, Uncle Patrick had asked bluntly, "What on earth is that?"

“They had them all summer in Newport. I read about it in *Harper’s Bazar*,” Maureen had answered.

“It’s fall,” William had thrown out.

But Maureen had overcome their skepticism with her usual charm. “Exactly,” she’d said, her eyes shining, “New Orleans’ most beautiful season. *This*,” she had gestured at the blooming snapdragons, dianthus and purple chrysanthemums through the window, “is why we tolerate the blistering summer heat. And garden parties are wonderful; they’re very beautiful and very amusing and worth all the trouble.”

“I don’t know about the eighteenth, Cousin,” William had said, glancing meaningfully at her father, who was staring beady-eyed at one of the flowers on the china plate before him. “Wouldn’t a party of this magnitude be too much ... with everything at the factorage ... and the Exposition?”

“No, no.” Uncle Patrick’s eyes had sharpened with offense. “A garden party is just the thing.”

“Wonderful.” Maureen had given William a tiny triumphant nod. “The eighteenth of October, then. That won’t interfere with Anna’s wedding or All Saints Day.”

What William wanted was time alone with Renee. Time to draw her body close, taste those wondrous full lips again. A garden party wasn’t “just the thing” where that was likely to happen. At the same time, he’d been delighted to see father and daughter collaborating on the project, though the guest list had swelled to the point that they were now discussing how to accommodate the infirm and rheumatic.

Concern for the weather further aligned father and daughter. Uncle Patrick forecast to a decimal point how early frost in Clarksdale, Mississippi, would affect his bargaining for hold space to Baltimore. For her part, Maureen dreamed up tents and rehearsed newly hired servants in quick scenery changes in case of rain. The Bouchard sisters, flittering around more than ever,

debated how to include everyone yet discourage overnight guests, how to decorate rooms the Frilots would use to freshen up after their long drive in from the country, among questions of shade and tea. With regard to the guest list, Maureen was firm on one point only: “No children. They interfere.”

The walk home from the Exposition site was longer than he anticipated, and William’s feet began blistering in his blasted dress shoes. The night took on a damp chill, and the road was so dark he saw only a few yards ahead. Above, fast-moving clouds blocked the moonlight. This stretch of St. Charles remained undeveloped and gas streetlights were few and far between. His feet made no sound on the dirt, and fog swirled up from the road as high as his knees. Every so often, thinking he heard the crunch of dry leaves behind him, he swung around, only to be confronted by empty air, nothingness.

Passing into a particularly dark block, his sense of disquiet grew. All at once, he felt a rush of air on his cheek. In response, he lifted his right arm up and rammed it back. His elbow connected with a jaw and, hearing a series of patois curses, he swung around and landed several punches on the dark shape in front of him. An inhuman yelp chilled his blood. From the corner of his eye, he saw an object, a board he thought, swinging in his direction. He sprang from its path, but lost his balance. He stumbled, fell back, and hit his head against a tree root.

He raised his arm to protect his face but another blow never came. In the silence that followed, his attacker’s boots thudded on the path as he ran away. He lay there, staring up at the dark canopies of live oak, catching his breath. After a moment, he sat up, felt the lump rising on the back of his skull, brought his hand to his forehead and eyes and was relieved he wasn’t bleeding. He stood, dusted himself off and lumbered the last few blocks home.

He felt heartened to spot his uncle’s porch light at last but his relief at being home was tarnished by the shock of walking into a

house almost completely bare of furniture and floor coverings. An enormous number of sofas, armchairs and rugs had been removed from the downstairs rooms, or otherwise repositioned, poised to be moved into the gardens in carefully considered groupings, along with the wicker chairs and rocking chairs from the porches, and iron benches already in the yard. The house seemed about to take off. Maureen, he realized with a pang, was about to launch herself into society.

Tonight father and daughter were in the parlor, going over the menu, which had expanded to include shrimp with Remoulade sauce, crab salad, tomato aspic, Charlotte Russe, cakes, cold ham, fried chicken and jellied tongue. According to *Harper's*, everything had to be cold, William knew, but Patrick had argued that his guests deserved hot food. When William walked in, they were deep in a discussion about fruit—melons, peaches, grapes, strawberries. Barely glancing at him, they continued their talk unabated.

He sat on the blue sofa and loosened his tie, thankful to have a moment without scrutiny. He'd had a narrow escape tonight. Whoever had come at him with the board might have killed him if he'd been less skilled. It was no random attack. He'd made enemies the last two days. First, the red-headed follower of Madame Voison and, by extension, Smiley. Second, dozens of Exposition workers.

Still listening to Maureen, Uncle Patrick poured a whiskey and handed it to him. He sipped the whiskey, unable to contribute whatsoever to the conversation, which had now shifted to drinks such as claret cup, champagne cup, milk punch, and lemonade for the ladies; brandy, Collins Irish whiskey on a separate table for the gentlemen. He waited patiently for them to finish, but they seemed nowhere near exhausting the subject.

When they started considering old Madeira, sherry and port, William could take it no longer and abruptly turned to Maureen, "Cousin, have you been out by yourself since your arrival in New Orleans? Have you noticed strange characters about?"

Her back stiffened instantly but she answered calmly enough. "Ridiculous as it may sound, a lady of my age and station cannot go out alone. My maid, Luz, goes with me everywhere if I don't have another chaperone."

Uncle Patrick murmured in William's direction, "She bristles at restrictions."

"I want you to take care, Cousin. Keep your wits about you when you go around town. It's well known the Exposition has brought any number of undesirables to town. It's come to my attention that some ladies are feeling threatened."

Maureen huffed. "I have other things on my mind." She kissed her father's cheek, then excused herself to consult with Guy and Julia about serving platters.

William was relieved to see her go. At Maureen's departure, Uncle Patrick rose, poured two more generous whiskeys, handed one to William and nodded toward the door. By unspoken agreement, they walked quietly down the bare hallway to the back porch.

Clouds covered the moon. The porch was lit by a gas lamp, but beyond the railing, the night seemed to hum with darkness and the smell of sweet olive trees. Here and there in the vast expanse of the lawn, Maureen's white tents glowed ghost-like. They disentangled two chairs and a table from the jumble of furniture and sat.

Uncle Patrick finally broke the silence. "I believe I'm overworking you, William. You seem troubled."

"Not at all troubled by being overworked, Uncle." He took a large gulp of whiskey. "I am troubled, though, about the matter of Madame Voison."

Uncle Patrick frowned. "Your questioning of Maureen ... Your Miss Renee hasn't been harassed, too, has she?"

"Not that I know of," he said, not exactly lying but not telling the whole truth either. Renee knew the hatter Robert. Was his following her home harassment?

“It’s good of Miss Renee to be concerned about Madame Voison. When she came to me, I thought to pass the chore to you.” His eyes crinkled in a smile. “It worked out well you volunteered. What have you learned?”

William related last night’s events, including his pursuit of the red-haired man following the lady. “He said he was being paid by a man named Smiley—”

“I can help you with Smiley,” his uncle interrupted. “He’s a well-known ruffian. He manages his affairs from the Sugar Park Tavern along the wharves. It’s his office, so to speak.”

William threw his hands up. “And to think I scattered coins in my wake at the Exposition site and nothing! I’ll question Smiley and get to the person who hired him.”

William took another swallow of his drink and waited. He’d learned that silence often induced New Orleanians to tell stories concerning the person just mentioned. Sure enough, Uncle Patrick went on in a contemplative key. “I always felt a bit sorry for Marie Voison when she ended up with Henri. Her family was so incredibly rich. The plantation in Natchez, thousands of acres of timberland in Alabama, and more sugarcane fields than you could count. Even if she’d been attractive, it wouldn’t have been easy to find a man in New Orleans as rich as she, so there was always this imbalance, which she wears on her face.” He paused. “But she’s very bright, always enjoy talking with her. If she says she’s being followed and thinks one of Henri’s associates is involved, I’d wager she’s right.”

William rubbed his sore head. “Which brings us to the Exposition. I just came from the site and I’m stunned.” He pulled his notebook from his jacket and related everything he’d seen, while Patrick dropped his head back and listened. “There’s no doubt in my mind Madame Voison is correct—someone’s stealing huge sums of money because construction is more or less at a standstill.”

Sighing, Uncle Patrick said what they both knew was true. “And her knowledge has endangered her.”

William took two more gulps of his whiskey. He thought of Monsieur Lanoux and Renee’s belief that he’d ordered Robert to follow her. “Could Henri Voison be paying someone to protect his wife? Is that possible?”

Uncle Patrick didn’t hesitate. “I really can’t imagine him being so considerate.”

Exasperated by the situation, William spoke up. “Uncle, we’re both sure of one thing: There’s no way the finances are in working order. I’m good with numbers and ledgers. Let me take a look at the Exposition books.”

“I’ll get the books from Henri on Monday. I would hate to learn that he’d gotten involved with this, this grand theft against the city, the government and the people, but if so, we’ll take the matter straight to the police. Captain McCorkle, originally from County Clare, will know how to proceed.”

William’s head throbbed but he decided against revealing the night’s attack. Maybe he was just an easy mark for a thief. Not so easy. He hoped he’d broken the man’s jaw.

They stood and went inside, down the hall to Uncle Patrick’s first-floor bedroom where he paused at the door. “God help us for this garden party, eh?” He gave a half-hearted laugh.

William couldn’t help grinning as he thought of the tents dotting the yard. He and his uncle parted ways. “We’d better rest up.”

To William’s surprise, Maureen was still awake, still dressed, sitting at the desk in the upstairs parlor, writing instructions for Guy. She looked up, not smiling. “Just what’s on your mind, William, with your comment about strange people around town, and not going out alone?”

“I didn’t mean to alarm you.”

“You didn’t, but you probably alarmed Papa, who’ll restrict me further.” She turned to screw the cap on her ink bottle. “You

have no idea what it's like to be a young lady. Luz is with me day and night. I can't even see Vespasian alone."

William hadn't had a chance to talk with Maureen privately since he'd seen Vespasian on Gallatine Street. The last thing he wanted to do right now was discuss the young man, but when could he be sure to have another opportunity? "Would you like to have a drink with me?"

She grinned at the invitation. "Of course. A little whiskey and lemonade, please."

The Collins family in New Orleans, just like his in Ireland, kept filled Waterford crystal decanters in every sitting room. Maureen sat on the sofa. William poured them each a glass and joined her.

"Here's to a successful garden party, the likes of which no one in this city has ever seen," he said, touching his glass to hers.

"I do believe it will be great fun, don't you, William?"

"I'm looking forward to it." He had the day off, an entire Saturday, and Renee would be beside him all afternoon. Would he steal a kiss behind the yaupon hedge? Not likely, but he might hold her hand as they strolled across the yard.

"Vespasian is coming, of course, and his parents, Emile and Helene, are traveling in from the country and staying at their city house just for the party. His older brother, Emile, declined."

"I have met his father on several occasions at the forage. A very pleasant fellow."

"Like father, like son."

William didn't pick up on her comment. "Maureen, do you know anything about my sister, Sarah?"

She shook her head.

"I wish this family talked more among themselves because her story—"

Frowning, she interrupted him. "What are you trying to say?"

He sat up straighter and looked at Maureen intently. "My sister, Sarah, had many fine suitors, but she fell in love with and ran away with a man who is a gambler and a drinker. A man who—there is no way to put this politely—likes a variety of women in his bed."

Maureen gasped, bringing both hands to her cheeks. "I had no idea," she said slowly. "Papa never told me."

"She has been married to this rakehell for nearly five years. She has two children, two sons, and she is miserable. In Ireland, there is no divorce, but she spends a great deal of her time at our family home in the country rather than with her husband in Dublin. I'm telling you this because I want you to be cautious. I know you think you love Vespasian."

"I don't *think* I love Vespasian, I *do* love him."

"I caution you to think of your cousin Sarah before you decide to marry him."

She locked eyes with him. "I'm not thinking about marriage just yet."

"I'm glad to hear that. I have promised to get to know Vespasian better and I will, but his reputation is not good. You do know that?"

"Yes, but none of it is true."

"Expelled four times by the Jesuits."

Maureen's eyes flashed. "Everyone makes mistakes, William."

"Vespasian seems to have made plenty."

"So has Renee," she snapped.

Surprised at her churlishness, William fell back against the sofa's cushions. "What do you mean by that?"

She clasped her hands over her mouth and turned flaming red. "Nothing," she stammered, removing her hands and twisting them in her lap. "I don't know what I meant ... I'm sorry."

He grabbed her forearm. "Maureen, what are you talking about?"

“Renee was ... she was unfaithful to Rupert,” she whispered. In a rush, she gave up all her information. “With many different men. That’s why she didn’t inherit the Soniat land. Rupert disowned her.”

Speechless, William tried to absorb this news. He gripped the glass with such force, he was surprised it didn’t shatter. It couldn’t be true. Not Renee, who needed coaching in kissing. Impossible. His mouth went dry. Or was Renee playing an elaborate game with him, toying with his affection? Was she, like Effie, simply not passionate for him? “Where ... Who told you that?”

Maureen’s eyes filled with tears. “I heard it a few days ago ... from Anna Bouchard. I was trying to find out some information for you ... about how odd the Soniat are ... information that would encourage you in your suit. I was trying to investigate. And ... I’m sorry, I didn’t intend to tell you.”

“And why is that?” He heard his own voice vibrate with suppressed fury—not at Maureen, not an Anna Bouchard, not even at Renee—but at fate. Why was he attracted to women who were capable of such deceit?

Her face expressed both bewilderment and outrage. “Why? Because it doesn’t matter! It’s in the past. Surely you see that?”

He took a large swallow of his whiskey. “Maybe.” His mind went to Sarah’s husband.

A gentleman’s past was a predictor of his future behavior. So was a lady’s. He poured another glass of whiskey and gulped it down.

Chapter Fourteen

From her dressing table, Renee could hear Aunt Sophie at the piano pounding out “Die Wahr am Nacht,” a piece that signaled Renee that it was time to hurry down. She adjusted her hat once more in the mirror, but wasn’t pleased with her appearance. The fact was, she was uneasy about the Collins garden party.

Earlier in the day, William had dropped by the shop as she was closing. He’d followed her into the workroom and suggested he pay his debt. Michelle had left already, but she never knew when Monsieur Lanoux might step in her shop to wish her good day. With a smile, Renee had stepped away and said in what she thought was a teasing tone, that he was mighty presumptuous.

“Come, come, Miss Renee.” He had grinned, rather roguishly. “Surely a kiss is nothing to you.”

“It certainly is!” She had put a hand to her neck to calm herself, but felt the beginning of tears burning her eyes. She’d enjoyed the kisses they’d shared in this workroom. But there was something about his tone that made her wary. Was he angry? Disappointed?

Phillis brought her out of her daze. “You lookin’ mighty fine, Miss Renee, and Miss Sophie done playing that little tune of hers. She gettin’ mighty anxious.”

The pounding of the piano stopped abruptly. With a sigh, she left her room.

Renee descended the stairs. Aunt Sophie stood in the front hall, her parasol, gloves and beaded handbag in her hands.

“We’ll be beyond late,” she scolded.

“Perhaps, but you’ll be the most attractive lady there,” Renee answered with a smile. “You look lovely.” And she did. Her brown hair, touched up monthly with henna to hide some silver threads, was swept up in piles of curls on the top of her head. Barely lined, her skin glowed with excitement, and her green silk dress accentuated her slim figure.

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Renee.”

Phillis followed Renee to the bottom of the steps to admire them both. “The mens gonna fall at your feet.”

Aunt Sophie checked her skirt length in the mirror in the lower half of the hall pier table. “I don’t know, Phillis. The hemline is all right, but is the bustle too large? I can’t see it in this mirror.”

“No ma’am. It look good.”

“The bustle’s perfect,” Renee assured her. “And the green silk is just right for an afternoon party.”

Renee never wore a bustle. She thought it a style best left to older women, one she hoped would be long out of fashion before the term *older* applied to her. Her own dress was deep teal silk with a round-necked bodice instead of the typical square-necked one. Gathered simply at the waist, it showed her hips to advantage.

For the occasion, Renee had made hats, which were nearly identical in color to their dresses, but of heavier silk brocade over buckram to give them shape. Both were wide-brimmed to shade their faces in the afternoon sun. Aunt Sophie’s featured a simple silk hatband punctuated with black feathers. Renee’s was trimmed with shades of deep purple, which emphasized the reddish shades in her chestnut hair.

The blue sky and the temperature, neither too warm nor too chilly, made the day ideal for a garden party. Did the Collins family order up the weather along with the food and flowers? Renee

chided herself for the thought and determined to change her attitude as the cab rounded Lee Circle and made its way down St. Charles Avenue.

But her stomach twisted with nerves and she tortured herself replaying every gesture and word of her earlier encounter with William. He had sought kisses and affection, but not kindly. He’d been imperious, demanding, seeming to have no memory of Wednesday’s rapport. He’d seemed a different man altogether.

Staring out the window while Aunt Sophie talked of all the friends and relatives they were certain to see, Renee admired the huge oak trees and the lovely new homes with expansive front yards. She still preferred the French Quarter’s town homes built right on the street with their private courtyards in the back, but as the city expanded westward, many of the newly rich had built palatial homes here. Had she not been so troubled, she would have enjoyed the drive into what she considered country.

Renee hadn’t seen Aunt Sophie so excited about an event in the years they’d lived together. “I’ve not been in the Collins house since the reception after Bridget’s funeral. It’s dreadfully sad. Patrick built it for Bridget and she lived for less than a year after they moved in.”

It took all her willpower to find anything positive about this party, but she murmured something about how they were certain to be in for a good time. Aunt Sophie responded by repeating gossip she’d heard of sumptuous food and elaborate decorations.

As they approached, Renee gazed critically at the home everyone in New Orleans called “Collins Castle” behind the family’s back. Made of large, heavy gray stone blocks, the house was a solid three-story fortress rumored to have twelve bedrooms. It sat back a great distance from the street and the lack of flowering bushes in the front yard gave the place an austere appearance. Their driver turned in through an iron gate and joined the line of guests’ carriages and cabs winding down a circular lane lined with a half

dozen live oak trees, three on each side, to the front door. Two footmen opened carriage doors and helped ladies and gentlemen disembark. From the number of vehicles—she counted at least fifteen—this was no small party.

Patrick Collins, William, and Maureen greeted their guests in the front hall. The site of William in a dark blue suit and blue paisley silk waistcoat tripled her level of anxiety. He bowed and kissed her gloved hand cordially, but he fixed his gaze over her shoulder. Her heart sank and she wished she could melt into the floor. They stood awkwardly, she focusing on her hands, while his Uncle Patrick gushed over Aunt Sophie, thanked her for coming and repeated several times that he couldn't wait to talk with her at length. He held Aunt Sophie's gloved hand far longer than customary and Renee sensed her aunt's pleasure. Finally Aunt Sophie stepped away and Renee moved on to compliment Maureen on her blue silk dress decorated with a Polonaise of fine lace.

That ordeal behind her, Renee followed the crowd down the hall, through the dining room and out the bank of French doors onto the terrace. As she and Aunt Sophie stepped outside, they both gasped at the splendor. Tall vases filled with arrangements of deep blue stalks of larkspur and purple foxglove lined the flagstone porch. Each white-clothed table held a centerpiece of pink dianthus or pink damask roses. Four wide steps led to the lawn where massive beds of snapdragons in a rainbow of colors punctuated large areas of grass on which a great number of sofas, armchairs and rugs were arranged to foster conversation. White peacocks strutted among the guests, unperturbed by human conversation and laughter. Games of cards and checkers were set out under the oaks. A knot of young ladies hoop-bowled on an expanse of lawn to the left.

Renee left Aunt Sophie to a lively discussion with Kathleen O'Hara and Augusta Bouchard about Maureen's gift for flower arrangement. Apparently, she'd done all the floral decorations

herself. Descending into the garden, Renee breathed in the gardenia-like scent of sweet olive trees. No doubt these ladies held high hopes that their eligible daughters would attract William's notice. Both women had three and wanted them all to marry Catholics.

Heart heavy, she wandered alone down one of several white oyster-shell paths. She curved through the beds of flowers—more damask roses and phlox in whites and pinks—and ended up at the first tent. Inside she found iced tea, ginger cakes, orange ices, chicken sandwiches, claret-cup, lemonade—and William, who had somehow escaped the receiving line, standing under the wooden eaves that supported the canvas, chatting with Elise Bouchard in front of the ices.

Was he punishing her for not kissing him this afternoon? Was he rejecting her because she wasn't an experienced enough kisser? If so, why was he wasting time with Elise Bouchard, who certainly knew less about kissing than she herself did? Renee dropped her eyes and went straight for the nearest punch bowl.

As she sipped a glass of milk punch—a powerful mix of brandy, sugar, whipped milk and nutmeg—Renee nursed her resentment of these matrons who plotted their daughters' futures. Her own mother, having died three years before her marriage, had played no part in advising her. Her father had encouraged her to marry his good friend. Why had she agreed? Yes, it had eased her father's mind that she was well taken care of. And yes, she had felt some affection for Rupert. But Renee hadn't understood that respect and friendship were not enough for a happy marriage. She wondered if her own mother had been alive then, if she would have supported Rupert's suit or urged Renee to wait for love.

Drinking her punch, Renee circled through the crowd, greeting the Rapiers, the Colvilles, nodding here and there, always keeping an eye out for William. She stopped to speak with Maureen and Vespasian who sat together on a wicker chaise, he with his entire body stretched the length of it, a sly smile on his handsome

face, she perched to one side, her feet on the ground, her hand in his. Their overt physical display surprised her. She moved on quickly and soon her scan of the second tent turned up William again, deep in conversation with Agnes O'Hara, the young girl's eyes gleaming as she looked up in obvious worship at him, her hand touching the sleeve of his jacket.

Renee returned to the punch bowl, hurt and confused.

This morning, William had been irritated when she refused to kiss him in the workroom. In a playful tone, she had promised to collect her kiss when it pleased her. Following her outside, he had offered to escort her and Aunt Sophie home after the party, which she accepted. Then he had reminded her again that he owed her a kiss.

"Surely you don't expect it here on Royal Street," she had answered.

He had turned and walked away without another word.

Renee knew nothing of this courting game—if that's what he, what *they*—were doing. Was she to kiss William every time he asked? Kiss him the way he had taught her? Lost in thought, she took a few hearty swallows of her punch and, seeing William charming yet another lady—a former friend of hers at Ursuline, Aisling Moreau—a married woman—she looked at the ground and almost collided with Henri Voison. He grabbed her elbow to steady her.

Renee took a step back. "Good afternoon, Madame, sir." Madame Voison stood slightly behind her husband's shoulder.

Henri Voison moved closer, "*Enchanté*," he purred, taking her hand and kissing it.

Madame Voison's eyes were round with panic.

"Thank you for making a beautiful hat for my wife, Madame. I'm grateful that you took on the project." He laughed as he said it, but Renee did not. Neither did Madame Voison.

Henri Voison's eyes flicked from her face to her bosom to her hips. Her skin crawled. Renee asked him how the Exposition

construction was going, but while they talked, his eyes wandered to every pretty face and figure walking by. At last, he excused himself and headed in the direction of William and Aisling.

"Let's have a cup of punch, Madame Voison," Renee whispered, grasping the older lady's arm. Her husband's remark—calling her a project—combined with his wandering eyes infuriated Renee. Rather than take it out on him, which unfortunately a lady couldn't do, she focused on being doubly kind to his wife.

Over her shoulder, she spotted Madame Soniat, in a dress so covered with ruffles and flourishes that it must have required at least twenty yards of her customary black silk. A petite and well-proportioned lady, Madame Soniat must have cut quite a figure in her youth. Now, however, deep lines etched her face, no doubt the result of many years of frowns and scowls.

As Renee prepared to trade insults, the lady walked by, acknowledging neither of them. Of course she wouldn't. Her life-long friend, now former friend, had defied her order and bought a Desselle hat.

Madame Voison seemed too rattled to notice the cut. Her voice wasn't more than a whisper. "Is there any news to report?"

"I'm afraid not," she answered honestly. "William Collins is trying to track down the man called Smiley, but so far, he's had no luck."

"The red-haired man has been replaced by an even more unsavory character, who is as vigilant as ever when I'm alone." She took several sips of her punch before continuing. "Twice this week, Henri and I walked after dinner and no one followed us. That was proof enough for Henri that I'm imagining all this. He says I need rest."

"It's not in your head. I'm sure Mr. Collins will track down Smiley—"

Madame Voison cut in. "I think it's Henri."

Unsure she'd heard correctly, Renee leaned closer. "I beg your pardon."

“Henri is having me followed.”

At that moment, Maureen rushed up with two friends, introducing them as Louisa Mermentau and Paulette Plemer, daughters of the partners of the law firm handling the forage’s legal matters. “I’ve told them you know everything there is to know about fashion, Miss Renee.”

As she talked with the young ladies about hats and styles from Paris, Renee watched William over Maureen’s shoulder. He was with one of the Demarais brothers and yet another of the O’Hara sisters, Shannon. Very pretty, curly red hair to her shoulders, a curvaceous figure, Shannon O’Hara was a child of seventeen.



William looked down into the bright eyes of a young girl, one of Maureen’s friends, he supposed, but he couldn’t have stated her name if his life depended on it. Something that started with an S. Or was it a K? Was it Sharon? Karen? Marion?

Renee’s ramblings across the lawn were driving him to distraction. He couldn’t keep his eyes off her. The sunlight on her curls made them gleam almost red. The deep teal of her dress stood out against all other flowers in the garden, including the dozens of fluttering women. He’d seen the encounter with the Voisons. The way Henri had looked at her made his jaw clench with disgust. Of course Henri appreciated her enticing breasts, her full lips. Unfortunately, since this blasted party began, all he’d seen of her was the elegant slope of her back, the alluring sway of her hips.

“Mr. Collins?”

The girl had just asked him a question and waited for an answer.

“Well, I’m sure that’s the case,” he said vaguely.

A brief look of confusion crossed her face, but she gave him a glimmering smile. He took her arm and shifted her so he could

watch Renee. Instead, his eyes fell on the woman he’d met in the receiving line, Madame Soniat, Renee’s former mother-in-law. Clad entirely in black, clutching a black parasol in a gnarled hand, she seemed to cast a shadow on the corner of the garden where she stood.

William turned again and located Renee. Now she was in a heated discussion with Madame Voison. The woman looked close to panic and, though far from being able to hear them, he could tell that his sweet, kind Renee was comforting the woman as best she could.

What was he thinking? *His* sweet Renee? If Maureen’s report were correct, Renee had let half the men in New Orleans have their way with her, and yet she played the prude when he asked for a simple kiss.



The supper buffet was the most elaborate Renee had ever seen. Silver platters of fried chicken, sliced ham and roast beef, stuffed crab, raw oysters and boiled shrimp with Remoulade sauce lined one serving table. Another was laden with bowls of green beans almondine, okra and tomatoes, buttered potatoes and parsley, rice and gravy, fried sweet potatoes and corn maque choux. A third held desserts, everything from Charlotte Russe to pecan cake to bread pudding with whiskey sauce.

Renee had enjoyed quite a few glasses of milk punch and now a little light-headed, she ambled down the line and allowed the server to give her a small chicken breast, a slice of ham, and a helping of green beans. William followed behind her. She could feel the tension coming off him, but he said nothing beyond suggesting that they join Aunt Sophie and Uncle Patrick at a table on the terrace. Once seated, he never looked at her directly. He engaged instead in a nonstop discourse about the charming people, the fine

and friendly populace the climate of New Orleans had produced. Maureen and Vespasian, the Bouchard sisters and several young men she didn't know enjoyed themselves at the next table. William leaned over and talked so much to them, he barely seemed to taste the delicacies on his plate. The moment he finished his meal, he excused himself. Not long after, she saw him with Shannon O'Hara again.

Alone, Renee circled the terrace until she found her cousin, Sean O'Brien, Aunt Sophie's son, and his wife, Mary. They introduced her to Charles Smith, a Liverpool man in shipping, a frequent visitor to New Orleans. She wasn't five minutes into a discussion of her need to import jet from England when he led her to a chair at a small table, sat down beside her and began to sell the benefits of his line.

William, across the garden but in her sight, wasn't likely to miss her intimate conversation, if he were watching her. Unfortunately, she couldn't be sure he was. Renee listened to Mr. Smith and promised to consider his offer. Concentrating on business was difficult because her mind was on one man—William Collins. She wanted him to look at her as he had done at Antoine's, stare into her eyes like she was the only woman in the world.



Good God! He left her alone for five minutes and she was already charming up the sniveling Liverpool man. Could he sit any closer to her? Could he look at her more adoringly? He felt an urge to charge over there and knock that fool backward on his chair, and he was about to cross the lawn, when he felt the pressure on his sleeve. A young lady looking up at him with concern. "Are you all right, sir?"

"Of course." He tried to smile reassuringly but he felt sick. The young lady went on, telling him the plot of some novel,

which his lack of attention made even more difficult to follow. A handsome duke kept prisoner in his uncle's tower? A milkmaid, who was really an heiress, switched at birth? He needed a drink, a strong one, or several. When would this infernal party be over?



As the moon rose and the guests thinned out, Renee found Aunt Sophie, whom she believed had not left Patrick Collins' side since supper, in the front hall. William approached and reminded his uncle that he had promised to escort the Desselle ladies home. Patrick Collins gave Aunt Sophie a peck on the cheek and William helped them into a carriage. During the ride, William and Aunt Sophie chatted, he asking questions about various guests, she filling him in on family histories. Renee remained quiet.

Handsome as William was, she couldn't forgive him for slighting her all afternoon. He had flirted with any number of young women and they with him—for all the world to see. Mrs. O'Hara had seemed confident that William was smitten with Shannon; she had positively beamed during the good-byes.

When they arrived home, William asked if he might come in for a moment to discuss a business matter.

"We'd be delighted, wouldn't we, Renee?"

Hoping to put him off, her tone icy, she murmured, "Certainly. I'm sure we can scratch up a brandy for *you*, sir"

Aunt Sophie glared at her but said nothing.

William followed them into the front hall. Aunt Sophie excused herself immediately, citing her waiting newspapers. Once she left the room, Renee went straight to the cellarette and poured them each a glass of brandy.

He took the glass, swallowed half of it and stood until Renee sat on the sofa.

William chose an armchair. "Brandy again?"

“Are you here to talk about my choice of spirits? You mentioned a business matter.”

“I saw you in a lengthy discussion with Mr. Charles Smith from Liverpool. Rather than send goods from Liverpool to New Orleans on his shipping line, you could ship your supplies through Uncle Patrick’s connections. I wanted to make that offer.”

“You don’t approve of Mr. Smith’s company?”

He met her eyes directly, smirking at her double entendre. “I know little of his shipping company.”

Renee glared at him. “You don’t approve of *him* then? I’m a grown woman with a prosperous business. I will speak to whomever I wish whenever I wish.”

“I simply meant ... you spent a great deal of time with him and, at the risk of besmirching the gentleman’s reputation, I must inform you that he’s known to be rather unscrupulous.”

Was he *jealous*? And yet she was supposed to stand by while he flirted with other ladies? Ladies? *Girls*. “I didn’t fail to notice that you spent an inordinate amount of time with Shannon O’Hara,” she shot back.

“I had obligations to our guests.”

“To Miss O’Hara particularly, it seemed.”

William took another taste of his brandy. “I’m surprised you noticed. After your ... attitude this afternoon at the shop.”

“I am a businesswoman, sir, and my place of business is not the location for ... other matters.”

He rested his glass on his thigh. “Not when Monsieur Lanoux is nearby, is that it? Perhaps he means more to you than you led me to believe.”

“Monsieur Lanoux is a business associate. As for you, sir, I think you should pursue your interest in Shannon O’Hara. She’s barely out of the convent school, but perhaps you desire a lady you can mold to your wishes.”

He rolled his eyes. “Oh, good Lord.”

That did it. “Henceforth, Mr. Collins,” she said, her voice tight, “I think it best to confine our association to our mutual concern for Madame Voison’s welfare.” She continued. “Since you seem to have come to a standstill in your search for Smiley, perhaps you should see if Henri Voison is involved. His wife believes he’s the one who is having her followed.”

“That makes little sense,” he said gruffly.

She shrugged. “Anything’s possible. And I must tell you before you make your way home—although I don’t know how much credence to give it—I’ve heard that Henri Voison is involved in voodoo.”

“I know nothing about—”

Renee cut him off. “It’s said to have the power to drive able-minded people to hysterical frenzy. Who knows, sir? You may enjoy looking into it. Perhaps you can purchase a love potion to help you woo Shannon O’Hara.”

William placed his empty glass carefully on the table and stood. “Thank you for the brandy. I will see myself out.”

As his retreating footsteps sounded in the hall, she wanted to leap up, throw herself into his arms, and bring him back, but she sat immobile. Two days ago, she had imagined herself falling in love with him. Today, she couldn’t understand what had come over him. When the front door shut, she threw herself across the sofa and wept.

Chapter Fifteen

Several days after the cursed garden party, William left the factorage the minute he could, hired a carriage and driver and set out for Desselle Millinery. Renee had said she wished to confine their association *henceforth*—as she’d put it—to investigating Madame Voison’s plight, and he finally had some news, which was his only excuse to see her.

The night before he’d wandered into Sugar Park Tavern, only to learn that Smiley had not yet arrived. He’d canvassed Gallatine Street, found Vespasian and taken him home, then returned to Sugar Park where he’d finally encountered the illustrious Smiley.

Spirits loosened the man’s lips, and William’s purchase of a glass of Barbadian rum for him made him downright loquacious. He immediately recognized Renee’s sketch of Madame Voison and went on to tell of a “cook from a fine house in the French Quarter” who had hired him over a month ago to follow the lady and give a daily report. Smiley admitted passing the contract off to a footpad, who took copious notes. Smiley dropped these jottings at Citizen’s Bank in an envelope with an account number on it. In exchange, the banker gave him a packet of money.

“Easiest coin I ever made,” Smiley said, but when William pressed him about his employer’s details, the man became frustratingly vague. He had met the cook once only, he said, out on the wharf around dusk. Whoever he was, he’d known enough to

ask for Smiley by name. When asked for a description, Smiley allowed the man was a tall mulatto, who spoke with a French accent. Smiley had determined the man was a cook because of his white coat and the smell of bacon grease, garlic, and onions.

Now, as his carriage maneuvered through the narrow streets, William mused on the bizarre nature of Smiley’s story. He had not been in town long enough to speculate on its credibility—who could this cook work for?

He’d told himself his actions at the garden party had been out of obligation, pure and simple, though he admitted to himself he had enjoyed a variety of women’s attention. In truth, he realized that he’d shied away from Renee all afternoon because he’d been distraught over Maureen’s revelation about her infidelity. Why should it matter? All he wanted was to bed her. But even as he told himself that, it didn’t ring quite true. Sometime during his slow seduction, he had developed feelings deeper than physical desire, feelings that bewildered him.

When he’d gone to the shop Saturday to deliberately test her, to demand she kiss him—after all a widow who’d enjoyed multiple affairs appreciated a man’s physical needs—she had rejected him, which made no sense. He knew he wasn’t an ogre. He couldn’t imagine a wanton woman not welcoming his touch.

Had he misread her interest in him, her willingness to learn to kiss him intimately? He could have. He’d certainly misinterpreted Effie’s affection. She had played with his lips and his heart, only to reject him. He suspected that her father had convinced her that a marriage between a Catholic and a Protestant doomed a couple to a life of conflict and misery. But not to talk with him face-to-face? To fail to meet him? To refuse to see him? That was both cruel and cowardly.

Renee’s anger over his conversations with other ladies at the party meant she cared about him, didn’t it? Despite the distraction of tracking down Smiley, William had thought of little

else. If Maureen's rumors were true, it resulted from a passionless marriage to a much older man. Still not right, but somewhat understandable.

Yet, he couldn't believe it. Renee, a willing widow? She seemed too innocent; she couldn't have been with multiple lovers. If she had, they'd been terribly unskilled. And where were they now? Doubts continued to nag him. Why hadn't she remarried? Were her closets so full of secret lovers, she had no desire to marry?

A grim laugh escaped his throat. He pushed the thoughts from his head. Whether she had or hadn't been unfaithful, he was determined to see her. With the new information he possessed about Madame Voison's follower, Renee would listen long enough for him to apologize for his behavior. He might walk her home, come in for a brandy and, he hoped, another kiss, perhaps a deeper one.



Tired, hungry and eager for a hot bath—Michelle had left some time ago—Renee stayed on to finish a sketch. From next door she heard male voices, an occasional chuckle, Lanoux drinking brandy with one of his clients. The other man's voice, though slightly familiar, didn't belong to William, so she paid scant attention.

She hadn't heard from William since the night of the odious garden party. Why hadn't he come to report on his progress with the case? She couldn't believe William hadn't found the man named Smiley, with scars on both cheeks. He must be incompetent—or he'd dropped the investigation. In any case, after Saturday night, he wasn't going to stop by to walk her home. He was probably taking Shannon O'Hara for a carriage ride this very minute.

At the sound of an unmistakable guffaw, followed by Lanoux's quiet snickers, she realized Henri Voison was next door. She retreated behind the curtain to the workroom, listening for a few minutes, surmising from the scraps of conversation that the

gentleman was giving Lanoux a rundown on the physical attributes of certain ladies at the Collins party.

The idea disgusted her. As a child, she had overheard comments between her mother and friends about unfaithful men. To Renee, *unfaithful* meant skipping Mass, so the ladies' horror seemed extreme. When she was older and began reading novels, she revised her notion of the term and quite understood the ladies' consternation. During her brief marriage, she had learned plenty more. Rupert had told her about rich gentlemen planters who kept quadroon mistresses in cottages along Rampart Street, often fathering children by them.

She wished Henri Voison had the grace to confine his extramarital activities to Rampart Street or to prostitutes on Gallatine or Franklin. Gawking and flirting openly with women of his wife's social circle as Renee had seen him do at the garden party were unpardonable sins. The memory of his gaze openly appraising her own hips and breasts turned her stomach.

And here she was, trapped in her own shop, with the man right next store. Michelle had not turned the sign to FERME when she left, and Renee couldn't lock the front door or the adjoining French doors without the men seeing her. Nothing was going to make her speak politely to Monsieur Voison, even if she had to work until midnight.

She went into the workroom and busied herself organizing bolts of black lace. Absorbed as she was, she nevertheless breathed a sigh of relief at the sound of the French doors shutting tight. Thank God. Lanoux locking up and leaving for the night. Both men were gone.

"Madame Renee!"

Voison. Alarmed, her hand flew to her lace fichu, tucked into her bodice.

His grating laugh raised hairs on the nape of her neck. Renee pivoted. He stood in the doorway not a yard away. "You gave me quite a start, Monsieur. I'm closed for the evening."

He advanced several steps until inches separated her chest and his. His eyes narrowed. "I'm not here to buy a hat."

Her insides roiled with nerves at his boldness, but she stepped sideways, took her own hat from the rack, picked up her handbag from the workbench and walked back toward him. "Excuse me, Monsieur. I really must be going."

He stretched himself in the doorway, his left arm on the doorframe, his walking stick extended to the opposite side. He lowered his voice and coaxed, "I thought I might persuade you to join me for a coffee."

"That's impossible, sir. Aunt Sophie is expecting me this minute." She smiled as she said it, hoping if she pretended this was a pleasant exchange, it would remain so. How stupid she had been to avoid the man while he sat with Francois Lanoux. Had she greeted him then and left the shop, she'd be home now.

"I don't imagine she'd notice if you were late."

"Oh, sir, you don't know Aunt Sophie. I'd never hear the end of it."

"I must insist you give me a moment of your time, Renee."

She pursed her lips and squared her shoulders. "I do not have coffee with married men, Monsieur Voison."

He chuckled, seeming to be genuinely amused by the refusal. "Oh, come, come, my dear. Madame Voison and I are married in name only. Everyone in New Orleans knows that."

The predatory look in his eyes terrified her. Her instincts told her to run. The back door was already locked. She couldn't possibly open it and escape through the courtyard without him catching her. No doubt Robert was out front waiting for her, but she couldn't get to *him* without pushing through Voison.

"I have a ... friendship with your wife, sir," she stuttered. "Please let me pass."

"Ah, yes, I know." He stepped forward and Renee moved back again. "That's exactly what I want to discuss with you. How good

of you to bring it up." He came closer. "You have put the foolish notion in her head that she is being followed."

Renee backed up until she came up against the workbench.

"Don't deny it. From the day she bought that hat, she has insisted that I'm having her followed." He gestured with his walking stick. "I assure you I'm not. I'm not in the least interested in where my wife goes."

Renee didn't doubt that. Dread clouded her thoughts. She wished with all her might that the milliner's heads—*papier-mâché* models that lined her shelves—had real eyes to witness this man's bullying and real mouths to cry out for help. She couldn't scream, her mouth was so dry, her powers of speech numbed by terror.

She thought of telling him she knew for a fact his wife was being followed, that William Collins had run down a red-headed man hired by Smiley. She swallowed, took a breath and decided not to reveal everything she knew. In a firm voice she said, "Sir, your wife didn't come by her belief that she's being followed by something *I* said to her."

"You're lying," he snapped. "I just heard from Lanoux that you, too, have imagined someone following you. Of course, the fairer sex has been known for tendencies to hysterics."

The fairer sex having hysterics. What a useful sentiment for oafs like Voison. Renee fought an urge to slap his face. "I suggest you," she said through clenched teeth, "show me the respect I deserve."

He put his walking stick on the workbench behind her, reached out and grabbed her shoulders with both hands. "You like older men, don't you, Renee?"

Revolted, she trained her eyes on the floor. Then, drawing courage from a well of inner strength, she lifted her head and met his gaze. "Sir, come to your senses."

He aimed for her lips, but she turned her head. He kissed her jaw, then pushed his body against her, crushing her against the workbench. Panic rose in her throat. She tried to scream, but his

hot mouth covered hers. His hips ground against her. She felt his arousal against her skirts. She raised her hands to push at his chest, but he seized them and pinned her wrists in one hand. He moved the other hand from her shoulder to her skirt, yanked it up to her waist. He parted her legs with his knee.

With all her strength she pulled her hands free. Swinging her right arm back, Renee made a proper fist and punched him hard in the side. He groaned, but his knee remained in position, the flannel of his pants rubbing between her legs. His hands grasped at her breasts, his mouth roamed over her neck and cheeks, trying to find her lips. She tossed her head from side to side, managing to move one way as his lips went another.

Please, God. She needed a miracle.

Her cousin Sean's words played in her head: *Girls are good kickers.*

She raised her right foot and slammed the heel of her boot into his left ankle.

Howling, he crumpled to the floor, and sat, clutching his foot with both hands. "You bitch, you broke my ankle."

She grabbed his walking stick from the workbench and brought it down hard on his head. The hit knocked him backwards, curses flowing from his throat. She raised it again, brought it down harder this time. Dropping it, she ran through the curtained doorway, around the counter, and charged blindly toward the front door. Straight into William's arms.



"My God, what's wrong?"

Renee's face was ashen, her breath came in quick gulps. "I hit. Monsieur Voison. I ... hit him. He attacked me." She pointed a shaking finger toward the workroom. "In there."

He sat her down in a customer's pink chair. "Stay here."

Enraged, his blood boiling with hatred, he ran into the workroom and found Voison sitting on the floor, pressing a handkerchief against the back of his head with one hand, while he rubbed his ankle with the other. "Ah, Mr. Collins, I believe I've taken a nasty fall."

"The hell you did, you slimy bastard." He grabbed his cravat and pulled him to his feet. With every fiber of brute force he possessed, he smashed his fist into the man's nose, then dropped his body to the floor.

Voison blinked and spluttered blood. "You broke my nose! Are you crazy?" He sat up, covering his nose with his hand. "I'll charge you with assault. Leave me be."

Exerting extreme self-control, William looked down at him and spoke with icy calm. "You best be on your way." He extended his hand and pulled the man to his feet, pleased to see him wince in pain as he put weight on his left ankle. William picked up the man's walking stick and noticed a bit of blood on the tip as he handed it over.

Monsieur Voison took a few tentative steps, leaning heavily on the stick. William motioned to the back door, stepped in front of him and unlocked it. "If I ever hear you came anywhere near Renee again, I'll kill you, Voison." William spat out the words. "Is that clear?"

He gave the man a shove at the threshold and he tumbled onto the ground, landing in a pile of wood and coal chips. William bolted the door behind him. "He's gone, Renee," he called. "I'll just be a minute."

In the workroom, he wiped up the blood on the floor with his handkerchief and gathered Renee's hat and handbag. Satisfied that the place looked presentable, he went to her, glad to see some color had returned to her face. He knelt beside her. Tears filled her eyes, nearly overflowing. Dear God, what had the bastard done?

With his hands in hers, he gently raised her to her feet. She buried her face on his shoulder, her fingers clutching the lapels of his jacket, and sobbed more. He put his arms around her and held her tight.

“Thank you,” she whispered into his neck.

He released her and stepped back so he could see her face. “Are you all right, Renee? Please tell me. What did he do? I swear to God I’ll kill him.”

“He tried to kiss me.” Sobbing, she shook her head. “I can’t . . . I fought him off.”

He knew she wasn’t telling the entire truth but let it go. Thank God, her dress was intact. Even her fichu. “Voison’s going to be uncomfortable for some time.” He pulled her close again and whispered into the top of her head. “He’ll never bother you again.”

Renee lifted her face to his. “I hope we scared him off.”

Her comment struck him as willfully light-hearted. He was shaken by the scene he’d just walked into. Everyone talked of keeping ladies safe from Exposition riffraff when in fact, in this city, they needed to be kept safe from gentlemen of their own class.

Renee seemed determined to move past it, so he followed her lead. “Actually, Miss Renee, I came to ask you to take a ride with me. I have a carriage and a driver waiting.”

He helped her into the conveyance and boldly sat beside her, his thigh pressing against her skirt. His arm around her, he rubbed her arm up and down. They sat in silence for a long time, the horses’ hooves hitting the cobblestone streets the only sound. Soon they were at Jackson Square in front of the Cathedral. At last he felt Renee relax against him.

“Are you quite sure you are unhurt?”

She nodded. He moved his grip from her shoulder to her waist. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there sooner. I came to apologize if I

offended you Saturday at the garden party or afterwards when we argued.”

She rested her cheek on his shoulder. “I’m sorry I was angry with you.”

He tightened his hand on her waist. Looking down, he saw a sly smile come over her face. “I believe I have a debt to collect, don’t I, sir?”

Fascinated, he watched a smile curve her lips. Then, to his amazement, Renee knelt, one knee on the bench, her foot on the floor, and lowered her mouth to his. He’d never seen such hunger in her. He supposed she wanted to erase the recent unpleasantness with kisses. He opened his mouth to her and she made small, exploratory plunges with her tongue, circling his mouth and finally kissing his lips softly as she withdrew.

He answered her with another kiss, this time taking the lead. Renee wrapped her arms around his neck and brought him closer still. He felt her breasts press against his chest as he squeezed her waist tighter. She tilted her head back and gasped as he traced kisses down the side of her neck to just above her collarbone.

“My God, Renee,” he whispered in her ear. “You’re driving me mad.” He pulled her down onto his lap. His lips moved down to her neck while his fingers, pushing aside the lace fichu, explored the impossibly soft skin just under the rim of her bodice.

She bolted upright and slid off his lap. He fell back against the cushion in the corner, putting a good foot between them. Closing his eyes, he took several deep breaths before speaking. “Do you realize what you’re doing to me?”

She was momentarily silent. Then, once again, seemed to decide to make light of it. “You have paid your debt very well, sir.”

Chapter Sixteen

Renee led him through the dark house, lighting lamps as they went. “Everybody’s out,” she explained, as she directed him into the back parlor.

The fire was laid. He motioned her to the sofa, put a match to the kindling, poured her a full snifter of brandy and insisted she drink it all, hoping it would calm her nerves. He sat beside her, stroking her arm as he’d done in the carriage. He talked of anything but the odious man while her tense body softened. Soon, she leaned back against the cushions, smiled and laughed as he told tales of his youth in Ireland, how he and his older brother had spent their summers searching the coastal caves for buried treasure.

She urged him to have a brandy, too, so when he poured her second glass, he made one for himself, which he sipped. He wanted to distract her and protect her, stay with her until he was sure she felt safe in her own home before he took his leave. Although desire still coursed through him after her kisses in the carriage, he vowed not to touch her tonight. He’d shocked her on the drive home by reaching into her bodice.

He attempted to quell his ardor by turning the conversation to the results of his investigation for Madame Voison—to Smiley.

For some reason, his report struck Renee as uncommonly funny. “A mulatto cook from a fine home in the French Quarter?” She giggled. “That narrows it down to—what?—twenty?—thirty?”

She was tipsy; he repeated Smiley’s words. “A mulatto cook. That’s what the man said. Do you know if the Voisons have a mulatto cook?”

Once again, her peals of laughter filled the room. “I have no idea.”

He went on, speculating about the Voisons, but she paid no attention. He’d never seen her like this. He supposed the brandy made her silly, but he worried that Voison’s assault had agitated her mind. He’d read of such lapses in men and women after a dreadful experience.

She asked, “It’s warm in here, don’t you think?” Her chestnut hair glowed red in the firelight, and tendrils, loosened by his hands when she’d kissed him earlier, wisped around her face like tongues of flame. Her fichu, still awry from his fingers’ exploration, revealed tantalizing glimpses of the pale skin of her breasts. Her topaz eyes gleamed with anticipation. Did he read desire—hunger—for him there?

She stood, swaying slightly, and playfully pulled him to his feet. “Have you ever seen my father’s orangerie?”

My God, was she really going to lead him to an even more private place? The idea that she wanted him stirred him with a painful arousal. From the first moment he’d seen Renee, he’d wanted to make love to her. He’d wanted to find the perfect time when she was ready for him. Part of him knew this wasn’t the opportunity he’d been waiting for. She’d drunk two full glasses of brandy and been assaulted by Voison. But he couldn’t stop himself.

He followed her through the kitchen to a greenhouse filled with orange, grapefruit and lemon trees in huge clay pots. Heavy green fruit hung from the branches of some trees. The sweet smell of citrus blooms on others intoxicated him.

Two steps inside, she turned and faced him, expectation burning in her eyes. With a gentle hand he untied her fichu, which fell to the floor. His fingers danced across her jasmine-scented skin.

He fell to kissing the warm velvet of her neck. A moan escaped her lips. He pressed his own lips harder against her quickening pulse. He cupped her breasts, feeling their ripe fullness in his palms.

She murmured something indecipherable and pulled him tighter to her, grabbing his hips and pressing her skirts into his manhood. He inhaled sharply. Last week, she'd been petulant about a kiss. Suddenly, she seemed to want him as much as he wanted her. He angled his throbbing erection against her thigh, increasing his own sensation and sending her an unmistakable message of his desire. He found her mouth, bit playfully at her lower lip, then deepened the brandy-flavored kiss. Her legs quivered against him.

Delighted by her response, he circled her waist with his hands and gently lifted her so she sat on the edge of a table. Unable to stop now, he raised her skirt to her knees and snaked his hand under it, up the outside of her leg, to cup a hand around the warmth of her bottom.

"Oh, my," she whispered.

Astounding him, Renee opened her legs wide and pulled him closer. The musky smell of her sex enflamed his passion. The lady wasn't a good kisser, but she knew how to excite a man. He pulled her tight against him, pushing his throbbing member against her mound. He hardened further at the sound of her sigh, a soft mew-ing. Reaching his free hand into her bodice, burrowing under her corset, he found a nipple, which stiffened against his fingers. Her head fell back, a gasp coming from her mouth, as he massaged the tip. Her skin burned; her body perspired. He covered her mouth with his and thrust his tongue deep into her.

Renee answered his scorching kisses with her own tongue. She licked his lips, explored the depths of his mouth.

Without a word, she leaned forward, unbuttoned her bodice and unhooked the front fasteners of her corset. Through her thin chemise, her breasts and the tight, dark pink buds of her nipples shimmered in the silvery moonlight. She arched her back,

thrusting her chest outward. He accepted her invitation, pulling the chemise low, bringing his lips down to feast on her. She ran her fingers through his hair, drew his mouth down harder. He licked, bit softly, suckled.

Every inch of his body thrummed with sheer need to fill her. Every nerve urged him forward. He had only to unbutton his trousers and find her entrance. Renee raised his head from her breasts and kissed him greedily. The lady learned fast. The powerful smell and taste of the brandy on her tongue hit him again, and, even as he pressed himself closer a question formed in some very dim part of his mind: Was he being selfish, using her emotional and intoxicated state for his own need? He knew the right thing to do, though he also knew he'd spend the night staring at the ceiling, cursing his conscience in every Irish oath he knew.

He leaned back to gaze into her eyes. He whispered, "Renee, I can't do this." He shifted her chemise back into place and pulled her skirt down over her knees. His voice gravelly, he stepped back further. "Not like this. Not now."

She covered her breasts with her hands. He turned away and ran his hands through his hair, his breath coming in deep gulps. Behind him, he could hear the rustle of fabric as she righted herself. She asked him to retrieve her fichu.

Silently, he scooped it from the floor, his heart wrenched. He understood without looking at her that she was mortified. She hadn't expected him to stop. What had he done?

He turned and handed her the fichu. "Renee, let me explain."

She took it without lifting her head. "I'll tie it." When she'd finished, she slid off the table. He caught her elbow to steady her, probably embarrassing her further. His hands circled her waist. He ached for her.

He walked her to the kitchen, held a chair for her at the table. "I'll make something soothing for you."

Her eyes followed him as he scrambled eggs, buttered a piece of toast and poured a cup of tea for her. He placed the supper on the table in front of her—only one place-setting.

“You’re not eating?”

“I’m concerned that you eat and rest,” he said. “You’ve had a terrible scare. Tomorrow you’ll feel better.”

She pushed the food around on her plate aimlessly, but he was determined to sit there until she finished. Attempts at conversation were anguished, and weighed him down further. Twice they both tried to speak at the same time. Each deferred to the other. Finally, she picked up her fork and ate the eggs, then the toast, with gulps of tea between bites.

When she finished, he suggested she rest on the sofa in front of the fire until Aunt Sophie came home. She nodded and let him lead her to the back parlor where she stretched out and closed her eyes. He kissed her softly on her forehead and promised to call on her Saturday night.



The next morning, late for work, Renee hurried down Royal Street, her face hot and, she suspected, flaming red. What had happened? She’d allowed him too many liberties. Had she? No. As a widow, she was entitled to enjoy passionate moments with a single man. Widows did as they pleased. She’d told William so.

Surely bachelors did as they pleased, too. Yet William had stopped. *The only man, including Adam, in mankind’s history, to pull away from a willing woman.* “I can’t do this, Renee.” Almost the identical words Rupert had uttered on their wedding night. Every night during her six-month marriage she’d wondered why Rupert couldn’t love her. Rupert had never removed her nightgown, never looked hungrily at her breasts as William had last night. She *knew* he wanted her. What had she done to ruin it all? What was

wrong with her? Was she too tall, too thin, were her breasts not large enough, her hips not full enough?

Rupert was an old man; William young and virile. She loved him. She wanted him. Yet he didn’t want to make love to her. He seemed to want to travel only so far, emotionally and physically. What held him back?

The brief sad look on his face when they’d dined at Antoine’s had led her to suspect there had been a woman in Ireland he’d once loved. Had she died? Had she spurned him? What woman would throw William over? Not only was he handsome—her Adonis—but he embodied every desirable masculine virtue and none of the faults. William’s eyes shone with intelligence, his conversation sparkled with wit, his manners were those of a gentleman. Beneath the polish he exhibited a raw masculinity that made her pulse thrum. Add to that, she loved his adventuresome spirit. He could have stayed in Ireland, enjoying an easy life in the whiskey business. Instead, he travelled to New Orleans to learn to be a cotton factor, a challenging profession even for those who’d grown up on the Mississippi. Add to that, he used little liquor or tobacco from what she’d seen. No gambling, whoring, swearing.

Whoever she was, she must have died. Rupert’s first wife had died. Did having a loved one die make men unable to . . . to perform?

She pushed her thoughts aside as she entered her shop, removed her hat and smiled at the dozen *papier-mâché* milliner’s heads on floor-to-ceiling shelves, some wearing hats in various stages of completion. They were hand-crafted in France; their painted curls and facial features gave each a personality. They hadn’t been able to help her last night when Henri Voison attacked her, but Renee was in the habit of greeting their friendly faces with a respectful bow as she put her handbag in the workbench drawer.

Madame Voison and Michelle came in together moments later. Michelle busied herself in the workroom, while Renee placed the latest issue of *Godey’s Lady’s Book* on the counter.

“Several of these designs would be very flattering on you, Madame.” Renee said, as she tried to gather her thoughts.

Madame Voison pulled a chair up close, jugged out her lower jaw and frowned as she flipped through it. She wasn’t here to buy a hat, and Renee wasn’t in the mood to sell one so early in the morning, when she had not had time to process the events of yesterday. Renee could never tell *the man’s wife* about her husband’s attack, but when she looked at her she thought of nothing else. Dimly, she recalled William’s report about Smiley, something about a cook.

She lowered her voice to a whisper. “I have news.”

“Thank heavens.” Madame Voison pressed her hand to her forehead. “It’s getting worse and worse. Henri threatens to send me to the North Shore to rest.”

Renee shuddered. Rest on the North Shore of Lake Pontchartrain was a euphemism for a private asylum for the rich, where ladies and gentlemen were well-treated, fed, bathed, and allowed a modicum of freedom on the grounds. But high fences, locked gates, and at night, locked windows and bedroom doors, kept them imprisoned. To her knowledge, no one who went to the North Shore for rest ever returned.

She leaned across the counter and spoke urgently. “Madame, you’re not crazy.”

The lady waved her hand dismissively. “I’m well aware of that,” she bit out.

“Mr. Collins talked with Smiley. And Smiley is paid by—”

“Henri?”

“No.” Renee straightened her shoulders. “By a mulatto cook from a fine French Quarter house.”

Madame Voison blanched. “No.” Already fair-skinned, she turned paler, her eyes closed for a moment and her hands stilled on the counter. A second later, she shoved the *Godey’s* into Renee’s stomach, and slammed both fists down where it had been.

“Impossible,” she hissed. “We don’t have a mulatto cook. Our cook, Pierre Savarin, came straight from Paris. And I’m certain it’s Henri.”

“The transactions are through Citizen’s Bank. Smiley sends a note.”

“I don’t want to hear this.” Standing, the lady covered her ears with her hands.

How childish! Perhaps the lady *had* lost her mind. But she needed to hear this, so Renee caught her breath and went on. “Every day, Smiley sends a report of your whereabouts the previous day. He receives money in return. The mulatto cook came to the docks and asked for him by name, hired him on the spot.”

Madame Voison’s lips trembled at the corners. “It can’t be.”

Renee folded her arms across her chest. “Smiley doesn’t know the cook’s name. I suggest you think about your acquaintances and their cooks. There must be someone other than Henri who wants to frighten you.”

Her lovely blue eyes flashed in anger. “You’re lying!” she sputtered. She turned and stormed from the shop. The door slammed so hard Renee expected to hear shattering glass. Speechless, she stared at the reverberating door and clanging bell.

“*Mon Dieu*,” Michelle exclaimed as she rushed into the front room. “She doesn’t like the designs in *Godey’s*?”

Renee laughed at her assistant’s dry wit, but an awkward silence ensued. Monsieur Lanoux poked his head through the French doors. “Everything all right?”

“Madame Voison has a terrible case of nerves,” Michelle said.

He nodded, hesitated. “I must speak with you, Miss Renee.”

My heavens, what now? She followed him into his shop where he took a position behind the counter, his feather duster in hand.

Renee forced herself to be pleasant. “I’m sorry about that scene, sir.”

He cleared his throat twice. "I've noticed William Collins in your shop frequently in recent weeks."

She thought of saying Mr. Collins' coming and going was none of his concern, but that was certain to offend him, especially as he was already struggling for words. "It's very difficult to say this to you, knowing as you do that I have. . . ."

She remained silent.

"The fact is, Miss Renee, the fact is William Collins is not the sort of man you should . . . you should even think of choosing for a husband."

Her hands clenched into fists. "Monsieur Lanoux, you've reached the outside of enough."

"It's not my business, I know, but for your sake, I must tell you." He turned his back to her, dusted the shelves a moment and faced her again. "I know you could never love me. Our age difference alone makes it highly unlikely. And our families. I'm a tradesman, after all; you are a lady who chooses to sculpt hats for your amusement."

She closed her eyes for a moment, praying for patience. "Monsieur Lanoux, please don't."

"This is unpleasant for me as well." He clasped the duster so tightly his knuckles turned white. "But I feel it's my duty to tell you. Mr. Collins spends his evenings in gambling dens on Gallatine Street and—"

"He's working very hard, Monsieur," she interrupted. "It's harvest. The boats come in day and night. He often works nights at the factorage."

Lanoux shook his head sadly. He actually seemed to pity her. "So he might for a few hours. But by midnight he gambles for high stakes and there's more."

Renee felt heat flare to her face as she tried to make sense of his statements.

"He visits women . . . women of ill repute in the many houses on Franklin and Gallatine."

She felt her mouth drop open.

"His manners are impeccable, but . . . but he has a dark side. Please, I'm telling you for your own good."

So shocked by his revelations that she knew her face betrayed her feelings for William, Renee took a deep breath and fought to remain logical. She was torn between the sensible, reliable haberdasher and the dashing Irishman she loved. "And how do you know this? That's a terrible thing to say about a gentleman."

"I've heard it on good authority."

Renee glanced into her shop; Michelle was talking with a woman she didn't recognize. She turned back to Lanoux. "What do you mean? What good authority?"

"Men talk as much as women do, Miss Renee. Some of my customers are not home with their wives every night."

She spoke as calmly as she could. "I've not just graduated from the convent school."

"Yes," he said resignedly, "which is the only reason I take the liberty of speaking."

Her eyes traveled to the top hats and bowlers displayed on the shelves behind him.

"Gentlemen have mentioned to me that William Collins is quite . . . energetic." Lanoux stopped short.

My God, what would he say next? Her dry throat made speech impossible. She couldn't stop him.

"Sometimes he visits more than one house a night."

She closed her eyes, remembered his mouth on her breasts. Suddenly she knew why he hadn't taken her last night. He was sated by the whores on Gallatine. "And how often . . ." she asked, then paused to gather her courage. "How often is he on the street?"

"I've heard four to six times a week."

A lump rose in her throat as she stammered something about getting back to work. Not looking at Monsieur Lanoux, she walked unsteadily through the door and shut it behind her.

Michelle, alone again at the counter, glanced up. “*Mon Dieu*. Miss Renee, what did Monsieur say?”

Unable to answer, she rushed into the workroom, sat down at their table, covered her face with her hands, and let the hot tears fall. Michelle’s hand squeezed her shoulder. “It’s William,” she choked out. “Lanoux says he’s a ... gambler and a ... whorer.”

Michelle sank into the facing chair. “I don’t believe it.” She patted her hand. “He loves you, Miss Renee. I see it in his eyes.”

“I *thought* so.” Renee’s lips trembled. “He’s with a different woman every night.”

She took the handkerchief Michelle offered and wiped her eyes and nose while Michelle disappeared for a moment. When she returned, she handed her a glass of sherry. “Tell me.”

Renee poured out the Lanoux revelations, Michelle interrupting every so often to ask for details. By the time she’d finished, they’d consumed a glass of sherry each.

“We must find out if it’s true,” Michelle said. “You’ve told me not to believe everything I hear. When are you seeing Mr. Collins next?”

“Saturday night.” New tears formed in Renee’s eyes. “He said he had to work every other night this week.” She brushed them away but they came faster.

“You must act as if you’re none the wiser. Can you do that?”

Renee pressed her handkerchief against her eyes, concentrating on stifling tears.

“You must.” Michelle stood to pace the workroom. “I have an idea.”

Chapter Seventeen

As the hall clock struck nine, the doorbell rang. William stood on the doorstep, looking weary. Peering over his shoulder, Renee spotted Robert across the street and William’s carriage parked nearby, which was what she’d hoped for.

She sat in Aunt Sophie’s chair and William took a chair opposite her, some distance away. He drank Collins whiskey while she had sherry. Unsure if she could look at him, she stared into the fire.

He broke the silence. “Renee, you seem disturbed. Are you ill?”

How can he act as if nothing happened between us? “Just what Aunt Sophie said at breakfast. I’m very... nervous about my hats ... since Governor LeBlanc’s wife ordered her hat for the Exposition.”

Reaching across the gulf between them, he patted her forearm. “That’s quite a compliment to have Madame LeBlanc as a client. I understand she’s quite a beauty.”

Of course he would know who was beautiful and who was not. She had no doubt he had had his way with half the ladies in Louisiana by now.

She raised her glass and took a bigger sip than she intended, choked a little and sat back against the chair.

“Tell me what you’re going to do for her. Big hat or small? What fabric?”

She breathed a little easier. Discussing hats for another thirty minutes or so would be simple enough. She'd removed her corset an hour ago, to make her change of clothing easier later. She wore a black wool skirt and a modest high-necked shirtwaist. No fichu for William to remove tonight; he wouldn't see one bit of her skin, much less touch her, kiss her.

Feeling his intense blue eyes on her while she talked, she lost her train of thought and trailed off. Why couldn't she just tell him what she had learned about him from Monsieur Lanoux? Why pretend she didn't know?

"What have I done to offend you, Renee?" he asked bluntly. "There is a distance between us—and not just in this room. I don't think for a minute you're worried about Madame LeBlanc." He took another swallow of his whiskey. "Have you heard something further from Madame Voison?"

She recounted the lady's bizarre reaction to the news about the mulatto cook. "She's still convinced Henri's behind it."

His left eyebrow arched. "But that's not what's troubling you, either. It was the other night in the orangerie. Is that it?"

How dare he bring that up? She hoped to never recall it again for as long as she lived. She took another sip of sherry.

"I shouldn't have been so forward and I apologize," he said, but a brief smile crossed his face. He paused. "As I'm sure you know from your husband—"

Mortified by this discussion, Renee's face went warm. She turned her head away from him. "Know what?" she whispered.

"I was dangerously close to a point from which there's no turning back." He swallowed more whiskey. "While I would like nothing more than to share your bed—"

"That's rather presumptuous of you, sir," she snapped. "I don't wish to share yours."

He sat back as if he'd been struck. "That's where we were headed," he said stiffly.

When she made no comment, he stood, approached the front of her chair. "Look at me, Renee. I will be honest. *I do want to share your bed.* I thought we should be cautious that night given the circumstances."

Cautious? They must be cautious? If she were in William's shoes, she, too, would be wary of bedding a New Orleans lady, even a widow. The alternative on Gallatine Street was far less complicated. Renee felt an overwhelming rush of conflicting emotions, but her mind honed in on the words he had said. *I do want to share your bed.* She felt the heat from his body, breathed in the luscious almond scent. She wanted him, oh, God, she wanted him in her bed. But if he were truly a rake as Monsieur Lanoux said, could she love him?

He leaned closer, his mouth near her lips. "Renee, you will continue to let me see you, won't you?"

Seeing the vulnerability in his eyes, she couldn't help herself. When he leaned closer, she put her arms around his neck. He sank to his knees on the floor, his mouth on hers. She parted her lips and welcomed his tongue. Beginning in her stomach, desire swirled outward until it reached the roots of her hair and the tips of her toes. He was first to break away. "I believe that's a yes."

He rose to his feet, took both her hands in his and raised her to stand opposite him. Then he scooped her up in his arms and placed her on the sofa. Sitting next to her, he kissed her so thoroughly—and skillfully—she thought she might faint. Her body told her to pull him on top of her, but thoughts of the task ahead intruded.

His lips left hers. "You're shivering. You're cold?"

"I was thinking of Henri Voison," she blurted.

He jumped up, his face masked with anger. "I hope you see nothing in common between Voison and me."

She didn't answer.

“I think perhaps a good night’s sleep is what you need,” he said coldly. “I believe you’re overworked. Have you thought of turning down orders for the Exposition?”

“Would you turn away a barge loaded with cotton?”

He chuckled, a little hollowly. “I see your point. Speaking of which, I have to go back to the factorage to check on a few things.” He pulled his watch from his pocket and glanced at it. “I’m afraid I must say good-night. Would you like to take an afternoon drive tomorrow—say two o’clock—out to the Exposition site? Many of the buildings are still under construction, but you can get a sense of the grand scale of the thing.”

“That sounds lovely. I’ll look forward to it.” Part of her *did* look forward to it, though another part of her dreaded that what she discovered tonight might make it impossible for them to see each other ever again.

She faked a yawn as she followed him to the front hall. At the door he turned, a mix of hurt and confusion in his eyes. Renee’s heart filled with fresh doubt and she dropped her gaze to the floor. Did she really need to see it with her own eyes? Couldn’t she just ignore what she’d heard from Lanoux? Might it be pleasant, living in denial? More than anything, she wanted to call off her reckless plan.

“Good night, Renee.” He kissed her hand instead of her lips.

Keeping his distance, all of a sudden, was he? Saving his strength for the women of the demi-monde? It took all her self-control not to slam the door.

Racing back down the hall, she took the stairs two at a time, her skirts held high. From her bedroom she grabbed a valise, ran down the back stairs, out the kitchen door and through the courtyard, emerging from the gate just in time to see William’s carriage turned leisurely onto Burgundy. She dashed for Michelle’s vehicle, hoping no one noticed a woman tearing down the street with a valise.

Throwing open the door of the closed carriage, she grabbed the hand hold, pulled herself up and inside. Michelle cracked the reins and they were off. Her heart pounding, Renee peered out the window. Within minutes, she knew they weren’t going to the cotton factorage. She closed the curtains quickly. Then she bent down, untied and removed her half-boots, garters, stockings, petticoat and chemise. She undressed as quickly as possible, shivering from the cold and the fear, which sat in the center of her chest like a fist. She had practiced a quick change last night and moved automatically, unbuttoning her skirt at the waist and sliding it off as she pulled the trousers up over her drawers, unbuttoned her shirtwaist and slipped it off.

Michelle made a few sharp turns that nearly threw her to the other side of the carriage. Even though she hailed from the bayou country, Michelle clearly wasn’t the expert coachman she claimed to be. Another wave of icy dread came over her. She prayed silently they didn’t have an accident as she buttoned the man’s shirt over her bare skin and stuffed her own clothes in the valise.

The waistcoat and topcoat fit, but not well. If she ventured from the vehicle, someone would certainly notice her sloppy tailor. She had no intention of setting foot on the street, especially in a man’s shoes several sizes too big. Not only was it illegal for women to dress up as men—*sailing under false colors*, it was called—but if anyone recognized her, she would be ruined socially, which, if she were arrested and charged, would be the least of her problems. Dear God, what was she thinking? She was putting Michelle at risk as well.

She pushed the curtain aside an inch or two and peeked out, growing increasingly alarmed. They were headed to Gallatine Street, a place she’d never been in her life. From Gallatine Street, it was said, unwary sailors were shanghaied onto ships bound for foreign ports.

Gallatine was the very street from which the unfortunate Henry Parmalee had disappeared several years ago. Renee recalled

Aunt Sophie's reading of the papers every day to get the latest news about the case. The very rich and very handsome gentleman, only twenty-two, engaged to a lovely young lady, a classmate of Renee's at Ursuline Academy, had entered a dance hall with friends one night and was never seen again. She shuddered at the memory.

As they turned onto the infamous street, Renee took a deep breath, hugged herself to keep warm, her every good instinct screaming at her to ask Michelle to turn the carriage around and go straight home. She was terrified for herself and for her assistant, up there on the bench, guiding the two horses. Standing up, she lifted the lid on the roof box. "Michelle, are you all right? Are you frightened?"

"Please stay where you are. That'll make me feel safer. It's lively on this street, no?"

"It is *that*." The gaslights illuminated shadowy figures in the foggy night. Raucous music and shouting drummed in her ears. Renee scanned the low slung, dimly-lit buildings, their overhanging balconies of black iron lace almost joining in the center of the narrow street. The carriage passed one dance hall after another, doors flung open to reveal scantily clad women hanging on the necks of sailors.

"I'm right behind him," Michelle said.

William's carriage travelled deeper and deeper into what Aunt Sophie referred to as a "den of iniquity." Men and women in all variety of dress staggered down the banquette, veering into one open door or another or ducking into an alleyway, which, Renee suspected, led to back courtyards and rooms where women entertained men.

Something ahead blocked the traffic and they stopped for a moment in front of a shop where tubes of various lengths and materials hung in the window. Painted on the glass were the words: Lamb's Bladder, Pig Intestine and Strongest of all, Rubber.

Renee couldn't take her eyes off the merchandise. She knew coverings existed that fit on the male member to prevent disease and pregnancy, but she never dreamed men bought these so openly. A woman behind the counter inside took money and handed packages to a steady stream of men.

In front of the next shop, a man barked: "Cover yourselves, ladies, with real hair mirkins. All colors to match what God give you." From the clothesline in the window hung small triangles of hair—blond, brown, black and several shades of red—wigs for a woman's most private area. Shocked anew, Renee averted her eyes. As the carriage trundled forward again, she glanced back one last time. She wondered why prostitutes wore these. How did they attach?

"He's stopping." Michelle said anxiously, then called to the horses and pulled over. From her window, Renee watched a form emerge from the carriage. She couldn't distinguish William's features, but she shuddered in recognition of his height, build and walk. He wore a long black cape she'd not seen before, which gave him a menacing air. The thick fog, hovering between the street and his knees, occluded his steps, but the cape swished around him. Her eyes followed his movements in horror as he went in the dance hall closest to the corner. She lifted the roof box and whispered, "Let's wait."

Too tense to sit, Renee continued standing on trembling legs, peering through the box. Piano music coming from two or three dance halls filled the air. An eternity passed before Michelle said softly, "He's just come out. He's walking this way. He seems very determined."

Slamming the lid, Renee crumpled to the floor of the carriage, her heart pounding. She couldn't chance that he'd see even a sliver of her profile through the curtained side window. She lost track of time as she prayed that William's mission here was not what it seemed, that she and Michelle would get home safely, that

Aunt Sophie would not get back to the house before her. At last, a knock came from the roof. Renee stood and raised the lid.

“He’s gone in the place directly beside us ... and it doesn’t look like a dance hall.”

Renee’s shaking fingers parted the window curtain just enough to see out. Through the open doorway, she could make out William, moving around, patting men on the back, throwing down a glass of whiskey, and more appalling, stopping here and there to speak to women with bodices so low their nipples were plainly visible. One of the women reached around and squeezed his bottom and he wagged a playful finger at her.

“My God,” she whispered. “He’s having a grand time.” Her heart breaking, she couldn’t control her wild thoughts. Why is this amusing to men? He could have had me—all of me—for the asking.

She watched him take a woman by the arm and bring his lips close to her ear. She nodded and led him to the back of the room and out of sight. As he disappeared, Renee felt a fresh wave of anger and disgust. Nausea rose from her stomach and she had to take quick breaths to quell it. How did these women get into this so-called profession? Could they possibly enjoy it, making a few nickels to bed stranger after stranger all night long? Was society to blame for giving them no other options for making a living?

To the left of the dance hall, she spotted an alleyway and on impulse, opened the carriage door and leaped to the ground. Michelle whirled around in her seat. “Are you out of your mind? Miss Renee, dear God!”

“If I’m not back in five minutes, go to Collins Castle. Aunt Sophie’s there for a card party.”

She crossed the cobblestones and entered the alley. The pungent smell of urine wafted over her as she stepped cautiously, terrified she would find a rat, a feral cat or possibly a drunk human sprawled in her path. Bracing one hand against the side of the

building, damp with slime, she picked her way along in the dark, careful not to trip on the uneven stones or step in the greenish puddles. She felt something crawling over her hand and nearly shrieked. A roach. She shook it off.

At last she came to a courtyard ablaze with light. Fascinated, she remained in the shadows, her eyes trained on the scene before her. In the center a group of men, some gentlemen by the look of their clothes, sat at long benches drinking and singing out of tune. Beyond the drinkers, gaslights illuminated a staircase leading to a rectangular structure with a balcony running its length. Women hung over the railings and called to the men below. Some wore gossamer dressing gowns that left no part of their bodies private, even below the waist. Renee’s breath caught. What she had done in the orangerie, revealing her breasts to William, was commonplace here. Did he just think her another whore?

She turned her eyes away from the women, and froze. William emerged from a back door, a prostitute on his arm. She strained, but couldn’t hear his words over the music, the singing, and the laughter from the balconies. He talked intently, appearing to question his companion. The woman, who could no longer be called young, nodded her head and held out her hand. He dropped several coins in it. She tilted her head toward the balcony and led him across the courtyard. Renee retreated when she saw him mount the steps.

Stumbling down the alley, her eyes blurry with tears, she ran straight into another figure, a young boy. “I’m sorry, I beg your pardon.”

“It’s me, Michelle.”

“Oh, thank God, I’ve seen quite enough. Let’s go.”

Michelle opened the carriage door and Renee stepped up and in quickly. She heard her assistant sit in the driver’s bench, just as a woman knocked on the carriage window. “Would the young gentleman like a little sport? From the look of you, it’s your first time.” The whore cackled. “It’ll be the time of your life, young master.”

Michelle flicked the reins and the carriage lurched forward.

With fumbling fingers, Renee undressed and put her own skirt and shirtwaist back on. She had just finished when Michelle brought her back to Dauphine Street. The business of shedding the men's wear had distracted her from the pain of her discovery and she kept her voice steady as she said goodnight. "I can never thank you enough for helping me tonight, Michelle."

She slipped in the gate and crossed the garden. A sob escaped her lips as she passed the orangerie. Empty valise in hand—she had left the men's clothes with Michelle—she hurried through the kitchen and up the back stairs. She closed her bedroom door, washed her face, undressed in the dark, and climbed into bed.

Dear God, how stupid to risk her life and Michelle's to follow the worthless Irishman. How stupid of her to care about this man. Men were nothing but animals. William Collins and every other man in the world could go to hell. Pulling the blankets up to her chin, she curled on her side, too angry and humiliated for tears. She thought of Madame Voison and her unfaithful husband. She loved William; she would have given herself to him the other night. Not now. She would have nothing to do with a man who preferred prostitutes.

Chapter Eighteen

Love made her sick. Renee opened her eyes to a blinding headache, a sore throat and a cough. Or not love—but the lengths she had gone to for love. She blamed the night air for her condition. What did she expect after running around in the streets on a cold, damp October night? Her bedroom was chilly and Estelle was off, so she wrapped herself in a heavy robe, put on slippers and tended the fire. The coals were warm from a proper banking, so she laid a few new logs over these and was rewarded with a blaze in minutes.

She climbed back in bed just as Aunt Sophie rapped at the door. "It's after eight, Renee. Are you going to nine o'clock Mass?"

"Come in," Renee called, her voice coming out as a rasp.

"Oh, dear. I thought you were coming down with something when you weren't eating yesterday." She came to the bedside and touched her forehead. "No fever, thank heavens."

"Just a head cold, but I better skip Mass."

"I'll ask Phillis to bring you a pot of tea and some crullers. And I'll make a batch of cough syrup when I return." Aunt Sophie continued to stare down at her, a concerned expression on her face. "You had a quiet night at home last night?"

Renee gave a weak nod. "And did you have a good time with Patrick Collins?"

“Oh my, yes. Six couples, three tables of whist and an absolutely delicious late supper. I’m afraid the night was rather long. Your light was out when I arrived home.”

Renee pulled the covers up to her chin as Aunt Sophie recounted the details of her conversation with Patrick on the way home. “I can tell you Patrick is quite taken with William. He couldn’t say enough about his aptitude for business and figures. He’s a whiz at handling the books. And he’s learned to grade cotton faster than any man alive, Patrick says. Apparently he’s a natural. What’s more, he’s a hit with the men on the docks. They all like and respect him.”

“I’m glad he’s doing so well.”

Aunt Sophie raised an eyebrow. “William came to supper last night, didn’t he?”

“He was tied up at the factorage until about nine, but we had a lovely visit.” She faked a cough because she was choking on her own words. “We planned a carriage ride to the Exposition site this afternoon. Could you please send a note telling him I’m too ill?”

“I’ll find a runner in the square.”

After Sophie left the house, Renee drank two cups of tea and looked at the plate of crullers. These deep-fat fried confections, akin to scones with a hint of cinnamon and nutmeg, were usually the perfect food when a meal was too much. Today, she couldn’t even stomach a bite. She’d never be able to eat again, smile again. She was so devastated, so confused, she was having trouble just getting out of bed.

Her mind returned to the first glimpse she’d enjoyed of William in Monsieur Lanoux’s shop. He was handsome, damn him, and charming, and according to Aunt Sophie, an excellent businessman. Uncle Patrick would give him more and more responsibility until he ran the whole factorage. Be that as it may—handsome, intelligent, rich—she shuddered at the thought of any further connection. Did powerful men require intimacies with

multiple women? She’d sooner remain a widow who ran a millinery than attach herself to him.

What about Michelle? Sitting bravely on the box like a hired coachman, she had been exposed to the elements last night far longer than she had. Though weary, Renee dressed in a blue serge shirtwaist and skirt, wrapped a wool shawl tightly over her shoulders and made her way downstairs to write a note to Michelle before her aunt returned.

Would William stop by this afternoon and be solicitous or simply send a get-well note? Or neither? What does a gentleman do when the lady he is courting is sick? Does he call on her before he goes to see a prostitute for the evening? Last night, William suggested she needed a good night’s rest. Maybe he should have done the same. *Going back to work at the cotton factorage. Hah!* Is that what he told Uncle Patrick in the evening when he wanted to take a trip to Gallatine Street?

She went out the front door, unlocked the cast-iron double door and signaled to a boy in the street. She handed him the note, told him exactly how to get to Michelle’s boarding house and placed a coin in his hand. “Please wait for a reply and there’ll be more money when you return.”

“I’m glad to see you up and about, Miss Renee.” She spun around at the sound of William’s voice. William and Aunt Sophie walked together up the banquette toward her. Even knowing what she did, the sight of him caused her insides to trill.

“Renee, you shouldn’t be out,” Aunt Sophie scolded. “You’ll catch your death of cold.”

She hadn’t put on a hat or a coat for her errand. “I was sending a note to Michelle,” she stammered. “Mr. Collins.” She nodded to him then dashed back in the house, coughing as she crossed the threshold.

“Straight into the back parlor, Renee,” Aunt Sophie ordered. “Sit in front of the fire and I’ll prepare the cough syrup.” She headed down the hall to the kitchen.

"I'll see that she behaves, Madame," William called, following closely on Renee's heels.

She pulled a chair up to the fire while he leaned against the mantel, facing her. "When your aunt told me you were too ill for Mass and too ill for our ride to the Exposition site, I was very concerned. What can I do?"

She couldn't look at him. She swallowed and her throat ached with the effort. "Nothing. I'll have a dose of Aunt Sophie's cough syrup, sleep this afternoon and be fine in the morning."

"I hope so." He began to pace in front of the fire. "I'm very disturbed, Renee."

She stared at her feet. "I'll be quite all right. I never remain ill for long."

"It's not your physical health that worries me as much as the fact that you're so distant."

She didn't answer. Renee's head ached. Gazing at the man she thought she loved, she recalled their meeting in the orangerie. She'd acted like a whore, the whores he visited every night. No doubt, bare breasts were nothing special for him.

Tears formed in her eyes and threatened to spill over. She blew her nose into her handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes. "I think it might be best if we didn't see each other any longer."

He sank onto the sofa, resembling a wounded animal.

She felt no sympathy. "You're so busy at the forage and I have all these commissions."

"I beg ... to disagree. I'll make more time for you. I'll tell Uncle Patrick I need more time off."

"I assure you ... that's not necessary." She looked up and saw his eyes flash with frustration. *Good.*

"You are damnably headstrong, Miss Renee."

"You're not the first person to tell me that," she said crisply. "It was a favorite criticism of my mother-in-law, Madame Soniat."

At that moment Aunt Sophie breezed in with a tray laden with a teapot, a coffeepot and a carafe of gold liquid. She poured a cup of tea for Renee, then poured coffee for William. "A good strong cup of tea and a few tablespoons of my cough syrup and you'll be much better, dear."

Her aunt left them alone. Renee wished she'd stayed. "Her cough syrup has three ingredients." She turned to William, glad for the safer topic, though it was a trial to keep her voice even. "Whiskey, honey and lemon juice. But whiskey is the major component by far."

He seemed equally relieved. "My mother makes up something similar. She always said the whiskey eases pain and induces sleep; the honey coats the throat and the lemon cures the cold."

Renee spooned three tablespoons into her mouth in rapid order. She kept her eyes down but felt him watching her. She guessed he would drink his coffee as fast as politely possible.

"Do you expect to feel well enough to work this week, Miss Renee?"

"I sent Michelle a note telling her to carry on without me if I'm not in."

The doorbell rang, and she heard Aunt Sophie scurry down the hall to answer it. "That's her reply."

William leaned toward her. "Do you wish me to continue the investigation? Should I attempt to find the employer of the mulatto cook who's having Madame Voison followed?"

She hesitated. "We've come this far."

"I'll report back when I have news." He stood and bowed rigidly. "I best go."

She nodded, not raising her eyes. Moments later she heard him passing Aunt Sophie in the hall. "Miss Renee needs rest. I will see myself out. Thank you, Madame."

Aunt Sophie entered the parlor and handed her Michelle's reply, which she opened and read quickly. "I was worried, but Michelle's not ill."

Aunt Sophie frowned. "Is there a reason she should be?"

"I just thought since the two of us work so closely together," she said quickly, "when one is ill. . . ."

Aunt Sophie poured herself a cup of coffee and sighed. "You don't look happy at all."

"My throat hurts."

"William Collins looked positively crestfallen when you weren't at Mass. He was very concerned when I told him you were ill."

"Mr. Collins is very good at pretense, I believe."

Aunt Sophie frowned, but didn't challenge her.

Renee stood. "I think I better go upstairs and take a nap—a very long nap."

Aunt Sophie unfolded the *States-Item*, scanned the headlines and looked back up. "Maybe you'll wake up in a more cheerful mood. It doesn't do to be sad just because you're ill. If you maintain a good attitude, you'll get well quicker."

"Whatever you say." She could hear the rising tears in her voice. It was all she could do to drag herself out of the room before they fell down her cheeks.



Storming away from Renee's, William was awash in powerfully conflicting emotions: anger, confusion, disappointment. He would never understand women or what they wanted. How fickle could she be? Or had she seen something essentially abhorrent in his character? What this could be, he had no idea, but whatever it was, it was conceivably the same flaw that Effie had seen, the flaw that had persuaded her to pass up his offer of

happiness. Without knowing what this flaw was, he was powerless to reform.

What had he done? They had kissed passionately last night. That had been her response when he asked if she would allow him to continue to see her. Now, not twelve hours later, she treated him like a stranger. He could see no connection between her physical illness and her change in attitude. She hadn't been feigning sickness. Her hair had hung loose around her shoulders, her eyes dull and nose red, her simple skirt and shirtwaist not the prettiest he'd seen her in, yet his impulse had been to pull her into his arms, not say good-bye.

He couldn't believe she meant to end their association, yet there was no doubting her words. What had she said? That he was too busy at the forage, she too busy at the millinery? The excuse was flimsy at best, but since she refused to tell him the real reason, he willed this useless speculation away. Maybe he should respect her wishes. Restrict their relationship to the Voison investigation—which, now that he thought of it, was going nowhere.

Clearly there was a connection between the shady dealings surrounding the Exposition—of which Henri Voison was chairman—and the mulatto cook who'd hired Smiley to follow his wife. But what was it? It was this question, the same one he had mulled over many times, that knocked against his head.

Walking aimlessly, he turned onto the levee. He knew of two Collins shipments being loaded into two different hulls up on the Tchoupitoulas wharves. He sought to avoid the questions after Renee's health that her absence at Mass would illicit from Uncle Patrick and Maureen, so he skipped the formal Collins Sunday afternoon dinner and headed to the docks to supervise—unnecessarily as it turned out. Fabre was there, and the process went smoothly.

He stopped into Sugar Park Tavern, ordered rum and asked for Smiley but the man wasn't there. He slugged the rum and headed

back outside, his mood so turbulent he barely noticed the clear, bright, beautiful fall afternoon. He opted to walk home, deciding to check the main warehouse that stored Collins cotton along the way. The short walk only increased his gloom. South Peters Street contained an odd mixture of warehouses, offices of lawyers and speculators, and boardinghouses. It being a Sunday, few people were about, yet his mind was troubled, his stomach unsettled. Uneasy, he thought someone watched him from above. He dismissed the thought as soon as he had it. It was broad daylight.

As he neared the Collins' warehouse, he was certain a figure moved across the third-floor gallery of the building just behind him. He whipped around for a closer look: Nothing. His eyes were playing tricks on him. At the door, he pulled his keys from his pocket. He heard a scraping sound from the roof, then a rain of pebbles hit his shoulders and sprinkled the sidewalk around him. He looked up—nothing—then down at his shoes, which were now covered in plaster and mortar dust.

He took a step to the left and intentionally spent extra time searching his pockets for the keys. As he reached out to put the key in the lock, from the corner of his eye, he saw something fall. He leaped right, a second too late. The bricks hit his left shoulder, knocking him to his knees. Wincing in pain, he struggled to his feet. He ran to the middle of the street to get a better look at the rooftops.

A man leaped from the roof of the Collins warehouse to the building behind it—and beyond. There was no point in giving chase. From his vantage point several stories below, William hadn't gotten a good look at him. By the time he climbed three flights of stairs to the roof, his attacker would be six rooftops away.

The bricks were intended for his head. He couldn't pretend this was an accident any more than he could think the earlier attack on the walk home from the Exposition site was. Someone wanted to stop his investigation of the Exposition's finances or his

investigation on Madame Voison's behalf. Which one? Or both? He waited for the streetcar, which never came, and finally took a cab. These attempts to scare him off only goaded him onward. He was making someone mighty nervous and he wasn't about to back off.

By the time he walked in the house, he had a splitting headache. His shoulder swelled against his form-fitting dress jacket. The entire household was resting, but Uncle Patrick had left him a note in the front hall: *William, Exposition account ledgers in the library.* He poured himself a whiskey and sat down at the large desk to examine the figures.

First up: the black book labeled Subscription Records. The left column listed hundreds of names—not alphabetized, of course not, that would make it too easy—and the right column noted the amount each donated to the Exposition. How absurd! Any child could manipulate these numbers. Had someone named Jean Arceneau really given five dollars or had he given ten, with Henri Voison pocketing the difference and misreporting it in the books?

The only way to check would be to write to a random sample of subscribers and ask them to confirm the amount of their donation. Such an endeavor would take weeks, and he knew he couldn't put Fabre or Neville on the task. Not only did Exposition business fall outside their duties, there was simply too much work at the factorage. Perhaps he could pass the chore onto Maureen. Hell, maybe a bit of serious work was just the thing she needed to dislodge that rogue Vespasian from her brain.

With a sigh, he turned to the next two books: the contracts for work and the receipts for supplies. He couldn't believe there was no separation of duties here. The handwriting was the same in all columns. Whoever had withdrawn the money to pay for contractors and materials was the same person who'd made the payments. And that person, he knew, was Henri Voison.

Several hours later, Julia brought him supper in the library. After a few swallows of vegetable soup and another whiskey, he

turned his attention to the payroll. The list of people employed was mind boggling and, though this list wasn't alphabetized either, enough of them had the same last names to make things even more confusing. John and Stephen Keenan; Manuel and Jose Orantes; James, George, Walter, and Thomas Hudson. Other well-known New Orleans surnames appeared on the paper: Dumas, Plaisance, Bender, Williams, Adler, Garrison, Hebert, Pitre. Were all these people working at the Exposition? In what capacity? With so many workers, it made no sense that construction was riddled with delays.

He restacked the notebooks, his eyes feeling like sandpaper. He avoided the face of the grandfather clock on the landing as he trudged up the stairs. His shoulder ached and sleep would not come. After several hours of twisting in his sheets, he lit a lamp. The chill floor on his bare feet made him second guess his wakefulness for a moment, but he pulled on his dressing gown, shoved his feet into sheepskin slippers and made his way back downstairs to the library to go over the books again. Around dawn he put his head down on the desk and, left hand still resting on the beads of the abacus, fell into a light, fitful sleep, a sleep swirling with unpronounceable names and indecipherable numbers.

Chapter Nineteen

Renee stayed late at the shop on Wednesday, missed her evening sherry and didn't join Aunt Sophie until dinner. After they said the blessing, she picked up her soup spoon and stared into the bowl of bouillabaisse. A crab leg on the broth's surface reminded her of a drowning person's last, futile reach for survival. Putting down her spoon, her eyes roamed the table, falling on the *rouille* and the basket of French bread. She lacked the strength to spread the thick, rust-colored sauce on a piece of bread and put it in her mouth.

Aunt Sophie's eyes sparkled and she wore a faint, faraway smile. Renee took a swallow of claret and forced herself to ask, "Good news?"

"I'm about to burst. I received a note this afternoon." She paused dramatically. "Patrick Collins has invited us to join him in his box at the opera opening night!"

Renee's heart sank. She wanted to see William—desperately—but, knowing what she did of his evening activities, she couldn't imagine herself being polite to him. Reaching across the table, she patted her aunt's hand, then withdrew it quickly. "I'm sure you'll have a lovely time. I think I better decline."

Aunt Sophie rested her spoon on the plate beneath her bowl with an exasperated sigh. "Don't say you have too many hat commissions!"

Renee drained her wine glass. “William and I have had a disagreement. I suspect he doesn’t know his uncle invited me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Aunt Sophie threw up her hands and let them fall gracefully on either side of her plate. “Six chairs to a box. I’m Patrick’s guest; you’re William’s, and Maureen has invited Vespasian Colville.”

Renee raised an eyebrow. “Patrick Collins approves?”

Aunt Sophie had a quick defense. “Patrick said he’d rather have Vespasian under his eye than have him sneaking into the garden in the evenings.”

Once again, Renee noted her aunt referred to Patrick Collins as simply “Patrick,” not “Mr. Collins.” Her mind wandered. Vespasian and William were probably quite close these days. She imagined the two carousing together nearly every night, ogling naked women. She took a few valiant swallows of her soup.

Aunt Sophie was not one to let the matter drop. “I don’t want to pry into your business, but I’m certain William knows you’re invited. It’s no doubt his way of smoothing over your disagreement. I wish you would accept. You know you should. And I’ll enjoy it more if you’re there.”

Renee took a few more spoonfuls of soup. “I suppose ... if you really think I must.”

Aunt Sophie seemed to take the word *suppose* as acquiescence; she put her spoon down, fairly glowing. “I’ve made an appointment with Frau Kohlmeyer at seven tomorrow evening here at the house. You’ve no excuse not to join us.”

In spite of her dark temper, Renee brightened at that notion. The November issue of *Godey’s* featured a daring design that she’d love to have made up—with a few adjustments. Damn it, she would order the barest dress Frau Kohlmeyer had ever made. If William found the half-clad women on Gallatine Street so attractive, what would he think of *her* in a provocative dress? An image

of herself in such a frock brought a smile to her face for the first time in days. “Actually, I have an idea for something quite elegant.”

Relief spread across her aunt’s face. “Excellent. I can’t wait to see your sketch.”

In the parlor after supper, she worked on her design while Aunt Sophie wrote a letter to her daughter, Michaela, in Mobile. Renee retired early, taking a copy of *Tom Jones* with her to bed. She saw Aunt Sophie take note of her choice but made no explanation. It was a novel she’d read at the convent school. Tom, she remembered, was happy to bed a willing woman at every opportunity, but he kept his hands off his beloved Sophia until they were wed. Renee didn’t get very far in the first chapter before her thoughts turned to William. If they were to marry, would he continue his liaisons with prostitutes? Surely then he would be happy to have her and her alone in his bed? Never, she thought, her anger returning. The cad would never share her bed.

The next day was the fourth since she’d seen him. Not that there was any reason to count. She was swamped with commissions—enough to justify being panicked about whether she could finish on time, yet, to her dismay, she found it difficult to muster up enthusiasm for her work.

Thank God for Michelle, who was brilliant with shaping and trim—and sweet. Michelle understood her distraction. She’d been on Gallatine Street with her and was kind enough not to say anything the second time Renee misplaced the Rapier sketches. Mid-afternoon came and went and Renee barely noticed the postman enter with a delivery, until Michelle began squealing as she cut open the box.

“It’s the peacock feathers, Miss Renee. Look.” She laid them carefully on the counter. The light from the window caught the blues and greens and the feathers glimmered. Spellbound, Renee cradled the feathers in her hands, and they hurried into the workroom. “Let’s try satin ribbon, don’t you think?”

Michelle lifted down the milliner's head on which Madame Rapier's wide-brimmed hat had been formed, while Renee flipped through her sketches. For the next several hours they pinned and tucked and braided, they stitched and molded and trimmed.

A little after five, Michelle declared the hat a masterpiece. They stood back and admired the design and impeccable workmanship. "It's the finest hat Desselle Millinery has ever produced," Renee declared. "Madame Rapier will be gorgeous."

"Her hat will be the talk of the town," Michelle gushed.

Renee wrapped the leftover feathers in brown paper and sent Michelle home. Although she had plenty of work still to do, Renee spent an hour on sketches of her dress for the opera. Finally, she gathered these and locked up, the *Godey's* magazine and the package of feathers also under her arm. Across the street, Robert waited. She nodded curtly to him and started for home.

As she walked, she pictured Madame Rapier's hat. It was almost too beautiful. Perhaps it would bring her more clients than she and Michelle could handle. But why was she afraid of expansion? She was talented, smart, able-bodied. Her hats drew nothing but praise. In the future, she *should* expand, perhaps even include clothing and jewelry. Her clientele would grow by the week. She wouldn't need or want William's riches—or his kisses. She was a brilliant designer and a more than competent businesswoman. In fact, she brought Monsieur Lanoux clients and not the other way around. At that thought, anger flashed through her. Why did she allow Monsieur Lanoux this ridiculous charade of pretending he didn't ask Robert to follow her?

She stopped so suddenly that a gentleman behind her nearly crashed into her. Spinning around, she hurried back along the crowded banquette until she stood directly in front of the startled hatter. "Stop following me, Robert. This very minute."

Flinching, he removed his hat, covered his mouth with it and, trembling, backed away. She knew he was embarrassed by his blackened gums and loosened teeth.

She softened her voice. "I don't need you to follow me home, Robert."

Several gentlemen rushed by, smirks on their faces. She stepped against the building. "Monsieur Lanoux said he didn't ask you to follow me, but I know he did. I know he put you up to it." She reached out and pulled the hat from Robert's face.

His eyes widened in confusion. "Nome. Nome," he stammered, shakes wracking his withered frame.

Renee sighed. "I'm not angry with you, Robert. I know you're just doing what you're told."

He mumbled and began backing away as if she might strike him. "It weren't Mr. Francois. It weren't."

"Who then?" she demanded. "Who pays you?"

"Don't know, ma'am. A tall man."

A carriage raced by as his lips moved again. She thought he said "a mixed fellow," but she wasn't sure. Distracted by thoughts of ordering her dress and exasperated with the hatter, who was simple-minded, she pressed a few coins into his hand. "Please go home to your family."

A tall man. A mixed fellow. Icy fear ran up her spine. The mulatto! The same person who had paid to have Madame Voison followed! She tried to swallow but couldn't. Her mouth was bone dry. Her whole body tensed; her heart pounded in her head. Her legs shaky, it was all she could do to put one foot in front of the other and hurry home.

Phillis greeted her in the front hall, a half dozen freshly starched petticoats over her arm. She pointed to the ceiling. "They upstairs and the cloth lookin' mighty good."

Renee threw her coat over a chair. She took a minute to catch her breath and double-checked that the front door was locked. Then she put a hand on Phillis' arm and showed her a sketch from the satchel.

Phillis took one look and dissolved into giggles. "Oh, Lawd, Miss Renee. You gonna have a good time in that one."

Renee laughed too; it felt good, daring, and dissipated some of the fear that lingered after her encounter with Robert. As she climbed the stairs to join Frau Kohlmeyer and Aunt Sophie in the upstairs parlor, she promised herself to put her worries aside and enjoy this one night.

The dressmaker brought along more than satins and silks. Fabric samples draped her aunt's lap and lay across the length of the settee. Aunt Sophie examined Merino wool swatches in shades of blues and greens, ideal for suits, as Frau Kohlmeyer pulled another sample from her satchel.

"This is something new. We used to call this *Sicilienne*. It's light mohair and silk. Now I understand it's being referred to as *bengaline*. Please, sit, Miss Renee, and feel this. It's as soft as silk, but as warm as wool."

Enthralled, Renee shook off her agitation, sat opposite Aunt Sophie and reached out to run her fingers along the material, which had small raised florals of the same color as the background. "It has a wonderful feel. This blue—it's almost cobalt—is very pretty." She thought of the hat she had made for Maureen Collins. The young lady should have a dress of this new fabric. "Does it come in other colors?"

"There's a lovely plum." Frau Kohlmeyer handed her another square of cloth.

"Say no more. I have to have a suit in plum *bengaline*. That is, unless you want this fabric made up for you, Aunt Sophie?"

"I think that color would be spectacular on you. I'll go with the cobalt for a dress. But we're getting distracted," she said sharply. "Let's concentrate first on dresses for the opera."

Renee and Frau Kohlmeyer shared a conspiratorial laugh. Fabrics and trim, measurements, designs, the whole process of ordering dresses consumed the ladies. Phillis and Estelle came and went with tea and sandwiches, tea and sherry, and didn't hesitate

to offer their blunt opinions as it neared nine o'clock. What better way to spend an evening?

At length Aunt Sophie settled on a gold cisele. The fabric featured a raised pattern in velvet on a satin ground that would be striking under the many chandeliers at the opera house. The dress style was traditional, with a square neck, fitted waist, a small bustle and train.

Renee praised her for her good taste.

Her turn now, she handed Frau Kohlmeyer three of her sketches and the magazine with the color plate. A broad smile spread across the dressmaker's face. "I believe there is a particular man who will love this dress, yes?"

Indeed, but Renee didn't admit it. "It's quite forward in style, but I think in silk—"

"It will be magnificent." Frau handed the sketches to Aunt Sophie.

She took her time perusing front, back and side views. "I say!" The corners of her mouth curved when she looked up at Renee. "You *do* have the figure for it, dear. Why not? And yet I wonder if it couldn't be made more—"

"Leave it to me," Frau Kohlmeyer said, brandishing a tape measure. "I will make it decent, Madame Sophie."

Renee chose Persian, a thin, almost transparent silk, in royal blue. She asked the dressmaker to use two layers of the material, so the bodice would mold to her shape, but not be actually transparent. "It's to have a very low-cut V-neck bodice, fitted at the waist. I want most of my bosom to show."

"Renee!"

"It's what ladies are wearing in Paris, Aunt Sophie, every night."

Frau Kohlmeyer scribbled notes.

"Maybe so! Heavens! I'm sure they are, but—"

“And right in the V of the bodice, a spray of feathers. These came in just today.” She placed the package on the sofa beside Aunt Sophie and pulled back the wrapping.

“Oh, my.” Aunt Sophie reached out and touched them gently. “How beautiful. The colors are ... out of this world.”

The dressmaker nodded vociferously. “A brilliant idea to cover some of your bosom. You must leave something to the imagination, Miss Renee, yes? And you’ll wear a corset?”

“Just a chemise sewn into the dress,” she said. She didn’t wait for Aunt Sophie’s protests, but went on, pointing to the drawing. “There are no shoulders, really. The bodice and the back will be held in place with a strap no wider than an inch on each side. The dress is tight to the waist and then flares over the hips. All the way up the front is ruching, draped to look like the folds of curtains.” Holding up a large piece of muslin to her waist, Renee bent over and creased it to make ripples to her ankles. “Do you see what I mean, Frau? In the back, the gown starts just below the shoulder blades, fits tight at the waist and hips and comes across the derriere with a slight drape. No bustle or train.”

Frau Kohlmeyer brought her hands together in a prayerful pose. “Yes, yes, I see. It will be lovely.”

“The sleeves are one-inch strips of material spaced at six-inch intervals from shoulder to wrist.”

A frown spread across the dressmaker’s brow. “But I don’t understand how they will attach.”

Renee smiled at her confusion. It had taken her some time to devise a solution. “I think if you run a satin ribbon down the underarm, it will hold them together. Stitch the ribbon to the bodice under each arm.” Renee gestured to her right armpit. “Here.”

“Ah, yes. I see. That will work. It will be extraordinary, Miss Renee. Very delicate. Men will love you.”

Renee wasn’t interested in *men*. She wanted the dress to tantalize one man only—Mr. William Collins. She hoped to torture him with the sight of so much of her skin. She’d taunt him until he begged to have her. Then she’d refuse him. He would rue the day he chose a prostitute over her.

After Frau Kohlmeyer departed with a large down payment for two opera dresses, a suit for Renee in plum bengaline, and a Sunday dress for Aunt Sophie in cobalt of the same fabric, Renee retired to her room, pleading exhaustion.

While Phillis brushed her hair, Renee stared at her reflection, her mind returning to the confrontation with Robert, fear spreading back over her.

Phillis took an overly long time braiding her hair, and every time Renee glanced at her in the glass, she looked away. “What’s wrong, Phillis? You seem upset.”

“And you ain’t sittin’ none too still.” Phillis shrugged. “I know you ain’t happy one bit. I know you had a fallin’ out with Mister William.” She dropped her hands from the braid and wrung them together. “I seen Lizzie ... and Lizzie say Madame Soniat carryin’ on, you know. She say—”

“Madame Soniat?” Renee’s heart tightened. “What now? Please just tell me.”

Phillis bit her bottom lip and shook her head. “She tellin’ folks you had other men friends when you and Mister Rupert married. But everyone know it ain’t true.”

“My God.” She tried to stand, but the room spun. She collapsed back in her chair. “Some might believe it,” she whispered.

“There, there, Miss Renee.” Phillis pulled her to standing and put a firm arm around her waist. “I puttin’ you right to bed. Never you mind that crazy Soniat lady. All you gots to do is talk to Mister William. Tell ’em it ain’t true.”

Renee lay on her side fighting the salty taste in her mouth and taking deep breaths in an attempt to calm her heaving stomach.

Phillis hovered, stroking her forehead, adding blankets, stoking the fire.

“Thank you. Please go.”

At last Phillis slipped out, closing the bedroom door behind her.

Chapter Twenty

The grace with which Maureen put fall dress on the Collins mansion impressed William. Seasonal details—the dining table candles were deep blue, not yellow; vases held clusters of red snapdragons instead of white daisies—suggested the onset of winter. And it went further.

Under Maureen’s direction, Guy, Julia and Luz removed the white slipcovers to reveal cayenne velvet upholstery on the sofas and armchairs, rolled up the reed rugs, stored them in the attic and replaced these with wool Persians in beautiful patterns. White lace drapery gave way to silk brocade. Maureen bought cedar knots from Luz and, though there was no real need for a fire yet, William enjoyed lighting one in the upstairs parlor late in the evening, staring into the flames, wondering what had gone wrong with Renee as he pored over accounts.

There were other signs. Coal women appeared on every corner around the Cotton Exchange. Vendors and shopkeepers called out *Toussaint*, alternating with *All Saints*. Wreaths of light-catching black glass beads and wax, festooned with black satin ribbons, appeared in every shop window. Maureen had been discussing the annual trip to the cemetery on All Saints Day almost from the moment she arrived in New Orleans. Fabre, too, had warned him that tomorrow was a big day and even petitioned to leave early to prepare. William let him go with an impatient wave.

A little after six o'clock, the usual time to find Renee alone, he stopped by the hat shop. He knocked on her door, knocked on Lanoux's. Did everyone close early on the eve of All Saints? He entered the courtyard from the back alley. The yard had Renee's mark on it. Empty but carefully mulched flower beds were no doubt filled with blooms in spring and summer. He noted the shed where the hatter worked, the woodpile carefully stacked to one side of it, a hatchet leaning against it; a four-by-six foot coal box with a lid, a shovel beside it; and two clearly marked privies, one for women, one for men. He peered through a window into Renee's empty workroom. Part of him was relieved by her absence—he had no idea what he would say to her.

Nevertheless, back on the banquette, he found himself walking to the Desselle house. Outside, he joined Robert in his usual place, lodged in the doorway of a shuttered carriageway across the street. He introduced himself, pressed some coins into his hands and thanked the man for watching after Miss Renee. "I worry about the lady. It scares me how she walks about alone."

"She do ... do that, suh."

William was tempted to ask him where she had gone recently that was not usual, but checked himself. The night turned chilly and both men buttoned their coats. William tried to ask the hatter about his work for Lanoux, but the man's halting speech was difficult to understand, so it was painful for them both.

Around eight, he said he was sure Miss Renee was in for the night and suggested Robert go home to his family. The hatter hurried off, but William stayed, watching the lights in different rooms. The hall and parlor shone brightly for another hour; then the upstairs front right bedroom light came on. He knew that was Renee's bedroom; she'd mentioned looking out the window to check on Robert before going to sleep. Was she reading, brushing her hair, sketching? Was she wearing only a nightgown? If she looked out now, might she see him?

He couldn't say what had drawn him to her shop, to her house, what kept him watching. He had nothing to report on the Voisons. He certainly wasn't going to tell her about the two assaults against him. All he had to go on was a vague foreboding, a sense that the city was badly aligned since he was no longer in Renee's good graces. Shortly after ten p.m., the light went out in her bedroom. Next, she would check for Robert. He backed further into the shadows. By his watch, ten minutes passed before a figure in white pulled back the curtain. It took every bit of self-control not to run across the street, pound on the door until Estelle or Aunt Sophie opened it, run up the stairs and pull her into his arms.

He did none of those things. Lonelier than he'd ever felt in his life, he walked away. As he headed down Royal Street, his mind wandered from Renee to the Exposition. He'd studied the ledgers for the past several days and discovered several loopholes through which Henri or anyone else could have skimmed funds, but it would take several more days, at least, to uncover a trail of proof. Perhaps he would skip tomorrow's visit to the cemetery and use the time to catch up on work. He had not known his Aunt Bridget. Perhaps Maureen and Uncle Patrick would prefer to go alone.

The next morning, when he came downstairs dressed for the factorage, the scene amazed him. Maureen—wearing her Desselle Millinery creation—stood in the front hallway, supervising the loading of cakes, flowers, picnic baskets, candles, and cleaning supplies into both the large Collins carriage and a mule cart. She took one look at William and ordered him back to his room to change into his best dark suit. "And be quick about it."

A grim-faced Uncle Patrick explained from the parlor doorway: "All Saints Day. Nobody works today. The factorage is closed, so is the Cotton Exchange, all the banks, stores, offices."

"Hurry," Guy murmured as he passed with another load of flowers.

Ten minutes later he was seated in the carriage. Slowly—the servants and supplies were in the cart behind—they made their way through carriage- and cart-crushed streets. Lemonade stands, peanut vendors, pralineres, boys selling shells and sand, florists, candle and cake vendors all clustered along the road that ran past the cemetery.

In Ireland All Saints Day was a solemn Holy Day of Obligation, requiring Catholics to attend Mass. Nothing had prepared William for this. It dawned on him by the amount of food being unloaded from the carriage that they were to spend the *entire day* at Aunt Bridget's grave. He couldn't picture what they would do there for hours and hours.

Maureen marched their little group through the cemetery's wrought iron gates. In spite of his sullen mood, William was charmed by the miniature city of streets and curbs lined with above-ground tombs, little houses with doorsteps and porticos, separated by black iron fences. The streets of this city were thronged with people. Even the grocers, washerwomen and coal women from the neighborhood were dressed in the height of winter fashion. All carried flowers, wreaths, and baskets, greeted friends and neighbors as they organized and set up near tombs.

He knelt at Aunt Bridget's tomb for a moment with Uncle Patrick and Maureen while Luz, Julia and Guy carried all their supplies into the Collins gated area and placed them on the grass. Uncle Patrick suggested William walk around and, grateful to get away, he wandered, glancing at the names chiseled into the stone houses. Many members of the same family were buried in one tomb: KEENAN, John, Virginia, Jonathan, William, Stephen, Allison, Barbara, Charlotte; ORANTES, Maria, Juan, Manuel, Jose; HUDSON, James, Adele, George, Victoire, Walter, Thomas. Fascinated, he went up and down the streets, recognizing many familiar New Orleans surnames: DUMAS, PLAISANCE, BENDER, WILLIAMS, ADLER, GARRISON, HEBERT, PITRE.

At the stroke of ten, everyone moved toward the entrance of the cemetery for the outdoor Mass. He found Uncle Patrick and Maureen and stood with them. He scanned the crowd for Renee and Aunt Sophie though he could already feel, without having to look, that neither was there. As members of an old French family, they were probably spending the day in a different cemetery, one near the French Quarter where all the Desselles would be buried. Guttled with disappointment at not seeing her, he barely listened to the gospel and the sermon.

Tears dried as families returned to the graves to eat. Julia set out a picnic of lemonade, soul cakes, and the simple meal of boiled shrimp with Remoulade sauce, fried chicken, and for dessert sparkling wine, caramel cake, pralines and chocolate, all of which had been the favorites of Aunt Bridget. As he enjoyed these delicacies, William had to marvel at the gorgeous fall sunshine, at the delightful way New Orleans imprinted its unique stamp on the Church calendar.

Next, they got to work. Maureen, like a little general, sat on an iron bench, arranging flowers and directing Guy in painting Bridget's tomb with a brilliant whitewash. Uncle Patrick strained the seat of his dress pants bending to de-root vetch and cat's claw and William scrubbed the marble doorstep until it gleamed. The next several hours were devoted to decorating the tomb with arrays of yellow chrysanthemums, red coxcombs and wreaths of iridescent black glass and oyster shells.

Watching the care Uncle Patrick and Maureen lavished on the marble structure—he on a step ladder polishing the angel at the portico, she washing the stained glass—William's heart twisted with a private grief, not for family members among the dead, but for those among the living who would die—his parents and his brothers; his older brother Cormac and his younger brother John, and of course his sister, Sarah, the unhappiest of all, on the other side of the world—and for his own loneliness, for the passion he

wasn't able to inspire in Effie, for the distrust he somehow engendered in Renee.

The fastidiousness with which Maureen in particular took with placing the flowers, caused him a stab of sympathy for Renee, who had also lost her mother at a young age and who was at this moment mourning her mother and father, her husband and Aunt Sophie's husband, her Uncle James.

The O'Haras, Voisons, Desmarais, and Aisling Moreau; Guy and Julia's son Sache; not to mention Laclos, the washerwoman; Gina, the Italian fruit vendor; and Francois, the confectioner, all stopped by the Collins tomb to pay their respects to the departed Bridget. Sharing pleasantries, William was newly aware of the special attention Shannon O'Hara paid him and felt annoyed. Had Renee not said something about Shannon's pursuit of him and vice versa, he might have thought the young lady was genuinely curious about him and his family back in Ireland. Now he believed she was interested in one thing—a rich husband. Aisling's flirtations were different. She already had a rich husband, an *absent* rich husband.

The appearance of the Bouchard sisters with a gorgeous pot of soft-blue plumbago, somehow kept alive until November first, delighted Maureen, though he caught her more than once glancing behind the three sisters to check for someone—obviously the missing Vespasian. He saw her disappointment and could only hope his own at not seeing Renee here wasn't so transparent. One look at Uncle Patrick told him it was. He roused himself from a slouch against Aunt Bridget's tomb and made a point of speaking to Madame Voison. Though he was surprised at how poorly she looked—sunken cheeks, dark circles under her eyes—he sang the praises of her hat, which he recognized as Renee's design.

Madame Voison acknowledged the compliment, then snapped her closed fan into her gloved palm and glared at him with her marble-shaped blue eyes. "Renee Desselle told me you found

Smiley, that he said he's paid by a mulatto cook from a French Quarter house. Surely you can't be correct."

Dumbfounded that she addressed him as she might a servant, William replied coolly. "Have you another theory?"

She cast a sad, distracted glance at her husband, who was talking to Aisling Moreau. William looked, too, and noted the pair stood rather close.

"I'm sure Henri is behind it and our cook is French, straight from Paris. Henceforth, you, sir," she slapped the fan again to punctuate her speech, "will stay out of my business." She turned and was gone, charging off toward the gates. He had a half-mind to chase her down and shake her. He had spent many an hour on her behalf and many more sleepless nights thinking about the source of her distress. And this was the thanks he got?

Henri lingered to kiss the hands of every lady, including Maureen, and exchange parting pleasantries with the men. What a fool that man had been to marry for money!

A slow procession of priests with a train of acolytes carrying lighted candles moved now from the gate and passed up and down the streets of the city of the dead, sprinkling the graves with holy water while chanting the Litany of the Saints in Latin.

"*Sancta Maria*," the priests sang.

"*Ora pro nobis*," answered the altar servers.

William's heart stilled at the sound. The lengthy prayer with supplications to every saint he'd ever heard of and plenty he hadn't—to all the holy martyrs and all the apostles, all the confessors, and all the just and perfect servants of God—calmed him.

Uncle Patrick and Maureen came up on either side of him to watch the procession.

Sancte Gabriel.

Ora pro nobis.

Sancte Michael.

Ora pro nobis.

Her eyes cast downward, Maureen looked as sad and lonely as he felt. He reached out to squeeze her arm. "I spoke with the Bouchards," she whispered. "It was Madame Soniat."

Omnes sancti Angeli et Archangeli.

Ora pro nobis.

Not sure what she was talking about, he leaned closer and murmured, "What?" just loud enough for her ears.

"Madame Soniat is the one who told Anna that Renee was unfaithful."

He would have been happier to have ice water poured on his head than to hear that news. "Ahh," he said, emitting the word with a long sigh. He had told himself to stop thinking about that rumor. Now Maureen opened the wound again.

The chanting went on and on, and gave him time to compose his thoughts.

Omnes Sancti et Sanctae Dei.

Interceditepro nobis.

Madame Soniat? But of course she would have known of Renee's indiscretions. She lived with the couple and would have been far more likely to know of Renee's comings and goings than Rupert. No doubt Rupert spent half his time upriver at the plantation.

William felt oddly hollow. He wanted to know everything about Renee's relationship with Madame Soniat. And he wanted to know about her relationships with the dead—her husband, her mother, her father, her uncle—he needed to know how she faced death. He knew nothing about her. Who was this woman? His desire for answers to her secrets squeezed his chest with its intensity.

Requiescant in pacem.

Amen.

Standing as still as one of the marble statues nearby, he watched as the crowds began picking up their belongings and moving slowly away.

After the sunlit day among the throngs at the cemetery, the Collins home resembled a cave. Uncle Patrick locked the front door behind them and the little parade went wearily down the hall to the chilly back parlor and sat in silence. Guy, Julia, and Luz had the next two days off. William lit a fire while his uncle poured lemonade and splashes of whiskey, even serving Maureen the spirits. They toasted Bridget Fitzgerald Collins. Maureen's eyes filled with tears. She held her grief admirably, William thought, as he watched Uncle Patrick and Maureen hug fiercely. Maureen kissed her father's cheek quickly and left the room clutching a handkerchief.

Left alone, Uncle Patrick poured them straight whiskey, untied his cravat and stood by the fire. William, with a loose tie likewise, accepted the second drink and remarked that he was sorry he had never met his Aunt Bridget, that it was clear she had been much loved by many.

"I do miss her dearly," Uncle Patrick said, "But it's Maureen who suffers more from the lack of a mother."

"I'm sure it's difficult for you both."

There was an awkward silence. His uncle sat down and William took a chair himself. "We've not talked in days," Uncle Patrick began. "Have you had a chance to examine the Exposition books?"

William explained that he had seen several opportunities for fraud and intended to do more investigating. "I must tell you, Uncle, someone has tried to scare me off." Quickly, he related the recent assaults, playing down the seriousness. "I don't know who is behind it. It could be the employer of the mulatto cook, who hired Smiley to follow Madame Voison. But I've been to the Exposition site, and I'm examining the books, so it could be that the person or persons embezzling want me out of the way."

Uncle Patrick frowned with worry and only agreed to let him continue after William assuaged his anxiety by promising to be vigilant concerning his personal safety.

His uncle stood and paced in front of the fire. "I worry about you, William." He put his glass down on the mantel and spoke to a point on the floor. "And I'm constantly worried about Maureen and this Vespasian character. She talks of him incessantly."

"How well I know." William smiled, but Uncle Patrick didn't.

Uncle Patrick ran his hand over his brow, reached for his glass and took a swallow. "Emile Colville is a fine man, one of our most important clients, as you know. Bridget, bless her soul, hoped for a marriage between Vespasian and Maureen, but the poor lad is obviously a fool." He took another drink. "I can barely stand the sight of him."

"I'm afraid it's worse than that, Uncle. I've learned a great deal about the young man that I've wanted to discuss with you."

His uncle stared at him for a moment. "William, you never cease to amaze me." He gave a grim laugh and finally sat in a chair near the fire. "Tell me everything you know."

William sugarcoated nothing. Drinking, gambling, yanking Vespasian from the arms of whores and sending him home in a cab or taking him home personally in a cab or the smaller Collins carriage. "I took it upon myself to watch over him—for his father, for Maureen, and for the factorage's sake."

"So you go to Gallatine Street? Four times, five times a week?"

William nodded.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph." He took another drink while William sat silent. "I'm not against it," he said at length, "as long as you can keep up with your work at the factorage. I know you're putting in long hours and I don't want you spreading yourself too thin. And for God's sake, keep an eye on your wallet."

William chuckled. "Actually, I've had my watch stolen already."

They finished their drinks, rose and stepped into the hall, where they found Maureen in her dressing gown looking awe-struck. "I couldn't sleep ... it's been difficult ... the day. Do you mind, Papa, if I have more whiskey?"

"I'll join you, sweet pea." He patted her on top of the head. "And we'll make it a thimble. That's what your mother and I always called our last drink of the night."

William left father and daughter together and walked quickly up the steps to his bedroom. Surely Maureen had heard, but how much? The sordid particulars about her beloved Vespasian? Uncle Patrick encouraging him to continue his visits to Gallatine? Or both?

Chapter Twenty-One

Very glad she closed at noon on Saturdays, Renee sat at the counter balancing the week's accounts. Michelle had left and she planned to be gone herself in a few more minutes, so she was a little irritated when her door flew open. Maureen Collins hurried in. She was lovely in a blue wool coat and her blue velvet pork pie hat, but her cheeks were flushed from the cold and she was breathless as if she'd run a block.

"Miss Renee, I was worried you might have closed."

Maureen's youthful enthusiasm was contagious. A free spirit, she brought happiness wherever she went. Renee greeted her warmly, but she felt anxious to see her, knowing how close she was to William.

"May I show you some hat designs?"

"Please do!" Her voice sang out, but tears filled her eyes and she bit her lip as she approached the counter.

"Goodness, you seem troubled." She gestured to her to go behind the curtain. "Make yourself comfortable in the workroom. I'll lock up so we won't be disturbed."

She found Maureen seated at the table, pulling a handkerchief from her handbag and wiping her eyes. She sat opposite her.

"It's Vespasian," the young lady whispered. "It's terrible. William and Papa think—" She began to cry softly, stopping to blow her nose from time to time, while Renee strained for

something soothing to say. She knew Vespasian's reputation as a wild man went beyond whatever actions the Jesuits had considered punishable by a final expulsion from Immaculate Conception College. Though she'd never paid much attention, she'd heard talk of trysts between the young man and older, married women.

"Do you drink sherry?"

The pretty head nodded up and down and her black curls bounced on her forehead, much like William's. Renee went into the front room for the decanter and two glasses. As she poured, a horrid thought hit her: Vespasian had compromised Maureen. Dear God, she hoped not. The girl was only seventeen, but with his reputation for seducing women anything was possible.

Maureen thanked her, took a sip, then a quick second and third. "I came to you because you're young, but you know about men."

"Not much." Renee waved a hand in dismissal. She'd had a six-month marriage to one who'd never touched her. She knew very little about men. A wave of nausea came over her. Of course! Maureen had heard Madame Soniat's rumor. The young lady's social schedule took her from teas to luncheons to musicales to dinner parties.

Renee pursed her lips and struggled to contain her fury. "You've obviously heard some tales about me," she said in a flat voice. "Not one word of it is true."

Maureen turned bright pink. "Oh, no," she stammered. "I'm here about another matter entirely."

Suddenly, an even more appalling notion assailed her: Maureen was with child. She patted her hand. "We're alone here. Not a word will go past this room." She took a gulp of the sherry, sending a prayer up to the Virgin Mary. "Vespasian has not—"

"He's been a perfect gentleman."

"Thank heavens." Renee relaxed a bit, but she now felt a trifle annoyed. What could be the problem?

Maureen whispered, "I want *Vespasian* to take me to his bed."

Renee closed her eyes, wishing the scene before her would disappear.

"I know it's not done," Maureen rushed on. "I know it's wrong for me to experience the pleasures of the marriage bed beforehand."

Dear heavens, Maureen voiced her exact wishes. *Or the wishes she'd had before she learned the truth about William.* She swallowed more sherry before delivering the required line. "You must wait until you marry."

"Is that what you and Rupert did, Miss Renee? Wait until your wedding night?" Maureen didn't give her time to answer. "That's not for me. I don't want to *marry* *Vespasian*. It'd be too much trouble taking care of him. You know how he is." She sighed. "I thought since you're a modern woman in business . . . I'd hoped you'd say something else."

Maureen paused for a moment and Renee used the awkward silence to refill both glasses.

Maureen went on. "I want to go into business like you. I'd like to do something with flowers, plants. I have a talent for growing things. Or maybe I'd even work at the factorage. I've been helping William with the Exposition books, looking for improprieties and writing letters to subscribers. He and Papa both say I have a head for business. Maybe I won't be a wife and mother. But I know I love *Vespasian* and I want him for a lover."

Renee's heart ached to be in the same room with this young girl who, however foolish, still lived and breathed in William's sphere. It pained her that Maureen was helping William. *She* was the woman who should be looking for improprieties in the Exposition books. *She* was the one who had asked him to investigate Madame Voison's troubles, which led him to think someone was embezzling.

"I know you and William are at some sort of impasse," Maureen rambled on, the sherry working its charm, "but he loves you, Miss Renee."

Her stomach dropped. Could Maureen really know her cousin's feelings? Could William love her the way she loved him? She forced aside these fluttering hopes and focused on the matter at hand. "Maureen," she said, "if you and *Vespasian* were to enjoy such—" She stopped herself, searching for the right word. "—pleasures, you'd be ruined. No man other than *Vespasian* would ever offer for you. You'd be trapped with him despite your father's wealth."

Maureen's tears had dried some time ago. Now anger replaced them. "It's not fair," she snapped. "Men take their pleasure whenever and wherever they want."

Renee understood Maureen's resentment of different codes of behavior for men and women. "Men don't bear children," she said matter-of-factly. "You could be with child after one encounter and then what would you do without a husband? Religion aside, there are very practical reasons that encourage restraint."

Maureen pouted, which made her all the more beautiful. "I wish I'd been born a man."

Renee sympathized. It had been hard not to feel exactly the same way when she first opened her shop. Had she been a man with similar talents, it would have been far easier to rent property, ship to and from foreign ports, open a bank account, expand her business to include dress design.

She returned her attention to Maureen, who was now describing what she loved about *Vespasian*—the dimple on his cheek, the softness of his lips, hardness of his chest, his lush black hair and on and on. "So," she concluded, "I suppose I'm also glad I'm a woman so I can love him—which I'm determined to do."

Lord, she's come full circle.

Maureen filled the silence. “Do you mind telling me how it’s . . . actually done?”

Renee froze at the question, and she felt feverish with shame and rejection. All she knew came from the printed page. Her voice came out in a croak. “When I was your age, I found a book in my father’s library. It’s very scientific, but it explained everything with pictures.”

Maureen gasped. “Photography?”

“Illustrations. If I can find it again, I’ll lend it to you.”

Maureen clapped her hands. “Oh, please do. I’ve spent my life in convent schools where you don’t learn anything. And I can’t ask my father.”

She could ask William. A man with his rakish habits could answer any question Maureen could dream up. But even Maureen—uninhibited, impulsive—wouldn’t ask a male relative, no matter his vast experience. Though Renee commiserated with the young lady, she thought as an older, wiser woman, she must be stern. “This book is for *reading* only. You’re not to act on its subject matter. Do you understand?”

Maureen looked up at the ceiling.

“Do you?”

“Yes,” Maureen said quietly.

“Then I’ll bring it to the shop on Monday, and you can pick it up whenever it’s convenient.”

Maureen’s eyes twinkled. “Perhaps William will pick it up for me.”

“As you wish.” She was sure Maureen would never convince her cousin to run this particular errand.

“It’s so unfair that men have so much freedom and women don’t.”

Back on that again. Renee stifled a sigh.

“I mean . . . I don’t know if I should tell you, but I . . . oh, why not?”

Renee held her breath. What on earth would come out of this girl’s mouth next?

“I overheard Papa and William last night. It seemed to be a heated exchange because I heard Papa say, ‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph,’ which he rarely says.” Her expression showed she enjoyed repeating the phrase.

“Go on,” Renee urged, her blood racing. She was anxious to know every word William spoke—on any subject.

“I heard Papa tell William that as long as he could keep up with his work at the forage, he was not against his trips to Gallatine Street. In fact, Papa told him it was a *good idea* to continue his visits.”

Renee’s hand rose to her mouth, which did a poor job of concealing her horror. “Your father knows?”

“Yes. And he thinks William’s visits to the notorious street are just fine. Talk about unfair! William is allowed to—I don’t know—lie with a different woman every night, but I can’t give myself to one man?” She held up one finger. “One man, just one!”

“Damn unfair,” Renee said under her breath while her mind spun out of control. How could Patrick Collins think it was all right to go nightly to Gallatine Street? Had *he* behaved like that as a young man before his marriage? *After* his marriage? And now? Did he, as a widower, visit prostitutes regularly? What would Aunt Sophie think of *that*?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Saturday night, William was uncommonly nervous while he dressed as Fabre had prescribed, in a worn black suit and a soft cap. He sidestepped the front parlor where Maureen was entertaining Vespasian, Jules Voison, and two of the Bouchard sisters and made his way to the factorage on the streetcar. The November night was already dark and the smell of wet leaves rose from the gutters.

As he turned the corner at Perdido, William saw the silhouettes of Fabre and his cousin Gaston sitting in a conveyance—a mule and the stripped shell of a black carriage, minus even its doors. He climbed in and sat on a hard bench opposite Fabre.

He didn't have much hope that the night would shed light on the investigation but he was running out of leads. It had been almost two weeks since Renee mentioned her shop girl's casual comment—that Henri Voison was known to dabble in voodoo—and William was hoping to learn something, anything.

Waiting for Exposition subscribers to respond to Maureen's letters asking for verification of their contributions moved excruciatingly slow, especially with Uncle Patrick handpicking all the people who were to receive notes. Wisely, he insisted on scattering the sample group to try to save the Exposition from scandal. Although scandal was a certainty when the amount of embezzled money became public knowledge.

As the carriage rumbled toward Rampart Street with Gaston on the box at the reins, William leaned into the open doorway and took a few breaths of night air. It refreshed him to be moving into the unknown and for a moment, he remembered the relief travelling had given him after Effie. An adventure combined with a night away from the factorage lifted his spirits. Even so, he could feel the tight-lipped tension Fabre exuded. The man had been very clear about his opinion of this little excursion.

"*Non, non,*" he had said the first few times William had brought it up. "It's dangerous. You can't get out of it, you know, once you get in."

"Just give me the address."

"*Vous ne serez pas admis,*" Fabre had muttered.

"They won't let me in? I'll disguise myself."

Fabre had shaken his head, sighing. "You're underestimating these powers."

William thought the clerk avoided him after that. He consistently declined to go down to the hotel lobby for a whiskey. Night after night, he made a great display of drinking his blasted aromatic tea, and showed no interest in tailing Vespasian Colville.

In response, William lit on Fabre with renewed persuasion, sharing some half-truths and outright lies regarding his investigation of Madame Voison's mysterious follower. Telling Fabre he was sure Monsieur Voison might do his wife harm, he played on the clerk's sympathies for a helpless female. Fabre's resistance lasted three days. He finally relented, agreeing to take William to *Fet Gede* on All Souls Day, the night after the All Saints.

"You seem rather obsessed," he said to William with a slight smirk. "While you're there, you might want to pick up a love potion and find yourself a lady friend to distract you from this Voison business. Said to be powerful stuff."

William turned away from the taunt—it was so similar to Renee's. At the same time, he wondered just what such a potion

might be. A tonic for a man to drink to improve his staying power? Or a tonic to slip into his lady's sherry to arouse her? He indulged in thoughts of Renee under such an influence, pushing him down on his back on her settee, climbing on top of him, straddling him, yanking at the buttons on his breeches. He believed he would pay almost any price for even a small dose of such a potion.

The old carriage left the French Quarter behind. The shell road gave way gradually to dirt, then finally to sand, which the rotting carriage wheels could not navigate. Fabre gestured for William to climb down, and now on foot, the pair turned and headed toward the river. The night was humid; William took off his coat after a block, stopped, lit a cigarette and kept walking, a canvas bag over his shoulder that contained two bottles of Collins whiskey as an offering.

"*Ecoute, ami,*" Fabre said after several blocks of silence. "The human is a complicated creature, a mix of good and bad traits, no?" He spoke in so low a voice that William had to lean in to hear. "The *Gede*, the spirits, sometimes don't make distinctions between these traits. All expressions are welcome, *comprenez?* And the best way to connect with the ancestors is by possession by the spirits." He paused, staring at William for some acknowledgment. "The spirits can take over the human body," he reiterated. "These spirits are mysterious, at times even ferocious. There are even some who use chemicals ... herbs ... to create certain results."

William walked on determinedly. "I've made up my mind, Fabre." He had come this far and didn't intend to be dissuaded.

The humidity made the underlying chill in the air more pronounced. The sky was blown out with clouds, and winds gusting through the trees created the illusion that the night was wrestling with itself. As they approached a clearing, with nothing more than a wide path leading from it, Fabre stopped again and William endured a stream of last-minute warnings: "Don't touch anything

on the altar. Don't get too close to the central pillar and whatever you do, don't dance."

Wood-shingled shotgun houses lined the path on both sides. William couldn't have told one from the other, but Fabre pointed to a raspberry-colored front door and climbed the steps. The door swung open at his touch. Fabre removed his hat and William did likewise. Inside, the heat and smell of roasted pig hit him like a heavy fog. Women with purple tignons glided by with plates of food piled high, rolled meats, breads, corn cakes, steaming vegetables, rice and red beans.

Fabre wove his way through the rooms, past dark-skinned people who had floured their faces, past lighter-skinned people who had used coal to outline the bones of their skulls, all costumed in purple and black. Lining the wall in the farthest room, bearded men in black dress seemed to leer at them. Fabre didn't turn his head.

Once through the back door and in the air of the back garden, William took several deep breaths. Taller than many of the people in front of him, he saw that a shell walkway lined with candles led to an altar against the black wrought iron fence at the rear of the property. Fabre motioned to step off the path, and they stood among dozens of shadowy spectators on the grass. William hoped to spot the person who had power, but having promised Fabre he would keep back, he leaned against a tree and eavesdropped on the conversation of two women near him, one with shockingly white hair, the other with a black scarf on her head. They were evaluating the headscarves of different women at the ceremony. Not so different than society ladies discussing hats at St. Louis Cathedral.

A man with his face painted bone white, in a black suit, green silk waistcoat and green top hat, entered through a side gate and crossed the flickering candlelight. He climbed the tree behind William and Fabre and edged out onto the branch just above them. From that perch, the green waistcoat and hat and the bone

white face glowed in the moonlight. A shiver ran down William's spine. The man could spring down at any second.

The drums started, at first faint, then louder and louder until his ears rang. A line of servitors, similar to altar boys—dressed in long white cotton robes tied at the waist with rope—emerged from a side door and whirled their way through the crowd carrying sacred flags in satin and velvet, embroidered with more glass beads than William had ever seen in one location.

“The spirits,” Fabre explained in a muted voice, “are attracted to shiny objects.”

A hush fell across the crowd: the call for prayer. *Papa Legba ouvri baye-a pou mwen. Pou mwen pase le ma tounen, ma salyie lwa yo.* A great plume of smoke rose towards the heavens, filling the air with the scents of wood, almond, honey, clover, accompanied by the sound of cracking whips and the rattle of gourds. William felt the drums pounding through the soles of his shoes and up through his torso. The crowd, also edgy, began to pass a bottle of some type of intensely-sweet distilled sugar-cane liquor. William took a swig and passed the bottle to Fabre, who also drank deep.

Another song and another call for prayer. A woman stood at the central pillar, a painted wooden pole embedded in the earth that reached tall into the night sky. She pronounced the night and asked the *Gede* to visit them. Having never encountered a priestess of any kind, much less one with such a stunningly resonant voice, William guessed she was the voodoo priestess—the *mambo*. She was surrounded by the servitors, themselves ringed by the singing and dancing crowd. All he could see was that she wore a dark purple homespun dress; firelight gilded the dark brown skin of her face, neck and bare arms.

Suddenly he caught sight of Maureen on the other side of the circle. The black hair and white wool shawl were unmistakable. His blood boiled. Maureen was like an animal that had to be caged! He grabbed Fabre's shoulder, about to charge over to her

but when he looked up again he saw it wasn't she. The woman he had taken for Maureen was a negro woman in a white cotton shawl, who seemed to laugh at him as she caught his eye. Was he seeing things? Determined not to drink any more of the sweet liquid handed from person to person, he opened one of the bottles of Collins whiskey, took three large gulps and passed the bottle into the crowd.

The priestess sang again in her beautiful contralto: the call for offerings, Fabre said. William brought out the second bottle of whiskey as sections of the crowd shifted position and filed toward the fence to deposit their offerings—pounds of coffee and sugar, flowers, pigs' feet, rum. When the people near gestured for William to move forward with his bottle, he followed the man beside him, edging up the makeshift aisle, Fabre behind him carrying a sack of coffee.

He couldn't breathe as he came nearer to the altar, which was a green cloth on the ground against the fence. Spread across it, flowers and mirrors, sequined bottles, elaborate piles of fruit, bowls of rice and mashed egg shells, bottles of rum, bowls of what looked like hair and nail clippings.

William fixed on the small wooden coffins painted black, red crosses carved into their centers. The chanting of the priests behind him increasing, he bent over and put the bottle against the fence, straightened up, and took one last look at the splendor before turning slowly and facing the *mambo*. Next to her, he spotted Henri Voison's blond hair, looking eerily-bleached in the candlelight. He almost didn't recognize him, as the gentleman wore a tattered suit of purple velvet with patches worn away at the knees. Not willing to so much as nod to Renee's attacker, William ducked back into the crowd to watch.

Clearly drunk, Voison weaved in between other practitioners, dancing so fast the drums seemed to respond to his steps, not vice versa. With rhythmic stomps he progressed to the altar where he placed a crude doll on the green cloth.

Moving as one, the crowd surged forward, forcing William toward the central pillar, exactly what Fabre had warned him against. He couldn't stop the tide. As he drew closer to the inner circle, his mouth went dry: In personality, mannerisms and dress, the man was not Henri Voison—but it was unmistakably he thrusting his hips forward and circling his pelvis in a lewd dance, his mouth loose, his tongue lolling and laving at men, at women, at the air, then twirling his walking stick, a top hat, pushing out his bottom and hopping backwards toward the crowd.

As he watched, the drums reached a crescendo, pounding inside his veins and William's hunger for Renee—for her body—suddenly consumed him. He wanted to press his aroused length between her thighs, thrust into her, release his seed deep inside her.

Something burned. Incense? His own body? Trembling at the pent-up power of his desire, he felt himself begin to dance, moving his pelvis as Voison had. Next he was on his knees in the grass, thrusting into nothingness, just moving his body in sexual thrusts. He stood now and danced forward. Someone grabbed his elbow but William shook him off, reached down, snatched the doll Voison had left on the altar and tucked it into his jacket.

His heart thumping with the beat of the drums, his head shaking, he realized he was standing in the middle of a lighted circle. Had he just been dancing? He aimed dazedly in the direction where he thought he'd left Fabre—he no longer knew—when he felt a rude, cold bump on the back of his left shoulder. He turned and saw a heavy, carved wooden skull at the end of a staff. The expression of the man who held it chilled his blood. Had the man seen him take the doll? William moved forward, only to feel the skull nudge him once more. He looked back angrily; the man made a little gesture indicating he'd been pushed by the crowds.

William looked up into the tree in front of him and met the eye of the skeleton face in the green waistcoat. With the deadly staff aiming at his back, he felt hemmed in. On his right, people

poured spirits into the ground, knelt and pressed their faces into rum-wet dust. On his left, bowls of dark liquid passed above the heads of the dancers who stamped their feet, pulled their shoulders backward, and waved their palms at the ground. As he turned toward the dancers, the drums grew louder and faster, his skin burned with heat, his feet moved in time to the pounding in his chest.

He felt another yank on his elbow. Fabre tugging him through the crowd, out a side gate, down a dirt path lined with negro families standing silently on their porches listening to the drums. William had never seen Fabre move so purposefully. He cut off the path and rushed through the pines toward the main road. William struggled to keep up.

Just before they reached the road, Fabre stopped and demanded to see the poppet; it took William a minute to remember he'd taken the doll from the altar and another minute to locate it in his jacket. When he pulled it out, Fabre snatched it and unpinned a note from its chest. "I don't want to be *touching this!*" he raged. He pocketed the note and held the cloth poppet away from his body as if it were a snake.

Confused and tired, William felt a crushing emptiness. He reached out, grabbed the doll from Fabre's palm, stuffed it in his own jacket pocket and climbed into Gaston's carriage.

Once they were heading home, Fabre softened. "I know someone who can probably translate what's on this paper."

The last thing he remembered was moving about in his bedroom. He closed the drapes, pulled the doll from his jacket, dropped it and the jacket to the floor, loosened his tie and fell like a brick onto the bed. In his dreams, he read list after list of the dead. Dead New Orleanians who had toiled in one way or another, who had lost their lives to yellow fever, war, the body's decline with age: Hervé Boubacar, Giles Boubacar, Alons Bender, Roland Dumas, James Hudson, Thomas Hudson, John Keenan,

Stephen Keenan, Manuel Orantes, Jose Orantes, Frédéric Plaisance, Williams, Hebert, Garrison, Pitre. . . .

He woke with a start, dazzled by the strip of warm, late-morning light between his curtains. His eyes fell on the poppet on the floor. He was incredibly thirsty and, in spite of long periods of absent memory from last night's ceremony, he felt strangely calm when he emerged from his room. He found Maureen and Uncle Patrick having a cheerful late breakfast in the overwhelmingly bright dining room.

"I tried to wake you up for Mass but you were sleeping like the dead," Maureen said as she buttered a piece of toast. "Out late, Cousin?"

"You can catch the noon Mass at St. Joseph's," Uncle Patrick added helpfully.

"I need to see the Exposition payroll again."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sunday afternoon, the minute Aunt Sophie left for the orphanage where she read to children, Renee headed straight for her father's library. Located in the middle of the second floor with no windows, the library was a quiet, secure place for reading and contemplation. Lined on four sides with bookshelves, the only natural light came from a skylight in the ceiling above her father's desk.

Her aunt would be gone for hours—a perfect opportunity to look for the marriage manual. Methodically Renee began reading titles across the shelves at eye level. Henry Fielding, Jane Austen, Augusta Evans Wilson, a complete set of Dickens, Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. The Greeks and Romans, the Italians, the British. Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton. One wall contained books on Napoleonic law; another housed books dealing with methods of raising and harvesting sugar cane.

"Damn," she said out loud. She couldn't remember the book's exact title; the search might prove futile. Thinking her father might have placed it in a more out-of-the-way position, she pulled the library ladder along its rail to the wall that housed science texts. She climbed the rungs and began to search the highest shelf. Her neck ached after a few minutes from straining to look upward. At last. *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*. She grabbed it, blew off the dust and flipped through it, saw the author

was Charles Darwin and put it back. She'd read a bit of this book several years ago. Decidedly not what she was looking for.

Perhaps her father had disposed of the book before his death. After all, she was already a widow at that point. Not one to give up easily, Renee moved the ladder around the room, checking all the top shelves, until at last her eyes fell on a small brown leather-bound volume. *A Guide to Marital Relations* originally written by a Frenchman, Dr. Pierre Laborde, in 1874. This edition had been translated into English and published in London in 1877.

She carried it to the sitting room and settled into a cozy chair in front of the fire. She'd found this book on a table in the library one afternoon shortly after she'd accepted Rupert's proposal. At the time, she'd thought it odd that her father owned it. By the publication date, her mother was dead, her father a widower. Then she'd realized he had purchased it for her and had left it where he knew she would find it in order to convey the information she would need on her wedding night.

Skipping quickly through the early chapters that assured the reader of the importance of healthy relations in a loving marriage, Renee turned to the graphic illustrations, specifically the opposing pages that had shocked her years ago. The left page showed a man's torso complete with a flaccid penis and testicles; the right page, a torso featuring an erect penis at least two times the diameter and length of the one on the left. The penis stuck straight out, with a simple explanation in the text underneath: "The physical mechanisms of arousal are different in male and female. The male's penis becomes erect almost spontaneously with very little stimulation needed. His tumescence leads to rapid ejaculation of sperm, which results in detumescence and relief."

Should she lend this to Maureen? As Renee stared at the erect penis, she thought of William in this state. Her breath hitched, her body warmed. She knew very well that Maureen would look

at this drawing and think of Vespasian. Would it encourage her desires or diminish them?

On the next page, an illustration of the female. The text explained that the female's clitoris corresponded to the male penis on a smaller scale. It went on with a lengthy analogy comparing the vagina to a lock and the penis to a key. "The key must be inserted slowly and carefully into the lock. The key may not fit easily initially, but the lock will adjust to the key after many uses."

There was a brief paragraph noting that a man experiences pleasure in kissing and touching the woman he desires. These actions make the penis grow erect and enable him to perform the sexual act. "The woman, however, may or may not experience pleasure. In fact, she may suffer pain if she is not aroused and secreting over the sexual organs. Her secretions serve to lubricate her parts and enable the male to insert the erect penis in the vagina." No explanation followed telling the male how to arouse the female or what body positions were best to easily facilitate placing the key in the lock.

Renee continued reading as rapidly as possible. While the book described the act in all its technical minutiae, Renee imagined herself with William, both of them naked, lips on lips, skin against skin, his engorged member throbbing between her slick thighs, their tongues in a dance that could only grow more and more frantic, leading in one direction—their final union. She removed her fichu and fanned herself.

A chapter on the importance of chastity for women explained that it was God's plan for females to be passive and resist advances from males until marriage. It noted that women by their nature are more constant than men. "Females are unlikely to feel sexual desire for more than one man at a time. They tend to be attracted to one man only." This, of course, was all part of the divine design because the meeting of sperm from the male and egg from the

female could result in pregnancy and maternity. The female's attachment to one man gave her and her offspring security.

Renee tensed as she turned to the last chapter, which grappled with the issue of male chastity. "Should men refrain from sexual relations before marriage?" asked the first sentence. Renee's nerves raced as she read further. "Men are desirous of coitus with any young and healthy woman,"—certainly true for Vespasian and William—"whereas we have shown in the previous chapter, women do not feel desirous of coitus with every healthy man of their acquaintance."

Just because they have the desire doesn't mean men should act on it! Renee nearly threw the book into the fire. She went downstairs, made a cup of tea, grabbed a handful of ginger cookies and returned to the sitting room, her mind on William's apparent inability to curb his appetites. She removed her half-boots and toasted her toes on the hearth before she picked up the book again.

"The old theory that stressed the importance of chastity among men prior to marriage was based on the belief that there was a limited supply of sperm in the male's body. Wasted sperm used in sexual relations with women other than his wife might later inhibit the husband's ability to produce children."

Dr. Laborde went on to assert that such an idea was out of date and absurd. Sperm production was ongoing and constant, just as hair and fingernail growth. Dr. Laborde argued that the male's experience with many women was an asset when he settled down to marriage with one woman.

"From his experience, the husband is able to woo the wife and arouse her properly on their wedding night so that she will enjoy sexual relations throughout their marriage, producing mutual enjoyment and many offspring. If he is inexperienced as a lover, the male is likely to be impatient, to think too much of his own pleasure and thus cause pain and emotional hardship for his

wife. With such a beginning, she may be afraid of sexual relations for her entire married life."

Renee closed her eyes at the words, written by a male physician who was no doubt a man of vast experience himself. So all these sexual acts with prostitutes that William and Vespasian were engaging in during their visits to Gallatine Street would make them better husbands? Was that really true? And what about women? The book never once mentioned what a woman might do to stimulate herself or her husband to greater enjoyment. She suspected it would be many years before experienced women wrote books on these matters to inform inexperienced women.

She believed women should learn everything they could about the world and that included money, business, real estate, agriculture, machinery and—why not?—intimate relations. Acting from knowledge rather than ignorance was always preferable. She decided Maureen should see these illustrations for herself, read the chapters on arousal and chastity. The book might not alter the young lady's mind, but the information would be valuable nonetheless. She closed the book, wrapped it in brown paper and put it away in her satchel.



Telegrams back and forth negotiating with Liverpool took all of Monday morning and into the afternoon. Around two, William told Fabre he was going down to the hotel for luncheon. Once on the street, however, he flagged a cab to Desselle Millinery. Maureen had asked him to pick up a book from Renee that she'd been dying to read. She wouldn't tell him the title, but no matter. Maureen had provided a pressing enough excuse for the visit. And he needed to tell Renee his discovery about the Exposition payroll.

The beautiful milliner seemed amazed to see him walk through the door. Surprise gave way to—what was it? He believed it was a

smile. Not a huge smile, but one civil enough that it emboldened him to walk up to the counter and greet her warmly.

“Mr. Collins, good afternoon,” she said, shifting her eyes away from his face quickly to rest them on the countertop.

“Maureen asked me to pick up a novel she is borrowing from you.”

“A novel?” Her eyes met his. “Ahh, yes.”

It amused him to see her face turn a shade of raspberry. What type of novel was this? She retrieved the small, wrapped package from the chifforobe drawer. When he extended his hand for the book, he purposely touched her fingers. She looked so lovely and so tense that he wanted to grab her in his arms and kiss her, to make her fear vanish.

“Maureen is certain to ... find the book enjoyable,” she stammered.

He tucked the parcel under his arm. He guessed she had just handed him a racy love story and decided to tease her further. “If this is one of your favorites, Miss Renee, I’m sure I’ll also enjoy it. Perhaps I’ll read it myself before passing it on to Maureen.”

“Oh, no, no. I’m certain there’s nothing in it that you don’t already know.”

He read sheer panic in her eyes and though he was more curious than ever he decided to desist. There were no customers in the shop and he heard no sounds from the workroom so he guessed Michelle was on an errand. He leaned in closer. “I have news.”

Her brow furrowed. “I have news as well. Please sit down and tell me.”

He didn’t sit, but instead stepped closer, so that he was almost behind the counter with her. “I’ve given the Exposition books a thorough going over and I see several ways Henri Voison might be skimming quite a bit of money.”

As he explained the ease in falsifying amounts paid for subscriptions, she drew toward him, so that they stood less than a foot

apart. He smelled the faint jasmine of her hair, and it was all he could do not to reach out and run his fingers over her soft cheek. He continued in his most businesslike voice, “Maureen’s writing to subscribers. I’m hoping to get her mind off Vespasian.”

“I don’t believe that’s possible.” She looked as if she wanted to say something more but stopped herself.

His eyes fell on her parted lips. He wished she loved him half as much as Maureen loved Vespasian. But she was older and not given to romantic notions. Widows were always more cautious in choosing their second mate. Even so. Why couldn’t he just demand an explanation for her jilting him? And why were her eyes filled with a mixture of pain and regret? What had he done to inspire that look?

As they stared at each other, an image of Saturday night’s dancing at *Fet Gede*, including the images he’d had of Renee, naked on her back, her legs spread open for him, flooded his memory. His arousal growing, he swallowed, broke her gaze and moved to the side of the counter to hide his condition.

She gave him a quizzical look. “Are you all right, sir?” She seemed genuinely concerned. When he didn’t respond, she said, “I’m a subscriber. I gave fifty dollars.”

“All Henri Voison had to do was write down twenty-five in the ledger and pocket the rest.”

“I suppose that would be easy enough.”

“And there’s another problem,” he said. “The names on the payroll—for example—Juan, Manuel and Jose Orantes; Jonathan, William, Stephen Keenan—were familiar to me, but I didn’t know why. Then I remembered. They’re the same names I saw on the tombs in the cemetery. On All Saints Day. Henri Voison is paying dead men, dozens of them every week.”

She shook her head. “Aren’t you and your brothers named after older male relatives?”

“Not that many with—”

“In New Orleans,” Renee interrupted, “we’re all named after those who’ve gone before us. I’m sure Juan Orantes has a father, grandfather or uncle buried in St. Joseph’s Cemetery.”

“Perhaps. But paying workers who don’t exist is a common way to doctor books and commit fraud. I learned as much when I was chief accountant for Collins Irish Whiskey.”

Her eyebrows arched and her topaz eyes brightened as she looked at him. “So you’re good with numbers?”

Was she mocking him? “Better than Henri Voison, I assure you.”

“He’s not known as the sharpest pair of scissors on the workbench.”

William began to laugh. “You damn me with faint praise, Miss Renee.”

She giggled a bit herself, and his heart soared at the sound. In truth, he hadn’t felt so happy since the moment right before she’d told him—with no explanation—that she wanted to confine their association to their mutual interest in the Voisons.

“There’s more.” Her lush lips parted in expectation and he went on. “The number of workers on the payroll is almost double what it should be, and the prices for materials are exorbitant. Voison is the only committee member who handles the money. There’s no one checking behind him.”

“You must go to the police at once,” she said with adorable grimness.

Nothing would have pleased William more than to stay here all day talking about Voison. Renee seemed amenable to it herself. “I need more evidence. I have appointments with suppliers to learn what they really charged. And I’ll see the foremen about these men, risen from the grave it seems, to work on the Exposition buildings.”

She nodded solemnly, clearly holding something back. What a blockhead he was! He’d been rambling on and on. Had Maureen

rubbed off on him? He’d been trying to impress her with his investigative feats, when she’d said some time ago that she, too, had news. “Forgive me,” he said. “Please tell me your news.”

At once, her face clouded with worry, her eyes dimmed and she lowered her voice. “I talked with Robert last week. Lanoux is not behind it. Robert’s being paid by the tall mulatto.”

He felt like he’d been punched in the chest. He tried to keep his voice calm but found it impossible. “If the *same* person is having both you and Madame Voison followed, then it has nothing to do with the Exposition. *Think*, Renee. What’s the connection between the two of you? Is there something from years ago?”

“There’s nothing,” she said breathlessly. “All I did was make the lady a hat.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

The day before the opera, the Desselle ladies received a note from Maureen: Patrick Collins would escort them in the larger, more luxurious carriage. William would drive Maureen, who could not travel with Vespasian without a chaperone, in the family's second, smaller carriage. Vespasian would arrive alone in his cabriolet and join them at the Collins box. Aunt Sophie read the note aloud, and they joked that the young lady had orchestrated the arrival of her guests for the opera with as much care as the conductor had rehearsed his musicians.

Standing in front of the mirror, Renee wasn't laughing. The hairdresser had left an hour ago. Curls framed her face; the rest of her long hair was twisted into a knot at the nape of her neck. A peacock feather affixed just over her right ear brought out the rosy tint of her cheeks, which the hairdresser had insisted on staining with sandalwood powder.

The strains of Aunt Sophie sight-reading her way through a Beethoven sonata rose to the second floor. Patrick Collins would be here any minute. As Phillis fluttered behind her, telling her how beautiful she looked, a fresh wave of trepidation hit Renee. She had never worn a gown even half this bare. Frau Kohlmeyer had followed her specifications *too* perfectly and cut the dress low enough to reveal the flesh just above her nipples. The peacock

feathers tickled the sides of her breasts and, if anything, drew the eye directly to the plunging neckline.

She turned to Phillis. "Can you help me find a shawl that will go?"

Busy straightening garments in the wardrobe, Phillis ignored her.

Renee made a quick turn back to the mirror and her concerns grew. The stitched-in-chemise meant her underclothes provided no additional modesty. Essentially one fabric covered her. A sudden movement could shift the bodice enough to allow one of her nipples to escape. For the next three to four hours, she would sit beside William in a pair of low, close chairs, watching *Le Mariage de Figaro*, based on Beaumarchais's scandalous play. What with twisting in her seat to view the stage and greeting friends during the several intermissions, the potential for disaster loomed large.

She asked again for a shawl.

Phillis stood behind her, hands on her hips. "You needn't hide nothin', Miss. God gave you mighty pretty skin."

Nodding politely, Renee stood, went to the wardrobe and pulled out every lace fichu and shawl she owned, some finer than others. She tried three or four while Phillis shook her head in disapproval.

Then came the familiar signal: Aunt Sophie pounding out "Die Wahr am Nacht" on the piano downstairs. Renee's heart went momentarily still at the realization that it was too late to change. Grabbing her finest black lace shawl, she gave Phillis a small hug, crossed herself and descended the stairs to the notes of the lively march.

A glass of sherry before her on the piano top, Aunt Sophie switched back to the Beethoven as Renee entered the parlor. After several fumbled trills, she dropped her hands and swiveled on the bench. Her breath caught. "Oh my."

Renee remained standing, turning around for Aunt Sophie carefully, lest the bodice shift even lower. “Perhaps I should run put on the emerald gown, the one I wore last Christmas.”

To her surprise, Aunt Sophie let out a delighted laugh. “Well, at least it has a back.” She motioned for Renee to pour herself a sherry. “A dress like that demands wearing. Be proud of it. Leave the shawl behind, dear. And for heaven’s sake, stand up straight.”

Renee’s skin grew warm the moment she entered the box and William came forward to greet her. The sight of him in white tie and tails took her breath away. The tailcoat made him appear even taller; the tight linen shirt and fitted pique waistcoat accentuated his muscular chest. He bent over her gloved hand and gave it a kiss, and as his head rose, his eyes lingered on her bare bosom. She enjoyed a triumphant moment as he struggled to raise his eyes to hers.

“It’s so good to see you this evening, Miss Renee. You look—”

He didn’t finish the sentence, but gave into total appreciation, his eyes growing large as they darted from the peacock feathers between her breasts to her waist and hips, to her hair and the feathers there. His gaze finally stopped on the strips of cloth circling her right arm. “I’m surprised by ... the sleeves.”

“Or lack of them?”

He didn’t smile at her joke or speak another word.

She filled the awkward silence. “It’s quite the fashion in Paris.”

“New Orleans is not—”

“Your Uncle Patrick said the dress was quite becoming,” she interrupted.

He nodded, withholding his own compliment. “Champagne?”

A waiter appeared at his side and William removed two glasses from a tray and handed one to her. Before she put the glass to her lips, Vespasian intruded. “You are a goddess, Miss Renee.” He leaned toward her. “I shall swoon at your feet before the evening is over.” At which point he fell on his knees and kissed both her gloved hands.

Embarrassed, Renee laughed softly, then deliberately turned away from William to speak with Maureen, who stood behind Vespasian in a gown of pink satin that also exposed a bit of bosom, though not nearly as much. The young lady greeted her with a kiss on the cheek. “The novel you lent me is quite enlightening. Thank you.”

“I know nothing of books,” Vespasian said in a haughty tone, “but I’m sure William here does. What novel is this?”

“*Tom Jones* by Henry Fielding,” Maureen announced.

Had someone lit a fire in the Collins box? Renee was powerless to stop the heat that rose to her face. She was sure William noticed. The 18th century English novel concerning the intimate exploits of the title character was the most suggestive book she’d ever read. What was Maureen thinking?

William’s eyebrows shot up, and he spoke quite forcefully, “Such books are inappropriate for young ladies.”

Maureen slapped his arm playfully. “Oh, William, please. The girls at school passed it around and I didn’t finish it before the end of the term. I *had* to know if Tom ever wed his beloved Sophia.”

Blessedly, the gaslights lighting the immense hall dimmed and then rose higher, signaling the opera’s start. Uncle Patrick ushered several visitors from the Collins box, which was positioned in the first tier, stage right. The three couples took their places in six gold, straight-back wooden chairs with red velvet upholstered seats. Uncle Patrick was beside Aunt Sophie, William and Renee next, and then Maureen and Vespasian, all in a neat row. Maureen, not Vespasian, was beside her, thank God.

Gazing about, Renee regretted that she hadn’t been here once since Rupert’s death. She and Aunt Sophie had been foolish to skip what was widely considered the best opera in America simply because they were widows. The performances were only half of it. The building itself, the most elegant in New Orleans, decorated in red, white and gold, was a pleasure to behold. A huge Renaissance

dome with painted blue garlands and wreaths of roses ascended nearly one hundred feet above the orchestra seats. The red tapestry lining the walls in the reception room downstairs, the crimson damask drapes in the boxes, the large gold framed mirrors on each side of the stage thrilled her aesthetic sensibilities.

Using her mother's pearl-handled opera glasses, she studied the members of the orchestra and the patrons in the boxes opposite. She took in the ladies' dresses and jewels, critiquing their taste silently. When Madame Voison came into focus, Renee's enthusiasm dimmed even as Mozart's cheerful overture began. She sat with Henri, their sons and a young woman she didn't recognize. Renee trained the opera glasses back on Madame Voison for a moment. Even from this distance, she looked unwell.

Renee knew their positions and relative heights made it impossible for William to look at the stage and avoid seeing the expanse of her bare bosom. He turned his head often to look down her dress. The illustration of the aroused male from the manual came to mind, and her skin caught fire yet again. She glanced at William's lap, then quickly back to the stage. The gown was working.

She turned her gaze to the loges on the fourth tier of the concert hall. Lattice screens shielded these spectators from the view of the rest of the audience. Negroes sat together in one section; pregnant ladies in another; prostitutes in another. How hypocritical that William—no doubt half the gentlemen here—shared the most intimate acts with these women but didn't think them their social equal on opera night.

Was it the champagne, the lack of a solid meal or her attraction to William? The stage seemed to spin beneath her, her breathing became shallow and rapid. She used her libretto to fan herself until she felt cooler.

At intermission, Renee excused herself, but William insisted on accompanying her to the crush room, the second-floor lobby

where many opera goers paraded in their finery all evening, preferring to be seen rather than to see the opera. He grabbed two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter, handed one to her and just stood there looking at her. She saw deep concern in his eyes, but he didn't speak of it.

"Do you see Madame Voison? She looked troubled and I'd like to speak with her."

Taller than most men, William scanned the crowd and gestured to the far wall. "She's over there. I'll stay out of sight and keep watch." He pointed to a large window overlooking Bourbon Street.

Renee made her way past two sets of couples to the lady, who stood alone sipping a glass of wine. Would she respond or cut her cold? "Madame Voison, good evening," she began.

Renee hid her surprise at the change that had come over her former friend. Madame Voison was deathly pale and seemed to have aged ten years since she'd last seen her. "How are you?" she asked.

"Not well, not well." Madame Voison glanced over her shoulder and Renee followed her gaze to Henri having a smoke by the window. William was nowhere to be seen. "I'm distraught," she said in a shaking voice.

"Have you ... thought ... have you thought who might want to frighten you like this?"

Madame Voison shook her head no, but in the next second her face crumbled. She bit her lip and her eyes filled with tears.

Renee took her gloved hand in hers and squeezed. "I want to help you, Madame."

"I must speak with you in private. There's something I must tell you. I should have told you long before now."

Renee caught sight of Madame Soniat, resplendent in black satin, but ridiculous in her clothes. "Call on me at home or at the shop," she whispered, then turned her back as Madame Soniat descended on them.

Tonight, the lady acknowledged them both. “Marie, you look lovely. Your gown is most becoming.” She paused to assess Renee from head to toe. “Renee, dear, yours is an abhorrence, not fit for decent company, a black mark on Rupert—”

Renee wasn’t interested in a dead man’s opinion, especially not as interpreted by his mother. Her gown was designed to lure a living man to her side. Her eyes narrowed. “And you, Madame, have made mourning an interminable ritual,” she said in a loud, but controlled voice. Several other patrons turned toward them. Renee continued. “The truly grieved don’t make a six-year spectacle of themselves, and they wear bombazine, not satin.”

Not waiting for a reply, Renee swiveled and, head held high, made her way through the crowd. William appeared by her side, offered his arm and led her from the crush room. She wondered, as she had wondered all week long, if he had heard Madame Soniat’s rumor that she had been unfaithful to Rupert. If so, why would he be so solicitous?

Back in the Collins box, he handed her a glass of champagne and stood with her when two of the three Bouchards invaded, the oldest off on her wedding trip if Renee remembered correctly. Kathleen O’Hara with her daughter Shannon also stopped by.

Resenting their intrusion, Renee stepped away but she listened while William asked polite questions about their impressions of the Italian soprano making her American debut. As she retreated to her seat, Vespasian blocked her. He placed his trousered leg directly against her skirt, touching it along her thigh.

“Mr. Colville,” she hissed, sliding sideways to break the contact. She didn’t want to encourage such behavior, yet it also occurred to her that it might be helpful if the two of them had a private talk.

When she suggested it, he grinned. “Name the time and place.”

“This is a serious matter, sir.”

His smile widened and he took up her hand. “I’m at your service, Madame.”

“Tomorrow evening at my home. Seven.”

As she pulled her hand away, she looked up. William watched her. She gave him a bright smile, which he didn’t return. Finally she sat, picked up her opera glasses and pretended to scan the crowd milling around on the first floor.



By the middle of the next act, William was ready to toss Vespasian from the balcony into the hall below. Problem was, it might hurt other innocent concert-goers. He’d seen his leg pressed against Renee’s thigh, seen the exchange of whispers between them. Could he blame Vespasian? Any man with blood in his veins, a pulse in his body, would want Renee tonight. The dress couldn’t have been tighter had it been sewn to her skin. What’s more, the blue silk outlined the buds of her nipples, the curves of her backside, the bones of her hips. Even in Paris he’d not seen a gown like this.

The five weeks he’d known Renee had been the happiest in his life, even the last two when the fear of losing her had tortured him. But he had made no claim on her. He hadn’t declared his love. She was free, fair game. In the next moment, he disliked himself for thinking of her as an object to be hunted and possessed by the ablest man. Vespasian? Would he bed her tonight? The thought turned his stomach; he took a gulp of champagne.

Every time he glanced down the row toward Vespasian, he found him nuzzling Maureen’s neck, whispering in her ear. Was Uncle Patrick not watching this? A look in the opposite direction revealed his uncle’s arm resting on his thigh, Aunt Sophie’s hand intertwined in his fingers.

At the end of the second act, William allowed his hand to graze the silken skin of Renee's upper back as they both stood and walked toward the far end of the box. During the third act, he took her hand twice to help her from her seat to applaud two fine arias. The second time they resettled in their chairs he held her hand tightly in his. He was elated that she didn't pull away. Every muscle in his body grew taut. One more squeeze of her hand, one more glance at her body served up in that dress and he was afraid he might have to excuse himself for fresh air. And yet he knew he couldn't move.

Hours ago, he'd given up following the opera's bewildering plot threads, embroilments, confusions—the eavesdropping, forged letters, the missing pin, the false identities—acted out on the stage below, and he'd had enough champagne that by the fourth act, the music itself became the character he followed most intently.

The opera had been translated from the original Italian into French, and he knew enough of the that language to pick out some of the chaos in the final scene. To foil the count's plot to seduce the chambermaid, the countess and chambermaid exchanged clothes. That night, the count hid the chambermaid—really the countess—in the deep recesses of the garden, intending to return and have his way with her. But first he came across his countess—actually the chambermaid—in a compromising position with a courtier, and refused to forgive her for the indiscretion. When the real countess emerged dressed as the chambermaid, the count realized his error.

The music slowed as the count fell to his knees and in a clear baritone delivered his heart-wrenching supplication. “Comtesse, pardonne, pardonne, pardonne.”

William put himself on stage beside Renee. Whatever he had done to displease her was in the past, just as her possible infidelity was. Tomorrow he would beg her—what was pride compared to losing her love?—to take him back.

The music paused and William held his breath to hear the countess's clear soprano reply. “I am the more forbearing, and I forgive you.” So simple. Was this not the way of enduring love? One partner may disappoint the other, but in the end, no infraction is too great to break the sacred bond. Did he want Renee in his bed or in his life? His plans to elope with Effie had ended in rejection. Was he ready to take the risk again?

The beauty of the final chorus stirred his heart with an almost painful need for peace. The chorus delivered the plain words in a gorgeously unhurried melody—“Ah, we can all be happy now. This day of worries, fantasies, and folly can now come to an end in joy and merriment.” An unadulterated calm washed over him. His life had been full of worries, fantasies, and folly. It was time to shed all those and surrender to the simplest of all: Forgiveness. Love.

The tempo of the music accelerated and the opera ended in less than a minute. As the lights rose, William saw that everyone in the box was profoundly moved. No one spoke. Gently, he took Renee's arm to lead her into the hall and down the steps. Before he handed her into the carriage, he asked what time he might call on her the following evening. The warmth and beauty of her smile gave him hope.

“Eight o'clock.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

After the opera, William, Maureen and Uncle Patrick shared a nightcap in front of a crackling fire in the upstairs sitting room, no one speaking except to mumble some comment about the events of the evening, a remark which the others more or less ignored. With his head leaning back in the armchair, his legs sticking out in front of him, Uncle Patrick, no doubt thinking of Sophie, wore an absentminded smile. Every few minutes, Maureen punctuated the silence with a dramatic sigh that spoke of the dissatisfaction of an infatuated lover.

William recognized her anguish. Renee had agreed to his suggestion that he call on her the following evening. Eight o'clock. Twenty hours to go. He dared to dream that she would accept him into her arms again. The image of her in her opera dress was seared in his memory. The soft slope of her breasts—he wanted to run his hands over them, cupping their fullness. The elegant curve of her back—he wanted to run his tongue along her spine until he reached the twin globes of her derriere. Egad! He couldn't carry on much longer like this.

Bidding his family goodnight, he retired to his room. The night was cold and he climbed into bed with the Exposition account ledgers, without any real hope of distracting himself. He started going through what he already knew, his eyes drooping,

and as the sound of rain began, he dropped off to sleep with the light on, the books still open on his legs.

Saturday morning dawned with rain now torrential and bitterly cold, but William set out anyway. He used Patrick Collins' name shamelessly to gain access to the offices of the head man of five Exposition suppliers: lumber, brick, glass, steel, and hardware.

Before noon, he had copies of their invoices for the last six months. He was confident these documents alone would be more than enough to arrest and convict Henri Voison for fraud. Unable to find a cab in the miserable weather, he took the streetcar back uptown to the Exposition site. There he met four foremen and copied the lists of each one's employees. The absolute audacity of Voison's enormous payroll list almost amused him. How could the man have thought he would get away with this?

Late that afternoon, he returned to the Collins house to see Uncle Patrick. As he laid his evidence on the desk, the man appeared saddened more than angry. He sighed heavily. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, and all the Holy Martyrs."

Feeling like a gladiator who'd finally slain his opponent, William lashed out. "Uncle, I've spent hours poring over ledgers and conducting interviews. I've even suffered personal attacks to get to the bottom of this. Aren't you happy we can put Henri Voison behind bars?"

Uncle Patrick shook his head slowly. "Henri is such a fool. He has everything a man could want. A good wife, two sons. And he throws it all away. It's a crying shame to see greed corrupt a man. And poor Marie. This will be such a scandal."

"Yes, well." William's reserve of patience was spent. "I've several other important appointments this evening. I have to change out of these wet clothes. I'm counting on you to write to Captain McCorkle without delay."



The rainy night hadn't dissuaded Aunt Sophie from attending a whist and supper party with Patrick Collins. Left alone and nervous about the hours ahead, Renee lit a fire in the back parlor before Vespasian's arrival. By seven-fifteen, the young man was settled on the sofa, not waiting for her to sit first. Renee took a nearby chair. He shook his head, patted the cushion beside him and took a sip of brandy, all without taking his eyes off her.

"You may have the wrong impression, Mr. Colville."

"I doubt it." He slid across the sofa in her direction, so his knees came alarmingly close to hers. "I'm quite accustomed to invitations from beautiful widows."

Renee found his mischievous smile offensive. "Actually, Mr. Colville, this meeting concerns Maureen Collins."

"Maureen?" He sat up a little straighter.

"I have befriended her since she arrived back in New Orleans."

"As have I." He re-crossed his legs. "We knew each other as children, but she's quite grown up now."

His words hung in the air between them. Renee sipped her sherry. How could she phrase this without making Maureen sound like a wanton woman? "What I have to say is difficult."

His handsome face fell. Clearly the evening wasn't unfolding as he'd expected. He stared at the fire. "I am eager to hear anything that concerns Maureen." He downed a hefty swallow of brandy.

"Maureen is very attracted to you, sir, as I'm sure you know."

He tilted his head toward her. "I'm often told I have that effect on women ... of all ages."

Renee's irritation grew. The arrogance—to say that women fell at his feet—even if it were true! How could Maureen find this man interesting? She supposed to a seventeen-year-old the dashing Vespasian might be appealing, but Maureen was intelligent and ultimately she would yearn for someone more substantial.

Vespasian's attitude made Renee's decision clear. She could not allow this pompous idiot to ruin Maureen. She looked him

straight in the eye. "I urge you to be cautious in your friendship with Maureen."

"And what possible concern is it of yours, Madame?"

She hadn't expected defiance and it took some effort to keep her voice even. "I'm acting as a guardian, a chaperone. Maureen has no mother to look after her. Her aunt has returned to Atlanta."

"Thank the Lord!"

Renee paused, astonished at his rudeness. He had drunk most of the large glass of brandy and she wondered if he hadn't had several others before he arrived at her home. "You would do well, sir, to be a gentleman."

A grin spread across his face. "I suppose, Madame, that I should be insulted that you assume I am anything less. However, I take my reputation as a young man who enjoys free-spirited fun far more seriously than I do the title *gentleman*."

Infuriated now, Renee looked absently around the room for a heavy metal object. Something that would hurt when she slammed it over his head.

"Madame, asking me to stop seeing Maureen is overstepping your bonds of friendship with her."

"I'd like you to promise that you shall always act the perfect gentleman in her presence."

"Notice your use of the word *act*?" He gave her a mocking look, then shook his head as if gravely disappointed. "I will *act* the perfect gentleman only in so far as Maureen *acts* the perfect lady." He paused wistfully, as if savoring some private memory. Then his face broke into another broad grin. "Madame, I must tell you. Maureen is not particularly interested in what you might call proper behavior." His eyes sparkled with sarcasm. "I, of course, wouldn't dream of making inappropriate advances, unless *she* makes inappropriate advances."

In spite of herself, Renee could imagine why women were attracted to Vespasian. The combination of a strong brow, high

cheekbones, perfectly smooth olive skin and arresting, light green eyes made the youthful radicalism of his statements all the more alluring. He promised recklessness, freedom from social constraints.

She forced her thoughts back to the matter at hand. “Maureen, I’m afraid, may let her heart override her mind at times. She may be impulsive.”

“Maureen impulsive? I certainly hope so.”

She jumped to her feet. “Be serious,” she snapped. “Maureen enjoys novels. She reads a great deal. These books may give her ideas.”

Vespasian smirked. “They’ve already given her some very good ones.”

“Mr. Colville, hear me out.” She paced in front of the sofa, staring down at him. “With Maureen, you will have to be the one who exercises restraint.”

“*Moi?* Are you asking Vespasian Colville to exercise restraint?”

Renee considered pouring another sherry, her frustration was so high, but she had no intention of offering Vespasian another drink. Fleeting, she thought of William—of the question of male restraint. *Why* wait until marriage? Had her refusal to kiss William, to collect her debt before the garden party, led him to his Gallatine Street exploits?

She lowered her voice to a whisper. “This is a grave matter. Maureen will be ruined if you choose not to marry her. Do we have an understanding?”

“No.” He finished what little was left of his brandy and put his glass on the table beside the sofa. “No, we do not, Madame. I thank you for inviting me to this discussion, but I must be on my way.” Without another glance at her, he stood and strode into the hallway.

Renee followed him to the door, where he paused to button his cape. “If you hurt Maureen Collins,” she said, her voice filled with icy conviction, “or leave so much as a spot on her reputation, you will hear from me again.”

He passed his hand over his hair before putting on his hat. “Maureen and I must travel our own road,” he said almost mournfully. “Your advice, I’m sure, is well intended, but Maureen should have made herself clearer: She doesn’t need anyone telling her how to feel or how to behave.” He bowed and was out the door into the heavy rainstorm before she could speak another word.



By six o’clock darkness had fallen over town and the rain showed no signs of letting up. Near the factorage, William settled into a booth across from Fabre in the corner of a tavern. He took the translated voodoo note, Henri’s supplication to *Gede* that had been attached to the doll. He unfolded the paper and scanned the words—*Release my fate and fortune from female interference.*

“I’m guessing he’s tired of his wife,” Fabre murmured.

William looked for the hint of a smile, but there was none. Fabre took requests to *Gede* very seriously. “I appreciate—”

His words were lost amid shouts. Two patrons stood, threw chairs at each other, and overturned a table. Wood splintered as the furniture crashed on the slate floor. The brawlers crouched behind their fallen table. William saw the glint from a steel barrel.

“Take cover!” he yelled. Bystanders flattened themselves to the floor; others dashed for the door. Bullets ricocheted off the wooden wall behind William’s head. He and Fabre dove under the table, crawled to a side exit and made their way out into the flooded alley.

It took them both a moment to catch their breath, and even under the gaslight, Fabre looked pale. He spoke in a shaky voice. “I don’t know what you’re up to, but those bullets were aimed for your head.”

William didn’t respond.

“For me, that’s too close a call,” Fabre said. “I’m for home.”

William reached out to thank him with a pat on the shoulder, but the clerk had already put distance between them.

Unable to find a cab, William was soaked to the skin by the time he reached the Quarter. *Release my fate and fortune from female interference.* The entreating words ran through his head. Fabre had assured him the translation from voodoo dialect was as accurate as possible.

Cold rain running off the brim of his hat and down his neck, his dress shirt stuck to his skin, he smelled of damp wool and felt like a wet dog. His appearance certainly wouldn't impress tonight. With the tearing wind, the umbrella was ineffectual; his socks squished in his shoes. He'd hoped to find time to return to the Collins house to change again but he was due at Renee's in less than twenty minutes and dared not be late. In spite of the dreary weather, in spite of the bullets—there was no question the fight was staged, the bullets intended for him—his heart felt light as he set off at a brisk pace.

Stepping off the banquette into rushing rivers in the streets, William felt momentarily sorry for Henri Voison. Married to a rich, rich woman, he enjoyed luxuries he would not otherwise have had—the townhouse, the plantation, servants, horses, carriages, fine tailoring, food and drink. At what cost? His masculinity?

William suspected Madame Voison's harsh words to him at the cemetery were only a sample of her capacity for vituperative speech. He could easily imagine what she said to Henri in private, trying to control every move the poor man made. Now Henri Voison fought back. He'd grown so desperate he was praying to *Gede* to release him from his wife, while stealing every dollar that passed before him—so that he could be free.

As he turned the corner, William paused to dry his face with a handkerchief. Looking up, his heart dropped at the sight of a man leaving Renee's house and hurrying down Burgundy Street. Between the heavy rain and the gentleman's hat pulled

low, William couldn't see his face. How many men was the lady entertaining tonight?

When she answered the door, Renee's shy smile turned to concern. "Where on earth have you been? You look like a drowned rat."

"Not what I hoped you'd say, Miss Renee." He removed his hat and bowed, rainwater cascading off his head. He kissed her hand. He wanted to hold it forever, but forced himself to release her warm fingers.

"Stand in front of the fire. I'll get you a brandy."

He addressed her back while she poured, explaining that he'd met with five suppliers to get copies of their invoices and had spent the afternoon in the rain at the Exposition site meeting with foremen who employed far fewer men than the payrolls in the account ledger indicated.

Renee handed him a glass, and he saw admiration in her topaz eyes. At last his investigations impressed her. He didn't understand why she'd broken off their courtship. He understood even less why she'd allowed him to call on her tonight. But he was grateful.

Seated on the sofa, she took a small sip of brandy and spoke calmly. "After Henri Voison attacked me, I thought him capable of just about anything. But I confess I'm surprised that he is so vicious as to put the entire city's reputation in jeopardy."

"His day is over, I promise you. Uncle Patrick wrote to Captain McCorkle this afternoon outlining our evidence. Voison should be in jail by now, where he belongs. I suspect Uncle Patrick will take over as chairman and the Exposition will get on its financial feet quickly."

"With his capable nephew handling the books, I imagine."

He smiled at the compliment. Then his eyes traveled from her face to the empty glass on the side table. "You've had one caller this evening already I see." His mind flashed to Colville's thigh pressing against her skirt last night. "Did I see Vespasian leaving

your house as I came up the street? What are you doing entertaining a young man with his reputation?"

Renee looked up to meet his eyes. "He was here briefly, but you mustn't jump to the wrong conclusions."

His soaking clothes and dripping hair did nothing to calm his nerves. "You have made it clear more than once, Miss Renee, that I don't make your decisions." His voice rose. "But as someone who has more than a passing interest in your welfare I have to warn you against Vespasian. He's trouble."

"I know," she said. The hint of defeat in her voice stopped him from accusing her further.

An awkward silence reigned for several moments. "I will not be offended if you remove your coat and dry it by the fire," she said. The firelight danced in her eyes and a slight smile played across her lips. "You're creating quite a puddle." She gestured toward his feet and the water pooling on the hearth. "I'll get you a towel."

Before he could answer, she disappeared.

By the time she returned, he had removed his coat and waistcoat and he could feel her appraisal of his chest, which was clearly visible through the wet white shirt. She handed him the towel and took her position on the sofa again. He pretended Renee herself held the towel and took his time drying his neck, running it over his hair, sliding it down his shirt from collar to waist. Then he hung it over the fire screen and sat very close to her.

Eyes down, she took a healthy sip of the brandy.

"We were discussing Vespasian," he said.

She sighed and lifted her head. "I invited him here to talk about Maureen because she's in love with him. She confided in me last week."

Of course he knew of Maureen's infatuation with Vespasian, but the fact that she'd gone to Renee suggested the problem had grown. He combed his fingers through his hair as his thoughts ran

riot. "Has she ... has Vespasian?" He leaped to his feet. "I will call him out to the Oaks. Is she with child?"

"No and no," she answered quickly. "But Maureen wants ... she wants him to ... I told him I ... hoped he would be a gentleman at all times."

He leaped up and paced in front of the fire. "And?"

"Actually, he laughed. He said Maureen was not always a lady."

"I'll kill him." He took a gulp of brandy, turned his back to her and put his glass on the mantel.

"She came to me and asked questions about ... this is very difficult to discuss."

He clenched his hands at his sides. He wished she would dispense with what seemed to be an affectation of virginal modesty and come out with it. "Tell me."

She rushed ahead. "Maureen intends to offer herself to Vespasian *before* marriage, that is, *without* marriage because she never intends to marry, and she had questions about intimacies."

He turned to face her. "You lent her that book. I suspected as much. She left it on the table in the upstairs sitting room. Renee, it's quite ... explicit."

"It's a scientific text," she said defensively.

"Well, I wish you hadn't enlightened Maureen." He couldn't keep the annoyance from his voice, but he wasn't angry with Renee as much as with Maureen.

Renee rose and came toward him. "Women *and* men who are educated are better able to make decisions about all aspects of their lives."

He faced her. "True in most matters, but in intimacies?"

She tilted her head, meeting his eyes. "Do you believe a lady should be surprised on her wedding night?"

The question startled him. He'd given the matter plenty of thought on the long night waiting for Effie in his carriage. He

had looked forward to teaching her, with the assumption that she knew nothing. But that would have been a wedding night!

Maureen wasn't on the verge of matrimony. She didn't need to know about intimate matters, the little fool.

"I'll get us more brandy," Renee said as she left the room.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Carrying the decanter, Renee stopped and admired William from behind as he squatted to feed the fire. The cloth of his trousers stretched tight across his thighs and molded to his firm, shapely bottom. The muscles of his arms and back strained under the damp fabric of his shirt as he lifted several logs from the brass bucket and positioned them in the grate. She longed to feel those arms around her, feel his skillful hands caress her. Two weeks ago he had pulled her against his arousal in the orangerie and she couldn't deny it—she loved the sensation. That night, she rocked and rubbed against him with abandon because it lit a flame within her. But then he stopped, pulled away from her.

Doubts clouded her mind. Could she excite a man, arouse him sufficiently so he could complete the act? She'd not been able to interest Rupert in her body. He'd had no physical need for her.

William did. She saw desire in his eyes, felt it in his touches, his kisses. Last night at the opera he stared at her body in her dress, and one glance at his lap told her she affected him. Her test proved he longed for her as much as she did for him. She didn't care that he visited prostitutes regularly. Or did she?

Stepping up beside him, she allowed her dress to brush against his knee. His hand on the hearth was inches from her ankle. If only he would put his hand on it and stroke higher on her leg. She was certain he could read her thoughts. Her face grew warm. She met his eyes. Every inch of her thrummed with desire.

His full lips curved into a wide smile. “Why not join me on the floor?” He sat on the rug, his back against the sofa, leaving room for her close to the fire. He opened his palm and rested it beside him. Uncertain, she lowered herself to her knees. He moved his hand and she shifted sideways, dropped her hip to the floor and curled her legs under her skirt. She leaned against him, tilting her head to his shoulder while he stretched his legs in front of him, circled her waist with his arm, and pulled her closer.

Heart pounding, she said the first thing that came to her head. “I assure you, sir, I lectured Maureen on the many reasons why intimacies prior to marriage aren’t advisable.” She bit her lip. She hadn’t meant to turn the conversation to Maureen’s interest in intimate recreation. Her own interest in the subject was more to the point.

“And your words had no effect?” His hand moved higher, grazed the side of her breast and moved back to her waist.

She held her breath; her skin beneath her chemise grew warmer. “She’s quite headstrong.”

“Did she say when she’s planning this tryst?”

Renee exhaled slowly. “No,” she stammered. “The next time they’re alone, I suppose.”

“I’ll watch her like a hawk.” He reached across her and picked up the decanter from the hearth. She inhaled his warm, manly smell with its lingering trace of almond, rain, and tobacco smoke, and she had to restrain herself from burying her head in his chest.

“More?”

Renee nodded, working consciously to still her trembling hand while he poured. William filled his own glass, took a swallow and said with a touch of bitter humor, “I’ll just add Maureen to the list!”

Renee picked up the poker and jabbed at the coals. “What list is that?”

“It’s all I do these days when I’m not at the forage—follow people all over New Orleans. I’ve followed Madame Voison, but

Henri has been with her both times and I saw no one else. I’ve followed Robert following you.”

She let the poker slip from her hands; it clattered against the hearthstones, but he just grinned. “I confess.” He swallowed some brandy. “Last week, I met Robert in front of your house one night, sent him home and kept watch *for* him.”

“You did?” Surely that was the action of a man in love, wasn’t it? Keeping vigil?

He put his glass down beside him on the rug. “Then there’s Vespasian.”

“You follow—” Her mind reeled. If he followed Vespasian—

“Why not? I’m following everyone else! He goes to Gallatine Street. Four or five nights a week, I’m dragging him out of brothels or dance halls or gambling houses and bringing him home. His butler puts him to bed. That man—the butler, I mean—is a saint.”

“Oh!” Happy enough to laugh out loud, she kept her eyes on the fire.

“You seem surprised.”

“You follow Vespasian,” she repeated, her voice squeaky even to her own ears.

He shrugged. “Emile Colville is our biggest client and a friend of Uncle Patrick. I’ve been trying to protect the Colville family from Vespasian’s stupidity and to save his life for Maureen’s sake, in case she really does love him. It’s possible to lose a fortune gambling and easy to get knifed or shot in that part of town.” He smiled ruefully. “After what you’ve told me tonight, I think I’ll let him get killed.”

“That’s wonderful!” Her hand fell on his upper thigh; she snatched it away. “I mean, I’m glad you’re keeping Vespasian out of trouble.”

Arching a brow toward her, he leaned forward until his lips touched her earlobe. “You knew about Gallatine, didn’t you? Did you think I went for my own entertainment?”

She felt her face flush. Like a foolish schoolgirl, she'd let gossip make her doubt him. His warm breath caressed her neck just below her ear, his lips touching her skin. She wasn't sure she could speak but needed to hear him deny it. "I thought you might—many gentlemen seek—"

"Not my taste." He nibbled her ear. "I want only you."

A jolt of lightening ran up her spine. How long had she wanted to hear those words? He bent his mouth down to hers and she met his advance with parted lips, enjoying the force of his tongue against hers. It had been too long since they'd kissed. She pulled her lips away to say that, then found them again.

She sensed a ravenous hunger in him, a feeling that all of it—Vespasian, Maureen, the Voisons, the factorage—took second place to his desire for her. The fire leaped higher in the grate, but the warmth spreading throughout her body was coming from him, not from burning embers or the strong spirits.

Grasping her shoulders, his mouth never leaving hers, William guided her down to the floor and stretched out beside her. "We're alone?"

"Estelle and Phillis went to a dance and Aunt Sophie—"

"Is playing whist with Uncle Patrick."

Their eyes met. They laughed until his lips covered hers again. One hand crept up from her waist to cup her breast.

"Oh," she gasped as his fingers found her nipples. Wanting him to do more—to see her bare, to lick her nipples as he had in the orangerie, Renee guided his hands to her dress's buttons where they worked with remarkable speed.

"Why so many? I'm going mad," he grumbled. She knew William was hungry for her, nearly savage in his need to feast his eyes on her. He wanted to make love to her. No thoughts of Rupert, of Madame Soniat's cruel words about her childless state could ruin this moment. She excited him. She would not stop; he would not stop tonight.

William lifted the dress over her head. "So many layers," he murmured. She giggled nervously, but helped him pull her petticoat over her head, too. He tossed it and the dress aside.

She knelt up and whispered, "Unhook me."

He came to his knees; his hands moved slowly. From top to bottom, he loosened the front-fastened corset and finally it fell from her hips to the floor. Through the thin cotton of her chemise, his fingers danced over her breasts. He teased her until she began to pant, then, through the chemise, he closed his wet lips around her breasts, one then the other.

Renee's insides melted and her body shrieked with need. She squirmed closer, grabbed his bottom and brought him tight against her. His iron-hard shaft pressed between her legs. Her chemise and drawers had to go. She wanted to put her bare skin against his.



He reached out and slid the chemise off her shoulders. It fell to the floor beside them. His breath caught as his eyes lingered on her breasts, moving slowly from the creamy white swells to her deep pink buds. He began with kisses on her neck, her shoulders and finally down the slope of her breasts. Arching her back, she thrust her chest toward him. He flicked her nipples with his tongue until her skin flushed and grew warmer to his touch.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever known," he whispered in a voice so thick with emotion he didn't recognize it as his own. He returned to sucking one nipple. "I want you. I need you, Renee." Her body trembled beneath his tongue.

Certain he could read her mind, William reached for the top button on her drawers. Beneath that fabric was the place he wanted to touch, the place he wanted to claim for himself. But he needed to woo her, excite her to blissful enjoyment—in a way Rupert must never have. Shifting positions, he sat again and lifted

her onto his lap, her back against her chest. Gently he cupped her breasts in his hands, while he smothered the nape of her neck with kisses. He'd shaved not three hours ago, so he rubbed his smooth cheeks across her velvet skin, savoring her jasmine scent. She trembled, and shivers of pleasure ran down his spine.



Renee had never undressed a man. She turned to face him and, with shaking fingers, she undid his necktie, unbuttoned his wet shirt and pulled it off his shoulders. His undershirt came next, straight over his head. The sight of his broad chest with its lush curly black hair sent a thrill through her. Her fingers lightly traced his chest hair from its beginning just below his neck to the swirl of it around each nipple. With a tentative touch, she circled one nipple with the tip of one finger and felt it grow hard. Following William's example in exciting her, she moved closer and licked it, then bit it lightly.

Emboldened by his moans, she played with a wisp of black hair inching upward from his waistband, then placed her hand on his trousers, grasping his swollen manhood. He sucked in his breath.

"Ahhh, Renee. That ... feels good, very. ..."

She never believed she could ignite such a rapturous response in a man. She ran her fingers up the curve of his stiff shaft. As she reached the tip, he pushed himself against her hand, his eyes dark with desire. The sight and feel of his body and its response to her touch, his musky smell, all made some place deep between her legs quiver. She squeezed him again and he fell onto his back. Renee straddled him. Caressing her bottom with one hand, he reached between her legs to open her drawers, then rubbed his arousal against her, his clothing the only barrier separating them.

Her breath came in pants and she rocked back and forth against him. Her mind dazed by desire, all rational thought left

her. She was all body. William rolled her on her back and brought his hand into her drawers. He touched her hair lightly at first, playfully. Wanting more, she spread her legs. In seconds his fingers parted the folds of her desire and his thumb found the nub of her passion.

"Oh!" she cried out.

"Should I stop?"

"No," she said huskily. "Please, no."

Fear and desire exhilarated her as the sensations building one on another grew in speed and intensity. A new wave of pleasure crashed over her. The core of her being ached. She felt she was riding a wild, untamed, unknown beast. She wanted to scream, she wanted to go higher, faster; at the same time, these heights frightened her. She wanted it, but she feared what was on the other side.

William's soft voice in her ear urged her onward. "Let yourself go, Renee. Let it feel good."

But what about him? She must give him pleasure. Wasn't that the whole point? She found his waistband, unbuttoned his trousers, tugged them open and reached to his woolen underwear, which she yanked down, her breath catching as his bare shaft shot up. She stared. He was much larger than the illustration in the science text. Moving her fingers tentatively along his bare skin, she studied him. As her hand continued upward, his shaft flexed and stiffened. He sighed in pleasure. She wrapped her hand tighter and felt it throb. Bringing herself closer to him, she used her feet to kick his pants and underwear to his ankles.



He popped the side buttons of her drawers and peeled them away. She lay on her back completely naked before him. Her body enchanted him. The firelight brought out the flames in her hair, danced over the creamy skin of her breasts and stomach. He kissed

down her body from her breasts to her waist. He feared he would explode at any moment so he moved quickly over her. She spread her legs for him, a welcome that heightened his desire. His manhood in one hand, he opened the folds of her most private place with the other. Renee was wet and ready.

He nudged at her entrance. "Widows do as they please?"

Smiling, she nodded.

He entered her with a powerful thrust.

She shrieked. Her fingernails dug into his back.

Shocked, he pulled out and rolled off her.

Her body trembling, she turned her back to him. My God, he should have known. He'd had to teach her to kiss! William moved close, put his arm across her waist, his mouth to her ear. "I had no idea." His naked chest snuggled against her back while his hand rubbed her arm from shoulder to elbow. "You and Rupert never—"

"He couldn't," she whispered. "I never told a soul—"

"Why didn't you tell *me*?"

She turned to him and buried her face in his chest. "I hoped you wouldn't realize."

Sweet, gentle Renee. He supposed she wanted him to take her with all the force of his desire, which he had. Which he damn well wouldn't have had he known she was an innocent. He pulled her chin up and with a thumb on each cheek, wiped away her tears. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

"You didn't. I mean, it was wonderful until—" She stopped. "I knew what to expect from my scientific text."

"Really?"

"Not exactly." She arched an eyebrow. "I was surprised by your—size."

He hugged her close and buried his face in her hair.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

William lingered in bed, feeling more content than he had since—well, more content than he ever had in his life. He could put any doubts about Renee's infidelity behind him. In fact, she'd been as faithful as faithful could be and to a man who couldn't consummate his marriage vows. It moved him that she had shared herself with him before any other man. He felt like he'd won the Louisiana Lottery, but that sentiment was followed with sorrow—that warm, loving Renee had married into such an odd, cold-hearted family. Six months with the Soniats was too long by six months.

He needed to get up but didn't. Instead he moved his bare arms and legs against the luxurious cotton sheets, so fine a grade they felt cool against his skin, soft as flannel. He closed his eyes to better remember the night, the vision of Renee's alabaster skin in the firelight; the sensation he felt when he spotted the dark circle of her nipple through the thin white chemise, when he traced the delicate curve of her side from her breasts to her stomach and back up to her hips. The taste of her desire was the ambrosia he wanted to spend the rest of his life enjoying.

The rest of his life? He meant it. He wanted her the moment he saw her, but now he wanted her body and soul. He wanted to marry her.

The memory of her crying sobered him. Why hadn't she told him she was inexperienced? What kind of sod was Rupert that he married her in the first place—and then never touched her! Something told him the explanation for this behavior was darker than even Renee knew. The question of how she must be feeling this morning intruded on that thought. In a split second he decided to send flowers. Would five dozen be enough? He'd follow them in person and propose.

He pulled the bell cord next to the headboard, jumped up and reached for his pants and shirt from last night, hoping they still contained a trace of Renee's scent, then went straight to the writing table and scribbled his instructions to the florist. Just as he was signing his name, he heard Julia's soft knock and called cheerfully, "Come in!"

Not noticing her grim face, he rushed up to hug her. If anyone would know where to purchase flowers on a Sunday morning, Julia would. Furthermore, there was no one better to handle such a personal matter.

She took the note from his outstretched hand and nodded gravely as she read it over.

"Can it be done this morning?"

She nodded.

"Wonderful." He turned, running his hands through his hair. "Could you please bring me some coffee?" He stared into his wardrobe, wondering what one wore to propose. It took him several moments before he realized that Julia was still standing in the doorway.

"There's trouble downstairs," she said flatly. "Your uncle waitin' on you."

"Fire?" He imagined the worst as he reached for his cravat. The Gravier, the Calliope, the Poydras warehouses.

One look at Julia's face told him it was infinitely more serious. "Please see to the flowers," he said, grabbing for his coat.

He found Uncle Patrick and Captain Perry McCorkle of the New Orleans Police drinking coffee in the library. William poured a cup, glad that Henri Voison was finally going to come to justice. He was ready to lay the evidence of fraud out on the desk, but Uncle Patrick raised a staying hand.

"William." He cleared his throat. "Madame Voison is dead, brutally murdered at about ten o'clock last night.

William froze in place at the news.

Captain McCorkle turned to him. "Your uncle sent me a note concerning various irregularities in the Exposition finances, but if you think I'm here to discuss that, you're sorely mistaken, young man." William bit his tongue and McCorkle turned to Uncle Patrick. "I know you have occasion to see the Voisons socially, and I wondered if you could shed any light on this ... hideous crime. As you know, Madame Voison was one of the wealthiest women in the state."

Uncle Patrick nodded in agreement and McCorkle continued, "As far as the Exposition is concerned, it's my main job to ensure that the streets of New Orleans are safe for the thousands of visitors you expect to attend. I must solve this murder as quickly as possible."

William barely heard. Had he failed to protect Madame Voison? He had. After she'd berated him in the cemetery, he'd assumed the lady was crazy. But murdered!

His thoughts turned immediately to Renee. Whoever had employed the mulatto cook had also hired Robert. He needed to get to Renee immediately. From now on, he would not leave her side. Perhaps *he* could hire someone to protect her. She wouldn't like him to issue an order, but that's the way it had to be from now on. New Orleans was dangerous.

"It's come to my attention, sir"—McCorkle paused long enough for William to realize he was staring at Renee's sketch on the library desk, the sketch he showed Smiley—"that you've

been known to carry a likeness of Madame Voison around town. Perhaps you would explain why.”

Uncle Patrick put his coffee cup down with a clatter. “In recent weeks Madame Voison believed she was being followed. William was looking into the matter for her.”

McCorkle gave him a quizzical look. “And what did you find, sir?”

William explained quickly, saying that a mulatto cook who worked for a resident of the French Quarter had hired Smiley to follow her, and that Smiley had paid another to do the footwork. He also mentioned that he’d told Madame Voison this but she’d not believed him. She’d insisted that her husband, Henri, was having her followed.

McCorkle squinted with suspicion. “And where were you last night, Mr. Collins?”

He hesitated. Pictures of Renee’s fire-reddened hair spilling across her creamy white breasts, her bare backside, the soft skin of her inner thighs flashed through his mind.

“Mr. Collins.” McCorkle raised his voice. “Where were you last night?”

He came to attention. “Where was I last night? The factorage. I was at the factorage.”



Sunday morning, Renee’s coffee tasted richer. On her walk to church with Aunt Sophie, the sun shone brighter and the sasanqua blossoms, poking through the iron fences, were a deeper pink. She was surprised but relieved William didn’t attend Mass at the cathedral. She suspected she would have turned to jelly at the sight of the back of his head. She doubted if her legs could have carried her past him to communion and back to her pew.

The five dozen yellow and white roses on the front steps when they returned home left no doubt she was in his heart. Aunt Sophie raised a highly speculative eyebrow but kept her comments to a wry minimum: “Patched things up, I see.”

Humming happily, Renee worked for some time arranging the flowers just so. She put one dozen white roses in a vase in the center of the dining room table, one dozen yellow in her bedroom, and divided the final three dozen among Aunt Sophie, Phillis and Estelle, for their bedrooms. From time to time she pulled the card from the pocket of her dress and reread it: *Your First Love, William*.

Aunt Sophie fumed as she scanned her newspapers but Renee barely attended to her muttered complaints. She attempted to sketch out an idea for a dress she’d discussed with Maureen, but her heart raced and she started every time a carriage passed down the street, which was often enough that Aunt Sophie asked if she were expecting someone.

“Not necessarily,” she murmured, but she leaped from the sofa at the sound of the bell. Swinging open the door, she saw at once that William’s face wore a deep frown, his blue eyes dark with worry, his lips pursed. Patrick Collins looked positively ill, his usual ruddy complexion quite green.

“Mr. Collins. And Mr. William.” She swallowed. “Please come in.”

“Thank you,” Patrick Collins said tersely. “Your aunt is also home?”

“Yes, sir, in the back parlor.”

He stepped briskly in that direction.

“Something terrible has happened,” William whispered as he took her arm and led her down the hall behind his uncle. For a brief moment, he put his arm around her waist, which she understood as an unspoken reassurance that he felt the full significance of what they shared last night.

Aunt Sophie looked up, dropped her lorgnette and stared at the three of them. “My gracious, Renee. Gentlemen. What is it?” She started to rise but Patrick Collins shook his head.

“Please stay seated, Sophie, I’m afraid we bear bad news.” He looked to William.

“Marie Voison has been murdered.”

Aunt Sophie crossed herself. Then the room spun. Renee’s knees buckled and she sank onto the sofa. “My G . . . God.” The words stuck in her throat. Her hand moved up to clutch the base of her neck.

“What an awful tragedy.” The words were Aunt Sophie’s, the voice even and controlled. She was upset, Renee knew, but she believed a lady never displayed extreme feelings. “Please, Mr. Collins.” She nodded to William. “Pour some sherry for Renee and me, and some brandy for yourselves.”

Patrick Collins patted Aunt Sophie’s hand, but sat down beside Renee. His reassuring arm around her shoulder eased her shaking body. “This is a shock, a terrible shock,” he said softly. “I know you and William tried to help the lady. The police are investigating and will find out who did this.”

Renee dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief she pulled from her skirt pocket. The fact that the police were on the case offered cold comfort. Madame Voison had confided in her and now she was dead—murdered. She took a few deep breaths to stave off an outburst of sobbing.

William handed her a glass and their eyes met. Thank God he and his uncle had come to report the tragedy. Her eyes on him, she took a sip of sherry. “Please tell us everything,” she said, her voice husky with emotion.

Patrick Collins began: “Marie Voison was found, God rest her, by a policeman on the beat around ten o’clock last night, in an alleyway off Royal, not far from Desselle Millinery.”

Renee closed her eyes, picturing the lady sprawled on the ground.

“Fortunately, the policeman recognized her and sent for a doctor. Nothing could be done, however, so they took her to her home. Her husband was not in.”

William, still standing, took up the narrative. “Henri Voison was at the Pickwick Club until midnight. He’s not currently a suspect because he had many witnesses. It seems he hadn’t seen his wife since the opera on Friday evening and had no idea of her plans for the rest of the weekend.”

Renee interrupted. “When I saw Madame Voison in the crush room, she said she had something to tell me.” She took a shaky breath and held it, regaining her composure. “I think she may have finally realized who was threatening her.”

“The police suspect a common hoodlum murdered her,” Patrick Collins said. “Her handbag was open and all its contents taken.”

Renee didn’t believe that for a second. “That’s unlikely. Marie Voison had been afraid for weeks. She believed Henri was behind it. Maybe he had her murdered.”

Beside her, Patrick Collins inhaled sharply, and Aunt Sophie gasped. “Renee, that’s quite an accusation.”

Renee pursed her lips, then went on, “Madame Voison *knew* her husband was stealing money.” Not exactly, she thought, as the words tumbled from her mouth. *She suspected*. She looked up at William, her eyes going blurry with tears again. “We did what we could, didn’t we? Should we have gone to the police?”

“Don’t blame yourself, Renee.” William began pacing across the room. “We relayed the information we learned to her. She chose not to believe it.”

Renee met Aunt Sophie’s eyes. “If her murder had nothing to do with the Exposition, could Henri have had another reason to kill her? Or did the person who employed the mulatto cook also

pay to have her murdered?” She turned to Patrick Collins. “How was she murdered? Strangled?” She saw William glare at his uncle and shake his head.

“The method is immaterial,” Patrick Collins said quickly. “You ladies don’t need to hear that.”

Clearly shaken, Aunt Sophie crossed herself again and murmured a prayer to Our Lady of Prompt Succor. Renee took a swallow of spirits. So did her aunt.



Uncle Patrick still held a protective arm about Renee’s shoulders and William envied him. He wanted desperately to hug her to his chest, to console her. He knew she believed she’d failed Marie Voison, but damn it, Renee had done all she could for the woman. He was the one who’d failed.

Aunt Sophie’s words broke into his thoughts. “Why on earth was Marie out alone so late at night? Could she have been going to meet someone?”

“Going to meet a man? I would think a man actually committed the murder—due to its nature,” Uncle Patrick suggested, his voice trailing off. William groaned inwardly. His uncle had given him numerous lectures on manners since his arrival in New Orleans, yet here he was alluding to the bloody details.

“I think anyone—man or woman—in a fit of passion, could commit a violent crime,” Renee said. “We need to make a list of anyone Madame Voison might have trusted enough to meet alone at night.” She jumped up to get pen, ink and paper from the desk. This was one of the things he loved about Renee. When necessary, she was capable of putting emotions behind her, analyzing a situation and acting to resolve it.

His uncle stood, refilled his glass with brandy and sat in a chair next to Aunt Sophie. Renee returned to the sofa and William took

his uncle’s place beside her. As much as he longed to sit close enough to press his hip and leg against her skirt, he left a respectable space between them. He held the ink well on his thigh. Renee was poised to write.

Aunt Sophie cautioned against their strategy. “Marie Voison lived in New Orleans all her life. If we list every parishioner at St. Louis Cathedral, not to mention her classmates at Ursuline, we’ll have half the city.”

William felt Renee slump beside him. “If that’s the case,” he said, chagrined at the vast job before them, “we might have better luck going door to door right in the neighborhood and asking if anyone saw her last night and with whom.”

Aunt Sophie objected immediately. “Mr. Collins, you cannot go around town asking about Madame Voison.”

“Why not, Madame? She came to Renee for help. She involved us.”

“It’s unseemly,” Aunt Sophie said with a sniff. “Madame Voison was a lady of a fine family. Her whereabouts, even last night, are a private matter. If the police must delve into the subject, they have that right because they’re trying to apprehend her killer, who might well strike again. They have that responsibility; the public has entrusted them. But you and Renee don’t have that public trust. You simply cannot go door to door, as you put it, and ask questions about Madame Voison.”

“Madame Sophie is correct, William,” his uncle agreed. “The police will handle this.”

Surprised by the older generation’s scruples, William graciously conceded. “I understand. We’ll compile a list and give it to the police. I’ll write while you ladies think of her friends.” He took the pen and paper from Renee, handed her the inkwell.

Aunt Sophie leaned forward in her chair, patted Renee’s knee. “The police will take care of this, dear.”

Renee nodded. Beside her, William could feel her resolve to carry out her own investigation, proper or not. He knew she understood she wouldn't do this alone. He would be at her side every moment.

Aunt Sophie and Renee went back and forth until William's hand ached. With each name, he imagined a maid answering a front door, an invitation to go into the parlor, a few minutes of conversation with the lady of the house. This was going to take many, many hours and he itched to get started.

When the list reached a third page, William suggested some fresh air for the ladies, perhaps a drive. Aunt Sophie balked at the idea of a pleasure ride when a lady had been brutally murdered. His uncle offered a pleasant alternative: He and Sophie would take a stroll in the garden while the young people went for a drive.



William practically raced to the door. "Would you like to fetch your hat and gloves, Miss Renee? I'll wait for you in the front hall."

Renee's stomach fluttered with excitement as she settled in the carriage and William joined her on the bench. "The roses are beautiful. Thank you."

"Not as beautiful as you."

"And the card ... I love it." Renee's face grew warm. "And my, five dozen! Aunt Sophie noted that we must have patched things up."

"We have, haven't we?" He reached into her lap, took her hand and squeezed it.

His leg pressed against hers through her skirt and petticoat. Last night she had run her hands up and down the tightly corded muscles of that thigh. Good heavens. She'd even run her fingers along the hot skin of his aroused manhood. How could they be

sitting beside each other now, discussing a murder? She pushed the thought of his body from her mind as best she could. "Shall we call on Madame Rapier? She's at the top of the list."

He grinned, brought her hand to his mouth and kissed it. "You're reading my mind."

William put his head through the small door in the roof and gave Noah instructions. Sitting beside her again, he put his arm about her waist and drew her close. "How are you today?"

"Happier than I've ever been ... until you brought your news."

"No negative physical ...?"

She stopped him with a hand to his lips.

"No regrets?"

"None." In spite of last night's discomfort, her body craved his again; her breasts and thighs tingled and she felt herself turn warmer still as the memories of last night's passion ran in a loop through her mind. He had played with every inch of her body, and she with his. She wanted to make love again as soon as possible but dared not say it. He pulled her even closer against his chest. Surely he had the same thought. Her heart swelled.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Madame Rapier's front parlor was decorated in the current mode, a Chinese motif: blue and white vases on the mantel, a black lacquered chest along one wall, a Persian rug of blue and red medallions, and blue and white patterned silk draperies on the floor-to-ceiling French doors. Renee loved the style, which had gone in and out of home furnishings since the middle of the seventeenth century.

Against the splendor of the room, the lady of the house looked ghastly. Seated in a chair that exposed her to unflattering afternoon light, her eyes and nose red and swollen, a saucer of untouched coffee in front of her, she seemed to lack the strength to rise and greet them.

"Madame Rapier, I'm so very sorry for your loss." Renee grasped both her hands then stepped aside so William could offer his condolences.

"Thank you for coming, Renee, Mr. Collins." She made a limp gesture to the coffee pot.

Renee and William declined.

"My husband has gone to see if there's anything he can do for poor Henri," she continued in an uneven voice. "I understand he's beside himself with grief for going out last night and leaving Marie alone."

Renee thought Henri Voison should blame himself for his behavior his *whole* married life, not for this one night, but she

didn't share her view. "It's good Monsieur Rapier is with him. I'm sure it's very difficult for Monsieur Voison."

Madame Rapier shivered. "A common hoodlum robbed and murdered her." She dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. "Marie out alone so late. Where could she possibly have been going?"

"We were wondering the same, Madame," William said.

Staring into the fire, Madame Rapier seemed to forget their presence as she spoke. "Henri may blame himself, but Marie enjoyed it when he went out to play cards. It meant she could indulge in the novels she so loved. Oh, we teased her about it, but she was wild about Augusta Evans Wilson and used to read each of her books two and three times. She would recount stories to us as if she knew the characters. I think it would have taken a lot of persuasion to get her to interrupt an evening of reading—to go out alone—after dark."

Renee waited for Madame Rapier to compose herself. "Had you noticed that Madame Voison was upset or agitated in recent weeks?"

"Marie suffered from bouts of nerves for years." She shrugged. "Nothing unusual lately that I know of. She was looking forward to the parties opening the Exposition." Again, she fought back sobs. They listened for another half hour and then made what Renee called, once they were back in the carriage, a graceful exit.

"Graceful, yes, but too time consuming." William insisted they needed to move faster with these calls or they'd be at it for weeks. "We could split the list," he offered. "For instance, if you'd rather not see Madame Soniat, I could go alone."

Renee dreaded stepping into the parlor of the home that had been hers for six months. That William was sensitive to that fact meant Maureen had regaled him with all sorts of sordid tales. He'd certainly heard Madame Soniat's rumor—a rumor their lovemaking had squashed—but he had heard probably about the strange

conditions of Rupert's will and Madame Soniat's public chiding of her.

Renee took a steadying breath. "No, let's go together. But I warn you. She may not even see us."

Renee received a welcoming hug from Lizzie, Madame Soniat's housekeeper of many years. "Why, Miss Renee. It's good you come. Miss Therese been takin' on all afternoon. This a sad end, the end of Miss Marie."

Renee stepped back to introduce William. As Lizzie turned to curtsy, Renee saw her swollen cheek and jaw and stifled a cry of alarm. She felt certain Madame Soniat had inflicted the damage with her parasol. A glance at William told her he'd noticed it, too. Renee was speechless with fury and she was grateful when William took up the thread with his customary courtesy. "Is Madame Soniat receiving?"

Lizzie covered her cheek with her hand. "Lawd, yes. Her friends been comin' and goin' all day. I'll tell her you here."

The parlor hadn't changed in six years. Dark green velvet covered the sofa and chairs, goldish velvet hung at the windows and the carpet's gold, green and brown design completed the décor. Renee had always found the room dreadful and had gone so far as to speak to Rupert about redecorating several months before his death. Even the well-banked fire couldn't alleviate the dreary atmosphere.

Madame Soniat sat stiffly in a chair by the hearth, a glass of sherry in her hand. Her voluminous black skirts, wrinkled skin, loose jowls and the scowl on her face put Renee in mind of a shriveled prune. She barely nodded as they came forward. Renee spoke first. "Madame, we came to offer condolences." She shook the older woman's hand in a quick greeting. They had long ago given up a kiss on both cheeks.

William, who'd met the lady briefly at the Collins garden party, acted the perfect gentleman. He took her outstretched hand,

kissed it and murmured he was sorry for the loss of her friend. She snatched her hand away and turned her head, a cold cut if Renee had ever seen one.

Madame Soniat raised her face to Renee. "I'm surprised to see you. You were never one to remember the dead."

She went hot with mortification. Madame Soniat's rudeness never failed to astonish her. Renee had shed her mourning clothes two years after Rupert's death, which was traditional. She'd shown no disrespect for her dead husband.

Not being asked to sit, the pair stood looking down at their hostess, who ignored them and stared at the writing desk under the front window.

Renee brought her attention back to them. "Madame Voison and I were on very pleasant terms after she ordered a hat from me. I'm very—"

"You've lost a valuable customer," she barked.

The lady had needled her in just this fashion from the moment she'd accepted Rupert's proposal. Renee refused to be brought in.

"Well, you have, haven't you?" Madame Soniat's eyes narrowed as she warmed to her bitterness. "I know Marie was back and forth to your shop several times in recent weeks, but I'm certain she was not pleased with your hat or your company."

"I know her presence there displeased you," Renee said, "but I considered her a friend."

"Ha!" Madame Soniat sniffed. She looked from one to the other, her dark eyes beading on them. "I see you've duped yet another gentleman, Renee. Why are you here?"

She adopted her business voice. "We wondered if you knew if Marie Voison had any reason to be upset in recent weeks."

"Absolutely not. She was in fine fiddle until she had a falling out with *you*."

William spoke up. "Do you know of any reason why Madame Voison would go out alone at night?"

“What is this impertinence?” Her shrill voice filled the room. “Are you on the police force, sir?” She took a swallow of her wine. “I have no idea why she went out alone last night. None at all. Except that Marie Voison was foolish. Lord knows, she read enough of those ridiculous novels.”

“Thank you, Madame,” Renee said. She thought of reaching for her hand, but Madame Soniat pulled it into her lap to prevent any such touch. William said no more. He bowed, turned toward the door, held his arm out for Renee and escorted her from the room.

Lizzie, standing at the parlor’s entrance, followed them to the front door. “Don’t mind her, Miss Renee. She been bad all day. Tremblin’ like and upset. The police was here. She done told them, like she told you, she don’t know nothin’ ’bout Miss Marie.”

At the door, Renee turned back and put her hands on Lizzie’s shoulders. Though she whispered, her order was firm. “Listen to me, Lizzie. I’m taking you away. Go straight to your room, pack what you need, and leave by the back door through the garden. Mr. Collins and I will be in the carriage on the street. You’re working for me now.”

Lizzie’s eyes widened in panic. “Lawd, I can’t. I’m the last one here.”

“Hurry,” Renee said. “I’m not letting you stay here.” Without another word, Lizzie dashed towards the servants’ quarters in the back of the house.

William handed her into the carriage and asked Noah to drive around the corner and wait. Renee could feel the rage simmering inside him. As they pulled away, he spoke with icy control. “It took all my restraint not to throttle that . . . woman.”

Renee sighed. “She’s a bitter old lady.”

“There are other words in my vocabulary.”

“She had a hard time. Her father committed suicide. Her only brother died at Shiloh.”

“Do me a favor, Renee.” His voice was low and commanding. “I never want to hear you make an excuse for her ever again.”

Renee bit her lip and struggled to contain the emotion that resulted from years of frustration. “I’ve never understood why she hated me. She inherited all of Rupert’s property, including my family’s plantation. Papa sold it to Rupert, practically gave it to him.”

William said nothing. He circled her waist with his arm. He didn’t care a whit about her loss of property. He had a vast personal income from the distillery. Besides that, Uncle Patrick paid him well and ultimately he would run the factory, which would support him and Renee as well as Maureen and her husband—not Vespasian, he hoped—and their offspring for many generations to come. Though the injustice of Renee’s loss of inheritance disturbed him, the emotional wounds she’d suffered at the hands of Madame Soniat and her fool of a son bothered him more. “I hope you never see her again without me at your side.”

Renee stared at her shoes. “I hope I never see her again.”

“You don’t want me at your side?”

Her heart lightened. “You know I want you at my side.”

He took her hand in his, brought it to his lips and kissed it, then held it on his thigh. “What’s in the writing desk under the window? Did you notice how she kept looking at it?”

Before she could reply, the carriage door whipped open, Lizzie hurled her valise to the bench and propelled herself in behind it. William pounded on the roof and the horses leaped forward.

Lizzie took gasping breaths. She choked back tears and wrung her hands. Renee moved to sit beside her, putting an arm around her shoulders. “Lizzie, I’m going to take care of you. Madame Soniat’s not ever going to hurt you again.”

“But she so old and I’m all she has left!” Lizzie wailed. “I been with her a long, long time.”

William put his handkerchief in her hand. “A woman who hits her servants has no right to have them, Lizzie.”

“You right, Mr. William.” She took a ragged breath. “They all done gone. I’m the last of the lot. The cook left just this morning. Maybe Miss Therese gonna starve and I ain’t sorry, may the Lawd forgive me.”

Her tears soon subsided and, as the distance from her employer grew, Lizzie related stories about Madame Soniat. “That poor cook, Mr. Paul, she rode him to no end, sending him off on all kinda strange errands, then she ’spectin’ a good dinner on time.”

Renee continued to rub Lizzie’s back but her hand froze at William’s next question. “You say the cook left this morning? What did he look like?”

“Tall and handsome as can be but too young for me. Light-skinned, you know, of mixed family, and a fine cook besides.”

William and Renee locked eyes, but Lizzie went on without noticing. “She done screamed at him to high heaven last night and when I stepped in, she walloped me.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

On Monday morning, Madame Voison’s murder dominated all conversations. Almost gloating, Monsieur Lanoux took the first opportunity to lecture Renee on the scourge of crime in New Orleans, foreign hoodlums who robbed and murdered members of the finest families on a whim. Marie Voison’s father had been one of Lanoux’s father’s first clients when he opened his shop many, many years ago. And, he added—as she well knew—her husband, Henri, was a current customer. “He’s always in great humor, a funny gentleman with stories to tell. It’s a joy to have him in the shop. Oh, but I feel for him now. I wonder if I ought to send him a note. This must be a terrible shock to him.”

Renee kept quiet. Henri was at the very least a notorious ladies man who enjoyed bedding other women and gambling with his wife’s money, at worst an embezzler who had arranged his wife’s murder. As for the evening in her shop when he tried to force himself on her, she couldn’t even think about it without shuddering.

Michelle arrived carrying a copy of the *State’s Item*, the front page of which gave the facts of the case. An editorial called for a larger number of police to patrol the streets of the French Quarter. Renee read it hurriedly, but she needed to retreat into work to calm her emotions. In the workroom, she helped Michelle fit felt

around two milliner's heads. She explained how she wanted the brims stitched onto each.

She hadn't slept most of the night thinking about Madame Voison. The discovery that Madame Soniat had employed the mulatto cook made *her* a murder suspect. Acting for the lady, that cook—Mr. Paul, Lizzie called him—had hired both Robert and Smiley. But why? Except for designing her hat, Renee had no connection with Madame Voison. Even more perplexing, if Henri Voison killed his wife, did he involve Madame Soniat in the plot?

Disturbed as she was, as she played the weekend's events over and over in her mind, Renee always came back to making love with William on the parlor floor. She took a deep breath, feeling her blood go hot. Rupert had never undressed in front of her, so she'd been astounded to see a male's body. William's broad shoulders, his chest, his thighs were all hard with muscle. And that wasn't all. She had delighted in touching him just the way he touched her.

The bell on the front door clanked and Renee's heart started. Perhaps William with news. She parted the curtains and felt a jolt of disappointment. Not William, but a heavysset man in a police uniform strode into the room, carrying a hatbox—not one of hers—a plain black one, under his arm. He put it on the counter. "I'm here to see Renee Desselle."

Affronted by the man's unwarranted aggression, she answered sharply. "I'm Renee Desselle. Owner of this shop."

"Captain Perry McCorkle." He gave a brief nod. "Investigating the last moments in the life of Madame Marie Voison, who was tragically murdered Saturday night not far from here. Is there somewhere private where we can talk?"

"Of course, sir. This way." She led the captain into the workroom and introduced him to Michelle, then asked her to watch the front counter.

She gestured to the table and two chairs. "Please have a seat, sir."

He settled into a chair, placed his hat box on the table and pulled out a small notebook and a pencil from the breast pocket of his uniform jacket. "I trust you will be cooperative, Madame?"

"Of course, sir." Renee was taken aback by the implication that she wouldn't be. "Madame Voison was a valued customer."

"So I understand from her husband." He combed the underside of his graying beard with the fingers of his left hand for a few moments, looked at her intently and began. "You sell hats and hat pins, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir, and hat trims of all sorts. My hats are custom made here in my workroom with Mademoiselle D'Artois. The hat pins and trim I buy for resale from various shops here and abroad."

McCorkle cleared his throat and she went silent. Perhaps he didn't want to hear all this about her shop. Aunt Sophie would say she was talking too much. The man stared intently at her face. She didn't flinch. At last he spoke. "Madame Voison was murdered with a hat pin. I wonder if you can identify it."

Merciful Lord. Renee swallowed hard, then took a calming, deep breath as her mind swirled. No wonder William and Uncle Patrick refused to discuss the murder weapon. The police captain pulled a leather pouch from the hat box, unsnapped it and removed a black cloth, which he placed on the table. He unfolded it.

Renee winced. She stared at the beautiful pin of pearls and jet beads, dried blood on the tip. She stifled a gag.

"I see from your reaction, Madame, that you have seen this hat pin before?"

"Yes, sir. I . . . I sold it to Madame Voison. She ordered a hat . . . and . . . and when she came for it, she bought the pin at the same time."

"Would you happen to have the receipts for those transactions? I'd like to see them."

Renee felt his watchful eyes on her, which both outraged and terrified her. She excused herself, went to the front room, to the receipt drawer under the counter. Her hands shook as she withdrew the sales slips for the hat and hat pin. Michelle stood stiff as a statue, an expression of pure panic on her face.

Back in the workroom, Renee handed the receipts to the captain and sat again. "Madame Voison purchased these in October." She pointed to the date. "Friday, the tenth."

McCorkle took his time perusing the receipts. "Madame Voison was wearing a black hat when her body was found," he murmured, taking his time to look over the receipts at least twice.

Renee held her breath.

Without looking at her, he reached into the hat box and extracted a hat, holding it up for her to see. "You'll recognize it as your creation, Madame. It has a Desselle Millinery label in it."

The hat's appearance nauseated her. She put her handkerchief to her mouth. The dark splotches at the back of the felt and a spattered pattern in the front on the red grosgrain trim were surely blood stains. Her stomach dropped. Any second, she would have to run out to the back courtyard and be sick. A bead of sweat rolled down her hair line, yet when she touched her cheek, her skin was cold and clammy. She folded her shaking hands in her lap. "It's ... my hat," she said hoarsely.

"I know." He pursed his lips. "Her husband, Henri, confirmed that." Then he sighed, giving her the impression that he sincerely regretted what he had to say next. He cleared his throat. "Inside the hat, in the pocket here sewn into the brim, there was a note."

"A note?" Her voice came out a squeak. She didn't believe William and Uncle Patrick had kept anything from her—except the hat pin—and they hadn't mentioned a note. The Captain must not have told them about it.

"Yes, Madame, a note from you."

Impossible. She shook her vigorously. "My assistant sews a pouch inside the crown of each hat where a lady can keep money and so forth."

"You never sent Madame Voison a note asking her to see you Saturday night?"

"No, sir." Her voice shook now as much as her body.

Again, the captain delved into his hatbox. This time he produced a folded piece of cream-colored stationery, a shade and fine stock very popular with New Orleans ladies. He opened the paper and placed it side by side with the receipt on the table.

Renee gasped. The words—in her own handwriting—leaped from the page. *Meet me at the shop at 9:15. Urgent. Renee*

"I don't." She had to stop to gather her breath. "Understand. I didn't write that note. What is this?"

"I hoped you had a reasonable explanation, Madame."

"May I see it?"

He pushed the note across the table. She didn't touch it, but bent over it. Right away, she knew she hadn't written it and, damn it, she needed to set this man straight. She chose her words carefully. "It's ... it's a very good imitation, I can see that, but it's *not* my handwriting."

Inconsistent letters jumped out at her. She pointed to differences in her receipts and the note on the table. "Look at the E on my signed name on the receipt and on this note," she said, gaining confidence. "Look at the Ts in MEET and THE, and my T on the receipt for the words HAT and FELT. They are not the same."

The captain shrugged. "They are very, very similar, Madame. Written at two different times on two different papers with two different pens. Close enough for me."

"Nonsense!" Renee fisted her hand on the table. She raised her voice in panic. "I did not write that note."

Captain McCorkle sighed, cleared his throat. "Madame, why did you send a note to Madame Voison on Saturday night asking her to meet you at your shop?"

Did the man not understand English? “I have no idea who wrote this note, Captain, but I assure you, sir, I did not. It’s *not* my handwriting.”

He looked musingly at the ceiling. Did he look away to give her a few moments to calm down? She couldn’t. She didn’t.

His eyes bored into her again. “I understand a cook working for a resident of the French Quarter paid Smiley to have Madame Voison followed. Are you perhaps that resident?”

Renee closed her eyes and brought a hand to her forehead, then faced the man squarely. “That’s preposterous, sir! I know for a fact that Madame Soniat is the one who coerced her cook into hiring Smiley to have both Madame Voison *and* me followed!”

McCorkle’s face went red with anger. “How dare you cast aspersions on one of the most respected matrons in this city! That’s not going to get you out of the mess you’re in, missy! Where were you between nine and ten o’clock on Saturday night?”

Renee raised her chin and forced herself to answer truthfully. “I was at home in my own parlor. Vespasian Colville visited from seven to about eight.”

He wrote in his notebook.

“And William Collins from eight to after ten.”

He combed his beard with his fingers again. “Can Sophie O’Brien, your aunt, or Mr. William Collins verify that you were at home with both of them?”

Her lips quivered. “My Aunt Sophie cannot. She was out with Mr. Patrick Collins. I believe they played whist with the O’Haras that night. Mr. Collins and I were alone.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“I’m telling you the truth, sir. We were discussing a business matter,” she added, “the benefits of his uncle’s shipping prices over that of another gentleman’s.”

“And what time did Mr. Collins leave your home?”

“I don’t remember. I’m guessing around ten.” She recalled the tenderness of their parting kiss. “Yes, it was exactly ten. The clock struck the hour just as I saw him to the door.”

“Madame, I believe I’m being led in a circle. William Collins, the nephew of Patrick Collins, is the only person in New Orleans who can swear you were at home Saturday night?”

She bit her lip. “Yes, sir.”

He spent a few more moments scratching away with his pencil then shut his notebook with a flourish and put it back in his pocket. He carefully packed the hat and hat pin away in the black box, stood wearily and addressed her. “I trust I can find you here or at your home if I should wish to ask you more questions.”

“Yes, sir. I’m here every day except Sunday. The shop closes at noon on Saturday.”

She rose, holding the table to steady herself. Her legs trembled as she escorted Captain McCorkle to the front door. He made a hasty exit with a not-so-pleasant good day.

The moment the door closed, Michelle rushed to Renee and hugged her. “*Bon Dieu*, the police think you killed Madame Voison.”

Renee sank into one of the client’s chairs, the nearest place she could collapse. “I’m afraid Captain McCorkle does.”

“You’re pale and shaking. I’ll pour you a sherry.”

“No, Michelle. Some water please. I’m afraid I might be sick.”

Renee raised the glass to her lips with a shaking hand. Her mind reeled from poor Madame Voison to the hat, the hat pin, her despicable husband, Henri, Madame Soniat’s mulatto cook, the letter in a near duplicate of her own handwriting.

Renee had read enough penny dreadfuls to know how things worked. Logically, she knew the police looked for an important reason—a motive—why one person killed another. She had no reason in the world to want Madame Voison dead. The only way to save herself was to find out who did.

Chapter Thirty

Renee knew most of Madame Voison's close friends: Genevieve Rapier, Therese Soniat, Desiree Blanchet, Marguerite Loubiere. Those four ladies were the ones most likely to know Madame Voison's state-of-mind in the last days of her life.

Desiree Blanchet lived in the Garden District. Her husband had built a new home beyond Canal Street because he had served as a Colonel in the Confederate army, and couldn't tolerate the sight of Union soldiers in the streets of the French Quarter. Renee decided to start there and then come back into town as the afternoon wore on, ending near her own house with the ladies who lived nearby.

Renee had met the charming lady on many occasions at the Soniat home. A slender woman in a stylish purple wool dress, she seemed pleasantly surprised to see her, and welcomed her warmly with an offer of refreshments. Though she'd skipped the mid-day meal, Renee didn't think her stomach was equal to a slice of pound cake and she settled for a cup of rich coffee before coming to the point of her visit.

"Madame Blanchet, I wouldn't presume to call Madame Voison a close friend, but"—here she stretched things a bit—"she and I had some wonderful discussions at the shop. About all sorts of things, not just hats and fashion, but legislation against saloons

in the Quarter, the prosperity the Exposition is bringing to the city. She was such an intelligent woman. I'm sure you spent many good times with her."

Madame Blanchet's eyes brightened. "I can tell you about plenty of good times when she was Marie Pacquet. We were at Ursuline together back when the school was on Dauphine Street. Many years ago now. Marie was the dickens. She always got the rest of us in trouble. She once brought tobacco and a pipe to school that she'd taken from her father's library. We went up on the roof of the building during recess and smoked."

"Marie was the ringleader?"

"She sure was." Madame Blanchet's eyes teared up at the memory. "She believed if men found pleasure in smoking, there must be something to it and that young ladies should try it too. She was very forward thinking."

"You were caught?"

"The nuns sent notes home and we had to *clean* the classrooms after school for two weeks." She chuckled. "It wasn't too strenuous. Dusting, washing slate boards, that sort of chore, but it *was* humiliating."

Renee laughed politely. "You two must have been married around the same time, raised your children together."

"Oh, yes." Madame Blanchet's smile faded. "Marie was a great comfort to me after my husband's death."

Renee murmured her condolences and waited in sympathetic silence. Then she said, "Marie and Henri Voison. I've gotten the impression ... it was not a love match?"

"Oh, no, it wasn't." Madame Blanchet shook her head and sighed. "Marie loved *him*. He was in love with Therese Benoit, who became Madame Soniat when she married for money. As a young lady, Therese had a terrible time of it, you know. Her father's death. After her brother's disappearance at Shiloh, her mother went mad and had to be sent to the North Shore. Therese

was alone in the world, and I suppose she decided to choose security with Monsieur Soniat over love with Henri Voison.”

Renee lifted her coffee cup to her lips quickly, which she hoped hid her surprise at the revelation.

“Oh, Renee, I realize you’ve known her only in her later years, but as a schoolgirl, Therese was compassionate, funny, a sheer delight.

“When she threw over Henri for Monsieur Soniat, he began to show Marie a lot of attention. Her brothers worried he was just after her money, but at the end of the day, Marie was so in love with Henri, she simply didn’t care. She wasn’t a great beauty, but she was a kind, happy person who would have made any man a good wife. Somehow Henri Voison convinced her he would make a fine husband.”

Renee waited and Madame Blanchet went on, unbidden. “Henri was *never* a fine husband. As you probably know, the man didn’t confine himself to loose women. He was indiscreet with some of our social acquaintances, which was heart-breaking for Marie.”

“I can imagine.”

Madame Blanchet poured out more coffee for both of them. “Marie confided in me once, early in her marriage, when her brother Jacques wanted to call Henri out. Marie refused to hear it. She was certain Henri was a much better shot than Jacques, that he would kill Jacques. She should have let the duel go forth. Henri can’t shoot a sitting duck at two feet.”

Renee strained to think of a general remark. “Some marriages are ... unfortunate,” she said, putting down her cup. Madame Blanchet gave her a shrewdly assessing glance, and Renee rushed to fill the silence. “Her two sons must have been a great joy to her.”

Madame Blanchet sighed again. “One was. Laurent studied law but fortunately never practiced with Henri. He, his wife and three children are a constant delight. I’m sorry, *were* a constant

delight. But the younger son Jules is following in his father’s footsteps. Spends his time on Gallatine Street with that incorrigible lush Vespasian Colville, I’m afraid.”

“I hope Laurent inherits her family’s wealth and not her husband.” Renee regretted her words the minute she said them. It was not the sort of comment a lady made about another family’s finances. What’s more, it couldn’t fail to remind Madame Blanchet of Rupert Soniat’s will, which, as everyone knew, left very little to her. Her mind flew to Madame Soniat’s pernicious rumor. No doubt Madame Blanchet believed it.

Mercifully, the lady put an end to the awkward pause. “Laurent is well taken care of. Marie was an astute businesswoman. Tobacco wasn’t the only interest she shared with men.” Madame Blanchet laughed. “Her father taught her plenty and she kept up with her stocks and land holdings herself. If Henri had been more discreet, he might be a wealthy man today—” She stopped in mid-sentence. “He wasn’t, and Marie changed her will several times, each time leaving Henri less. She had her private attorney make the arrangements.”

“I’m ... pleased to hear it,” Renee managed.

“In fact, I happen to know she changed her will last week, this time leaving what she called a ‘pittance’ to both Henri and Jules and the rest to Laurent. She was very upset the last time I saw her, opening night at the opera. She just rolled her eyes when I asked after Henri.”

Renee knew she was asking too many questions but she couldn’t stop herself. “Do you think Henri knew she’d changed the will? If he thought he was inheriting a great deal of money at her death—”

“Renee! What a terrible thing to say. You think *Henri*?”

“Not if he knew he *wasn’t* inheriting money,” Renee answered quickly. “He’d have no reason to kill her, would he?”

“No, he would not,” Madame Blanchet said with a finality that told Renee the subject was closed.

She reached for her gloves. "I'm sorry if I'm being impertinent, but I must learn the truth, Madame. You see . . . Marie Voison was murdered with a hat pin I sold her."

Madame Blanchet's hand flew to her throat, adorned with a heavy gold chain and locket. It took her some moments to regain her composure. At last she leaned forward and patted Renee's knee, not unkindly. "I'm sure, Renee, the police will find the ruffian who did this."

"You're correct, Madame. I know the police will do a fine job." At the thought of McCorkle's accusations, she felt an unbearable need for fresh air and quickly made her departure.

It was nearly five in the afternoon when she returned to the Quarter and called on Marguerite Loubiere, an unconventional widow who said and did as she pleased. Renee had fond memories of the lady enjoying a coffee with her mother and other members of the Altar Society in the front parlor, of hearing the laughter between snippets of conversation while she played with her dolls in the back parlor.

Quite heavy, yet corsetless in a dressing gown, her feet propped in the middle of an enormous tapestry ottoman, Madame Loubiere looked comfortable and totally unprepared for callers when Renee entered her parlor. Most shocking of all, she held a cigarette in her hand. Renee couldn't see the lady clearly; her face was suddenly obscured by a large expulsion of smoke.

"Dear Renee, I'm so happy to see you," a voice spoke from the cloud. "You'll join me for tea, won't you?"

Madame Loubiere nodded to the servant who'd remained in the doorway for instructions. Then she gave her guest her full attention. "Sit down, dear. Would you like a cigarette?" Madame Loubiere smiled and arched one eyebrow. "If you've never tried it, you don't know what you're missing," she teased.

Indeed that was true of many things. Renee smiled despite the seriousness of her errand. "You're quite right, Madame, I believe

I will try one. Earlier today, Madame Blanchet told me that it was Madame Voison who introduced a group of her friends to tobacco."

"That's absolutely a true story. And I loved it. I've been smoking for more than thirty years. Ladies don't smoke in public yet, but they will. Meanwhile, I indulge in the habit when I'm at home. You may find you like it."

Renee—who now counted herself among the most forward thinking women in the world because she not only ran a business, she'd made love to a man not her husband—was willing to try anything else modern women enjoyed. Madame Loubiere pulled out a long white cylinder from a package labeled Richmond Straight Cut No. 1, put it to her lips, struck a match and lit it. She handed it to Renee and told her to close her lips around it and inhale.

She immediately began to cough. "Goodness, it burns."

With a chuckle, Madame Loubiere offered more encouragement. "Try it again. The burn is some of the pleasure."

Renee did as instructed. She didn't cough this time or the next; she inhaled a few more times until she began to feel light headed and a little nauseated. "I really don't think this is for me." She handed the cigarette back to Madame Loubiere with a grimace. "I suppose it's an acquired taste."

"Tobacco is like making love as far as ladies are concerned." She let out a raucous laugh. "It takes practice, but then it's wonderful." Renee had loved her intimate experience—even the first time—so if the lady were correct, she might well become a smoker.

Madame Loubiere, smiling sweetly, snuffed it out in a crystal bowl that contained the remains of quite a few others. "All right, dear, how about some sherry instead? Surely you drink." She turned to the maid who had just placed a tea tray on the table and asked for two glasses of sherry.

Sipping slowly, Renee's dizziness dissipated and her stomach settled. More comfortable here than she'd been with Madame Blanchet, she told her hostess straight out that Marie Voison was terrified of someone or something the last few weeks of her life.

Her hostess enjoyed quite a few sips of sherry while considering Renee's words. Finally, she spoke. "And if I had to guess, I'd say she was upset over her rift with Therese Soniat."

Renee put down her glass. She pretended ignorance, hoping Madame Loubiere would tell her everything she knew. "I understood there was some tension between them, but what was it?"

"I know Therese's history with you, dear." She blew another huge plume of spoke out of her nose. "There's no love lost between you and your former mother-in-law, so let's talk frankly. A lady has been murdered."

Renee sighed with relief. "Let's. Please."

"Therese and Marie Voison had a huge falling out concerning—actually concerning you. Therese was very opposed to your hat shop."

"She made it no secret."

Madame Loubiere met her eyes directly. "Five years ago, she told her friends—all of us—we would be betraying her if we ever ordered a hat from you."

Renee tightened her hand around her glass and took a large swallow of sherry. "I had some indication that she objected to you ladies ordering hats for the Exposition, but I had no idea she'd opposed your purchases for so long, that she was so cruel. I should have realized, of course. None of Madame Soniat's close friends are clients. Only Madame Rapier."

"Genevieve Rapier was more than willing to give up Madame Soniat's friendship, such as it was, in favor of your hats." Madame Loubiere smiled softly. "Genevieve is very fashionable

and nothing was going to keep her away from the best hats this side of Paris."

Emboldened by the compliment, Renee asked: "And you, Madame? You've never been in my shop."

"I rarely wear hats." She paused. "But then again, perhaps you could make me something sensational for the Exposition, something that would make me love hats."

"I'll do my best to convert you, Madame. But please tell me more about the feud."

"It really was peculiar. Therese, Madeline Prange, and Marie were here one afternoon playing euchre." Madame Loubiere lit another cigarette as she warmed to her story. "Marie mentioned that she wanted a new hat for the opening of the Exposition. She was to sit on the dais with Henri." Sherry in one hand, cigarette in the other, she alternated between the two. A sip, a puff.

"Poor Marie. She announced that she planned to order a Desselle hat. Therese forbade her, but Marie grew defiant. Therese became enraged, and the two argued about it right here in my parlor. Madeline stayed inside with them, but I just couldn't stand it. I paced out on the balcony. I could hear every word. It was almost as if Therese didn't want Marie to get to know you, to become friendly with you at all."

Renee's throat tightened. She swallowed before she could speak. "I stopped trying to understand Madame Soniat a long time ago. Why did she possibly care if Marie Voison and I became friends?"

Madame Loubiere shrugged. "I've never seen Therese like that before. I came back inside in time to see her threatening Marie with her parasol. I thought she was going to hit her. I took Marie's side. Therese stormed out and hasn't been in my parlor since. I can't remember exactly when that was."

Renee knew exactly what day Madame Voison had entered her shop, what day the lady had argued with Madame Soniat in

front of the millinery. She'd never forget the day. October first. The day she'd first set eyes on William, when he'd offered his arrogant opinion on the hat style she'd sketched for the harried lady, when she'd fallen into his arms as she turned in fright at the sight of Madame Soniat waving her parasol.

Chapter Thirty-One

William pulled his watch from his pocket, glanced at it, then looked through the windows of the front parlor out onto Burgundy: Carriages rushed by in both directions, narrowly missing each other or pedestrians who packed the banquettes, carrying parcels of bread, fish, meat, vegetables, rice, crossing right in front of the carriages without looking. The newspaper urchin darted around the corner. No sign of Renee.

Turning abruptly, he stalked through the pocket doors into the back parlor. "Madame Sophie, is it usual for Renee to be late? Mademoiselle D'Artois told me she left the shop hours ago."

He detected a slight smile on Aunt Sophie's face, but he'd used Renee's first name on Sunday in front of her and didn't intend to ever stop. The lady put her embroidery hoop down in her lap and answered with obvious sarcasm. "You could set a clock by Renee. If she isn't struck by a new idea for form or trim, she locks up at six sharp and is here in ten minutes, that is, if she doesn't stop for pralines, or dally around the window at Adler's, or go for a coffee with Michelle."

William made a mental note of Renee's candy preference. He would buy her a dozen pralines—tomorrow—if she would just walk through that door right now. "It's nearly seven."

“She’s just as prompt in the morning.” Aunt Sophie continued. “Dawdles over what dress to wear, reads the paper, drinks another cup of coffee.”

William lost patience. “I’m worried.”

“I understand,” Aunt Sophie said soothingly. “How about a brandy, Mr. Collins? I’m ready for a sherry. Please.” She picked up her embroidery. “You know where the decanters are.”

He returned from the cellarette with glasses for both of them. “And please, sir, sit down. Your pacing makes me nervous.”

He sat. “I beg your pardon, Madame Sophie.”

“Calm yourself, sir.” She took a sip, put down her glass and resumed with the embroidery hoop. “I have a pretty good idea Renee’s out doing the very thing I suggested you and she not do—interview Madame Voison’s close friends.”

The lady’s insight amused him. “I suspect the same, but we certainly learned a great deal by calling on Madame Soniat yesterday.”

“I’m so glad you all brought Lizzie here, where she’s safe.”

William couldn’t refrain from a comment, modifying his vocabulary for the lady’s ears. “What a beast of a woman!”

Aunt Sophie’s eyes sharpened on her hoop. “Madame Soniat’s made her animosity no secret, but having her cook pay Robert to follow Renee is beyond the pale.”

“You haven’t heard the worst of it,” Renee announced from the doorway.

William jumped up at the sight of her, very nearly catching her in his arms as she stormed into the room, tossing her coat and handbag into a chair, removing her hat and throwing it on top of them. She kissed her aunt on the cheek and then turned to him. It distressed him not to be able to kiss her on the lips, but he took her hand, pressed his lips to it.

She was all business. “Pour me a brandy, please, William. I think I’m quite ready.”

“My goodness, dear, mind your manners,” Aunt Sophie declared.

Renee didn’t appear to hear, nor did she sit when Aunt Sophie gestured toward the sofa. Instead, her back to the fire, she accepted the glass he offered and took several swallows. “Madame Soniat is more despicable than I’d ever dreamed.” She polished off one glass while explaining that Madame Soniat’s efforts to keep customers away went back five years. She drank another relating her encounter with Captain McCorkle.

William exerted every ounce of willpower to keep from seizing her, bringing her arms down to her sides, crushing her against his chest. She was wringing her hands as she recounted Captain McCorkle’s visit. “He practically accused me of murder right there in my shop. Anyone could have forged my handwriting. *Anyone*. I’m in business. There are people all over New Orleans who have copies of invoices and receipts I’ve written.”

Clearly alarmed by her niece’s behavior, Aunt Sophie urged William to stay for dinner, which he readily accepted. It was unthinkable that he would leave Renee while she was so agitated, impossible that he would manage to eat without seeing to it that she ate as well. She had his undivided attention as she took her place at the head of the table. He sat to her right, Aunt Sophie at the opposite end.

“Captain McCorkle is correct in one of his assumptions.” Renee paused to take a sip of water. “Whoever wrote the note either killed Madame Voison or was an accomplice.”

Estelle served a light meal of catfish, stewed tomatoes and okra, and cornbread. When she withdrew, Aunt Sophie spoke for the first time in some minutes. “You and Marie Voison *had* become friends, Renee. The person who wrote the note knew he could lure her out to her death because she trusted you.”

William nearly dropped the cornbread he was buttering. He put it down on his plate and voiced the thought he had pushed

away several times in the last hour. “Madame Soniat had both of you followed to learn how often you and Madame Voison saw each other, when and where.”

Aunt Sophie spoke again in a voice so soft it was almost a whisper, “Why could she possibly care how often Renee and Madame Voison saw each other?”

Indeed, why? William looked from Renee to Aunt Sophie. “That’s what we need to learn, ladies.”

Estelle brought in demi-tasse cups of coffee and a plate of ginger cookies and William was pleased to see Renee eat two. She’d barely touched her fish and vegetables, but at least there was some nourishment in the sweets.

When she finished her coffee, Aunt Sophie excused herself to read her papers. She bid them both good night. William stood; Renee snatched another cookie from the platter. “She’s going up to say a rosary.”

“Not a bad idea,” he murmured. He offered his arm and led Renee into the back parlor. “I have some news.”

Her face brightened as she sat on the sofa and motioned for him to join her. “Tell me.”

He harbored a piece of information he’d shared with no one—not Captain McCorkle, not Uncle Patrick, not Renee. He hesitated to admit he’d attended a voodoo ceremony, but after the confusion concerning his visits to Gallatine Street, he didn’t want to keep another secret from her. He began, “This might upset you.”

Her face fell, and he rushed to get it over with. “You put it in my mind—I might find Henri Voison at a voodoo ceremony.”

Her eyes widened. “Voodoo?”

He hurried through his explanation: Fabre, the mule-drawn carriage; Henri’s lunatic dancing; his theft of the poppet and note that Henri had left on the altar. He told her everything he remembered of the night. Well, not all. He didn’t relate his own episode

of frenzied dancing. “Fabre gave me the translation of the note Saturday night, just before I came calling.” He smiled. “I was so distracted by you, I forgot all about it.”

Her face went hot at the reference to their love-making. “What did it say?”

“Release my fate and fortune from female interference.”

She let out a tense breath. “Henri murdered his wife. Doesn’t that confirm it?”

“I wouldn’t call it hard evidence.”

Renee seemed not to hear. She pulled her hand from his and twisted her two hands in her lap. “It’s my turn to be honest,” she said, tilting her head upward to lock eyes with him. “When you said I’d be upset I thought—well, I was terrified you might say you were married . . . or engaged. When you said voodoo, I was relieved.”

He swallowed. Was there a better time than now to tell her? “There was a young lady I thought I loved. A Protestant. We talked of eloping, but she said no.” He leaned toward her and brushed her lips in a soft kiss. “And I’m so very glad she did.”

Renee sighed. “Me, too,” she murmured, but he could tell her mind was running in a different direction and her shoulders remained tight with tension.

“Don’t worry about Captain McCorkle,” he said soothingly. “We know we were together and neither one of us killed Madame Voison. Our only choice is to keep investigating until we find out who did. As for Captain McCorkle, I’m not surprised he ignored you when you told him Madame Soniat had both you and the murdered lady followed. He paid no mind to my evidence that Henri Voison was embezzling. Whether he’s daft or crooked, I can’t say. All I know is we’re on our own.”

He rose to build up the fire; he could feel her eyes on him as he knelt on the rug before the hearth. It was the exact spot of their lovemaking two nights ago. He wished they could repeat

that intimacy now, the feeling of the first teasings of her tongue in his mouth, the soft skin of her bare back, her long legs wrapped around his torso. He shook the visions from his head, made an inane comment about the pine kindling, replaced the brass poker in its holder and stood.

Her beauty took his breath away. The firelight added tinges of red to the curls framing her small, oval face. Against her dark burgundy dress, her pale skin looked as smooth as alabaster.

“William—” The haunted expression in her dark eyes terrified him. “I told Captain McCorkle the truth—that you were the only one who could swear I was in my house at the time of the murder—between nine-thirty and ten Saturday night. I told him I was here alone with you—having a business discussion.”

His blood froze in his veins and he slammed the mantel with his fist. “Damn it to hell, Renee!”

Her eyes jumped in fear. Dear sweet Renee had told the truth! He swallowed and softened his tone. “I told him I was at the factorage.”

“What?” She raised her own voice now. “Why did you say that?”

“I was thinking of your reputation.”

The color drained from her face as the ramifications of his lie sank in.

“My reputation?” Her soft chuckle alarmed him. “William, he thinks I’m a *murderer*.”

Joining her on the sofa again, he took her hand, but she pulled it away. “I assure you,” she said in an icy tone, “before my marriage, neither Aunt Sophie nor Papa would have left me alone with a gentleman, but the rules are different for widows. Widows do as they please.” Her voice caught. “Aunt Sophie would have lied to protect me, but you—”

“I’ll go see Captain McCorkle tomorrow and tell him the truth.”

“He’ll never believe you now. The Captain said he was being led in circles when he spoke to me. Now I understand what he meant. When I told him I was with you, I could see he didn’t believe me.”

He put his arm around her waist, pressed his thigh against her skirt and this time she didn’t resist. He felt Renee tremble.

“Will I?” She stopped. “Will I be arrested for Madame Voison’s murder?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I will.”

“You hardly knew the lady.”

“I suspect McCorkle thinks you wrote the note, but he believes someone else—probably me—killed her. He’ll check my story with Fabre and know I wasn’t at the factorage.” He shifted Renee’s body toward him with a gentle pull at the waist, lifted her onto his lap and tightened his arms around her.

She put her head on his shoulder and he held her for a long time. He waited until he felt the tension in her back muscles ease before he spoke again. “Madame Soniat had you both followed. She’s the key. We need to learn more about her and what she keeps in that desk.”

“Tomorrow night,” Renee said. “She’ll be out playing cards.”

He continued holding her until her breathing steadied. Then he looked at his watch. “I wish I could stay until you fall asleep, but Maureen invited Vespasian to call this evening and I promised I’d chaperone.”

“You’d better get home.” Renee yawned. “Those two can’t be alone for a minute.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

The next night, at ten o'clock, Renee checked the street and saw no carriages or pedestrians. She let herself out the back kitchen door into the courtyard. True to his word, William was prompt. She heard a soft, melodious whistle above the brick wall, the visor of a black felt cap appeared, then his forehead, eyes, nose and mouth. "Unlock the gate," he ordered in a soft voice.

She turned the key quickly and he was inside, all dark workmen's clothes, rough wool pants, oversized jacket, shirt open at the neck and cap pulled low. "You look quite handsome in your disguise." She smiled and kissed him on the cheek despite the seriousness of their task.

He stepped back and stared at her in the bright moonlight. "And you ... what is this?" His eyes darted down her body from her man's shirt to her trousers to her boots and back up to the laborer's cap into which she'd stuffed her hair. Her pants, too large, were held up by a bit of rope tied tightly at the waist. The rest of the fabric fit closely around her hips and thighs. They left no part of the lower half of her body to William's imagination.

"My God, I've never—"

She finished his sentence. "Seen a lady in trousers?"

"Yes. I mean, no," he stammered. "I've never seen a lady in trousers."

"I borrowed them from Estelle's cousin." Teasing, she twirled once so he saw all angles. "Like it?"

"You're wearing a negro man's clothes?"

"That doesn't bother me a bit."

"Me either. The negro. But a man's? That does bother me."

"Don't be old-fashioned. Chopin's lover, George Sand—do you know of her? She was a writer in Paris decades ago and wore pants more often than skirts." She strode out the gate and through a back alley between two houses, William following. "I can move faster in them. Let's go."



"I can't," William mumbled to himself. He was so stirred by the sight of her shapely bottom as she walked down Ursuline that he lost all interest in their mission. His chief thought was of grabbing her hand, pulling her back into the Desselle courtyard and making love to her under the magnolia tree.

She turned. "William, whatever's the matter? Please, keep up."

Oblivious to his problem, Renee was clearly enjoying her freedom—no corset, no garters and stockings, no chemise and heavy skirt tangling her legs as she walked. Her legs—he could look at them no longer. Keeping his eyes on her shoulders and the back of her head, he followed dutifully for some yards then pulled even with her.

"Do we look like a pair of footpads out for no good?"

"We do indeed, Renee. Let's get this over with, so you can put on women's clothing again, please."

"I'm sorry you're so disturbed."

"I'm not disturbed exactly. I'm—"

A dog barked and he stopped mid-sentence.

"Nervous?" she whispered.

"I can't say this is my usual evening exercise," he answered.

“Let’s take Royal and find an alleyway between two houses to Chartres when we get close. That’ll be fastest.”

He really did want to get this over with. His strides were long and he was pleased to see Renee keeping up with no difficulty. He joked with her that she must swing her arms as she walked if she really wanted to look masculine. She giggled and aped his movements.

The Soniat home was dark, just as Renee had said it would be. He hoped the lady remained true to her card-playing habit on Tuesday nights. They knew her servants had all left her. Entering the house should be simple enough. Still he couldn’t imagine the consequences if they were caught in the act.

He glanced up and down Royal one last time and seeing no one near them on foot, he nodded to Renee and they slipped together into the alleyway. Light from other house windows combined with the moonlight to illuminate their path and they made their way quietly and quickly to the Soniat courtyard. Renee paused beside the tall iron gate, which she had assured him was never locked. Right she was. He pushed it open.

She took a few steps, stopped and turned to him. With a huge grin, she reached in her pants pocket, removed a large black key and waved it in front of his face.

He had to stifle a laugh. “You devil, you.”

“When I moved out, she never asked for it.”

Relieved that he wasn’t going to have to pick the lock, leaving evidence of their entry, William began to think they might actually get away with this. He was very glad he’d agreed to let Renee join him. Feeling a need to hug her, he gripped her shoulders and brought her back against his chest, his mouth on the nape of her neck. “You act as though you’re accustomed to breaking into houses.”

“I have many natural instincts,” she whispered suggestively, “as you’ll learn when you know me better.”

“I can’t wait.”

She took his hand and they walked down the slate path to the back door. “Do you have a light?”

“Matches.” He struck one and held it while she put the key in the lock and turned.

“Door squeaks a little, as I recall.”

Putting his hand on the knob, he pushed gently, causing very little noise.

She punched him playfully on the shoulder. “I believe you’re quite good at this, too.”

He almost returned the gesture, then caught himself. My God, she’d assumed the demeanor of a young lad in these trousers. It was the sort of good will punch of one man to another. He was horrified. He didn’t like the transformation from Renee to ruffian housebreaker. “After you, my lady,” he said with the utmost formality to remind her who she was.



Renee gave a little laugh, hoping to hide her fear. They’d come this far. She couldn’t let William go in alone. She stepped inside first and tiptoed through the butler’s pantry. But the familiar smell of the main hallway—lemon polish, dog hair, wool rugs, roses—unnerved her. Madame Soniat’s dog had died a year or so ago, she’d heard, but the odor lingered. She shuddered. Walking behind her, William grabbed her hand and squeezed it. The man could read her mind. He understood the house held painful memories for her. He seemed to realize that she not only felt an intense physical reaction around Madame Soniat; she felt it just standing in her home.

Reassured by his firm grip, Renee took a deep breath and led him down the dark passage. She wasn’t alone any longer. What had William said Sunday afternoon after they’d paid their call? If she ever saw Madame Soniat again, he’d be by her side. He was.

The large front parlor was partially lit by a gaslight on the street but not enough to read by. Wordlessly, she took the matches William held out to her while he crossed to the front window, and positioned himself behind the curtain so he could see the street, but not be seen from outside.

A trickle of perspiration ran down her back. She'd been telling herself that anyone could break into an empty house successfully—especially if one had the key—but her courage drained from her with every passing second. She hated the fear the lady inspired in her.

“Damn.”

She knew William heard her soft curse. She felt his eyes on her as she forced her feet forward, past the sofa toward Madame Soniat's private desk, her heart pounding. In the semi-dark, she could just make out the silver gleam of the candlestick always on the desk. She reached for it and sent it clattering to the wood floor, the candle falling out and rolling under the desk.

William stayed put at the window, but reprimanded her in a low growl: “Can you make any more noise, for God's sake?”

Renee bristled. After the candle's crash, she didn't dare answer. Slowly, she lowered herself to her knees and reached under the desk to retrieve it. She extended her arms on the floor, her lower back swaying, her bottom in William's view if he happened to look this way. But this was no time to feel self-conscious.

She grasped the candlestick under the desk, put it to rights on the floor, crouched beside it and struck a match. After an initial flair, the flickering from the candle was woefully dim, but still bright enough that a passing coachman would see it from outside. She must hurry. Standing again, Renee pulled open the desk's central drawer and peered inside.

“Hurry, for God's sake,” William called.

On top of a sheaf of papers were letters written on pink stationery. Not believing her eyes, she grasped the pages, and bent

nearly double to bring them down close to the candle. *These were her own letters!* Letters she'd written to Madame Soniat every third day during her wedding trip up the Mississippi River with Rupert. Why on earth had Madame Soniat kept them and why on earth was she reading them now?

She held her breath as she flipped through them, her eyes darting to underlined text. The word *shop* in a description of a dry goods shop where she had purchased fabric. She shuffled though the pages, faster and faster. “Rupert and I are going to *meet* another couple for dinner tonight.” *Me, at, the*, all underlined. Renee turned over the last page of the last letter on which she'd written of their *urgent* desire to get back to the dock before the 9:15 boat left them in Memphis. And her signature—*Renee Desselle Soniat*. Fool that she was, she'd taken pride in her new name and written it out on the bottom of every letter.

“*Bon Dieu.*” She sank to her knees.



William couldn't see Renee's face clearly in the semi-darkness, but he heard her exclamation, saw her sink to the floor. He rushed to her. He took the papers from her clutched hand and understood at once what Madame Soniat had done: studied Renee's handwriting, the curve of every letter. All the words—*Meet me at the shop at 9:15. Urgent*—were underlined, plainer than day.

Enraged, he ransacked the desk drawer, grabbing by the fistful sheets of cream paper with each word written out dozens of times. “Look. She practiced quite a bit.” Yanking the rest of the stationary from the drawer, he waved it in Renee's face. “She copied your script!”

At that moment, he heard horses' hooves outside. Before his eyes, Renee froze with fear and his own heart dropped at the sight of her. Cursing himself for leaving his post at the window, he

leaned in, pinched the candle flame with his thumb and forefinger, and stuffed all the pages into his jacket pocket. He shut the drawer with such force the little desk shook on its legs.

“Let’s go.” He put his hands under her arms and lifted her to her feet. Renee started toward the hall, but William redirected her with a shove in the opposite direction. “Not the hall. She’s coming in.”

She stared at him, unmoving, uncomprehending. His hands on her shoulders, he shook her gently. “Renee, which way? Can we get out another way?”

At the sound of a carriage door, she snapped from her daze and tilted her head toward a pair of pocket doors. Taking her hand, he led her into an adjoining dining room, where she pointed toward the far corner beside the fireplace, to a section of paneling beside a built-in china cabinet. Hoping to God she was right, he yanked her to it. She pushed on the wall and a narrow door opened. He propelled her through, glad for the first time she wasn’t wearing voluminous petticoats, then stooped to pass through himself. He heard the front door open. He shut the secret passage into the butler’s pantry as footsteps sounded in the front hallway. Silently, they made their way through the kitchen and out the back door.

They ran down the garden path, out the gate, then slowed as they entered the alley leading back to Royal Street. “I didn’t lock the back door,” Renee said, stopping dead. “She’ll know someone was there.”

“She’ll know that soon enough anyway.” He patted his jacket pocket that held the letters.

She backed into a recessed doorway in the darkest part of the dirt path. “I didn’t want to steal anything, William. Now we’re thieves.”

“They were *your* letters, Renee! What’s she going to do when she finds them gone and the back door unlocked? She won’t dare call the police.”

“We should have left them there.”

“So she could burn them? I’m stunned she hadn’t disposed of them already.” He patted his pocket again. “We have proof she forged the note.”

She shook with nerves and her lips trembled so badly, she couldn’t speak. His hands circled her waist, his fingers twining around the rope holding up her pants.

“Madame Soniat killed Madame Voison,” he said, “or at the very least lured her out so someone else could kill her.”

She turned suddenly and dry-heaved into the bushes. He put a comforting hand on her back.

When she’d recovered, he produced a handkerchief and she dabbed at her mouth. “She was always a mean, hateful woman, but a murderer?” She shivered. “It’s hard to believe, even of Madame Soniat. And why? Why would she do such a thing? She and Madame Voison had a rift over a hat I made, but they were life-long friends.”

Ordinarily he loved this quality in Renee—that she refused to see the worst in people. Did she need more proof than they had just found? Of course it was a shock to her. Her body shook as he held her tight against him.

“I’m taking you home and going straight to Captain McCorkle right now.”

“Good, good,” she murmured, her head still buried in his shoulder.

“I have another reason to see Captain McCorkle. I want to know why he hasn’t arrested Henri Voison for embezzlement.”

She pulled her head up to look at him, her cheeks wet. “I can’t wait until he’s in jail.”

He took her face in his hands and kissed her forehead softly. He didn’t trust himself to kiss her lips. “Renee, we had a close call. Have a sherry before bed.”

“A brandy.”

“A brandy.” He smiled. “Now I must get you home and out of those ridiculous clothes before Aunt Sophie returns and realizes you’re out.”

“I like these clothes.” Her eyes brightened for the first time since they’d set foot in the Soniat house. “I couldn’t have escaped if I’d been in my usual attire. If we should go on any similar adventures in the future, I shall borrow them again.”

“I certainly hope there’s no need,” he said firmly.

Chapter Thirty-Three

No, he did not like these clothes at all, but not for the reason Renee supposed. He wasn’t old-fashioned. Not one bit. They fit her form so closely they showed every curve of her body. He could clearly see the outline of her breasts through her rough-woven woolen shirt. The pants legs were tight on her thighs and outlined her crotch. God, he wanted desperately to get her out of those clothes.

By the time they reached Burgundy, his every nerve was frayed. It was after eleven o’clock, but the fatigue from their ordeal made it feel much later. He needed to return to the factorage where he hoped to find a note from Fabre reporting on Vespasian’s whereabouts tonight, and he dearly needed a drink. There were many other reasons to say good night at the gate—Renee repeated more than once that she was fine—but he couldn’t just yet. A compulsion deep within him urged him to stay with her. He wanted her safe in his sight, not just tonight but every moment hereafter.

They moved slowly and noiselessly through the garden toward the back of the house. In the darkness William used the moonlight on the back of Renee’s pale neck—her hair tucked into the cap—to guide him forward on the path. He couldn’t end the evening now, not when the tension evident in her neck and shoulders tugged at his heart. He wanted to hold her, kiss her properly, caress

the shock of Madame Soniat's treachery away. He wanted to be the strength she needed.

By the look of the dark house, he guessed Aunt Sophie hadn't returned from dining with his uncle at Tujague's Restaurant. As they approached the door of the orangerie—he took her elbow and stopped her. When she turned, he hugged her, squeezing her body against his chest. Without a corset, her nipples rubbed his shirt, igniting him with desire. Unable to stop himself, his hands moved down from her shoulders and covered both breasts with a gentle touch.

She melted against him and parted her lips to welcome his tongue, sending shots of pleasure through his blood. Even while he deepened the kiss, he fumbled with one hand behind him for the orangerie's knob. The door opened, he stepped back and clutching her bottom, pulled her into the room with him. He kicked the door shut.

The air here was at least ten degrees warmer. The smell of citrus blossoms brought back the memory of the caresses they'd shared here. The table on which she'd sat that night contained a dozen or so pots of snapdragons and larkspur—plants too delicate to withstand the occasional New Orleans freeze. The number of lemon, orange and grapefruit trees seemed to have multiplied. Where could he make love to her?

The orangerie itself made him long for her, but her mind was still on Madame Soniat. She pulled away. "I don't understand why she hates me ... to kill her friend and frame me. Why?"

He held her close while running a firm hand up and down her back. "We'll know soon enough. The police will arrest her, question her."

She sighed, turned her back, and he now wrapped his arms tightly around her waist. She lay her head back against his chest. They remained this way for some time, standing as they had in the alley earlier tonight. Her clothes, the jasmine scent in her hair,

her body against him—all stirred his desire. Then she moved even closer, pushing against his manhood with her bottom.

Oh, God, he wanted her. It had been three days since they'd made love, three very long days filled with fear and anxiety. Her movement invited him to fondle her. He slid his hands inside the front of her trousers, easy because they were much too big. She didn't protest so he began to tease her, his fingers lightly touching her silky hair, but venturing no further. She reached her arm up, circled his neck and kissed his earlobe. Delighted that her need seemed as strong as his, he broke off, took her hand and led her deeper into the room until he found suitable space.



William removed his workman's coat and placed it on the floor. The sweet smell of lemon and lime filling her senses, Renee trembled as he carefully lowered her to the floor. Her untucked man's shirt rode up in his hands, but she didn't stop him. She wanted this, oh, how she wanted him.

When he lay beside her, she recognized the same desire in his eyes she'd seen on Saturday night. Feeling wanton, she unbuttoned her shirt and shoved it off her shoulders. She drew his lips down to her exposed breasts. He kissed and sucked and all thoughts of Madame Soniat's treachery evaporated with the sensation.

Untying her rope belt, William lowered her pants and her drawers to the top of her mound and brought his mouth to the tight stretch of her stomach below her navel. Goose flesh rose on her skin and she drew in a sudden breath. William's kisses darted back up to her neck. She had thought he might put his mouth, his tongue, further down, but he stopped.

He rubbed his fully-aroused manhood against the curve of her hip while one hand squeezed her breast and his mouth moved from her neck to lick and bite at her nipple again. She ached to

feel him inside her as he had been the other night. Would he do that again?

She felt his hand clutch the edge of her waistband and tug her trousers and drawers all the way off. She lay naked next to him. She sent a prayer to heaven that if Aunt Sophie, Estelle, Phillis or Lizzie, by rotten chance, came into the garden at such a late hour, she'd have the discretion to turn back and pretend she'd heard nothing.

He knelt up and removed his suspenders. She tugged his trousers down to expose his erect manhood. She gazed at his instrument, stroked it softly with her fingers, and giggled when it grew more erect.

He groaned. "Oh, God, Renee."

She snatched her hand away. "Does it hurt?"

He replaced her hand on him, then slid down beside her and, guiding her hand up and down his shaft, he buried his nose in the spot just below her ear. He kissed her there, a soft rhythm that drove her mad.

Gently he turned her on her back and moved a hand to her lower belly. It tickled. Her stomach muscles tightened and her breathing quickened. His hand resting on her mound, his fingers slid between her folds. His hand felt hot, but her skin, too, was on fire. She wanted this; she wanted him to touch her. When he found her nub, she sucked in a sudden breath, but he didn't stop. Her breathing became a pant and her legs tightened and loosened rhythmically around his hand. She heard a low whimper escape her lips, and she rocked her hips up and down with the rhythm of his fingers.

Renee clung to rational thought. She stood on the threshold of a glorious new realm ruled by instinct, passion and love. Her body, begging to leave this shore, tossed in a storm of physical sensations. Part of her wanted to let go, let love take her where it might. The other struggled to stay in control of her emotions and

her thoughts. She lay on the floor in her father's orangerie. She'd never imagined she would share such experiences with a man.

He knelt between her legs. "Let me excite you more." Putting one hand on each thigh, he spread her legs farther apart. "Don't be afraid," he whispered as he touched the center of her pleasure and then brought his mouth down to it.

Oh, God. She couldn't. Her hands in his hair, she pushed his head away.

"Trust me, sweetheart. I'll stop if you say to, I promise."

She loved him and he loved her. He said he wanted only her. She had to trust him. She had to let go of her fear. She opened her legs wide, and he began to explore her with his tongue.

He pulled up once, grinned at her and resumed his attentions. When she arched her back to press herself against his mouth, he slipped a finger inside her with a whisper that she'd like this.

A new wave of pleasure wracked her body. She gasped for breath, clutched his shoulders, lifted her hips. With two hands under her raised bottom he romanced her with his tongue. Suddenly, every muscle in her body shook, then went stiff. Her hands flew above her head, her legs stretched beneath him, her toes curled. She called his name.



Thrilled to see her go limp with satisfaction, William entered her. The feel of her pulsing around him delighted him as he slowly moved within her. She quivered and panted beneath him, and he was certain she felt no pain tonight. He thrust deeply into her one last time, then fell to kissing her as he shuddered his own release.

He lay with his cheek against her bare breast until his heart slowed, then turned on his back and reached around to draw her close. Her head fit perfectly in the curve between his shoulder and his chest. Her hand played in his chest hair lulling him into a

singular contemplation: exactly when to ask her to marry him. He felt a draft through one of the glass panes that comprised one tier of this glass house and pulled her closer. Smiling at the thought that, regardless of all their riches, this little house was their private mansion, he stroked her hair.

Her tears leaking onto his shoulder brought him back to his senses. Egads! “You’re crying!”

“Because I’m overwhelmed with happiness.”

He brushed the tears from her cheeks and kissed her.

Chapter Thirty-Four

William was light-headed and feverish—from the sensations Renee left on every inch of his body and from the rage he felt toward Madame Soniat for attempting to incriminate his beloved. He strode purposefully down Dauphine to Canal, where he paced back and forth on the slate banquette a moment, finally entering the St. Charles Hotel to ask the desk clerk for directions to the police station.

He headed straight back toward Jackson Square and burst through the door of the station only to be informed by a surly junior officer named Lapeyre that it was past midnight, which William well knew. Captain McCorkle was long gone for the evening and wouldn’t return until morning.

William demanded to be directed to the man in charge, and Lapeyre answered with a smirk. “I don’t know how long you’ve been in town, *guvner*, but there’s no one in charge.” He looked at his watch. “Pandemonium is in full swing about now. Our job is to clean up the mess in the morning.”

Frustrated and full of energy, William walked in the direction of the factorage, thinking to pass the night there since it was much closer to the police station than the Collins house. As he started to climb the stairs to the office, however, he was struck with the need to see Maureen and Uncle Patrick—to confirm they were safe at home in bed.

Madame Soniat was about to discover her missing papers—if she hadn't already. How far would her rage extend? More troubling still, if McCorkle hadn't arrested Henri Voison by now, the villain had certainly spoken to the foremen and suppliers, and knew the net was closing in on him. Surely Voison was behind the three attacks on him, designed to appear accidental. If Voison were still a free man, he might send someone to threaten Uncle Patrick and Maureen. He might send someone with more skills to kill him. William wished he'd thought to hire a guard for the house.

Streetcar service stopped at midnight and there were no cabs in sight. Exhausted though he was, he set out on Magazine Street toward home. He walked for nearly an hour before he at last glimpsed the cheerful glimmer of the gaslight on the Collins front porch.

He tiptoed through the quiet house. He heard soft snores coming from Uncle Patrick's bedroom on the first floor, then dragged himself up the steps to the hallway. He listened for a moment at Maureen's door, then gently turned the knob and pushed it open. In the darkness, he made out a form under the coverlets and a pile of black hair on the pillow. Reassured, he had a hot bath, changed into a fresh shirt and suit, carefully transferred the evidence of Madame Soniat's forgeries into the inner pocket of his coat. Then he sat in a chair in the front parlor to wait for dawn.

Several hours later, sounds of commotion disturbed his sleep—Luz crying and other exclamations of distress, doors opening and closing, pounding on the front door. He jolted awake, stiff from sleeping in a formal chair. He stepped into the hallway in time to see Guy open the door for Uncle Patrick's wide-eyed secretary, Hennessey. Guy led the secretary toward the library without a word. William followed.

Uncle Patrick sat, florid-faced and cursing, writing some kind of list. When he registered that William was there, he ordered Hennessey to wait outside for instructions.

"Maureen's missing. She's nowhere in the house or grounds."

"Impossible," he stammered. "She was here last night. I checked on her a little after one in the morning. She was in bed, sound asleep." He looked at the clock—seven in the morning—still unwilling to believe it.

Uncle Patrick shook his head sadly. "She wasn't in bed. It was bit of black yarn and carefully arranged pillows. I'm afraid she's eloped with Vespasian."

On such little sleep, William possessed no reserves. He received the news like a blow to the stomach and sank into the chair opposite his uncle. He took a cup of coffee from a tray and swallowed several gulps. Uncle Patrick pushed a sheet of paper across the desk. "As you know, Vespasian, the scoundrel, has been living off the credit *my* factorage has extended against the projected proceeds of his father's harvest. I need you to cut this credit off immediately. Apprehending Henri Voison will have to wait."

William looked down at a list of at least twenty business establishments. "Those are only what come to mind," Uncle Patrick continued. "You'll need to check this list against the Colville files."

William looked up. "Fabre or Neville will have to handle it."

Uncle Patrick glared at him.

"I have to see McCorkle right now." William stood. "Madame Soniat forged the note in Renee's hand to lure Madame Voison to her death."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," Uncle Patrick whispered. "Madame Soniat murdered Marie Voison?"

"I'm certain of it. When I see Captain McCorkle at the station, should I inform him of Maureen's disappearance?"

"No, no. Don't say anything to McCorkle just yet. Maureen can't have gotten far. We'll handle this within the family. Hurry. Take the small carriage. I'm leaving for the factorage. Send a runner with a note of your progress within the hour. Wait!"

William paused at the library door, his hand on the knob. “You won’t find McCorkle at the station,” Uncle Patrick said. “He runs his morning operations from the St. Charles Hotel.”

After sleeping in it half the night, William’s shirt was once again too rumpled to be presentable, so he ran up to his room to change it. On his bedside table were neatly stacked pages of notations in Maureen’s hand that he hadn’t noticed the night before.

One glance confirmed that Henri had stolen from Exposition subscribers, too. For more than half the subscribers Maureen had contacted, Henri had recorded an amount significantly lower than their actual gift. He ran his finger down Maureen’s alphabetized list. Under Desselle, Renee, Henri had entered twenty dollars in the ledger; William knew she’d given fifty. With a silent thanks to Maureen, he put the papers in his pocket and set off with the evidence against both Madame Soniat and Henri Voison.



All morning Renee alternated between thinking she was perfectly safe at the shop with Michelle, and worrying that Madame Soniat might rush in any minute wielding her parasol and accuse her of stealing her letters and her servant.

Before breakfast, Phillis had fixed her hair, all the while repeating tales about her wayward nephew who had gone to Memphis to chase a famous singer. Renee watched her own face in the mirror, barely listening until Phillis’ final words. “Lizzie keep sayin’ that crazy Soniat lady hate you something awful.” She dropped her voice. “You be careful, Miss Renee.”

Every time Renee recalled the exchange with her maid, she paused, took a deep breath and reminded herself that she was safe at the shop. She tried to concentrate on trimming hats. At eleven o’clock when the cathedral bells chimed, she assured herself that

by now Madame Soniat had been charged with the murder of Madame Voison. Why hadn’t William sent a note to tell her?

Madame Rapier’s arrival distracted her from her worries. She always raised Renee’s spirits. Not only did she typically spend a great deal of money, she always put the best spin on any event. Unfortunately, even she couldn’t hide the anxiety fomented by Madame Voison’s gruesome murder.

Her usual enthusiasm was absent as she showed Renee swatches of fabrics for new dresses she’d ordered for the Christmas season. Frau Kohlmeyer was her dressmaker, too, and soon this stylish lady would be decked out in plum bengaline, just as Renee would. It was quite smart of the dressmaker to push this expensive fabric on her best customers. A hat to match was no problem. The day after Renee had ordered her own suit, she’d sent a swatch to her felt supplier and ordered enough plum to make a half-dozen hats. With Madame Rapier leading the plum rage, Renee would have no problem selling all her felt in this color.

As she took the lady through design discussions for three hats, the older woman’s preoccupation became apparent. For such a lovely woman, her eyes were sad, the skin around them pinched. Clutching a handkerchief in her right hand, she seemed indifferent to Renee’s suggestions and finally said, “I trust you, dear. I’m sure you know what’s best.”

With that, Renee put the materials away, poured them both a sherry and led Madame Rapier to a pair of low armchairs near the full length mirror.

“Hats are the farthest thing from my mind right now,” the lady confessed, her eyes liquid. She took a fortifying sip. “I know you’re busy, Renee. I’m sorry to take up your time.”

“I can’t concentrate myself. How can I help you, Madame?”

“I wanted to tell you how delighted dear Marie was with the hat you made for her; it breaks my heart to think of how much joy it brought her. She wore no other hat in the last weeks of her life,

you know. She died in that hat. It's silly, but I woke this morning feeling so empty and distressed, I couldn't make it through a rosary. I just needed to see you."

"I'm glad you came."

"I hope Marie is happier in heaven than she was on earth. Henri brought her nothing but pain."

Renee was certain that was true. She listened sympathetically as Madame Rapier recounted the last time she'd seen her friend—at a soiree after the opera—how she noticed Madame Voison seemed troubled, but had not taken the time to learn what worried her.

Exhaustion distorted the older woman's features. She put down her empty glass with a heavy sigh and Renee placed her hand gently on her forearm. "You mustn't blame yourself," she said softly. "The last several days have been very troubling. Madame, you need rest."

Nodding resignedly, she rose and took both of Renee's hands in her own. "Please be careful, Renee. No one is safe until this scoundrel is apprehended."

She saw the lady to the door and then sat at the counter sketching a new design, hoping to keep her mind off William, Captain McCorkle, the stolen letters and Henri's thievery. It didn't work. By half past noon, William still had not communicated in any way.

She watched Monsieur Lanoux lock his front door and disappear to the back of his shop and was relieved he was staying in today. Michelle and Robert always brought their mid-day meals and Renee felt comforted that the four of them were here together. She didn't lock her front door, lest she miss a messenger, but she joined Michelle at the table in the workroom.

"Are you all right, Miss Renee? The police haven't questioned you any more, have they?"

She shut her eyes for a moment and sighed. "I think by now they have reason to suspect someone else."

"And arrest him, I hope," Michelle said, slapping the table for emphasis. "The whole neighborhood is on edge. You can feel it in the streets. It's taken entirely too much time."

Too much time. William had taken too much time to get to the shop. Something dreadful had happened to him, she was sure of it. Where could he be? What was he doing that he hadn't sent her a note? She ate a few slices of bread and cheese with a cup of hot tea, but she had no stomach for anything else. She noticed Michelle, too, left most of her food untouched.



The one o'clock bells chiming from Immaculate Conception church found William sitting outside the Perdido Jail, positively apoplectic with fear and aggravation. He was furious with himself for having wasted part of the morning in the lobby of the St. Charles Hotel with half a dozen other men who smoked, drank coffee, and waited to file complaints with McCorkle.

The presence of other men at the hotel had at first given William confidence that the police captain would eventually appear. Now he criticized himself for having stood around, politely listening to their complaints—against a woman who'd turned the third floor of her boarding-house into a house of ill-repute; against a young gentleman who'd won a prosperous farm through cheating at cards; against an ice-house employee who'd stolen a cache of coffee, cigars and bananas.

He had driven away at a reckless speed back to the police station, where he'd once again encountered Officer Lapeyre, who, perhaps realizing that William was about to throttle him, directed him to the Perdido Jail.

On his way, William passed the rows of low tenement houses on Girod Street and heard the gabble of tongues—German, Spanish, French—around the streetcar stops. Though only a few blocks from the factorage, he didn't take the time to inquire about Maureen. Instead, he hired a runner to take a note to Uncle Patrick, explaining that he was still seeking out McCorkle and asking that any updates be sent to him at the jail.

The warden told him that McCorkle would be along shortly, and William saw no option but to wait. He considered returning to the Soniat house and apprehending the woman himself but worried that such a move might further implicate Renee, since she was the chief suspect and his relationship with her was well known.

Memories of last night's passionate embrace rose to the forefront of his mind but the cold stone of the bench outside the dungeon where he sat brought him back to the matter at hand. Group after group of sots, sailors, pickpockets, blacklegs, drunkards, card sharks and boys on the road to ruin passed him on their way to cells deep inside the stone edifice.

He looked around for a runner to send a note to Fabre and saw no one he would trust with the task. Meanwhile, the commentary of the old German man seated next to him added to his agitation. According to this man, who introduced himself as Herr Breitlauch, some people were being brought in for rather obscure moral infractions: strolling around in nothing but a collar and spurs, suspicion of being a *maquerelle*—a homosexual—taking an air bath on the public streets, obscene language, cross-dressing, vagrancy.

Before long William realized about a third of the arrestees were women dressed as men, which was considered a crime at any time other than Mardi Gras, Herr Breitlauch said. The charges were "appearing as a disguised nymph," "sailing under false colors," or "assuming the breeches." These women appeared in all sorts of

garb—that of a cabin boy, a barber shop assistant, a grocery store clerk, and a barkeeper in a taproom. Not one looked as alluring as Renee had last night.

The bells chimed half past and still he sat, the evidence of Madame Soniat's treachery, of Henri Voison's thievery, burning a hole through his jacket pocket into his chest. As he thought of Renee's courage, beauty and pluck—last night breaking into the house that held so many torturous memories for her—despair's cold fingers tightened their grip on him. For fear of missing McCorkle, he didn't dare go to the factorage to join the search for Maureen or go to the millinery to check on Renee. Or go to find Henri Voison.

Though he was well aware that he was sitting in a jailhouse, he felt as if he were in a station waiting for a train that held his wife, a train that would never arrive. The people passing by him on their way to jail might as well have been passengers just off the train and he longed to see any recognizable face, but there were none. Over and over, he turned his violent and tumultuous thoughts to Madame Soniat, Vespasian Colville and Henri Voison, in that order. He had never felt so helpless in his life.



At two o'clock, nearly at the end of her wits with worry, Renee was delighted to see Marguerite Loubiere enter the shop. "I promised I'd buy a hat, Renee, and here I am," she sang out.

Madame Loubiere accepted a glass of sherry from Michelle, lit a cigarette and paged through the latest issue of *Godey's*. While Renee began her sketch, it occurred to her with some unease that Madame Voison's friends—Madame Rapier and now Madame Loubiere—were rallying around her. Did they know she was a suspect in their friend's murder? Did they know something she did not?

“My goodness, these hats, Renee. I just don’t know. Here’s a black straw for next spring.” Madame Loubiere read the caption beneath the black and white illustration, “Trimmed with gros-grain, feathers, and a large bird.” She grimaced. “Heavens, there’s a whole stuffed bird balanced on the brim.”

Renee shook her head. “Absurd, isn’t it? Ladies have been wearing feathers in their hats for years. I suppose someone in Paris decided to take the custom to extremes.”

“That’s not for me. I have three canaries, you know. What would the poor things think if they saw me with a bird sewn on my hat?”

“They’d be horrified,” Renee said with a smile. “I find stuffed birds on a hat abhorrent myself. It’s odd that it’s fashionable to keep canaries as pets, yet wear birds on a hat.”

“I’m glad we’re in agreement on no birds.” A second glass of sherry in her hand, her fourth cigarette between her lips, Madame Loubiere seemed ensconced for the afternoon, which Renee found reassuring. She pointed to some illustrations in *Godey’s* and *Harper’s Bazar* to show off new hat styles, which were a little narrower and a little higher in the crown than last year’s. Then Renee led her into a discussion of the popular colors this winter—shades of mushroom, seal and mordore, a golden brown.

The lady interrupted with a frown. “I wouldn’t be caught dead in any of those colors. Too somber, Renee. Really. I like to be noticed when I enter a room.”

“Livelier colors are also *le dernier cri*. Purples, plums, blues, greens and deep reds are huge in Paris this year.”

“I don’t care a wink what’s popular in Paris,” Madame Loubiere declared. “We set our own styles here in New Orleans, or at least *I* do.”

Ultimately she chose a bibi, not too different from the one Renee had sold to Madame Voison. Only hers was to be made up in heliotrope felt with red grosgrain ribbon and jet beads. No

feathers. Renee had none of that bright reddish-purple in stock, but she promised to order it by telegraph. The hat would be ready in two weeks.

Michelle asked if she might step into the back garden for a moment—indeed the whole shop was quite heavy with smoke. As soon as she left, the lady leaned across the counter and grabbed Renee’s arm rather forcefully.

“There is something I forgot to tell you.”

Renee’s mouth went dry. Madame Loubiere lowered her voice further. “It was more than a year ago, another peculiar incident. We ladies were having coffee together, and the talk turned to grandchildren. Therese said she was happy to dispense with grandchildren because Rupert’s will left the property to her and she was more suited to run the Soniat property than even he. Madeline Prange, who has nine grandchildren, said she didn’t believe Therese meant it. She said she was sorry that Therese’s grandson by Rupert’s first wife died in infancy and that you and Rupert had no children.”

Feeling her face grow warm, Renee defended herself. “We might have had Rupert lived longer.”

Madame Loubiere blew out a plume of smoke. “I know, dear. I’m not casting any aspersions on you. I can tell you, though, Therese wasn’t sorry that grandson died or that you had no children. I’ll never forget it, it was so odd. Therese said”—she paused for emphasis—“she had taken care of matters herself.”

Renee’s legs went weak; her temples throbbed. Surely the lady wasn’t implying that Madame Soniat killed her grandson! “You mean?”

Madame Loubiere shrugged just as Michelle interrupted to ask Renee’s opinion on ribbon width for the LeBlanc hat. At that, Madame Loubiere apologized for staying so long, paid half down and took her receipt. Then, just like Madame Rapier, she took both of Renee’s hands in hers and squeezed them, urging her to stay safe.

Too distracted to think about ribbons, Renee went into the workroom and simply agreed with Michelle's choice. That settled, she sat at the front counter and sketched different bead designs for Madame Loubiere's hat. She looked from her sketchbook to the front door and back again a hundred times before a delivery boy arrived with a note from William.

She nearly tore the paper in half in her haste to open it. She read the missive three times, more confused than ever. Cryptic at best, the note said Henri Voison was nowhere to be found, not at home, not at his office, not at any of his favorite gambling or drinking establishments. It didn't mention Madame Soniat or Captain McCorkle. Frankly those two interested her far more than the hunt for Henri Voison.

The note was clear on only one point: William was taking longer than expected. He insisted that she wait at the shop for him. He would meet her there as soon as he could.

Chapter Thirty-Five

"Calm yourself, Mr. Collins," the captain said with a raised eyebrow. "You seem to think I've been frittering away the morning, but I assure you, I've been up to my elbows in the muck of the very crime that has you so concerned."

The two sat in a small office at the jail, William's choice because he refused to take the time to go back to the station. Seething with anger, he spread Renee's original letters next to Madame Soniat's forgery practice on the desk between them.

McCorkle took some moments examining them. At last he folded his hands over his stomach and sat back. "This is all very interesting," he said, "and I appreciate your ... shall I say ... initiative in acquiring these, but you must understand that I can't go about arresting one of our most respected female citizens, especially since, as I say, the case has been solved."

William thought he was dreaming. His throat tightened with panic; cold sweat popped out on his brow.

McCorkle went on. "Henri Voison has disappeared. A man matching his description embarked on a steamer for Liverpool in the thick of the fog last night under the rather transparent name Louis Guilbreaux, the name of his maternal grandfather."

William stared at McCorkle in disbelief. "Good God, man! How can this be? We sent you a note Saturday afternoon with all the evidence! Why didn't you have him arrested at once?"

“Now, now, it’s not an easy business managing the nefarious characters in this city. If I were you, I wouldn’t concern myself with Madame Soniat’s little notes. Don’t you see the murder has been solved? You, sir, should hurry to your uncle, who’s bound to be distraught. If your evidence is accurate, Monsieur Voison absconded with no small amount of Exposition funds.”

William’s mind was agog with the many threads of disaster descending all at once, entangling all he loved. He could feel it—no matter what McCorkle said—the case wasn’t solved. With some effort he separated out Henri Voison’s embezzlement and Maureen’s disappearance and refocused on the papers before them. “Do you mean to disregard this evidence?”

“I wouldn’t use the term *disregard*, sir. But let’s review the facts.” Clearly satisfied with the morning’s work, McCorkle spoke as if he had all the time in the world. “Now I’m not one to pay mind to idle gossip, but it’s fair to say that there was no love lost between Monsieur and Madame Voison. Let’s speculate that Monsieur Voison could not tolerate his wife a moment longer, so he killed her and fled. I admit that it’s gruesome. Murder generally is.”

“But you said Voison had an alibi for that night.”

“So he hired someone to kill her.”

William sat forward on his chair. “These letters suggest Madame Soniat was the person who wrote the note luring Madame Voison to her death.”

A soft knock on the door brought a boy with a note for William. His heart leaped at the thought it might be from Renee, but he recognized Uncle Patrick’s script. He excused himself and read quickly. Maureen, too agitated to speak, had returned home in a cab and gone straight to bed. The next line told of Voison’s escape with more than one and a half million dollars in cash.

William sighed in relief at the news that Maureen was safe, but it was quickly replaced with exasperation at her foolish impetuosity

and fresh frustration at McCorkle’s obstinacy. “Madame Soniat must be apprehended at once,” William insisted. “There isn’t time for more talk.”

“Why on earth would Madame Soniat want her dear friend killed?”

The question pulled William up short. “I can’t answer that, sir. But the letters speak for themselves.”

“Of the two, I would suggest that Monsieur Voison’s disappearance is the more damning evidence.”

“But,” William reasoned, waving the note he had just received in the captain’s face, “Patrick Collins added up all the discrepancies in the account books. He said Voison took more than *a million dollars* of Exposition money with him on the steamer. Wouldn’t that be reason enough for him to disappear?”

McCorkle steepled his hands. “Perhaps.” He paused for some time. “Could it be that Madame Soniat is, at this very moment, on the steamer with Henri Voison? Are you aware of any previous association between those two? Has anyone checked her whereabouts?”

“For God’s sake!” William exclaimed. “That’s exactly what I’m asking you to do!”



Madame Soniat had taken care of matters herself. A growing horror gnawed at Renee as she mulled over Madame Loubiere’s revelation. Madame Soniat killed Rupert’s baby? She sat immobile at the front counter, her mind flooded with memories.

She thought back to the night before their marriage when Rupert had told her of his loss. He and Adele married in 1863. His duties as a cavalry officer offered limited furloughs, but he returned for visits at every opportunity and was thrilled when she was with child. During the last days of the war, while he was still

in northern Virginia, Adele delivered a son at the Soniat plantation upriver. Madame Soniat and Lizzie were the only people in the house with her. The baby boy died within a few hours; the next day Adele passed away. Rupert received the heartbreaking news in a letter.

Renee now saw her wedding night in a new light. When Rupert couldn't make love to her she blamed herself. But was it perhaps his fear of getting another woman with child and causing her death that sapped his desire?

Michelle put her arm on Renee's shoulder. "*Vous etes blanc comme un drap.* Are you feeling all right, Miss Renee?"

"Just very tired."

"No one's coming in at this hour. It's dark and getting colder. I'll lock up."

"You go on home, Michelle. I'm going to finish up a few things." She forced herself to give her assistant an appreciative smile. "Thank you for all your excellent work. Between Madame Rapier and Madame Loubiere, we had a very good day."

Michelle made a face. "Madame Loubiere in a heliotrope hat! *Mon Dieu!*" With a little laugh, she went out the front door.

Renee couldn't decide whether it was better to obey William's order and wait at the shop or head directly home. She locked the front door behind Michelle, then sat down at the counter. Sometime later, when Monsieur Lanoux poked his head in to say goodnight, she pretended to study the account book and barely acknowledged him. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask him to walk her home, but she didn't.

Alone now, Renee poured herself a glass of sherry, and opened the newest issue of *Harper's Bazar*, hoping to distract herself with its up-to-the-minute style reports. "Stripes are popular for parts of dresses in combination with two or three other fabrics. Using several fabrics in the same dress will continue in the spring season." She read down the page to a mention of a new fabric called

Polarian, which boasted silk threads woven in small loops, imitating, the text said, "the smooth skin of astrakhan lamb."

At a noise behind her, she swiveled on her stool. Madame Soniat stood just inside the back door of the workroom. Terror gripped her. She felt her mouth drop open. In yard after yard of black satin, strand after strand of jet beads covering her chest, and an enormous black crepe hat that seemed to absorb all the light in the room, Madame Soniat moved slowly forward. In her right hand the woman held a hatchet—Robert's—from the woodpile out back. As Renee stared, she raised the weapon high. Frozen in place, Renee couldn't move, couldn't think. A giant claw held her in place.

"You stole my letters and I want them back." Madame Soniat shrieked. Her stance, legs splayed, hatchet raised, made Renee's blood run cold.

Something told her to move slowly, to try to reason with the lady. She slid off the stool and faced her. "I don't have your letters."

Madame Soniat moved toward her in small, careful steps. "Don't lie to me, you ninny," she hissed.

The lady was going to kill her.

Renee reached for the stool. Her heart raced, her skin tingled, but she grabbed it by the legs and held it in front of her, the thick wooden seat offering a makeshift shield. She gaped at her former mother-in-law, not believing what her eyes were plainly telling her. She weighed her advantages if an attack came, just as Cousin Sean had taught her. She was taller and at least forty years younger, but her opponent was armed—with a hatchet, for God's sake—and her brown eyes shone with unearthly hatred.

For a moment they eyed one another, circling each other, so that Renee ended up with her back against the workroom door, while Madame Soniat stood in the curtained doorway between the front and back rooms. Could she open the back door and run? But where? Into the garden? The garden had no place to

hide and the complicated latch on the closed gate would slow her down.

Expecting a charge, Renee gripped the stool's legs harder in her sweaty palms. Her breath came in quick gasps. Every nerve tense, she waited.

With a galloping step, the lady rushed at her. Renee swung the stool at the hatchet, but missed. The blow hit the lady's shoulder and knocked her off balance. Renee leaped toward her, hoping to wrench the hatchet from her hands. But just as fast, Madame Soniat righted herself and swung the blade in a wide arc.

Holding the stool with one hand, Renee backed away in jerky steps until she hit the workbench. With her other hand, she felt behind her for a weapon. The wooden yardstick, a basket of straight pins, a swatch of velvet, all worthless. She stretched her hand farther and her fingers touched a pair of large shears. Sliding the shears from the bench, she held them in her right hand at her side, hidden by her skirt.

Advancing in mincing little steps, the lady raised the hatchet above her head.

"Madame Soniat, please—" Renee begged.

Her plea seemed to amuse the lady, who stopped dead still, breathing heavily. "I earned every acre of the Soniat land living with Rupert's father for twenty years. No one is ever going to take that land away from me," she screeched.

"You *have* the Soniat land!"

A vicious smirk crossed the lady's face. "All Rupert's father wanted was heirs—babies and more babies."

The woman's cold eyes never wavered from her face, so unnoticed, Renee shifted her body weight from her left foot to her right and back again, ready to spring in either direction when the time came.

William, wherever you are, please come! Please, please help!

Her only hope was to keep her talking. She shouted the first words that came to her mind. "You killed Rupert's baby, didn't you?"

Her opponent's eyes flashed. "The baby was tiny. Wouldn't have lived a week anyway. The mother—his Adele, he called her—struggled."

Madame Soniat killed Adele, too! As much as she loathed the woman, it was a shock to realize just how truly evil she was. To kill an infant? And Rupert's wife? Now that she knew the truth, it made a kind of sick sense—the woman's bitterness and hate, the poison she'd spread through Renee's life.

"I hope you won't struggle the way Adele did."

Oh, she'd struggle all right. She wouldn't die without a good fight. But she wanted one answer before they fought to the death. "Why Madame Voison?"

"Madame Voison?" Madame Soniat cocked an ear as if remembering the significance of the name. "Marie?"

"Why did you kill Marie?"

Her face contorted into a smile that crinkled the skin in the corners of her eyes—a grotesque response to the question. She'd gone stark-raving mad. Her eyes beaded into little black dots in her face.

"I always liked Marie but she was a fool. She knew Henri changed Rupert's will for me. She even signed the new one as a witness not an hour before you arrived at his deathbed. Henri would do anything for money. And he'd do anything for me. He loved me, you know. He always loved me best.

"But he couldn't keep *la flute* in his pants," she snickered. "In the end, Marie was growing tired of the humiliation and growing fond of you. I knew Marie was going to tell you. I had to stop her."

Rupert hadn't betrayed her. Hadn't given his land and the Desselle land to his mother. All these years, she had fought against the resentment that occasionally overcame her when she thought

of her family's land. Of her father's support of her marriage to Rupert. Renee's eyes filled with tears, regretting how much she had misunderstood.

Madame Soniat leaped. Renee lunged to the side. The hatchet came down to the right of her shoulder. Its blade dug into the workbench. Seizing the advantage, Renee thrust downward with the shears, stabbing the lady's thigh just below her hip, below the whalebone corset that protected her waist and chest.

Madame Soniat howled, fell to her knees and yanked the shears from her leg. Standing above her, Renee raised her foot to deliver a blow to her head. She hesitated, moved by the sight of the quivering figure beneath her.

In the next second, pain shot through her right arm as Madame Soniat sank her teeth into the flesh just above her wrist. Screaming, she kicked blindly at the woman. At last, her boot struck home. Madame Soniat fell backwards, but she brought Renee with her, pulling her by the arm she still held in her teeth.

Renee had never felt such pain. The mad woman chewed like a wild animal.

Sobbing and shrieking, Renee thought only of William. He loved her. She wanted to live for him. With every ounce of strength she could muster, she balled her left hand into a fist and pummeled Madame Soniat's cheek and nose. Blood spurted from her nostrils. Her mouth fell open, releasing Renee's arm.

Her arm useless, Renee couldn't climb to her feet. Sliding backwards along the floor on her bottom, pushing with her left arm, she backed away. Relentless, Madame Soniat crawled toward her on her hands and knees. Renee moved a little faster. The front door. She had to make it to the door.

With an inhuman squeal the lady dived at her again, slamming her head into Renee's stomach. One hand jerked upward and yanked a tuft of Renee's hair above her ear. The woman scratched at her face with her nails.

God help her, how could she stop this? She had to grab her hand. She caught one of Madame Soniat's fingers on its next pass toward her face. She bent it straight back until she heard a crack. The old lady wailed and cradled her damaged hand in her good one. Renee didn't hesitate. She punched her hard in the stomach, knocking her back to the floor.

Weak, nauseated, aware of blood dripping from her arm, Renee crawled on her stomach toward the front of the store, over the threshold that marked the division between the workroom and the front room. With all her strength, she knelt, then pulled herself up with her strong arm to standing. She leaned against the counter and used her good left hand to pick up the second stool.

Wood splintered. Her head snapped back to see a man's boot smash the glass, a hand reach in to unlock the door.



William took in the scene: Renee's bloodied face, her torn sleeve, one shattered stool on the floor, another in her hand.

"My God, my God," he shouted.

Her body swayed. He jumped over the counter, catching her in his arms as she collapsed. As he held her up, his eyes went to a scuffling noise in the workroom. Madame Soniat stood unsteadily, hatchet raised above her head, framed in the curtained doorway.

With a scream, she charged.

Renee in his arms, William sidestepped out of her path. Madame Soniat, her wild eyes unfocused, ran to her right. She rounded the counter, hatchet held high. He shouted to her to stop and whirled around in time to see the lady plunge through the open door. She ran across the banquette into Royal Street.

A four-horse carriage swerved, not quickly enough. The lead pair hit her and knocked her down, the second two trampled her. Shouts and whinnying horses filled the air.

Renee struggled in his arms to turn toward the noise.

“Don’t.” He covered her eyes with his hand. “Don’t look.” He pulled her closer, buried her face in his chest and held her. Her body shook, her right arm hung lifeless at her side. With every tremble that racked her, a cold shower of fear washed over his heart.

He pulled back, assessing her face scratches, missing hair and blood-stained scalp. “Let me see your arm.” He touched her sleeve; she let out a piercing scream. In horror, he stared at the mauled, bloody flesh of her arm.

Chapter Thirty-Six

William was initially relieved at Renee’s prognosis. Her family physician cleaned the wound and bandaged it. William stayed by her bedside for two days and two nights. Although she was never lucid, drifting in and out of laudanum-induced unconsciousness, she didn’t develop a fever, a good sign.

By Friday morning, he felt confident enough to leave her for a few hours to sleep, bathe and change his clothes. When he returned that afternoon, however, Aunt Sophie greeted him with the news that Renee had taken a turn for the worse. She burned with fever.

Dr. Hans Jaeger and his nurse, called in on the case, helped Phillis tend Renee upstairs while William, Aunt Sophie, her son, Sean, Uncle Patrick and Maureen kept vigil in the back parlor. Aunt Sophie grasped beads in her hand and led them in a rosary—the Joyful Mysteries. The gentlemen responded by rote to her clear, firm voice, saying the Our Father and the ten Hail Marys of each decade, then the Glory Be to the Father. Five Our Fathers, five times ten Hail Marys, five Glory Be’s. Maureen, weeping softly, knelt beside Estelle, who kept one hand on the young lady’s back patting her gently; in the other, rosary beads. Lizzie, also weeping, knelt next to Estelle.

William had never prayed harder for anything in his life. As a boy, he had prayed for silly things, a pony, which he received for his

birthday, his own gold watch, which he received one Christmas. And yes, not so very long ago, what seemed like a lifetime ago, he had asked God to lead Effie to him. He thanked God now for not answering that prayer. If he had eloped with Effie, he never would have known and loved Renee.

Renee, his darling Renee, lay on a bed above them, the doctor cleaning her wound, hoping to stop the spread of infection. He pleaded to have her life spared and if possible, her arm. Men who were shot on the battlefield or injured in industrial accidents often lost their arms or legs after the fact because of infection. He pushed the thought of amputation from his mind. He wanted Renee whole, but he loved her and would love her no matter what.

Yes, he had once asked God for frivolous things. He begged forgiveness for those selfish requests, promised that if Renee's life and arm were spared, he would never ask for another blessing for the remainder of his days.

Aunt Sophie put her beads back in their case and closed her eyes for a moment. "Dr. Jaeger is the best doctor in New Orleans." She sounded hopeful as she shared his credentials with William. "He's a renowned surgeon. He has studied all over the world, even with Dr. Joseph Lister in England, who is doctor to Queen Victoria herself. With God's help, Dr. Jaeger will save Renee."

She turned to Estelle and Lizzie and asked for sherry and brandy as well as biscuits, ham and cheese. Estelle was back in minutes with two decanters and a tray of glasses.

"It's my fault." William repeated. "Captain McCorkle took his time the whole damn day—excuse me, Madame Sophie—and I stayed with him instead of going straight to the shop to protect her."

"No one could ever have dreamed that Therese Soniat"—Aunt Sophie had difficulty even mentioning the outrageous attack—"would come after her."

"I should have." William took a large swallow of his brandy. "Renee and I questioned her about the murder; she knew we suspected her. And I'm sure she figured out we stole the papers from her desk. Who else in New Orleans would have dared do that?"

Renee's cousin Sean interrupted. "Don't torment yourself, William. Renee is going to be all right. She's a fighter."

Aunt Sophie turned her eyes to the ceiling, a supplication to both medical science and to heaven, it seemed.

Uncle Patrick, sitting beside her on the sofa, put his arm around her shoulder. "I believe it, too, Sophie. I believe it." He fixed his eyes on his nephew. "When you get to be our age, William, you have lived through so many deaths of loved ones and friends, you develop an instinct for it."

William clenched his jaw, his hand shook as he lifted his glass and he struggled to keep up with the conversation. "It's thanks to you, Sean, that she's alive at this moment. She told me several times you taught her to fight. She defended herself well."

"She's strong, William," Sean answered. "She'll get well."

Placing his drink on the mantel, he laced his hands behind his back and renewed his pacing. "I know this bothers you, Madame Sophie, but I can't sit. May I call you Aunt Sophie? I believe Madame Sophie is too formal, under the circumstances." He paused for a moment in front of the fire. "I intend to ask Renee to marry me the minute she feels better."

"Oh, William!" Maureen exclaimed, the first words she had spoken for hours. She jumped from her chair, hugged him and kissed his cheek.

Aunt Sophie, tears in her eyes, called to him. "Come here, William. Take my hands. You are a fine young gentleman. I'm delighted to welcome you into the family." Her eyes twinkled and she offered her cheek, which he kissed.

Sean stood, slapped him on the back and congratulated him. "I second my mother's welcome. You are a wonderful addition to the family."

Uncle Patrick offered his good wishes with a chuckle. "I knew you were smitten the first night you asked me about her."

"And I know Renee loves you very much," Aunt Sophie said softly.

"Do you? Did she tell you that?"

"She didn't need to *tell* me. I knew it," Aunt Sophie said, "the moment she mentioned a young Irishman who'd burst into her shop. She said you had 'the perfect head for a hat.'"

They all laughed a little at that, breaking the tension. Uncle Patrick filled the next gap in conversation with further information about the ramifications of Henri Voison's departure. "I'm chair of the committee now and I've asked William to handle the books, but there will be plenty of work to do to build the public's confidence in this entire enterprise."

Lizzie entered, put down a tray with sliced ham and roast beef, cheeses, bread, butter and five small plates and napkins.

"Thank you, Lizzie," Aunt Sophie said. "We must all try to eat something. Maureen, Patrick, William, Sean, please. We do Renee no good if we fall ill ourselves from nerves or hunger."

William shook his head. "I don't believe I can. In fact, I believe I'll step outside for air."

He was out the door, down the hall and out the back kitchen door, pausing to pat Estelle, who stood over the sink dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief.

Once outside, he filled his lungs with cold air, taking one deep breath after another, walking blindly down the path, around the fountain and back again. On the fifth circuit Maureen joined him, matching his stride step by step. Taking her hand, he squeezed it.

"I'm praying to our Lady of Prompt Succor," she said in a small voice. "The Ursuline nuns pray to our Lady using that title when

all hope seems lost. Praying to Our Lady saved New Orleans when the British attacked. I sent word to the convent to pray for Renee."

"Thank you."

"The prayer is: Our Lady of Prompt Succor, hasten to help her."

He repeated the phrase out loud once and then in his head ten times before Maureen spoke again. "I'm sorry I caused additional worry with my recklessness the other night."

"Don't speak of it, Maureen. I'm just glad you're home."

"I spent the night at Vespasian's house, I admit, but in the library."

William's mind was on Renee, not Maureen and that fool Vespasian. "I'm not in the mood to navigate half-truths, Maureen."

"Nothing happened, Cousin."

"Please, Maureen, I'm glad you're home, but if you think you're ever leaving the house again, you've got another thought coming."

She sighed. "I suppose I deserve that."

Still holding her hand, he led her back inside to the parlor where Aunt Sophie selected the smallest biscuit, filled it with a thin layer of butter and two slices of ham and handed him the plate. "William, please try. If you eat this, I'll allow you to have the first watch when the doctor leaves."

That was all he needed. Taking small bites and sipping tea in between, he managed to eat the entire biscuit. The very moment he returned his plate to the tray, he heard Doctor Jaeger's footsteps on the stairs and his stomach lurched. Good news or bad, he wanted to be the first to hear it.

Aunt Sophie clutched Uncle Patrick's arm as William rushed past her to the front hall to greet the doctor. Terrified of what he might see and hear, he forced himself to raise his eyes to the man's face. Obviously weary, the doctor wore a smile and his head bobbed up and down in answer to William's unasked question.

“Thank God,” William shouted. “Thank God.” Taking the doctor’s arm, he ushered him into the back parlor. “Please, come in and talk with us.”

Accepting a glass of brandy, Dr. Jaeger sat opposite Aunt Sophie. “Renee is resting comfortably. She reacted well to the chloroform and slept peacefully while I cleaned the infection.”

“Thank heavens,” she murmured.

“Dr. Jaeger, I understand from Mrs. O’Brien that you’ve studied with the great Dr. Lister,” Uncle Patrick said. “You’ve used his methods to thwart further infection?”

“I have, Mr. Collins. I utilized a weak solution of carbolic acid, which I’m confident sterilized it. I didn’t stitch it because it needs to heal from the inside out. The latest research shows that a bandage of calico cloth spread with a solution of carbolic acid, coated with gutta-percha dissolved in benzene is most effective in these types of injuries.”

The doctor went on, though William was barely listening. “It’s really quite ingenious, a Dr. Lister innovation. The calico is soft against the wound while the gutta-percha—it’s hard, you know, made from resins from Malaysian trees—protects the wound from bumps and bangs.”

“I’ve heard of gutta-percha,” Aunt Sophie said. “Don’t they make jewelry and buttons of it?”

“You’re quite right, Mrs. O’Brien.” Dr. Jaeger drained his brandy glass and his voice took on a more somber tone. “The next few days will be critical. If she successfully fights the fever, Renee might be up and about in two weeks. But I don’t believe she’ll be strong enough to leave the house for a month or more.”

“May I see her now?” Aunt Sophie asked.

“Yes, but she’s still groggy from the chloroform, so don’t be alarmed if she makes very little sense. And have your cook prepare some beef tea right away. I expect Renee will be ready for some within the hour. I will look in on her several times a day and I’d

like a nurse with her around the clock to monitor her fever, her heart rate and her pain. I’ll send a nurse at ten tonight to relieve Mrs. McCafferty.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Aunt Sophie mumbled as she hurried out. While she was gone, William filled the doctor’s glass. “And her arm, doctor?” Dear God, she had to keep her arm. “It’s her right arm and she’s an artist.”

The doctor shrugged. “I can’t say for sure. We will take it hour by hour, day by day. If there’s no spreading of the infection, I expect she’ll regain full use of it. If however—”

Maureen sobbed loudly and dashed from the room, just as Aunt Sophie returned. Uncle Patrick cut the doctor off. “Enough. We’ll pray for the best.”

Aunt Sophie reported that Renee was awake and talking. “Go to her, William.”

Taking the stairs two at a time, he raced down the hall, past the ladies’ sitting room to the second door. He knocked softly and the nurse motioned him to the chair beside the bed. “I’ll be outside if you need me, sir,” she whispered.

He tiptoed toward Renee, ignored the chair, and sat on the edge of the tall four-poster bed. Her chestnut hair was loose on the pillow, the deep red scratches on both cheeks, her chin, even her forehead, still apparent. A circle of hair above her left ear was missing and would take weeks to grow back.

“Renee, Renee.” He leaned forward until his face nearly touched hers. He could feel the heat coming off her in waves.

She opened one eye, then both. She recognized him for the first time since Wednesday. “William?”

“I’m here, Renee.” Taking her left hand in his, he squeezed it gently.

“She ... bit me.”

He brought her hand to his lips. “I know. Don’t speak. Doctor Jaeger says you’re going to be fine in a short time.”

“My arm.” She started to raise her bandaged arm, then let it drop to the sheet again. “Hurts.”

“Your arm will be better soon.”

She bit her lip and tears filled her eyes. “Madame Soniat?”

“There was nothing anyone could do for her.”

Renee shut her eyes. “Poor ... lady.”

Her voice was so weak, he could barely hear her. “Renee, I have something to say, something to ask actually. Your bed is so high, I cannot kneel.”

Opening her eyes again, she raised an eyebrow. “Kneel?”

“Will you be my wife, Renee? I love you with all my heart and soul.”

Her pale face brightened, her mouth curled into a weak smile. “Yes, William. I love you. I thought you ... would never ask.”

He grinned, then kissed her pale, dry lips. She put her good arm around his neck and drew him closer, so his chest was against hers. Her body felt like a furnace.

“It feels so good to hold you. But I must keep my mind on your recovery. Beef tea. Dr. Jaeger wants you to drink lots of beef tea.”

She made a face.

“I’m sure Estelle will make it palatable. Here she is now.”

“Oh, Miss Renee. It’s so glad to see you lookin’ good. Ain’t she fine, Mr. William?”

“I’m ... a ... sight.”

“A lovely sight,” William said softly.

“I can’t ... eat.”

“Doctor’s orders, Renee,” he coaxed. “Aunt Sophie granted me five minutes, but I’ll be back in a little while. Promise to drink the tea?”

She mumbled agreement.

Estelle approached the bed, a large tray in hand. “Miss Renee does what I says; don’t you worry, Mr. William.”

When he came downstairs, a half dozen carriages lined Burgundy Street, as news of Renee’s dangerous condition spread through the city. Well-wishers filled the front parlor. Sean’s wife Mary and their baby; Michelle D’Artois; John and Genevieve Rapier; Madame Loubiere; Fabre, Neville, and Hennessey from the factorage; and Vespasian Colville all stopped by with food, liquor or both.

One glance told William that Vespasian, fool that he was, was doing the right thing for once in his life. He sat beside Maureen holding her hand. The sad look on her face remained the same, but she seemed less agitated.

At ten o’clock, Aunt Sophie sent everyone home, but as promised, allowed William to join the night nurse upstairs. A Sister of Charity, Sister Agnes seemed a holy presence in the corner in a rocking chair, knitting Christmas sweaters for orphans while he sat in the bedside wing chair, keeping watch hour after hour.

Renee shifted restlessly, rolling on her left side, then to her back, again and again. He longed to climb in bed with her to hold her and calm her. At one point, she moved onto her right arm, cried out in pain, turned to her left and fixed him with a stare. “William?”

“I’m here.”

“I’m sick.”

Before he could move, Sister Agnes was there, supporting Renee from behind while she vomited into a porcelain bowl. He felt utterly useless. He’d never nursed anyone before, especially the woman he loved. Renee groaned again in pain and Sister Agnes gently lowered her head to the pillow. “She’s so hot,” she muttered. “I’ll get water to dampen her face.”

Sister Agnes left the room and he reached for Renee’s hand. She wasn’t hot; she was on fire. He held her hand until Sister Agnes returned and then he quietly retreated to the corner rocker.

“This would be a good time to take a break, sir. Go downstairs and rest.”

“No, I can’t, Sister. We’re engaged to be married. I want to stay.”

From across the room, he watched Sister Agnes put a cloth in a basin of water, ring it out and touch it gently to Renee’s face, her neck, her upper chest. This continued for an hour or more until William summoned the courage to ask if he could help her. Sister Agnes agreed and the two switched places. His hands shook as he touched the cloth to Renee’s face, dabbing at her forehead. She woke several times, called his name and seemed to recognize him when he leaned over her and spoke soothingly.

William and Sister Agnes shared the duty all night and just before dawn, she called him back to Renee’s beside. His legs trembled as he crossed the carpet. Was she dying? Dear God, save her.

Sister Agnes took his hand. He felt a gentle squeeze. “Her fever’s broken.”

He dared to shift his eyes to the bed. Renee looked better. No longer restless, she was sleeping comfortably, her breathing regular and soft. Her skin seemed to have gained a little color. Or perhaps he was imagining that? He wasn’t sure about anything except the fear in the pit of his stomach that she might die. He could not live without her.

He sat in the chair beside her bed, took her good hand in his, put his head on the mattress beside her and fell asleep. Aunt Sophie woke him with a gentle hand on his shoulder.

He took a cab across the city. In a daze, he barely recognized familiar streets and buildings. The sun shone, the air was crisp and smelled of wood fires; men and women marched up and down the banquettes. All the activity baffled him somewhat. Renee had been at death’s door. He’d imagined the whole city shut down, all the residents packed into churches to pray for her. He wanted to shout the good news. Her fever had broken!

Uncle Patrick and Maureen were at the breakfast table, pushing eggs around their plates. When he entered, they looked up at him, abject fear plain on their faces. He had never seen Maureen so subdued. She was on the verge of tears, and Uncle Patrick looked petrified. Clearly, neither had slept much for days.

“Her fever has broken.”

“I knew it, thank God,” Maureen exclaimed. She jumped up and hugged him. “Our Lady answered our prayers.”

“I believe she did. And in a hurry, just as you said.”

Uncle Patrick stood and embraced him heartily, then collapsed back in his chair, overwhelmed with relief.

“Cousin,” her tone was lighter now. “I’m guessing Renee accepted your proposal? You never said.”

He winked at her. “I’m happy to say she did. Perhaps in a few days you will accompany me on a shopping expedition to buy a ring.”

Uncle Patrick beamed. Maureen clapped her hands delightedly. “I would love nothing more.”

Epilogue

December 1885

“William, wake up. The babes are crying again.” Her voice and Renee’s hand on his shoulder shaking him disturbed his dream. Reaching out to the bedside table, he fumbled for his watch. “Like clockwork,” he murmured. “It’s three a.m.” Rolling over, he faced Renee and ran his hand across her bare breasts. “And you’re full of milk and ready for them.”

“Find my robe, please. I think you tossed it to the floor on your side. I need to look respectable.” Smoothing her hair back from her face, she tucked it behind her ears. “Lizzie’s coming.” She urged him to respond with a nudge to his leg.

Hearing the raucous cries of their twins, Marguerite and Louis, named after Renee’s parents, draw closer to their room, William bounded naked from the bed, grabbed Renee’s wrap and threw it to her, then slipped his own nightshirt over his head. When Lizzie’s knock came at the door, the two were sitting up against the headboard, the bedspread up to their waists, covering their bare lower halves.

“They hungry again, Miss Renee.”

“I don’t mind a bit.” She smiled. “I’ll take them, Lizzie.” The nurse handed the babes to Renee, who kissed each on the forehead, then put their mouths to her breasts. “There, there. Ma-ma’s

here,” she cooed. “Thank you, Lizzie. I’ll bring them to the nursery when they’re finished.”

“Yes ma’am.” Lizzie departed.

William snuggled close to her, putting his arm around her shoulders. It had been six weeks since the twins were born and they continued to amaze him with every move they made. Like every father he’d ever heard brag, he thought his were the best looking babes ever born. Both his son and daughter had dark curly hair—what little they had—and sparkling blue eyes that seemed to take in every object in the world around them. A sure sign of intelligence, brilliance even.

He watched his babes knead Renee’s breasts, their little hands pushing against her creamy white skin, as their mouths closed around her nipples. He loved this private time with his family, away from Lizzie and the nursery—even though it was the middle of the night.



Watching her babes nurse, Renee felt boundless love for these little creatures and for the man who fathered them. She enjoyed the suckling of the tiny mouths. The release of her milk relaxed her, calming every extremity, enabling her to sit still while the babes filled their tummies.

“See how your daughter takes dainty sips. She even pauses now and then.” Renee leaned her head toward the babe at her right breast. They both laughed as Marguerite pulled away for a moment, licked her bottom lip and then found the nipple again. “Louis is so greedy. Look at him. He locks on and gobbles.”

“Takes after his father. I can’t get enough of you either.” William rubbed his face against hers.

“Umm. Last night was wonderful,” she murmured, turning enough to kiss his cheek. She thought back to their hours making

love. She certainly preferred a bed to the parlor carpet or the slate floor of the orangerie.

William gently pushed a few errant chestnut hairs away from her breasts. "And there are many more like it ahead."

"I'm a willing pupil."

"As am I."

She pressed the babes tighter in her arms. "Would you ever have believed twins?"

His response convinced her he could read her mind, a trait he'd seemed to possess from their first meeting in the hat shop. "No one in New Orleans doubts your fertility now. From no babes to two overnight."

"Not exactly overnight," she teased. "It was a long nine months."

"For both of us," he whispered, a playful lilt in his voice.

She watched Louis, now sated, pull away and close his eyes.

"If you remember," William continued, "I had to haul samples of wallpaper and curtain material from the draper's for months. To be honest, I never thought you'd make a decision on the nursery's colors."

"Life's so tough for you!" She grinned seductively, hoping Louis was really asleep. "I'm glad I chose green. It's a restful color."

"These two don't seem to have gotten the message. I believe they're awake more hours than they're asleep."

She laughed softly. "Lizzie has lots of experience. She thinks they'll sleep through the night before much longer. They'll love the nursery, you'll see."

They would because she did. She loved everything about their house, right next door to the Desselle home. A month before their marriage last January, William had snapped it up and redecorated it for his bride. She turned her head to catch his eye. "You've given me and your children a beautiful home."

"I wouldn't have dreamed of giving you anything less." He planted a kiss in her hair.

"It's so convenient for Aunt Sophie," she went on. "She was here yesterday regaling me with news of President Cleveland and when the twins became rambunctious, she slipped away to read her papers—far from the wailing sounds."

He poked at Renee's neck with his nose. "I happen to believe she may be joining Uncle Patrick on St. Charles Avenue before too much longer."

"I hope so. It's about time."

"I saw him peering at rings at a jeweler's on Royal Street yesterday."

"Hmmm. Everyone in the family—actually half the city—will want new hats for the wedding."

He laughed loudly and Marguerite's eyes shot open.

"Shush." Renee nodded toward their daughter, who was fighting sleep, her eyelids closing, then opening. "I know Marguerite will like hats. Maybe she'll like designing them."

"And do you think Louis will become a cotton factor like his father and great uncle?"

"I think he's on his way. Look how his little hand is grabbing my robe. He's thinking 'fair to middling cotton' right this minute."

"Look at me."

When she turned her head, William kissed her lightly on the lips. "Their father's thinking it's time to take the babes to their cradles in the nursery," he said softly, "so he can enjoy their mother."

"Now?"

He shrugged. "We're awake. Why not?"

Historical Note

The World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition celebrated the 100th year of the first cotton export from the United States. Its many attractions included a main building of thirty-three acres, the largest roofed structure in the world at the time; five thousand electric lights; and an observation tower with electric elevators.

The U.S. Congress lent the Exposition Committee \$1 million and donated an additional \$300,000 for a U.S. Government and State Exhibits Hall. Heavy rains and corruption delayed construction. The Exposition opened on December 16, 1884—two weeks late—in Upper City Park, an isolated, city-owned tract of land where a third of the 249-acre site consisted of nothing more than plowed-up mud.

More than one million visitors attended the Exposition, less than a fourth of the projected number, in its six-month run. It closed on June 2, 1885. The Exposition was a financial failure, largely due to the Louisiana State Treasurer's theft of \$1,777,000. He left for Europe with this fortune.

Despite its problems, the Exposition sparked a building boom in this part of the city. Audubon Park, Tulane and Loyola universities now encompass the original site.

Author's Note on Language

New Orleans from its earliest days blended cultures: French, Native Americans, Spanish, Africans, and French Canadians. After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Americans of largely English descent arrived. Many Free People of Color populated the city before the Civil War. After the war, many former slaves resided there. By the 1880s, immigrants from every country in Western Europe, Eastern Europe as well as South America and the West Indies settled in the city. In such a cosmopolitan seaport, a businessman might converse in French, Spanish, German and Italian in the course of an afternoon.

In this book, we have given our characters the wildly different speech patterns of New Orleans citizens, whether they are African-American, Irish, French or Cajun—both working and upper class—while still making them understandable to contemporary readers.

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Author Bio

Ursula LeCoeur is the *nom de plume* of mother-daughter writing team, Mary and Helen, who set their series of romances, *Love in New Orleans*, in 1880s Louisiana, the Gilded Age in the American South. They rescued Ursula, a family cat, from the streets as a kitten, post-Katrina. LeCoeur, a common name in New Orleans, means *heart* in French. Together, Mary and Helen share a love of the history, foods, stories and traditions of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Helen's first novel, *In the Hope of Rising Again* (Penguin Press 2004, Riverhead 2005) is available on Amazon.com.

They love to hear from readers. Email them at ursulalecoeur@gmail.com. Visit their website, www.ursulalecoeur.com, for blog-posts on New Orleans history and traditional Southern recipes. Friend them on Facebook (Ursula LeCoeur) and follow them on Twitter (@ursulalecoeur).

**Don't miss the next novel in Ursula
LeCoeur's Love in New Orleans Series**

Enjoy this excerpt from *When a Lady Loves*

Chapter One

**New Orleans
December 1885**

Benjamin Merritt couldn't believe his luck. His first night on surveillance and a young woman bolted from the side yard of the Collins home toward the front gate and the street where he stood. He saw her racing across the broad lawn, anticipated her path and turned just in time to catch the full brunt of her head and shoulders against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her as she fell backwards from the impact.

Stunned, she wriggled free of his arms, sniffed and brushed her hair off her face, wiping her wet cheeks with the same motion. "I beg your pardon, sir."

Bowing, Ben tipped his cap to the most beautiful young lady he'd ever seen. A governess, he presumed, to the young daughter of Patrick Collins. He took in the expensive fabric of her dress, the decorative braid, the jet buttons on the bodice and thought it beyond the means of most employees. Perhaps an older cousin? He'd been told Patrick Collins had but one child—a daughter, Maureen, thirteen years of age.

The lady was a tiny little creature—her head barely reached his shoulders—but she was lusciously proportioned. He'd felt her full breasts against his chest and now he could see, even in the dim light, she had the face of a Madonna: white skin as smooth as alabaster, huge sparkling blue eyes, and a perfectly rosy, pert little mouth. A mouth swollen with desire, cheeks flushed with longing.

"To what do I owe this unexpected honor, Miss?"

"I . . . couldn't sleep," she stammered, showing remarkable dignity as she uttered what he knew was a bald-faced lie. "I came out for a stroll."

"You seemed to be strolling very rapidly. And at midnight."

"Actually, I prefer running to strolling. It's the newest exercise for ladies." She raised her chin. "I'm surprised you don't know that."

"Ah, of course." He struggled to maintain a serious expression. "That must be the reason you're without a hat. This new exercise—running. Perhaps you'd enjoy running with me to the corner and back?" He offered his arm. "Or strolling?"

He stood still while she studied him under her long, black lashes. He watched her eyes travel to his laced-up workman's boots, his denim pants, plaid shirt and rough black wool jacket. Then to his hair, unfortunately no longer neatly combed after two hours at the docks. He waited as she hesitated, clearly calculating her options. She glanced back to the gate through which she'd come. Running away from someone, was she? Not someone all that threatening. Her breathing had calmed. Her clenched fists had relaxed. He saw defiance, not fear, in the straightness of her back.

"It's tempting," she said finally. Raising her blue eyes to his face, she sighed heavily. "But how do I know you're not a scoundrel? There seems to be no shortage of them out and about tonight."

A lover's quarrel, then? He smiled. "A scoundrel would not have as warm and friendly a smile as I have."

“I suspect that’s what all scoundrels say.” With remarkable pluck, she leaned in a little closer to frankly examine his face under the flickering light cast from two gaslights mounted on the stone pillars. “And who told you your smile was so friendly?”

He laughed out loud. “Are you disputing my mirror?”

“Perhaps it needs a good dusting.” A smile lit her face and her eyes sparkled as she said it. Quick-witted and flirtatious, the young woman tilted her head, and a black curl tumbled down her bodice and settled on her right breast.

Seized by desire, his breath quickened. With tingling fingers, he grasped her face and brought his lips to hers. The softness of her cheeks, the warmth of her lips and the rose scent of her hair overcame all logical thought. She gasped ... but didn’t move. Neither did he for some moments.



Oh, my. The mirror didn’t need dusting whatsoever. The gaslights illuminated his handsome features. Clean shaven with longish straight hair, a high forehead and strong jaw, he stepped back and grinned at her predicament. Maureen liked his kiss and he knew it. In fact, she liked it so much she was breathless, her knees trembling beneath her skirt.

In any case, she couldn’t return to the garden. Vespasian, with whom she’d quarreled, might be waiting for her at the kitchen door or he might be lying drunk in the bushes. And, heaven help her, this man might just follow her to be sure she was safe, and see him.

He now stood a respectful distance away. Was there harm in lingering here to talk with him? But a stranger on the street? Well-spoken yet incongruously dressed in workman’s clothes? They’d not been introduced. And he’d kissed her. “I believe it

would be best to forego my midnight, er ... run ... tonight ... I should go back in the house.”

“So you would deny yourself a stroll? And deny me the opportunity to spend more time with the most beautiful woman who’s ever run into me?” The left side of his mouth rose in a quirky grin.

She pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders. She’d had enough foolish gallantry for one evening. “Good night, sir.”

He pointed to the front door of her father’s house. “I’ll watch until you’re safely inside.”

That was the last thing she needed. “I’m sure that isn’t necessary. You should be on your way.”

His grin deepened. “I insist.”

To get in the house, Maureen needed to find the key hidden on the lintel above the double front door. Problem was, she’d have to stand on something to reach it, which would confirm for the stranger what he probably already knew: She’d sneaked out to meet a young man.

There was no help for it. She forced her feet to turn and step through the gate. Had he heard her and Vespasian shouting at each other? Had he heard him say he would have her yet? Sound traveled a long way at night. She could feel the man’s eyes boring into her back as she made her way slowly up the front walk. She added a little swing to her hips that swayed her skirt from side to side.

Under the porch light, her skin warm with mortification, Maureen dragged a heavy rocking chair across the stone porch, lifted her skirt to mid-calf to climb on it, and balanced rather precariously as she felt along the lintel with one hand while holding on to the door facing with the other. No doubt the gentleman on the sidewalk found this show quite amusing. The key in her grasp, she jumped to the floor, repositioned the chair in its original place and unlocked the door.

Was he still there, really waiting until she was safely inside? Her hand on the doorknob, she paused. She wanted to look back, just a quick glance, but she kept her eyes forward and entered the house.

Pausing in front of the hall mirror, her body went hot with embarrassment. Her hair was a mass of flyaway curls, sprinkled with bits of broken leaves and grass, which also dotted the shawl on her shoulders, the bodice and skirt of her dress. Without question, the handsome man had noticed. Thank heavens she wasn't likely to see him ever again.