

INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI - 1854

PART ONE

VIRTUE

FITTINGLY, AND WITH THE suspect irony of a prank fabricated by one of the more mischievous gods on their mountaintop, I first met Virtue after an epic bout of debauchery.

It was morning, although that I did not know. For I was still loitering in my dream, where it was an insufferably hot afternoon. I sat on the bank of a deep muddy river, soaking my feet, watching a tall bearded man in a robe paddle slowly across the current in an Indian canoe. Somewhere, someone was pounding a fist against wood, but otherwise there was no sound besides the sizzle of the sun and the easy lap of water.

The man drew up in his primitive craft. "Shall I take you across?" he asked.

I squinted over the river. There were no trees over there, no cool relief of shade, and nothing much to recommend that yonder shore beyond the one where I already was. But I have learned that hope dies hard, and curiosity urged me that perhaps there was something pleasant awaiting me on the other side.

"Sure," I told the man. "Just hold on."

But when I brought my feet up out of the water, I was dismayed to discover they were not the two appendages I had expected. Hooves! Cloven and dripping. Like something off a billy goat. There was no way in hell they were ever going to fit properly

into my boots. I was stricken with the revelation that no matter where I roamed again, people would discern, from the wobble in my gait, that I was not truly a man.

The fist pounding on wood sound grew ever louder as I stood there on that riverbank beneath the burning sun, pondering my future, while growing accustomed to my new hooves.

Then I heard a voice.

“Rain!” it called, very far away, as if from out of the sky. “Rain, you there? Answer me, Rain.”

As I tipped my face to the blue heavens, I inadvertently stirred myself awake, leaving that man waiting for me in his canoe.

As far as I know, he is waiting there still.

“Rain!” The pounding continued, like some club-headed woodpecker having go at a hollow log. I had a bad taste in my mouth, a bad feeling in my gut, and a grimace in my persona. I was in no shape to enter into the waking world. But at that particular moment, I would have done anything – even something so Herculean as rise up out of bed – to stop that incessant pounding. I stumbled to the door, opening it a crack.

“Yes?” I said, in a voice even more scratched and dry than I expected.

“Rain!”

Distantly, I recognized my go-between, the man who found the tasks that I would then perform. “Cedric Dallon,” I said. “How are you?”

“I’m put out, that’s how I am.”

I could tell by his mien that what he said was true.

“We had an appointment to meet our client this morning. He’s been waiting, but I’m sure I don’t know for how much longer.”

“I thought our meeting was for Tuesday.”

“This *is* Tuesday!”

I scratched, and rocked back into the room, as if consulting my calendar. Then I stuck my head back out into the hallway. “So it is,” I said. “My apologies, friend. I seem to have misplaced a day.”

Dallon turned a color that brought to my mind the line, “My love is a red, red rose...” There was spittle on his mustache.

“Doggone it, Rain! This job is big. And I’m stretched so thin I can’t afford to let it go! These people are prepared to pay us more money than you and I have seen in all our other jobs lumped together.”

“Well.”

“Can you get yourself in shape?”

“Of course. I only need a minute.”

I commenced to close the door, but Dallon stopped it with his foot. “Rain,” he whispered loudly. “Impress him. You know, in that way you have. Let the man know you speak French and such.”

I nodded. “Sure, Dallon.” And then I closed the door.

The room was unfamiliar. It smelled like a stable. The curtain was drawn and a blade of sharp white light cut in around its edges. An empty bottle stood upright on the floor in the corner and a woman was curled up asleep beside it. She was naked, as was I, and it did not take Pythagoras to put two and two together in order to calculate the sum of our relationship. It seemed unbecoming of a gentleman to leave her in such an undignified position, and so with no small cumbersome effort I hefted up her fleshy bulk and dropped it onto the bed.

She did not wake.

I pulled back the licorice tendrils of her loosened hair. Someone’s little angel, I thought, albeit, after she had taken a dubious turn. She might have been quite pretty, had she not been so god-awful homely. Even in sleep, she wore her difficult existence like a mask, and although I did not recall her face, I was relatively certain that given the proper illumination, and from the proper angle, I might. I found two dollars in my trousers pocket.

“One for ink and paper,” I said. “And one for you.”

I curled the coin into the girl’s fist.

“Well, dear,” I said. “I hope we had a fine time.”

Then in a fit of romantic delusion, I was compelled to lean over and kiss her cheek.

“Happy dreams,” I whispered.

She snored quietly while I dressed.

All in all, our farewell had been highly unsatisfactory.