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Literary Fiction
96,500 Words

TERRE FERME

Prologue

The baby wouldn't have a name. "*It* died." As though to damper the indelicacy of its voicing, Mrs. Duchande hissed through lips covered with a dainty lace kerchief. "*It* was mongoloid," she told her friends. "*It* was a bastard."

Its gender happened to be male, and had he survived the soon-to-come journey through its mother's weak canal, his parents would have named him Dominique Duchande, IV. But such a title would never be granted, nor any proper name ascribed. It wasn't a thing done in Catholic South Louisiana. Their understanding of the Pope's proprieties and Latin Mass precluded the naming of unborn babies. Neither tight-lipped priest nor parishioner could conjure up an explanation for why a baby was a baby at conception and therefore couldn't be aborted without inviting the certainty of burning in hell for committing a venial sin, yet still proclaim that to name dead babies that never gulped even a single breath of life, never suckled the smallest taste from mother's breast, never lifted tiny lids to expose the grey eyes of the world's newest innocent creature, blackened one's soul.

When *it* died, it tried to comfort its parents, singing them a song dead babies can only compose with the help of angels come to take them home, for the baby was unconstrained by man's interpretation of God's Word. He knew he was a real baby, and the tune flowed soundless to his parents' ears.

Let not my mother worry
 why I remain asleep,
 for in her joyful world,

she knows not I am dead.

Let my father dream

his dreams of ancestral land.

He thinks I'm safe inside her,

though grief hovers on his heel.

Let angels thwart

the end of them,

while Grandmother smiles

and thinks she wins.

* * * * *

Tres strolled down the curvy dirt road that led home through his family's hayfields. He munched on tender honey grass, sucking out its rummy sap while cool, fat drops of midday rain rinsed off his world. The fresh musk of Louisiana earth, blended with blooming clover and crisp rain air, filled him with contentment. On the horizon stood the house he built, glowing warm and proud on ancestral land.

His mother drove up beside him, slowing to a gentle roll under the sweet orange trees that lined the drive.

"Son, come sit," came her deep, deliberate voice.

"Mother, Joie's waiting." He didn't lose a stride.

She patted the seat beside her.

"Mother, can't it wait? Joie went to the—"

“The doctor—I know, she’s... Tres, please stop walking!”

In the ghostly blankness of his mind, Tres’ *what do you know* blossomed into the *vignettes tragiques* he’d seen once before.

He stopped and stared at the puffs of pale clouds now distant.

She braked a full stop, the door handle at his fingertips.

She wore a yellow sunhat and matching linen dress, and draped across her shoulders lay a waistcoat, its white piping and tiny white button at the neck glowing in the reborn sun.

Tres wondered who had folded her roof. It had only now stopped raining.

His mother smiled her look of concern.

She hated Joie. Did she hate his baby? He had to believe his mother wouldn’t, couldn’t, hate the baby’s mother all her natural life. Another dead baby. Joie too? No, he’d feel it. Mother might feel sorry for Joie now... The thoughts flew in and through and out of his mind in an instant, and he realized his mouth hung open, the soles of his boots had bonded to the earth, and he still didn’t know what terrible thing had happened and couldn’t bring himself to ask, couldn’t will himself to hear.

His gaze rolled down to the door handle. His hand pried back the latch. His arm swung open the door.

Hopefully, by the time he looked back into his mother’s face, he’d have figured out what good might come from whatever this bad news might be.

He slid in. He noticed the dark specks of imperfection in the seat leather, foggy in his head.

“Son, you know, I’m here for you...”

“What, Mother!”

“It’s dead, son. It’s dead.”

That was how Dominique Duchande, III found out about his second baby.

Another of his children was dead. Another heir and numeral, a *IV*. In his mother’s mind, they would all be just one more *it*.

* * * * *

A year later, PawPaw was hunched down in his garden, pulling weeds when the car of two representatives of the United States Army Corps of Engineers clanked up. When he stood to face them, the tall one demanded, “You have to leave this place.”

The shorter, thick-necked corpsman added, “We can’t keep rebuilding the same levees over and over.”

Joie stood with MawMaw at the stove, holding her hand as they watched men they didn’t know pronounce a sentence upon them. She looked out into the woods her forefathers settled, here, in the mire of Deep South delta, the very fabric of her heritage. A canopy of Live Oaks the age of her ancestors dwarfed the house, and the crisp pineyness of cypress wafted over a latticework of unhurried bayous. This land was their home—beloved fishing holes, wilderness trails, and moss-draped trees where the *qui'lerrrrl'ps* of tree frogs and winding whir of cicadas harmonized to the rhythm of brown crickets and the chorus of Joie’s beloved equine. It made them the *we* that they were.

MawMaw waved the men up the tall row of steps to the kitchen, saying, “Come sit,” then busied herself with serving coffee while the corpsmen spread out an official map larger than her kitchen table. They pushed aside her cups of *café au lait*.

“From here—” the tall corpsman pointed to a spot where the Mississippi River ran true south before a great curve, “—to here.” His finger crawled around the edge of a great *O*, where the river almost touched itself before turning south again. East of those points, only a narrow swathe of land separated over a hundred Fryoux’ from the rest of the world. But spring waters often swelled the river to overflowing, breaking bits and pieces of levee and drowning their land.

“We’ve told you. Nature has to take her course,” the short corpsman barked. “This is where we’ll build the new levee.” His stubby finger cut across that narrow passage into Fryoux land. “Don’t you understand? These flimsy house stilts won’t hold up in the middle of a river.”

Waters would liquefy this lush land and carry it in great, discombobulated heaps into distant swamps to rot without the faintest recollection of its bearing on the lives of those who cherished it. The soul of Joie’s entire people would meet its demise. PawPaw had taught his family to love their land in the way they loved their lives. Would they now fear the river like a dying man who fears his closing day, with no degree of control, waiting for last visits, the ultimate decree, one final labored breath?

In all her years, Joie had never heard anyone speak so harshly to her grandfather, yet the corpsmen wore blank faces, sitting there straight-backed in their crisp uniforms as though they visited royalty, not a rickety home where, at nighttime, passersby could see the slivers of light that crept through fissures in its weathered half-inch by four-inch wallboards. The only new structure on the peninsula was a chapel they had started building that spring, and Daddy had already etched Mother’s name into a platform upon which a wooden *pietà* would lay: *In memory of our beloved Ariat*. Joie wanted to slap the men. They’d obliterate an entire culture! Why wasn’t PawPaw fighting them?

Her shoulders rounded over. The dignified old patriarch, who just sat there unflinchingly could do nothing. PawPaw's head, browned from long decades under the sun, hung a tad lower than usual, but Joie was the only one who noticed. She knew him that well. Because she loved him that well.

PawPaw certainly wondered how future generations would learn that obstacles were made for overcoming if he, their leader, couldn't overcome this final, greatest obstacle to their very future. How would they feed themselves? Would another familial graveyard be abandoned, same as PawPaw's ancestors' thrice before?

The family had settled in these woods to remain safe, but now the whole clan would lose their homes while the *nouveau riche* remained dry on the highlands—even their animals would be safe on that land they had stolen from PawPaw's father. Joie could only imagine how her dear grandfather's gut would wrench when he saw the Highlanders' livestock grazing safely on high land while his extended family slinked away—how he would see himself as a failure after all the bigotry and injustice he had survived at the hand of the Highlanders; how, in the end, he would have failed at the one most foundational duties of the patriarchy—this would be the cruelest of blows.

The corpsmen finally stood to go, the tall one offering a *humph* and, "Keep the map."

"We won't come tell you again," the other warned over a shoulder.

Joie and MawMaw remained silent and motionless as PawPaw placed a thumb on the map to cover his little peninsula and stare at the result. Then he folded the map, took it outside, and put a match to it.

* * * * *

The prospect of PawPaw losing the family's last bit of land sent a shiver up Joie's spine as she stood at her French doors looking out into black skies six months later. Would God wipe out a culture that wouldn't, couldn't exist anywhere else?

She strained to see the barn that was home to her beloved Itsy. It might be the last night she could see its silhouette in the moonlight, though the far-reaching clouds of a massive storm were already nipping at its glow. Hurricane Valerie was coming.

She filed away the memories of how she mucked Itsy's stall and rubbed her withers, and how the mare looped her head around to nuzzle her legs and back. PawPaw was right—there was nothing like a beloved horse treating you like its own species.

She smothered the memory of how Tres had understood that, how he loved horses nearly as much as she did. How he had even helped her muck the barn once (though he rushed home to bathe so he could avoid his mother's lecture about getting dirty from common labor). What had she been thinking... the idea of a Highlander marrying a Lowlander... ludicrous. Joie and Tres had been clueless to his mother's shenanigans until she bragged about journeying down to Isle de Jean Charles, at the tip of Louisiana's delta, to have a vodoun curse Joie. Then she had gone home and convinced her neighbors to stop buying PawPaw's vegetables, stop letting Joie's family earn a living.

A sudden longing tightened her throat. Tres was barely a mile away. Maybe she could take a quick gallop and catch a glimpse of him at his bedroom window, staring out into the black.

She pinched herself. Seeing his mother's monstrous, hilltop house on their way out in the morning would be more than enough. They'd probably already evacuated, anyway... left the staff to batten up the mansion and even their fancy horses' shiny, lacquered stables. They were probably sipping digestif up in Natchez by now.

When she noticed a dim blush above the trees, she shook her head, glanced once more at Itsy's home, and closed her French doors. It was time.

If only her mother were here.

PART ONE

Our livelihood is but a peninsula, our lives its slaves.

Chapter 1

The childhood memory of the only cross words Joie ever heard between her daddy, Jules, and momma, Ariat, still plagued her thoughts and dreams. She was only four when the family midwifing duties called upon her mother. She was driving away in her calash, Jules repeating, then hollering, “No, the rain’s comin’.”

Ariat winked at her husband. “So is the baby.”

Joie and her brothers looked back and forth from their mother’s smile to their father’s reddening cheeks.

“Wait, I’ll drive you!”

“No, help M’Maw feed the children.”

She tapped the long-reins on her horse. “Getty-up.”

Joie cried, “Mommmyyyy!”

But her mother only waved goodbye. “Toots, go nap. Be a good *tite fille*.”

“Don’t leave meeee!” She ran after her mother.

But her father yanked her back by the collar. “Go do like your momma said. Pretty little girls don’t whine!”

Joie could only frown. She wasn’t whining. Little babies whined, and she wasn’t a little baby. She already knew her numbers to ten in English and French, and could sing the alphabet song and Frere Jacques, too!

Jules dragged her by the collar to where the top button popped off, and at the top of the tall steps his tight fist pounded open the door and he pointed that long finger at the bed with his wife's new quilt.

Joie ran and jumped up into her mother's deep moss mattress. She made pretty pictures in her mind. She'd bring her mother some lavender water hyacinths that float on Grande Bayou and look like the lace doilies she knits.

Bayou Paul swelled. The mare strained against her collar. Her feet slipped on soggy leaves. The carriage and the brown mare and Ariat along with them slid ever so slowly and gracefully off the slick planks and into a churning river that most times was barely a creek.

“Mommmyyyyyy!”

Though Joie would dream that scene over and over again for years to come, that first time, Jules woke her from her nap and latched onto her like a buoy. He rocked back and forth, rubbing away the tear-soaked hair stuck to his only daughter's forehead and cheeks. Then he tore free and raised the lantern.

His face was wet. Mommy wasn't coming back; it wasn't just a dream that first time.

In the years to come, Joie wouldn't recall her father's hugs or kisses prior to or since that day. She was never Daddy's little girl. She had to bend her neck back as far as it could go just to see the face of the giant man. He rose before the rooster, and other than on the Lord's Day, his wife, three older sons, Joie, and a tiny Joey still in diapers saw him only at mealtime, churchtime, choretime, and bedtime. On the Lord's Day—when Ariat was alive—the family awoke to the thick, warm aromas of dark roux, caramelized onions with green peppers, celery, and garlic from the family garden, and the sound of cracked corn Jules pulverized in the hand mill latched onto a corner of the kitchen table. Before church, they ate cornbread he sweetened

with honey from hives so close to the cane fields that it was dark and sweet as molasses, and they drowned large chunks in bowls of coffee-milk. After church, the aromas of the morning's cooking watered their mouths and they all sat for a dinner comprised of the bounties of their land—its deer, squirrels, rabbits, and fruits of the waters Jules boiled with the staples of their garden or simmered in roux gravies and stews.

When Ariat was alive, she soaked lost bread, *Painperdeau*, in eggs, cream, and sugar, then fried it for breakfast in butter churned from the cream of their own cow. For dinner and supper, she made her own versions of gumbo, stew, *rémoulade*, and *étouffée*. But on Sundays, she rested and allowed her husband to pamper her.

After Ariat died, MawMaw prepared their meals. After Ariat died, her children were never again chased out of the kitchen with threats to be tickled or kissed to death. After Ariat died, they never again fell asleep in the arms of pure love and drifted into slumber alive with dreams of their ancient land.

The part of Joie that revolved around her mother was suddenly gone, *poof*. All she had left was the man who showed her how she could be happy again, the man whose hugs and kisses filled the void, the man who showed her where to find joy again: PawPaw. When hauling trash for one of the Highlander families, he snagged a Buster Brown painting book with dogs as big as ponies and rearing horses with rivers of black mane. Joie had no paints to color in the incomplete pictures, but that didn't matter. What mattered were the horses and Mary Jane, Buster's sweetheart. Next time Joie was in town with her father, in the big window of Hebert's—the cobbler's shop where PawPaw had begged for his betrothed's continued affections after Highlanders stole his family's land—lay shoes that looked just like Mary Jane's.

Jumping up and down with the tiny tip of her finger pressed against the window, she begged, “Daddy, look... ooooh, Daddy, pleeeeeease can I have some?”

Without even looking at his daughter, he stated, “No,” in the impassive voice he had developed since his wife’s death. “Need boots where we live.”

Each time Joie looked at her father, she saw the stern, angry face he had shot at her mother when she drove off against his wishes. When Joie looked at her older brothers, her resentment that they didn’t cry now tempered her love. She wanted little to do with boys so eager to move on without their mother, like her father.

That awful night after her mother didn’t come home, Joie had taken little brother Joey with her to live at MawMaw and PawPaw’s. When their father eventually noticed them missing, he sent all three older boys to find their young siblings. They found the two on PawPaw’s lap and wrenched their arms all the way home.

When everyone went to bed that night, Joie woke Joey, again snuck over to MawMaw and PawPaw’s, and lifted her brother into their bed before she crept up as they slept.

Jules didn’t fetch them again.

Chapter 2

Joie folded her hands, rested them on the table, and stared down at them the way she saw her father do when he had something on his mind.

PawPaw winked at his wife then rested his coffee on the table.

He cleared his throat and MawMaw rose to get food, touching Joie on the shoulder as she passed. “Go on and have a sit with P’Paw.”

But Joie only shook her head.

“*Non?*” PawPaw crossed his hands on the table the way Joie did.

She stretched the corners of her mouth down as far as she could. “And I don’t want nothin’ to eat!” Couldn’t they see this problem was too serious to solve with food?

“C’mon and tell P’Paw what done got at your craw.” He patted his lap.

“Nothin’s at my craw!” She knew she’d cry if she said it out loud. The sun was barely up and Daddy had already caught her crawling into the bateau unattended.

PawPaw patted his lap again.

“Well... maybe I could eat just a li’l.”

She sat with Joey at the kitchen table almost head-in-bowl with the fried cornmeal MawMaw called *couche couche* and the clabbered milk she called *cayai*, oblivious to the whispered tones of the elders until PawPaw patted her shoulder. “Hurry, child, time to go.”

“Where we goin’?”

“Town.”

“What we doin’ at the town?”

But PawPaw was already out the door.

She gobbled her food and ran after PawPaw to see his cart loaded with sharpened tools and vegetables for Highlanders. MawMaw hoisted her up onto the seat beside him, and he cracked the whip.

“Liberry,” he finally announced as he pulled up his mare on Plaquemine’s Main Street.

“I knew it! I knew it!” PawPaw had brought her a horse picture book from town two days after her mother died. She had slept with it under her pillow to pull out those times when nightmares woke her, and always tucked it under an arm when they visited kinfolk.

As they climbed up creaking steps to the giant white-board structure, Joie held her grandfather’s craggy old hand at eye level. That was what she focused on—not the diamond-shaped beveled-glass doors taller than her house, or the strange, churchlike smell of the vestibule, or the librarian’s priest-podium desk where the old man deposited her. PawPaw could not guide her to the pictures she longed to hold and touch and dream about; he signed his name with an X. She had seen him do it at the grocer’s and asked, “P’Paw, you don’t know how to read?” PawPaw had returned only a down-turned smile, and that night Joie dreamed they were driving a little gray car in a cave, then suddenly PawPaw stood there as the car rolled toward him, and Joie pulled on the car door to make it stop, but it kept rolling, and she woke up that last moment before impact, crying, “Mommyyyyy!”

Her father had said, “You get nightmares when you’re bad!”

She started having that same dream every time Jules admonished her.

* * * * *

Joie followed the nice librarian lady to a wall of shelves that reached the ceiling. When the lady pointed down low, Joie gasped and drew a hand to her open mouth. Two rows of horse picture books! And she could reach every single one!

With two books safely tucked under an arm, she ran to PawPaw, who scooped her up like so much hay, and Joie hugged his neck through the time they left the library, boarded the wagon, and drove away.

They stopped at a local grocer then a few ranches, as they would for over a decade. Twice each week they made the trip in PawPaw's beat-up wagon pulled by an aged gray Morgan that had once been brown, selling PawPaw's wares and beautiful vegetables—tomatoes, green beans, okra, black-eyed peas, eggplant, merlinton, and carrots, the products of PawPaw's garden, his pride and joy second only to Joie.

Though Joie's father worked that same garden, even sank a hoe into the moist, loamy soil with the same graceful motions, his thigh was stone to her grasp, his hand one to push her away whereas PawPaw's was to stroke her head. Daddy's advice struck her as darts, so stern were his warnings to abstain from the emotions that rock the worlds of young children, so unlike PawPaw's gentle hand to shield Joie from her demons.

If Joie's father had found out how she came to know real horses so well, her days of adoring them would have been cut off. Joie was glad PawPaw was the one who found out. Two years after her mother died, Joie, now six, came home once too often with the wide eyes of a shamed face and fresh scratches up and down her arms and legs. When PawPaw saw her condition, he asked, "Where ya been?"

Joie couldn't find it in herself to lie to PawPaw and blurted out a confession of dastardly deeds and her newfound addiction, over which she lay powerless. "P'Paw, um, well I snuck over

to the Highlands, where the Schafers live, and, P’Paw, I mean, it’s just awful how they stick that little brown pony out in that pasture where nobody ever goes visit him! I mean, ‘member, you said it ain’t right to neglect poor ignorant creatures?”

“Aww, *cher*, but—”

“But P’Paw, the pony was lonely and really needed somebody to play with him and love on him and I just *had* to go keep company with him and he’s soooooo gentle, really, P’Paw.” She paused for a couple quick gulps of air. “He let me lead him right up to that old wood fence and he stood still and I climbed the boards and I grabbed a bunch of mane and I just jumped right on!” PawPaw was the guardian of all things living, master of the souls of man and animal alike, God of the universe... wasn’t he? Surely he’d understand her duty to rescue a pony!

“That pony takes off running as soon as I get on but I can stay on longer and longer every time before I slide off.” When she rubbed her bottom, PawPaw had to hide his grin. “Them Boudreaux’ got lots of thistle in that pasture. I like ‘em to eat and they sure are soft to land on but they scratch like heck.” (She could say *heck* in front of her grandparents.)

What she didn’t tell PawPaw was how she had a nagging little part inside her that kept hearing him call for her to stop what she was doing. She could have sworn she heard the clicking sound he made when he sucked air between his gums and wooden teeth to make a *tsk*. She figured she was going to get another of his talks, like the one the week before, after she’d found a small box and propped it up on one side with a stick and string that ran from the garden to the trough she hid behind. A bright cardinal hunting for seeds had hopped under the box but instead of pulling the string, she waited as a second hopped over. She could catch two! But they got spooked and flew off and she went crying to PawPaw for a pat on the back. Except she heard *tsk, tsk, tsk*, then, “Aww, but *cher bebe*, you mean to put a cardinal in a box?” *Oh no!*

Joie tucked her chin into her chest to wait for PawPaw's explanation on how she'd again been unkind to one of God's creatures, one God Himself had left, as with all things in this ancestral land, to his care. But PawPaw just stood there, the seconds passing each like an hour. She finally peeked up at her grandfather to find he hadn't changed the easygoing expression on his wrinkly old face. Her grandfather never hollered like her father did, still, she had scrunched her eyelids into raisins to prepare for his surely unfavorable reaction.

Finally, he asked, "Well, how'd you know 'bout that ol' pony, *cher*?" in his gentle, rolling cadence.

She popped her lids wide open, looked him straight in the eyes, and declared, "Well, P'Paw, we saw him when I rode up to the Schafers with you, when you brought back their sharp scythe blades. But I was only five back then and I waited 'til I made six before I did it!"

"Hmmm." He nodded his fuzzy gray-haired head toward the house. It was Saturday afternoon, time to shave and go to confession.

Unlike their kinfolk, Jules and PawPaw had splurged on the luxury of running water in their kitchens *and* bathrooms. Spigots pulled water from a rain tank set on giant stilts beside the house, so PawPaw started his shave in the bathroom without having to cart in water from the kitchen in those old pitchers and bowls everybody else had to use. But they hadn't an indoor toilet yet and PawPaw hated it when Joie turned the pee pot upside down to have something to sit on, so she rested her bottom on the smooth, cool curve of the claw-foot tub next to the zinc. She made a game of swaying her body instead of moving her eyes to watch PawPaw run his straight-edged razor in long, easy strokes against an old leather strap. Joie knew he was thinking real hard—the deep lines on his forehead stacked up like upside-down Vs all scrunched up in the middle.

He dabbed a little water into his shaving cup, did his funny little chop-chop stir-stir to make it foamy, and spread the milky lather. Joie winced when he put the blade to his neck but couldn't stop staring, amazed at how he scraped off whiskers with that sharp blade without ever cutting himself.

She warmed to his soft voice, using words like *permission* and *honorable* in the same sentence, then *responsibility*, and finally *love and honor creatures*. Though Joie would never forget his message, more than anything, she'd remember his humped-over body, the musky perfume of his creamy soap, the scratch of his shiny razor, just being with PawPaw.

Chapter 3

PawPaw's mare didn't have a real name. He mostly called her *Girl*, though sometimes *Booray* for the trick card game. Today, she went from a trot directly into a backward hop at the DDR entrance as Mr. and Mrs. Dominique Duchande II spun away in their brand new 1905 Queen Model B Runabout. It was the first time PawPaw's old mare ever saw such a loud contraption, and the Duchandes had barely slowed at the intersection.

PawPaw leapt down, led the mare to the side of the DDR mansion, and deposited Joie on a swing that hung on the back porch outside the kitchen. While he went inside to collect earnings, Joie passed the time on the swing, a toe of her tiny foot sweeping the planks for a lazy sway. She had twirled an auburn lock around her finger and pulled it taut across her cheek to the corner of her mouth when a boy ran out.

The boy slid to a stop in the shiniest boots Joie had ever seen. She took a gander at his face only long enough to notice his eyes looked like one of Joey's marbles, with swathes of green and a black center. Then it was back to those glowing boots, peeking at them sideways through dark bangs.

He froze in his split-legged stance and stared at the tiny girl, finally taking a deep breath. "H...hey."

He rested his hands on his hips and stood tall, but when Joie didn't answer, just pushed off the swing for a stronger sway, he ran around to the front of the house and came back with a yellow rose and placed it on the swing beside her.

Joie released the lock of hair and paused the swing but remained silent.

The boy scratched his head. "You like ponies?"

Joie finally looked up and half-rose onto one leg.

When she still didn't speak, Tres ran inside then back out with a piece of candy. He held it out and announced, "Got a Welsh in the barn."

Joie could only stare at the peppermint stick.

As Tres backed toward the barn, still holding out the candy, Joie inched forward but anchored herself to a column when she reached the steps. She eventually slid around to the top step with one hand behind her back, the other with a single fingertip barely touching the post. Once she caught a whiff of the peppermint, she edged her way down, accepted the candy, and took Tres' hand to cross the lawn, the shed row a scant twenty yards away when a dark lady called out that Tres better come right back up to the house "...befo yo momma seen who you playin' wit'."

Joie threw down the candy, wrenched away her hand, and ran to her grandfather's wagon.

"Mother isn't even here!" Tres stomped a foot.

"Don' matter none, boy." She shook a finger at him. "You know she got eyes back o' her head can see all what anybody and got to hide."

Tres let out a *humph* and started toward the wagon when PawPaw exited the door, slipping into his pocket a small cloth sack weighted with coins. He tipped his weathered hat and

walked on around the corner of the house, where Joie had already climbed up on the wagon and sat head down with shoulders slumped.

“So, *cher*, you been sittin’ out here alone all this time? Nadine kept goin’ on ‘bout some ailment or ‘nother. Don’ know how she get her work done.”

Joie whispered through the finger she chewed on, “They’s a little boy lives here.”

“*Oui*? You play wit’ that boy while you was waitin’?”

Joie trembled with silent sobs but all PawPaw could do was wrap an arm around her and pull her into his side. “‘s all right, *cher*. We goin’ home now.”

Chapter 4

As far back as he could remember, Tres Duchande had heard how Great-Grandfather Antoine Duchande fenced in 200 acres of the old Fryoux property, his slaves completing a mansion and barns just in time before their emancipation.

Antoine practiced law and sent his only son, Dominique, to law school, but wouldn't live to see the marriage of grandson Dominique Duchande II to Lillian Bourgoyne, daughter to Tres' only living grandparent.

Each time Grandmother Bourgoyne came to visit, Tres, the third Dominique Duchande, and sister Annette counted brown spots and black bumps that poked out all the way from the woman's ears to her décolletage—the pastime they devised as to not suffer the boredom of their grandmother's stories as they sat silently beside their mother on her settee.

“Now, children... where did I leave off last time?”

Tres, only six, and Annette, barely two, could only shrug.

“Oh, yes,” she continued, “about your father. Every child needs to know where they came from.”

Tres was glad the woman was a little hard of hearing and didn't notice his groan but his mother did, her elbow-nudge delayed until Grandmother searched the ceiling for her next words.

"I'm sure you know what good stock you come from, especially with what all we had to go through," she advised for the thousandth time. "Heed you my words: Don't ever let a man of another faith put you down!" She shook a finger, once at each child, then placed her hand on her chest to begin her usual lamentation.

"We came down here and went Catholic like the locals, and your father was finally able to start his own firm, what with the same laws as France. Lillian, you chose well, daughter."

Her daughter nodded.

"You certainly did better than your poor old mother here." She shook her head and dropped her gaze to her lap.

Tres' mother sighed at the last bit of nice talk they'd hear from the old woman.

"Course now, *my* husband—he was a famous doctor." She looked up with a *humph*. "God bless his mean soul—snatched me out of those gentle pine hills of North Louisiana to live in New Orleans. Now *I* thought that mansion was plenty pretty, but I didn't know how the Garden District flooded like it did... driving me off the first floor... me there alone... him working all the time and leaving me to raise your dutiful mother all by myself. Lillian, dear, you had a much easier time, what with hiring better nannies than I could ever find down there."

The ancient woman's hand trembled as she picked up her teacup and jutted her pinkie out toward Annette. "And you, young lady, you'll do well to take your mother's example if you want to marry well. Now's the time to start practicing for your season. Come, let's see your skin."

Tres lost count of the spots and bumps by the time his grandmother finished flipping Annette's chin every which way, the tea in her cup quivering at the rim.

"Lillian, are you cleaning this child's skin like I taught you? You know all the scrubbing it took to clear up *yours*."

"Yes, Mother." Tres' mother's lips tightened.

"Well, I suppose you're doing a well-enough job." She pointed that pinkie toward the settee, but when Annette returned to her mother's side, she slouched.

"Sit up, child! You get that laziness from your mother!"

A proper French woman with a delicate frame, always dressed in the finest French couture, matching bag, and shoes, Tres' mother coiffed her hair a little fluffy at the top with a tight twist in the back, accentuating her long neck. She was a vision of beauty on her husband's arm and Tres couldn't even begin to imagine his mother looking anything other than perfect. And slouching? She rarely even leaned forward—only to point in a face or reach for an arm to yank him toward the scene of one crime or another. Even then, she bent like an angle iron.

Tres frowned in his mother's behalf, but the criticism didn't seem to bother her—her lips were still tight, but she had maintained that *demure smile* she so often made Annette practice.

They all jerked their heads toward the front door and the clank of a carriage.

Mrs. Bourgoyne waved her daughter back down to her seat. "I'll greet him."

It wasn't until the woman left the room did his mother take a giant breath, close her eyes, and tilt her head back. Just for a moment. She regained her proper posture when she heard her mother and husband's footsteps; she remained seated and stared at her mother pouring whiskey; and, finally, she stood and grabbed the glass from her mother. "He likes ice!"

Fawning over her son-in-law—*Oh you must be tired... Oh look how fine you still look after a long day cooped up in that office... Oh I just don't know how you keep yourself so fit!*—

Mrs. Bourgoyne missed her daughter's breach of etiquette.

* * * * *

Tres' mother called her children into the library a month after Grandmother Bourgoyne's final visit. "Your dear grandmother has died in her sleep."

Tres wondered why she was dabbing a kerchief to her eyes. At least the old woman wouldn't fuss at his mother anymore if she saw a loose hair, or if she put too much food on her fork, or walked too hard. "Why are you crying?"

His mother was sitting on that same favorite settee and slapped him across the face with a force that sent him reeling to the floor. "I'll not raise an impudent son!"

Annette ran screaming to her room.

Tres held his hand to the hot that covered the entire side of his face, stared at his mother for a few seconds, and when he was sure she would say nothing more, joined his sister.

He waited with Annette until he heard his father return from work. He listened to hear ice tinkle against crystal as his mother prepared his father's whiskey, heard his father rustling the newspaper. When his mother's heels faded out into the kitchen, Tres crept into the library.

"Father, what does *impudent* mean?"

"How do you know such a word!"

Tres crabbed out of the room so he could again seek refuge with Annette.

"Go on, then." Dom waved him off. "Run away and be a ninny. You're too young!"

But Mrs. Duchande would repeat that declaration many times and Tres eventually found its meaning in a dictionary. Of the many words that described *impudent*, he settled on one that was used in three different forms: shame, shameful, shameless, then went to find his sister.

He found her in the kitchen with Nadine, took her by the hand, and led her into her room to slip under her bed, where they frequently met to remove themselves from the line of fire directed from one parent to the other, words that stung their ears and stomping heels that rumbled their stomachs. He had to warn Annette.

Tres' young sister didn't know many words, but *shame* was one she couldn't help but figure out as her mother commonly shook her head with one hand on a hip and the other wagging a finger in her face. "Shame. Shame. Shame on you," whenever Annette wet her bed, soiled her dress, or mussed her hair.

Tres and Annette played beneath that bed often, eventually begging Nadine not to clean under it so they could occupy themselves with dust bunnies.

"What y'all doin' under that bed! Best your mammy don' see y'all under there together like you be doin'."

"Oh, she won't, Nadine!" Annette exclaimed.

Tres agreed and added, "Just leave the covers hanging down like you do, and then she can't see us—but we can see her through the fringe, and I promise we'll be quiet so she won't find us. And then you won't get in trouble for the dust bunnies!" Aah, what a plan, so covert, ingenious, absolutely freeing.

He and his sister giggled now when they ran from their parents, hand-in-hand skipping down the hall to Annette's room, until one Thursday when they sat with Nadine at the kitchen table to eat their bedtime snack and their mother stormed in.

She dangled a dusty white glove far out in front of her as though it were a dead mouse she held by the tail. “What’s the meaning of this!”

All three winced.

Annette and Tres ran off to bed and didn’t see Nadine until mid-morning the following Sunday. Their mother had huffed and puffed about how much work had to be done for two days, then finally sent one of the cowhands to fetch her.

The children tried hard not to get Nadine in trouble again but Nadine was often to be fired and re-hired—sometimes for failing to control the children, occasionally for not polishing the silver until Mrs. Duchande could see her reflection, and once when hurricane winds vibrated a shutter latch free and a limb crashed through the window.

When Tres heard his mother tell Nadine her pay was short because she was careless, he and Annette took their piggy banks into his closet (their new hiding place, further from the living areas so as to buffer sound), and shook them until pennies flew out. The first time they did it, they ran to Nadine exclaiming, “Close your eyes! Close your eyes and hold out your hand!”

Nadine clamped her eyes shut, kept them that way as Tres and Annette shouted, “Open your eyes! Open your eyes!”

When she did, her eyes didn’t shine the way they did when the children brought her flowers, and her mouth was bent down in the corners.

Nadine fixed her mouth straight and sat them down with cookies. “*Bebes*, white chirrens givin’ a darkie they money ain’ proper,” she told them. “You don’ wanna get ol’ Nadine in trouble, now do ya?”

The following week, the day after Annette’s birthday, Tres collected spoons, bowls, and leftover ice cream and set it all on a blanket on the lawn. He surprised his little sister with a

special little birthday picnic. Annette squealed over and over again, but the serving spoon slid into the grass and was left outside.

That night, their mother strutted into the kitchen. “Well, I’ve seen it all now. Where is my silver spoon?”

Nadine was fired for four days that time, and was re-hired only once Tres found the spoon and snuck it back into the house.

In the future, Tres and Annette would sneak into Nadine’s pocketbook while she hung laundry to dry, and they’d slip in no more than two pennies at a time. To feed their habit, Tres met his father each day when he returned from work and sat on the floor beside him—his father had a habit of jingling the change in his pocket while he read his paper, and Tres waited for shiny copper pennies to escape and land soundless on the thick rug, where he’d snatch them up—only a single penny at a time, never a nickel, dime, quarter, or dollar—and hurry to show his sister. The first time he did it, he whispered to Annette once they reached his closet, “Look, more firing money!”

Huddled in their little sanctuary, Annette raised her shoulders up to her ears and asked, “Tres, that’s not stealing?”

“I didn’t *steal* it, sister. I just *found* it.”

She poked out her bottom lip and scrunched up her forehead while Tres counted pennies, only accepting his wisdom when he rustled her hair. “You my *bestest* brother.”

Under Annette’s bed, and later in Tres’ closet while Annette dozed, Tres thought about how to keep his mother from getting mad, and how to make his father notice him. Sometimes he figured that he should just stay out of their way, but then his father seemed to forget about him. How could he make his father like him?

Once, he prepared his father's iced whisky when he arrived from work—but only once. Being sure to add ice, he was holding the glass near its rim when his mother yanked it out of his hand. “Would *you* want to drink from a glass like that? It's like licking someone's dirty *hand*!”

Days later, he held the reins of his father's carriage horses, sending the cowhand away so he could show his father could how he could control two big animals. When his father exited the front door and saw Tres with his arms above his head holding onto the horses' bits, he paused in his step, then walked across the pebbled drive, climbed up to the seat, perfected the lay of his suit coat, and gathered the reins. “Step aside.” He used the same low, droning tone as when he dismissed the ranch hands.

Lillian waited for Tres at the front door. “Look at you!”

He clamped his jaws so hard his teeth hurt.

“Horse blow all over your suit. Nadine!”

More pennies for Nadine's pocketbook.

The only foolproof method of gaining Tres' parents' approval was more one of avoiding their disapproval: excellent marks in school. The only foolproof methods he could figure out for Annette were for her to remain quiet; never sneeze or cough without bringing a kerchief to her face; check the mirror often for stray hairs that escaped her ponytail; never enter a room in her mother's presence without lifting and straightening her socks at the ankle, her tights at the knee.

They both did their best to avoid getting Nadine in trouble. Sometimes, they simply hadn't enough pennies.

It was worse for Annette, Tres was sure of it. He could ride off on his pony and find friends to play with, but Annette's only exposure to girls her age was always in the company of

their mothers. “Girls from proper homes, even during playtime,” Mrs. Duchande had instructed her daughter, “must act according to their status.”

Tres joined his sister in her room one day after their mother heard her holding a two-way conversation with dolls.

“What language!” Lillian stood over her daughter. “And stop slouching!”

Once her mother finished shaking her head with *tsks* so loud Tres heard them from his room, Annette ran to Tres’ closet.

He sat her on the bed, crossed her ankles, pushed back her shoulders. “Like this. See? Then smooth out your dress, like this.” He spread it perfectly along her knees. “And make sure you unfurl the lace at the bottom.”

Thank God he wasn’t a girl—he didn’t have someone hovering and waiting to correct him all the time. Annette couldn’t even dirty her hands without having to submit to a harsh wiping and their mother’s lecture about how, “When *I* was your age, *my* mother slapped my hands and cleaned them with lye. You don’t *know* what a lucky little girl you are.”

“It’ll be better when you’re old enough to go to school.” He had patted Annette’s back after what they were sure was the hundredth telling.

Once, she asked, “But how many days before I go to school?”

Tres found a pencil and paper and scribbled out some numbers. When he saw the result, he forced a grin and a gay tone. “Seven hundred twenty-two.”

Annette looked down and wiggled each finger. “That’s more than my fingers.”

“Yes, sister, and more than your toes, too.” He was glad his sister couldn’t imagine such a big number.

Chapter 5

Joie wished for one of those fast cars as PawPaw's mare trudged home from the Duchandes'. She had to get to a pony.

PawPaw tried to snatch her but caught only her smock when she tried to jump off before the mare stopped. She wriggled free and took off, ignoring the slicing and poking scrub for a shortcut to the Schafer pasture. She hopped on the pony and this time stayed on until he made a ninety-degree left at the corner near the Schafers' house and her body didn't make the turn. She was dusting off when a tiny voice squeaked, "I'm gonna telllll."

Joie froze.

"You hear me, little girl?"

Joie turned around to see a girl her own age in a frilly blue dress with pink butterflies, white socks... *and Mary Jane's shoes!*

"I heard ya." Joie stared as the girl turned back toward her home. She had to think fast. "I love your shoes."

The girl stopped, turned to smile, then looked down at her feet and wiggled her toes to where her shiny shoes curled up at the ends.

Joie couldn't help but stare at the beautiful shoes, wishing she had such a treasure, but then she winced at the thought of Daddy finding out. "Get those from Mr. Hebert? He's my cousin."

The girl looked at Joie's threadbare dress, then down at her own. She fingered its ruffles and said, "I gotta go. We gotta go to confession."

"Me too." Joie pulled up some Saint Augustine and let the pony pick it slowly from her fist.

"His name is *Boots*." The girl pointed to the pony. "'cause he got white legs."

"Well, *my* name's Joie."

"I'm Debbie Tullier."

"You don't come from there?" Joie pointed to the nearby house.

"Naw. That there's Margaret Schafer's house. I live over there." She pointed across the street. "Boots is hers."

"Oh." Joie looked down at her rough, leather boots, still worried about the girl tattling, still worried about what new punishment her father might devise for such awful disobedience.

She turned to go but Debbie leaned forward and whispered, "Wanna come play? Next Saturday? 'Xcept early?"

Joie blinked at Debbie's dress, all its butterflies, its collar a web of white lace finer even than MawMaw's, its ruffles gathered with enough fabric to make a whole new dress.

"I got dungarees! You could show me how you got up on Boots. And I'll bring Maggie so she can learn too. Maggie loves horses. Me too!"

Such a thing as a horse owner unable to ride was unimaginable. Joie scrunched her forehead the way she had seen PawPaw do it, and asked, "How come Maggie don' know how to ride her own horse?"

"Aww, that's just 'cause her daddy died before he could teach her."

"When'd her daddy die?"

Debbie shrugged. “Been a while. Don’t know my months. Your daddy show you how to ride?”

“No, done that myself.” Joie turned to go, barely mumbling, “Yeah, I’ll come back next Saturday,” and a second later adding, “But you cain’ tell nobody. My daddy’ll whip me but good!”

“Me too! We’ll be best secret friends forever!” Debbie clapped, hopping on her toes in those shiny shoes until her ruffles rolled like waves +and its butterflies danced.

Joie ran back home so happy about making new Highland friends that PawPaw had to ask, “What you so happy ‘bout now, *cher*?”

She straightened her face quick as she could. “Nothin’, P’Paw. Nothin t’all. Time to go to church?”

PawPaw nodded toward the house so she went inside to clean up, images of playing patty-cake and making clover necklaces flitting through her mind as easily as memories. She’d watch these Highland girls when not around their mothers...find out if they held out their pinkies when they had tea parties...see if they always stood on their toes when they were happy... learn how they spoke... learn how to be someone, anyone special, unique. Surely there was more to her than a compilation of her father’s admonitions about what Cajun girls *shouldn’t* do, think, and be. MawMaw said she was just like her mommy. Wasn’t that good enough?

Every morning when she woke up, Joie slipped her fingers under her mattress and eased out the picture taken at a local festival many years before her parents started having babies. She’d make a tent sheet, lay the photo beside her head, and tell her mother how beautiful she was, but as each month passed, Joie’s memory of Ariat’s face blurred more and more, her only picture now tattered and cloudy from Joie’s touch. She had vowed to stop fogging it up but her

mother was so dainty, with exotic black eyes and curves exactly where they were supposed to be. But sometimes it was just too sad. She didn't recognize her own straight-sided body in the picture, and though she tried to recognize herself somewhere in her grandfather's saintly perspectives about beloved ancestors, there were too many times she had disappointed him to believe she was a worthy descendant to those grand people he talked about with her great aunts and uncles. She loved the old stories but the only time Joie could bear the old aunts was when she was safe on her grandfather's lap... when he dribbled some of his coffee onto a saucer to cool for her, and MawMaw brought her pieces of crusty bread with syrupy figs, and she could bury her face in the warm crook of PawPaw's neck to keep the elders from slobbering the whole side of her face with juicy kisses after they pinched and jiggled her cheeks and buried her in their bosoms to bemoan, "Oh, you poor *'tite fille*, wit' no mamma."

But MawMaw had already taught her how to cook eggs and boil grits, cut onions without slicing her fingers, and churn cream. Plus, she was learning how to sew, though the needles kept stabbing her thumb when they slipped off the oversized thimble. And any time she used good table manners or was polite to her elders MawMaw nodded, "*Respectueux*." Didn't that make her a proper-enough Cajun girl? Even without a mommy?

And what about how MawMaw wouldn't even allow her to wear britches? When the old woman saw Joie in a pair of her brothers' hand-me-down dungarees, she'd shake her head and say, "It ain't right." Joie figured her grandmother would just as soon have her wear those old frocks she, like all ladies on the low land, fashioned from floral and striped cloth that originally contained twenty-five or fifty pounds of flour or rice or sugar. She made all the boys' shirts too but they were boys, after all.

The only cloth they got from the merchant was the white muslin needed for unmentionables, and the only ready-mades they bought were dungarees and winterwear, making it easy for the Highlanders to identify Lowlanders without much difficulty. When Highlanders addressed them in town, they mixed up their names and seemed eternally baffled when they tried to match children to their respective parents, but the Lowlanders really couldn't blame them. They all had the same tanned complexion, the same dark hair and eyes, and the same food-clothes.

But Debbie and Maggie seemed different. After a few Saturdays of sneaking off to play, they no longer stared at Joie's simple clothes. One august summer afternoon, when the sun shone white and cotton clouds made for a polka-dot sky, and the Mississippi River breeze sang through the pecan groves, she came home from a play date and PawPaw asked her where she'd been. Joie, so well-heeled in the vows of her new friends, admitted, "At the Indian Mounds, making wildflower crowns and bracelets with Debbie and Maggie. They rode out on Boots—'member that pony?"

PawPaw was filing a scythe blade held fast between his knees but stopped halfway through a stroke. "Highlanders?"

"I taught 'em how to climb the fence so they could ride. And I been kind to that pony, just like you said."

Joie didn't hear even one single *tsk*, so when she saw PawPaw's forehead didn't scrunch up to start one of his talks, she kissed his cheek and ran off to get ready for confession.

Once she and Joey were old enough for chores, Jules had collected them to live under his roof, so that night when MawMaw clanked her chuck wagon bell, Joie followed her father to MawMaw's kitchen. Daddy was still happy about how she went to confession without needing

to be pinched, and he was smiling about the pecan pie he saw cooling, and she was still feeling brave after telling PawPaw about the girls, and so she thought maybe her father was in a good enough church-going mood to ask, “Daddy, am I being good enough to get a pony now?”

He grabbed her shoulder, popped her on the butt, and answered as gruffly as ever, “It ain’t right for a girl to have a pony of her own when her brothers share a whole barn-full. Now go help your grandmother before you get a real whippin’.”

Same old answer, but today Joie scrunched her eyes and shot back, “But, Daddy, them’s big horses,” waiting to see that long finger point to her room.

She stomped off to bed, giving her father a quiet little *humph* once she was out of earshot. Her heart pounded in her neck as she lay there gloating about how Daddy thought he was so smart about everything in the world but he’d never know her secret about stealing rides on the Schafer pony. It was safe with PawPaw, but, maybe, only if she didn’t get hurt, so she prayed to Saint Christopher and crossed herself twice for good luck so PawPaw wouldn’t ever have to tell.

Joie had been hopping on horses she thought to be wild or neglected for the better part of a year by the time she admitted it but didn’t get on a darned colt until she felt sure it wouldn’t buck her off. It was really quite simple. It didn’t make sense to get on an animal ten or twenty times her size without its permission.

At dawn the next morning, Joie ran into the kitchen toward the smell of fresh biscuits, not the usual cornbread MawMaw came to make every morning. She stopped so fast she almost tipped over—PawPaw stood there, not in his garden.

MawMaw wiped her hands on her apron and pulled out a chair at the table. “Eat so you don’t hold up P’Paw.”

PawPaw walked over and plopped down a miniature halter made from a smooth, miniature rope dyed red as holly berries. "Time to go find that pony." He smiled so big that his teeth slipped out.

It would be the greatest day ever lived! He would bring her to all the neighbors in the parish and they'd find the best pony in the world!

She was jumping on her seat when, barely out of the peninsula and into the Highland grasses, she asked, "Can we go see the ponies at the big white house? Maybe I could play with that little boy. He got the shiniest boots I ever saw!"

"Humph." He was still fiddling with his teeth. "That boy what made you cry?"

"Oooh, nooo, P'Paw. It was that maid said he cain' play with me."

"Aww. Now, *cher*." He paused for a minute before tapping his teeth back in and starting one of his sing-song stories. "Know how big horses makes big horses?"

"Yessir."

"And know how little horses makes little horses?"

"Yessir."

"Well, now, see, Mr. Duchande over there, he makes big horses, so little Tres, well, his daddy most likely brung him 'round to places just like we doin' now to find him a little pony, on account of they big horses cain' make no horses that stay little."

"Okay, P'Paw." She nodded and smiled up at her grandfather, but then he pulled up his mare over to the side of the road, Vs scrunched up in the middle of his forehead.

"And know how a horse and a donkey make a mule?"

"Yessir."

"And know how you cain' mix a girl and a boy mule to get a baby mule?"

Joie looked up. “How come?”

“Well, just don’ mix right is all. Same thing how come we don’t mix wit’ the Highland people, *bebe*. Just don’ mix right. *Comprendre?*”

Beaming about how she learned something special about how to mix horses, Joie offered the old man her sweetest, “*Oui, vieux-pape.*”

* * * * *

Three days later when she and PawPaw went to DDR, Joie waited near the wagon to avoid that maid, occasionally peeking around the corner until Tres ran out. She held a finger to her lips before whispering, “I got a pony!”

He tiptoed over to the corner of the porch. “Best we stay here,” he sighed, *Nadine*.” He flicked a thumb toward the kitchen.

When Tres hopped down from the porch, Joie whispered, “And my daddy said I could ride him at the festival if I’m good!” Her dark ponytail danced a jig as she hopped up and down.

“That’s just two months out! I’ll be there—I could teach you what to do!”

Joie frowned. “But Nadine’ll see us.”

“Let me think.” Tres hopped up onto the back of PawPaw’s wagon and gave Joie a hand.

She sat quietly, just swinging her bare feet and bending forward to see Tres’ strange marble eyes until he jerked his head up and said, “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

He ran back inside, trotting back a minute later with pencil and paper. “Go keep a lookout?”

Joie hopped off and stood guard at the corner of the house, half-hopping and cutting her dark eyes back and forth from the screen door to Tres until he waved her over.

She slinked back to the wagon and Tres held the paper so she could see a big square, a long fence-line, and two hills.

“This is where we are,” he pointed.

“And that’s the Indian Mounds?” Joie asked.

“It’s halfway between us and y’all’s land. Nobody’d see us there.” Tres eyes twinkled in the sun like Joey’s marbles, and Joie couldn’t help but clap and start hopping again.

“Shhhh.” He wrapped his hands around hers. “Next Saturday?”

Joie nodded, but then the corners of her mouth drew down like an upside-down horseshoe, forcing out her bottom lip to where pinkness showed. “‘Xcept that’s where I been meeting Maggie and Debbie.”

“Can’t you meet them somewhere else—that’s a good field to practice.”

Joie grinned, thinking he must really like me. “Well, the next Saturday, then. This Saturday I’ll tell ‘em I wanna go in the pecan grove.”

Tres frowned, but before he could answer, footsteps clacked on the porch. He mouthed *okay*, then ran around to the front of the house.

What a lucky little girl she was to have three Highland friends. She wiped the smile from her face when PawPaw approached.

* * * * *

Tres saw Joie again five days later at DDR, but his mother’s presence forced him to watch Joie from afar. Then he saw her again the Thursday before their scheduled Saturday. She was walking on Main Street, holding the decrepit hand of her grandfather. He wanted to talk to her that day but couldn’t get away from his mother.

When they finally met on Saturday, he told Joie, “Look, play like you’re passing me on the street. We can practice how I can hand you a note so nobody’ll see.”

“Huh?”

“You know, so we don’t have to wait ‘til Saturdays.”

“Buuuut—” She scrunched her brows. “Tres, I just know my numbers and the alphabet song.”

When Tres saw her gaze fall to the ground, he nudged her with an elbow. “But you know your days, right?”

Joie looked up, now flaring all her teeth save the one in the front that was just peeking out. “Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday!”

Tres clapped. “Okay, I’ll write a number—like, one for Sunday... two for Monday...”

“Three for Tuesday?”

“See? It won’t be hard. We’ll meet after supper at the Mounds.”

“But I wash dishes and sometimes have chores after supper. ‘Specially now. I been real good to never say *heck* in front of Daddy and finish all my chores every day. I cain’ have him saying I’m too big for my britches, or he won’t let me bring Patches to the festival.”

Tres sucked in his lips. “It’s okay.” He nudged her again. “I’ll wait for ya. And when you know how to read, we can say other things.”

“Huh?”

“Like, I don’t know.” *Like... I like you.* That would be a fine thing to write to a girl!

Joie shrugged only a moment before mounting Patches. She set her reins and heels like Tres told her to, squeezed Patches with her legs, and instructed him, “Walk on.”

* * * * *

The following Saturday, Tres was waiting for her when she galloped full-on to the Mounds. Breathless, she spit out, “Debbie and Maggie keep askin’ how come we cain’ meet at the Mounds no more! What if they show up while we’re here?”

“Hmm.” Tres handed her a bunch of butterweeds speckled with pink primrose. “Let me think on it.”

Grinning at the first gift she ever got from somebody with different blood, Joie sat in the grass and started weaving clover flowers into jewelry, occasionally sneaking a look at Tres’ eyes. By the time she finished a bracelet and reached it toward Tres, she thought about her secret hiding place. “Tres! Quilted Bay! Those two giant rocks back by *Lapeninsule Deux*?”

“Quilted Bay?”

“That’s what *I* call it. I lie down on my momma’s old quilt over there.”

Tres was sliding the bracelet onto his wrist when he jerked up his head again. “Good idea... but... what do you do over there all by yourself?”

“Nothin’. Just kinda lay in the shade and daydream.” She kept her gaze on the crown she was weaving.

“What about?”

“Well, ‘bout how I’ll be a famous horse trainer. How I’ll change gaits and nobody’ll see any cues and I’ll win lots of blue ribbons.”

Tres reached over to hold her hand, but the bracelet on his arm made her so giddy she hopped on Patches and flew home.

They met four more times after supper, plus all those Saturdays before the Acadian Festival, but it would be years before Joie could remember to do everything required for permission.

Chapter 6

On the way to the festival, PawPaw and Joie had barely left the woods of the peninsula when PawPaw began a story for the long ride. “You know, child, our people shook in they boots when they first come down here, thinkin’ on red men wantin’ they scalps.” He patted Joie’s hand. “But they wasn’ no savages, *bebe*. They ain’ had no use for the swamps and helped our people learn how to cut off they lives from the soldiers what hunted them. Ain’ nair one of them soldiers goin’ in that swamp to get ate by gators and moccasins, just tryin’ to catch up with some people ain’ had no tax money anyhow.”

Joie’s grandfather had always kept her family’s history and culture alive, had kept her mother’s legacy alive since Joie was a toddler and sat on his lap during those storytelling afternoons with great aunts and uncles gathered ‘round. Now, at almost twelve years of age, she was old enough to step into the life of those whose station was changed when her ancestors left France, then Nova Scotia to settle in Maryland with the British on their heels, only to flee again without their livelihood, cattle, and most of their belongings. “They barely had what they got on they backs and some pots and pans...” he told Joie in that melodious voice of his.

“Them English, well, *bebe*, they was wantin’ our people to *parler anglais* and give up the Church. But they was too strong for Mother Mary and come all ‘cross the ocean to Nouvelle-Écosse (Nova Scotia), a place they called *Acadie*. Had to leave that place too when the English come huntin’ ‘em down again for tax money. It take a lot of brave to leave.

“That’s when they headed down south a ways, place called Maryland ‘cause they’s some *Catholique* there. But soldiers from *Angleterre* come for ‘em again... then *la Guerre de Révolution*. That time, they left 50,000 horned cattle, 30,000 sheep, 20,000 pigs, and 5,000 horses, come down to *terre ferme* named after the Royals Louis and Anna.

“That was your momma’s people, Jean and Elizabeth LaBiche, they son Pierre, his wife Beulah, and they daughter, Emeline. She was betrothed to Louis Arceneaux. ‘When we get down South,’ Louis told her, ‘meet me ‘neath the biggest tree in the parish.’”

Joie had warmed to his stories many times as a child, sitting on PawPaw’s lap, sipping *café’ au lait* he poured into his saucer to cool for her, and eating crusty bread with fat, syrupy figs MawMaw put up in Mason jars. Now she warmed to how brave those people were. She’d have to be more like them. After all, didn’t she have the kind of love Emeline and Louis had?

“Our people was fin’ly safe, built homes hid in the woods on the low land, left the high grasslands for they few head of livestock.

“They promised *fidélité* to they new home, promise to court her sweet, *respectueux*. They listen as she whisper her secrets, wooed her soil for *plante abondant* and *gros animal*. In ditches, shallow bayous, and river-overflow pools, they found little creatures that look like big lobsters they caught in Maryland. They Indian friends called ‘em *saktce-ho’ma*, and Jean figure out how to fix a square net to sticks like a teepee frame to catch what they called *escrevisse*. So they ate crawfish, not lobster.

“They studied the seasons, the moon, the tide in the marsh. Saw how spiders build short, thick webs before a storm. They told they young just like me and your daddy told you, ‘Go play with your cricket traps tonight, set ‘em in the brush... you’ll hear ‘em loud before it rain.’ Been getting’ bait that way ever since. Same wit’ frogs when we say go grab your sacks and torches

when the rain comin' and they goin' croak loud. See who catch more. May be just a game for younguns but we get some legs for frying and you learn the good that come from duty.

"I still remember my paw's voice. He'd bend down real low like, like almost to whisper, and he'd say, 'Listen, one day you'll hear our land whisper her secrets... listen, and she'll speak her wisdoms to you.' *Bebe*, that was all more 'n a hundred years before I was born. Then the *nouveau riche* come."

* * * * *

PawPaw pulled up his old mare at the festival, Joie tapping her foot as she scanned the crowd for Tres. She moved to jump down, but PawPaw grabbed her arm. "Now, *cher*, you 'member your people.

"Over by Laf'yette and Saint Martinville, where your momma's people first settled, Longfellow the one how come people started callin' it Evangeline country, and that old tree Emeline and Louis was s'pose to meet at after they got drove from they home, he called it Evangeline Oak. Course, Emeline, she sho made her way to The Great Tree, but Louis, he never did come. Longfellow heard the story 'bout your great aunt and changed it to make that poem. Man changed Emeline's name to Evangeline, and her betrothed to Gabriel."

PawPaw finally released her arm and poked out his chest. "It be Longfellow's Evangeline they honor wit' the Acadian Festival. You 'member that, and do your people proud."

An hour later, Joie and Patches walked out of the ring to where PawPaw waited, and reached down to hand him her ribbon. "I did just what you said, and kept Aunt Emeline on my mind."

PawPaw held it up as though it were a golden chalice.

Chapter 7

The following spring, Joie met Maggie and Debbie in the field next to Barry and Sande Comeaux's house. The boys collected low-hanging dried pods of old mimosa trees while the girls climbed up into the branches to collect fluffy pink flowers. They were dabbing them on their necks like powder puffs that smelled as sweet as Fairy Floss—the cottony festival treat that melted on their tongues like magic—when Debbie pointed. “Look. That’s the Duchande boy.”

Tres reined in his pony, smiling up at Joie until stubby-legged Sande ran over and starting pulling on his leg. “Help me climb? Pleeeease?”

Tres was lifting a leg over the back of his pony when Debbie shouted, “Noooo! This is *our* tower,” which sent the boy crying to his mother.

Tres settled back in his saddle, giving Joie another big grin when Miss Elaine called, “Barryyyyyyyy,” from her wheelchair at the window.

Joie scooted down her limb fast as a coon but before she could mount Patches and take off, Mr. Comeaux appeared at the corner of the house.

He stuck out a finger at each child. “I know you. And I know you...” Then he saw Joie. “Who are you?”

Joie couldn't find her words.

“You’re one of the Fryoux clan.” He slapped his hands once, as though to shoo away a critter.

Joie cowered, hopped up on Patches, and galloped back home hoping her father wouldn't find out. She was back home haying Patches when she realized none of her friends had called out or come after her. *Humph... Highlanders.*

By breakfast the next morning, Joie settled with the idea that her friends had done what they needed to stay out of trouble, and by the time the family left for church, she was sure she didn't need to confess anything to Father Barbier. Certainly, playing with Highlanders couldn't blacken her soul. But on the way out after Mass, Mr. Ronnie pulled PawPaw aside.

Shoulda made another confession.

At dinner, Joie was ready for a scolding. She cleaned her plate without a word, trying to think of what she'd do if her father took away her pony—he was itching to. He had warned her from day one that he would if she ever got too big for her britches, and playing with Highlanders would certainly count.

Joie collected plates and tried to make herself small and invisible at the zinc, but then PawPaw tapped her on the shoulder. “Need to trim that pony's hooves.”

Trying to appear as sorrowful as she could, Joie walked chin-on-chest to fetch Patches.

PawPaw picked up a hoof, rasp in hand, and began the long strokes to file down the pony's hoof. Without looking up, he asked, “Know how Miss Elaine stay in a wheelchair?”

“Yessir.” Short, quick answers would be the most *respectueux* and get her out of that barn before her father came around to reprimand her surely more harshly than PawPaw would.

“Well, know how come?”

“Nossir.”

“She got the polio.”

Joie didn't know what that meant. “Uh huh.”

“Gets to the nerves.” PawPaw kept stroking the hoof in his lap.

“Uh huh.”

He craned up his neck. “Like in the *makes a woman nervous* kind of nerves.”

“Yessir.”

He nodded and went back to filing. “Be a right Christian thing to do to keep a woman from havin’ to fight wit’ them polio nerves, what wit’ all the mischief children can bring on a momma.”

Here it comes. Joie cringed now when PawPaw looked up, but then he released Patches’ hoof and bent to pick up the next, saying, “Go on now, get to them dishes.”

She hugged her grandfather’s neck, promised, “I’ll pay mind, P’Paw,” and ran inside more thankful than ever that MawMaw didn’t have to sit in her old wheelchair, which she now used as a wheelbarrow.

The following morning, she heard her father shout, “Girl! Girl!”

PawPaw must have let the cat out of the bag. She froze, dropping and breaking the handle of PawPaw’s favorite *demitasse* as it slipped from her hands at the kitchen zinc.

Her father barked from the door behind her, “Why aren’t my pecans ready? You are *not* to ride that horse until your work’s done. That animal can go back where it came from just as fast as it came.”

* * * * *

Now thirteen, Joie thought she had learned when to keep away from her father, but she didn’t realize his lessons could be much harsher.

The next Sunday in the early morning hours, Patches and Joie ran for what seemed hours down the narrow trails throughout the peninsula. His tail swished and his ears (the left one

white, the right, brown) pricked back and forth from the trail ahead and back to Joie, responding to her soundless summons, feeling her urge him on, to take flight over ditches and charge through underbrush. His eyes, wide and deep, sparkled with the joy of it all.

But Joie left Patches to graze too close to PawPaw's prized plot when they left for church, and he sniffed out the carrots like a pig with truffles.

"Shoo! Out o' here," her father screamed! Damn it to Hell!"

Jules and PawPaw flagged their arms up and down and all over the place in a frenzy trying to get Patches out of the garden, until Jules saw Joie sitting on PawPaw's back steps, laughing and pointing at them.

Joie thought Patches was laughing, too. The only time her little paint ever saw such a spectacle was when they played pasture-tag. Joie'd chase him while waving her arms the way the men were doing, trying to corner him so she could touch his neck or shoulder or rump. As soon as she did, she'd turn around as fast as she could and flee for dear life, zigzagging her way through the pasture so he couldn't tag her. But he always did, half the time with a nose on Joie's behind that put her in flight and sent her diving into the ground. He thought that was funny. Joie thought it would have been funnier if she were a 600-pound pony rather than a seventy-pound girl.

Jules stomped over and dragged Joie into the garden. "No respect for your elders, eh? After all your grandfather's work? Get that animal out o' here!" He shoved Joie toward Patches.

"Shh, boy... it's okay." She slipped a knuckle through Patches' halter and started toward the barn.

"You will fix this. I don't care how long it takes. Do you *hear me*?" he shouted after her.

Joie nodded.

“Do you hear me!”

“Yes, Daddy.”

She knew how PawPaw loved the handsome symmetry of his garden and its generous bounty, but his artwork was no longer precision lines of mounds groomed to perfection, each row identical to the next from end to end, all with the same perfect spacing, perfect grades. It now more resembled a child’s painting, a drab brown background with globs of green dabbled anywhere and everywhere.

Joie secured Patches in the barn, and when she returned to the garden with a hoe, Jules walked over, shook her shoulders to where her head plopped back and forth, and hollered, “All of it!”

* * * * *

The worst part about Joie’s punishment was not the scolding or the gardening chore, nor the blisters that formed each day atop the previous ones. She actually took pleasure in the work. Her grandfather taught her how to hoe, and his pride and joy in this land lived in the same genes that coursed through Joie’s veins, bringing her the same happiness. Much of the time she shared with her grandfather was in this very place, between meticulous rows of earthen sculpture. He taught Joie the sweet smell of luscious soil, its moist, grainy texture that best allowed seeds to burst open and reach into unencumbered depths, never-ending fingers drinking in all the magical nutrients of their land.

The tears Jules witnessed were not because of the work, but rather for the many days that would pass before—if ever—he would allow his daughter to ride again, and for her understanding that Daddy and PawPaw were mad at her beloved pony. Especially Daddy. He

didn't understand. He didn't know what it meant to hold something so dearly that the mere thought of being without it could shred your insides and bleed your heart.

Early morning the third day of Joie's monumental task, PawPaw walked up to the edge of the garden near his back porch, and stood there for a spell, his hands cupped over the top of the hoe propped up in front of him.

Joie played like she didn't see him... until she could bear it no longer. She turned to face her grandfather, looked into that leathery, shriveled-up old face with its kind, understanding gray eyes, and hot tears streamed down her cheeks. No choking sobs, no whining, only tears of sorrow from the eyes of an adolescent whose mind comprehended, quite simply, that something she dearly loved had caused harm to someone she dearly loved.

PawPaw made his way over to his only granddaughter, there in the remnants of art, still with so much mess to make right. As was his way, he rested a rough old spotted and scarred hand on her head and smoothed her matted hair, and when his arm came to rest on Joie's shoulder, her sobs broke loose. She had hurt her grandfather, her friend, the man she credited as responsible for so much joy in her life.

PawPaw let her sob, gave her a few soft pats on the back, and after a moment of quiet consolation, left to work on the next row. A silent apology, silent forgiveness, and a confirmation that Joie's was the greatest grandfather who ever lived.

* * * * *

Weeks later, when Joie was again allowed to ride Patches, she met Debbie and Maggie at the pecan grove.

Debbie said, "We almost gave up waitin' on ya."

Joie couldn't tell them how mean her father was. "Y'all get in trouble after Mr. Ronnie saw us?"

Both responded, "What for?"

Joie had to smother a smile at the thought of PawPaw's long-ago talk about horses and donkeys and mules.

"Mr. Ronnie said it... about me being a Lowlander. Y'all'll get it trouble if your mommas find out."

"Well," Debbie confessed, "they already did."

Joie's eyes sprung wide with surprise. "So you *did* get in trouble?"

"Not exactly," Maggie explained. "More like *threatened* to get in trouble if we hang around with you. But I lied, and so did Debbie." She and Debbie both looked down into their laps for a long moment.

Maggie mumbled, "We said you just showed up and we didn't know you." Still frowning, she looked up to ask her poor friend, "Are we awful?"

Lying to parents was awful, but they did it so they could all still be secret friends. Joie had taught them to ride, how to circle ponies right up next to them so they wouldn't be hurt if they kicked out, had convinced them that climbing a tree didn't mean they were bad. They were real friends, weren't they? But then why didn't she tell them how she felt about Tres?

"Not *too* awful." She couldn't help but smile.

"Look, there's Tres." Maggie pointed to a carriage rounding the bend.

"And Annette," Debbie said. "She and her mother came over for tea, and I wanted to take her to go see Maggie and Boots but Mrs. Duchande grabbed her arm and wouldn't let her."

“Yeah,” Maggie said, “Mrs. Duchande looks mean. But Annette looks nice. She looks real sweet when Tres walks in town with her.” She shielded her lips with her fingers as though to whisper a secret. “What’s he doing out here? Think his daddy knows how far he takes her?”

With raised brows, Debbie almost sang, “Prob-lyyyyy nooooooot.”

Joie kept looking back and forth to her friends, breathing from the top of her lungs. Was Debbie hinting at something? Had she smiled too big when she saw Tres? What if they figured it out? Would her secret be safe with them? Unsure and too afraid to give them more evidence, when Tres looked over and the girls waved, Joie hurriedly shook her head to tell him not to stop.

The Comeaux fiasco had been a close call, and Joie had been thankful for their clandestine visits through the years at Quilted Bay, in a secluded pasture of one of those poor ponies they practiced gentling, or even at PawPaw’s carriage, but Nadine had long since wised up to Tres’ antics when Joie and PawPaw came ‘round—she had started leaving two candy sticks on the kitchen table so Tres didn’t have to sneak them out. She only did it if Mr. and Mrs. Duchande weren’t home, but this was the same woman who had fussed at Tres for taking her hand and walking toward the shed row those many years ago. When had she switched to his side? And what about Tres being so risky passing her those notes? She had a drawer full. And he had migrated toward her at the Acadian Festival. What if someone saw them? Was Nadine now to be trusted? And Maggie and Debbie? As a teenager, Joie struggled more and more to keep her feelings to herself.

Chapter 8

The summer before Joie's sixteenth birthday, older brother Beaufort ran home shouting, "A Duchande cowboy... P'Paw," he gasped, "man got bit by that horse what belonged to the Arceneaux"! Got a dent in his arm look like a slaughtered pig neck!"

The Duchandes had collected the yearling in lieu of payment but had then stalled him for half a year and dumped him out in a pasture for years before a cowboy tried to break him. When the horse slammed the man into a fence and broke three of his ribs, the cowboys had beat him until the poor thing turned mad enough to attack the cowboy when he pumped water for the field trough.

PawPaw bowed his head, shook it slowly once to the left and once to the right, faced his grandchildren, and said, "The acts of unprincipled men."

It was a lesson in the canons of life that would become part of the *us* they knew themselves to be. Joie had to act.

She whistled for Patches to jump his paddock fence, and they made a hard gallop the entire distance to DDR. This wasn't just any colt—it had once belonged to a friend.

* * * * *

Joie had gone to First Communion Catechism with Claude Arceneaux, and Mother Catherine had buddied them together to memorize the *Act of Contrition*, which feels to eight-

year-olds like a thousand words long, requiring endless hours regurgitating its incantations in hopes the words would find a permanent resting place in their brains.

Claude's mom rewarded their efforts with soft peppermint sticks, the kind Tres gave her at DDR, and Joie liked going there because Claude's older brother JuJu helped Joie teach Patches to play pasture-tag. Plus, they had their very own mother, who Joie was eager to please not only for the candy but for her gentle touch, her soft eyes when they conquered a passage, her giggles when her husband popped her on the bottom and she slapped his hand and jutted her gaze toward Claude and Joie. "The children," she'd whisper.

When Joie arrived at the Marionite Order's St. Basil's Convent for First Communion and couldn't find Claude, one of the old nuns told her he had to go to a hospital in New Orleans to be with his father, who got the polio. Though Joie still didn't know exactly what that meant, she figured it couldn't have been too bad because the adults said not to worry on account of it normally killed just children. But in another part of her brain, Joie figured it must've been pretty bad because it was a really big deal to miss First Communion and Claude would most certainly find himself on the brink of burning in the brimstone and fire of Satan's hell.

The emaciated stick body of Claude's father survived and was returned to his family the following winter, but not before missing the sugar cane harvest. Lowlanders helped them as much as they could but didn't get in enough to pay Mr. Duchande for the balance owed on the boy's horse. Other than how unfair they seemed to their children and the fact that they wouldn't say hello when her family greeted them in town, at that point in her life, Joie had no reason to hate Tres' parents. But taking back that boy's horse fashioned a blinding revulsion in Joie's soul the scope of which she had theretofore reckoned unfathomable.

* * * * *

By the time Joie and Patches reached DDR the day Beaufort told her about the bitten cowboy, her heart throbbed in her neck, her cheeks, and even her eyelids. She dropped to the ground on trembling legs, breathing fire and not sure what to say when the ranch hands approached. Tres' parents were in Atlanta on vacation, so she knew Tres would be in the barn, and waited for him to wave off the cowboys. From the shed row, he watched Joie and Patches corral the beast in a nearby round-pen.

For the remaining three hours of the morning, Joie sat on an upside-down washtub at the inner perimeter. Amid the pointing and laughing of a handful of cowboys gathered to see a stupid girl get her brains kicked in, she printed her name in the dirt, split long blades of hay into thin hairs, and did anything she could think of to occupy her mind. But most of all, she just sat.

At noon, Joie and Patches chased the horse back into the pasture, then rode home.

Next morning, same routine.

On day three, at a leisure walk the horse entered the round-pen with the two on his heels, and on day four he ate hay on the ground three feet from Joie's washtub. On day five, she sat on the tub in the center of the pen with her back to him. An hour later, his curiosity outweighed his fear and he peeked over her shoulder to see what she was doing with the three-foot stretch of rope she knotted and unknotted.

Day six, he met Patches and Joie at the gate. Day seven, he followed Joie into the round-pen, and on day eight he allowed her to touch him on the shoulder. Three days later, he let her saddle him and sit on his back, and the next day, twelve days into training, they walked the perimeter of the Duchande ranch—the horse, a saddle, a rope halter and reins, and Joie on his back.

From the corner of her eye, Joie had watched Tres watch her. His shadow would appear at the end of the shed row, and after a minute or so he'd walk away, only to return an hour later. Twelve days in a row.

Joie felt proud of her accomplishment, and overjoyed that Tres had kept an eye on her day after day, but deep inside, she knew she should have let that particular horse be, should have heeded her family's warning never to get involved with "*those people* from the Highlands," as her father put it after one of the Duchande cowboys crossed the street in town the following week to tip his hat at Jules and snigger, "Mighty fine cowgirl ya raisin' there, Mr. Fryoux!"

She could only imagine the steam shooting out of her father's ears when the cowboy told him what she'd done, and she was shucking corn when Jules returned from town that morning.

"Girl! Girl!"

Joie scrunched up her shoulders and walked out the back door as her father reached the top steps, slamming her eyelids shut so she didn't have to see his fist bang against the door.

"Headstrong!" Jules screamed it a dozen times at the kitchen table.

He would push Joie toward the submission expected of Cajun women until she conformed, but the more he tried to rein her in, the easier it became to dismiss his admonitions. Joie sat quietly at the table across from her father, cursing him for trying to suffocate her and leave her with no life at all to herself, to live under the governance of his all-seeing, all-knowing eyes. When he finished dressing her down, finished slamming both fists on the table with every third word, finished fussing with one final *Damnit to Hell, stay away from that bunch!* Joie slipped out the back door and whistled for Patches before her father could punish her from riding again. Off she went on the wings of her paint pony, through the thicket and creeks and fields, off to find something different, something more, something *her*.

She flew through the woods dreaming about the magical training methods she'd use to make herself famous. But the very idea that she might actually make a living and a career for herself, earning more in one year than her elders in ten, raised hackles on the necks of the men folk, especially Daddy and PawPaw. For the whole first decade of the twentieth century, most of the country had been rapidly changing, but things didn't change so quickly in the Deep South, and such things as women's rights and careers just didn't set well with men. As understanding as PawPaw was, Joie had to admit that he was still an old man from the South.

When she sat down to dinner, Jules and PawPaw were already complaining about Linda Coleman, that *woman* who had the audacity to go to Tulane Medical School, taking away a classroom seat that should have gone to a man who no doubt had to feed his poor starving family.

Joie couldn't help it, and chirped in, "That's old news. She graduated already. She's a doctor same as any other man doctor. Shouldn't we respect her now?"

Jules' fork hit his plate. "Them women're bastardizing our Southern family values!"

"What about Eve Butterworth Diebert?" She was a philanthropist who received a papal award when she wasn't even Catholic. "Shouldn't we be happy about heathens helping out us Catholics?"

Jules squinted and bit down so hard the muscles on the side of his face waggled. "Respect your elders." Subject closed.

Joey kicked her under the table but whispered her pet name, *Boo*, from the corner of his mouth. Joie knew her sweet brother was right, that she was going too far on a day she was already in trouble, that maybe she should try a little harder to conform. But life offered too much

fun and she didn't dwell on the downside any longer than it took to think up a good daydream to escape from conflict with her father, and within herself, too.

She whispered *sorry* to her elders, finished her meal daydreaming, washed dishes, and hopped on Patches to be alone for a walk through the oceans of sweet Highland grasses, still with visions of proving her elders wrong by becoming a great trainer, how she'd have her way in this one matter, how they'd be unable to look her in the eyes when she stuck a finger in their faces and chided them with a smart mouth: "I told you so!"

The breeze was still that day, and they kept getting caught in the swarms of teeny gnats that congregated around their heads and followed them on hot summer days, so once in a while they had to trot off or even gallop for a bit to leave them behind. They passed the Indian Mounds and reached the rocky terrain where Patches had to tiptoe through fat gray stones at Quilted Bay.

About twenty yards from her little fortress, Patches stopped dead in his tracks. Joie squeezed his ribs. He jerked his head straight up in the air. His ears pricked back and forth, back and forth, and she thought he must have heard something, so she let him stand a while. After a minute or so, she squeezed him again, then thumped him with her ankles, and again a little harder. But he wouldn't go. Frustrated, she hopped off and started picking her way through the rocks, but then Patches nudged her, hard, on the behind, and she fell and got even madder, and fussed at him for making her bruise her knee and scrape her elbow and palms. He kept waving his head up and down and around in tall oval circles, but Joie thought he wanted to play and kept fussing, "Stop it!" He pawed the ground and grumbled in that low, gravelly voice normally reserved for suppertime in the winter when he smelled the warm molasses mash Joie cooked for him. He pranced a high-stepping trot dance, circling around and around Joie, and she

was still sitting in the rocks, rubbing dirt out of her skinned palms and watching this one-horse show, thinking of all the blue ribbons she could have won if Patches had danced like that in the show ring, when she heard it. Except she knew it was a lot closer. And so did Patches.

Joie froze.

Patches half-reared. His left front foot came down to strike the rattling tail, but the rest of the snake still lay in the crevices between rocks and his hoof couldn't slide in that deep, so he kept half-rearing and stomping the rocks, maybe a dozen times before Joie came to her senses and crept away. She called him again, but he reared and stomped, reared and stomped as if he were hypnotized and couldn't stop.

Then he came down that one last time, and Joie heard the pop, and tasted the bile, and saw the red, then the white of his jagged cannon bone jutting out of the patch of brown on his right leg.

"Patchessssssss!"

That last blow smashed the snake's head like a pancake.

* * * * *

Joie refused the men of her family the honor of relieving her beloved friend of his misery.

PawPaw pointed to a spot near Patches' brown ear and stepped back. Joie pulled the trigger. The low, grumbling moan and writhing ceased.

PawPaw held Joie close on the walk to his carriage, shielding her eyes while her brothers dug a giant hole at the base of the Indian Mounds.

Chapter 9

Tres brought Joie a white-and-pink striped sugar stick, hoping to see her smile the way she did as a child, when she brushed by and he slipped one into her hand. She loved them since the first time he tried to lure her to the barn, and always giggled when the airy treat tickled her tongue as they melted. But Joie didn't want one today. Patches was dead, slain by her own hand.

Tres hadn't seen her since Patches died. A week had passed before he figured out something was wrong and risked a trip into the peninsula with a fake excuse that he had found a riding crop he thought was hers. "It's not your fault," he whispered, but her sobs only deepened.

"How can you say it's not my fault? I told you what happened! He was trying to tell me not to go on, and I didn't trust him." Her head was in her hands as she sat beside Tres on a crossbar under the cistern, her fingers flexing her scalp back and forth as if to rub the vision out of her brain. "The way he was looping his head around... I know that means trouble, and I ignored it. I let him down and I had to kill him for it!"

Tres peered up at Joie's house, then at her grandparents' to see if anyone was looking before he placed a hand on her shoulder, quivering with waves of grief. He was out of his element. He didn't have the words to comfort her. All he knew was that he had to find a way to make Joie smile, to be happy enough to smile.

“Remember that first show with Patches? Heck, Joie, I couldn’t see your cues even back then. Y’all won a lot of ribbons.” Horse shows had become the only environment where they could publicly say hello, hiding within the anonymity of a sea of tan jodhpurs and blue coats, Joie in her homemade outfit sewn perfectly by MawMaw, a secret Tres was proud to know.

Tres wanted to tell Joie that she’d love another pony, that he’d still wrap striped candies in palm-sized notes that asked her to meet him at their hiding place, and he’d be her sweetheart, confidante, and biggest fan forever. But that might only make her cry today. After only a week of not seeing her, he yearned to hear Joie tell him how the rolling land reminds her of the ocean swells in a picture she had seen in *The Black Stallion*, and the breezes that blow through the grove sound like tumbling waves. He needed to see her stand in the middle of hayfields and watch them transform gold to red and back again in the sun and wind, become mesmerized by how the breeze whorled her flowered dresses... roll, roll, roll, with the cadence of the ocean. The grasslands were their ocean and their cavern its bay—Joie coined it *Quilted Bay* because she said that’s how the place felt to her, like the warmth of her mother’s old quilt, always tucked into a deep crevice.

Would they ever again be able to meet there, ever again crouch down under the barely visible valley between overhangs of boulders that sheltered them from sun and rain, Joie’s old quilt laid out upon a thickness of moss where they sat and talked? He closed his eyes to the vision of her dark, curly lashes quivering beneath peaked brows as she twirled a bit of candy from side to side, occasionally floating it against her front teeth so she could nibble off a tiny flake, closing her mind to the rest of the world.

In recent years, Tres had gone so far as to meander into the peninsula to join Joie when she visited cousins. She was the only person who knew him, who he really was inside. She

knew the stock he came from, understood his sister's loneliness, and knew Tres poured his heart into the land her own ancestors had first settled, a land alive with ancient stories, animals adored, and childhood games that breathed hope and promises of joy into a mystic culture.

She even knew his little tricks. When they were young, Joie had come across he and Carroll Devillier matching pennies on a dare that Tres could climb a tree whose lowest limb was more than three feet above his head. She watched him make the bet in earnest then impiously stand on his horse's back, grab a limb, and swing like a laughing baboon before noticing the corners of Joie's mouth turn ever-so-slightly downward.

She had tucked in her lips when he told her he got a lecture from his mother after she saw scars on the calves of his Italian leather boots—tree bark skinned off the polish and pitted the leather when he swung his legs around the branch to heave himself up.

She was his conscience even then, had shared how she felt only guilt and self-chastisement after she and Joey cheated to win *boat-leg*.

As much as he loved Joie, Nadine's old warning still haunted him. The back of his neck prickled with visions of his mother's wrath if she ever found out he so much as acknowledged a Lowlander and his stomach flipped over when he saw Joie in town, but he ignored her when his mother or one of the society ladies was nearby. He watched her from the distance, waited for the expression he had seen when she caught him being unfair to Carroll. But he never again saw it, as though she were now protected by some mystical god duty-bound to guard her from hurtful emotions. He chilled with the truth of the hurt and disappointment he inflicted whether she showed it or not.

Still, he ignored her and disappointed her in the same manner he had learned to disappoint his parents and the little sister for whom he might have set a better example, had he

not been so consumed with figuring out how to make his father like him and please an unrelenting mother who criticized people like Joie, claiming they lacked respect for themselves and their own culture. After all, they abbreviated *Acadian* with *Cajun* and created their own dialect because they're ill-bred and too illiterate to enunciate proper French.

Tres wasn't like Joie, wasn't raised to think of others before himself. His was a family of cattle and horse ranchers descended from French ranchers, raising the same bloodlines his great-grandparents floated across the Atlantic with their human cargo, and now Tres was a proper sixteen-year-old French boy who attended St. John the Evangelist Catholic School.

He had learned how to read when he was five and, at six, his mother had assigned him the task of reading *Moby Dick*. Though much of the literature was beyond his understanding, Captain Ahab—the strong, virulent leader who'd stand up to anyone and everyone for a singular noble purpose—became his bedtime hero, second only to Joie.

She was the only girl he knew who thought the very river around them, and the sands of the Amite, and stones and boulders of the Highlands were alive, that they lived with the simple abandonment in spirit that people should strive for. He couldn't remember ever not being in love with her, from the moment his seven-year-old heart had cottoned to those deep-set eyes glancing sideways through dark curls that all but hid the sweetest face he'd ever seen. If only his mother could understand—.

The only time Tres had ever challenged his mother was that summer of his grandmother's death. And he didn't care that he suffered a bruised ego from being slapped across the face and it did nothing to grow him into a man. Something was terribly amiss in his life and his expectations of other people. When he thought about his parents, his stomach sank. A void in his life had gouged open like a busted lip that only Tres could see, and he felt like a real human

being only when he snuck out to the peninsula and experienced the love style of those simple Cajuns, where children went barefoot, ran wild through the woods, and ate with their fingers.

He and Annette dined on china and ate with three different forks. They adhered to strict schedules for academics, the arts, and social engagements, and neither of them would be caught dead without their shoes not only because their mother judged it indecent, but because they both carried the gene that represented their mother's single physical flaw: their second toes grew grotesquely long. Tres had once grabbed Annette by the hand when she was five, led her to a patch of shaded ground under a Live Oak after a rain, and coaxed her to remove her Mary Janes and socks at the edge of the grass. They stood there ready to jump in and hop around barefooted in the mud when Annette suddenly gasped, "But how do we make us clean again?"

Tres had felt daring and brave, a strong leader and big brother intent on finding a way for little Annette to taste freedom. But he couldn't figure out how to avoid being punishment for their improper behavior, so on went their shoes.

Duchande children would never be switched, the common punishment on the peninsula (Annette had shrieked in horror when Tres told her he saw one of Joie's aunts break off a thin branch, strip it of its leaves, then swing three full-blasted strokes against the back of her daughter's thighs when she stuck out her tongue at her). But they would both prefer corporal punishment to their mother staring them down with her hands on her hips, and the subsequent deep exhale of disappointment from their father when she marched them into his library to stand in front of him, look him straight in the eyes, and confess their shameful indiscretion.

Though Tres might have sloshed through the mud by himself that day, he couldn't risk getting Annette in trouble for following her trusted big brother into a puddle, consequences be damned. Why he never attempted to do so while alone, he would ruminate on for years, oft

times convincing himself that he was proud to act like a good son, that he should act on his impulse to be daring and independent only when he was safe with friends. He could do that. He had the luxury of going out on his own, but Annette was a prisoner of society's rules, of proper etiquette, of their mother's legacy and her mother's, and nowhere in that philosophy of life was there room for the exercise of free thought or unregulated behavior. As the years passed, Tres' sporadic challenges to his mother's cold upbringing served only to stoke hidden coals and to feed Annette's need to rebel and her growing sense of isolation.

Annette didn't have anyone like Joie, no one to prove that she was loved and accepted even with her imperfections and flaws, no one to show her that she was perfect in her own humanity. He didn't have the perfect, believable words Joie so easily summoned to convince others of the goodness inside them, in their land and lives. He couldn't even find a way to show Annette it was okay to step into a puddle. When he thought about his sister growing up without a decent example of love, he decided to bring her with him one day to visit Joie at Quilted Bay.

First, he took her by the hand into the pantry to retrieve three sticks of soft peppermint, telling her, "This is step one." When she gave him a quizzical look, he explained, "See, little things make people happy. We'll stop on the way to pick wildflowers."

Annette said, "No, Tres, let's get her some of Mother's roses."

She was already, then barely pubescent, stained with the belief that the quality of gifts was the indication of their value.

"Nope. This'll do fine." He himself was still learning the signs of love and care, and wasn't quite sure how to explain that simple things could show Joie he had been thinking about her, that organic signs of love often meant more than fancy gifts.

"Stick candy and weed flowers that'll die before nighttime?"

“Watch. You’ll see.” Tres patted her back when she frowned, and stashed the candy in the pocketbook Annette insisted on carrying.

Ten minutes later, he stopped the carriage near the Indian Mounds to pick a handful of flowers, and in the short five minutes it took to reach Joie, their heads had already drooped over in half-death. But when Annette handed them over and Joie threw her arms around her with a squeal, Annette’s eyes bulged and her mouth went agape as though her brother had the power to stop the rotation of the planet.

Joie took Annette by the hand, telling her, “Come and I’ll show you my secret place. And I’ll teach you how to braid flowers to make jewelry.”

The two sat cross-legged, Annette still with that look of amazement through the time Joie crowned her with a wreath. “Am I beautiful, Joie?”

“The most beautiful of princesses.” She kissed the girl on her forehead.

Annette pulled out the peppermint sticks and they lay back holding hands, crunching bits of candy and looking to the sky in a contest for who could find the first horse-cloud.

Tres lay in the shade under the carriage once the girls cordoned themselves off in Quilted Bay, and only joined them when he heard Annette clapping.

“I win! I win! Tres! Come see!”

It was the happiest he had ever seen his little sister, her love for a big sister she’d never have, like the kind of sister she’d have made up had she ever known of an example.

On the way home, Tres kept looking over at the toothy grin that stayed on his sister’s face longer than any he had ever witnessed.

They rode in silence until Annette leaned into his shoulder and announced, “Joie held my hand, Tres!”

He wrapped an arm around her and drew her in so close he could feel her breathy giggles,
all the time wondering why their mother couldn't love.

Chapter 10

Tres sat in the rose garden beside the library. He did his best to concentrate on *Moby Dick*, his fourth pass, while thirteen-year-old Annette sat in her assigned position beside Lillian on her settee. An April breeze billowed the shears while they visited with Annette's friend and her mother. With proper posture and her favorite blue dress displayed perfectly, Annette's breath shallowed.

That any glorification her own mother might offer always took place in the presence of her mother's friends hadn't escaped the girl's notice and she had always remained mute on the matter, but, now, sitting there, watching the lady toy with her daughter's fingers, pet her with the gentlest of strokes, look down upon her with the warmth due a beloved treasure, the unfairness of the world seized her breath.

She fisted both hands, sprang to her feet, stomped a heel, and faced her mother. "Do you love me?"

She pointed to her friend. "I never get attention like other girls." Her voice remained steady and her face placid—the only signs of distress two shiny paths of tears slipping lower and lower on her cheeks while her mother only stared.

Lillian finally smiled at her friend and stated, "Annette, *bebe*, darling child, of *course* I love you more than anything," emphasizing *course* with an extra syllable and a warmth her children would have theretofore doubted even their dramatist mother could simulate.

Lillian turned to the other mother and half-flipped her rubied hand as if to shoo away the silly things children say.

“I try so hard to make you love me,” Annette continued, “how I wear my hair, I never muss my clothes—”

After a long moment, Annette’s mouth fell open and she stuttered a nearly inaudible, “Mother, oh, I’m so sorry.”

She then watched motionless as the friend’s mother rose, grasped Mrs. Duchande’s hand in consolation, and headed toward the door with her daughter.

Lillian closed the door, strode back into the library, and in her normal tone stated, “Children, we’re dressing for supper tonight. Please be seated at 6,” without giving her daughter even a quick glance.

* * * * *

Tres sat quietly with Annette in her room that afternoon. They no longer hid in the closet as they had as youngsters, especially not today—they sat at the edge of Annette’s bed, listening for their father’s Ford.

Tres offered, “You had every right to call her out in front of her friend.”

He didn’t think Annette much believed him. She kept repeating, “I don’t want to face Father.”

An hour later, Dom’s Ford sputtered and coughed as he killed the motor. Lillian’s heels click-clacked toward the front door.

Ice tinkled in a whiskey glass. Any second now, they’d call for Annette to receive her father’s sigh of disapproval.

Instead, two unexpected words echoed down the hall. “No! Enough!”

Tres and Annette put an ear to the door but only heard their mother's heels fade down the hall to her bedroom at the opposite end of the house, where she remained, missing their customary trip to the Baton Rouge Club.

The following morning while Annette and Tres ate breakfast with Nadine, Mr. Duchande stormed through the kitchen and out the door in dungarees. He rarely wore anything other than a suit even on weekends, so Annette, Nadine, and Tres exchanged wide-eyed glances and rushed to follow him.

Dom took giant strides down the hill toward the barn, hollering, "Wake up!"

Still groggy from their Saturday-night stupor, the cowhands appeared with half-buttoned shirts and dangling belts.

"You!" Dom barked, "get that stud y'all can't seem to break!" He shoved another in the direction of a storage room. "Get tack!"

Two cowboys steadied the colt in the round-pen. Mr. Duchande mounted. He held on tightly. The colt bucked and hopped in unnatural contortions. It slammed sideways into the rails and Mr. Duchande thumped down in the dirt.

The children had been clapping, shouting *ooh, ahh*, and, "Yay, Father!" until that point, and Tres was so proud of his old man, prouder than ever—not that his father had been a man to be ashamed of, but rather because he was a near non-entity as far as parenting was concerned and this seemed to be a giant act of machismo in direct defiance of his mother's demand that no man in her family lower himself to common cowboy chores.

Just as Tres and Annette had roles to play, so did their father, a man of starched dignity, a community leader respected for his wisdom, leadership, and business savvy, the greatest Duchande ever born. He was an attorney and chairman of the city council; he was godfather to

children of the right families; he ran the best ranch in South Louisiana, and Mrs. Dominique Duchande II expected her son to surpass his father's accomplishments. Tres would be the first Judge Duchande, Senator Duchande, and in time Governor Duchande, so when he struggled in school, complained, or otherwise abandoned his role of perfect son, after she marched him into the library to receive his father's sigh of disappointment, she'd flip his shoulders around to face her and ask, "Do you think you'll be able to go to law school with *average* marks?" "Do you think people would ever *vote* for a man who complained all the time?" "What would people *say*?"

Tres was in his final year of school and now despised the thought of carrying out all the natural-born days of his life under the scrutiny of people he didn't know, people who would always want something of him, always judge his every action or inaction. He was proud of his regal father and the admiration he garnered but didn't want to be like him. And as proud as he was of him that day he acted like a strong, brave, defiant man in that round-pen, Tres' elation was short-lived and his pride in his father forever diminished not because the colt got the best of him but because he instructed the cowhands, "Hog-tie him."

Mr. Duchande heated up the blunt-tipped, buffalo-bone castrating knife in the blacksmith's red coals, sliced off the colt's testicles, then limped back to the house to receive his wife's admonishment without a single word in response, both of them too engrossed in their own worlds to hear Annette's screams.

Tres couldn't cover her eyes soon enough, couldn't still her racking sobs, couldn't make her pain subside. For the entire next week, they both feigned stomach sickness, Annette unable to leave her brother's side. It had happened too quickly. She hadn't a moment to process what was happening before her father withdrew his hands, dripping with the castoff, and threw the

bloody glob into the colt's face. She could barely lift her eyes to look at the world for weeks to come, too afraid of what it might offer with the blink of an eye.

Tres cringed each time he saw his parents—he hated his father for what he did to Annette, hated his mother for what she did not do for her, and hated himself for what he could not do to make up for their shortcomings.

Chapter 11

To fortify her vision of a future with Tres and keep it from fading like her mother's old photograph, Joie pulled up Shellac, Patches' replacement, behind a bit Live Oak. A procession of black-robed students filed up a center aisle of chairs on the lawn of St. John Catholic School. Joie envisioned that center aisle as the one in the cathedral, that the black Tres wore was his fancy wedding garb.

She no longer visited DDR with her grandfather and his wares, and both she and Tres had sacrificed the show ring for the classroom. Their customary childhood afternoons of riding and picnics and laughter were replaced by endless hours of study, and for Tres the packed social calendar his mother insisted upon. Joie had rarely seen him since last summer when she gentled that red colt. Tres had started senior school.

During that long year, Joie's straight sides and flat chest had started to curve more like a woman's—like her mother's in that faded picture. She was anxious to show him how she was growing up, to replace his old memory of the boyish girl of his childhood. Those beautiful debts could be turning his head by now. And why wouldn't they? They were all Highlanders.

Every time she thought about those debts, about how Tres might be forgetting about her, Joie turned to her studies. *I'll go to college. Then I'll be their equal!* But she could ride that high so long before the missing of Tres sank her heart. She studied more and more.

* * * * *

For two years, MawMaw did her best to keep Joie's mind occupied with something other than study, but nothing had worked. "Go on with Cousin Alice and learn midwifing," she offered.

But Joie always countered with, "Got a test to study for," or, "Got my chores to do."

When the men and boys asked Joie to help with chores, MawMaw started telling them, "No, she's got her studies."

But then Joie would slam her books shut and help.

When MawMaw sat her down to the tedium of her fine tufting, Joie complained, "My fingers are too big," now without the gay smile MawMaw had grown to expect.

When Joie stood on stage to receive her high-school diploma, she didn't find Tres in the audience.

Debbie and Maggie now rarely mentioned that they saw him.

Joie rarely caught a glimpse of him in town.

Their lives grew ever more disparate, Joie always reminded of it when she rode into town and passed the DDR mansion—set upon the tallest Highland hill.

As much as Joie loved her land and heritage, she had to find a way to meld the old culture of her people with the future she laid out for herself. She had started taking small steps to exert her own sense of individuality within her family unit, even going so far as to tell MawMaw that she was friendly with Debbie and Maggie. MawMaw had simply nodded.

So Joie felt brave and resolute when she stood at the kitchen table the Sunday afternoon after her high school graduation and announced, "I'm going to school in Hammond. To learn about horses, about all animals, how to work with doctors, to patch them up, and breed and

deliver babies,” then stood shaking, amazed at how her courage vanished with the sound of her voice.

MawMaw was standing at the table ready to serve crawfish bisque when her mouth fell open, same as the men and boys already seated.

“Out of the question!”

Joie expected as much from her father, so she looked over to PawPaw only to feel abandoned and hopeless as he remained silent, his gaze drifting between his wife and his son.

Jules lifted his plate toward the pot his mother held, but the woman didn’t move, just looked at Joie in the eyes so long Joie had to bite her lip to stop from crying.

He finally rested his plate on the table and took a deep breath to speak.

But his mother banged her ladle on the table. “Let the girl go.”

* * * * *

MawMaw’s behavior confused Joie with how the woman could insist that she learn to make the perfect roux and not wear pants one day, and the next be a champion of women’s rights at the dinner table by exerting a sense of authority the men wouldn’t dare question. But it was the strength of MawMaw she took with her when Maggie and Debbie snuck into the peninsula in Mrs. Schafer’s automobile weeks later and packed Joie’s belongings while she kissed everyone goodbye.

Joie had rented a room at Mrs. Sabine’s Young Ladies’ Home and enrolled in Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, north of New Orleans and about sixty miles east of the peninsula.

She held onto her grandmother’s strength and remained tearless until they were halfway to Hammond until Maggie muttered, “Tres’ going to marry Renee.”

“Maggie, you don’t know that! Debbie shook her head. “Why would you say that?”

But Maggie insisted. “I heard his mother tell my mother. She said it’s all planned out.”

“Well, I don’t believe it. I’ve never even seen them together except when Renee hangs on his arm when they run into each other. She’s such a flirt!”

“Yeah, well, that’s true,” Maggie nodded.

Joie sat quietly in the front seat between her friends, jerking her head left to right as each spoke. She had learned the ways of Highlander girls, how they often talked in subtle riddles a person had to figure out. Did her friends understand the depth of her feelings toward Tres? Were they preparing her in case she heard a rumor? Was Debbie trying to reassure her that wouldn’t happen? Weary over the continued deception and always having to figure things out, she set her jaw stern, wiped her face dry, and belted out, “Tres won’t marry her! After I graduate,” she gasped, “his parents’ll have to accept me as equal!”

“I knew it!” Debbie clapped. “That’s why you try to ignore him!”

“Yeah,” Maggie agreed, nodding albeit shallower than before. “And you’re right. You deserve him.” She patted Joie’s leg. “Tell us! Tell us what y’all do together!”

Joie shuddered in relief—it was finally out in the open and both girls were smiling! She was more confident than ever that Tres would be hers—two Highlanders agreed. Now nothing would stand in her way...except...why hadn’t he come to her graduation?

* * * * *

Joie didn’t make it home for Thanksgiving. Trains didn’t run; a hurricane landed at Mobile, and Hammond wasn’t far enough west to escape the sixty-mile-per-hour winds at its edges, nor the tornadoes that formed there.

On the way home for Christmas, Joie was jolted from her seat when the train passed the swaths of two tornadoes. Undergrowth was nowhere in sight, most of the trees were gone, and of those remaining, trees once seventy-five or even a hundred feet tall, only naked trunks stood, their limbs and tops amputated, giant stubs jutting skyward from the middle of sodden pastures.

Still shaking with the vision of how close she had been to massive destruction, when she arrived at the station no one was there. Joey appeared a few minutes later, saying, “P’Paw couldn’t make it.”

She opened her mouth to ask why, but when her voice cracked with “W—,” she swallowed her breath.

Shellac was still slowing near the garden when Joie hopped out and ran to find PawPaw.

She found him in bed, ran to hold him, kiss his head, his hand. Beside him lay an old saucepan with a broken handle, and when Joie fixed her eyes on it, PawPaw waved a hand over the makeshift cuspidor and cleared his throat. “Awww, *cher bebe*, see, I’m getting’ my air better now.”

By the time Joie finished her second term, tuberculosis ravaged his lungs. She couldn’t even consider the possibility that the disease would take his life. Instead, she resorted to her old ways of running through the scrub on the wings of Shellac, wondering when she’d see Tres. Months had passed since she spied on him and his mother through a store window as they walked Main Street.

She rode into Plaquemine three days in a row but couldn’t find him there, nor at Quilted Bay, the Indian Mounds, or the pecan grove. She thought she had dismissed Maggie’s allegations about Tres and Renee but a tapeworm of doubt started eating at her guts and her nightly prayers now lingered on bent knee on through the following semester.

She was home again for summer break when Tres finally appeared at the club where she waited tables, one of her jobs to earn money for books and board. Hanging on his arm was that blond deb from Plaquemine, the striking Renee Wilbert, so Joie slipped into the kitchen, only stealing glances until the two entered the private room reserved for members.

Joie avoided them, and though Maggie's words still echoed and made her skin prickle, she was no less giddy than when as a child and they tipped hats at horse shows—Joie, along with all the other little-girl wannabes, had glowed and panted from the tops of their lungs when he was nearby, Joie warm and secure in the secrecy of their special friendship. But that was long ago, she had to admit. Now that they were older, she didn't know what she'd say. So calm and cool, and so very, very charming, since his graduation, they hadn't met in any of their special places, and now he made her feel like her brain went on holiday and took her tongue along with it.

She served only those patrons in the main dining area. Renee's presence made it easy to avoid Tres, the woman's character fully lacking any tolerance for Lowlanders. The Wilberts were a wealthy Plaquemine family and at the Acadian Festival years earlier, Joie had met Renee, who extended a palm-down hand.

"Oh, how I sometimes envy your seclusion, never having to deal with the things the rest of us here have to deal with. Course, *I* could never live there, with nothing to entertain myself."

"Oh, how I sometimes envy your seclusion, never having to deal with the things the rest of us here have to deal with. Course, *I* could never live there, with nothing to entertain myself."

Renee's gaze had met Joie's face only a moment before it slid down to the Lowlander's clothing and she offered a dead-eyed, closed-mouth grin that spread tightly across her teeth without revealing even a hint of the white until she turned to Maggie and said, "Let's have tea."

Once Renee was out of earshot, Joie faced Maggie, held out a palm-down hand, tilted back her head to where her nose pointed in the sky, and with raised brow said, “Ooooh. So *very* nice to have made *your* acquaintance,” as she curtsied.

But that was long ago. Now Mother Mary was needed. Mother Mary hadn’t yet interceded so Joie added morning prayers. Then mealtime. Then each time she rode to town.

It was July when she again wore her maid-waitress uniform at a dining hall in Baton Rouge and Tres walked in with Carroll Devillier and three boys Joie didn’t recognize.

With Tres on his heels, Carroll weaved through the tables when he saw Joie. He wrapped her hand in his, soft and warm as Tres’, and gave her a toothy grin so straight and even that they looked like a real version of PawPaw’s, minus streaks of woodgrain. “Joie,” he whispered. “Last time I saw you—”

Joie had already calculated six months and five days since she’d last seen Tres but couldn’t remember when she’d last seen Carroll. The Festival was most likely but when she opened her lips to speak, Tres stepped in and with a light touch to her back guided her toward a table where the other boys waited. He bent forward and said, “I saw Shellac.”

She was still ten feet away, her mind racing with the idea that maybe Tres saw her horse at Mr. Mac’s and only then chose this establishment, when a dark-haired boy in a baby-blue seersucker suit ordered, “Beer!”

The other two looked to be twins, both with fair hair and wearing dungarees and plaid shirts starched stiff. One said, “And keep ‘em coming.”

The other twin asked if the beer was cold, and when Joie nodded, all but Tres let out a *woohooo*. Tres’ hand left her back and found her pinkie finger. “We’re celebrating. Everyone, this is Joie.”

The twins and the suit flicked a chin-out.

She squeezed Tres' finger too tightly before she realized what she was doing. "What's the occasion?"

All five celebrated offers to clerk at major Baton Rouge and New Orleans law firms, and each time Joie brought a fresh round of beer, Tres gave her a big smile and found something to talk about: "What are you studying?" "How are your grandfather's lung treatments going?" "I heard your new stud-horse is a handful..." on through closing time and all but Carroll had left.

Joie had given Tres quick, cautious answers in front of his friends, certain he would hang around and ask her to have a nightcap at his club, and he'd be proud that she was on his arm because surely it must have been Mother Mary who encouraged her to wear a smock made from real linen. Instead, she got a super-sized tip.

She dropped the two silver dollars into an empty stein for the dish boy.

* * * * *

PawPaw hadn't recovered enough from his tuberculosis for Joie to feel comfortable leaving him when school started again, so she was still on the peninsula weeks later when all three of her older brothers entered the barn where she mucked stalls.

Beaufort announced, "DDR boy here askin' for ya."

It was September 18, Joie's birthday, and the three stood solemn with arms crossed.

She sprinted to the barndoor and peeked through a knothole. Harnessed at PawPaw's back porch was a carriage in tow by a horse bearing the Double D brand.

She thought of Renee's scorn and winced at her floral flour-bag shift. She flattened its wrinkles only to find black filth under her nails, and when she tried to smooth stray hairs, she felt a glob of something in her hair bun. Hoping it was mud not muck, she took a few deep breaths,

cursed Renee under her breath, then stood tall, threw back her shoulders, and departed from the weathered gray barn to see what brought Dominique Duchande III to call on the eighteen-year-old Fryoux girl.

She was trying to think of what she might say when Tres eyed her. “I, I’m uh, I, I thought I’d stop by because Father needs some help to start our two-year-olds.”

By now, Joie’s reputation for gentling colts far surpassed those of older cowboys who used brute force to break the spirit of horses that Joie knew need only be trained with kindness. But, more than anything, Joie hoped Tres was using the story as an excuse to see her. She caught herself in a trance with her hand still fingering her mud bun before finally pointing toward MawMaw’s kitchen door. “Coffee?” It was all she could say, and climbed the steps hoping a few intelligent words would find their way through her lips. *Say something about his new colts. Say something*, but her thoughts trailed off into a bad romance novel, *kidnapped by his eyes, full lips, blond crest of hair...*

Halfway up, she glanced over at Tres to find his cheeks were pink, surely from the stuttering, but it was those eyes she couldn’t help but stare at. The way his pupils pierced his crystalline green irises made it easy to see he was looking down at his feet with each step. She felt like the shy child she was back when she first noticed his eyes, sitting on his back porch, unable to find her words and too afraid to speak had she known what to say. She was an adult now, so why didn’t she feel grown up in his presence? She had worked out her future with him, hadn’t she? Had imagined their life together, had practiced her adult feelings. Even if it was just puppy love back then, wasn’t that a decent enough basis for an adult romance?

They made it through those stair-climbing and coffee-making minutes with barely a handful of words before relaxing into their natural, lifelong talk about horse shows and colts.

She was refilling their cups with hot coffee when she heard MawMaw on the steps and Tres lowered his voice. “A while back at the club, was there some reason why you avoided me?”

Chin on her chest, Joie found no answer on her shoes. She couldn’t tell Tres she was insecure about letting Renee see her in her waitress uniform, couldn’t tell him her blood boiled with the thought of him marrying the woman. All she could do was shrug and lift her palms to the heavens.

Tres told her, “It’s okay, you know.”

She wanted to ask exactly what that meant, but not in front of MawMaw.

MawMaw walked in and said, “Mr. Duchande,” with a big smile, to which Tres nodded, said, “Ma’am,” and turned to go.

* * * * *

Had she known that Tres missed her, maybe she would have been braver. But she didn’t. She didn’t know that he had hidden from view at her graduation ceremony; she didn’t know that he had spied her on Shellac half-hidden behind a tree when he was on stage receiving his own diploma; she didn’t know that he would go back home after this visit on her birthday to hear his parents chastise him for hiring a Lowlander, that he would manufacture any excuse to see Joie and defy his parents time and again.

Chapter 12

The next morning, Joie woke up before the rooster, dressed in Joey's outgrown dungarees, and galloped out to DDR.

Tres was waiting for her in one of the round pens down the hill beyond the barns, and handed over the lead for a dark Morgan with showy socks. She had barely finished working a second colt on a lunge line—galloping him around and around until they learned to face her when she said *whoa*—when Tres whistled from the next pen and flipped a thumb toward his gelding, now tacked and hitched beside Shellac.

They rode out to the pecan grove, released the horses to graze, and settled on a patch of Saint Augustine that buried their legs. Reclining against an old, downed pecan tree, they cocked their chins up to the sky and watched swirling white clouds fatten into elephants, and clowns, and sheep when a wave of butterflies flew in. They twittered their midair dance, fluttering around the couple's heads and once in a while taking a break to tickle arms with tiny stick legs hardly able to support such massive wings. No words had yet been spoken.

Joie picked clover pom-poms and bundled them into a bouquet, but when she held them out for the butterflies, the stems quivered. She set them in the grass and, hoping to distract Tres in case he noticed, blurted out, "P'Paw says butterflies are the fairy maidens of the meadows... here to help make beautiful flowers... and provide beauty... he says we have to make ourselves

vulnerable to natural beauty, so it's bad to ignore them." It was the first thing that popped into her head, but now she felt her face go warm at the waxing and wanted to kick herself when Jules', "Don't be a showoff and get too big for her britches," made her roll her eyes at herself. Yet Tres had raised a brow.

"Who in the world would ignore them?"

His voice was that of a curious child, so small and innocent that it caught her off guard.

"Oh, just people, I guess, some people," she offered, nudging him with a flirty elbow.

"P'Paw taught us a lot about people."

Tres reached for her hand and started making circles in her palm with his thumb. "What does he mean about being too vulnerable to natural beauty?"

"You don't want to hear all that." Her cheeks reddened.

But his eyes widened. "No, I mean it—I've never thought about things that way."

Joie couldn't take her gaze off of Tres' thumb, still making those circles. The idea that he was interested in what she saw as an integral, intimate relationship between people and nature pleased her but she paused when MawMaw and Cousin Alice's, "Ain' right for girls to be talkin' too much in front of boys," swooped in.

Tres insisted, "Tell me."

Maybe she could risk saying a little more.

"Well, noticing the beauty of butterflies, the way P'Paw says it, is one of the natural tenets of life that he wanted to teach us. We have to be that soft, that sensitive with nature."

"So, to not notice them, is it a sin or something?"

Joie laughed. "Well, it might be tantamount to sacrilege."

When Tres laughed, he smiled, finally looking into her eyes so long Joie had to look away. His gaze fell back to her hand and she knew he understood, but the sweetness of the moment dissipated. "Time to go."

They mounted and again rode wordlessly to the highland grasses between DDR and the peninsula, where he turned right and she left.

A minute later, just as she entered the trail that led home through the woods, she heard a gallop and, "Tomorrow? After supper like we used to?"

* * * * *

Joie rushed to clean dishes as quickly as she could without drawing the attention of her older brothers. As soon as she had dismounted after her visit with Tres, all but Joey had peppered her with questions about what she did and why it took so long, then admonished her for leaving her own barn dirty just to go clean somebody else's. She smothered the urge to set them straight and let them think whatever they wanted so she didn't have to deal with them even one single second longer.

She dilly-dallied with the dishes hoping to slip away when no one would notice, but when she stepped inside the shed row, Joey greeted her with a tacked Shellac.

He handed her the reins and said, "Shellac's been waitin' for ya." Then he looked at her and murmured, "Me, too."

had already tacked Shellac in the morning, and he proved his understanding the following day after supper when they met at the Indian Mounds. He showed up with the troubled colt he had watched Joie gentle years before.

Joie hadn't seen the scrawny horse since day twelve of his training, and she couldn't believe the seventeen-hand mass of red that stood before her. "This is him? This is Claude's colt?"

"Yep. We have a handful of his babies on the ground, too," Tres said.

"Really? I'm surprised your father bred him so much." She stroked the colt's neck.

"His coat, it's like copper! Are the babies chestnut?"

"Every one of them." He nodded and pulled back his shoulders, adding, "But I'm the one in charge of bloodlines now, and I'm trying to get enough reds on the ground to make good pairs."

"People buy *red* Morgans?"

"So far, so good. Course, the flashy white stockings get a good price."

"Are they fast? I mean, is *he* fast?"

Tres handed her the reins, she mounted the colt, and with a soft ankle to his ribs left Tres and Shellac with only a rear view through kicked-up sod.

They galloped their horses as if their tails were on fire, until Joie's giggles of excitement turned into the choking gasps she was always susceptible to when having so much fun. She pulled up the big red beside a stream to let him drink, heard brittle pecan leaves crackle under Tres' boots, then there he was, beside her, reaching up.

The heels of his palms pressed against her hips, his fingers wrapped around her waist, and Joie lifted her nose to his musk, watched his sun-bleached hair as she slid down. She saw those cored green-apple eyes follow her midriff until he set her down in the scant inches between him and the colt. Joie wanted him to draw her even closer, to lift her up again just those last few inches when she felt his breath on her face, when the blood pounded in her ears to resound the

love in storybooks. But he waved an arm toward the identical pair of hills no taller than Joie's cistern.

She stood motionless until he reached for her hand, his so soft. Were hers rough to his touch? She worried he'd notice, until he draped an arm across her shoulder, saying, "I like the way Indians built these mounds to honor beloved leaders, same as Egyptian pyramids."

Joie snuggled under his arm, drinking in the manliness of his sweat. Feeling safe in his warmth, she whispered, "That's one reason I wanted to bury Patches here."

He squeezed her tight against his side. "I always knew that."

Joie stopped suddenly. "I didn't think you knew what the Mounds were."

"Why not?"

"We were so young." She shrugged.

Tres stomped on the grass to flatten it, saying, "I'm older than you, and you did." He cupped her elbow to help her sit. "Maybe I knew you better than you thought."

Tapping one of his boots against hers, he asked, "Do you still blame yourself?"

Joie had never known Tres to be sentimental—or had she? Maybe this kind of talk didn't chase him away.

She leaned back on her elbows and stared at how she and Tres were tapping boots in unison. She waited for the humiliation of causing her pony's death to pass. "Not blame, exactly." She huffed at herself. "More like regret, now that I think back on it. I was young, and preoccupied, and I wasn't paying attention."

"What were you preoccupied with?" Tres asked with the same brow-lifted earnestness as he had back when he visited a week after Patches died.

Unable to face her crime, she had run to the solace of her bedroom.

But she was a child then, and now felt she could face it. With a deep breath of resolve, she explained, “I had just run off after getting in trouble with Daddy. I didn’t want him to take away Patches like he was always warning. I was mad. And I wanted to stop thinking about all that, so I was daydreaming. I just wasn’t paying attention, so I lost him for good.”

“I remember you used to daydream at Quilted Bay.”

“Oh, sure,” she admitted. “Same as always when I got in trouble. About becoming a famous horse trainer so I could have some control.”

“Over?”

“Just... life, I suppose.” She sat up, had to gather the courage to confess, “*Our* lives.” She tried to sound light. After all, they had been so young, and she couldn’t gauge how Tres might react.

When he reached to hold her hand and said, “Me too,” she almost told him that she had hoped going to college would impress his mother. But MawMaw and Cousin Alice would skin her hide!

They lay back, wordless, at the base of an Indian Mound where it melded slowly into the ground at the perfect angle to watch the sun descend, and Joie’s mind wandered to the time she was working with PawPaw in the garden and a giant yellow butterfly lit on her hand. When he steadied himself even as she continued to sink the hoe into the ground, PawPaw had told her, “That there, the su-preme act of trust.”

Later, when PawPaw took his coffee break, he had explained, “*Cher*, if a butterfly trust, it ain’ ‘fraid. Be a great compliment, bein’ honored by the very bein’ what bring us dreams. You know, Blackfoot squaws,” he continued, “they paint buckskins wit’ butterflies and put ‘em wit’

they babies when time to sleep, singin' songs to call on butterflies to come flutter they wings to put 'em to sleep."

When Patches died, Joie had wanted him to slumber in that kind of peace, she wanted to constantly remind herself that she deserved trust even though she was responsible for his death, and wanted to think of her and Tres' babies sleeping under the spell of Blackfoot butterflies—or maybe Aztec butterflies, who believed that those happy in death present their souls in the form of butterflies come to console grieving relatives, so they sniffed bouquets only from the side so their relatives could visit at the top.

When she married Tres, Joie had promised herself, she'd always have fresh flowers in their home, and her mother would visit their babies. And Tres would understand that part of her because he understood the significance of the Indian Mounds, and he understood something about her culture, and who she really was. One day she'd tell him the Indians and butterflies were part of the reason she buried Patches by the Mounds. Maybe she'd tell him her dreams about their lives together. Maybe one day she'd tell him about wanting to impress his mother, and they'd both laugh.

The growing sun transformed from golden hues into deeper and deeper tangerine as it approached the horizon. Its rays reminded Joie of the shafts of light that emanated from Jesus's head in a picture MawMaw shellacked onto an old sheet of wood.

Fuchsia, lavender, and periwinkle flowed at the horizon against the orange and yellow of the sun, and just as the last vestiges of the sun's arc disappeared, the clouds broke to expose a thin golden slice with silver-edged bands that rippled along the horizon. It was a sign—Cousin Alice told the tale to all the young girls on the peninsula: When couples witness this phenomenon, they'll experience a golden relationship that will float above the ripples of life, but

eventually, illusions will distort the goldenness and divert it in all directions with combative colors. The only question that remained was whether the last bit of setting sun would slip out and find its way to clear skies before dissolving into *terre ferme*.

At the last possible moment, the clouds cleared, the final remnant of orange disappeared, and again, countless butterflies appeared from nowhere. Never before had Joie or Tres witnessed such a proliferation—yellow ones with navy wingtips, orange ones with red and blue dots, white ones with purple splotches, all kinds of butterflies they'd never seen.

They fluttered and lighted and tickled their arms. They gazed upon the couple, slowly stretching out their wings before gently folding them. They hovered between their faces, and Joie didn't know which was more beautiful, a butterfly in midflight like a hummingbird, or the face of the man Cousin Alice prophesied would share the rest of her eternity.

Chapter 13

Jules and PawPaw never found out about those long afternoons Joie spent with Tres. They hadn't known of Joie's childhood afternoons with him either and Joie had no desire to tell them at this late date that she had betrayed their trust, so a certain amount of shock was to be expected weeks later when Joie finally gathered enough gumption to tell this old Louisiana family that Tres wanted to ask for permission to see her.

Joie's family wished for nothing but her happiness, but only a happiness they could comprehend, and in no part of their consciousness could a match between a Lowlander and a Highlander end in anything but misery and recrimination from the Highlanders, especially the Duchandes. But it was far too late for such considerations. They would never be able to *not* be together.

Joie made sure they were all seated before she came in for supper that night, stood behind her chair, and uttered the words she knew the men would find lethal: "Tres asked to speak with you."

PawPaw and Daddy sat back in their chairs and shook their heads, the boys looked back and forth between Joie and the elders, all of them ignoring MawMaw until she banged her ladle on the table.

PART TWO

Damselflies, Mayflowers, and Fairy Maidens

Chapter 14

“No! I won’t!” Tres snapped. He hadn’t the courage to tell his father he planned to meet with Mr. Fryoux and ask for permission to court Joie—revealing a simple plan to see her was all he could muster, and now Dom wanted Tres to go tell his mother of his intentions.

Tres had hardly slept, knowing he had to rise early and confront his father, then ride out to the peninsula by daybreak to catch the Fryoux men before they headed out to the cane fields. He had saddled his horse and waited for Dom in heavy morning dew, then blurted out, “I’m going to see Joie Fryoux,” before his father had even seen him.

Dom jerked his head around to see Tres, looking him in the eyes for several seconds before speaking. “Not a good idea. Let’s go tell your mother.” He had already turned back toward the door when his son refused.

Tres expected such a reaction and wanted the confrontation to end, needed to get to the peninsula for a dose of humanity, but a weary expression folded more lines on Dom’s face than usual, so Tres waited, watched his father wordlessly toss his suit-coat through the open car door, look up into the low clouds, sigh his sigh of disappointment, and finally murmur, “Looks like rain,” before dropping his gaze to the ground.

Dom’s forehead scrunched up and his lips were slightly pursed in consternation, yet his eyes were soft with love—Tres had never seen such an expression on his father’s face, and followed him as he nodded toward the long dirt drive and walked away from the house.

“I was on my way home from an Atlanta auction, had to wait for the train to load coal in Natchez,” Dom began. “It was still a small town back then, had one of those old western establishments with stacked letters painted next to the door, *S-A-L-O-O-N*.” He drew letters in the air. “Had a long, dark mahogany bar on the left and a giant mirror on the wall behind it. I remember how flat the beer was, and barely cool.”

Dom’s whole face smiled, his eyes glittering with the old memory, and Tres tried to recall another time—*any* time in his whole life—that they had enjoyed such a pleasant moment together.

“A pretty blond girl was peddling nickel bags of peanuts. Cute little thing. I was a young man, Tres, too young. Your mother had our announcement party planned for the next day. Far too young.

“Two dirty cowboys sat at a table up front, called for the girl to clean shells all over the table.

“She pulled a chair out for me on her way and I thanked her, but the little thing just kept her head down. She swept the shells in her apron with a little hand-broom, but when she turned to go, one of ‘em grabbed her arm and shells flew everywhere. He was a big man, son, probably two-three inches taller than myself, probably had fifty pounds on me as well. Held her so strong her whole body was leaning back against him.” Dom swayed side to side to show how the girl tried to free herself.

Tres had never seen his father so animated. Had never seen a sparkle in his father’s eyes. Had never shared an actual conversation.

“Cowboy started talking about, ‘Look what you done.’ Wouldn’t let go of her. Then he said, ‘C’mon and sit in my lap. I know you got a pretty little blond patch I wanna see.’ That’s

what he said, Tres, on my momma's grave. Funny thing was, the girl didn't react at all, didn't even look scared, like she heard that kind of talk every day." Dom shook his head.

Tres watched, mouth slightly agape. How seldom his father had been exposed to such behavior.

"I drew a loud breath and cleared my throat... you know how I do, figuring to admonish the man, but before I said a word, I heard a fancy gentleman at the table behind me screech his chair back. He came stood stand right beside me.

"‘Sir.’ That's all the man said, Tres." A scowl creased Dom's face, his smile now downturned and eyes flat.

"That big cowboy shoved the girl away, and him and the lankier one both stood up real quick-like, letting their chairs fall. I stood there with that gentleman, none of us four moving, sort of a gentlemen's game of *chicken* I guess. Seemed like quite a while." He looked over at Tres and elbowed him the way a schoolboy might jibe a buddy.

"I don't know what I'd've done if they made a move on us. Heck, I never laid a hand on any man my whole life. Not even when I was little. And that gentlemen, he was dressed like he just came out of a courtroom in his black suit—doubt he ever raised a hand to a man in anger. But that's as far as it went. The smaller cowboy pulled a silver dollar out his pocket and tossed it on the table, and then they just walked on out the door. Didn't speak a word."

Dom reached a flat hand up to his forehead. "That gentleman tipped his hat to me, and that was that so I started helping the girl right the chairs when I saw four stripes on her arm."

Dom reached out with a palm in a cutting motion. "Four. I reached to see it better but she pulled away. Thought she might need a doctor but, ‘No, sir.’ I could barely hear her, she was such a little creature. She said, ‘I'll be fine enough,’ and went to cleaning up shells again.

“Her name was Michelle. Michelle Fontenot.”

Dom stared far toward the horizon, over the hundred acres of pasture, the barns, and the paddocks. His gaze settled on the mansion for long moments before looking back down at his shoes, tapping one against the other until he straightened his stance, pulled back his shoulders, and still with that faraway look sucked in enough air to poke out his chest even further. “I passed through Natchez the following week.” His words barely rose over the swoosh of hay that bowed to a clouded sky. “And the next, and—, some things in life, son, you just can’t have.”

Tres mumbled, “Damn you,” and stepped backward, lips trembling. Then he shouted it over and over as he ran back to the mansion, hopped on his gelding, and took off at a gallop. He should have known. He should have known he couldn’t trust his father, should have known his father wouldn’t support him, should have known those feelings of warmth and love couldn’t have had anything to do with his own son but rather to convince his namesake that there was honor in giving up real love, that a noble act could prevent an ignoble outcome.

At the edge of the woods, Tres turned back to shake his head at this unknowable man. Dom still stood some hundred yards from his car, droplets of dewy rain falling unnoticed on his shoulders. He kept staring off into that field, not looking as his son rode away, not calling after him, not trying to wave him back. Tres didn’t know why he expected his father to try to stop him, to fight for his beliefs, to put forth *effort*. He wanted a father who would do more and hated himself for expecting anything from a man hollow to the bone.

* * * * *

Tres rode a hard gallop, had to get to Joie, had to be near her to feel her love, to feel the love of her family. It was only the night before that Joie had told her family to expect a visit from Tres, and though he didn’t know what their response had been, whatever they said to Joie,

whatever their words to him now, they would come from a soul filled with love and concern for Joie.

The closer Tres got to the peninsula, the more he could envision her face, the more he could feel the warmth between the Fryoux', and when he finally reined in near the garden, he looked up to see Joie pause in the glow of the kitchen lantern and wiggle her fingers *hello*.

But he wouldn't see more of her this morning. The men would speak in Joie's behalf and only for her wellbeing. Tres vowed to take it like a man, not run away as he had from his father. He took as deep a breath as he could manage, and by the time he dismounted and reached the garden where the men pulled weeds on their hands and knees, MawMaw appeared on the back porch with three cups. "*Le café*."

PawPaw and Jules finally looked up and rubbed their hands with rags.

PawPaw shook Tres' hand. "Son," he said.

Jules stepped over to shake Tres' hand, then nodded toward the cistern. "Le's get out this drizzle."

Tres took the coffee MawMaw offered and sat between the men on a crossbar. On his right, PawPaw set down his cup, withdrew a pocketknife, and picked soil from his nails.

On Tres' left, Jules sat erect and cleared his throat. "She'll have a pair of hogs. Sow's pregnant now, so she'll have them too. 'Nough hens for a decent roost. A fine cock."

Tres thought the two men were carrying on a previous conversation so he sat quietly until Jules looked over with one bushy brow hiked up. Then it hit him.

He could only gasp.

"O'course that red gelding she ride, too," PawPaw added.

Mortified at being so ignorant, Tres smothered a long *oooooooooh* and finally offered, “Oh yes, that’s more than agreeable, Mr. Fryoux.”

PawPaw and Jules emptied their cups, patted Tres on the back, and rose to return to their garden, leaving Tres under the cistern alone with his thoughts and untouched coffee. He’d have a new family, one that would love him and treat him with a tenderness he didn’t deserve. They would hug and kiss him when he came to visit. They would inquire as to his wellbeing and actually care about his answers. They would ask for his opinions and consider them. He wouldn’t have to fight for their approval. They would call him *son*.

Tres glanced up at the house hoping to get a glimpse of Joie but he couldn’t focus. He rode home, tears melting into the rain and thinking about how, by now, his own father was sitting at his desk reviewing a brief and not giving a second thought to his son. He had done his best to steer his son back to the right path but now his duty was done and life was already moving on.

When they sat in his library at the end of the day Dom sipped his iced whiskey, laid his newspaper in his lap, and almost sheepishly asked his wife, “Lillian, you know your boy’s making plans to see that Fryoux girl?”

Tres sat reading a case-study across from his father and watched his mother turn on her heels, twist her face into a grimace, turn back to Dom, and proclaim, “Tres will marry the Wilbert girl.” She then stomped down the hall toward her room.

Dom picked up the newspaper again and peeked over his reading glasses. “Hear your mother?”

“What about what *I* want?” Tres leaned forward and shouted down the hall. “I’m not marrying Renee, *Mother*.”

When he heard his mother slam her bedroom door, he threw his papers on the floor, turned to his father, and snarled, “You let her ruin your life and now you’re content to let her ruin mine?”

“*Ruin* my life? She’s done no such thing,” Dom huffed. “And you’d do well to take advantage of some life lessons.”

When his father didn’t even bother to look up from his paper, Tres sneered. “And wind up like you? Whining over lost love, taking out your frustrations on wild colts? You’re the one who’s been castrated!”

Dom just sat and continued to read his paper for long seconds before he took another sip of whiskey and finally said, “You don’t know what life is like between man and wife. You’re full of piss and vinegar now, but you’ll see. Learn to choose your battles wisely.”

“Do you hear yourself?” Tres stood, open-mouthed. “What made you like this?”

Dom finally looked up and asked, “Like *what*?” in that dismissive voice Tres abhorred.

When Tres noticed a curious scrunch of his father’s eyes, he had to admit that his father really had no clue. “Like... this... this powerless man kowtowing to his wife in his own home!”

“As I stated, you’ll understand once you have a few more years under your belt and some shared experiences, like your mother and I.” Dom glanced down at his paper again before adding, “Feel your oats and have your affair. Later you’ll marry the Wilbert girl.”

“Feel my oats? An *affair*?” Tres felt like a child again—all he had to do was stomp his feet for a temper tantrum. Hopeless, he turned to go.

When would he learn to act like a man?

Chapter 15

On Saturdays, Tres now played horseshoes, baseball, and marbles with the boys while Joie cheered them on. Tres courted Joie in the slow ways of her ancestors, and though chaperones and home visits were for the benefit of their elders, the couple found enjoyment in the old customs, slipping each other sideways winks and holding hands when they walked the levee, old Cousin Alice on their heels.

The sun was white-hot the second time they walked. Tres seemed to want to hear every story Joie could remember so she pointed to a clearing near Sardine Point. “That’s where Joey and I stole a race from our brothers. Remember, Cousin Alice?”

“Didn’ know y’all stole a race, *cher*. How come?”

“The big boys always won *boat-leg*.”

Tres asked, “What’s *boat-leg*?”

“Well, the older boys would start at Sardine Point and paddle down-river. They could zoom around the *O* with that fast current—you know, it’s fifteen miles around the peninsula—and Joey and I would run across the mouth, nearly a mile. Had to scratch and tear our way through the thicket.” Joie giggled. “P’Paw used to say it was *a long row to hoe*.”

Well, you know how the water table’s so shallow and keeps the low land real boggy. Especially sometimes when the levees break and let the water race right along the path.

“We only won that once. I remember my teeth were chattering I was so excited.”

Tres asked, “But *how*?”

“Tell you our secret? We made a pact to never tell!”

“Oh, *oui*,” Cousin Alice said. “*Now* I ‘member. Big boys used to tickle y’all to death tryin’ to make you tell.”

“That’s right! Joie giggled. “Never did though. Except P’Paw figured it out.”

“Come on, Joie, your secret’s safe with me.” Tres nudged her with an elbow.

“Okay... but, Cousin Alice, you have to swear you won’t tell.”

The old woman crossed her heart and kissed her fingertips.

“Okay, well, after Jean and Francis and Beaufort took off, we ran as fast as we could in the woods to where they couldn’t see us and, well, that’s where I’d left Patches. He was happy staying there nibbling on blackberries—”

“You used a horse to win?” Cousin Alice made a sound like PawPaw’s *tsk*.

“Yes’m. Sank my fingers deep in Patches’ mane, gave him a cluck, and we were off. Joey wrapped an arm around my waist and kept slapping Patches’ rump with his other hand why I don’t know. Just had to ask and Patches’d run his heart out. *Whew*, he sure did run fast that day. Tres, it was like he could fly over ditches and downed trees. He just plowed right through all the brush, stretching out his neck ‘til I could see his eyes dancing like crazy marionettes.”

“A horse.” Tres rubbed his chin. “And you were how old?”

“Maybe seven or so.”

“And you planned it all out in advance? I mean, you had brought Patches there in advance?”

“Oh, seemed like weeks I labored over that plan. But, you know, when you’re little, two days seems like forever. Had to have a plan. Egged-on the boys all morning, babbling on about

their mislaid confidence, challenging them to yet another contest they were so sure they'd win. Heck, they used to chide me and Joey about how we'd *never* win. We were relentless that day, though. Badgered them until they couldn't say *no*.

"Shameful." Cousin Alice shook her head. "But how'd P'Paw find out?"

"I had to go get Patches. He saw me come back after leaving on foot. Gave me just one little *tsk* and that was all."

Tres threw his head back in laughter. "Maybe it's good you got found out? Same as after I cheated Carroll?"

"Yeah, but I still feel guilty about it."

Tres squeezed her hand. "I love these stories."

By the time they finished their walk and Tres waved goodbye, Joie had slipped back into guilt, locked on the image of how Tres wouldn't laugh if he knew the depth of her guilt for sneaking away for those private meetings at Quilted Bay. Unlike her childhood excursions, Joie now worried her family would think she was sneaking out behind their backs, which of course she had been doing since she was five. Maybe they wouldn't notice?

Often when she attempted to understand the source of the building guilt, she blamed it on Catholicism, but then she'd wonder if maybe The Church was simply an easy target, with their *less-than* and *never-good-enough* philosophies. Either way, she had to acknowledge that the pensive recognition of lies told and trust abused took their toll on her self-confidence and the *me* she thought herself to be seemed to dissipate. No amount of justifying her behavior in the name of modern times could justify being dishonest with her grandfather, a man who had kept his integrity intact in the face of inequities Joie would never have to encounter.

* * * * *

After Daddy left to trade pecans for coffee one morning years earlier, Joie was helping PawPaw pull weeds when he straightened up, stretched his back, and stared at the sky. “Sunny day.”

He scrunched his forehead, called, “Maw? Café,” and headed to the cistern.

Joie sat beside him and waited.

He pulled on a rag, cleared the sweat from his jowl. “Sunny day when I was...well...long ‘bout five. Went wit’ Paw to bring a slave at *The Houmas* a bottle of medicine.

“They called me *Tee Ro* ‘cause Paw was Romain Senior. “Never got big like your paw. Real small I was. Paw had to scoop a black water moccasin out the pirogue. He said ain’ nothin’ to be ‘fraid of and patted me on the back and paddled down a bayou to trade sugar for the elixir a deep swamp fam’ly conjured up. But them gators and snakes was sliverin’ ‘long side us like they showin’ us how to pass.” He looked to Joie. “Y’know how a man could hardly see them cypress knees it’s so dark in them swamps?”

Joie crouched on her heels for a listen.

“Didn’t wanna get out at the medicine man’s hut,” he chuckled. “Didn’t want to feed them swamp monsters so I hunched down under a old tarp ‘til Paw come back, paddled down another bayou to the river and *The Houmas*.

“A fence went down the river road so far I couldn’t see the ends. Walked on past a house three floors high and fields of cane tall as the barn. I ‘member how I wanted to ask Paw why ev’ythin’ was so big, why they had a long fence like that... Just kept getting’ more things to ask ‘bout. Big pulp piles, giant sugar pots wit’ fire where them Negroes was sweatin’, stirrin’ that thick syrup wit’ paddles like what we got in the boat. Sugar house taller ‘n the house even.

Paddocks wit' horses of more shapes n' girth I ever saw. And they was real fine ones, too." He shook his head.

"Come a long walk to get to cabins. This'n had just one room. Window barely let in some sun. Outside was like a icehouse compared to this place." He looked over to Joie. "*Cher*, our barn be cooler. Even the swamp people had better cabins. Wasn' nearly 'fraid to visit these poor creatures though.

"Anyhow, by the fireplace they was a slave wit' his back all mangled. Got thick blood squeezin' out o' crisscrossed lines of drawing salve thick and black as tar. Giant Negro never opened his eyes, but I'll never forget him. Voice was like cotton when he thanked Paw for medicine goin' break his fever.

"Gets me to this day, now near-on sixty years later, how I couldn' look away, couldn' stop starin' at that big slave, how he still wore bloody, crusty overalls pulled down to his hips.

"I ask Paw how come that slave got beat and Paw say, 'Just the way things is, son.'

"Few years later, just before the war come down south, a few owners started freein' some slaves. Saw that slave's brother and his son starin' at Paw's fat cucumbers, giant purple eggplants, and t'matoes be weighin' down they vines.

"I run up the steps, hollerin', 'Come, Paw, come quick!'

"Paw come and seen 'em and turned right back 'round to tell Maw we got comp'ny. Wasn' the first ex-slaves she cook for.

"Tha's how William and JoJo come to be on the peninsula.

"They was eatin' shrimp stew, fried eggplant, *couche*, and *cayai*, and me and Paw went to find Cousin LaFleur. He a widower. Kids all grown. Had extry room.

“I used to ask Paw how come JoJo couldn’ ride to town wit’ us to sell vegetables. He just give me a pat on the back. ‘Just the way things is, son.’ Same thing when I ask how come he cain’ go to school.

“Course now, I didn’t go back to school after too long. Too many workers made the pay go down. Had to work. Cut rice ‘til them crops failed. Still too little to thrash pecans from the ground so I climbed them trees, cracked ‘em. JoJo helped. We built some mighty fine chicken coops. Last one stood ‘til that nineteen-aught-nine hurricane, one what hit Grand Isle. Kilt 350 souls. Didn’t ask Paw no more ‘bout why a Negro couldn’ ride in town or visit places wit’ us.

MawMaw brought a cup of coffee but PawPaw just nodded and rested the cup on a crossbar.

“Anyhow, William long gone, but we promise him we take care of JoJo on account he slow. He mong’loid, *bebe*. Tha’s how come he so slow. Tha’s how come he ain’ got nothin’ better to do than come ‘round here ev’y night and sit on the porch and close ev’y day wit’, ‘I’z sho worn out.’”

PawPaw let out a deep sigh, took a long gulp of coffee, and then walked on over to the barn. Joie went back to her weeding until he came back with a hoe and churned up nearly a whole row before he began again.

“Paw, he work side-by-side with the blacks, drink from the same ladles at the end of long rows they turn wit’ single-claws. Blacks and whites, we share meals and roofs... Maw birthed black babies and white, nurse the old.

“But the Highlanders here by then—”

PawPaw’s voice trailed off but Joie knew the rest of the story. Baton Rouge became the capital of Louisiana and Plaquemine the Iberville Parish seat, governed by Highlanders. But the

upper crust were not Europe's aristocracy, were not men who understood that their duties to the commoners were as important as their familial obligations. *Noblesse oblige* was a burden—Cajuns lacked education and social position due to lack of intellect; they remained impoverished because they did nothing about it; their ancestors had preferred to leave their homes and belongings rather than pay taxes. Highlanders chose not to remember Cajuns were the brave ones who refused to give up their religion. They were easy to hate.

PawPaw watched his own family endure, watched the Negroes, to whom the Highlanders' charity was rarely extended, barely subsist. He watched the Highlanders distance themselves further and further from the Lowlanders, and when he finally asked his father why people in town didn't want to talk to him, heard for the last time, "Just the way things is, son."

Chapter 16

Joie pinched a forearm so often it stayed red, each time reminding herself to draw strength from the courage of her forefathers. She'd been back in Hammond for three days and hadn't heard from Tres. Sometimes she felt strong but more often her crazed brain swapped her confidence for imaginings of how their relationship may well end as those of her ancestors. Why expect anything of Highlander contempt? Tres was a Highlander...but wasn't he different?

Her confidence faltered more and more crushingly each time she relived scenes of their last visits. She re-spoke each word, reenacted each glance or gesture, studied them over and over to uncover some discreet message she must have missed, some telltale sign, some, *any* thing she must have misread. A response or an overlooked opportunity to connect with Tres, something she could point to and say *there—that's where I went wrong*. How could he so easily let days go by without talking to her?

Eventually she'd accept that he wouldn't be calling at all. Perhaps for a few hours here and there she might convince herself he must have left town for business, or maybe a parent was ill, or a dozen other legitimate excuses for the passage of so much time between their last visit and the next, if there were one.

What if she hadn't gauged his love for her correctly all along? What if she hadn't gauged her own love correctly? Was she caught up in a childhood fantasy? Puppy love? What if Tres had done the same? He talked about how he loved her from the moment he laid eyes on her that first day at DDR but did he really know the adult Joie? What would happen when he discovered all her flaws and insecurities? She longed for the adult Tres but did he long for the little girl who made his childhood days bearable?

After allowing days of angst to slip through her fingers, Joie ultimately found her way back to peace with a Psalm or short passage of red-letter text. She recited *Trust in the Lord in all you do, and lean not on your own understanding* a dozen times, and followed up with *The Lord is my shepherd...he anoints my head with oil...surely love and goodness will follow me all the days of my life.*

On the way home for Thanksgiving break, she thought about telling Tres how she fretted when no letter arrived with the postman and when she wasn't called to the hallway after the gong of Mrs. Sabine's newly installed telephone tapped its bell. Had she left Tres with the impression that she was strong and independent? Would he think her childish? Even more unsophisticated than his kind thought of Lowlanders?

When she got home, she left her bags with Joey and ran to the barn to saddle Shellac before even finding MawMaw and PawPaw. Tres was waiting for her at Quilted Bay. She'd burst if she didn't share her feelings... if he balked, then so be it. Better he knew the real her... whatever that was... now, before he got in too deep.

"Let's walk," she told him. She had rehearsed the coming conversation until she was sick of the prospect of seeing him. Who was this man, anyway? Had he any clue to the heartache he inflicted when he ignored her? She cursed him for being the man. She cursed her

grandmother's lessons on propriety. She cursed her own mind for taking her into the void, and ill-treated ancestors for the scars of her heritage that reminded her how little her kind were valued.

When Tres said, "Hi," she walked past his outstretched arms. They trekked through the boulders and rocks where Patches saved Joie from a snake, and through the flowing sweet grasses to the base of the Indian Mounds. When she saw the shrunken heap of soil above Patches' grave, she continued to the opposite side, but as she passed her pony's final resting place, she thought about Indians and Blackfoot babies, how Tres had really understood her culture when the flocks of butterflies had appeared.

She sat cross-legged beside Tres and made white pom-pom leis that draped down to their waists, and finally leaned back onto his shoulder, picking off petals before finally whispering, "I'm not nearly this confident when you're not here." She knew Tres understood her feelings to the point that she shared them, but there was nothing to be said in response to the ranting of allegorical witches that vanished in his presence, leaving scary stories Joie could stand brave against only half the time, until Goliath appeared, now with gun powder and fuses, spewing tyrannical declarations in over-drawled Southern Speak: Too big for your britches! *How possibly could a Highlander understand a Lowlander!*

She tried to imagine what Tres would say if anyone asked if he cared for her. Now, while in his presence, she felt confident his response would be a compelling, non-hesitant *yes*. But when he wasn't around, it was hard to believe his definition of caring was that of her own—otherwise *why doesn't he... or if he cared, then...* Even now, when she felt confident, she started chastising herself for being so trusting, so naïve. She wanted to open up to Tres, but these

feelings of confidence and insecurity weren't mutually exclusive, and feeling safe dressed in neither skin, she held her tongue.

When he told her, "Everything'll be fine. It won't be much longer," her witches disappeared, and along with them her need to say anything.

But the witches returned back in Hammond, and her self-imposed burdens became all but unbearable the following spring. Tres visited her in Hammond as often as he could, but Monday through Friday he clerked in Baton Rouge, and often on Saturdays and Sundays, and Joie didn't see him even on the weekend. By the time she left Hammond for Easter break, she hadn't seen Tres in four weeks.

The improvement in PawPaw's health had maintained, and he was finally well enough to get back into his garden. That was where Joie found him, hoeing his rows into shape. But there weren't as many rows as previous years. It was a boot in her guts to be forced to acknowledge that PawPaw wasn't as mighty as he used to be, that he was getting old and would no longer have the physical strength nor endurance to plant and maintain a full garden. Instead of two long rows of tomatoes, there would be only one. Instead of a whole row of green bean bushes, only half. All the vegetables that required high maintenance, their scale was halved. The vegetables that required little maintenance, like okra, and the eggplant, squash, and merlinton that grew on lattice, their quantities would not be reduced, but all in all the garden would be smaller by a third.

She didn't find Tres at Quilted Bay. Hadn't passed him in town. Didn't even see him on Easter Sunday night when, still half-reeling from the realization of PawPaw's decline, Joie's dreams acted out the tale of *The Potter*, a story Father Barbier preached at Mass that morning

about a young couple who loved to go hunting for antiques together, only the main characters were PawPaw, Tres, and Joie.

Tres and Joie came upon an old shack, its sign, *Antiques for Sale*, painted on a half sheet of warped wood leaning against an old steam tractor with no engine. They ambled through the rooms to the very back, where a solitary teacup sat on the highest shelf.

Tres lifted the tiny handle and set it in his open palm. Hair-thin lines of paint gave the illusion of three-dimensional flora, all in blended hues of coral and green with sapphire blue and emerald green. They marveled at its intricacy, and when she reached to touch it, the cup began to speak.

“You know,” it said in PawPaw’s voice, “I have not always been this lovely teacup you now see. For an eternity I was but a dry, lifeless chunk of clay, until one day when a potter scooped me out and doused me with the cool freshness of spring water. I had not drunk in many years and I thanked the potter for his generosity.

“He wrapped his hands around me, and I knew I was truly blessed, but then he started probing me, and I became very uncomfortable, and told him *Stop That*, but he started spinning me around so fast everything became blurry. I told him I felt sick and he must stop, but the potter responded, ‘Not yet.’

“When the spinning finally stopped, I thought I was saved but he sank his fingers deep inside me and pulled out a lump of my very being. He tossed it aside and started the world spinning again but soon sank in his fingers and removed another piece of me.

“I shouted, *Stop. Stop, do you hear? That hurts, I beg you leave me be.* But the potter said, ‘Not yet.’

“Soon he rested me in his palm, and I smiled. He placed me in a warm place, but it became hotter and hotter and suffocated the life out of me. I beseeched the potter, *Please have pity on me. Do not allow me to perish in this heat!*

“His only response, ‘Not yet.’

“After the heat baked me until I thought I’d die, the man rescued me only to set me upon a small pedestal and cover me with foul liquids, and I shouted, *No! I mean it, Stop. I can’t breathe. What you demand I endure is too much.*

“Again his damnable response, ‘Not yet.’

“Finally, he put away the vile containers but again he placed me in heat, now twice as hot as the first, and it singed and burned and took my breath away and I roared, *I am in great pain and you must release me, that I might go home, back to painless anonymity among others of my kind.*

“‘Not yet.’

“So much time passed that I knew he had abandoned me. But he did come back and remove me from the heat. As I reveled in the pleasures of cool breath and calmness, the potter held a mirror where I could see my reflection. There before my eyes is what you see now, only the goodness of what he first retrieved. His refinement and artful skill left me in this beautiful state, where those who see me want me, and others like me bask in the peace and wonder of what the potter molded and shaped us into, though at so many moments we had begged he stop.”

When Joie had heard Father Barbier’s sermon, she felt like God was trying to comfort her, to help her understand the real, confident *me* inside her so she could let go of her all-consuming apprehensions about the future and stop getting in God’s way. But... what if God was saying hang tough? Now it soundlessly echoed over and over, leaving her to wonder what

exactly might happen if only she could hang tough, and why in the world the teacup spoke in PawPaw's voice.

Then, just past Joie's footboard, a hovering, whitish translucence appeared. About a five-foot oval, its cord extended to her chest and surged energy back and forth. It forced calm into her spirit and she felt the invisible and heard the unspoken voice of wisdom like the ambient warmth of well-wishing thoughts from someone dearly loved. Joie's unspoken questions quieted, and the vision disappeared, leaving Joie confident and no longer at the mercy of Tres to bring happiness her way. She decided to think of the image—even if it was just a dream—as her mother, come to comfort her. And she decided to believe that PawPaw's voice in the potter's dream was her subconscious speaking to her in the voice she trusted above all others.

Chapter 17

It was the end of October when Joie went home for All Saints Day and the Acadian Festival.

Slighted-eye boys in Fords honked their horns when they were forced to slow down behind the carriage Joey drove with MawMaw and Joie, followed by Jules, PawPaw, and the older boys in a wagon pulled by plodding draft horses. “Out of the way, hicks!” It was the one time in Joie’s life that she wished for one of those delicate little fans fancy ladies hid behind.

When she was a child and traveled to Plaquemine with PawPaw, their rides were peaceful, Joie always in the crook of PawPaw’s arm and a book of horses under her own. But that was before so many automobiles clanked by, blasting horns and puffing smoke that burned nostrils. “The festival’ll be over by the time those nags drive you in!”

MawMaw had cut cheese, brisket, and bread, and packed it along with Mason jars of sassafras tea in her oblong straw clothesbasket that more resembled a bassinet. Now they, along with the whole town, were anxious to reach the starting point of the parade and opening ceremony at the locks, where Bayou Plaquemine met the river. The Corps of Engineers had concreted a patch of levee at the locks—locals used it for soap box derbies—and between the two stood Plaquemine Youth Center. The locks, the Youth Center, and St. John the Evangelist Catholic Cathedral met the bayou for Plaquemine’s version of a town square.

The Fryoux' turned down Foundry Street on the north side of Bayou Plaquemine, and hitched their horses at Nadler's Foundry, across the bayou from the square. Down the grassy embankment, they would picnic and watch the reenactment of Evangeline's long-ago trek down Bayou Plaquemine toward the Mississippi River. Along the opposite embankment, Tres descended with a crowd while his parents sat in Dom's Ford in front of the cathedral, ready to begin the parade after the ceremony.

The morning sun glistened white off the brown-green bayou water when Evangeline's Indian scouts paddled around the final curve before the locks. The crowd quieted a moment when they saw a second canoe thirty yards back, then the adults set off firecrackers and Roman candles while children spun sparklers above their heads... there was the Acadian Queen—Evangeline—and her squaws.

A monstrous bunch of white roses and blue belladonna lay across Renee Wilbert's arm. Dressed in a frilly white dress that resembled a debut ensemble, at Renee's feet sat more scouts in breechcloths, and behind her stood Indian Princesses dressed in crude buckskin. Renee had waited three long years for this day, filling the role of a princess in previous ceremonies. No one expected any other girl would be the queen this year, so it was odd, onlookers would later agree, that a girl with three years of experience waving from a canoe should whiffle-waffle and lose her balance, then (*oh so gracefully*, they would remark), tip over into the bayou.

The crowd shrieked with Renee's initial falter, and though the bayou's depth during the heat of summer barely rose to four feet, Tres joined several men who plodded in to scoop her up. Renee floundered at the center of a moat of floating skirt but when the townies reached her they somehow couldn't corral her. Tres gathered her in his arms and carried her ashore amid hoorahs and an exuberant ovation.

Joie watched as Tres bent to lower Renee to the ground, watched Renee mouth inaudible words and shake her head, watched Tres carry her up the embankment to the Youth Center and his car. It was the first year in ten that Tres didn't ride in the first car of the parade, as the Plaquemine City Council voted Dom their Grand Marshall those many years.

Aside from the Fryoux clan, no one cared to remember that the Acadian Water Ceremony celebrated the life of a Lowlander. Longfellow had honored Plaquemine and Emeline LaBiche, and an enchanting, rewritten history now stood in place of her family's legacy.

Joie thanked her Heavenly Father for those dreams and apparitions that solidified her confidence and sense of calm, both for the bastardization of her mother's legacy and the curse of watching Renee pose as Aunt Emeline. She hadn't a single misgiving as she watched Tres drive off with Renee. When MawMaw grabbed her arm as they passed, Joie wondered if her grandmother thought she'd wave and shout to him, as did onlookers. Maybe she would have.

* * * * *

A canon shot out over the river to begin the parade, and the sun shone high in the sky when the procession reached the fairgrounds two hours later. Fine ladies baked under opaque parasols and fluttered cane fans across their necks and chests while men removed their suitcoats to reveal deep marks. Young children played games of chance for a nickel. The older ones flirted and prowled.

Renee Wilbert's brother, Arnaud, the Ford passenger who harangued the Fryoux' about their *nags*, seemed to be drawn to Joie like a bee to its hive. When unattended in town, the sixteen-year-old commonly followed her, hurrying ahead to mockingly open doors to shops and wave his hat before her as she stepped inside. Every time she saw Arnaud, Joie thought about his sister's condescension.

“Greetings, baby.” He was too sophisticated to use the colloquial *bebe*.

Joie was watering Shellac at a trough when Arnaud turned past the corner of the stables. Maybe he would pass on by.

But he circled back behind the carriage. “Joie, *ma petite fille*, come let me see them curls on your pretty head.”

At the corner of the stalls stood Renee under her parasol, cleaned and dried, now in the fancy new dress she had planned to wear all along, though it had still hung in her chiffonnier when Tres drove her home.

Joie looked over to see Renee wave that delicate fan across her neck as she looked on. Her chin cocked slightly upward and to her right, close enough for Joie to discern the little distortion of her mouth—the Renee thing—when she tightened the left corner of her lips and pinched flesh between her canines. Joie had noticed the expression years before when Renee mocked the Lowlanders with how she envied their lives, “...down there in the seclusion of The Point.”

“Don’t make me tell you again now, girl.”

Joie stood resolute.

“Come here, now, or—”

She turned and ran but Arnaud reached her with two giant leaps, grabbed her hair, wrapped an arm around her waist, and squeezed her against his abdomen. He jerked her head to the side. His hot, sticky breath sent shivers down her neck. His right hand slipped lower. His tongue slathered her shoulder.

“Or *what?*” Tres snickered when the boy looked over but then Renee stepped forward and rested a gentle hand on his forearm. He swatted it away as though to brush lint from his sleeve, then took a single step toward Arnaud.

When the boy didn’t release Joie, Tres’ voice deepened. “What...*petit...frère?*”

“This is none of your business, Tres. Take my sister back around to the fair.”

With one stride, Tres caught Arnaud by his ascot and twisted the arm that held Joie to where the boy’s wrist bent backward. When Tres saw Joie fly toward the trough and barely catch herself before falling into the slimy water, Tres squeezed until he felt two pops.

He lifted Arnaud in the way he had held Joie, and the boy’s feet flailed in search of the ground—the more he wiggled the more his britches slid up into his crotch and showed his stockings like a clown.

When Tres hurled her brother down into soggy, hoof-torn sod, Renee yelled, “Tres! You can’t... she’s just a—”

Tres sent her a snarly look that shut her mouth, but Renee turned to go only after she saw Tres extend his hand to a Lowlander.

Arnaud whined, “I’m gonna tell,” and ran to his sister, who no longer cocked her head to one side—though her chin did reach the clouds before she stormed off with swishing petticoats that showed her ankles with every step.

Though few seconds had passed, the vision of Joie’s nemesis succumbing to a greater force seemed never-ending. Tres needed scanty a muscle to subdue Arnaud, and when reached for her and winked, she couldn’t help but giggle.

“What took you so long?” Joie winked back at Tres.

“Oh, I’ve been close. I was on my way and saw Arnaud slinking around again. Thought I’d wait ‘til he was gone. Didn’t think he’d throw you down like he did though. Misjudged that... sorry. You’re all wet.” He kissed her hand.

“I’m fine.” She righted her bodice. “Guess you got delayed with Renee.”

“Swear to God,” he huffed, “you ever wonder how it is everybody doesn’t see she’s such a fake?”

Joie pulled in her chin like a turtle. “So you thought the fall was deliberate too?”

“I bet everybody does.” He looked up to see Joie’s perplexed expression and asked, “Why does that surprise you?”

“I guess I’m a little prejudice. Seems like Highlanders tend to stick together. Guess I wasn’t expecting that you saw through all the glitter and poise that ekes out her pores.”

“I’m learning.” He threw an arm around her as if to validate his humanity. “Still wanna take a ride?”

Joie shook her head. “Word’ll be spreading like wildfire.”

“Let ‘em talk. Come on, I’ll walk you over to M’Maw.”

“That’ll just make things worse.” Part of Joie wanted to let Tres walk her in public, but part of her just wasn’t ready for more confrontation. She and Tres had decided to see each other today secretly and give the world small doses of themselves only once they had completed the formal courting processes.

But when Tres looked down at her with those crystal eyes sparkling from midday sun and said, “Trust me,” she took his arm and let him welcome her to her first public experience with him. In her mind, the incident would remain a sense-binding picture in motion, beginning the moment she turned to see the man behind the voice of rescue, continuing through the time he

tipped his hat to MawMaw, there, in the presence of Highlanders who would later refer to the event as *the first time Tres had anything to do with that Lowlander girl*.

* * * * *

At dawn the next morning, Tres galloped to the peninsula. “Joie, we have to figure out how I’m going to handle my parents when they find out what happened yesterday.”

“They don’t know?”

“I stayed at the club until I knew they’d be asleep.”

Joie hopped on Shellac and followed Tres out to *Lapeninsule Deux*, a boot-shaped mini peninsula that stretched out into the Mississippi just upriver of The Point. Highlanders called it the land of thieves, *Terredevoles*, and they were forbidden to encroach upon it because gypsies often camped there in their intricately carved wagons painted gold with jewel tones.

Tres and Joie let the horses graze and started walking toward a pond halfway down *Lapeninsule Deux*. Tres had brought cane poles and a hand shovel to dig up earthworms so they could catch small pond perch with the gypsy children who often came to float makeshift boats. After they caught a few fish, the children would tie them onto their boats like sails, wade into the tiny pond’s chest-high water, and blow them in a mighty boat race while Tres and Joie cheered them on.

Today, a boy and a girl maybe five years old lined up little pewter soldiers on a play-board made of trash lumber. They had collected soft, fat maple leaves to lay on, and faced each other with the board between them. They waved as Joie and Tres passed, shouted, “We comin’,” and went back to resting their little chins on palms propped up on elbows to finish their game.

The little girl stared at the board from behind long auburn curls, her finger wrapped in a lock from her temple while the boy kept saying, "Come on," and shook a finger at her. "You know, Amelie, you take too much time!"

She never did take her turn. The smoke appeared long before the flames that approached from the hundred-yard-wide boot-top.

Tres and Joie huddled to figure out how get out of there without scaring the children.

Amelie tilted her curly head and proclaimed, "It's not nice to tell secrets," but then she spotted the billowing gray that seeped out from the woods. She nudged her playmate. They whistled for their ponies.

A crackle that sounded like fat sizzling on a roasting pig came from the woods. Dense underbrush hid the flames.

Joie rushed to Amelie and Tres to her playmate but the boy took off running.

Tres called after the boy, "Stop! It's too dangerous!"

"He went to get the ponies!" Amelie shouted.

The backburn crept toward them. The sky began to glow. The fire raced down the peninsula.

Tres sprinted backward toward the trail. "Run!" He pointed toward the heel of the small peninsula. "Go to the cove, I'll be right behind you!" Then he turned and ran after the boy, still shouting, "Go! Go!"

"Tres! No! Don't leave me!"

He stopped and looked back at Joie one last time, pointed to the little girl, and mouthed *go*.

Joie grabbed Amelie by the wrist and took off down an old cow path that led to the far end of the peninsula where it met a tiny, calm inlet inside the heel of the boot.

The crackles got closer, louder, and clearer. They grew into a deafening growl. Why couldn't they outrun it? How could God let her and Tres' lives end now, after all they had been through to be together! The wind still blew most of the smoke northward toward Tres and the boy, but the fire rode the pecan leaves and underbrush like a speeding train and heated the air so hot that Joie and Amelie gasped for breath. Joie couldn't stop thinking about what might happen to her family if the Highlanders found out she and Tres died together, how they'd blame Joie and ostracize her family. She picked up Amelie and ran faster.

When Joie was only seven, a hurricane had hit Lake Charles, about 125 miles west, and its wind and rain had ripped off a chunk of the small *Lapeninsule Deux*, exposing giant tentacles of gnarled roots that now sloped to the water's edge. When she reached the cove, Joie set Amelie down and got on all fours to show her how to use the roots as a ladder and crawl to the river. But the previous night's rain had slimed the makeshift rungs and they slid face down, feet first. They tried to grab passing outgrowths and roots to slow their descent but they were too slippery. They tried to wedge a foot or knee into slots they slid across, but mangled roots ripped their flesh.

Amelie screamed. High, quivering, gut-wrenching screams. Joie didn't want to frighten the child further, but the tearing and bruising had lives of their own and she heard guttural wails she didn't recognize as her own.

The screaming finally stopped. Joie looked everywhere. Amelie wasn't higher up or down below, nor to either side.

"Amelie!"

“Amelie!”

“Amelieeee!” Had the child slid past her into the agitated brown waters that swirled into whirlpools at the heel? Had the turbulence and undertows caught her as they flowed around the sharp angles of the boot toe?

She tried to stand but couldn't even stay on her knees. She kept sliding until her foot finally caught on an abandoned breakaway log. She lifted onto all fours to see a tiny leg poking out from the roots. Brown- and red-streaked in its ripped stocking, the leg jutted out only seven or eight feet above her. The roots that tore Joie's fingers and hands and arms had engulfed a body small enough to fit through the slots and into a hollow where hurricane winds and floods had washed away the earth.

Joie tried to scoot up the roots like a caterpillar. When that didn't work, she slithered like a snake, but each time she gained a few inches, the next move slid her back down to the breakaway log. The clarity of mind she had possessed to that point deteriorated, replaced with reason as foggy as the cinder that now engulfed her and made her pant and cough as it burned her throat. Could a person hyperventilate on air devoid of oxygen? She slowed her breath, forced herself to focus and think clearly until the solution finally surfaced.

She pulled her shift over her head, tied the sleeves together, and threw it time and again like a lasso to catch protruding roots. She caught a cypress knee, then another, until she pulled herself up to the tiny leg.

She could barely feel the pulse at Amelie's ankle. The precious child lay face-down in the root chamber, one leg inside, its knee buried in the soft mud from the impact, the other pinched between the snarled roots at the surface. Joie wrenched the child's leg to free it, but Amelie released a wretched scream Joie hoped her mother would never have to hear.

She tried again and again. But now Amelie didn't respond. Had the child passed out—or worse? Joie unknotted her shift, wrapped most of it around the tiny, exposed leg and foot, and tucked the remaining fabric through cracks around the opening, hoping the damp cloth would screen the heat and smoke. Then she released the cypress knee that had secured her beside Amelie and slithered down to the riverbank, leaving streaks of red trails on the moldy green roots until her toes dipped into the cool of the river.

She had left Amelie alone, her precious leg wrapped in flowered flourbag, and all Joie could see from an angle so far below was a tiny foot succumbing to thickening smoke that rolled down over her tomb. Then she lost sight even of that as this river, the lifeline whose spring waters fed her family's crawfish ditches yet threatened to steal their livelihood, the waterway that gave breeze to their stifled homes but fed deadly storm winds, as it accepted Joie into itself.

Chapter 18

Tres ran barely fifty feet up the path toward the mouth of the *Lapeninsule Deux* when the smoke overcame him and he fell to his knees. He turned toward the river, crawled through the underbrush, and followed the bank until the last moment, when the flames forced him to escape into the water. A mile downriver, he fought the current to reach land in the deep curve that started the big *O*, and then ran back to the little peninsula.

Tres tracked a repugnant stench to the water's edge near the ashes of maple-leaf bedding where the boy had played with his little friend. There lay the child's blackened, limbless torso caught in ash sludge near the bank. Tres wanted to rescue his body and find someone to give it to for a proper burial, but when he reached for the torso, the head separated and bobbed like a fishing line floater. He collected the pieces and set them on soggy leaves on the bank. He covered them with his shirt and left to find Joie and Amelie. He tried to convince himself that the boy died from smoke.

Fallen timbers still flitted with stubborn flames near the little waterhole. Small fires grew larger and hotter further toward the cove. Tres picked his way through the red embers of intact branches, sideways fingers of steam that shot out from emblazoned trees still with hot gases to release, and patches of burning scrub all the way to the toe of the boot, where the river breeze had sucked the flame into a monster fire that engulfed every pine needle, leaf, and vine in its path.

He thought of life without Joie, about her burned, lifeless body buried in a pine box under a ton of dirt with a crude wooden cross jutting out of the ground above her. He thought about the condition of the boy's body, what Joie's might look like, then escaped from the thoughts and went inside his head, continuing his search in a benign, numb state only thinking, *step over this branch... duck under this one... careful now...* until sunset and, unable to find the girls, he rushed back to the mouth of the peninsula and joined the locals in rescue efforts for gypsies trapped behind firewalls.

When he came across four dead horses, Tres tried to convince himself that the worst outcome would be that he would have to tell Joie she lost another horse and the boy died from smoke. Otherwise, he reasoned, he would have somehow felt her absence had she left this world. But what if he had sent Joie and that little girl to their deaths? This was all his parents' fault. If they survived, he would demand that they accept Joie. He would demand that they allow him to live his own life; otherwise, he would disown them.

He asked everyone he saw if they knew what happened to Joie and Amelie, but no one knew whom he was talking about.

When all were satisfied that everyone who survived had been found, Tres joined the procession of cars and carriages headed toward the church and hospital. Prayers and novenas for those lost to the fire hummed through Iberville Parish, and young and old alike filled the rows of St. John the Evangelist Catholic Cathedral until midnight, when Father Barbier and Mother Catherine went down each row to gently lay a hand on parishioners folded down onto knee rests, share in a final prayer, make the sign of the cross over them, and whisper, "Go home, dear child."

Tres found Joie at the hospital. MawMaw, Jules, and the boys sat outside her room in chairs that lined a long hall.

When he entered Joie's room, PawPaw hugged him. He saw Joie over PawPaw's shoulder and struggled to find his breath. *Burned!* He could only gawk at her arm, bandaged from shoulder to wrist, her upper torso naked under a thin sheet but for the gauze that wrapped it, her face with long strips of dried blood. For a moment, he withdrew from the unfeeling existence within his head, had to feel her pain and kiss her wounds, had to figure out a way to tell her the condition he found the boy. When pain over the thought of telling her stabbed at his chest, he tried to go back into his head, to feel that numbness again, but he couldn't stop staring at Joie's chest, how it rose and fell in jerks. When she coughed, he reached for a towel to soak up her gray sputum, held back her hair as she spit into the towel time and again. He couldn't stop staring at her bandaged body.

When he finally asked about her injuries and Joie responded, "Just a few cuts and scrapes," he was sure she lied.

"But you're wrapped up so—"

Picking at the edges of gauze, Joie insisted, "Only cuts and scrapes. Where's your shirt?"

Though he knew the answer would hurt both of them more than their own injuries, he had to tell her. "It was bad, Joie. He was just a little boy. I remember being that age when..." A darkness of spirit seemed to overtake Tres before he eventually forced a smile. "How's Amelie?"

"You found her?"

"Me... she was with *you!*"

"I had to leave her at the cove! She fell... and she was stuck... and I couldn't—"

“I’m so sorry, my sweet.” He couldn’t tell her he had looked for them there and everything organic was burnt. Crisp.

“She’s alive!” Joie grabbed Tres’ arm.

“I looked everywhere. Lay back, you’ll hurt yourself.”

“She survived, I’m sure of it.” She begged, “Please, you have to go back!”

Under a half-moon sky, Tres returned to search the black stench and gore. Whether Amelie survived or not, he had to find her.

Near dawn, he carried a comatose Amelie into the emergency room. She suffered from a broken pelvis, a triple-broken leg, and serious lung damage, but no burns at all. Once she went into surgery, Tres finally called his parents and told them he was being treated for a few first- and second-degree burns from running past and through ignited underbrush, and one three-inch by six-inch third-degree burn on his right forearm where he had fended off a red-hot branch near the riverbank and slipped on the monster roots that adopted and held safe the little girl named Amelie.

They were mad that he had risked his life but went to the hospital anyway.

* * * * *

Joie didn’t remember anything after she entered the water. Not the fishermen who pulled her out of the river, nor Dr. Spedale as he sewed up her right triceps and left elbow, knee, and breast. Her first memory of the night was PawPaw’s answer to her unasked question: a pat on the head and a craggy, “He’s safe, *cher*.” Her second memory was of how, high on morphine, she laughed aloud when a nurse changing her bandages held up a mirror so Joie could see her injuries—her triceps looked like the arm of that old cowboy who had once turned his back on a toothy colt. PawPaw said it ain’t right to laugh about something like that.

By the time Tres reached the hospital with Amelie, Joie's morphine high had subsided and she made PawPaw push her in a wheelchair down to the emergency room area to wait for Tres.

Joie listened to the rhythmic voice of a toothless old woman comforting a friend with bids of Jesus's plan and His love of intercessory prayer from no matter whom... another who patted a young man's hand when a doctor told him his wife was comatose and wouldn't recover from the birth of his daughter... a man with a gray beard that grew almost all the way up to the deep lines earned from a lifetime of laughter, trying to soothe a toddler with no understanding of why his mother wouldn't answer him there, lying sideways on a bench... compassion of the less advantaged lay its hand upon her soul and Joie wondered what was in their minds when they looked back at her. Did she exude the same emotions she perceived from them? Or had they cast her aside, into the quickly disregarded class sitting to her left, the Highlander Duchandes, whose raised eyebrows and lifted chins gave notice to these undesirables that their proximity was tolerated only due to circumstance. For years, Joie had felt that warning—at horse shows, walking on the street, in shops, whenever in the presence of this bejeweled woman, this matriarch. It was a message to know her place and stay in it.

Joie hadn't been so near Mrs. Duchande since she was a child and rode with PawPaw to deliver some of MawMaw's freshly sewn aprons. While PawPaw went to get his money, Joie looked for Tres and, when she couldn't find him, went to see Nadine. The old woman sat at the kitchen table hulling peas so Joie just walked right through the screen door as she normally did.

And there stood Mrs. Duchande. When she saw Joie walk in without knocking, chirping, "Hey, Nadine," like a best friend, she stopped Joie in her tracks with one of her infamous bull's-

eye looks that felt like it drilled a hole all the way through the back of Joie's head. Tres inherited her eyes, but on him they were nice eyes.

Mrs. Duchande didn't say a word to Joie, rather looked at Nadine out the corner of her eye without turning her head at all and breathed, "Nadine, you really should be much more careful running this kitchen, all these distractions from things not of our element," each syllable punctuated with the haughty over-enunciation the upper crust evoke so effortlessly.

Joie wondered if the woman really meant to include Nadine in the *our*. And would Nadine have accepted the invitation were it legitimate. Old Nadine's *our* worked for the Duchandes and other Highlanders in almost the identical manner as had their slave ancestors. For Nadine, the only real difference was that she was now given five silver dollars every week, less all those dollars she was docked when she was fired.

* * * * *

The hospital released Tres and Joie early the next morning, and PawPaw paid a motor taxi to bring Joie home. Mr. Duchande drove Tres through the smokeless, rolling breeze of the delta's sunrise hours. Locals lined the streets in trails like sugar ants. When they saw Mr. Duchande's yellow convertible with its top down, they jumped like children and showered their hero with kisses blown like doubloons tossed from Mardi Gras floats. Tres had saved a child.

"Go faster, Father!"

But Dom drove unhurriedly, lingering to catch the many hails of *Merci, Merci!*

"What are they doing!" Tres had left a second child to face a ghastly death! He watched the strangers as though their well wishes were intended for some other man, a man who didn't battle for control of his soul against the demon of *wouldas*, *shouldas*, and *couldas* that might have saved that other child, Amelie's friend and twin. When the child couldn't reach the ponies,

had he turned back, hoping to find his sister and the adults? Had he waited for them as the fire approached? Had he soaked his man-sized kerchief in water and tried to breathe through hot, cinder-ridden air? Had a whirlwind of fire sucked him in like a tornado?

“Pull over, Father!” He opened the car door and vomited.

“Too much excitement, son?”

When they turned onto the road that led home, Mr. Duchande said, “You know, the locals rescued almost two dozen gypsies caught behind the fire line. Carried them downriver four or five at a time in skiffs and bateaus. Course, who knows how many died. Who even knows how many there ever were in that camp of theirs. Doubt we’ll ever see those fancy traveling wagons again. Just as well. They can all blame the Lowlanders. Just another ignorant blunder trying to clear some land I expect.”

Chapter 19

Tres awoke the next morning to steak and eggs in bed, served by Renee Wilbert.

“I wanted to come see you in the hospital when your mother called,” Renee whined, “but you know how susceptible I am to just any old cold.”

Tres was unclothed and clutched his sheet, demanding, “How did you get in here?”

“Your mother, of course,” she grinned. “My hands were full so she had to open the door.”

“It was *locked*,” he snarled.

Oblivious to Tres’ stern voice, she continued, saying, “When she called me from the hospital, she was so upset...”

“And why are you here?”

“... going on about how you’d have scars where that fire caught you...”

“Mother!” He cursed under his breath.

“... and how I needed to come watch over you when she went to town.”

“But you said she’s here. She just unlocked the door.”

“Well, she’ll be leaving soon I expect. Just wanted to make sure I got you settled in with breakfast... and coffee... and fresh sheets.”

Renee still held his breakfast tray and bent over to place it on his lap. “Oh my,” she batted her eyes. “Well, you’ll just have to use your napkin to cover your chest.”

“I don’t need to be served in bed! And Nadine is perfectly capable of preparing my breakfast.”

She set the tray on Tres’ lap and, as though he didn’t understand, repeated with a voice a mother might use to make a baby coo, “As you said, the door was locked. Anyway, Nadine surely doesn’t have a key, and who wants an old nigra woman coming in his room when he’s naked. I swear, Tres. What are you thinking?”

“Nadine!”

“Hush now. Why do you want to interrupt her work?”

“Like you care about... I can eat by myself. Nadine!”

“Tres, be a good patient and eat up so you can gain your strength—”

“My strength is just fine. You can—”

“—and then I’ll change your sheets.”

“—go home, Renee.”

“Not until—”

Nadine appeared in the doorway. “Come on now, Miss Renee. Tres don’t like no women-folk ‘round when he indisposed. The mistress ain’ had no bi’ness lettin’ you in here.”

Renee crossed the room and slapped Nadine’s face. “Wait ‘til Mrs. Duchande hears about a nigra talking about what she ought and ought not to do!”

“Out! Out, Renee! Nadine’s here now. She’ll change my sheets.” He pointed to the door, but Renee walked back to the bed, draped his napkin across his chest, kissed him on the forehead, and only turned to go when she realized Tres still pointed.

When Renee said, “See you tomorrow,” Tres blew out an annoyed breath that appeared to go unnoticed.

The following morning at dawn, Renee appeared again with the same arguments, but when Tres hollered for Nadine, she didn't come. He ate his breakfast while Renee gabbed about social events, and when he finished, asked her to leave the room so he could dress. She still stood at the door when he walked out.

"There," Tres pointed to the bed, "change the sheets. Do you even know how?" He left Renee standing at the door and hid in the barn for over an hour until he heard her drive off.

That night before he went to sleep, Annette came for a visit and asked, "What's all the commotion going on every morning?"

"*Ugh*," Tres groaned. "Mother and Renee, of course."

Annette sat on the edge of the bed to tuck in her brother and offer a *humph*. "What's *she* doing here?"

"Serving my *breakfast*, of all things, and trying to change sheets if you can believe that. Mother's been unlocking the door."

Annette kissed her brother's cheek and turned to go, saying, "Prop a chair under the doorknob behind me."

In the morning when his mother couldn't open Tres' door, she pounded on it, and when he didn't answer, she screamed, "Nadine, get the foreman! Something's wrong with Tres!"

Resigned, Tres bellowed, "All right, Mother, I'm coming."

Renee and Tres' mother both sat with him, discussing Tres' injuries among themselves while Tres propped back on his headboard and mutely ate, doing his best to ignore the women until he heard his mother raise her volume about "... taking senseless risks—when he should have come here and prepared to save his own home from the fire."

"Mother! This house was never in danger."

“You didn’t know that! You were out on *Terredevoles* doing God knows what with that—”

“Don’t, Mother. Stop it right there.” Tres shot her a look that could curdle milk so she stood to go, kissing Renee on both cheeks. “Maybe *you* can talk some sense into him,” she whispered before walking out and closing the door behind her.

“Mother, leave the door open.”

Her heels clacked down the hall.

“Aww, don’t be so worried about propriety, Tres. The only ones here are us and Nadine.” Renee jutted out her chin and proclaimed, “I think she’s learned her lesson about sticking her nose in the affairs of her employer. She’s lucky she got her job back.”

“Got her job *back*?” When he realized that was why Nadine hadn’t come when he called the previous morning, he looked Renee in the eyes and growled, “Get out of here.”

But Renee had already moved on.

“You know, Tres, really, what *were* you doing with that girl? And whatever possessed you to embarrass me at the fair like you did?” She sat in a chair beside Tres’ bed, poking out her bottom lip. “Why, I’d rather see you dead than... Or maybe I’d just shoot *myself* so I wouldn’t have to see it.”

Renee showed up six days in a row. By the seventh, Tres’ burns had finally scabbed over. He arose early, slipped into the barn while it was still dark, and saddled his horse.

Chapter 20

Each morning after the fire, Joie found herself on her back steps long before dawn, even before Daddy and PawPaw awoke. She sat. And waited.

Later that first day, PawPaw had found her there. He came earlier the next morning, steaming coffee in hand.

MawMaw, Daddy, and the rest of her family had said nothing about being caught in the fire with Tres. Not a single word. Maybe PawPaw had been telling them he'd handle that job.

While Joie waited, she yearned for one of PawPaw's stories, any story to avoid talk about the fire and the trouble the family would suffer when townies figured a Lowlander was responsible for putting their beloved hero in danger. "P'Paw, tell me again how you and M'Maw met."

He reached over and smoothed her hair, sipped his coffee, and said, "Ever' Sunday, for near-on two months, I 'xpect, I sat in the pew behind her."

Joie scooted closer, letting her grandfather's arm come to rest along her shoulders.

"Had a neck like a swan, little ringlets comin' down from a dark mound under her veil. Kept thinkin' on how soft they might feel. So, one Sunday after Mass, I squeezed through the crowd to follow her. Got right next to her in line when time to shake Father's hand on the way out."

PawPaw chuckled.

“When she got to Father, I cleared my throat, you know how I do some time, had to make Father see me so I could flick my head over at Beulah and give him a wink.

“Ol’ Father Rabalais, he grinned big and said, ‘Oh, Miss Hebert, have you the pleasure of meeting young Mr. Fryoux?’ Course, Father don’t normally say but *bless you child* after Mass, so Beulah, she ‘bout tripped on her own feet when he held on to her hand.

“She looked on over to me so I gave her a big smile.”

Joie imagined that smile, how he probably still had his own teeth back then, big like Daddy’s, almost too big for his head. “What did she do?”

“Well, now, she just stood there a bit, seein’s how Father still be holdin’ her hand, ‘til he finally say his *bless you child* and he let her go.”

“Then what did you do?”

“Shook Father’s hand fast as I could and followed her to her carriage ‘til her maw and paw come back so I could ask to call on her.”

“But you skipped the part about your boots, P’Paw.”

“Boots? Aww, them things was turned up at the toes and so chewed they wouldn’t hold polish, and her paw, he be the cobbler. Kept waitin’ for him to look down and see ‘em and tell me I wasn’t goin’ be seein’ his daughter.”

“But he didn’t?”

“Naw. Just give me a quick nod.”

Joie let PawPaw sit there, knowing he was nodding his head about how Beulah hadn’t uttered a single word. He had never heard her voice except for the shaky falsetto she used for hymns.

“And you fell in love.”

“Fell in love.” He smiled.

Daddy walked out the back door, and Joie kissed her grandfather’s cheek before going to the barn. She’d have to ride that new filly that wasn’t quite ready. Joie had named her *Itsy* because she was so fine-legged. They rode through the peninsula until it was late enough to whistle for Debbie and Maggie. She thought a visit with friends would keep her mind off of how she had questioned God’s plan when she was on Lapeninsule Deux trying to save Amelie. It turned out that it wasn’t His plan to bring Joie and Tres to their deaths before they even started their lives together. Maybe she could get a little comfort from her friends.

But then Debbie told her how Renee was taking care of Tres and her blood boiled. She cried herself to sleep that night but only that once. She kept reminding herself that God had no intention of letting her lose Tres.

The following morning, she sat on the bottom step behind her house watching the first flits of sun seep through the trees and thinking about Debbie and Maggie’s report when PawPaw joined her. As soon as his bottom hit the step, Joie asked, “So you and MawMaw fell in love, but then you thought you lost her, didn’t you?”

PawPaw’s gaze fell to his coffee. He swirled it around for a while before looking over to Joie. “Close to the weddin’ date.”

He looked out into the woods and pointed toward the mouth of the peninsula. “I was out there. Checkin’ on cows on the high grass. Come across a stretch of fence. Saw a old Live Oak stump smolderin’.”

“And you ran off to find your paw.”

“Kept tellin’ him, ‘They’s a fence, Paw! On the high land.’”

Joie envisioned her grandfather nineteen years old, about the same as she was now, with wide eyes, stomping through his father's garden, how the man just stared down at his sunken hoe. What could he tell his son? He had known this day might come, but Tee Ro was too old to accept *Just the way things is*.

How could he explain that he had known this day might come, what with so many immigrants driving southward from the East Coast and northward from New Orleans. This might be one of the final lessons Romain could teach his son before he himself became patriarch, became the man more than a hundred Lowlanders would call *PawPaw*.

“‘Open land, son,’ that’s all Paw said. Course, I was fit to be tied. Kept talkin’ back to him, saying it’s ours.”

Joie couldn’t imagine such a gentle man *fit to be tied*. Couldn’t imagine him enraged, his hands balled into fists.

“‘God’s land,’ he said.”

The words still hung heavy when Daddy walked out.

She awoke even earlier the following morning, still waiting for the two men she loved best.

PawPaw had barely handed over her coffee when she asked, “What did you do after talking to your paw?”

“Guess I never finished sayin’.” He swirled his coffee again. “Hitched two horses to the buckboard and galloped the whole way to the Plaquemine. Pulled up at the stables and stomped on into the Land Office, told ‘em somebody done stole our land.

“Old clerk said it was too late, on account of how notifications ‘xpired a week on back.

“Didn’t know what that meant. Clerk said they stayed in the newspaper a whole month, wantin’ to know how come I ain’ been readin’ the paper. Whole slew o’ patents, he said, been handin’ ‘em out like candy.

“I tried to tell him that land was ours, but he said that’s the new Duchande land. Old cripple wouldn’t listen when I told him it’s been ours my whole life, and them cows and the ones come before ‘em been there through my paw’s time. And his paw’s too.

“He fin’ly looked on up at me like I said something that meant something.

“He said, ‘Been ‘ere for a while you say?’ and went down the hall and fetched a dignified-looking old man with a short-clipped white beard and a suit as black as Father Barbier’s cassock. Kept flipping through some papers in his hand, said, ‘Say you been having some cows on the Duchande land?’

“‘It ain’t belongin’ to the Duchandes!’ I told him. ‘Ever’body ‘round here knows it’s ours, knows we keep our beef cows there.’

“He pointed down at some writin’ on his papers, talkin’ ‘bout the paper say a Mr. Duchande done signed a paper saying they weren’t no identifiable livestock on that land.

“I told him they was just regular spotted cows. Pretty hard to miss even if you blind in one eye and cain’ see out the other.” PawPaw chuckled for a moment, then turned as solemn as Joie had ever seen him. His face only sunk like that when he got to this part of the story.

“Man just smiled at me. Said, ‘I mean to say, got a registered mark on ‘em. Fryoux’ got a brand?’”

Joie could only imagine how all the air must have left her grandfather’s lungs. How he couldn’t utter that single word that would end the conversation and, along with it, any hope for retaining his family’s land. How the resignation must have felt like it was melting his bones.

“Then you asked how much the Duchandes gave him for our land.”

“Not a penny. Land’s free. Just five dollars for the claim, another dollar for the newspaper.”

Joie left the story there until the next morning, when she asked, “So then what did you do, after you left the Land Grant Office?”

“Had to go tell Mr. Hebert I done failed. Couldn’t face him yet. He give me his daughter’s hand thinkin’ I’m goin’ be the patriarch of a whole peninsula of low land plus fields of high grassland.” PawPaw had saved for a whole year to purchase a round chip of ruby at Mr. Dicharrie’s store on Plaquemine’s Railroad Avenue, and Beulah had worn it proudly, set in five tall gold prongs above a thin gold band. What would she do?

“I run out of there, commenced a real deliberate pace back home, forgettin’ I took the horses. Took a path behind a tree line so I didn’t have to see the makings of a fence done already begun. Marched on through the pecan grove to them boulders what look like they from a mountain stream, and fin’ly took a rest under some leanin’ rocks and sat in the shade for quite a long spell.

“When I saw the moon, I went on to collect some kindlin’, and a downed cypress tree with branches old and dry enough to spark a fire. Got a stick to rub on a flat, cracked base. Got a fire goin’, loaded some branches, then some bigger one. It was the middle of summer, just couldn’t get warm ‘til I got the fire taller than my head, and I stretched out on a bed of leaves. Propped my head up on hand, lookin’ at them embers getting’ thicker and thicker. ‘Til my head slipped off my hand and it fin’ly hit me. *That fence... it didn’t go lengthwise down the field.*

“I jumped up and run in the dark half a mile to that clearing and, sure ‘nough, look like maybe the *back* of a paddock. So I run on, up on top them mounds what Indians used to bury

they warriors, thinkin' I could see. But I had to run some more, fin'ly seen that big hill on down a way in open grass. Seen a boiling pot hung over a campfire, couple tents, a pile of lumber. Moon was out, shinin' on what look like might be the floor of a house somebody was buildin'."

"And you were almost two miles from home by then."

PawPaw finished his story the following day.

"I went on back to Plaquemine. Looked through the front windows of Mr. Hebert's shop, seen a light come from beneath they the door what where they live so I tapped the window light like 'til Mr. Hebert open that door.

"He was holdin' on to his shotgun, so I raised my hands and said, 'Mr. Hebert! It's me, Romain Junior.'

"*Bebe*, before the man could unlock the door, I'm rantin' on 'bout a fence, a tree line, and a thief called Duchande.

"I told him, how I know me and my family might look not too worthy, what wit' no access to most the land people 'round the parish been givin' my family the understandin' to be ours... eyes started stingin'... swore to Mr. Hebert my change in means wouldn' keep me from providin' for his daughter. Give him my word I'd work harder 'n any man alive.

"But he held up both hands, sayin' he done heard enough. Figured I was ruined.

"He called the mother, said bring on in the daughter to come see 'bout the state of her marriage.

"Beulah come out. Big ol' wide eyes, like she was real scared.

"Mr. Hebert, he say, 'You two been holdin' ear to door?'

"Neither one said nothin', and he say, 'Figured.'

“Could only stare at the floor. I brung shame to the Heberts. Turned to go when Mr. Hebert says, ‘Mother, boy here says man named Duchande done come ‘long and started fencin’ in some Highland pasture. Hear anything ‘bout such a setback to the Fryoux clan?’

“And she say, ‘Only what we been talkin’ ‘bout these last weeks since you seen *The Post*.’

“Ewwwwie, doggie! They knew all since before I even come there.”

Joie wrapped her arm around PawPaw’s. “And they didn’t care.”

“Didn’t care none.”

It was MawMaw who stopped the story that time to get them in for breakfast.

On the seventh day, Joie asked, “So what else happened?”

“Aww, nothin’ much. Had a good chuckle when I see Beulah smilin’ all pretty again. Wasn’t ‘til I left what when I seen my buckboard pulled up by Mr. Mack’s. Sat on a hay bale waitin’ for the old blacksmith to open up and give me my horses. Happy day, *cher*. Happy day.

“Took vows the next month, moved on in where we now stay, that cabin what once belong to my paw’s paw, ‘cross the garden.” He pointed with a crooked middle finger—for some reason, all the Fryoux men pointed with their middle fingers. “My paw lived what be your house now. For a bit.

“Had my namesake right in that house. Buried him over on the bluff.”

“And when did you become patriarch?”

“Aww, not ‘til Paw died... what... maybe thirty years gone by.”

“So he knew before he died that it was like you thought it was with the grassland? That the Duchandes hadn’t taken all of it? Just the stretch a hundred yards south of that house, and north to that first stretch of fence you discovered? What, maybe a couple hundred acres?”

When he didn't answer, only nodded, Joie's face flushed for what her beloved family went through at the hands of Highlanders, and for guilt over what she was doing to draw more ridicule.

A familiar rhythm grew louder as it approached from the woods.

She kissed PawPaw's cheek and Tres gave her an arm up. She turned back to see PawPaw still staring into his cup.

They ran far and fast until they reached the clump of trees nestled beside Quilted Bay's fat gray stones and walked wordlessly to the place where they could be and say whatever they wanted, but today neither knew how to speak to the other. Tres had again saved Joie from her ruminations, but he felt like a dark shadow to her, untouchable. She remembered how she had once dreaded talking to him when she was insecure, how she had walked ahead to keep Tres from trying to hold her hand, same as he was now doing.

Finally, she said, "Tres, what is it?"

Tres stared at the horizon for a long moment before turning to the sky. "Look, the moon's still out."

Why was he being like this? "I don't give a damn about the moon."

Tres blinked hard at the first vulgar word he'd ever heard Joie utter. "Now I have to fight you?"

"No. Sorry." She spread out her mother's quilt and sat, reaching up for Tres' hand. "Come sit. Is it your mother? Debbie and Maggie told me she's gotten Renee to come over every morning."

Tres let out a giant sigh, scrunched his shoulders up to his ears, and plopped down.

“She’s not just *there*. They both come in my bedroom every morning. Today I had to sneak out before sunrise! Why can’t she just let me be?”

“Well, that’s probably never going to happen. Like you told me the other day, it won’t be too much longer before you’re out of there. Maybe we just need to try harder to ignore her.” Joie didn’t know if that were possible. “We have to try.”

“I do try. But when I can’t, I start thinking it’s all my fault.”

“Nothing’s your fault, Tres, you know that. We just need to try to ignore her for another few months.”

When Tres lay back on the quilt and threw an arm over his eyes, she asked, “Is there something in particular you’re worried about?”

His whole arm flopped up and down with his head. “I was thinking about our formal parent meetings.”

Joie blew out a *whew*. “*That’s* what’s bothering you?”

He jerked his arm from his eyes. “It’s not a trivial thing, Joie!”

She had to laugh. “No, dear. It’s just that, well, your visit with my family will be fun, and you don’t have to worry about my visit to your house—I’ve already decided to bite my tongue and ignore your mother’s little jibes when I go to The Marble Citadel.”

“The *what*?”

“That’s what everybody calls your house.” She tried to smother her giggle.

“*The Marble Citadel*? Oh, boy.” He looked to the sky, shaking his head. “Doesn’t that say it all.”

Joie nodded and Tres kissed her on the lips. Their first kisses had been light. Now they lingered, with lips parted and shared breath, and Tres now pressed himself against her for long moments before tearing himself free sooner than Joie wanted.

They mounted the colt for a slow walk to the peninsula. When they reached her back steps, Tres held fast to the arms she wrapped around him. She kissed his back and slid off, saying, "I'll arrange everything here." It would all be fine. Joie believed it.

Tres drank in her determination. "Me too. Tonight."

* * * * *

Mrs. Duchande stood in the kitchen, peering down the hill through the screen door until Tres approached. "Tres! Come here right now!"

Tres continued to the barn. If she wanted to talk to him right now, it wouldn't be her finest hour. He'd force her to lower herself to walking through dirt and muck in the shed row if she was determined to speak to him at a time when he was soaked through and through with Joie's strength.

He untacked his gelding, brushed him out, picked his hooves, and oiled his bridle and saddle before stepping out of the barn to find his mother with crossed arms, standing in the grass at the edge of the lawn. He threw his head back and laughed from his gut. "Oh, Mother!"

"What's so funny to laugh about! I can plainly see that hanging around with that girl has made you more impudent than ever."

"It's just... your hands aren't on your hips!" He laughed so hard that long tears rolled from his eyes and his mother turned to go.

Over her shoulder, she instructed her son, "Come to the library after you've cleaned up."

Nothing could stop him now. He had a mission. On the walk back home he had decided not to wait for his father to return from work. He knew what his father's reaction would be and didn't care. And he didn't care what his mother thought, either. Joie would come into his home to meet both of them, and that was that. What could they do? Fuss? Withdraw his trust fund? Threaten to disown him? What did it matter? *He* could disown *them*! He could make his own living. Joie didn't care about money; she might even be happier without it. All Tres saw was the upside of finally ending his parents' disillusionment. And Renee? Thank God that would be settled once and for all.

But when he walked in, he had to catch his breath. "Oh, God! Mother, what are you thinking!"

Mrs. Duchande stood next to a seated Renee, a hand on her shoulder. "Apologize to this girl right this minute. She's been here since dawn to take care of you. And where have you been, keeping us waiting so long?"

When long seconds passed without an answer, Renee sucked in her lips and Mrs. Duchande railed, "Do you mean to tell me... haven't you learned your lesson with that tramp?"

Tres lifted a brow to his mother. He'd keep his cool. He'd make his point and be done with it. He turned toward Renee, and with the kindest eyes he could fake, told her, "Renee, I'm sorry to make you wait. It was very rude of me, indeed. Understand me now when I say, I will not marry you. Ever. I'm going to meet with Mr. Fryoux and make sure he still won't mind having me for a son-in-law."

"*Still that girl!*" His mother stomped a foot.

Tres looked to Renee, who sat frozen in shock. "I'm sorry, but you won't be invited to the wedding."

Renee's mouth fell open and her eyes flew wide, but when she said nothing, Tres turned to his mother and warned, "If you ever again refer to Joie as a tramp, you'll find my clothes packed and out of this house. Immediately. You'll welcome Joie into this house just as you would Mr. and Mrs. Wilbert. You'll sit and offer her tea and cookies. You'll meet her family soon thereafter. And you will do this all with the dignity expected of a Duchande."

"I'll do no such thing! A Lowlander?" *Humph.* "In your father's house? Out of the question."

"So you're saying I should pack my bags today?" Tres scrunched up his forehead to make his eyes as wide as possible, almost hoping she'd say yes.

"Wait until your father hears—"

"Father already knows my plans with Joie. I told you both I wouldn't marry Renee. You just didn't want to believe me."

Renee broke into long, torso-wracking sobs interrupted only by hiccups of jerky inhalation. Tres had never seen a woman cry so violently and felt a pang of guilt. He worried the poor girl's pain might soften him enough to soothe her but saw her eyes were dry and he cursed first under his breath then at her. "And damn you too!"

Renee lifted her head with a jerk. "What did you say?"

"You heard me. Leave me alone! Stop telling your friends we're engaged. Have I ever given you any reason to believe I'd marry you? This whole concoction you and your family cooked up with my mother will come to an end. If you don't stop, I swear on my own grave I'll tell everyone you've contracted a deadly, sex-based disease and I'll not have you." He leaned over and pointed in her face. "Do you understand me? Nod your head or I swear I'll nod it for you!"

Renee rose to her feet with her nose lifted as though she detected a putrid smell. She rested her hands on her hips and said, "I'll see you in that grave you swear upon before you ever touch me with hands that touched that Lowlander whore!"

"Ah... Mother, see now, *that's* the real Renee." Tres chuckled. "Look, Mrs. Wilbert taught her how to show her disappointment with hands on her hips and an ugly voice just like you. You must have been so pleased to think she'd bear your grandchildren." He left the two with mouths agape and marched off to his bedroom.

Hearing a knock at his door twenty minutes later, he shouted, "I've heard more than enough from you two today!"

When his father murmured, "It's me," Tres swung open the door and groaned, "Whatever she told you, it's probably true." The exhaustion of the day finally drained his body, so he slumped into a chair to wait for the inevitable sigh of disapproval from a father who hadn't been in his room since he was a small boy, when the room was decorated in a western motif with stuffed barn animals perched on his pillows, and he wrapped his arms around his son as he sat on his lap to hear a bedtime story, then he kissed him and said, "Sweet dreams my son," every night.

Dom sat beside Tres, staring down at his palms, and rubbing them together as if he were removing soil. "You can't mean to move out, Tres, really?"

"That's exactly what I mean to do. It's what I *am* doing." Tres stood and went back to folding the shirts and suits in his armoire.

"I've spoken to your mother."

His back to Dom, Tres mumbled, "I just bet you have."

"Son, please stop and face me. I know we can work this out."

Tres didn't feel like his father's son but merely an employee being given a task. "I don't want to be *managed*, Father."

"Please. Tres."

He slammed the drawer of undergarments and took a seat next to his father.

"You can't leave. I won't allow it."

Tres released a groan of frustration and grabbed the armrests to lift himself out of the chair but Dom grabbed his shoulder. "That's not what I meant to say, just give me a moment to put the right words together."

"Have another story about saloon girls for me?" As soon as the words left his mouth, he regretted it. It wasn't his father he was so angry with, and though he had no reason to trust that this talk would end differently from their last tete-a-tete, he sank back into the chair.

"*Touché*," Dom conceded.

During long minutes while Tres waited for Dom to continue, he went into his head. It was comfortable there, familiar. He thought up every angle his father might take to dissuade him from marrying Joie and devised clever comebacks to redress each avenue his father might venture upon.

Dom finally stated, "Lillian called me at the firm. First time she ever bothered me at the office." He was still focused on his hands. "She said you were packing to leave, so I got in my car and drove on home.

"She told me what happened, starting with early this morning. Then I told her just about the same thing I told you a minute ago. 'Lillian, you can't break up my family.' I told her I wouldn't allow it."

When Tres' eyes widened and his mouth hung open, Dom said, "She looked about as stunned as you are. That said, I think you're wrong. I *know* you're wrong about this girl."

"Joie. Her name is Joie."

"Joie. Right. Right. I know she's a fine girl, and I know your mother flies off the handle and says a few ugly things, but, Tres, in the end, she's right about what this means for your life. Don't get me wrong... I don't give one God-Damn about what folks think, but have you thought about what the girl... what Joie, will have to face? I mean, people can be pretty ugly. They'll shun her. You know they will."

Dom was right about that, but Tres and Joie had talked about it, about what life would be like on a day-to-day basis—people would address Tres in town and ignore the Lowlander on his arm, Highlanders wouldn't visit their home or speak to them after Mass and they would caution their children against playing with Tres and Joie's—even Maggie and Debbie would have to avoid them in public. But he and Joie believed they could rely on each other to get them through the rough spots. So he told his father how strong Joie was, how warm her people were, how fine they judged people, or in the opposite didn't judge at all. When Tres explained that he felt more a part of Joie's family than his own, his father nodded in a knowing way.

"You have my word." Dom extended his hand. "That this family will receive your girl. Joie—on the one condition that you wait at least one year before you marry."

Tres knew his father expected him to change his mind by the end of a year, and though Tres hadn't formulated a comeback to such an unexpected albeit manipulative offer, he shook his father's hand and agreed. "Yes, sir."

"And you can't move out... not until... after."

“No, sir.” Tres didn’t feel the need to tell his father the Fryoux’ required a one-year engagement. “And what about Mother?”

“I don’t rightly know. Really, I don’t.” He shook his head.

“What did she say when you told her all this?”

“Didn’t go too well. She huffed off to her room. You know how she does. But, Tres, I thought a lot about what you said, what you accused me of in the library that day after I told you that story. I thought about it the whole time I was driving home. So I followed her in her room and... Well, remember how I said you’d think differently about life after you’re married a while? Tres, your mother... your mother, well, she’s suffered some things that—” He caught himself. “Well, that’s not your business.”

Tres could only roll his eyes.

Chapter 21

Joie lifted the brass Brahma on the Duchande door. She had never entered this house from the front, had never walked beyond the kitchen from the back door, and she chastised herself when she dropped the heavy knocker so hard it could be heard a mile away.

Mrs. Duchande had postponed the meeting twice—after the second time, Tres had told her, “Next time, just don’t answer the door. That’ll rid you of both of us.” Still, Joie had stood at her bedroom French doors all morning, straining to hear the Duchande houseboy again arrive with a note requesting another delay. She had waited until the last minute before allowing herself to think this meeting would finally commence, and slipped into a dress only once MawMaw came over and made a fuss about being late.

Joey had met her at the bottom of the steps with Joie’s new mare, Itsy, harnessed to a calash identical to the one that rested at the bottom of Bayou Paul, now maybe rotted into a thousand pieces. What might her mother be doing if she were alive? Would Ariat have pulled Joie’s hair into a finer twist today? Would the dress she made for Joie have been nicer, its seams more even and flat than what Joie had sewn with her own hand? She regretted not having been more attentive to MawMaw’s lessons, wondered if her mother would approve, wondered what she would do to impress Mrs. Dominique Duchande, II. Would she *do* anything at all?

Should she have waited until she had a degree in her hands before she met Tres’ parents? No. That was a foolish thought—the whole town had known she was in college that night in the

emergency room, and Mrs. Duchande had turned her head and refused to reciprocate Joie's greeting. What a fool.

Before she stepped down from the carriage at DDR, she looked at Joey, saw him mouth *be strong* then squeeze her hand and say, "I'll be right here, *Boo*."

But Joie knew she was on her own. She had even told Tres not to fuss over her and let her stand on her own in front of his parents. "I can do this," she had assured him. "Just let us work this out among ourselves."

A maid answered the door and left Joie standing in the foyer as she went to alert the Duchandes. The vast entryway of the mansion reverberated Joie's "Hello" as though it were projecting an animosity sure to follow, rejecting the very premise of this formal meet-the-parents. Even the floor, made from great slabs of stone carted in from the hills of Arkansas, seemed to echo her every breath. Joie had heard rumors about The Marble Citadel, its pillars imported from Italy, how it all rendered the atrium of this, their inner sanctum, the sacred piousness of a church. Its forty-foot ceiling dwarfed her.

To Joie's left, in a far corner of the library, lay the down-filled bed of Tobias. Yards of canary satin skirted the perimeter of his woven basket in great bunting-type rolls that reminded her of the fancy drapes drawn up behind politicians when they shouted their rhetoric at festivals.

Tobias, the Duchande cat. It was a sad thing for a girl to be jealous of a yellow Tom. She couldn't but be a little envious of the life Tobias must have enjoyed, the contentment that came with not possessing a single worry on any day that fresh food would find its way to his bowl—fresh *fish*, rumor had it.

Not until she saw Tres' mother on his arm did it dawn on her that the woman hadn't acknowledged her arrival with the customary Southern greeting afforded to anticipated visitors—

a hostess greets her guests at the door; she doesn't leave it to a maid. Had they been expecting her in the kitchen? PawPaw would have certainly swished a *tsk* or two. And where were Mr. Duchande and Annette? She didn't dare ask for fear of her voice shaking... and Mrs. Duchande thinking she was nosy... and an answer she didn't want to hear.

Mrs. Duchande approached Joie as stone-faced as the mighty walls of her home but stopped in her tracks when the minute hand of a long-panel clock clicked straight up to 2 and the metallic thump of its gong ricocheted off the stone like the Grand Canyon. All three turned to watch it for a long moment.

Joie welcomed the distraction from the hyper alertness she had left home with. She pinched her lip between her canines then chastised herself for doing the Renee thing. One of her biggest fears was that she might do or say something to validate Mrs. Duchande's low opinion of her, or miss an opportunity to impress her in some small way, if that were indeed possible. Now, somehow, she had done something that may well remind Mrs. Duchande of the woman she wanted her son to marry. Joie would be more careful now. She'd control her every movement and facial expression. She'd sit properly and remember to conjugate her verbs correctly.

As the low hum of the second gong faded, Joie turned back to catch an expression on Mrs. Duchande's face that she immediately knew was akin to catching her in a lie. Her face had scrunched up as though she had stepped in dog poop and her eyes were flat like a catfish, the blackness of an abyss from which nothingness stared back. But then in an instant her face slid into the expression she had worn when she entered the foyer, her eyes somewhat less blank. But her lips looked like those of the dead in their coffins, when undertakers set them straight across in neither a smile nor a frown.

Ha! In that infinitesimal slice of a second when she saw Mrs. Duchande transmute her expression, a piece of Joie's permanently carved *me* surfaced. It was an internal confirmation that she wouldn't wilt under Mrs. Duchande's scrutiny, that she wouldn't betray her familial code of honor and belief system in order to fit in with Mrs. Duchande's world, that she wouldn't be disloyal to her sense of humanity in order to impress this woman.

Mrs. Duchande's lips bent into a grin and her cool, flat gaze was overshadowed only by the lifelessness of the chilled hand she offered palm down, a gesture PawPaw said was the involuntary *tell* of condescension.

Joie took the woman's limp hand and instinctively released it a little too quickly for a well-mannered girl. She looked over to Tres, but he was still staring at the clock, until Mrs. Duchande cleared her throat and grabbed Joie's elbow to lead her into the library. No one offered an explanation for Dom or Annette's absence.

"Sit here." Mrs. Duchande pointed.

Tres followed his mother and Joie into the library, and he and Joie sat where his mother indicated, in a pair of armchairs beyond a tea table across from Mrs. Duchande's settee. They sat upon *fleur de leis* tapestry in chairs with wooden frames whittled into swans and vines.

They set linen napkins trimmed in French lace on one knee, hundred-year-old gold-trimmed porcelain teacups and saucers balanced upon the other. They sipped the tea Mrs. Duchande offered without lemon, sugar, or milk.

Mrs. Duchande watched Joie sit, looked down at her crossed ankles, perched herself on the edge of her settee, and pointed to a tri-level dessert tray loaded with lemon cookies. "Try them. It's my mother's recipe." More of an order than an invitation.

Joie dreaded biting into one. She had eaten these cookies as a child with Nadine and had never managed to eat one without covering her chin in the powdered sugar Nadine coated them with.

“My *nigress*, Nadine... oh, well, I suppose you already know Nadine... she makes them so well.”

Joie nibbled on one. Perhaps, if she didn’t exhale, small bites wouldn’t disturb the sugar enough to send it flying. “Thank you, ma’am.” She did her best to look genuine.

“Oh, don’t thank me. You can thank Nadine next time you visit with her.”

Joie placed the cookie beside her teacup and patted her lips with the delicate napkin while Mrs. Duchande reached for one of three picture albums set on the table.

Unlike Joie’s family, Tres’ had spared no expense in immortalizing their family history, and that morning in The Marble Citadel, the Duchande matriarch exhibited class disparity through pictures.

She stood the album on her knees and opened it facing Joie. Inside, pictures were affixed to tiny pocket-corners painstakingly glued to heavy black card stock. Ribbons held the sheets together through punched holes, and the album covers looked like the splotchy white and black of cow hide without its hair—something not quite skin yet not quite leather. Joie cringed.

In the first sepias, couples stood stoic, side-by-side facing the camera squarely with their arms hanging straight down their sides. Others showed men standing with right hands holding their jacket lapels near the waist, their left resting on the shoulders of stiff-backed wives seated in front of them.

Mrs. Duchande pointed to each. “My maternal grandparents.” She turned a page. “My paternal grandparents and my parents.”

“Antoine and Lisa Duchande. Mr. and Mrs. Dominique Duchande, Esquire...”

How odd, these pictures of families with no life in their faces. They all wore the same bland, dated expressions even though some were taken about the same time the joy-filled glitter of Ariat’s eyes and her radiant smile were captured at that long-ago festival.

“I don’t remember ever realizing the stone shown so keenly.” Mrs. Duchande splayed her ruby-weighted hand atop a picture of herself, sweeping widespread, long-nailed fingers through the air up high near her face, then down low back and forth, comparing the stone on her finger with the long-ago captured image of her ring in a photograph the woman could only see upside-down.

Tres and Joie glanced at each other briefly until Mrs. Duchande flipped to another page with a photograph of Tres propped up on the edge of a divan between his father’s legs. Beside them sat a small, hunched-over man, the first Dominique. Dominique II sat perfectly erect, shoulders back, fingers wrapped around his son’s waist.

Tres wore a thick white sweater and leotard, and Joie wished she could touch it. “Oh, how beautiful.”

But before air could cool her words, Mrs. Duchande’s rubied hand swatted them away like gnats over a fruit bowl. “Oh, you’d think he was beautiful enough,” she began, “but, *mon Dieu*, when Tres was a *bebe*, his sobs, they were unrelenting. I just could not leave his side without him wailing.” She glanced over at Tres with a single *tsk*, then turned to Joie.

“We went through three wet nurses before he found one he wouldn’t scream with.” She looked back down at the picture before continuing as though Tres weren’t there, “By the time he was six months old, he followed me every place I went. So many times I had to call Nadine to get him from underfoot.” Now she *tsked* twice.

Joie worked on keeping her face looking like she enjoyed the diatribe.

“He could crawl like the dickens. And he wouldn’t play with his toys in his room by himself, no. But such a bright child he was. *Mon Dieu*,” Mrs. Duchande shook her head.

“When he was in, oh, I suppose about the third grade, when his father got home after work and he heard the tinkle of ice against his whisky glass, he’d tiptoe into the library and take my hand and hold it to his cheek and kiss it, then he’d look back at his father and kiss my hand again.

Oui, my son wanted his momma for his own. I suppose the Duchande strength just didn’t develop with him early on. His father was always so easy on him. It was different in my day.”

“Mother—”

“What is it?” Mrs. Duchande turned back to the album.

Tres stared down at his lap as if to search for his next words. “He was *easy* on me? He sounds so different now.”

With a chin-tucked shake of her head, still leaning over the top of the album, she asked, “Different how?”

“It just seems that back then, Father, well, remember that day when I was, I don’t know, six or eight, and Father hurt his leg in the round pen? On that colt?”

“No. But it doesn’t surprise me that he did something like that back then. You have to understand, Tres,” she flipped another page, “it took many years for Dom to find his place as a father. And as a husband, too, for that matter.”

Tres’ eyes bugged out. “Why would you say that?”

“Tres,” she sighed before finally looking over to her son. “Your father didn’t keep much company with his father, so I suppose it was natural for him to over-compensate and baby you. It just took a while for him to understand when I warned him he’d make you weak if he kept on

spoiling you. ‘You better teach him what the world’s really like,’ I told him. Spending all that time lollygagging and coddling...”

She faced Joie and said, “*His fa-ther*,” slowly mouthing each syllable as though Joie had to read her lips. “He focused on work and success, and Tres’ father, he didn’t understand about the sacrifices a man has to make. He had to learn how important it is to build a legacy for his family.”

Tres nodded. “He does spend a lot of time working.” He winked at Joie and added, “And out of town.”

She winked back. Did his mother know about her betrothed’s affair with a low-class girl?

Mrs. Duchande dropped her gaze to the album and stated, “Dutiful husband,” almost off-handedly before turning another page and staring for another long moment.

Joie was looking back and forth from Tres to his mother. Why were their memories so different? Tres had sat next to his father to collect pennies, hadn’t he? And how could his mother have forgotten about that round-pen accident?

Mrs. Duchande tapped the next photograph and announced, “Gatie.”

Tres smiled. “That’s my great aunt. In the fourth grade, I learned about anagrams and came home from school one day to announce that Great Aunt Tigre Edna was too hard a name and the family should henceforth refer to her as *GATIE*.”

His smile disappeared when his mother went on to reveal how Gatie’s esteem of her husband dwindled when in 1906 he was seen strolling down Toulouse arm-in-arm with a red boa-draped woman, and said, “Gatie went down to the French Quarter and found the woman in her courtyard on Toulouse, said she was lounging back on a chaise with her little dog in her lap.”

Mrs. Duchande let out a deep breath. “The woman looked like she recognized Gatie so the whole scene, you can imagine, was *beyond* insulting—it’s one thing to have a mistress, quite another to put her in the same room with your wife.”

Gatie said she walked right past the woman through the French doors and into a sitting room where she dumped over three spindly legged tables with porcelain figurines, then tipped over a broken-pediment crystal-paned china cabinet. She screamed, “Harlot!” and grabbed the woman’s dog and took it with her.

“Gatie shot the woman’s dog in the head and threw her husband’s clothes out their second-floor bedroom window when she got home. Yes, ma’am, that’s just like something Gatie’d do. Been a little tiger all her life.”

Joie’s mouth hung open.

Tres said, “Mother, I don’t think Joie wants to hear about dogs being shot in the head.”

“Well, that’s what your *un-cle* says.” She bent deeply over the album with a creeping smirk. “Never was quite herself after that. Took to long stories the family knew weren’t true.” She looked over at Tres and asked, “Remember her tale about Edgar Degas?”

She waited for Tres’ nod before turning to Joie. “Degas went to New Orleans to visit his brothers, Rene and Achilles, in 1873, and painted them and his other relatives in *The Cotton Office in New Orleans*, and Gatie claimed *her* grandparents were the *other* relatives in the painting. Of course, it would be uncouth to point out the ethnic differences.”

Joie sucked in her lips.

“Leaving her without the companionship of even a stray dog was merely inhuman, whereas denying one philosophical expression is, in itself, to destroy that which is man’s modern concept of civilization and humaneness of its occupants.”

Any speculation on Joie's part as to the purpose for such grammatical unrest, let alone the woman's intended message, was abandoned as soon as the suggestion mentally surfaced. No matter her intentions, the woman's utterance of a handful of disconnected words comforted Joie and Mrs. Duchandes' perversity was absolved like a sin in a confessional. Such is the product, Joie supposed, of forgiveness for the ways of the unconscionable.

The story's historical accuracy remained a curiosity for Joie, however. New Orleans was home to over two hundred houses of prostitution at the turn of the century, before 1917's cease-and-desist law closed down the red-light district known as Storyville. So in 1906 it was still operating, and other than a few entertainers and flappers, a red boa-draped woman would hardly be found during daylight in Storyville let alone among the French mansions and detailed lawns of Toulouse.

Tres reached behind Joie, the slight pressure of his thumb on Joie's spine, feeding her strength and courage. It reminded her of Tres' determination to make their relationship work no matter the objections he faced. She closed her mouth, just as Daddy taught her to do.

The three went silent, Mrs. Duchande still looking at the image with her chin tucked and a quick shake of her head every few seconds when they heard the putter of Mr. Duchande's car. She flipped the album shut, picked up the other two, and rushed to secure them behind the burled walnut doors of her demilune. By the time her husband reached the front door, she had smoothed her dress, lifted her chin, opened the door, and presented her cheek with a relaxed self-possession Joie had never witnessed.

Maybe she had gotten Mrs. Duchande wrong. Maybe this matriarch was actually insecure. Maybe that was why she seemed so relieved now that her husband was home. She whispered something into Dom's ear and he followed her into the library.

Did ladies rise when a man entered? Joie uncrossed her ankles and went to lift the cup and napkin from her knees.

Dom waved her off. "Please." He walked over to shake her hand. "Pleasure, Miss Joie."

She returned a shallow nod, uttering a faint, "Sir."

Tres was shaking his father's hand when Joie thought to pour a cup of tea for Dom. "May I..." But when she pointed to the table, Dom waved her off again and flicked his head toward his wife, now preparing iced whiskey at the liquor cart and glaring at Joie.

Mr. Duchande said a few words about the new gazebo the city council had finally funded, finished his whisky, and picked up the newspaper, a cue Joie knew signaled the end of her visit. She thanked the Duchandes for their hospitality and shook Mrs. Duchande's hand before heading toward the door, leaving Dom to read his paper without so much as a glance in her direction.

* * * * *

The old cowboy who had brought Annette to town earlier pulled up just as the door closed behind Tres and Joie. Annette rushed over to apologize for not being back on time, then looked to her brother with red eyes and a face so frozen in anger that, when she spoke, only her lips moved. "Tres, it was Mother who did it. All I had to do was pick up some hair ribbons and a new hat I ordered, but old Johnston said he had to run Mother's errands, said she told him, 'And don't you come back without everything on that list!' He had to wait for five different lengths of cloth to be cut, then deliver it all to that haughty French seamstress of hers, then he had to wait for her to write a note back to Mother."

Tres was trying to wrap an arm around her but she shook loose. "*Then*, he had to go to the Grand Dame's house to deliver a note to her and wait for her reply. She did it all just to keep me from being here, I know she did!"

Joie was already standing at the carriage and reaching for Joey's hand when Annette turned to her.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. That witch!"

Joie turned to Annette, pulled a kerchief from her cuff to wipe the girl's tears, then kissed her on the forehead and took Joey's hand. She pointed to Annette and smiled at both, saying, "It's fine. Don't worry." To Tres, she said, "Go be with Nettie."

"So you're okay?"

Joie nodded and Joey tipped his hat, telling Itsy, "Walk on."

* * * * *

Back at home, Joie ran to see PawPaw and found him and MawMaw having afternoon coffee at their kitchen table. When she said nothing, PawPaw started one of his stories.

"They's a tale, 'bout Daniel. When he got sent in that lion's den, how he got rescued before he even got hurt. Got rescued by the very king what sentenced him. God done the same for our people, after we accepted all the possibilities what could happen. Daniel, see, he got rescued not just from the den of them lions, *non*, but truly from they mouth. Daniel's God saved him and rewarded little Daniel for his faith, see?" He reached over and patted Joie's hand.

Joie loved that story but always found herself saddened for the fate of those who fell to lions that crushed the bones of women and children, so she kissed her grandfather on the head and left to take a walk through the trails of her childhood. She needed time to think, to find the faith her grandfather always counted on, and to recover from the somersaulting emotions toward Mrs. Duchande. Did she condemn the woman who would barely receive her, or pity the woman who seemed so insecure without her husband?

Chapter 22

Tres opened the door for his sister, telling her, “I’ll see you in a minute,” then steered her toward her room before stomping back into the library. Glaring down at his mother, he asked, “How could you use your own daughter to insult Joie?”

“Watch how you speak to your mother, boy.” Mr. Duchande didn’t look up from his paper.

Tres could only shake his head. “Don’t you realize how embarrassing it was for her to miss Joie’s visit?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. This wasn’t any of her business.” His mother shooed him away with a flip of the wrist.

“She’s part of this family! No wonder she’s starting to avoid you.”

“She most certainly does not.” Lillian was drinking a second cup of tea, sitting straight-backed on that damn settee. “Annette is a fine daughter.”

“A fine d... Haven’t you even *noticed*? She just ran to her room in tears.”

Dom rustled a page as he turned it. “That’s enough, Tres.”

“Father, you know how she’s always fussing over Annette with *don’t do this*, or *that*. That’s why she stays in her room so much. And today—sending her on errands to keep her away? Doesn’t she have at least *some* say-so in her own life?

Lillian rested her cup on the table. “So I should stand by and let her end up with somebody like you did?”

He tried to calm the pulse that thumped in his ears while he figured out a new approach.

But then she jabbed a finger toward him. “*You*’ll be sorry you didn’t take your parents’ advice.”

Tres sat, placed an arm on his mother’s shoulder, looked into her eyes, and with the softest voice he could muster said, “Mother, I know to you it’s *giving advice*, but Annette thinks you’re telling her she’s wrong about everything, and she can’t ever be good enough.”

Mrs. Duchande paused, releasing the scowl on her face and turning it softer. Tres’ heart quickened with a surge of hope that maybe he had finally made a connection.

But then she shrugged loose and turned away. “It’s a mother’s *job* to give advice!”

Tres stood and faced the French doors so his mother wouldn’t see him clenching his jaw.

From behind, he heard her hard voice. “It’s for her own good.”

He spun around and scowled, “But look what it does to her. She’s crying in her room! I’m going check on her.”

“That’s not *my* fault.” She stood and grabbed Tres’ arm as he passed. “You’re the one setting a terrible example. She’s becoming as impudent as you.”

“I’m so sick of hearing that!”

“That type of impudence is exactly what I’m talking about. You turn things around! *I* know to be open-minded to advice, maybe learn something.” His mother threw her chin in the air.

The irony that flowed from her mouth would never land in her head, but Tres couldn’t stop himself. He jerked his arm out of her grip. “But look how it upsets her.”

“She’ll learn.” Lillian looked to her husband. “Dom? Surely you agree.”

Dom folded his paper with a sigh of disappointment and looked up at his wife with the blank expression of someone being summoned to respond to a conversation he had ignored. When he finally offered, "I think we've had enough discussion for one day," and started reading again, his wife stomped off to her room and his son could only stare at his father and wonder how it could be that neither of his parents ever considered going to comfort their daughter.

On the walk to Annette’s room, Tres thought about how his sister had cried for a week after the castration and wondered if she was still crying. But when he opened her bedroom door, Tres found Annette at her mirror applying face powder under dry eyes. “Are you okay?”

She replied, “Of *course* I am.”

Had her crying been an act? She didn’t even look into the mirror to catch Tres’ eye. Had she resigned herself to her mother’s abuse? Or was she turning into the same cold, impassive woman who had caused her tears instead of drying them?

It was more than Tres could bear. He turned from his sister’s aloof expression and went to his room. There must be something he could do to keep his sister from becoming another Lillian.

* * * * *

The following week, Tres rode to the peninsula for his formal meet-the-family. He had both dreamed of and feared the meeting. Since the betrothal agreement with PawPaw and Jules, Tres kept waiting for them to find out he had been sneaking around to see their beloved Joie and thereby lose any respect he had cultivated.

What if they found out he had been stealing up to Hammond after Joie had gone back to school? He wasn’t even sure they’d be happy that he called her on the telephone. Was it

breaking their courtship rules? He walked a fine line between giving Joie the attention she needed to feel secure in their relationship and avoiding guilt over actions he worried the Fryoux men would consider a sin of omission. At today's meeting, he'd hold his tongue for three seconds to censor his words and avoid blurting out any details that might give hint to their secret rendezvous.

People on the peninsula had no family albums, nor china, linen napkins, or lemon cookies. MawMaw served the boys sweet tea in cloudy old Mason, coffee to the others at the kitchen table, and fat, syrupy figs heaped up on crusty bread that filled the house with the doughy aromas of love and patience MawMaw used to prepare it.

Tres asked about PawPaw's current harvest and Mr. Fryoux's progress on his new whittling project. He gushed over MawMaw's figs, asked if he could have one of her buttered biscuits that cooled on the windowsill beside a broken-handled *demitasse* with sugar-water that distracted flies and bees. Biscuit in hand, he sat back with a full mouth and a shiny, buttered grin that garnered MawMaw's easiest smiles of contentment.

As he ate a second biscuit, the boys asked about the new batch of Duchande colts, which got them going about Joie and her horses, then a childhood game Joey was particularly proud to share. This was what Tres had come for, what he hoped for, these stories of family, tradition, and land loved. He had been embarrassed when his mother shared the story about Gatie—he loved his aunt, but the story pointed out the flaws in his family's sense of fair play, and he hated that Joie had to hear it.

"I was twelve," Joey started, "when I challenged my brothers and Cousin Alphonse, with his we-don't-know-what-kind of dog, Raymond, to a pirogue race. Beaufort had a Catahoula, a big one, weighed as much as two sacks of potatoes. Don't know if you know, but Catahoulas

come from Lou-siana. State dog. Prime huntin' hound, can run forever. Bossy as heck, though. They always tryin' to herd the pigs and cows. And Beaufort's? Jimeneee! He's the biggest and strongest we ever saw!

Tres had heard this story already on one of his chaperoned walks with Joie and Cousin Alice on the levee. He could envision how shadows were growing long when the showdown commenced at Sardine Point. The first boy-dog-boat team to make it to the opposite bank, retrieve a stalk of river cane for proof they hit land, and then return to Sardine Point was the winner.

Joey looked down at Tres and tapped him on the shoulder, saying, "We didn't use paddles. Had a stretch of rope about twice the length of a man, tied to the pirogue and bridled around the dog's neck and chest."

"The dogs did all the work," Joie added. "Joey always loved that race. When he was little, he won a lot, but Joey was getting bigger and his old paddle-footed Basset was almost decrepit by then.

"We got right down in the middle of the boats." Joey scrunched in his shoulders. "Like this. Balanced like, so wasn't a lot of drag. Gotta keep on the dogs, telling 'em how good they doin', makin' 'em go faster and faster. But then the *Delta Queen* come 'long... big paddlewheel makin' a wake."

"It was late summer," Joie chirped in. "When the river's real low, and the *Delta Queen* got out the deep part of the river channel."

"I was in the lead!" Joey exclaimed.

"Yep, he sure was. I could see all the way across. Joey needed only feet to dock when the paddlewheel's wake turned into tumbling waves in the shallows of the approaching shore.

He tried to steady his boat under the umbrella of trees that spread over the river's edge, and then stood up to try to reach for a limb. The boat pitched and he jumped for the branch, where he hung and watched his boat rotate belly-up beneath him. Hound struggled to keep his nose above the waterline. Dog-neck-deep water gurgled his bays as his feet sank into the slimy river mud, and the submerging pirogue and rope bridle sucked him under. The other boys, safe in the river where the wake was still a wake, scrambled to save their friend and his hound."

Tres savored every word of Joey and Joie's story, how their endless variety of vocal nuances and subtle body language imbued the richness and vivid detail of their land. The contest was forgotten when the boy and his dog needed rescuing, and Joey became a valiant warrior over his fear as he dropped himself from the tree and trudged through treacherous waters to rescue his lifelong companion.

"Now *that* story is quite impressive..." Joie tilted her head with mischief, "but what about that last, small detail, Joey?"

"Aww, Boo, why you gotta do that?"

Boo. Another pet name for Joie. PawPaw and MawMaw had called her *Tooda* earlier, Mr. Fryoux occasionally *Toots*, and the older boys *Sista*, now Joie's younger brother called her *Boo*. "Where do y'all get all these nicknames?"

"They kinda just, well, they just *come out*, I guess. They're not planned," Joey explained.

Tres looked to Joie, saying, "You know, y'all have unique names to start with."

"Ah," MawMaw threw in. "But the children's real names come from somethin' special. Take Jean. Being the first, he's named after our founding father. The next one, Francis, it means *Frenchman*, and then came—"

“I hate my name,” Beaufort fussed. “Everybody else got names that made sense, but mine came from that man that learnt how to measure strong winds and waves, and everybody blames hurricanes on me, sayin’ my name put a mojo on us.”

Everyone but Beaufort laughed.

“It’s not funny! The man’s first name was Francis and he lived in Great Britain, so he wasn’t even a Frenchman!”

“But your parents didn’t know that back when they named their children.” MawMaw hugged her third grandson.

Tres laughed, but it occurred to him that his little sister was just *Annette*. He’d change that. Maybe he’d call her *Nettie*, like Joie did when she came to DDR. Maybe *Annie*. But he quickly decided against those two—they were just nicknames, not endearing pet names. He wanted to bring the Fryoux warmth into his own home, wanted his sister to feel as endeared as he when his new family called him *son*. He smiled at the thought, at the story, and the love.

He turned to Joie. “What about you?”

Before Joie could speak, PawPaw said, “She the only girl-child of our Ariat. Only one can remind us of her. When I first saw her, I whispered in Ariat’s ear, ‘*Joie de vivre*.’

“Ariat, she ‘bout cried. Said, ‘That’s what she is. That’s *who* she is.’ Next day, she got a pencil wit’ the Church birthin’ papers, pointed at some writin’. Said, ‘*Joie*. She the joy of our life.’”

The table went silent for a long moment, until Tres looked over to Joey and asked, “They just run out of interesting names when they got to you?”

Joey’s jaw dropped open. “How’d you know?”

Now the table erupted in knee-slapping hilarity, all but Tres, who believed he must have committed a serious faux pas. “I’m right? That’s why?”

“Don’t feel bad,” Joey explained. “I always get the short end of the stick ‘round this place.”

Joie winked at her brother. “Yep... especially when you don’t finish stories with all the facts.”

“That again!”

“Well go on and finish then, Joie smiled.

Joey looked to the floor with reddening cheeks. “You tell it if you have to.”

MawMaw held up a palm. “I think we’ve had enough ribbin’.”

MawMaw didn’t think it proper to talk about some things at the eating table, so Joie waited to finish the story until she walked Tres to his horse after his visit, grabbing his arm and pulling him over to whisper, “Joey pooped his pants when he jumped into the river to save Hound.”

“Ahh.” Tres nodded.

She leaned in. “For forever and a day, all our great aunts and uncles told us kids that the thin arms of riverbank trees wouldn’t hold our weight, always talking about what happened to Great Uncle LaFleur when he was trying to rescue his old Lynx from a riverbank tree. He crawled too far out on a limb, and when it broke, Uncle fell right down on top of a gigantic sleeping alligator that without delay bit his face off!”

Tres didn’t know whether to laugh at the joke or gasp with the horror.

“True story,” Joie said, and punched his arm. “When Joey dropped down in that brown water, the image of Great Uncle and his missing face caused him to forthwith poop his britches.”

“Oh my God!”

“But that’s not all,” Joie whispered. “Everybody teased Joey wicked that afternoon, and we still do, but when Joey and I got to bed that night and I asked him why he soiled himself, he burst into tears and told me he just couldn’t bear the thought of having no lips to whistle with ever again.”

* * * * *

The following morning, Tres drove Annette to the peninsula. She had never seen a stilt-house, had never been so deep inside the woods, but Tres brought her not only to see where he had been spending his time, but also because of how she had reacted after she missed Joie’s visit. If she were becoming a cold phony like their mother, he wanted to show her what real families looked like, how they acted toward each other. And the best example he could think of was that pietà Mr. Fryoux was carving. He wanted his sister to see why a crude piece of wood that barely resembled the form of a woman and child could be more valuable than Michelangelo’s. He wanted her to discover how undying love could inspire an eternity of gratitude, how these people of such simple means had shown him how to love. And he wanted Annette to understand why he would never be able to live without Joie.

He slathered a couple hot biscuits with dark butter and dipped them in coffee while MawMaw left to collect the family and Joie took Annette’s hand for a walk.

* * * * *

Annette held Joie’s hand to her cheek. “What do y’all do out here?”

“We just play.”

“In the forest?”

“Sure,” Joie grinned. “Weekends after chores and Mass, and after school, ‘specially in springtime and the sun slows down and gives us more time.”

She pointed at a tree. “See there? That’s where mockingbirds roost. Joey and I used to sneak out early mornings and come here, and we’d make their clicks and whistles and caws. Know what we called ourselves?”

Annette tugged on Joie’s hand, her wistful eyes searching Joie’s. “What? What Joie?”

“*Mime bird mimes.*”

Annette’s face scrunched up on one side as she ruminated until she understood.

“Ooooooh.”

“Then when fog swooped in from the river, we climbed the levee, stretched out our arms, and glided through the rolling mist like eagles.” She looked down to see Annette gazing into the trees and swaying her arms as though she flew.

“Then, after the breeze from the river cleared out the morning fog, we did our chores and waited for playtime.”

“What kind of chores?”

“Well, me and Joey collected pecans, and fed the animals. That kind of stuff. The men were the ones who had to do all the *hard* work. PawPaw taught all the young men what his own paw taught him—how to retrieve runaway logs that escaped from upriver mills, corral ‘em in the shallows and rope them together to make a raft and float them to Plaquemine sawmill.

“How come?”

“They’d get a few pennies for ‘em.”

Joie walked her up the levee, pointed to the north bank of the peninsula and said, “That’s where P’Paw taught the boys how to catch mullet fish for crab bait. They call it *Sardine Point*.

P’Paw taught the boys how to swing a scythe right so they could cut cane down low, and when it wasn’t the time of year for logs, or sugar cane, or sardines, sometimes crawfish or crabs and shrimp, they bred the animals, planted the garden.”

“Y’all make everything you eat!”

“Pretty much, huh.”

“We never got to have so much fun.” Annette’s toothy smile turned downward.

Joie squeezed her hand. “Best we get back now.”

When they left the trail and stepped around the garden, Jules met them with a grin that showed all his big teeth. “You must be Annette.” He grabbed her wrist from Joie, told her, “Got somethin’ to show you,” and led her to the sculpture set upon a wooden crate on his porch.

He took a knee and said, “Close your eyes,” as he guided her fingers along the pietà. “Imagine how soft the veil really feels.”

Joie and Tres watched from the top steps as Annette gingerly slid her fingertips back and forth along the veil, a slow grin curling the corners of her mouth until she popped open her eyes. “It does! Tres! It really does!”

Joie watched a moment, until she felt her mouth hanging open.

* * * * *

Tres followed Joie to Itsy’s paddock, saying nothing while she kissed the mare’s muzzle. was nose-to-nose with Itsy. Her eyes were closed and he could see the veins in her neck pulsing far too fast. She started when he touched her shoulder. He had never seen her grimace so intently that it creased her forehead but she didn’t pull away. He asked, “How’s the new mare doing?”

Itsy whinnied with delight, and Tres waited as the mare nuzzled under Joie’s chin.

“She’s coming along. Still having to use too much rein and leg though.”

“You’ll get her there.”

“Sure.” Her face was tight with hurting, and Tres wanted to kick himself when he couldn’t think of how to soothe her.

He also wanted to tell her what happened with his parents after she had left his house, but her eyes were glassy, and before he could think of how to broach the subject, MawMaw called them in for coffee. They followed Jules inside, still holding Annette’s hand.

* * * * *

The following afternoon, Joie and Tres walked through the hayfields, a breeze bending the tall grasses and whirling Joie’s flowered shift when Tres asked, “It upsets you, doesn’t it. Seeing your father be so gentle with Annette.”

“Jealousy’s awful, isn’t it?” She shook her head. “It doesn’t make sense feeling jealous about my father being so kind to a girl who probably loved the attention when I wouldn’t have.”

“Does it have to make sense? Listen,” he stopped and took her hand. “It’s not like I don’t know what you’re feeling.”

Tres’ shoulders slumped forward and his mood suddenly seemed to darken as it had when he had referenced being the age of Amelie’s brother, and sometimes when he talked about his own parents.

Joie wiggled his hand. “What is it?”

“Nothing... really. Just thinking.”

“*Something’s* wrong. Tell me why you get this way.” More and more, Tres’ face seemed to tighten with a grin she was sure was fake.

“What way? I’m just thinking.” He relaxed his face and started walking again.

“Nothing’s wrong. I was thinking about how P’Paw calls me *son*. I get all these confusing feelings. Like I’m choking up. Then I get angry and resent how my own parents, well, you know.”

Joie paused, unsure of how to support Tres when she didn’t believe that was what changed his mood. She stopped and faced him. “That makes you unhappy?”

“It doesn’t make me *unhappy*, it’s just, well—on the way home with Annette yesterday, you know how giggly she was that day when we all left Quilted Bay? On the way home yesterday, when I wrapped my arm around her, instead of feeling giggles, I felt her shoulders shuddering a little, and she said, ‘Mr. Fryoux, he loved her so much.’ Neither of us really knows how to handle this... this... closeness.”

Sure Tres was avoiding something, her mind was racing with ideas of how to draw it out of him. When no ideas surfaced, she asked, “Annette was crying?”

“I think it was happy tears, really, but then I realized Annette probably saw something in your father that I missed.” He turned to Joie with a more genuine smile now. “He really loved your mother, right? And you look just like her, right? Can you imagine what it must feel like every time he looks at your face, to want to protect you no matter what after he failed to protect your mother? Maybe that’s what he’s thinking every time he whittles on that thing.”

“I think you’ve got him all wrong. He just doesn’t like me.”

“Now what would you say if I told you that?” He cupped Joie’s elbow and raised his brow. “And about how he is with Annette but never tender with you—we’re really kind of facing the same thing. It’s just that my parents try to control us because of society.”

Joie shook her head again but said nothing, and both stared off past the horizon for long moments.

“Sorry,” Tres finally said. “Maybe I shouldn’t be so hard on you when you’re already sad.”

“It’s not exactly that I’m sad about Annette bonding with Daddy, you know that, right?”

“Maybe you just want him to *act* like he loves you?”

“Same way you do.” Joie laughed. “You know, we do tend to lament about things a lot.”

When Tres released her arm and started walking again without smiling at her humor, she asked, “So... things still bad at your house?”

Tres’s face tightened again, and his eyes couldn’t stay put. “Mother’s been cold since your visit.” He sighed. “She hardly says a word to me and won’t even look me in the eye.”

Joie hated that pained expression she couldn’t make him explain, so simply patted him on the back. “That’s all past us now. Come on, didn’t we have fun when you came to meet my folks? Now all we have to do is find a place where both families will agree to meet.”

The only thing they could be sure of was that the meeting of the families needed to be some place near the church or where they could invite Father Barbier so everyone would be on their best behavior. Joie would wait until later to try to figure out what saddened Tres.

Chapter 23

After hearing about some of Tres' family's conversations, Joie wondered if the Duchandes followed any Bible precepts at all, and she thanked God that He committed her soul to the backslapping, pig-slaughtering, row-hoeing, swamp-fishing, family-doting, God-loving, manners-lacking, bust-a-gut laughing tribe that was the Fryoux family. She could survive the chitterling-boiling, the lip smacking, and the hundreds of manners of finesse her family's culture lacked. She was proud and grateful for the simple ability to recognize each individual's value as well as her value system as a whole—relative to the Duchande standard. But she couldn't think of a single way on earth that the two families could ever agree on a meeting place where they'd all be comfortable.

Mrs. Duchande told Tres the Fryoux women should come for tea, an invitation that wouldn't be extended, Joie and Tres agreed.

MawMaw offered a sit-in on quilt making for the bride's dowry, which Joie and Tres agreed would be declined if extended.

Mr. Duchande offered an afternoon of golf. Jules asked him to go crawfishing. Negotiations were fruitless for weeks, until old, slow JoJo suggested a crawfish boil on the grounds between the Youth Center and the Soap Box Derby hill. Being out of doors made the Fryoux family happy, meeting near the refuge of their church comforted the Duchandes, and a singular, all-inclusive meeting made them all thankful.

The Fryoux' provided sawhorses and sheets of wood for tables; the Duchandes brought cushioned lawn chaises and crystal hurricane lamps. The Fryoux' provided the crawfish, corn, potatoes, onions, and seasonings; the Duchandes brought English tea, mint and bourbon for juleps, and champagne and oranges for mimosas.

In the predawn hours, Jules, his sons, and their many cousins took to the marsh with a hundred tee-pee nets and chicken necks everyone on the peninsula saved for a week. They caught twelve sacks of crawfish (about five hundred pounds), and worried they caught too little.

The Duchandes sent their new butler, Charles, to Baton Rouge to collect three cases of champagne and one of bourbon—an amount entirely too stingy for a drinking family, and too liberal for one that didn't drink such things at all, but it would make a good impression and provide a welcome retreat from the company at hand if the Duchandes ingested it in large quantities.

Charles, who organized the event for the Duchandes, told PawPaw, the Fryoux organizer, that Mr. and Mrs. Duchande would arrive with ten guests. This confused PawPaw, who asked whether the Duchandes understood that their whole family was expected. The butler confirmed that the Duchandes surely did.

Joie's family arrived in twelve wagons, each carrying six or more, in addition to the dozen and a half who had arrived early to begin the hauling and firing of great tubs of water, the washing of two sacks of new potatoes, the stripping of three bushels of sweet corn, and the peeling of fifty pounds of yellow onions.

Joie's family provided for a hundred and twelve eaters; Tres' family for the estimated three-dozen they thought would attend. Except for the salt, nothing Joie's family brought was purchased. Nothing the Duchandes brought was not purchased.

In accordance with their culture, Joie's family arrived early, so when the Duchandes arrived a fashionable twenty minutes late, they were open-mouthed and awestruck by the mob that awaited them. Tres and Joie waited near the hitching posts in front of the Youth Center when the Duchandes crossed the bayou and turned the corner about a hundred yards away. Seated in her husband's banana Ford with its top folded back, Mrs. Duchande made the final adjustments to her flat, wide-brimmed straw hat, then looked up and saw a mob swarming toward her like maggots on the dead. Joie thought about her father's reminders of social etiquette: "You better close your mouth before a fly get in there."

Trailing behind Mr. and Mrs. Duchande, three cars carried Gatie and her husband, and their two sons and their wives. Annette and Nadine had driven in earlier with Tres and Charles, who rounded out the twelve.

Charles popped the first cork of champagne and Mrs. Duchande jumped so high in her seat that onlookers thought she might hop out and run. She had hardly the time to smooth her dress when Charles reached her. In one hand, he held a silver platter with six glasses of mimosas in shallow crystal glasses; in the other, a small tray with two short orange juice glasses for Gatie's teetotaler daughters-in-law.

"A new dress!" Tres' face brightened at his mother's ensemble.

"Perfect for the occasion." Joie admired the simple, yellow linen dress. Over Mrs. Duchande's shoulders lay a matching waistcoat with white piping. A tiny white button at the neck held it in place.

"And matching hat! Nice." Tres puffed out his chest.

Joie realized that he didn't notice that she too wore a yellow dress.

But Mrs. Duchande did, cutting her gaze away from the fine dress MawMaw had sewn from a stretch of cotton she bought new from D'Albour's General Store in Plaquemine. Joie flicked the little red demon off her shoulder when it whispered, *cheap cotton... ugh*, and instead listened to the angel who comforted her: *well done... fewer wrinkles*.

When the two groups started shaking hands, Joie kept an eye on PawPaw as he reached Mrs. Duchande and accepted her hand. She thought he might be too big a man to acknowledge Mrs. Duchande's palm-down *tell*, and maybe he was, but it seemed like he sure did stare down at her hand a little longer than the others'.

Before Joie and the rest of her family could greet them, Dom handed off his wife to Charles, flung his blue and white seersucker jacket over Charles's arm, and left it to him to settle the ladies in chaise longue chairs. The first batch of crawfish waited on the sawhorse tables.

The Duchande men started eating crawfish as though they had been born in the swamp, pulling off tails and prying the shells back with their front teeth to pull out the meat. Charles and Nadine patiently pulled off tails, peeled back the first sections of shell, then squeezed their tips to extract the meat. They tore off the back-strap and extraneous fat, then gently placed the clean meat—all facing the same direction as tiny, new, crescent moons—atop ice in silver bowls with thin slices of lemon and tiny crystal cups filled with rémoulade. They handed each lady a white linen napkin, a miniature silver fork with only two tines, and a bowl of hot crawfish tails sinking into melting ice.

Gatie finished her serving first and left her daughters-in-law and Mrs. Duchande to elbow her way into a spot in front of a big pile of crawfish between Tres and Joie. The whole table paused to gawk at how fast Gatie started eating when, with a full mouth of crawfish she ate like a man, muttered, "Damn baby forks."

Jules was the first to laugh, and Tigre Edna, the woman whose treatment of a foe had left Joie dreading what might happen when she met a slew of country folk, was suddenly one of them.

Jules gave a shallow cough to quiet his family, and they each slipped sideways glances over to the ladies in chairs. Their jutting pinkies froze midair under so many stares, then they lifted their chins and started mouthing words no one could hear. Joie vowed to practice holding her chin in its natural position just in case she was ever tempted to resort to such an act of disdain.

Big and tall—what some might call *rotund*—Gatie slowed down only after PawPaw asked her where her people were from.

“Fourchon, and proud of it,” she boasted.

Every Fryoux within earshot repeated *Fourchon*? Now when they sneaked a look, they knew the ladies heard Gatie tell Lowlanders that she was as deep a swamp dweller as any of them. Fourchon was at the tip of one of the three southernmost parishes in Louisiana. No roads traveled further south into the delta than Louisiana Highway 1, which ended shortly past the Fourchon area at Grand Isle.

PawPaw’s face scrunched up a few seconds while he figured the math. “*Mais, cher*, you was there when the storms come?”

“*Certainement! Tout les trois!*”

Tres tilted backward to see Joie while Gatie bent over the table to stuff more crawfish into her over-filled mouth. He cleared his throat to make Joie look over, gave her a quizzical look, and held up three fingers. He mouthed *one, nine, zero, nine*.

Joie couldn't figure out what he meant until Gatie recited the specifics of the three storms, beginning with 1893, "When I was a wee child..." Then the one in 1909, both of which, Gatie pointed out, had sixteen-foot surges with much greater winds than the 1915 storm.

"Oh." It slipped out of Joie's mouth unnoticed. When she looked back at Tres, he winked—Gatie was at least fifty years old, which meant she must have been born in the mid-1870s, making her a young adult in 1893. Then she got married, moved to New Orleans, had the incident with the boa-draped whore in 1906, and had two children (who were present at the crawfish boil and were obviously in their mid- to late-twenties), all long before the 1909 storm, which had barely affected New Orleans proper. She couldn't have been a wee child in 1893, and she definitely had long left the area by 1909.

Mrs. Duchande spilled her bowl of ice all over her yellow linen dress, and they all had to leave.

* * * * *

At the end of the day, once the Fryoux clan returned to the peninsula and put away all the crawfish boil equipment and fixings, Joie was sitting at the table peeling the remainder of the crawfish when PawPaw tapped her on the shoulder. "Granddaughter, come sit while I shave."

"P'Paw, it's too late to go to confession now."

He nodded toward the bathroom. "We'll go in the mornin' early before Mass."

Joie took her place on the edge of the tub and watched PawPaw sharpen his razor and do his little chop-chop stir-stir. These sights, these sounds, all drew her back into the soft love of her grandfather.

He lifted the brush to his face, but then paused, rested it in the zinc, and turned to Joie. "Miss Gatie, she from Fourchon."

Joie giggled. “Surprising, huh P’Paw?”

Staring down into the shaving cup, he asked, “Heard ‘bout Cousin Alphonse’s mule?”

“Nossir, what happened?”

“Had a foul.”

“What do you mean, she had a foul? Isn’t that something like *Immaculate Conception*?”

“Don’ be like that, girl.”

Joie heard her grandfather’s silent *tsk*. “Sorry, but I thought that couldn’t happen.”

“*Oui*. Figure you goin’ to learn more on how things really is.”

“In school? Guess so, P’Paw.”

Joie’s grandfather rested his cup in the zinc, dried his hands, and reached for Joie’s hand.

“In life, *cher*. Seems a man cain’ always say what won’ work and what just might.”

Chapter 24

“Oh, how awful!” Mrs. LeBlanc—the woman whose innate talents in deciding which *whos* would be successful in society, and which would not, had earned her the distinguished title of Grand Dame—consoled Mrs. Duchande the morning after the crawfish boil.

“Terribly,” Renee said.

“And *then*,” Mrs. Duchande continued, “after they all *swarmed* us... you know Dom, he always has to have the top down on that car of his, and my hat was askew and, well, even the *women* were shaking my arm so hard my insides jiggled. Can you *imagine*?” By the time she finished the story of her dreadful ordeal, she was dabbing a kerchief to her eyes.

“You poor thing,” Mrs. LeBlanc said.

Renee rested her palm on Mrs. Duchande’s hand, lamenting, “How *rude*,” with the pouty frown she had practiced in the mirror since childhood.

Mrs. Duchande knew little supplication was required of Renee, so simply squeezed the girl’s hand and implored, “My dear, you simply *must* do something.”

“Of course. Of course.” Renee cradled Mrs. Duchande’s hand now, offering, “It’s a spell; Lowlanders are known for them. But they aren’t very smart, really, nothing of a big challenge to outsmart.”

The women had stood by too long waiting for Tres to realize how Lowlanders couldn’t possibly fit his lifestyle. Now they had to act fast.

Renee promised Mrs. Duchande, “We’ll put our heads together and figure out how to get Tres back on track.”

Good! She had to keep Renee focused on the vision of walking down the aisle. She smile at her as she passed, then take her son’s hand at the altar.

* * * * *

The next morning at breakfast, gazing at Tres over her coffee cup, his mother asked, “So, when will Miss Fryoux return to school?”

“She left for Hammond yesterday.” He swallowed his eggs and added a suspicious, “Why?”

“And when will she return?”

“What’s that mind of yours conjuring up?” He squinted an eye at his mother’s smooth tone.

“Well, we’ll have a breakfast at the Grand Dame’s, of course.” She lifted her cup again, hiding a sidling smile.

“Why?” He took another bite of eggs and tried to keep his face calm so his mother wouldn’t see how anxious he was.

“Well...” she took a sip. “You know we have to announce your engagement.”

Tres swallowed hard and let his fork hit the plate. “At Mrs. LeBlanc’s?”

His mother’s cup was still at her lips. She lifted her eyebrows and said, “Sure. Why not?”

“Because you’ll have all your haughty friends make fun of her.” He wiped his face with a napkin, huffed, “That’s why not,” and threw the napkin down beside his plate.

“Tres, haven’t I expressed my good will already? Anyway, the invitation list will be the same no matter where.”

“I can see it now.” Tres sat back in his chair. “All the Fryoux’ in one room, everybody else in another.”

“Well, if you don’t think they’ll be comfortable...”

“Forget it.” Tres shook his head and picked up his fork, but then put it down again, saying, “Do what you have to do. Joie won’t be back in town until the second weekend in June.”

“It’s settled, then.”

Tres left the remainder of his breakfast and didn’t give his mother’s plans another thought until the second Saturday morning in June.

* * * * *

Renee seemed to cross Tres’ path every time he was in town, and there she was, exiting the same shop as a week before, when she had broken her promise never to allow him to touch her. Loaded with bundles from the dressmaker’s shop, Tres almost knocked her down when he passed the door as she exited, right next to Cobbler Hebert’s. All previous recriminations forgotten, or renounced, or however else Renee had put them aside to be ignored, she had laughed gaily, saying, “Oh Tres, there you are. Help me with my parcels.”

Today, she grinned. “Oh, hello, what are you doing here?”

“I just tried on my new boots.” He pointed next door.

“But I mean, what are you doing *here*? Why aren’t you already at the Grand Dame’s?”

“The Grand D—, I’m on my way there now.”

“Fine. Just fine then.” She reached out to let Tres take her hand. “Ride over with me.”

“You’re going?”

She tucked in her chin and stated, “Well, I wouldn’t miss seeing your girl for all the *world*,” pronouncing *world* with two long syllables.

He called out, “I have my horse,” over his shoulder, chastising himself.

By the time he mounted, Renee’s driver was galloping his horses full-on. Every time Tres’ thought he could catch up and pass, someone was coming the other way, all the way to Meriam Avenue, where carriages and Fords lined the street for two blocks in both directions from the Grand Dame’s. By the time Tres hitched his horse and reached the house, Renee’s driver had opened her door and she was stepping out. He’d have to find Joie right away before she and everyone else got the impression that the two arrived together.

But Joie wasn’t there yet. Nor any of the Fryoux clan.

Tres pulled his mother into a corner of the room. He whispered, “You sent the Fryoux’ women invitations, right?”

“You said not to. Remember?”

He tried to recall the conversation. Had he told her not to invite them? Impossible. *Ah*, he told her to do what she thought she needed to do. He hesitated, then reached to grasp his mother’s arm. “But you sent one to Joie, right?”

“Of course. Ten days ago, along with everyone else’s.” She patted her son’s hand. “Didn’t you bring her with you?”

“I forgot the date.” He stared at the floor.

She moaned, “Oh, well, how embarrassing. Our honored guest, not even here yet.”

Tres ran to the phone but remembered Mr. Fryoux hadn’t one. Surely, they’d be here soon.

After fifteen minutes, everyone was seated with breakfast plates and Tres' concern morphed into disappointment.

After an hour, now angry that Joie hadn't come, he stood solemn but courteously shook guests' hand at the door with his best phony smile.

"Too bad we didn't get a chance to celebrate with your girl."

"Maybe next time, eh, Tres?"

"Please extend our finest regards."

Tres simmered. Joie hadn't even bothered to send a note to decline his mother's invitation. *Inexcusable!*

When all but Renee had exited, Tres thanked his mother and Mrs. LeBlanc, apologized for his fiancée's absence, and left to find Joie.

* * * * *

Tres galloped into the peninsula so angry he couldn't stand himself. He started calling for Joie before he dismounted and scaled the steps to her back door three at a time. "Joie! Joie!"

She came running from her bedroom. "Tres! What's wrong?"

"What do you mean, *what's wrong!*" He pointed at her luggage, still at the door. Furious that she had only now returned from Hammond, he barked, "Why are you just now getting home!"

Tres could hardly breathe. Joie just stood there with that relaxed, composed face, those soft eyes she always used when Tres told her about his problems. "Don't play dumb! Mother mailed your invitation over a week ago." Her calmness infuriated him. "Did you *intentionally* try to embarrass me? Why didn't you want to come to breakfast?" Everything he thought about Joie was disintegrating.

“Breakfast?”

“The announcement party, Joie. Everyone was there.”

“Well, *we* weren’t!” Joie stormed down the steps and ran to MawMaw’s, Tres right behind her. “M’Maw, did you get an invitation from Mrs. Duchande?”

“*Non, cher.*”

Joie turned to Tres. “Well? I suppose my family wasn’t invited either?”

“Listen, Mother swore she sent you an invitation... except... well, I may have told her she didn’t have to invite your family.”

“You what!” She rammed a heel into the floor and clenched her hands into fists. “My family wasn’t invited to an announcement party?”

“Well, that part was just an accident, I just—” The realization that he’d have to admit to one of his mother’s games left him wordless. He had felt angry just seconds ago. Now guilt?

Joie stomped back to her house and was sifting through the mail when Tres finally caught up with her. Finding the invitation near the bottom of the stack, she threw it at him.

“She sent it here? Joie, she knew you were in Hammond, I swear I told her.”

“I don’t care, Tres. You need to leave.” She started toward her luggage.

Tres caught her by the arm. “You don’t understand—”

“Oh, it’s perfectly clear.” She jerked loose and scowled. “You don’t want your family exposed to mine again. It’s perfectly okay for *your* mother to avoid *me*, but turn it around and you’re fit to be tied!”

“I’m sorry! I don’t know why I got so mad. You know it’s Mother who’s to blame. All I told her was—”

“I don’t care what you told her.”

It felt as though her eyes were drilling holes through his head. Why was she so angry?

He stood mute.

When Tres didn't answer, Joie hissed, "It doesn't matter! You let her exclude my family, right?"

He still said nothing, just stood agape.

She asked, now louder, "Right?"

He wobbled his head left and right five times before he could say, "I didn't intend to," with the sickliest tone he'd ever heard come out his mouth.

"Yeah, now you're all sorry and remorseful. Listen to me. I didn't expect you were the kind of person to be *intentionally* prejudiced. That's not the problem."

"Well, what's the problem if you believe me?"

"I said I believed that you didn't *intentionally* tell your mother not to invite my family, but you didn't make it clear that she should, and you still went to the party."

"But I thought you were there."

"And how long did it take to realize I wasn't—or my family?"

"Well, if you had a phone..."

"*What?*"

"That's it. I'm having one installed here. I wanted to call you, then I waited an hour for you, and—"

Joie stomped a foot. "You stayed a whole hour before coming to see why none of us came?"

"Well, once mother explained that *she* thought that *I* thought your family would be too uncomfortable at the Grand Dame's house—"

“The Grand Dame’s?” Now Joie’s mouth hung agape, her eyes bulging as though they’d pop right out.

“That’s what I’m trying to say—it was so far that I thought y’all were just late so I stayed a while.”

“Still, an hour?”

“Joie, please let me ask your father if I can put a phone line in.”

“Don’t you dare embarrass my father!”

“It’s not my intent to embarrass him—”

“There you go again with your *intentions*!”

“Dear God!” Tres threw his hands up in disgust.

Joie pointed to the door. “Goodbye!”

“You don’t mean that. Let me explain. We’re getting all turned around here.” He needed to prove it wasn’t his fault. “You know this is mother’s doing.”

“You’re always going to do what that woman wants then say things aren’t your fault. You blame your parents for everything. Where’s your backbone? You run away from your father when he says things you don’t like, you slither away from your mother when she says she won’t invite my family. Hell, Tres, what were you doing agreeing to a fancy party at Mrs. LeBlanc’s? You gave your mother an excuse to not invite my family when you should have stood up for us.”

“I’m sorry! I didn’t want a party to begin with. You must know that! It’s just, I figure letting Mother have her way in the small things’ll make things easier on us.”

Joie’s face sunk into blankness, her eyes black and emotionless.

He felt her slipping away. He reached for her, had to comfort her, tell her he loved her, but she yanked herself out of reach and asked, “You’re *crediting* yourself?”

“Jesus Christ!” He staggered backward. “This isn’t my fault!”

Joie turned to take her luggage into her room, saying, “So keep doing what you’re doing. I don’t know what I was thinking. She’s never going to accept me.” Then she stopped, turned to face Tres, and warmly asked, “What happened to the fight in you?”

Tres’ chest tightened. He couldn’t breathe. His mind raced through all of his miscues until he finally realized that it was Joie who voiced those words was both a blessing that they came from a place of love, and the curse of displaying a character flaw he had been trying to hide from her since childhood. All those times he thought he had stood up to his parents now clearly rang the truth of Joie’s allegation. With each effort to confront them, he had ended up running away after only a feeble attempt. He had sat back and let his mother manipulate him. Not inviting Joie’s family because they wouldn’t be comfortable at a fancy breakfast was an easy way for him to get out of the conundrum his mother put him in.

When Tres didn’t turn to go, Joey opened the door with an ushering motion. He followed Tres down the back steps to his horse, but then blocked him from mounting. ““Member what Boo told you about your fight? You ever raise your voice at her again, you’ll eat my fist.”

Chapter 25

When Joie had questioned Tres' fight, she saw his shoulders droop, his eyes lose that innocent clarity she so loved. He had caved into himself and dropped his gaze to the floor, shaking his head again and again. When he looked up to face her, his eyes were glassy. He took a breath to speak but, no, her words had left him decimated. She hadn't known what to do. She couldn't step in and forgive him so easily.

Neither had moved until Joey made him leave, and Joie watched Tres look toward the door, then back at her with deep creases in his forehead. Did he want her to rescue him? Make everything okay again? When she didn't, all the air had left Tres' lungs in a mighty sigh as he wilted further under her brother's threat, Joie suspected from his helplessness in not knowing exactly *how* to fight.

Had she failed him? Had she proved to him that a relationship even as theirs could be violated by a single act? Her reaction had gone against everything she believed in. She had proudly been the teacher of good will not only to Tres but to her friends. Had she wanted to be a bigshot when she showed the girls how much Lowlander children knew about ponies? Had she tried to teach them some kind of moral lesson in convincing them she was a friend worth getting in trouble for? Had she done the same with Tres?

She ran out the back door and whistled for Itsy to jump her paddock fence. Memories flooded in from the time she had done so with Patches, how they galloped the entire distance to DDR. Itsy was faster—maybe they could catch up with Tres before he got home.

Joie had wanted to put the DDR cowboys in their place that day with the red colt, and now she had to admit that she was shallow with pride when Tres watched her from the end of the shed-row. Oh, how it must feel to be Tres, how crippled she must have made him feel with all her lessons in morality. That butterfly story she had told her little Lowlander cousins was an appropriate lesson for a child in the same way her own family's childhood games taught her about responsibility to others and Mother Earth, but had she intentionally chosen that opportunity to tell the story so Tres could learn from it? Who did she think she was? She wasn't PawPaw. Teaching such lessons was not her right.

And what about those dreams she had? She had read a magazine article that said a person is every character in thier dreams. In that dream about Father Barbier's sermon on the teacup in the antiques shop, the cup had spoken with PawPaw's voice, so did she consider herself as wise as he? Did she think of herself as the teacup shaped into beauty? Or even a god mighty enough to reshape a man into her version of beauty? And what possibly could it mean if she were PawPaw in the back of that cave about to be run down?

* * * * *

Tres walked his horse slowly out of the peninsula woods and into the grassland, stopping to stare at his house as it appeared on the horizon. What were the exact words he needed to chastise his mother? He had longed for Joie's touch, had needed to feel her equal after the deadening weeks without her, but his misplaced fury had ruined it. Now all his bright dreams and the illusions of their lives together were withering like a flower untended. And he was the

one who failed at being a proper caretaker. He had let those dreams and illusions stay just what they were: fanciful abstracts. The acknowledgement that he had relied on Joie's backbone to support his dreams made his stomach turn.

Lost in his thoughts, he didn't hear the rumble of fast hooves, didn't hear Joie's footsteps when she dismounted, nor her soft voice whispering his name. When she finally reached up and touched his hand, he could only look down on her in silence, already too fragile for another lesson, and ashamed for being so.

"Are you all right?"

Tres didn't want to need her so badly. And he didn't until she squeezed his hand. He looked over, saw how her face was glowing. He felt her warmth, envisioned her in his arms, lying in the clover at the foot of the Indian Mounds.

"Tres. Say something. You're scaring me."

"I'm trying to figure out how to fight this fight."

"I don't want to fight you, Tres. It wasn't right to condemn you like I did. The whole way out here, I couldn't help but think about how many times I've pointed out all your imperfections, and now I—"

"I'm not talking about fighting with *you*!"

Joie jerked back and winced. "Well, what then?"

Tres slumped in his saddle, sunk his fingertips into the knot in his stomach. "I have to find a way to stop Mother from doing things that make me humiliate myself and abuse you."

"God, Tres, you haven't exactly *abused* me, it really was just an oversight—I just need you to be more careful. I overreacted and I'm ashamed."

Tres finally hopped down from Cliché and took Joie's hand for a walk. "You don't have anything to feel bad about." Recalling a sermon, he stopped to face her. "Remember how Father Barbier talked about good guilt and bad? How people shouldn't feel guilty about things they didn't cause and can't change?"

"I do, because I was so surprised to hear a priest downplay guilt. What does that have to do with us being ugly to one another?"

"Okay, so maybe we should feel bad about that. But I'm talking about *Mother's* behavior."

"But us trying to be together *is* what's causing it." One side of Joie's face hiked up.

Tres insisted, "That's no justification for all her mischief."

"I see what you're trying to get at, but that puts us back to where we started. Saying we're not to blame is just one big, convenient excuse to do what we want without thinking of others." Joie tried to back away.

Tres held her fast. "But that doesn't mean it's not true."

Joie blew out an irritated huff. "So... what... we just go back and try to ignore your mother's shenanigans again? Sounds like you're the only one finding the easy way out."

Tres didn't exactly have everything straight in his head. He thought he had figured out how he and Joie could feel better, but she was right.

They walked all the way to Quilted Bay and were lying in the shade silently when Tres sat up in a flash. "I can just go ahead and move out now! Then she won't be *able* to stick her nose in my business!"

But Joie only shook her head. "All that'll do is make you feel bad about leaving Annette to deal with her by herself."

He hated it, but Joie was right. Annette being the only one his mother had to pick on would surely turn her into another Lillian. He kissed Joie's hand. "I promise, I'll figure it out." He rolled over onto her. He kissed her neck, and her chest, and pressed himself against her until she allowed him to release their lust.

They talked for an hour about school and colts before walking back to their horses. Tres wrapped an arm around Joie and kissed her on the head, asking, "So, you forgive me?"

She snuggled into his shoulder, said, "I will if you will," and felt more confident than ever about Tres' love. She only hoped he could find the same confidence when he tried to figure out what to do next.

* * * * *

Two days later, when Dom returned from an auction in Birmingham, Tres skipped his classes to see his father at work and tell him what his mother did with the announcement invitations.

"Jesus, Tres. What on Earth do you expect me to do? Apologize to the Fryoux'?"

"No, I've already taken care of that. I want to talk to you about my sister." Tres stood in front of his father's desk, glowering down at him.

Dom had gone back to fiddling with papers on his desk, but now looked up, raising one cheek and squinting his eyes. "What does Annette have to do with anything?"

"Did Mother tell you she didn't allow Annette to go to the breakfast?"

"What did you expect?"

When Dom started reading again, Tres wanted to reach over and rip his papers into shreds. "More of the same is what I expect. I thought we had an agreement about you

controlling Mother! I told you I'd move out. And that's just what I intend to do. I just don't want to leave my sister alone in that house with Mother."

"There's nothing I can do about that." Dom started shuffling papers again.

"Father, can't you stop and listen for a minute!" He waited for Dom to look up before resting his hands on his hips. "Yes, there is. I've talked to Annette and she wants to move to Baton Rouge."

"She's still in school."

That damn dismissive voice again! He wiggled his shoulders and took a deep breath. "I mean after she graduates. She wants to go to L.S.U."

Dom gave a derisive shake of the head. "I suppose you put that idea in her head."

"Damn right I did! Father, we made a deal—either you'd control Mother or I'd move out."

"I most certainly did not promise to control your mother." Dom slammed down the papers. "That's not possible and you know it. What I promised was that we'd receive your girl appropriately."

"Joie!"

"Stop this! I know her name full well. The fact remains that I made no such promise and you know it."

Tres spat, "Where's your integrity?"

"Don't start that again." Dom sat back and pounded his fists on the armrests. "You came in here intent on making trouble, now you're trying to put me over a barrel and add a new demand to an old promise I've already satisfactorily fulfilled. It doesn't sound like you're

worried about your sister if you're threatening to move out now. I have to get back to work. Anything else?"

Dom was right. Tres sank down into a chair. "Tell me. Did Mother tell you about not inviting Annette to the breakfast?"

His father stared at him when he slouched into the chair and, with a softer tone, said, "No. I wasn't here and she didn't tell me."

"You think it was right to exclude her?"

"No, I don't."

"And the day Joie came to meet the family, did you think it was right to exclude her then?"

"No. I wasn't home that morning either."

"So you see what she keeps doing behind your back?" Tres drummed his fingers on his thighs, waiting.

His father leaned forward to rest his elbows on his desk, inhaled his sigh of disappointment, and finally breathed, "So, *again*, what do you want *me* to do?"

"Let Annette move to Baton Rouge. She promises she'll come home every weekend if you buy her a car." Tres waited quietly as Dom sat back without a word.

Dom stared at the ceiling for what felt like an hour. He finally reached over for the phone, and a moment later said, "Dom here. Tres'll be there this morning to pick out an automobile for my daughter."

Was his father the kind of man who simply gave up an argument when the going got tough? Was that how Mother ended up getting her way?

Tres stood to go but his father stopped him. “Hold on a minute. There’s something else.” Dom rested the receiver on its cradle with a slow, delicate touch, and exhaled another sigh. “It’s about Renee Wilbert.”

“What now? You know she was at the Grand Dame’s? The woman has no pride.” Tres found himself with hands on hips again. Hating that he was picking up the habit, he folded his arms across his chest. “She stopped me in town. Again. And followed me there. She’s everywhere I turn.”

Dom continued, “I saw Mr. Wilbert at the town meeting. He wanted to talk about how you’ve treated Renee.”

“How *I* treat *Renee*?” Tres stood open-mouthed, but his father was looking down on those briefs again.

“He said you had some vulgar words for her a few days after the fire.” Dom cocked his head to the side. “Did you make some kind of threat?”

Tres slumped back into the chair. “I figured Mother had told you about that already.”

“So, it’s true?”

“Father, she won’t leave me alone.”

“Stop whining like a child. No excuse for insulting a well-bred girl like Renee.”

“Oh, but it’s perfectly all right for Renee and Mother to call Joie a whore? And a tramp?”

“I didn’t get that part of the story.”

“Surprised?”

“Guess I should have suspected there was more to it.”

Tres rose to leave. Would there ever be a day when his father asked him for the truth before assuming he did something worth that damn sigh? Opening the door, he turned to ask, “Do you always have to be on her side?”

“I’ve tried numerous times to explain how it is with me and your mother.” He still had his nose in his papers.

Tres mumbled, “Save the *poor Lillian* routine,” as he slammed the door behind him.

Tres picked out a small car at Iberville Motors, and for the next two days, taught his sister how to drive, both of them avoiding their mother for a week to let things cool down.

* * * * *

Joie returned to Hammond and made up the last of the work she missed when PawPaw was sick. Her classmates had graduated without her the weekend of Mrs. LeBlanc’s party, but she didn’t care about missing the ceremony. She and Tres were halfway through their engagement period, and life was making sense—no more parties.

In July, Carroll Devillier and two more of Tres’ friends drove Joie’s family to Hammond to witness her graduation. Tres had driven in early that morning, and he sat next to PawPaw to watch Joie cross the stage and receive a diploma for Animal Husbandry.

From the stage, Joie saw Daddy and PawPaw smile crooked smiles, but she accepted them as the pleased kind of smirks, not Linda Coleman “lady doctor” smirks. She liked how Tres winked at her.

After the procession, they drove to eat at the only restaurant the Fryoux family had ever patronized other than the concrete-block fried-chicken place on Railroad Avenue. When they stepped inside *The Round Table*, they were met by a lady who stood at a podium Joie thought to be of the same type as Miss Merry’s at the library. “*Fry-ox* party?”

“*Free-you,*” Tres offered.

The family followed the woman into a back room, where a single, giant table with a raised center platform was loaded with more kinds of food than the Lowlanders had ever seen together in one place—even PawPaw couldn’t help glancing at the selection as he bowed his head to bless it.

When Tres gave the Lazy Susan a spin to show how everyone could reach the dozens of platters and bowls. PawPaw breathed *aaaah*.

Half an hour later, the Fryoux’ started refilling spoonful after spoonful of the diverse selection until their plates filled again. Joie’s father’s demand that everyone *try everything on the table* rang in her ears as it had as a child. “Boy, I’m stuffed,” she patted her stomach, “I sure am glad you don’t have to try everything when you’re in a restaurant.” Joie adored the innocence of her family, and the fact that MawMaw was having such a feast without having to cook it or clean up.

Once they finished eating and headed back to the cars, Tres asked, “Uh, think it’ll be okay if I wait ‘til morning to load up Joie’s things and bring her home?”

Jules turned on his heels so fast his jowls danced and Joie held her breath as he poked out his chest with a huge gulp of air she was sure he’d use to growl, *Totally out of the question!* But Tres was smiling at MawMaw with his boyish façade of innocence. MawMaw elbowed PawPaw in the ribs, (she had no ladle), and PawPaw performed one of his *I have something to say* throat clearers. “*C’est bon.*”

Joie avoided looking back at her father, and kissed the others goodbye. As soon as their cars turned the corner, Tres drove to Mrs. Sabine’s, loaded her luggage, and the two headed south to New Orleans.

* * * * *

When Tres slowed the car as they approached The Royal Sonesta Hotel, Joie yanked on his shirtsleeve. “Keep going, Tres, please don’t stop.” She hid her face in her hands and made him drop her at the Godchaux store two blocks down and around the corner on Canal Boulevard.

Tres went back to register, and returned to find Joie on the second floor fondling the white silk ladies’ gown and matching robe a mannequin wore. She had never seen such things, not even at the Wilberts’ store in Plaquemine.

When Tres took her hand to lead her out, Joie was still so self-conscious that she couldn’t hold her head up long enough to look him in the eyes. She had let only one other boy touch her. She was fifteen and Tres was already in college when L.J. Rivet touched her breast on the dance floor of the Plaquemine Youth Center, and she pushed his hand away only after she caught a glimpse of the chaperones.

Then Catholic guilt stepped in to restrict her behavior, even as her thoughts strayed to the velvet-suited men in lace collars who lived in romance books she checked out of the library once old enough to go there alone. The stories told of men whose merciless insistence wooed bustling women into the submission they secretly yearned for. Joie’s fantasy was set in a time when even the slightest of a gentleman’s impropriety was followed with the speedy grasp of a woman’s wrist before her hand met with his face... then the twist of her arm behind her back, her other arm forcing him away with feigned opposition even as he slides a knee between her legs, lifts her many layers of skirting, and wedges himself between clamped thighs so his lips can meet hers, when she ceases her struggle, and instead draws in that face, those lips... After those last frames of the image, Joie’s half-hearted whimper pleaded with God to let her pleasure next come by act

of the man she would marry. In Joie's mind, it was a plea intended to fortify her resistance to suitors unlikely to appear on God's A-list—a short list.

Self-gratification somehow seemed a less damnable act when, *before the act*, she promise that she'd say a boatload of *Hail Marys* after the act. (Joie prayed to Mary because she needed an intermediary for such a *big sin*.) She thought the deal was a bargain for God, too. Back when she was eleven and a stifling upsurge of guilt forced her to confess one Saturday afternoon that sixth-grader Johnny Adams's first two fingertips grazed her chest when he reached for the books he wanted to carry for her, and she didn't bop him a good one on the arm, Father Barbier had given her the penance of only two *Acts of Contrition*. Committing such a sinful sex act was surely infinitely worse than anything she might do by herself, so a boatload of *Hail Marys* seemed infinitely more sorrowful than two *Acts*.

Of course, there had been that day she and Tres made up after that fight... But that was spontaneous lust—she hadn't a chance to stew on it. Now, when she and Tres exited Godchaux's and stepped out onto Canal, Tres turned the opposite direction from Bourbon.

"Let's walk a while." His words, light and soft, met the melodic thump and clank of a trolley headed toward the river, the putter of automobiles, the buzz of tourists.

None of the men shifted their gazes to avoid looking at a Lowlander, but rather dipped their heads as they passed.

None of the ladies inspected her homemade dress and scrunched up their noses. They nodded a gentle *hello*.

No one cared that Tres escorted a woman below his class.

At the end of Canal, they sat on a bench near the river and watched the trolley cars. They swung their arms high above their heads to greet passengers on the decks of the *Delta Queen* and

the *Mississippi Queen*, whose paddlewheels stood as tall as Joie's house and churned up more water than what flowed down Bayou Paul.

They watched the setting sun glitter gold on the crescent of the Mississippi, and when her breeze rolled up the levee and turned cool, they headed back to the Sonesta, where, flanking the hotel's big brass and glass doors, still stood the two doormen Joie had eyed when they first approached. With tall black felt hats, red tails, and ruffled shirts, they looked like the velvet-coated men in her fantasies. Would Catholic guilt interfere with her evening? She couldn't keep that darned prayer out of her head—the recurring supplications to petition God about *the man He intends for me*, and the millions of *Hail Marys*.

In the foyer, flowers set upon a round table loomed overhead in the way of a blooming tree, and behind the lobby—but thankfully before the long marble counter where all the hotel clerks no doubt anxiously waited to see what unmarried women might be sneaking into their hotel intent on having sex out of wedlock—Joie and Tres stepped into the horrifying little closet of space that shuddered as it rose in choppy three- and four-inch jerks. Everything but Joie's stomach stepped out onto the third floor, where oversized doors lined a long, red and green velvet-papered hallway.

Joie ran her fingertips along the wall, the edge of demilune tables, the long fringe of lampshades, until Tres stopped at the far end and unlocked a room decorated in the style Joie had seen only in magazines, finer even than the Duchandes' cherished Marble Citadel: spindly legged marble-topped tables, gilded settees covered in French tapestries, shimmering gold fixtures, and Persian rugs soft as clouds. French doors led to a balcony that overlooked Bourbon Street. Slippery notes of a saxophone floated up, and the taps of a street-dancer echoed from below.

And stacked around the hearth sat boxes in every shape and size wrapped with every imaginable color and tied with immense silk bows that sparkled. Joie couldn't resist running over to plop down among them.

When she looked up at Tres, he exclaimed, "Go ahead. They're calling you, 'Joie, Joie, let me out!'"

She grabbed a bright purple box with a giant bow and found a purple bottle of perfume with one of those air bladders she'd seen at Wilbert's. In a box large enough to hold a calf, she dug through mountains of slivered paper to find a leather riding crop in the bottom. Within white silk cloth she discovered fine papers and two fountain pens. She opened a big round box to find a wide-brimmed, straw summer hat and a scarf with fluffy white clouds aloft blue skies, and from a box that looked like a square orange, she retrieved a crystal baby horse lying with its front hooves tucked under him, his chin resting on a shoulder. In a matching box, a bisque mare lay with one foot tucked and the other reaching out in front, her head lifted in pride.

Clapping with each discovery, she asked, "Why so many!"

"One for each birthday I couldn't celebrate with you since we first met." He sat next to Joie as she wiggled with excitement, opening one package after the next.

On a porcelain vase, tiny pink roses and green vines were drawn so fine that the artist must have used a single hair to apply the paint—it reminded Joie of the teacup in her dream. An eighteenth-century print from George Stubbs' engravings of *The Anatomy of The Horse*; silk gloves and stockings; a silver *fleur de leis* collar pin; a bracelet made from dozens of tiny gold butterflies connected wingtip to wingtip; a silk gown and matching robe like the one at Godchaux's, except in Joie's favorite shade of blue; and, in the last box, she found a brand-new Buster Brown coloring book with wax crayons.

When they went downstairs for supper, she couldn't stop fondling first her collar pin, then her butterfly bracelet, as they shared a *Chateau Briand*. Giggly with the wine they drank, she didn't notice any nosey clerks at the desk when they walked back across the lobby.

Back in her room, she set her golden treasures on one of the spindly-legged tables next to the fireplace so she could see the fire dance upon them, then changed into her blue *peignoir*. Tres waited in bed. He held open the covers. No guilt.

When they finally settled to sleep on a bed so soft their bodies sank, Tres whispered, "I can't wait to get back to Quilted Bay."

"And wrap ourselves in the folds of a cotton quilt spread over Spanish Moss?"

"And wait for an afternoon shower," he added, "to rinse the world and fill the ponds, and make magic in our delta."

Chapter 26

After a long nap on the trip home from Hammond, Jules went to whittling on his pietà. Hours later when he didn't come in for supper, MawMaw came out to find him staring at the face of Madonna, hardly a sliver of fresh woodcut on the ground.

"Made your paw's favorites. Yours too."

Jules turned to look at his mother only once she rested a palm on his shoulder and offered, "Got some black-eyed peas wit' ham hocks, and more in the Swiss chard. Time to slaughter another pig soon, I s'pose."

Shen he still didn't respond, she nodded and asked, "You figurin' we goin' to lose our girl to the Highlanders?"

"I was just thinkin' on Ariat." It was as much the truth as a lie. What would Ariat think about her only daughter matching up with the family that stole their land? Would she shake her head in dismay? No. Ariat LaBiche Fryoux would have understood the baby girl who turned out the very same as she: headstrong. If his wife hadn't been so strong in the head, she'd still be alive.

He wondered if the dead held on to their character. If she were still headstrong, he figured she'd probably accept her daughter's choice of an interclass marriage, and she'd be like his maw, slamming down ladles to set down the law.

"Go on and eat. I'll be in in a while."

Jules didn't climb the steps up to his home until his parents returned to their house and he saw the last lantern extinguished. Joie's room had remained dark. When she married, it would remain dark day after day, and he'd be left with no reminder of Ariat aside from an old picture and the face of the Madonna he tried so hard to whittle into his wife's image. He knew he had failed in the attempt, as his family had never remarked on the resemblance. Only Annette, a Highlander, had asked, "Is it Joie that Mrs. Fryoux is holding?"

He went straight to his room to sit with the picture of Ariat at the festival, as he often did at night once everyone else fell asleep, spending long, sleepless hours with the photograph, especially during the weeks following the Acadian Festival. Most years, his worries had been limited to whether his late wife would think he was raising his sons to be strong, reliable men, whether his daughter would ever become feminine enough to find a good man, and whether she would be too headstrong to keep such a man.

His daughter had seemed to rebel against him at every turn since she lost her mother and had defied his wishes about going to school and choosing a Highlander boy to marry. He couldn't bear the thought of his daughter never returning to her room, off to live under any roof other than his own, especially now that she looked so much like her mother. When the eastern sky started to glow, he collected seven of the twenty-one dollars he had saved up, and rode to town to buy lumber and chicken wire.

Two weeks later, Jules loaded up the new coop and four-by-four timbers on a flat-bed wagon. He found his daughter and Tres at their new homesite pointing out where walls would be erected.

* * * * *

When she saw her father drive up, Joie couldn't believe her eyes. That he built her a chicken coop was the most magnificent display of her father's love since that night when he gathered her in his arms at four years of age.

Joie would never know the torment her father suffered from the loss of his wife, nor the terror of the prospect of his daughter abandoning him.

Jules wasn't like his father, and didn't know if he had within himself the character to age into the soft man responsible for teaching his father's gentle lessons. How ever could he grow into the role of a patriarch? He doubted that future generations would think the same of him as Joie did of PawPaw. After Ariat died, he came to doubt that he could ever be that soft again. His first three sons would grow up to be the same as he in early adulthood, before the loss of his beloved Ariat stiffened him, and Joey would be far gentler because of the influence of an older sister. Unable to forgive himself for his failures, and now with the acknowledgement that his daughter's future was out of his hands, Jules could only do his best to rid himself of his demoralizing thoughts—especially the thought of his ancestors' land returning to the Fryoux lineage through marriage into that family of thieves, of all things.

To avoid thinking about being related to the Duchandes, he decided to trick his mind: *I'll keep myself from thinking of Tres' name.* That way, his daughter would marry a regular boy, not a land-thieving Duchande. Whereas PawPaw called Tres *son* out of sentiment, Jules called him *son* to avoid his name.

Jules started unloading the timbers and a post-hole digger. When his daughter reached him, he steeled himself to her hug not because he had no emotion for her, but because he knew he would break from too much.

* * * * *

When Tres had first brought Joie to the spot where he wanted to build their home, a couple hundred yards from The Marble Citadel, he told her, “From here, you can ride directly to the peninsula without passing their house.” He had hired a New Orleans architect to design the home, and by the time Jules delivered their coop, the plans were drawn and the first load of timber from the Duchande mill marked the plot of land.

He would build Joie’s home without even a pebble of marble. The Acadian-style structure faced north, their bedroom in the southeast corner so Joie could wake up to the morning sun and Itsy, whose running paddock would reach all the way to the bedroom’s French doors. Joie would keep an apple on her bedside table. Tres envisioned her waking up every morning, whistling for Itsy, burying her face in the crook of her neck, and taking small bites out of the apple to feed her beloved mare. In a little rose garden outside his study, the next room over, they’d relax on wrought-iron benches like the ones on Canal, and sip coffee from *demitasse* cups.

A living room on the north side and three other bedrooms would form the perimeter of the house, and a loop of halls would surround the dining room and a huge eat-in kitchen at the center. Tres imagined his children running through the halls like wild bandits. Maybe he and Joie would give chase.

Their bedroom would have its very own flush toilet, and Joie her first closet, where she’d hang dresses sewn from bought cloths next to the selection of peignoir sets she collected—the first one Tres bought at Godchaux’s, and two others from Debbie and Maggie at a surprise wedding party Annette threw for them. His parents had boycotted the event—held in their own home—citing a last-minute need to check on Gatie, who was suffering with gout.

MawMaw and Joie's great aunts and cousins finished her wedding quilt by themselves, none of the Fryoux men laid eyes on a golf club, and the two families would never again meet.

Each Saturday and Sunday for four months after Jules delivered Joie's coop, the Fryoux clan arrived at dawn to build Joie and Tres' home. Tres wanted to dissuade them from leaving their cane cutting, but when he told Joie he worried about their finances if they didn't haul in enough sugarcane, she kissed his cheek and whispered, "It would be worse if they didn't help. Just the way things is."

* * * * *

The second Monday in November, Tres drove Joey, Annette, and Joie to the chambers of the judge he once clerked for. He would have liked to see Joie in a long white gown with a flowing train carried by a few of her little cousins. He would have liked to stand before the altar of their beautiful Catholic cathedral and watch his bride step upon pink rose petals in a slow promenade up the center aisle. He would have liked to hear a great patriarch say, "I do so give," but this was much more sensible, they all agreed. No amount of insane planning would ever please everyone.

Tres was sure it bothered Joie that she hadn't a proper wedding gown, but she seemed happy in the pretty little yellow dress MawMaw had sewn for the crawfish boil. They were both sad that her family couldn't watch them exchange vows, but this was much more sensible, they all agreed. No need to make her family face what should be a happy event with only loving worry on their minds, so they left the judge's chambers without a spray of rice or flower petals, drove to Father Barbier's manse so he could make their marriage a blessed Catholic union, and went directly to the Baton Rouge docks. Tres would have liked to celebrate their nuptials with a

huge feast and all of Joie's kin, but that type of reception would displease too many, they all agreed.

For two weeks, they traveled up and then back down the Mississippi River on the *Belle of New Orleans*. By the time they stepped off in Baton Rouge, all the furnishings they had been purchasing since the family had started building their home were in place, down to sheets on their bed.

* * * * *

Annette picked up the newlyweds from the dock with tears in her eyes.

When Tres hugged her, she burst into tears.

"Annette!" Tres held her back by the shoulders. "What's wrong?"

Annette couldn't say it. Her car wouldn't start when she left school the previous Friday, and a friend had lifted the hood and fiddled with the engine for an hour before deciding he couldn't fix it. He had given her a ride home, and when her mother saw her drive up in the boy's car, she had met Annette at the door.

"What have you done!"

"What do you mean? My car broke down."

"Liar!" She pointed in her daughter's face.

"I wouldn't lie to you, Mother."

"Liar! You've been with that boy!"

Annette's mouth dropped open. "That's not true. He just gave me a ride home."

"Then you would have been home long ago! Do you think any *decent* boy will want you now?"

Aghast at the inference, Annette pleaded, "Mother, *please* believe me!"

“Well, I don’t.” Pacing up and down the foyer while Annette stood in shock, she started nodding, saying, “I told your father you were too young to have that car.”

Annette stood at the doorway with her mouth hanging open, trying not to cry until her mother finished fussing and she could run to her room.

“I told him you’d go off gallivanting and get yourself in trouble.”

“I wouldn’t do that!”

“Then tell me the truth.”

“I *am* telling you the truth—he just gave me a ride home.”

“What if you’re pregnant?”

“Mother, this is crazy—I didn’t do anything bad—I promise!”

Mrs. Duchande slapped her face. “Don’t you *dare* call your own mother *crazy*.” When she kept drilling Annette over and over again, Annette said the only thing she could think of to make it all stop. “I wouldn’t do that with a boy, and anyway, I’m having my monthly.”

“I don’t believe you!” She yanked on Annette’s arm until they reached her bedroom.

She closed the door and pointed toward her daughter’s private part.

“What?”

Her mother wiggled her finger.

“Oh, no, Mother *please*!” She held both shaking palms out. “Mother, please stop this.”

“Up with your dress.”

Annette gingerly raised it and pointed to the thick wad between her legs.

“Come on!”

“Oh God *nooooo*!”

“Down with them.”

Annette froze.

Mrs. Duchande barked, "I'll do it for you!"

She slid down her undies.

Her mother saw the red and left.

All Annette could tell Tres was, "Mother's been especially awful. I'm just so happy you're back. Come on and I'll drive you home."

Sitting next to a silent Annette on the drive, Joie asked, "You sure you're okay?"

"Sure I'm sure. Just missed brother, and you, my new *sister*." She teared up again.

Chapter 27

They stopped to see the Fryoux' on the way home and, whatever their lingering concerns, the family didn't show them, only greeted the couple with warm hugs and kisses. They didn't hear from Tres' parents even after Annette went back home and reported on their return. Nor the following day after Tres went to work as a rancher. Nor a word of dissent when they found out he resigned his position with Wilbert & Sons. Tres didn't want to practice law, didn't want to be a judge, senator, or governor. He would be a horse- and cattleman.

The first night in their new home, Joie gifted Tres with three linen kerchiefs she embroidered with his initials and tiny red roses that represented the St. Teresa novena she so often prayed during their courtship. Tres had nothing for Joie, and told her he was still trying to figure out something special. "I'll know it when I see it."

Joie cooed, "Good, then I'll know your heart is really in it."

Tres came home for lunch every day, except for those times an animal doctor called Joie to research bloodlines or go to a ranch and assist a studhorse or bull to cover a mare or cow more safely than they'd do on their own. She wasn't getting many calls to gentle colts, but Tres thought she seemed to be okay with that.

She had also handled Christmas really well, after opening the house to visitors for supper the night before. Annette dropped in with a beau the Grand Dame introduced her to (he wanted to marry her, but Annette had a hard time believing any man could really love her). The DDR

foreman and Tres' right-hand man, the cowhands, and three shop owners from Plaquemine came by. All their loved ones came by, bringing baskets of fruit and nuts and pies, and salt and bread for health and prosperity. Even Nadine came with a basket of the salty biscuits Tres loved so much, the ones made from MawMaw's recipe.

Everyone except Tres' mother and father dropped in, but Joie seemed truly unaffected. They awoke each morning with smiles on their faces and kissed each other goodnight with the same happiness they carried throughout the day.

Then in February, Tres went to D'Albour's for a sack of fencing nails, and when he exited, he had to drop the heavy sack and run into the street to stop cars and carriages swerving to miss a straggly puppy. Though he searched for anyone who might look to be its owner, or even the poor thing's mother, he knew: *Joie's wedding gift!*

On the way home, he dreamed of the games the puppy would play with his children. He didn't care, and knew Joie wouldn't, that the puppy was about as ugly as a dog could be. She sported the face of a brown bear, the fur of a collie, the chest and shoulders of a hyena, and the tail of a chocolate Labrador. Her rear end was boxy and stooped at the same time, and she didn't resemble any kind of dog he had ever seen.

The puppy crawled up under Tres' chin for the ride, licking him so much that Tres wondered whether she had ever been loved on.

He found Joie fitting fresh sheets on their bed and stood in the doorway with hands behind his back and his lips clamped inside his mouth until Joie looked up. "What—"

She crooked her neck to see around him, but Tres stayed in the doorway. Each time Joie reached out an arm to feel what he was hiding, Tres stepped aside.

The puppy squeaked, and Joie stopped and stood like a statue with her mouth pursed and askew.

Finally, Tres slid the puppy around and placed it in her arms.

“Oh she’s so precious!” Joie couldn’t stop giggling as the puppy now crawled up into her neck and licked her until her whole face was so wet Joie had to wipe it on a sleeve. She held her out from her face, the puppy still flicking its tongue toward Joie’s nose, and looked over to Tres. “Definitely better than those silly kerchiefs you got!”

They named her *Bear*.

In the way a youngster toddles behind her mother-god, it would be Tres that Bear followed everywhere he went. But weeks later, Tres saw a dog with three similar pups crossing the road from the Youth Center to the cathedral with Mr. Flag, the stooped-over little man who swept sidewalks for a living and kept an old red cloth dangling from his back pocket. He pulled out the rag and waved it above his head to signal that he was about to cross a street, as his infirmity, whatever it was, prohibited him from standing up straight or twisting his neck to check for traffic.

Tres’ heart sank. It would break their hearts to give up Bear, but she belonged to Mr. Flag.

* * * * *

When he got home, Tres rushed to Joie like a boy reporting his first home run. “I offered him five dollars for Bear, but he wouldn’t take it! He kept saying, ‘Put that on back in your billfold, Mr. Tres.’ So I was reaching for more money and trying to come up with a good enough explanation why I couldn’t take my wife’s puppy away from her, and he reached his hand over on mine and said, ‘You jess give my pup a right-happy home and we be square.’”

“God, I was so embarrassed, I was going to offer him more and more money until he finally gave in!”

“Poor Tres.” Joie kissed her husband’s cheek.

It took him long seconds to realize what she meant... it was true; it was Tres who couldn’t have tolerated the loss. Bear had secured a permanent station in his heart when she joined his whistling with a sound akin to the bay of a hound that smoked and drank for fifty years—gravelly *awhuuuus* that seemed to extend long past the time her lungs should have collapsed.

When Tres told Joie that Mr. Flag said Bear was born the day they were married, her eyes filled, and Tres vowed he’d never again lie to Joie. It had backfired. He had conjured up the non-fact on his way home, trying to enrich the backstory of their little pup. Tres’ little lie had only served to remind her that she wasn’t pregnant yet.

The following week while hunting, Tres tripped and discharged a round into Bear’s right rear leg. They rushed her to the animal doctor, but Bear lost her leg. *Ahh... my penance*, thought Tres.

He did everything he could to get her to recover. He got MawMaw’s recipe for a poultice and applied them diligently, but infection hindered her recovery, and week after week she lost more weight than he thought a dog could drop and still be alive. Ribs poked out of her thick fur.

Tres couldn’t get her to move around, exercise, anything to keep her from dwindling away. He missed her waddling along in unison to his step and song, couldn’t bear to watch her lay there, hardly eat or drink, and speak not one *awhuuuuu*.

Three weeks into her recovery, while Tres worked in his study, a book slid off the edge of his desk and slammed onto the floor, *POW*, right around the corner from where Bear lay.

She jumped onto all threes, balanced herself almost as if she were born with one-too-few legs, wagged her tail as fast and hard as ever, and smiled shiny whites from her brown bear face.

Tres leaned forward, squinting his eyes really tight—was he seeing right? Bear just stood there, still showing every one of her teeth and whipping her tail at full blast, so Tres lurched at her in one great leap, landing about two feet from her face and pounding his boot heels on the floorboards with a huge thud as he stretched out his arms to where his palms reached to within inches of her face. “Boo!”

Her front legs splayed out, elbows down to the floor, back end balanced on her one leg and pointing straight up at the ceiling, and Tres sprinted into the hall and around the corner out of sight. He stooped low with a hand over his mouth until her nails clicked on the floor nearby, then jumped out and screamed an even louder *BOO!* Off she went on a three-legged dash through the halls that Joie and Tres would from then on refer to as Bear’s dog track.

The game advanced in complexity, and eventually mutated into a variation of hide-and-seek, where Tres crouched behind doors, beds, and anything else he could fit behind, then threw his voice: “*Beeeeaaaaarrrrrr.*” She’d run to find him, he’d jump out and scream *boo*, and she’d take off in her three-legged gallop through the halls only to be shocked again when Tres scared her from a new hiding place.

The way Joie and Tres figured it, the jolting *POW* of the falling book reminded Bear of Tres’ gunshots when they hunted, so in that instant she forgot about her sickly body and reacted how she would have before the accident—she was thrilled with the hunt, and from then on never again acted sick. She was Bear again.

“Now we have our own dog game to teach our children.” Tres clapped his hands, calling, “Come on, Bear,” and she followed him outside.

“And we’ll buy them their very own brand-new Buster Brown paint books,” Joie shouted after them.

“And I’ll buy the tiniest dungarees ever made for the boys, and the frilliest lace dresses for the girls. And we’ll teach them pasture-tag and boy-dog-boat.” He started humming, his penance now transmuted into legacy. *Awhuuuuu.*

Chapter 28

When October rolled around again, Tres helped Joie craft tiny papier-mâché horses for take-home gifts after his birthday party. The day before his birthday, he ground vegetables and crawfish tails for MawMaw to stuff into head shells for bisque, and spread apart blackberry vines so Joie could reach in without scratching herself and pick only the sweetest, juiciest for the cobbler he loved.

On the morning of his birthday, he left early to brand new calves in the south pasture, and at dusk, anxious to get home so he could eat crawfish bisque and celebrate with friends and family, he dragged tired legs toward home only to find an immense white tent at the bottom of the hill behind the mansion—it shaded over a hundred townies and some of Tres’ college friends who traveled all the way from Hammond and New Orleans.

A Blues trio played under a smaller tent. Fountains flowed with giant arcs of champagne. Massive spits turned sides of beef and whole piglets. A bright red convertible sported a *WE LOVE YOU!* banner.

And Tres did feel loved. He dusted off his shirt and pants and started looking for Joie

One after the next, Tres went to his guests, “Do you know where Joie is?” “Have you seen Joie?” No one had. *Sweet Jesus, noooo...*

He ran inside and picked up the telephone. It rang once, then again, and again. He was about to set the earpiece on its cradle when he heard her beaming *hellooo*.

Afraid to ask, he said, “Joie,” then paused while he tried to figure out his next words.

“Tres! Hi! Are you coming home soon? I can’t wait.”

“Joie, uh, I, I’ll be home before you know it.”

“All right.”

“Joie?”

“Yeah, honey?”

“I love you.” It was all he could think to say.

“How sweet. I love you immensely, honey. Come home soon, okay?”

“Soon.” He rested the earpiece, slowly, letting the news register for a long moment.

Once he figured out the perfect words to reprimand his mother for such a blatant, disrespectful, and downright horrid thing to do, he ground his teeth and set out and down the hill to find his mother and pushed through the crowd oblivious to their well wishes.

When his mother caught a glimpse of him, she raised her glass. “To the heir to the Duchande legacy!”

The crowd raised their glasses. “Hoorah!”

He pushed on through.

The men slapped his back. “Happy Birthday!” The women kissed his cheek.

He’s A Jolly Good Fellow rang out, and the crowd sang.

He couldn’t think of what to say. He mumbled what he’d so often heard about the measure of a man is his friends, thinking about those other friends a few hundred yards away, the newest but closest he ever had. They expected him to walk through the door at any minute, but here was an immense gathering and he didn’t think it would be right to leave—with or without an explanation. He did nothing, just stood stiff-backed at his mother’s side.

When she wrapped an arm around his neck for a kiss on the cheek, he whispered, “Damn you,” in her ear. She froze only for the slightest moment, pushed back to face her son, and gave him a bat of her eyes and a hurtful *Who, me?* look.

She morphed her face into a blank expression as quickly, Tres was sure, as she realized the crowd was all-eyes-on, and held her hand out to usher in his father, who squeezed Tres’ hand and shook it hard and fast enough to display his exuberance.

It took almost an hour for the guests to pass through the reception line, a whole slew of them saying *look, he’s flabbergasted* or *don’t look so shocked, it’s your twenty-fifth!* Tres wanted to scream at each and every one: *Mother didn’t invite my own wife!*

Toward the end of the line, Carroll Devillier and wife Eileen stepped up. He shook Carroll’s hand, and when he hugged Eileen, whispered, “I’ll need you in a few minutes. Meet me at the champagne fountain?”

Carroll and Eileen were refilling their glasses as Tres approached.

To their raised brows, he answered, “It’s Joie.”

“What’s wrong, Tres, did something happen?”

Still, he couldn’t find his words.

Eileen nudged them away from the crowd. “What is it?”

“She’s not here,” he finally spit out.

“What do you mean, she’s not here? Did you two get in a fight?”

“No, it’s not that.”

Eileen and Carroll stared at Tres for long seconds, and when Tres’s eyes glazed over, Carroll shook his head. “You don’t mean to say—”

Tres swallowed hard. “She’s home with our own party, probably doesn’t even know about all this.”

Eileen’s eyes narrowed but she and Carroll’s surprise lasted only a moment.

Carroll mumbled, “Your *mother*.”

After Tres and Joie had returned from their honeymoon, Carroll and Eileen had been the only Highlanders to welcome Joie into their lives.

“Carroll, go get the car.” Eileen pulled on Tres’ elbow. “Let’s get over there.”

“No, Ei. Wait a minute.”

Carroll grabbed Tres’ other arm. “Tres, we have to go.”

“No.” Tres pulled himself free. “I mean, yes, but, really, let’s not run out of here and make a big commotion. Let’s see. Just let me think a second.”

Carroll and Eileen stood motionless but for Carroll’s tapping foot.

“Wait here,” Tres finally announced. “Let me find Annette.”

Five minutes later, the four casually strolled down the long drive until they were out of view, then took to a brisk pace until they reached the Devilliers’ Ford.

Tres sat in the back seat, simmering on why he had stayed so long at his mother’s party, why he was content to be rude and let those he thought most of wait on him rather than leave the party immediately after he found out what his mother had done. What would happen when Joie found out? Wasn’t this one more example of his cowardice, same as when he stayed at that engagement breakfast? Would Joie’s commitment to her vows be strong enough to keep her in the marriage, not boot him out again if he kept up this kind of behavior?

But then his beautiful, loving wife kissed him hello, and his friends and new family hugged him, kissed his cheek, and made his world right again.

That night as he closed the door behind the last of his visitors, he realized that the deserved self-recrimination he felt only hours earlier had vanished. One more example of how he went on about his days like he'd done nothing wrong.

The following morning, it occurred to Tres that Joie hadn't even asked what had delayed him so long, or even how Carroll and Eileen showed up. He watched Joie study the flowers in the garden beyond his library, how she checked each one and pinched their heads, then cut their stems with the pocketknife she regularly swiped from his bedside table. The sun framed her in apricot, tangerine, and strawberry as it rose behind her and passed through her white cotton dress. He studied the curve of her hips, her jutting nipples. What would she say when she found out that he kept her waiting while he attended a party she wasn't invited to? He had to figure out a way to tell her, but still hadn't later that afternoon when they shopped at D'Albour's and Renee appeared.

Joie had walked toward the back of the store to select a new set of kitchen knives, and Tres stood at the counter talking crops and weather with Mr. D'Albour when Renee flung open the door. With a great swoop of skirting, she walked straight over, reached up to a stiff Tres to plant a kiss on his cheek, and started talking about how good it was to see him again, and "...shame on you. You didn't let me give you even one single dance for your birthday. It was a lovely party—your mother always did know how to throw a big bash."

Joie stood only twenty feet away. Renee flicked a glance her way just long enough to let Tres know she saw her, then looked back at Tres. She lifted her chin, proclaimed, "Anyway, it was lovely to see you again so soon," and winked at him before she turned and left with a toothless grin that made Tres cringe.

Joie stepped up to the counter with neither a frown nor a smile and handed over the knives without looking at him. She was probably trying to be nice, and not reprimand him for his ill deeds, so he paid for the knives and looked down at them thinking *how apropos*. He was starting to hate how women knew exactly how to slice him down to size... benign expressions... hands on hips...

Mr. D'Albour wrapped the knives in brown paper and handed them over, and Tres held the door open for his wife without saying a word. As they turned to walk back to Tres' new car, Joie slipped an arm through his. How could she act like she was okay? Did she already know about the party?

"Did you hear the music? You knew about the party?"

Joie patted his hand. "Of course, honey."

When Tres thought about it later, he figured Annette had known all along about Joie's party, too. When he had found Annette and told her they had to get over to his house, she had followed without question—didn't ask why, didn't ask what was going on. Tres was too wrapped up in his own consternation to notice.

They had walked into Joie's party, hugged and kissed everyone there, drank blackberry wine and beer, sucked out stuffed crawfish heads and gorged on cobbler floating in cream until after midnight, and no one had said a word about what was happening on the hill behind the mansion. In the morning, he had retrieved his car for the trip to D'Albour's and simply told Joie, "Birthday present."

Tres wished he had told Joie about the depth of his confusion. Their conversation the day of the announcement party had gone a long way, but he wished he had told her more from the core of his soul, how he wanted to live in a vacuum with her, that what he should have done was

change the world around them. He wanted to remake the world into what it was when they were children and stowed away from the rest of the world at Quilted Bay. He wanted to share the secrets that haunted him—Joie had tried to coax them out of him but they were too big and all he wanted was to run away with her and think happy thoughts. He wanted to daydream about them sitting under the trees in the pecan grove when she taught him the French alphabet and numbers; about how her ponytail reminded him of a marionette that bobbed and danced when she giggled; about how he treasured her even then.

But he was a coward. As much as he had learned about the ways of love within families and between man and wife, as much as he thought he had matured enough to stand up to his parents, he still hadn't the wisdom or sensitivity to recognize the imperative of overcoming his cowardice during the most daunting states of affair. When he should have been facing his problems down, he escaped into the emotions of joy that shut out the rest of the world. Now he had yet again been betrayed by this mother, but rather than truly consider her betrayal and recognize it as a call to action, he shook his head over yet another example of poor manners from the queen of propriety.

* * * * *

The Monday after he and Joie ran into Renee at D'Albour's, while Tres sat with his father in the library working out employee schedules, his mother walked in, refilled their coffee cups, and announced, "Renee said she saw you in town."

Tres said nothing.

When she continued with, "You know that was rude of you to leave your party," he remained silent and she left the room.

Chapter 29

Days before Tres' birthday, Joie had summoned the courage to invite her Highland friends to the party she planned. Now that she had a telephone, she could call Debbie and Maggie, who had telephones in their bedrooms. She asked Debbie if she and Maggie could meet her for a visit at Quilted Bay. Could sneak away to her party without being spotted?

"Oh," Maggie had said. "I already got Mrs. Duchande's invitation."

"Me too," Debbie said.

"Oh." Joie recovered quickly. "Well, this is for *after* her party... just... prolly be better not to mention it to anybody if you can come—that is—if you're not too tired. And if you don't have to ride with your family to DDR."

"Oh, if we do," Maggie pleaded, "will you forgive us for not coming?"

"Yes, please say you will," Debbie begged.

"Of course I will." She grabbed her friends' hands and squeezed them. "You just come if you can. Don't get yourselves in trouble."

The girls hadn't attended Joie's party, but they didn't attend Mrs. Duchande's either, telephoning Joie early in the morning while she was still baking long trays of cobbler, saying, "We didn't want to go to the big party if we couldn't go to yours... and, well, what a mess... so we're going shopping in New Orleans instead."

Debbie and Maggie's absence hadn't bothered Joie—it was to be expected, just as her mother-in-law's antics. Joie had bigger problems to worry about.

Too much time had passed without becoming pregnant. Each month when she received the glaring reminder, she became more and more afraid about what might happen to her husband's love if she couldn't provide him with an heir. Also the prospect of Mrs. Duchande having one more tool to turn Tres against her.

But the fear didn't simmer much longer. Two weeks later, old Doctor Spedale confirmed that she was pregnant. Joie fussed at herself for having fallen into that crazy trap she had found herself in when she and Tres first started seeing each other, when her mind apprised her of every possible negative outcome for their relationship.

She bought lace and commenced the grand task of sewing a Christening gown. Tres began combing through all of Baton Rouge for the frilliest baby dresses (he was convinced their first child would be a girl).

MawMaw started crocheting booties but never finished the second one.

The cramping came suddenly and it went suddenly.

Joie passed the slick clod that would have been her husband's heir. Dr. Spedale told her she couldn't be a mother.

Old fears drew Joie more and more deeply into inconsolable grief. When Tres tried to brighten her mood with flowers or horse-talk, it now annoyed her. When he said, "Everything'll be fine. You just wait and see," she knew he lied. Everything would definitely *not* be fine. She knew it wouldn't.

When she cried too long and couldn't seem to control her emotions, she'd walk to her lingerie drawer to look at a note she wrote to herself the morning after her miscarriage: *Not yet*

doesn't mean never. She repeated to herself, *just let time pass*, and thought about the teacup story, with PawPaw's voice saying *Not Yet*. But all of that was before Dr. Spedale's pronouncement.

* * * * *

As Tres and Joie's first anniversary approached, Joie dreaded its coming, finding it unimaginable that she wouldn't spoil it with tears, and that their memory of this special, so important, first anniversary would be marred forever.

On the eve of their anniversary, Joie was so exhausted from worry that she didn't fall asleep until near daybreak. Before she could push her eyelids open, the musky perfume of coffee warmed her insides. She heard the muffled voices of her family and opened her eyes to her favorite scene in the world—the pasture that was Itsy's home, just beyond her French doors. A breeze tickled the light cotton sheet that lay across her midriff and, contented by the sights and sounds of her life, she set a goal to feel better by spring, thinking *March winds blow in April showers grow May flowers*.

Bear ran in through the French doors, jumped up onto the stool that Tres made for her because she couldn't jump very high with only one back leg, and hopped up onto the bed. She and Joie played their game of *no, don't you kiss me, no, you'd better not—I can't believe I let an animal live in my house! Nooo...* a game in which Joie partially hid her face in the pillows and turned side to side as Bear jumped over her head back and forth trying to lick her face.

A minute later, Tres snuck in with a cup of coffee and a biscuit. He kissed her on the forehead, walked over to the wardrobe, bent deeply at the knee, and pushed aside silk stockings until he found what was nestled beneath.

Sitting beside Joie on the bed, he held out a flat item about ten inches in diameter, wrapped in layers of sheer lace. Joie scooted up on her pillows, her smile almost as big as Tres', and started unwinding a delicate French shawl she had seen displayed on a canvas mannequin in the window of a boutique on Main Street when they had shopped for Christmas gifts. The intricacy of its spider-web thread had halted Joie in step, and she had awed over it.

As she uncoiled the final layers, she lay it across her chest, saying *oooooh* to its softness when a string of dried flowers slipped out.

"Remember? It's that bracelet you gave me. I pressed it in *Moby Dick*." He pulled out his kerchief.

Then Joie saw what seemed to be words inscribed on a round of wood.

"I sliced it from the end of the pecan tree we leaned against when the butterflies swarmed—remember, the one we carved our initials on?"

Joie ran her fingers along the glossy varnished wood. "It's so beautiful."

"It's a bible verse I remember from catechism. I heard in again at Mass that day you... stayed in bed."

"I remember that day." Joie touched his hand. "You were kneeling right there." She pointed. "Like you were praying. Your eyes were closed and you were holding my hand over your face, and kissing my palm."

"I started this the very next day."

At the top of the plaque, Tres had carved *Song of Songs*—the book of King Solomon's most beloved songs—in tall, slanted letters with swirls and loops:

How beautiful you are, my darling!

Oh, how beautiful!
Your eyes are doves.
Like a lily among thorns
is my darling among maidens.

You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride;
You have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes,
One jewel of your necklace.
How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride.

The kerchief he put to Joie's eyes was one of the three she had gifted him for their wedding. "We can adopt. Or I can be just as happy without children."

When Joie looked into her husband's eyes, she saw a strong man who meant what he said. But what she so loved about him—his sensitivity, his caring—also made him susceptible to the innuendo he would surely hear from his mother and her gang: How can she be the right girl for Tres if she can't give him a child?

Stop thinking like that! For now, she had to trust him. She *had* to.

Chapter 30

On Christmas Eve, Joie and Tres joined his parents and sister at the mansion for supper. Mrs. Duchande had decorated the house in grand style, as always, with garland and wreaths and red velvet draped all over the place, and a tree in the foyer that reached more than halfway up to the forty-foot ceiling. They sat in the library among stacks of boxes, including the many that Joie and Tres brought for his family. The only gift given to Joie was one from Annette. Tres didn't think Joie cared—she barely spoke to anyone, but that was surely because of her sadness over the miscarriage, plus his mother's morbid talk about the storm that hit Miami on the first of December.

“People all the way to Tampa died... a house collapsed on three men... one woman was disemboweled by a tree limb... fifty men were injured or killed when their bunkhouse collapsed.” She kept her gaze on Tres, never her husband, her daughter, or Joie. “Seven people died on one boat that sank, then there was a tug, and a barge, and a big ship with thirty people, and, oh, did you hear about those poor souls on that yacht? Five million dollars, that storm cost. And it wasn't even a hurricane. *Can you believe?*”

Tres stayed no more than an arms-length from Joie, and though she had remained quiet, even when they got back home, at least she hadn't cried.

He wanted to find a way to help her feel better, so in mid-January, frilly baby dresses now gifted to young peninsula mothers and MawMaw's unfinished booties stowed out of sight, Tres visited Mother Catherine.

That night, lying beside Joie and holding her hand, he whispered, "Mother Catherine wants us to talk to Father Barbier about getting a baby through the Church."

Joie pulled her hand away. "I wish everyone would stop talking about babies! It only makes me think about being barren!"

He should have known better. When Cousin Alice had visited and told Joie that miscarriages were a matter of *God's Will* and she had done nothing wrong, Joie had scolded the old woman. "What does that matter? You think that *soothes* me?"

Then MawMaw had told him Joie wanted her to stop babying her and keep Cousin Alice away because, "I don't need a midwife reminding me I'll never need one!"

For the next three days, Tres worked in the fields and picked wildflowers for Joie on the way home, but after the third presentation of flowers, Joie kissed him on the cheek without her usual exuberance and walked to the kitchen to exchange the positions of dishes and drinking glasses in the cupboard. Since the miscarriage, Joie had rearranged living room furniture, swapped out spare-bedroom armoires, painted porch rockers a different shade of white, and ridden to Plaquemine at least once each week to ask the animal doctor for work. Tres watched Joie's restlessness swell week after week, watched her frown more than smile, and busy herself with mundane tasks.

To figure out how to get Joie's mind off the miscarriage, he rode Cliché to Quilted Bay and lay on Ariat's old quilt to chew on a long stem of nut sedge while he chewed on Joie's

sadness. Was he making her feel worse than she already did. Had pushed her too quickly too hard.

He had believed his own words when he told Joie they could adopt and be happy, but was his intention of saying it to comfort Joie pure—or maybe rooted in his own need to convince himself.

He left Quilted Bay an hour later and rode to Plaquemine, excited to arrange the new distraction he planned. A week later, he presented Joie with two train tickets to Charleston and an invitation to the costume ball of Mrs. Charles Drayton, V. He brought pictures of a costume he thought she'd like, the one he arranged for his mother's seamstress to sew.

When he held out the tickets to Joie, thinking this might give her something fun to look forward to, he was still a little worried that his wife wouldn't like the idea of spending the party season away from her family.

"Oh, how fun!" Joie clapped her hands and stamped her feet the way she did when she ate a meal she really liked.

Tres didn't expect her to be so thrilled. "Then going to Charleston is okay?"

"Why not? And me as *La Pucelle d'Orléans*!" She clapped again.

"And the costume is okay?"

"It's perfect! *Jeanne d'Arc* was a peasant girl, sort of like me!"

Still amazed at Joie's enthusiasm, he admitted, "I was thinking about how you had those visions."

"Well, she was burned at the stake for that." Joie giggled.

"True," he laughed, "But she's a saint now."

Running her fingers along the picture, Joie asked, "So what would you be?"

Tres shrugged. “Haven’t figured that out yet.”

“Well, you have to be Callixtus III. He’s the pope that saved her reputation. It’s perfect!”

Tres couldn’t close his mouth from amazement that his plan worked so well. “Oh sure, me as a pope. Good thing we’ll be in Charleston. M’Maw and P’Paw and your father won’t be able to stop making the sign of the cross if they find out I’m being disrespectful to a pope.” Though he laughed at the idea, both he and Joie knew they would not be showing the outfits to the family.

The strategy worked well until two days before they left for Charleston and Tres picked up the completed costumes. When they tried them on, Tres’ fit perfectly, but Joie’s hung off her shoulders like a burlap sack.

“That damn seamstress!” His mother certainly her hand in this.

Joie threw her head back in laughter. “Don’t be so serious,” she insisted. “M’Maw can fix it.”

“But then everyone’ll find out I’m going to impersonate a pope!”

“It won’t be that bad, I don’t think.” She patted Tres on the back. “Listen, let’s let your mother and her old hag of a seamstress think they ruined it for us. When we get back, we won’t give hint. We’ll just smile and hope they get reports back from Charleston about how good we looked.”

“Better yet, we’ll sit for a photograph and put it in one of her albums!” Tres kissed Joie and drove her to the peninsula to find MawMaw.

When the old woman only laughed at Joie’s costume and nodded at Tres’, the couple thought they were home free—until five days later, when they walked into the ballroom of Mrs.

Drayton's elegant old Charleston mansion, and had to catch their breath. Tres' parents stood at the far end of the room beside Renee, Mr. and Mrs. Wilbert, and Mrs. LeBlanc.

In South Carolina, LeBlancs, Wilberts, and Duchandes held no particular stature, and the way Tres figured it, his parents, the Grand Dame, and the Wilberts were all dupes in accepting Mrs. Drayton's invitation. The Drayton family was one of Carolina governors and congressmen since the American Revolution, and though the family's original home, Drayton Hall (the oldest standing plantation in the country), lay beside North Carolina's Ashley River, the world of Charleston claimed the family as native. A chasm between *Charlestonians* and those who seasonally or even year-round *resided* in Charleston existed in a somewhat similar manner as Highlanders tolerated Lowlanders: Charlestonians needed someone to superior over. They were all rich, they were all beautiful, and they all had pedigree, but a caste system existed even among those who considered themselves aristocrats. To Charlestonians, even a poor Charlestonian was better than any outsider, but Tres knew the Highlanders across the room could never think of themselves as an underclass to *anyone*.

Mrs. Drayton, an English Lady whose husband and ancestors fought injustice through their governmental positions, felt differently from other Charlestonians. Such a fine lady was too gracious to submit to the vulgarities of banal prejudice, but it amused Tres to think of how the group across the room thought the other Charlestonians considered them their equals.

"Do you want to stay?" Tres asked, unsure if he wanted to be there.

"What, and miss this chance to show them their plan didn't work?" Joie let out a single, "Ha!"

"So you *do* believe Mother conspired with the seamstress? I thought you had laughed it off."

“Oh, I knew it all right.” Joie chortled. “I just thought it was funny, and I was already thinking about how they’d be so flustered when they found out we could fix everything. This is better though.”

Tres lifted his head, threw back his shoulders in pride, and escorted his wife through the reception line. When they reached their hostess, Tres bowed, Joie curtsied, and Mrs. Drayton shook their hands and smiled more graciously than Tres’ mother would ever think to do.

The couple slipped into a crowd away from Tres’ parents, but soon noticed the entourage shifting a sly inch or two here, a step there, until they stood ten feet away. Tres and Joie held their ground and watched the migration, elbowing each other and giggling with each move until Joie pulled Tres behind a column and whispered, “Listen.” She pointed to a man dressed as Louis XIV approaching Mrs. LeBlanc.

“Hello, Madame, may I present myself? LeBlanc, Henri LeBlanc, ma’am.” The words slid off the man’s lacquered tongue like butter on a hot biscuit.

The old lady bent into a shallow curtsy and said, “Sir.”

He said, “My honor, ma’am.”

She said, “Sir, *LeBlanc*, certainly we share ancestors?”

“My loss, Mrs. LeBlanc, as I am from the Monroe LeBlancs,”

Mrs. LeBlanc offered her hand for the honor of their shared surname, affording him the stature of her own lineage.

“Tres,” Joie whispered, “that’s *Le Serpent*! Remember?”

Tres’ eyes bulged out. “*That’s* your *cousin*?”

“Yeeeee.” Joie snickered. “Look, they like him! They’re all shaking his hand!”

Tres had met Henri's grandparents one afternoon when they visited MawMaw and PawPaw. They had cried because Henri sold his dead mother's ruby ring and went to New Orleans to buy fancy clothes so he could finagle his way into the bedroom of some old lady who bequeathed her Esplanade house to him.

Henri's grandmother had said, "He bragged on how everybody felt sorry for him, thinkin' he was so sad when he was just spendin' his nights in Storyville. Said he needed to go on and fill his days wit' gentleman work."

Her husband had handed her his kerchief when hers got soggy, then he had patted her on the shoulder and told how Henri had slithered in and out of their businesses and bank accounts and left New Orleans with a modest fortune made from selling a thousand percent of a nonexistent cotton gin.

"What do we do?" Joie tugged the pellegrina of Tres' cassock toward the group, saying, "Come on, we need to warn them."

"Ooooooh, no." Tres pulled back and shook his head. "They're on their own."

"But he'll steal their money, you know he will."

"Maybe. But you know what'll happen if you say you know him."

When Joie didn't respond, he added, "Trust me," and led her off in the opposite direction.

* * * * *

For the remainder of the evening and through the next day, Joie frowned at the suggestion that they not warn Tres' family, but her husband was right. Having contemplated long and hard about his advice on the distinction between good guilt and bad, she needed to trust and believe in him now more than ever. If they told the ladies about Henri, they would wave them off with an *I'm sure this would be a different LeBlanc, my dears*. If they told Tres' father, he would tell the

women. And even if they somehow managed to convince them of the man's true identity, to disclose that Joie had a scoundrel for a cousin would only fuel their thriving sense of supremacy over cheating and lying Lowlanders.

They stepped away from the red ant pile. They would watch as the Highlanders flocked to the smooth gentleman they thought they met. They would watch them invite him into their social clubs, civic organizations, liturgical groups, and banking boards. They would not interject their two cents worth, but rather would let the Highlanders find out for themselves that Henri had returned to his family in the pinelands of North Louisiana after his success in New Orleans and used those stolen funds to buy that plantation he bragged about.

Of the options available, Tres and Joie chose to feel guilty later rather than invite trouble now.

Chapter 31

Prior to the ball, Joie hadn't seen Henri since he had lived in New Orleans and paid a visit to her grandparents. Henri would now avoid the Fryoux clan for fear of being associated with his poor relations, but did he know Joie had married into the Duchande Highlanders? Had his grandmother told him? Did he even know to be cautious of being found out?

When Joie returned from the ball, she went to PawPaw. She reached out for his hand before lifting her head to face him. "Am I doing the right thing by remaining silent about Henri?"

PawPaw shook his head in his slow, thoughtful way, and told her to keep her nose out of the man's business. "Ain' your place to get y'self mixed up wit' people don' want you there."

* * * * *

By Easter, Henri LeBlanc had relocated to Baton Rouge. He took a Capitol Hotel suite overlooking the Mississippi River, and by virtue of Mrs. LeBlanc's acceptance and the precedent it set, local society welcomed Henri into their private circle. He acquired candidacy as a husband to the more homely of Mrs. LeBlanc's debutantes though he was older than any by more than twenty years (evidenced by straggly silver temples), and gained access to the inner sanctum of South Louisiana's elite. His name appeared on invitations to coming-out parties, he showed up at American Legion functions in Plaquemine, and he sipped tea each afternoon with a different female.

Though Joie heard about his comings and goings, Henri hadn't been on her mind much when she missed her time of the month. After the second miss and the onset of breast sensitivity, she started to believe in the miracle. Still, she told Tres and MawMaw only once she could no longer hide it.

The pregnancy cured the depression that had possessed Joie's natural, God-given instinct to strive for happiness during the months since her miscarriage, a time when she didn't even want to *want* to be happy. Joy had proved to be elusive for any period more than a few days at a time.

Another spring came and went, and Joie's belly grew so big that Bear didn't have a lap to sit on. Early mornings, when she jumped up on Joie's bed to play their *little animal that lives in my house* game, Joie could no longer roll over face down to allow Bear to jump from side to side, so Bear started sitting on the bed beside Joie. She'd lift a single paw and rest it on Joie's belly, occasionally stretching out her neck to sniff at Joie's inside-out belly button. It was the cutest thing in the world, but Tres and Joie had to be careful not to chuckle too hard and rock the bed. A little tripod sitting on her lop-sided rump, when Bear's sense of balance failed, she timbered, slowly, slowly, until she picked up momentum and crashed down sideways.

After Mrs. Duchande learned of Joie's pregnancy, Joie and Tres observed a reticence in her behavior, seeming, they hoped, to signal her fatigue in the battle to oust Joie. She didn't mention a *de la* or *Lowlander* (normally the word seemed to jump off her tongue like a grasshopper on a hot griddle).

As Joie neared the end of her term, her mother-in-law insisted that Tres dine with her and "Bring Joie a plate of leftovers." It didn't get lost on Joie that the term *leftovers*, in the mind of Mrs. Duchande, originated from the extra foods cooked for house slaves.

When Tres refused, she had Nadine cook some meals and bring them over to Tres and Joie's house.

Without the undertow of Mrs. Duchande's shenanigans, Tres took on a relaxed repose Joie hadn't seen since her miscarriage.

They took time for long strolls, extended afternoon picnics and love making at Quilted Bay, and three-day excursions to New Orleans, where, each time they arrived, Joie found gifts stacked all around the marble fireplace of their favorite Royal Sonesta suite, all set up in the way of that long-ago night after Joie graduated and Tres persuaded her family to allow Joie to stay one last night at Mrs. Sabine's Young Ladies Home, when her father saw his mother's purse-lipped, brow flagging *I have spoken*, reminding him of his place in the family order.

Maybe MawMaw had been a bit of a tart in her younger days? But, no. This was just one more example of her grandmother's contradictions—same as when she allowed Joie to say *heck* but prohibited the wearing of pants. Maybe her grandmother was trying to adjust to modern time? Joie often labored over her ancestors' change in station, how they had once lived a life wherein *noblesse oblige* defined their level of humanity, but with time and the loss of belongings and position as they repeatedly fled from the British, the family became those to whom Highlanders' unchristian charity was directed. The thought tore Joie's heart. Everywhere they looked, Highlanders saw them and hated what they saw. When the sight of their existence became too uncomfortable, that was when they helped. It was a munificent enough thing to do, to let a poor man shine your boot when not necessary; to pay your nigriss' five-year-old son to run a message up the road when a telephone sits beside you; to allow an old man to sharpen your gardener's shears more often than necessary.

Tres extended gratuities to Joie's family in a large though subtle manner—a new calf in the spring, a piglet in the winter, a bolt of cotton fabric in the summer. He disguised his efforts, making charity into courtesy. *The sow birthed too large a litter...* hogs easily care for many piglets. *The calf's mother died...* the Duchandes owned many milking cows. *The cloth left from making their maid's apron...* they provided an entire bolt for the sewing of a single apron.

Tres' compassionate use of veils always left the recipient's pride intact, yet, despite his abundant generosity, his search for humbleness never gave him rest. Neither did it help his conscience that he inwardly acknowledged the gifts' monetary value, as so many of them became dollars that the Fryoux' neither could nor would have accepted directly: they auctioned piglets at the stockyards once fattened, a calf improved the quality of their stock and amended its propagation, extra cloth became saleable clothing.

Joie and her family's gratitude for the acts and methods was immeasurable yet unspoken. To express thanks would be to admit that the item was a gift, and such unveiling was contrary to the whole purpose of the process.

Joie reveled in Tres' efforts, but when she praised his bigheartedness, he looked away and told her, "You think too much of the Highlanders. We only do it because we get brag value."

Joie thought his slant often made sense. Often not.

Perplexed, she countered, "But you don't brag. You don't tell anyone. I only find out from M'Maw. So if you don't tell anyone what you did, don't you think it's a good Christian deed?"

"No." Tres shook his head again. "Even when we give anonymously, we do it because of how good it makes *us* feel."

“Tres, if that’s how it is, then none of us practice truly Christian charity. Everybody feels good when they give. You’re saying none of us can claim we are Christian in our giving unless we don’t feel good about it.”

He looked up into the sky for a moment before turning a grin at Joie. “That’s where the true definition of Christianity is found. The true test is whether you perform the act because it makes you feel good in the giving, or because you know it makes God happy, and your happiness derives from His glorification.”

That was the bottom line, the absolute foundation of the unfaltering truth in Tres’ goodness—one that, until then, Joie had never been able to put into words even in her own mind. He was unquestionably a good man, but why had she always been convinced he was an exceptional man, higher and above other good men? The answer was a knowing that lived inside her, one unexplainable in man’s intellect. It resided in her heart’s ability to recognize the beauty in Tres. Intuitively, Joie’s heart experienced the essence of Tres’ soul, and Tres lived in that existence more than other good men—he was an exception.

* * * * *

Though she loved her husband’s principles and had faith in his goodness, Joie continued to question their morals. They had told Annette about Henri’s background, and when she overheard her mother and Mrs. LeBlanc discussing how they and Mrs. Boudreaux invested some of their parents’ estate money in a new business with Henri, Annette rushed to tell her brother and sister-in-law.

“And he comes to the ranch all the time,” Annette reported. “Twice on Friday afternoons after classes let out, I came home for the weekend and he was there.”

Henri visited Tres' mother for brunch, dinner twice each month while Tres and Mr. Duchande attended town meetings, and often for afternoon tea when the men weren't on the ranch. Mrs. LeBlanc and Mrs. Boudreaux never attended these meetings, and Tres and Joie giggled with secret imaginings that maybe Mrs. Dominique Duchande, II was having a sexual relationship with this man, whom she and her friends were so anxious to visit with and do business with, using their own private money away from their husbands' scrutiny. It was knee-slapping hilarious to think of what Tres' mother would do if it were ever found out that she was unfaithful to the Duchande name with any man at all, let alone a man who shared the same blood as the slut her son had sex with.

Chapter 32

Mrs. Duchande did everything she could to make *it* disappear.

The first baby had died after two months and she was overjoyed that her son's wife couldn't provide the heir Tres so deserved and desired. She saw an end to Tres' unruly, disobedient years. Neither *it*, nor any of its kind, would ever bear the proud Duchande name, ever become the new prince of the Duchande legacy. When she found out about the second pregnancy, she made sure *it* wouldn't be born. *That whore will soon be out of my life...* she steeled her mind to hold those words unspoken. This most recent *it* would remain only an *it*, same as the first. With a little careful management, *it* would become the final wedge between her son and his whore.

She cursed *it* in utero.

As soon as her husband left for the Natchez train early one morning, she changed into the black dress and hat she wore to funerals—the hat with a veil that covered her face. To Nadine's raised eyebrows, she said nothing, only got in her car and sped off. South. South for three hours down the skinny road that led through the deep delta to the tip of Louisiana. Isle de Jean Charles.

She stopped her car at an old, faded sign that hung askew off a single nail: *Madam Laveau*.

She walked inside to see a woman wearing an African print robe in a dark room. The woman rose to her feet with outstretched arms. A black ghost.

Mrs. Duchande followed the woman, the strongest of the vodoun, out her back door to a lean-to, where she squatted in the dirt beside a low fire. She pointed to an overturned wash tub for her guest.

From a rusty coffee can she withdrew bones and stones, shuffled them in her palms, tossed them into the dirt.

She rubbed her chin. She reached for a figurine and lit a black candle. “For you hat pin.”

Mrs. Duchande held it over the fire.

“The Devil’s Flame!” Madam Laveau chanted and handed over the moss-stuffed figurine.

Mrs. Duchande pierced the abdomen, inserting it ever so slowly, prodding, burning, gutting the *it* in effigy while strange, indecipherable sounds flowed singsong from the lips of a queen who, for two silver dollars, was happy to curse the most innocent of innocents with her black art.

Dominique Duchande III would re-marry, put this whole sordid relationship with a common Lowlander behind him, and start anew with a proper girl. There’d be plenty of time to have children, she’d tell her son, plenty of time once he polished the thin layer of tarnish off his reputation and reentered society. The town loved Tres, after all. He was a hero, a gentleman, sweet and caring. That was how he fell victim to the Lowlander’s charms—his sensitivities left him soft and vulnerable. But now he’d fall in love with a proper girl, one who would fill his days with proper social activities, his nights with propriety. She would come from a good family

with a suitable name, properties, a reputation strong enough to support his political ambitions, a lineage befitting of the Duchande name.

Mrs. Duchande had done everything she could, short of poisoning Joie Fryoux. The thought had entered her mind back when Renee's plan hadn't prevented Tres from marrying. So much fun when she telephoned Renee to intercept him in town, especially when Joie was with him. But then, she could always come up with a new plan.

Surely, the Fryoux clan would decline an invitation to an announcement party at the Grand Dame's. Then Tres had been putty, had provided the perfect excuse not to invite the Fryoux tribe at all, and she could avoid another crazy day like that crawfish boil.

When she told Renee about her plan, the girl had asked, "Can you find out when she won't be home? We'll have it then! We'll send an invitation to her house instead of Hammond!"

Oh! They had such a laugh after he left the announcement party!

Even the little attempts to force miscues, like the lemon cookies, hadn't worked. As Joie bit into one, Mrs. Duchande had imagined it coated with arsenic rather than powdered sugar.

But Mrs. Duchande was too respectable to risk being caught committing a crime. She was a proper lady, after all, wife of the wealthiest rancher in the parish, her father a prominent physician, her mother a strong woman who taught her everything she needed to know, be, think, say, all things essential to assure her success as the town's first lady, the mother of a Louisiana governor. Then that girl had stepped in and tried to ruin what she had worked out so carefully. That Cajun, backwoods girl, dark-haired, full-bodied, a menace. Her miscarriage was a necessity.

Mrs. Duchande's work was now almost done. She should have ruined the family long ago, shouldn't have let things deteriorate so far, shouldn't have relied on her son to do the right thing. He was his father's son, too weak, a victim of his libido. She shouldn't have relied on him to make the right choices, assume a leading position in society, the role to which he was born. Like his father, he'd have to be taught how to be strong. Once she proved Joie and the entire Fryoux clan were a thieving lot of low-lives, Tres would finally understand the error of his ways. The plan had to be perfect, incontestable, infallible.

She sat in her husband's library as, through the French doors, the sun slid low into the horizon. Her husband would be home soon. The Victrola, its burlled walnut gleaming alive with swirling incandescence in the soft sun, scratched out Mozart's Piano Concerto #27. She'd have to turn it off soon, before her husband arrived and wanted to read his paper in silence. She'd have to chip ice soon, before her husband arrived and wanted his whiskey. She'd have to adjust the lanterns just right, stoke the fire to make the room glow yellow, but not quite yet. She still had time to figure out the details of her plan, had to think things through from a thousand different angles. She sat straight-backed, legs crossed at the ankle, hands folded in her lap with poise, the manner in which she was taught to pose even when no one was around to see.

She found herself fingering the delicate carving of her antique settee's frame. The settee, one of the pieces her grandfather had transported overseas when the first Bourgoynes immigrated, was one of the few remaining original French pieces worthy of the Duchande mansion, so said her mother, who had once chastised her for resting her shoes on its tight-loomed silk. "You'll ruin it. If dirt gets into that fabric, we'll never get it out!"

Tres had brought that girl into her home, into this very room, where senators, governors, and even a President had reclined, sipped upon cognac, and divined the future of the land, where

Sherwood Anderson sat as he inscribed: *To the finest of Louisiana ladies and the most gracious of hostesses, my dearest Madam Duchande* on the title page of his newest novel, *Dark Laughter*.

He had gifted her the book, and having not yet read the famous author's latest work, Mrs.

Duchande swallowed her urge to flush and gush. She later gave thanks for the upbringing that avoided miscues, as she started to read the book but found she had to return it to a bookshelf never again to be opened. Oh, what sexually explicit language!

When that girl had entered this honored room and headed toward the settee, she found herself grabbing her by the elbow to intercept her path. "Sit here." She had said it a little too brusquely as she redirected Joie and reminded herself to smile. She was careful to use her body to block Tres' view of the harsh grasp, to shield Tres... always be careful to allow Tres to see and know only what he could handle. Young Tres. Sensitive Tres. The plan had to be opaque, yet still translucent—she loved that word, translucent, a word a spy might use to describe his ghostlike existence. Always give the appearance of transparency in the event actions are scrutinized. This new plan would definitely work.

* * * * *

Joie often went to Dr. Spedale's office, unable to trust that this pregnancy was the real promise of a child. The baby typically slept during the morning hours, and Cousin Alice told Joie that moving around doing errands and light housework is good for the baby; they float around in all that liquid and it lulls them right to sleep and that's why they don't kick as much, because they're asleep, and Joie just thought her baby was asleep that morning.

Dr. Spedale moved the cold metal disk of his stethoscope over her belly, kept moving it back and forth. Joie just lay there.

He was an old man and took his time. When he finished, he dragged his heels to the door, a tap and thump of the latch as he eased it closed behind himself, leaving without a word. Joie listened to the hushed tumbling of sad, imperceptible words. She closed her eyes and tried to distract her thoughts. The overhead light traveled through her eyelids and made red.

“We need to call Tres.” That’s all Dr. Spedale said when he walked back into the examination room.

My baby has all ten fingers by now, ten fingernails... dark hair like me? Light like Tres’?

* * * * *

When no one answered at DDR, the nurse rang Mrs. LeBlanc’s house and asked Mrs. Duchande to find Tres, to tell her son that they were bringing Joie to the hospital so they could make her give birth to a dead baby.

Mrs. Duchande got her purse, said all her goodbyes, kissed each lady’s cheek, and drove to DDR. As she approached the road to the ranch, the rain stopped so she pulled in at the fuel station to have the attendant pull back the roof of her convertible. Then she turned down the road to DDR and came upon Tres walking home in the shade of sweet orange trees.

Chapter 33

When the cocaine solution in Joie's spine wore off, they wheeled her into a hospital room where Tres waited. She said nothing. He said nothing. A nurse gave her a shot to make her sleep. When she awoke, the nurse gave her another shot.

When she again awakened and emerged from her stupor, she opened her eyes to see Tres kneeling beside her bed, his face contorted in anguish. "She said, '*It's dead*,' that's how she told me." Tres whimpered.

All the work Joie had done to try to understand his mother disintegrated. What a fool she had been. She wanted to kill her mother-in-law... string her up by her toes, peel back her skin to see if blood flowed through her veins.

"Stop it, Tres! Just stop. I don't care how she told you! My baby's dead. *Your* baby's dead. It was a *boy*, a real, live baby boy that was almost ready to come out and play with us. Your stupid *Duchande heir*!"

She propped up on her elbows to get air into her lungs. She hoped maybe she'd just stop breathing altogether and die, go be with her baby. How dare Tres come to her for comfort! "Go away," she gasped, "just... go... awaaaay."

Tres ran out into the hall, came back in following a nurse with a syringe.

"It's okay, honey," the nurse said. "Just relax."

"Make him leave, please, everybody, just leave me alone."

“Joie, honey, settle down...”

“Settle *down*?”

Tres pushed her shoulders back down into the bed, the nurse tapped a glass vile, and a warmth traveled up Joie’s arm until she couldn’t fight anymore.

She heard the nurse mumble something about morphine, about sleeping, and finally she could close her eyes and not think of any Highlanders, of the hollow inside where her baby had lived.

The next morning, Annette went to see Joie in the hospital, breaking out in tears as soon as she walked through the door. “I have to tell you, Joie...”

Dear God. Enough! She didn’t want any more bad news. She had her own pain. Why didn’t Tres keep that awful comment to himself! “Must you, Annette, really, is this something I need to know now?”

“You’ll hate me if I don’t tell you.” She knelt beside the bed as Tres had, as though Joie were their confessor, ready to absolve them of sin. “It’s the Highlanders... they’re saying the baby wasn’t Tres’,” Annette sobbed. “All those times Henri came to the ranch... Mother told them that *you* were his hostess. Those damn women, Mrs. LeBlanc and Mrs. Boudreaux, Mother’s *trustworthy, dependable* friends, they wanted to see it for themselves. They sent their Negro boys to the fuel station on the edge of town when Tres and Father were at one of their meetings, to see if Henri turned down the road to DDR.”

Shocked at her naiveté, how she and Tres had been so stupid as to enjoy the pregnancy with the notion that his mother lay down her arms, when Tres came later in the morning, she told him what Annette said.

Tres started pacing, looking everywhere except at Joie. “Yes, I know. She said, ‘Just watch, you’ll see, she is not carrying your child.’ But I thought she meant that you just weren’t pregnant, because of what Dr. Spedale said, that she was implying that the pregnancy was a lie. She said it was part of a web of deceit you were spinning to cling to me. She was so sure I’d never accept life without an heir, without a IV. Forget what she says, Joie, we’re fine, we’ll be fine together.”

Why did he avert his glance? Was that infinitesimally small pause before he responded a sigh of resignation to his mother’s will?

Tres called for the nurse with the syringe again.

The following week, the *Plaquemine Post* reported that Henri LeBlanc stole money from Mrs. Duchande, Mrs. LeBlanc, and Mrs. Boudreaux in a get-rich-quick scheme. For the *Society* section, a reporter interviewed the women, who emphasized how they trusted him, and oh, they should have known, and oh, it makes perfect sense, you know, considering his blood, a fact their husbands uncovered when they investigated Henri’s background after their wives finally confessed that they had invested with a man by virtue of his surname. When Mrs. Duchande had found out Henri was a cousin to Joie, she had knelt in church and thanked God for the confirmation that she had been following the right course of action all along. Then she made that trip to Isle de Jean Charles and again thanked God for helping the voodoo priestess engineer the *coup de grâce* miscarriage that would finally end her suffering.

* * * * *

When old Doctor Spedale went to see Joie the next morning, she asked, “Why did you say I couldn’t get pregnant?”

“Well, dear, I only meant to suggest that maybe you *shouldn't* get pregnant, not *couldn't*.”

Doctor Spedale's wife was one of Mrs. Duchande's oldest friends. Was Joie paranoid to think Mrs. Duchande had enough influence to make her own doctor shade the truth, just so she could have one more tool to force Tres to turn away from her?

“I'm afraid you now have a clearer understanding of why, my dear.” Dr. Spedale patted her hand. “But you can go home tomorrow,” he said, “that's good news, right?” He smiled.

Joie moved back into her old room at Jules's so MawMaw could take care of her. She couldn't go back to her own home, couldn't stand to be near Mrs. Duchande, so close to her mansion that she could see its broken pediment on the horizon every morning when she woke up and drank coffee with Tres, when she fed apples to Itsy and they watched the sun illuminate that woman's house, only a whisper away from the home Joie wanted to fill with warmth and love.

* * * * *

Tres spent most days and nights with Joie, but eventually she convinced him to get back to work and visit her in the evenings. By then, Joie noticed that PawPaw had been hanging around the house and not leaving to go to town. He needed to stop worrying about her and get back to selling vegetables and sharpening garden tools, but he wouldn't listen, so Joie asked Joey to convince PawPaw she was fine and he should get back to his regular life. “There's no reason for P'Paw to hang around just worrying about me.”

“Aww, Boo.” Joey sat on the bed beside his sister and reached for her hand. “He's not going to town so much as usual because people don't have work for him, and they don't need vegetables.”

* * * * *

This second miscarriage couldn't be bandaged with a Psalm or healed by a kiss. Somewhere deep inside, Joie was tired of it all, of the struggle to overcome the odds of finding happiness in a mixed-class pairing, the struggle to ward off the evil that lived in the form of Mrs. Duchande.

Her enemy had catapulted a massive boulder that penetrated the walls of her bastion. PawPaw was her stronghold, and his life and wellbeing had been compromised. Any consideration that her family was not off limits to Mrs. Duchande's tricks had never crossed her mind. This piercing of her home fort had to be stopped before the woman crumbled any more lives. It was enough that for years Joie's family suffered bruised egos and challenges to their pride at the hands of Mrs. Duchande, but Joie couldn't stand by and watch her loved ones attacked so directly. She couldn't stand the shock of the loss of another child. She couldn't bear the thoughts of the townspeople and their vile rumors. She couldn't face yet another puss-filled sore that always surfaced between her and Tres when yet another of his mother's schemes was unveiled and Joie's sense of confidence and peace was obliterated. She couldn't hear *don't let it bother you* or *she's just a jealous old woman* even one more time or she would blow her brains out.

Then it hit her—what would the woman have done to her child, to her son's offspring? What did she really expect of that woman? How would she behave toward her half-trash grandchild? Maybe she'd reject him wholly. Maybe she'd use him as another tool to wedge between Joie and Tres, maybe turn him against his parents and burst them open from the inside with the power of water freezing in the cracks of granite.

These became Joie's only thoughts every time she saw Tres. In his face, instead of the innocence of their childhood, Joie saw their dead baby looking up at her with Mrs. Duchande's flat gaze. To avoid the image, she closed her eyes and feigned sleep.

With a stroke of Tres' hand, Joie felt his mother's palm-down condescension. She claimed pain so he wouldn't reach out to touch her.

Prayers that helped Joie through her previous bouts of depression did nothing to comfort her now. God's silence, she finally understood, was a deafening answer to her pleas to fix her life with Tres: *No*. She had nowhere else to turn. She couldn't go to PawPaw because he would find a way to convince her to devote her life to her marriage no matter the cost to him or the family. She couldn't let that happen. She *wouldn't* let that happen. She had been selfish and foolish; now she had to make things right for them. The only way to do that was to eject the Duchandes from their lives. That meant giving up Tres, but she wasn't strong enough to come out and tell him their lives together had to end. All she could manage was to drive him away through passive disregard.

Now she was not only selfish and foolish, but she was also a coward, until a month later when Nadine came for a visit. She'd had a visit from Mrs. Boudreaux's housemaid, Pearl, who told Nadine that at tea a week after Joie lost IV, she overheard Mrs. Duchande explain that Joie's baby's death was Mother Mary's will, "... because, you know, *it* was mongoloid. That's what happens with incest."

Joie sent Joey to retrieve her old clothes from her new house.

PART THREE

Ruin

Chapter 34

Joie hadn't seen Tres in seven months by the time she stood at her French doors waiting for *Hurricane Valerie*. She had watched him stroll down Main Street, had hid in D'Albour's spying on him through the windows as numbly as she now watched the trees bend deeper than they had only an hour before. The time she saw him at D'Albour's was a month before the Corps came calling, and Joie didn't think Tres knew about their warning, didn't know how different her family's lives might become after the storm. So much had changed in the last few years, and now that PawPaw was wrong about having more time on their land, so much more change would come so much sooner than they expected—it seemed wicked and a curse to a people averse to change.

* * * * *

The wind began to shift. Radio announcers claimed *Valerie* was still out in the Gulf and wouldn't hit the coast until tomorrow, so this far-reaching easterly wind was a sure sign she'd meet Iberville Parish head-on. Her massive, coiling clouds were sucking up monstrous quantities of water, and when she made landfall, she'd release great torrents as solid ground pilfered her power and conjured rain from her clouds.

As bad as Joie knew the storm might be, and as torn apart as her family and ancestral land might become, she couldn't get her mind off her sorrows. She didn't blame all her woes on the Duchandes but felt just sorry enough for herself to stew on their wrongdoings. They hadn't

been the best of neighbors before they found out their son loved her, then she and Tres had forced their relationship down their throats in a blind stubbornness to have their way, confident that their love was strong enough to win them over. But that was all behind her now, along with all that fancy talk about good guilt and bad, and understanding people's intentions, and how parents want only the best for their children.

She closed the French doors as a slight knock interrupted her contemplations. Bit by tiny bit, she squeaked open the door to find Joey standing there in stocking feet.

“Shhhhh.”

To shush Joey into a quiet room was to ask a giraffe to pour a *demitasse*. Still in his teens, Joey was over six feet-four and weighed in at about 250 pounds (*half a hog*, PawPaw called him), and his physical dexterity hadn't quite caught up with his latest growth spurt. He couldn't but be a little clumsy and hard on his heels upon the old wood-plank floors, but that night he managed a surprisingly graceful, silent entry into his sister's room. As they had for almost two decades, Joie and Joey ran on toes across the room and leapt up into her tall moss bed to giggle and bury themselves in pillows and bedclothes, two kids finding comfort in the silliness of sheet tents.

Nestled with a pillow held fast to his body and his legs crossed, Joey made the same request he made two or three times a year. “Boo, tell me how Momma told us God gave us the little crawfish in ditches so close so we wouldn't have to go far to get bait for our cane poles.”

Joie knew Joey wanted her to talk about how their mother held them in her arms tight and secure against her bosom, rocking them, bestowing the love and tenderness that flowed from her like a river that couldn't be dammed. He wanted Joie to talk of how their mother imbued their

senses with the gentle charms of their land, the tenderness in themselves that must always be nourished, all the stories that in time Joie came to remember only through PawPaw.

Joey wasn't the little boy who rode bareback on Patches anymore; still, he sought the comfort of an only sister older than himself by a mere year and a half. So Joie patted her lap, combed back the whorls of ebony that made her brother as pretty as any girl, and told him the story of their ancestry, the saga of their land, the tales of a beloved mother all but forgotten, the stories of their games and contests and journeys into the woods that immersed them in its life force.

As young children, she and Joey had thought they were venturing into the great unknown, their steps falling upon ground never before stained by mankind's footstep, navigating deeper and deeper into a wilderness that tested the limits of their courage while they bit their lower lips to hold back the teary quivers that would belie their fearlessness and crumble their façade into tiny bits. The great unknown beckoned them to discover its virgin blackberry bushes, rotted logs with fat white grub worms, monolithic crawfish tubes, all the mysterious unearthings they later matured into knowing were only a stone's throw from their home.

She always started with the stories of their great ancestors. "We once possessed all the land around here, as far as you could see if you could fly high as an eagle. Course, it was like that in France, too.

"Lots of French Catholics had to leave. P'Paw says that on the way over, it stayed so hazy that our ancestors used to sit on deck and imagine they were in their fog-walled courtyards reclining in a chaise longue, relaxing to the peaceful trickle of pond fountains. He says those boats groaned from the belly and creaked with the wind. Mangy old sailors would use curse words nobody ever heard spoken above a whisper. Sometimes it was strong wind, sometimes it

was the calm, or their captain when he gave them too much work.” Joie giggled. “They *really* cursed the dead animals they had to haul up and thrown overboard, and the servants when they emptied ministration pots too clumsily. ‘Not far enough aft!’ they’d say, or, ‘On the down-swell, mate!’ But even that was better than having to convert to Protestantism. Some of their friends had been indentured when they refused.

“When they got to Nouvelle-Écosse—people here call it Nova Scotia—they thought they were fine. P’Paw says that when his grandfather talked about having to bury that first generation of Frenchmen not to spend their eternity in the hallowed familial graveyards of their beloved homeland, he’d weep like a baby.

“Still, it was better than having to speak English, give up their Church, and pay taxes to those tyrants. ‘Gotta love freedom and peace more than things.’ P’Paw still talks that way.

“They called that place Acadia but had to leave those family graveyards again. And most of their animals when the British captured Port Royal in 1710.

“This one British Colonel, John Winslow was his name, said the soil was too rich to be left to undesirables. He wanted to place “good” farmers on settled homesteads.

“So they heard about a place in Maryland and headed south. It was English, but word had it that were okay with Catholics. Then the Revolution came, and more Redcoats.

“Then they came and settled in the peninsula’s woods. Started another new graveyard.

“Had all the land an eagle could see. ‘Til the *nouveau riche* came. The Duchandes had signed their names and vowed to attend a sacrilegious church, to tithe to a religion so bold as to name itself Protestant. Guess they thought, maybe, they thought, I *hope* they thought Catholicism would be restored. But even when Napoleon came to power and fixed all that, they

stayed Protestant. They were all about money. That's when they came to America. To get richer.

"Tres said they were solicitors and avocats when Antoine Duchande crossed the Atlantic. Said they couldn't get good jobs until they came down here, where they could practice the Napoleonic Code.

"They still had slaves, and those fine cows and horses nobody around here had ever seen."

Joie looked down to see Joey was asleep. She envisioned how, after weeks of trekking southward, those old Duchandes had probably broached that hill on the high grassland, how they had heard the call of this new land, shimmering in silken sunlight asking something be made of it, a stunning tapestry of emerald studs of Live Oak, golden threads of honey grasses weaved through it at the hand of God's angels, this land, this beauty.

They would have seen that any dream could be realized with such a land. Anything could be made of earth with natural pecan groves, ponds brimming with fish, fields of alluvial soil growing hip-high grass, oaks waiting to become lumber, fences, their new home.

She envisioned how their animals had first stopped to feed on the sweet grasses and they went no further. Not a house nor a soul was in sight, nor a fence to mark the land's settling, so they filed papers the following morning and made their own of the land where seven head of unbranded Fryoux cattle grazed.

Tres had told her that they went back to Catholicism when that old Duchande went to Plaquemine that next morning. How he saw only one church, and old women with rosaries dangling on their hips. So he went back to the grasslands, got his wife and son from their tent, and had themselves baptized Catholic.

Surely, it wasn't a hard decision. After being unable to get good jobs up North, they knew they had to be more like the locals.

Religion was a small price to pay for abundance. The Duchande slaves helped build a horse and cattle breeding legacy before they were freed, and the Duchandes returned to a class even more superior than that of those ancestors who lived in the shadows of *la noblesse* in France.

Didn't hurt how Cajuns were simple folk. Joie was sure they were happy to now occupy the *top* social class. In Louisiana, attorneys could become judges, parish presidents, mayors. Here they could rule themselves, rule others, become a new breed of royalty who bowed to no one. Their children would bow to no one, nor would their children's children. No one would stand in their way. Not again.

Joie was happy to tell Joey the stories about their ancestors, but talk about the Duchandes just made her think about herself again, how she had been Joie Duchande. Mrs. Dominique Robert Duchande III, and she, all by herself, cut off that part of her life. The ruby ring Tres gave her—larger than MawMaw's but thankfully smaller than his mother's—now lived in a potpourri sachet she covered with old nightwear in a drawer. She scooted out from under Joey, tucked a quilt around him, and went to retrieve the ring. She stuffed it in her brassiere, and went to stand at her French doors, wondering if her life would ever be what she could call *normal* again.

She hated how her family acted differently toward her now, how her brothers suddenly wanted to help clean stalls, how MawMaw called them when she tried to haul sacks of vegetables up to the kitchen, how her father insisted upon *saving her a trip* when she needed something from town. They acted like she was still weak. If only they understood it was her heart that died with her baby.

For an all-too-brief moment, her life had changed drastically, but now she was back in Jules's home, right where she had started, most notably evidenced—to the family, anyway—by mucking her own barn rather than directing the many groomsmen at DDR. The home Tres built backed up to those shiny lacquered stables but Joie liked the old gray barn of her childhood home fine enough. She again imagined Tres at his window, but knew he was long gone. He had begun a new chapter in his life. He seemed happy enough when she saw him in Plaquemine with Renee only two months after Joey retrieved her clothes.

Chapter 35

The day Joie spotted her husband with Renee, Tres had been walking toward children playing in the courtyard that surrounded Plaquemine's new gazebo, thinking about having no child of his own. He thought about the first children's story Joie wrote when they expected a new baby for the second time. He thought about his own narcissism, wondered if it was he who had somehow seeded the storyline in Joie's subconscious, not for something admirable but rather that of a man still not strong enough to stand up to his mother, just like a frail butterfly trying to beat itself out of its cocoon.

He had sat on the ground beside Joie on a cool May afternoon after Cousin Susan Mary's First Communion, one of the regular opportunities Joie took to entertain her young friends on the peninsula. They huddled around Joie wide-eyed and enthralled to hear the story, but stopped her just before she finished, outraged with the unfairness of how they imagined the story was about to end: God was just about to abandon a frail butterfly-to-be.

"In the beginning, butterflies are pasty worms in a case they weave to protect themselves from other insects and birds," Joie began. "Now, some children," she ever-so-gently admonished any guilty parties, "they like to knock their pods out of the trees and crack them open like pecans, but, inside those ugly pods, the pasty worms make themselves winged beauties.

"Don't you just love to watch them land on your little arms and your hands if you hold them out real still? That's because they trust you so much.

“The worm,” Joie explained, “once it grows its wings, it thrashes about in its cocoon like it’s as strong as a giant. But the poor thing is far too weak. It struggles and fights, and keeps pounding on the inside of the cocoon hour after hour, day after day, until it makes itself so strong and big that it flaps its wings and the cocoon bursts wide open. And y’all know how tough those things are. You need a stone or a mallet to crack them. It’s very, very difficult, and they have to work at it for a very long time, but that’s how God makes them strong.

“A worm can only become a butterfly if he works real hard, all by himself.”

After Joie shushed a chorus of *that’s not fair* and *that’s mean*, Tres watched his wife settle them down to hear the rest of the story, watched their scowls turn into the animation that ultimate delight fosters in the face of a child, when sudden gasps arch backs and bright eyes go wide in surprise.

“See, sometimes the only way to get that strong is to try again and again. Even if you fail a thousand times, after it’s all over, that’s when you see how wonderful you are.

After a few more awes, Joie said, “If God didn’t make them so strong they couldn’t take care of themselves. You see, butterflies are so beautiful that the birds want them all to themselves. While God has them in their cocoon home, they grow and get prettier and prettier, and He has to prepare them to be strong and beautiful butterflies that delight all those who look upon them because, you know, even butterflies have enemies.

“Before God created butterflies, He felt sorry about how His beautiful little children got old and fat and wrinkled, so he collected all the best colors of the world and put them in a magic bag as a gift to the children. He put the greens of the trees and grasses in the bag, and the yellows and oranges of the sun, and the blues of the sky and its pink and purple reflections, and

when the little children opened their gift, out flew wonderful butterflies in all those glorious colors. And now the magnificent butterflies make us happy, too!"

Joie had pulled him aside later, saying, "I thought the children might think it was far too unfair, so I didn't to tell them butterflies originally could sing as beautifully as any of the songbirds. But the birds were jealous and complained to God that because butterflies were so beautiful, it was unfair that they could sing like birds, too. He thought they made a good point and unvoiced the butterflies."

Was this another of Joie's veiled lessons? Though he had tried to live up to Joie's vision of the man he could be, the underlying message of the butterfly story was a bar set so high that he fell short at the most critical points. He wanted a life with Joie, but such expectations seemed like a field of landmines. The burden of always being on the lookout for trip wires made him weary. In a way, he felt a sense of relief after they separated. For weeks now, he had been happy to forget about expectations and shortcomings, to live free from veiled lessons on life and character, but then the butterfly story slapped him in the face in the form of Renee Wilson the day Joie saw them together.

He had just left an auction in Plaquemine for DDR's newest generation of heifers when he walked toward the gazebo to watch those children play, and Renee appeared from out of nowhere—she managed to do so every few days after Joey came by to pick up Joie's clothes. Renee had exited a hat shop as he passed, tucked her arm into his, and invited herself to join him.

They strolled beside cranberry bougainvillea, glowing white azaleas, and a host of intoxicatingly sweet arbor, and were sharing in polite, idle chit-chat when Renee stopped and turned her body in toward Tres. The beauty of her perfect features, the long blond curls bundled

on her head, the nakedness of her sculpted neck, and the musk of her scent all stirred his senses, shocking him that he could be so affected by anyone other than his wife.

Renee pressed her breast against his forearm as she stretched an arm across him to point at a fawn that made her way into the courtyard surrounding the gazebo. Three young children did their best to corner the panicky creature, and Tres broke his view from the charm of Renee's laugh and turned to watch the children, and he took a deep breath and produced a wide-toothed grin, and just that sliver of a moment before he laughed aloud in amusement, Joie rounded the corner on Itsy.

Joie pulled in the reins with such abruptness that Itsy's rear end slid far beneath her and she reared with a great toss of her head and a flood of black mane.

Tres froze. Itsy's front legs flew up into the air again and again. Then he saw that wide-eyed look of fright he had witnessed only once before, the day of the fire when Amelie's brother ran off and he told Joie to go on without him. Joie's lips quivered, parting only enough to release the breath that had pried open her chest, there, only a few yards before him.

All four of Itsy's hooves left the ground in a giant leap that entered her into a full gallop in a single stride, and they were gone, leaving Tres with the image of a leather crop flailing Itsy's flanks, forcing her faster and faster until they disappeared around the bend in the boulevard far ahead.

All he could think of was how impossible it would be to convince Joie of the innocence of the meeting and walking. But that would be wasted effort—claiming he was innocent was only a way to excuse himself from acting with the integrity he claimed to possess.

He had wounded her again; this time she wouldn't forgive him. And why should she? The guilt he felt from denying her acquaintance as a young boy seemed to be no lesson. Rather,

he had avoided her back then with the excuse that it was okay because Joie understood why he had to—then, ignoring bigger issues came easier. Rationalization became justification became excuse for behavior. All the fancy talks about guilt were just that—fancy talks that didn't add up to a hill of beans.

Chapter 36

Standing at her French doors the night before the storm, when Joie thought about seeing Tres with Renee that day in Plaquemine, she only knew that he looked happy. Maybe Renee was the kind of woman Tres needed, one whose only demands dealt with the showmanship of society. Joie had become more like women in other parts of the country—proud, brave women whose self-identities were emerging as something other than the *lady of the house* or even *daughter* or *sister*. Even in the South, some women were less and less thinking of themselves as *damsels*, and now speculated that the person who coined the term *damsel in distress* most certainly had to have been a man of a long-passed era.

Many Southerners, both ladies and gentlemen, believed that women had relinquished their standing by forfeiting their pedestal, something much more valuable than what they might gain from the 19th Amendment that gave women the right to vote in 1920; therefore, the trade-off was a step backward in the advancement of womanhood. Though she thought herself to be enlightened, Joie couldn't wholly disagree, her empathy no doubt derived from her recent descent back into her old insecurities—plus a father who still fought to convince her to believe in the wisdom of his own philosophy of life.

For many years, Joie had tried to change more and more of herself, to outgrow her silly thoughts, and to mature out of the unknowing child she thought herself to be. When she completed high school, she had hoped college would do the trick. The week before she

graduated, Joie had taken a ferry across the Mississippi River to the new Louisiana State University, the facility only recently having moved from the old army barracks of The Big War. Before she tackled Jules and PawPaw's opposition to her attending college, she decided to try the role on for size to bolster her confidence and worthiness to attend a university. She crossed the river to see the new campus and walk around with books in hand to play the part of an active student, brave and independent, if just for a day. She had come from an area that didn't build its first high school until 1911. In the eyes of her father and the old generations, it was sacrilege to make girls attend high school. Females were sweet little damsels. Joie had to fight that mentality with the strength of Samson.

Then people in Joie's part of the country started calling damsels *dragonflies*. The creature had theretofore been associated with delicate, helpless females—the damsel in distress—but what these ladies perhaps didn't understand, Joie surmised, was that dragonflies were slightly different from damselflies. Unlike dragonflies, damselflies can fold their wings back flush against their bodies, and dragonflies don't have the damsels' narrow body, nor are their features as fine.

Then again, Joie considered, maybe they weren't confused at all. Damselfly nymphs are predacious; they lay in wait for other bugs to come into range, then grab victims quick as a flash with their labium, a kind of misshapen lower jaw modified for purposes of surprise and agility.

It pained Joie to realize how easily her mind transitioned from the simple surveillance of the beauties of her land to the distressing comparison of insects to Southern women. She closed the doors and stood over Joey, still asleep. The familiar catch in the back of his throat settled an unanticipated calmness upon her in the pre-dawn glow. Despite the rooster's summons, thick, roiling clouds overpowered the calling sun, evidenced only by a dim blush in the ocean of black

above the trees. The morning began without the fanfare of God's normal day-opening a cappella serenades, and the majesty of that final morning's moments, with Joie's sweet, all-loving brother, faded to close. It was time.

She kissed Joey on the forehead and pressed her senses toward the task of memorizing the sights and sounds and smells of her room and trees and animals, all of them to be nestled away in neat little boxes of memories to be retrieved much later, only when the coming shock subsided and she allowed herself to once again call to mind sweet memories of the lives her family knew to be their own—their lives before the storm.

Chapter 37

The week after Joie saw Tres near the gazebo with Renee, he hammered what was sure to become the final peg into the increasingly unrecognizable sarcophagus he was intent on constructing for himself.

He left town, had to get away from Joie and everything that reminded him of his old life, and when he told his mother he was leaving, she packed her trunks to go with him. In New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, each city provided a just-by-chance meeting with a débuted daughter of a *de la* something or other.

At a Broadway show in New York, they ran into Grand Dame LeBlanc, who, along with his mother, had a hand in matchmaking for local debutantes. Julie Langlois, one of their rejects, had débuted the same year as Renee, who had an evil streak even at that young age and always managed to get what she wanted. That year, Renee wanted Julie to make the final cut.

Julie was a mousy sort of girl with features so indistinguishable that it was hard to describe her. The popular consensus was that Renee wanted Julie to make the final cut for two reasons—so she would have less competition, plus she'd get credit for giving assistance to the less fortunate. Poor Julie never knew she was the subject of hushed speculations and finger pointing—*that's the girl, that's Renee's project*.

Julie's début proceeded without incident until the night of the final dance. All evening, Julie had remained seated in an adjacent drawing room. She hadn't danced even once and the

night was half gone so Renee asked Tres to dance with her. Julie's face lit up, all glowy and happy when she stood up to take his hand, and when she stepped forward, blood gushed down her legs all the way to the floor.

Tres met Julie for afternoon tea in Boston after he and his mother left New York, and he couldn't get the red out of his mind. When it happened, he had shielded her from the rest of the room by blocking their view with his body, then he asked a waiter to find Susan Riewe, Susan Christenson, and Michele Lafortune, three of the sweetest girls of the parish. They shielded Julie as they headed toward the front door and escaped unseen, but when Renee heard Julie had left evidence of her accident, the girl's season abruptly ended.

For the first time in his sense-deadening trip, Tres was relieved to find someone he could actually talk to as a friend. Julie was unmarried, and though Tres knew their association would be misconstrued, he was desperate to talk to someone he could trust. Julie lived in Paris during the years subsequent to that fateful dance, and a year after she returned, he and Joie had spent time with her and Gerald Guilbeau at a church picnic. Julie attended the party Annette hosted before their wedding and knew how desperately Tres loved Joie.

They visited museums, got lost while searching for Paul Revere's house, and dined at the blandest fancy restaurants any Southerner ever patronized. They could have been brother and sister.

But then Renee blew into Boston and landed on Julie like an eagle on a field mouse. Julie had developed into a spectacularly beautiful woman (coal black inch-long eyelashes, hair that curled down her back all the way to her bustle, a chest she must have grown while in Paris after she became a woman). Renee found Tres with Julie at the hotel restaurant enjoying afternoon tea.

“Julie, look how beautiful you are, my love. I haven’t seen you since that dreadful day years ago...” Renee kissed Julie on both cheeks.

Julie excused herself. “I have to pack for Philadelphia.”

Renee sat in the chair Julie vacated, snapped her fingers *garcon*, and lit into a monologue about her travel woes as if she had excused herself from the table for only a brief moment to visit the powder room.

Tres promised to join her for dinner the following night, but later paged her with a message to say he wasn’t well. It wasn’t a lie. The following morning, he rose early and sent another message to say he was called to Philadelphia on business.

As soon as he arrived, Tres found Julie and apologized for not standing up to the putrefaction of Renee’s manners. He tried to explain how sorry he was for not doing or saying something to rein in Renee, but Julie just stood there and looked at him without saying a single word. It was her blank face that somehow forced Tres to acknowledge his pattern. Why was he so willing to play dead to manipulative women? What was it inside him that germinated into a willingness to sacrifice his own responsibility and integrity? Inside, he knew that Joie would never be able to swallow his mother’s hatefulness, yet, year after year, he stood by and excused his inaction with empty commendations for succeeding in smoothing out *the wrinkles* his mother created.

But he was too tired to fight it when, again, Renee showed up and Julie became suddenly unavailable. He brunchd with Renee, rode with Renee, walked with Renee as though he were ignorant of his weaknesses and had never admitted responsibility. Day after day, he watched himself do the same nothing.

Two weeks later, he saw Julie at Debbie Tullier’s wedding reception.

“All of Plaquemine is abuzz about your travels with Renee.”

Tres guessed that included Joie and decided to ignore any coming ramifications long enough to allow time and distance from Joie, Renee, and his mother to numb his mind to his failures as a husband, brother, and man. His plan worked well enough through the winter holidays, until Mardi Gras season approached and he couldn't get the Charleston ball out of his mind, nor Henri LeBlanc and his mother's vile rumors about his dead child. He walked to the telephone a dozen times to beg Joie, to do and say whatever it would take to make her allow him to bring her to the Rex Ball. But when he again remembered she had no telephone, he didn't ride out to the peninsula to ask her in person. Rather, he realized he was fooling himself and went alone. He had already ridden out to see her once, toting Bear along to use as an excuse to see her, but she had refused to come out, and Tres had surrendered Bear to Joey.

Renee attended the Rex Ball with a New Orleans man no one knew, he dressed as a king, and Renee as Queen Elizabeth, complete with red hair and what seemed to be a hundred yards of silk, satin, and taffeta in emerald green. At least half a dozen times in the first hour after their arrival, Tres overheard friendly debates wherein someone inquired as to the name of Queen Elizabeth's husband king.

“Queen Elizabeth didn't marry,” someone said.

“Then the king must be King Henry.”

“But King Henry banished Elizabeth. He wouldn't be caught dead with her.”

In another debate, “Elizabeth was queen because Henry died, so Elizabeth wasn't queen until Henry was dead, and the king and queen are never father and daughter anyway, so that doesn't make sense.”

And in another, “Well, maybe they aren’t Queen Elizabeth and King Henry in the first place.”

The word *asinine* came to mind. How could he have allowed these ignorant social snobs to affect his life to the extent they did? All he could think about was Joie, how they could have been at home, together, stretched out on a lawn quilt with Bear hobbling quite ably and the horses whinnying for Joie to open their gates so they could graze near her. He was smiling with the vision, a fluffy white feather dancing in his mind when Renee touched his arm and it vanished.

She started saying something about the man she came with, nothing important enough to really listen or respond to. He was watching the rise and fall of an emerald she wore around her neck, one the size of a thumbprint. It reminded Tres of an antique piece he once saw in a museum. Only Renee would adorn the costume of a masquerade party with a stone akin to the crown jewels.

* * * * *

The following week, Tres took a train to New Orleans for a Morgan auction. Joie had made a practice of going with him for a getaway weekend, always at the Royal Sonesta. Every time they stayed there, they gorged on *Chateau Briand*, a meal for two, and on his last night in town, Tres ordered it, ate half, and drowned himself in the misery of watching the other half sit on the platter and go to waste in Joie’s absence.

The restaurant steward was handing Tres his coat and hat when he heard her laugh. Down a short hall across the lobby, the elevator attendant said, “Evenin’ miss,” and Renee stepped inside.

He froze. She was at least fifteen feet away and Tres hoped he could remain unseen, but she turned around and snagged a view before the doors closed.

“Stop!” She was with Mrs. LeBlanc, who held her parasol out in front of the elevator attendant, lifted her chin, and pursed her lips.

“Ma’am. Miss Renee.” He tipped his hat.

“Come, have a cognac,” the Grand Dame said as she handed Tres the key to her room.

He poured cognac, swirled a bit around in a snifter, and after an obligatory fifteen minutes of socialite conversation said his goodnights. To Tres’ surprise, they didn’t try to convince him to stay. He offered his thanks for the digestif and turned for the door when the Grand Dame told him Renee had to be walked to her room.

Renee retrieved their cognac, said goodbye to Mrs. LeBlanc with a kiss to each cheek, and then walked with Tres down the hall to her suite. When Tres opened the door and stepped in to turn on a lamp, Renee slipped through the door, set down the snifters, and closed the door before Tres could turn around.

She pressed the curve of her hip against him.

He pushed away her shoulders, then kissed her on the forehead, saying, “Goodnight.”

“So why are you pushing me away? We dine together, ride together, stroll, but every time we have a moment alone you distance yourself from me. Is it that you still love her?”

“Renee—” He couldn’t raise his gaze to look in her eyes.

“Why are you doing this, Tres? She left you. *She* ended it. And she ended it because she knew she can’t live in our world, and that’s still true, and it won’t change, and I know that when you’re with me you forget about her for a while.”

It was true. “Look, Renee, yes, it does help to get away from the memories for a while and think of myself as recovered and ready to live again, but—”

“We’re the same, you and I.” Renee puckered her lips, then drew down the corners. “You belong with me, someone who appreciates your heredity, who dresses your arm in society, who lusts for you in the same way you lust for her. We can live the excitements of the privileged, live such a beautiful life.”

Maybe that was true. Maybe he could learn to love a different kind of life—*the life you were born to*, his mother always said.

“She left you, Tres, and she doesn’t want you back.”

Her knife slid between his ribs.

“She doesn’t want you.”

It rotated.

“We made a commitment!” Tres snapped. “And you’ve never been there, so it’s easy for you to sail into my life and pick up the pieces and put them back together in the order you’d prefer.”

“That’s because I *can*, and you know it!”

“Right, just stroll in and warm my frozen heart like absinthe, right?” Part of him wanted her to do just that, to mend and soothe him, to warm his insides. “Please, Renee, be a friend and let me do what’s right for me.”

“What’s right?”

She was standing so close he could feel her breath.

“You’re not doing anyone favors, including yourself. You’re tormenting yourself and I’m left to the side. I’ve been patient, but now it’s time for one of you to be the first to start their life over. Let her free, Tres.”

So simple.

“I’m here with you and I love you and deserve you, and you deserve my love and the life I can give back to you. You said it, I’m the only one who can warm you.”

Maybe he actually hated this woman. “That’s not exactly what I meant to—”

“Whether you intended to or not, you said what you really meant.” She poked out her lower lip and tipped her head to the side as she batted her eyes.

“You damn women with all your getting inside my head, always trying to figure out my intentions!” He grabbed her shoulders and gave her a jolt. “You’re twisting—”

She rested her hands on his chest. “What? The *truth*? Isn’t the truth that you’re hung up on a girl who dresses and acts like a boy and won’t give you the time of day? Or that your obligation ended when she slammed the door in your face?”

“That’s enough, Renee!”

“It’ll never be enough! Not until you *understand*.”

He hoped she was wrong. He knew she was right. When she stood silent a moment, he convinced himself that he was determined to resist her and turned to go.

His hand was on the doorknob when she grabbed his wrist and leaned in to whisper, “I know you want me, but I understand. It’s one of the things I love about you.” She stepped closer to say goodbye and an arm went around his shoulder, an innocent kiss to his cheek, the slight of a finger rolling behind the lobe of an ear.

When and if he and Joie ever reconciled, Tres wanted to be able to say he hadn't been with another woman, a fortifying impetus for abstinence. "I don't love you, you know that."

"Tell me you don't care for me."

In that fateful little pause while he searched for the perfect response that wouldn't get him in trouble with his father again, his anger at this woman matured into an all-consuming rage. But then the musk of her scent rose up to meet him, the scent he so loved, along with what it did to him, and he closed his mind. He abandoned all thought of honor, of determination, of how he had resisted women already for so long, and his body reminded him that many years had passed since he had touched a woman other than Joie. That part of him to which Renee appealed, the part that wanted to be powerless to her seduction, became stronger and stronger as she forced her hip against now taut trousers, slid one hand behind him to press him firmly against her, the other between his legs to find that special spot.

When Tres looked down at her, the beauty of the vein that traced the side of her long curvy neck made him want to bite it... chew right through it and kill her. Instead, he watched it throb stronger. He released the knob, spilled Renee over the top of her dress, watched the throb in her neck pulse stronger and bluer, saw that chest rise to beckon him, the curve of her breast, mounds of satin. He grasped a handful of blond curls, jerked her head back, raped her mouth, then her neck, her chest, wanting to swallow her nipple, pressing it hard against his palate and sucking so hard Renee gasped and reached for his buttons. Her knees met the floor, and her parted lips revealed the very tip of pink tongue.

Tres watched himself as someone else, anyone other than the man who lifted a woman he hated up onto the sideboard, someone else whose hand slid under her dress, fingers deep within her silks, someone else's lips buried within her folds, her musk on his tongue, and it felt so good

to again please a woman, the urgency of long nails buried in his scalp, the rhythmic thrust before she screamed and slivered to the floor.

That pink tongue showed itself between shiny lips, its intermittent contact, lips that kept kissing. It wasn't until inevitability threatened that he came to his senses and pulled himself from her, squeezed himself hard enough to prevent it, but her fingers still worked him, and he was inside her again and all he could see was that open mouth, and imagine that pink tongue as it danced in perfect unison to her fingers... and the final slather brought with it an oblivion, and an extended moment of clarity, the warmth of fluids dazing him, the silk of her head now unmoving... his cry to shiny lips.

Except his cry was to the blushed lips of the dark-haired woman in his memories.

Renee coaxed him to join her on the floor, but all he could do was go down on one knee and lift her to her feet. His *I can't do this* infuriated her, and the flush of her cheeks came no longer from passion. He realized it was from anger only a moment before her swinging hand met his face.

"Now you can't?" She shook her head. "Now you can't!"

She disappeared into the lavatory to smooth her hair and right her facer. She walked back out, opened the door and, before slamming it on Tres' heels, hissed, "So much for that high and mighty integrity of yours."

* * * * *

In the days to come, Tres expected, the next time he passed her on the street, she would be certain to beg forgiveness for her indictments. With words dripping in maple syrup, she would express her grief not because she incurred regret, but rather as part of her mission. Tres knew his integrity, or lack thereof, didn't matter at all to her, the remark was offered only for

effect. She knew integrity mattered a lot to him, and for Tres to gain such insight from a person of Renee's ilk was a baffling turn of God's hand. The sum total of the differences between Joie and this woman was that Renee would smile while watching someone bleed from her scratch—Joie's heart would bleed if someone laughed about a scratch.

Left alone to face such an insight, Tres lay in bed disgusted with himself for not behaving with the level of integrity he was sure Joie had no trouble maintaining. And what about PawPaw? Dear God. PawPaw!

While Tres and Joie were courting, he had helped PawPaw shore up his barn when the edges of a South Texas-bound hurricane approached, and the old patriarch had started talking about how MawMaw had fallen and broke her back during a freak ice storm. He said Jules used to watch him prepare and serve her the broth of rabbits and squirrels, eventually a little rice he'd cook mixed with beef hip bone soup with carrots and onions.

He waited at the door when PawPaw changed MawMaw's gown and sheets, and one day asked, "How come you don't get one of the women to do all these woman chores?" PawPaw had to rub his chin and ruminate on the answer for a while.

"In the bible," he said, "Jesus say man rule the home, but if he keep his wife on a pedestal like he ought, then the husband'll think about what she think, what she need. A Godly man cain't get no ideas in his head that don't respect the wife, got to be happy wit' puttin' her first.

"See now, my wife, she be the midwife. Couldn't do that no more. Couldn't even take care of her babies when—"

"Babies?" Tres asked. "I thought your first son had already passed." Joie had told him MawMaw had slipped on ice during a freak storm after a solar storm that nearly rivaled the Carrington event of '59, had used that wheelchair while she recovered from a broken back.

Before Jules was born, MawMaw and PawPaw had already lost Romain Joseph Fryoux III to Yellow Fever when the 1878 Memphis outbreak reached a few young Louisiana victims. Joie had cringed when she told him how Plaquemine's only physician, a North Louisiana transplant who always greeted patients and their families with a limp handshake but a vigorous, "Doctor Rhodes Joseph Spedale, Senior, at your service," had confined MawMaw to her bed and prepared the family for permanent paralysis from the waist down. "Childbirth," he had told MawMaw, "is out of the question."

PawPaw had been nailing a supporting beam through the story, but then his hammer stopped mid-air. "My namesake. Yessir," he said, waiting a long while, still staring at that nail before he turned to face Tres. "I mean Jules and baby Ariat. See my wife helped bring Ariat in the world few weeks after Jules be born and, well, her maw, well, she didn' make it.

"Took that baby home." PawPaw smiled. "I can still see them babies, on the breast at the same time. Used to hold hands. Shared the same crib. Never seen my wife so happy. Ariat's paw come to see her near-on ev'y day 'til he fell in the river under some logs we was floatin' to the mill."

PawPaw's face darkened. "Cousin Alice come got the babies when my wife fell. Kept 'em better part of a year 'til my wife could walk again. Course, Alice, she barren. My wife, she couldn't see her way to takin' away *both* babies from Alice."

After a long moment, he reached over and patted Tres' shoulder. "When Jules be wantin' to know how come I don' get some woman to come take care of my wife, I told him, 'I cain' see no way of puttin' a wife first wit'out the *doin's* of puttin' her first. Just the way things is, son.'"

* * * * *

Tres cringed. What would PawPaw think of him if he found out about what Tres had done in New Orleans? Was he already disappointed in Tres because he hadn't protected Joie from his mother's shenanigans?

Joie had always been the quintessence of a lady—she was true to Tres and had brought him nothing but pride and confidence and honor. Now he had dishonored her with a woman who tried to take everything she wanted, a woman who would never give in. When he had finally fallen asleep that night in New Orleans, he dreamed of Joie sitting on the swing on his back porch the first time she visited DDR with her grandfather. One leg dangled from the swing, the tip of her toe reached the floor for a slight sway, and she watched Tres from behind long bangs like a spy through a cracked door.

But in Tres' dream, Joie was a woman dressed in the riding clothes she wore astride Itsy that day on the boulevard when a fawn made children laugh, and Renee pressed against his arm, and Joie rounded the corner.

Tres opened his mouth to speak to her, but nothing came out. Still, Joie knew what he intended to say, and told him not to say *I love you*, not look at her, not kiss her so sweetly there, sitting on the back porch. He woke up and cried for only the second time since childhood, when ruthless men had robbed DDR.

He *wouldn't* speak out to his mother at the most critical times, and now he *couldn't* speak to Joie. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out why his mother had such power to make him, even for a second, do or say anything that would in the slightest way betray his loyalty and devotion to the woman he claimed to love. Yet he had so many times. He didn't blame his mother for his own shortcomings, and certainly not for his weakness with Renee, but there was something about their relationship that he couldn't figure out...

During the months that followed his mistakes in New Orleans, Annette started spending weeknights in Tres' guest room. One evening after classes, she reminded him about how it took three weeks of serious discussion at Quilted Bay to convince Joie to marry him. "But she didn't hesitate because she didn't love you. She does. I know she does. But that doesn't mean she can forgive you." Annette was propped up against a flowered silk upholstered headboard and down pillows while Tres sat crossed legged facing her. Reaching out to hold his hand, she had to admit, "Look, you could have been a better husband. You detested all of mother's attitudes and beatitudes, but you stood by and watched her do and say awful things. All that condescension and conniving and wickedness, and that perverted sense of *noblesse oblige*. You were so good to Joie and her family in so many ways, but some things you just can't make up for."

Overcome with the enormity of the truth and guilt he had been unable to assuage, he needed someone who knew the whole truth, to tell him he still had a chance, to support him—the way Joie's family supported each other. "There's something else."

"When I was in New Orleans at that last auction..." He kept his gaze on Annette's smiling face. "Renee was there..."

When he continued after a long pause with, "... at the Sonesta," her eyes went glassy.

How would he handle it if he had to see two long paths of tears, the way she cried as a child when she confronted their mother? Instead, she sat calmly through the end, when Tres summed up with, "... so I left. And that was that."

Annette slapped Tres across his face with a force that sent him reeling back on his elbows, the third time he was slapped by a woman who professed love for him.

"How could you!"

“Jesus, Nettie!” Tres reached for his kerchief. The blood matched the tiny roses Joie had embroidered in the corners. He couldn’t stop staring as it migrated into the roses.

When he finally looked at Annette, this controlled, cautious woman who had never once in her life been able to confront anyone in anger, she sat erect, her chest puffed out and her chin lifted. Her eyes had gone dry. Tres realized he had really *hoped* for his sister’s tears.

“After all she put up with from this *family*!” Annette screamed at Tres louder than he had ever heard in her life. “Do I have to remind you of Christmas? And your birthday? You bastard. She stuck by you, and you did that after she had been gone only a few weeks! You don’t *deserve* to be forgiven!”

She stood, started pacing back and forth across the room. “It’s not just our parents who did her wrong. It’s *you*. And this whole damned society we were born to.” Then she stopped right in front of him and poked a finger in his face. “*You!* You’re to blame! You brought her into situations you should have known would destroy her! All that crap about, *so what was your mother’s name, my dear?* Just as well could have held up a sign saying *you don’t belong here!*”

Tres had been praying his sister would assure him he still had a chance, perhaps even inspire him with a suggestion of how he might win Joie back. And he thought, if his braveness held out, he might tell her the other secret he had kept even from Joie. But by the time Annette threw herself into her pillows and started crying, Tres realized her slap was a dose of truth too large to leave room for more, and her tears were his farewell note.

He kissed Annette on the back of her head, offered, “Thank you, dear sister,” then went to find the maid to see if she could remove the blood from his kerchief. When he couldn’t find her, he decided to allow the blood to remain long enough to stain the cloth permanently.

Chapter 38

Joie let her brother sleep while she grabbed socks, boots, and a shift, then tiptoed out into the kitchen. MawMaw and PawPaw had already come over, and the unexpected perfume of chicory coffee comforted Joie, until she saw her grandparents' creased faces of surrender. A wordless response to her whisper of *bienvenue* yanked her into the cold reality of the morning. This was not a time for smiles and politesse.

PawPaw put down his cup and walked out the back door.

Joie finished dressing.

Crates Joie packed the night before sat in a corner of the kitchen, beside them, PawPaw and MawMaw's belongings, ready to be loaded onto the long flat cart PawPaw normally stacked with vegetables he was again able to sell. Deep in the corner, Joie discovered a box packed with sentimentals, to which she was sure her father would have objected for the wasting of precious space, had he known. Inside lay MawMaw's kitchen wall picture—the print of Lord Jesus shellacked onto a thin five-inch by ten-inch remnant of the wood PawPaw used to build a cabinet for her dishes. Dressed in a virgin white robe, the blood-red heart on His chest resembled both His physical heart and the shape that represents love, and it glowed with outbound rays of light much in the same way radiant shafts emanated from His head. She remembered how, as a child, the gentle eyes of longhaired, bearded Jesus followed her everywhere she walked, and she wondered whether He watched her when she wasn't looking.

Beneath the picture lay Joie's diploma and the *Song of Songs* plaque. Tres had begged Joey to bring it to Joie when he retrieved her clothes and Itsy, but Joey handed them over to MawMaw for safekeeping, until the time came when his sister was ready to relive old memories.

Her heart quickened, but she quickly slid it back into the box. This wasn't the time for emotion.

MawMaw poured *café au lait* into an old blue tin cup with starry specks in the paint, handed it to Joie with two biscuits wrapped in Jules's newspaper, and nodded sideways toward the door. *Work now.*

Outside, dawn's slight glow shone on a pile of planks and boards, the remains of an abandoned chicken coop fallen prey to the mallets of men in need of wood for windows and doors. Each family had left their share near their tall rows of steps the night before—it was bad juju to board up until the last minutes, as the protective saints would not turn away the storm if people were too eager to accept it.

Jules sloshed around the edge of PawPaw's garden, coming from the barn around to the back steps. On his shoulders hung collars and long-reins that led the horses required to pull wagons. Itsy wasn't included. Though her breed was suitable for light carriages, her thin legs could not heave weighted carts through the depth of mire they were sure to travel. The thick hindquarters and trunky legs of heavy draft horses were the only suitable option. This was a time for logical thinking.

Joie still stood on the back porch when MawMaw came outside and patted her on the bottom to tell her to stop lollygagging. She wore her ruby ring.

At the bottom of the steps beside the stack of wood, PawPaw tied on his scratched and beaten tool apron now bound together with twine. A hammer occupied one pocket. The other two bulged with nails.

Jules pointed a long finger at the carts and hung two pair of collars and harness on Joie's arms and shoulders. He scaled the steps in trios, and before Joie completely tacked the first pair, her brothers appeared in varying degrees of readiness—tin cup and newspapered biscuits in one hand, unadorned clothing in the other—Jules on their heels. Not a word had yet been spoken.

By all indications, the morning could have been one of early spring, when warm winds sweep away the cool of night and clouds form at their bisecting temperatures. But it wasn't spring, and the Live Oaks were still dressed in deep green leaves that swayed and glistened with morning dew like a naïve child not knowing he was about to be struck. The customary cackling, neighing, lowing, and braying of animals to be fed offered none of the ethereal effects normally witnessed, not that last morning on the peninsula, and the negligible light that had tried so hard to appear was already waning. Clamor replaced silence, chaos tranquility. The hellishness of *Valerie's* violence stung their hearts. The winds sang the piercing cries of their land.

Once released from the barn, the goats and pigs ran with the cows for a while, doing their best to distance themselves from the bending trees and double whistling of wind as it echoed first through limbs and leaves, then the tucks and folds of their ears. Then they returned, desperate to regain their sense of safety, to seek out the sanctuary of their plotted-out homes sheltered only by thin planks of warped wood and rusty sheets of tin, more frightened of homelessness than any storm. They compressed themselves into packs of like kind or paced with tails tucked deeply into their loins. They shortened the distance between front feet and rear. They cowered with rounded backs. Joie turned away from them. She was afraid to ask her father if they could tie

Itsy onto the back of one of the wagons so she could go with them, afraid to hear a *No* she couldn't question, though there could be no reasonable explanation as to why not.

After she tacked the second pair of draft horses, Joie saddled Itsy and drove the animals toward a crest at the mouth of the peninsula. *Maybe it'll remain above the water line... maybe the levees won't break... maybe life as we know it won't end.* She slapped herself across the face.

Joie and Itsy started back to the house. The sky was darkening by the minute. Tiny patches of light shrank until they were pinched off by the hurricane's far-reaching swirl of clouds. Would the pecan grove survive... the place where she and Tres shared their first days, where a log still lay with initials carved on one end, its other end packed in one of MawMaw's crates. In her head, Joie missed Tres and their lives together, but she couldn't feel it in her heart.

After Joie cut Tres from her life, it wasn't the automobiles, custom-sewn dresses, or even the grooms that she missed most about life with him and the Duchande money. What she missed was his love. What she regretted was the return of her family's pennilessness. Money was important to her family, to all the extended family. They had very little, and very little prospect for obtaining it, and though they caught, shot, or grew most of their food, and traded for flour, coffee, and grain, money was still needed for muslin, shoes, and medical care. Joie made the sign of the cross, thankful that PawPaw could once again sell his vegetables and services now that she had left Tres.

The Duchande money removed the worrisomeness of the *not having*, and as much as Tres' boundless generosity honored Joie's family, it had inflamed his family to an equal and opposite extreme. In retribution for Joie not accepting her place in the world, Mrs. Duchande had injected her venom. If venom is injected just a little bit at a time, you don't even notice that

you're being poisoned. Until it's almost too late. Was the *me* she once thought herself to be dead? Maybe it was better if it were.

Wind blew the rain sideways. Leaves whirled into thick blankets. How tired she was from staying up all night. She was allowing Itsy to walk.

She picked up a trot.

Would the insects fly away with the birds? Did the chickens still know they could fly up into the treetops. Would the beehives float?

She picked up a gallop.

Itsy took to the air over rusty tracks that once carried locomotives past the peninsula. She stretched out almost flat to fly far past the opposite ends of the warped ties and cockeyed old rails. But Joie's judgment as to where the rails lay failed. She wasn't thinking straight and had cued her mare to jump too soon. The back edge of Itsy's right front foot came down on the far edge of a tie hidden beneath the leaves. Her hoof pivoted. Her leg pitched forward and, along with it, her body and Joie's.

Itsy's other three legs splayed in determination to stay righted. Her neck twisted around to where her nose almost touched her left shoulder, forcing herself with all her might to balance. For the briefest of moments, Joie thought she would. But then the whites of Itsy's eyes showed, and the flat note of her horrid scream pierced Joie's ears with what no horse lover can bear. They hit the ground some ten feet beyond the tracks.

Joie stared into the multitude of whites and grays. A ballet swooped through the sky, and Joie desired nothing more than to let their dance enthrall her without end. But then she heard the labored grunts of her friend, and her grandfather's soul-warming beckon, *Tooda, come home*.

Still, Joie didn't want to leave the hypnotic show. She wanted to let the pirouetting cloud-ghosts sweep her up for an aerial tour.

PawPaw called louder.

Joie's eyelids forced themselves into rest.

She tried to answer her grandfather but couldn't get her lips to separate or her tongue to help, and took a great breath time and time again, forcing her body to speak, to emit any kind of sound that would let PawPaw know she wasn't ignoring him... *I hear you!* Only a rumbling came forth. PawPaw's warm, craggy old hand smoothed his granddaughter's hair. The enchantment of his love insisted she come.

Valerie's raindrops splashed soundlessly. Frame by frame, Joie watched their splatter slow until each single drop that landed on Joie's face and chest, and Itsy and her saddle and everything around them, exploded into a dozen tiny fragments. The clouds decelerated with the diminishment of the earth's spin, and the vacuum it created formed a vortex, drawing Joie upward, sucking her into the heights of a tunnel toward high, clear skies when she again heard the cry of her grandfather begging she come, and suddenly she was back with Itsy.

The raindrops moved naturally, a light tap when they landed.

The clouds rode the wind, the leaves rattled again, and they were there, she and Itsy, beside the tracks in the mud her body displaced when it crumpled.

Joie could again hear all the sounds of her world, except for Itsy's breath.

Chapter 39

The night before the hurricane, DDR ranch hands worked without stop to board and brace every window and doorway of both Duchande houses, the cowboy cabin, and the supply sheds. They battened down the stables, whose exterior walls had been constructed with two layers of solid brick to stabilize six-by-six oak beams and two-by-six interior wall planks. The main barn housed over thirty mares, geldings, colts, and fillies, and the small barn all three of the Duchandes' champion bloodline stallions in totally compartmentalized stalls with individual running paddocks.

The cattle were on their own, but the land was high and their only foes were the howling wind and the debris it carried. The animals were as safe as they could possibly be when, the following morning, Mr. and Mrs. Duchande announced that they decided to wait out the storm in their home.

Tres' jaw dropped. He started shaking his head, saying, "No... no... you can't really mean to stay!"

Lillian jutted out her chin. "And why not. This house will withstand any storm."

They stood in the darkness of his father's library, a persistent wind already vibrating the French doors through their shutters, and Tres couldn't understand what on earth could be more valuable than their lives, but then, he really did know.

They wouldn't leave their lovely home and their prized bulls, studs, and broodmares to vandals—their home was built by the best architects in the state and would certainly withstand *Valerie's* attack.

Annette tugged on Dom's suitcoat. "Father, please, this is a bad one."

Nadine echoed, "Yessuh, real bad."

But Dom ignored them all.

When the ranch foreman nodded, saying, "Real bad," Dom waved an arm toward Annette's luggage.

He told the man to grab a bag and, outside, instructed him to find someone to stay and care for the animals. The foreman stared at his boss for long seconds, until Dom demanded, "Now!"

He trudged back toward the house fifteen minutes later, finding Dom and Tres saying goodbye to Annette at her car. After she sped off, the foreman simply shook his head at his boss.

Dom stormed off to the cowboy cabin, Tres following, finding only three remaining. "You." He pointed, but the first cowboy shook his head, grabbed his duffel, and walked out. When the second did the same, Dom turned to the third. "You ever want to be more than a water boy or a cooler, you'll take care of these animals." When the boy didn't say no, Dom turned back to the house.

Tres had been standing behind his father, watching, and everything clicked in his mind. He had gone through his entire life trying to make these basically good people more sensitive to others and their ways, when all along, the premise upon which his efforts were built—that they were fine people who were just getting caught up in the society life and their errors in judgment were a result of mislaid loyalties—was wrong. His parents were not fine people. They were

close-minded people, true, Tres had known that for many years, but it took the immensity of the tragedy at hand to make him realize that it was their love of society itself that drove their behavior. They were the engine, the propagators of the life v. property mentality, not the victims of a cruel society. He couldn't blame their faults on society or anyone in it. His own parents were the ones who led the whole gang of misguided minions.

How might he have lived his life with this new realization? How did it come to be that he was so lost in someone else that her love came to be the only sane thing in his world? The probability that Joie no longer loved him was not a reality he had to accept. As his father strolled up the hill and walked back into the kitchen, Tres ran around to the front of the house and sped off in his Ford.

The road that led to the peninsula was already treacherous, and the wind blew harder with every yard he traveled. Leaves circled in whirlwinds around each curve. His tires sunk deeper and deeper into the soft, saturated ground as he entered the lowland.

For a brief moment, the sun seeped through a crack, then disappeared in an instant. *Valerie's* winds shifted, now more easterly. Stronger. The parish would take a direct hit from this hurricane, the diminishing sun yet another sign that the storm now lay its fingertips upon them.

When Tres reached the road at the mouth of the peninsula, he picked up on a peculiar sound, or, *non*-sound. He heard no neighs, barks, lows, or cackles of a single animal. Life was eerily still and unmoving. He killed the motor, strained to hear a peculiar sound he thought he heard yet didn't really, and couldn't identify. After a few seconds, the wind whirred again, the rain thumped on the car's roof, and the lowing of nearby cows returned. Tres restarted the engine and drove on to Mr. Fryoux's house.

When he got out of the car, the odd non-sound returned. The trees stood straight. The leaves lay flat. No one was to be seen, the wind was again absent, and sound had once again been kidnapped into some sort of noise vacuum. He ran to see two wagons hitched on the side of the house. They hadn't left yet.

He ran and turned the corner of Jules's house near the garden.

The family huddled together, some clutching each other, some down on knees.

JoJo nudged Joey and pointed.

A man lay on the ground. The rest of the family encircled him.

Tres stopped in his tracks. "Where's Joie?"

Joey opened his mouth but nothing came out. He shook his head and scrunched up his shoulders.

"What's happened here!"

The others looked up only for a brief second, surely wondering why on Earth he'd show up here. As much as these people cared for him, Tres wasn't sure he was welcome, after everything the Duchandes put their Joie through.

"Tell me!" Tres shook Joey's shoulders.

"He fell." Joey pointed up to a half-boarded window twenty feet above their heads.

Tres ran to one after another, asking, "Where is she?"

Those who weren't crying stood petrified; those who were, cried louder. He went back to Joey, begging *please*.

"She left on Itsy to herd the animals to the bluff," Joey finally spit out.

"West? I just came from that way. Where is she if she's not here? How long ago did she leave? Shouldn't she be back by now?"

Joey was nodding as though his head dangled from a chain, saying, “Yes... yes... yes.”
Then, “A hour... yes... a few minutes, maybe twenty... Tres, you know it’s not far.”

MawMaw finally turned to Tres with sunken eyes. “Find Joie.”

Chapter 40

Joie left her beloved companion in the mud. She had to get to home.

Tooda... Tooda.

Through pastures and bogs that all melded one into the next, she ventured farther and farther into an unending maze. She and her horses had made their way through these woods on moonless nights hundreds of times, but now she traversed foreign elements of some far-off country whose endemic trees she did not recognize, nor its underbrush, nor its stench of upturned leaves layered year after year and now half rotted into compost. She searched in ever-widening circles. If only she could find the path she and Joey and Patches used as a shortcut to steal a race from their older brothers when they were children. But Spanish Daggers sliced and punctured her legs, and great lengths of blackberry vines latched onto her dress like barbed wire to shred her flesh and refuse passage. When PawPaw called again, she remembered how he told her about the rotation of hurricane clouds.

To look overhead was to stare into hell, where walls and ceilings of agitated clouds occupied all different levels of the sky and rolled in all directions, and Joie couldn't see where the whole of the mass was going. *Trust in the Lord with all your heart... he will make your path straight...*

She turned her face to the heavens and closed her eyes, desperate to still her mind. She opened her arms to the sky, and waited. When she reopened them, the sun tore a slice through

the layers of gray and, in their closing, bit by bit they cloaked the sun from right to left to reveal the direction of the clouds.

... remember, they turn counterclockwise...

Home was behind her.

Joie turned around. There! She and Tres' fallen pecan tree! And just beyond the fattest part of its trunk, the old trail. She followed its smooth coat of flattened leaves to the end of the pasture her family's cows grazed upon. Her legs screamed but carried her faster than ever across the expanse until she reached the pod of magnolia trees that shaded the front of her house.

She ran beyond the trees and between her and PawPaw's houses to see her family in humble deference, on knees, bowing, blocking her view of... something... what was it... and time again stretched into exaggerated expanses of silent moments. Each instant stole the place of three, and the rain did not ping, and there was no sound but PawPaw's *Tooda*.

No one scurried to board the last windows, nor rush the last bundles onto the carts. When the group saw Joie after her long-delayed return, saw her without Itsy, saw her blood-stained face, arms, and legs, they turned their heads in panic. Joie thought their open-mouthed, wide-eyed horror was wholly overstated. She was clearly in one piece with barely a limp from the ankle Itsy fell upon. When they turned to face her, she saw what they bowed over.

MawMaw knelt in the grass muddied from the garden's overflow. She leaned over PawPaw.

Joey sprinted to Joie and grasped both shoulders. He blocked her view. All she could say was *what*. Not a question, more like a noun, like *house*, or *cat*, or *dog*. Joey said her name and a few words she couldn't comprehend. She pushed him to get out of the way. Then she could see PawPaw again.

Joey started pulling on her, but her legs wouldn't move. He yanked her arm and pulled on her shoulder until they reached PawPaw's side, and Joie's knees collapsed opposite from her grandmother.

MawMaw's left hand cupped PawPaw's face. Her right arm cradled his head so he could see the family. She bent low to whisper whatever it is soon-to-be widows whisper into their husbands' ears in the closing moments of the fifty years they shared. Odd, how Joie couldn't see any tears come out of MawMaw's eyes. Her grandmother must have had some but they all disappeared into the raindrops as though they had never been.

"P'Paw. P'Paw, please—"

MawMaw's hand left PawPaw's face to grab Joie. Joey held her stable, and the others, Joie's faceless family, bundled into a solid circle around their patriarch.

MawMaw whispered her final words in PawPaw's ear, then looked back up to Joie and said, "He waited."

He couldn't die. He just couldn't!

His eyes opened intermittently, but his wrinkly forehead and gray eyebrows sunk down heavy and made it too hard to lift his lids.

In those last seconds when he held his eyes open, he turned to see his granddaughter. His hand shivered as he reached up to touch her cheek, and she couldn't help but kiss him, his hand, his cheeks, his eyelids, his browned head, until she heard the barely distinguishable words that would become his last, when he breathed, "Sometime... it's just... *not yet*," and faded.

She knew he was telling her to stop running from everything and let life catch up with her. That things would be okay. She had heard his story many times. *God, He don't want for us to run, Tooda. That's why He give us them weapons 'gainst evil: sword of the Spirit;*

breastplate of righteousness; shield of faith... but they don't work 'less we stand strong and face the danger, else we run and expose our bare back. Wait, girl... face what you got to.

* * * * *

While boarding up an attic window, PawPaw had lost his footing on the wet ladder and fallen all the way down to the ground, so far below.

Unrestrained weeping of old women in mud-laden aprons, and the disquieted coughs of men desperate to smother their sobs, imprinted the image now so firmly planted within a permanently cordoned-off place in Joie's heart and soul. PawPaw wanted to see her face just one more time. But the gash in his temple flooded his left eye, and the blood spilled across the bridge of his nose and into his right, and Joie wondered if he saw her at all.

Cousin Alice trudged over to MawMaw's house for a quilt. They wrapped PawPaw in it. Joie hated that Cousin Alice made them cover PawPaw's face.

Joie's grandfather lay motionless beside his garden. Wind thrashed the rain into pelting sheets that soaked PawPaw and the clean old quilt that would no longer warm his and his wife's bodies on cold, drafty nights.

"Please, Cousin Alice, please let me see his face again."

"*Non, cher*, best he wrapped complete."

So Joie's grandfather lay next to his prized plot like a cocoon plucked from a tree, the beauty of God's most brilliant of creatures tucked within.

Joey and Jules pulled the spades off the wagon and started digging into the soupy mud of PawPaw's garden, but the hole collapsed with every scoop. Joie sat beside MawMaw, watched her rock back and forth, plopped down in the muddy grass beside PawPaw while the men piled

up liquefying earth in a way PawPaw never would have expected to see in his garden. She tried to shield her grandmother from the splotch of red that seeped through the quilt.

Chapter 41

Tres took the car back the way he had come and turned onto the trail that led to the bluff, but fallen branches blocked his way. He got out and ran down the path, but it narrowed only a few feet ahead, and past that it was no longer a path. If Joie had come this way with the animals, he wouldn't be able to track their route.

He must be near the old pecan tree he and Joie once leaned against, and the monstrous blackberry patch where Joie collected berries to make his cobbler. But nothing looked right. He was scared that he would get lost when he remembered a story Joie told him when they were expected for Christmas Eve supper with his parents. She had been scurrying around the house trying to make sure Tres' clothes had the perfect crease and her hair the perfect twist, and making perfect all the other details she fretted over before meetings with her in-laws, and she was running late because she couldn't find the wax polish she needed to shine Tres' boots. She had looked everywhere three times before she decided to just stop for a moment, close her eyes, take a deep breath, and say, *Okay God, I could use a little help here.* When she opened her eyes, she saw the wax sitting on the shelf right in front of her, where she had checked three times.

Tres closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and recited his wife's plea to God. Then he waited. Five seconds... ten seconds... after fifteen, he opened his eyes. Through the trees in front of him he saw something white among a blanket of brown leaves. He stepped forward, afraid of what he might see when a second splotch of white came into view, then a familiar form.

He ran as fast as he could into the clearing, tripping on something hidden in the leaves and lurching face forward, sliding in the mud into the white-stockinged form that was his wife's beloved Itsy.

“Joie! Joie!”

But she was nowhere in sight. He doubled back and doubled back until he figured she must have found her way home again. He ran back to his car and drove to Jules's house again, where he found Joie beside the garden with MawMaw, both of them staring at the dead body ready to be lowered into a muddy hole.

Joie was swaying side to side. Her lips trembled when she looked up. Maybe, just maybe, there still lived a flame inside her that might ache for him. He ran to her, and when she rose to greet him, Tres wondered how it was that she could again forgive him.

“I thought maybe you could use a friend.” That's all he could say, so he held her through her sobs until she could speak.

She finally looked up and pointed to the hole in the garden. “Tres, P'Paw, the water'll wash him out!”

“No. I won't let that happen.” Tres opened the top of the red convertible he got for his twenty-fifth birthday, called, “Joey, come give me a hand,” and the two slid PawPaw's dead body onto the back seat, where his head rested on MawMaw's lap in stinging rain he'd never feel.

Tres drove Joie, MawMaw, and PawPaw's body as fast as he could to the hospital, where he convinced old Dr. Spedale to store PawPaw's body in the morgue so the Fryoux' wouldn't have to worry about the floods washing PawPaw out of his grave and down into the delta never to be found again, and the old patriarch could have a Christian burial when they returned. The

Rhodes J. Spedale Hospital, constructed of concrete blocks in 1924, could withstand hurricane-force winds, and even if *Valerie* tore off its roof, the morgue was self-contained in the basement.

Tres only hoped it wouldn't flood.

The nurses got poor old PawPaw's body all cleaned up, wrapped him in crisp, white hospital linens, and rolled him into a cooler no different from a meat closet. Five other gurneys lined the walls, each with a body folded as tight as a papoose in fresh, unwrinkled linen that smelled of hospital disinfectant.

They had covered PawPaw's face again, and Tres was thankful not to be forced to tear Joie and MawMaw from his side. They reached out for one last kiss to the forehead, and then fled, headed northwest.

Chapter 42

Joie didn't remember much from that morning. She remembered how it poured so hard and sideways that her eyelashes couldn't stop the rain from sheeting her eyeballs like water on a windshield. The gully below her nostrils overflowed with backwash from her top lip and flooded her sinuses, so she had to breathe through her mouth, keeping her head tilted downward because the rain flew in all the way to the back of her throat and choked her. The rain stung like red ants, ting, ting, ting, until the flesh on her face and hands and arms numbed themselves.

She remembered PawPaw's final words, and how Tres came and scooped up what little bit of sanity she still possessed, sitting her and Bear in the front seat of his car. But she remembered nothing else until they stopped and picked up L.J. Rivet, who had made it all the way up from White Castle before a wagon wheel broke off. The bodies of his wife and three-year-old daughter lay dead beside the road, catapulted into the mud and crushed by a flying wooden crate L.J. had painstakingly pieced together to protect his wife's and baby's keepsakes—wedding and baptismal dresses, silver hairbrush and first spoon.

Tres forced him to leave everything behind.

Half a mile further, they stopped to pick up old Mrs. Haydel, the Turnerville midwife. She left behind her crippled husband—he pitched forward out of his wheelchair into mud and ankle-deep water in the yard behind their house while Mrs. Haydel packed the last of their valuables. He drowned on the spot.

In West Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana Highway 1 brought them near the Port Allen train station. Men, women, and children screamed and begged them to stop, mothers with their palms pressed together. No trains would rescue them. They jumped onto the car's bumpers and held on as long as they could.

Tugboats clanked upriver alongside them, riding a river so swollen with storm surge that they appeared to float above the levees. They dodged uprooted trees that bobbed and weaved with the occasional man clinging on for dear life. Those on the levee did their best to reach them, shouting *Here, grab it!* but the branch they extended was never long enough nor the floater strong enough to swim to the river's edge, there, at the top of levees that would soon melt and inhale every last one of them.

No more souls fit inside Tres' car. The bumpers and hood were too slippery to host hitchhikers. They left them all behind to die.

With the storm at their backs three hours later, they reached towns whose residents still boarded windows and did their best to prepare for travel. Psalm 23 seeped into Joie's consciousness. ...*He makes me lie down in green pastures...* She thought of Itsy, the way she saw her beautiful mare through the French doors, her head lifted high and proud in the green pasture that was her home. Had Itsy missed her mother, as Joie did in times such as these, when panic set in, when blinding jolts of lightning cut away the darkness and shook the ground? Had Itsy comprehended her mortality as she lay crumpled in mud with a broken neck? Had Joie's mother been aware of her own mortality?

And PawPaw?

* * * * *

Before turning north, Jules, Joey, and the extended family drove carriages and carts west toward Lafayette to reach a road further from the river and on slightly higher land—better suited for horses and wagons.

Joey managed to bring along his Catahoula when he left the peninsula but was forced to choose human life over dog as he passed endless lines of wretched souls. He stopped his horses, walked his old hound off into the palmettos on the side of the road, and shot him. He threw his coon rifle down to the ground and left it beside his dog so he'd never have to see it again, then fit the Saurages' two toddlers on Hound's seat.

* * * * *

The water rose higher and higher through the late-night hours of October 20. The Cajuns who lived deep in the swamps below New Orleans watched it. *Just a little wind comin' up*, they thought. *When the wind change, the river, she'll go down again.* Then it rose a little more, and they began to wonder if maybe a big storm was coming.

No warning traveled to the deep-swamp dwellers. Their remote homesites left them to infer what they might from the wind and rising water. *The water, she always rise with this kind of wind.*

They battened the windows. They went inside to wait. The wind grew.

The skies turned shades of smoky gray lavenders.

The rain came. *Here it come.*

Relentless fists of rain beat on the walls of their houses. *She be a strong storm, this one.*

The waters did not recede. The river and bayous rose higher. The wind changed direction. At three o'clock in the morning, deep-swamp dwellers below New Orleans realized

this was more than a storm. Terrebonne Parish and Isle de Jean Charles, Fourchon, and Grand Isle disappeared.

Inland of the Gulf Coast, within the hundreds of square miles of swamp, some men left their families behind to fight their way toward the river for news from those who lived closer to the information circuit. Some didn't make it. Those who did found flocks of their neighbors along the levee and climbed up to see the river only inches from the top.

They watched the occasional tugboat groan its way upriver with the surge, passing scores of Cajuns, Creoles, and Negroes flailing their arms and screaming against the wind: *come for our infant child... just my baby... one more family I beg of you, Captain.* The boats navigated through uprooted trees, busted fencing, and mewling cows caught on sandbars behind tide pools now submerged under a mile-wide river.

By the time inland fathers and husbands found their way to enlightening news, it was too late to go back to rescue their families. Inside their homes, mothers and children huddled in far corners away from the wind. The gales blew in the window glass. The water crept up the stilts under their homes. The cow floated away. The chicken coop drifted into the trees. The steps creaked and squeaked until they finally tore free.

The roof flew off. And still the water rose. It flowed into their homes over the thresholds and seeped in through the wallboards. Mothers grasped their children with all their strength until the floors swayed ever-so gracefully and the stilts slid out from under them.

For a few lucky families, parts of their homes floated long enough for the strongest to reach the rafters, where they could breathe a while longer, until the houses slammed into trees and wedged themselves unmoving while the waters continued to rise around and through their homes.

Men who did venture back upon hearing news were washed away along with their horses and carriages.

Governor O.H. Simpson, in office only a few months subsequent to the death of his predecessor, granted New Orleans permission to save itself. Huey P. Long would win the campaign a few months later, citing the immense loss of life that resulted from Simpson's order for the Corps of Engineers to blow up the west-side levees south of the city.

The waters flooded into the delta to ease the pressure within the riverbanks, spreading out freely into the surrounding marshland before it crept northward with the wind and surge all the way up past the Fryoux peninsula.

Delta waters rose as high as the river within her banks, but New Orleans had been saved, nestled within a deep crescent of levees that followed the great curve of the Mississippi, the grand Lake Ponchartrain at its back.

North of New Orleans, the bayous that fed into the deep delta and the river met the resistance of their high waters, forcing the bayous past their banks further than anyone could have anticipated.

Dozens of bayous joined themselves and made lakes of homesites. The peninsula flooded with bayou water first. Then the levee at that first great curve at the mouth of the peninsula broke and its waters joined the bayou lake to form the vicious anger called a flood. The peninsula had long been evacuated when two feet of rain found its way onto land and into ditches and creeks and bayous already high from the storm surge and the salvation of New Orleans.

The winds grew to a hundred miles per hour. Then 110, 120. By the time they reached 140 miles per hour, most of the deep-swamp dwellers were already dead. White-tops crowned

waves up to thirteen feet tall, riding high atop a northbound twenty-foot surge from the Gulf that joined the Mississippi River water that escaped through broken levees.

The Fryoux peninsula drowned under thirty feet of water.

PART FOUR

Creation

Chapter 43

In Ville Platte, the seat of Evangeline Parish, Joie stayed close to MawMaw, stuffing a fresh kerchief into the old woman's fist once each hour—her husband was dead, and her son and grandsons still hadn't shown up.

"M'Maw, here, at least have some chicken broth."

But MawMaw waved her away time and again when she brought coffee, broth, and even a crust of bread with butter. She sat at the window in a rocker similar to the one her husband had made, now tied onto her grandson's wagon, and she talked about how PawPaw shaved her legs twice each week, sitting in that rocker on her back porch. She could only ask what that back porch looked like now. Outside, the rain came steady, but they had outrun the harsh winds, and drops fell at barely an angle.

At midnight, MawMaw pointed out the window. "A lantern!"

Joey led a caravan of four wagons. Another eight had headed to Mamou, and ten more would continue toward other relatives in Pine Prairie.

Joie stayed busy tending to MawMaw and Joey until nearly two o'clock, when they all lay out on quilts and fell asleep from exhaustion.

Tres tried to lay next to Joie, but Joey wedged in.

The second night, Tres again tried to secure a spot next to Joie, but Joey intervened again. Was Joie trying to avoid him?

In the morning, having stayed awake most of the night trying to figure out how he might share his secrets with Joie, she had awakened him with a cup of coffee and brushed his hair from his eyes, saying, "Let's take a walk. It stopped raining."

Joey had wanted to walk with them, but Joie had said no, and they had walked silently for several minutes before she asked, "What'll happen to us when we get home?"

"That might depend on what happens while we're here." Tres was building toward a confession, trying to put the words in place.

"I'm not talking about the storm and the peninsula... I meant... what'll happen between *us*."

"Well, I guess that depends on how we can reconcile ourselves to what's happened this last year."

"But I don't want to think about any of that. Nothing but bad has happened this past year, and when you got to the peninsula and said you thought I could use a friend, it hit me, that you are a friend. Even closer to me than Joey. But I still don't see how we can survive in public any more than my friendship with Debbie and Maggie."

"That's what you want from me then?" His shoulders sagged. "Just friendship?"

"That's not what I meant. But if we can't even be friends in public, how can we be more?"

"Do you really think that I'd let my mother hurt us ever again?"

Joie opened her mouth, but long seconds crawled by before she shook her head and said, "Tres, there's nothing you can do to protect my family from being ruined. Even if the peninsula survives, your mother'll blackball us again, and my family won't be able to sustain itself. She prevented our sales of produce, pecans, and sardine bait, and the few aprons M'Maw sews, and

P’Paw’s tool sharpening... the next things on the list will be cane cutting and the few logs they collect.” With tears in her eyes, she tried to look him in the face but couldn’t. “Be honest with me—can you figure out a way to prevent that?”

“So it’s futile then? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

“I guess I’m not trying to *tell* you anything. I’m just talking about my thoughts, and I can’t figure it out.”

“There’s got to be a way.” He sighed. “Anyway, we don’t have to figure this out right now, when we don’t even know what’s going on down south.”

“Ironical, isn’t it, that if the peninsula is ruined, the family is ruined, but then your mother wouldn’t have any leverage to hurt us.” She squinted her eyes and turned her palms to heaven.

“But if the peninsula and my family are saved, then we’re back to where we started and you and I are ruined as a couple.”

“There might be other things that could ruin us as a couple.”

“Such as?”

“Renee.”

“Jesus, Tres. Her again? She never really bothered me that much, I mean, not after I finally got my head straight about her, so there’s no reason to worry about her. It’s just your mother that has me worried.” It had started to sprinkle again, and Joie headed off. “Come on, let’s go back.”

“Wait, Joie, I mean it.” He grabbed her arm. “We need to talk about what happened with me and Renee.”

She shook loose and started running back to the house, shouting, “I don’t care!” over her shoulder.

* * * * *

But she would care. Tres had to decide whether he could live with another lie. Even his sister had taken weeks to forgive him for what he'd done in New Orleans. Could he risk his entire future with Joie?

Up ahead, Joie stopped in the rain and turned back. When she gave him a quick smile and reached her hand back for him, he made a decision about his New Orleans transgression. He'd remain silent about that particular secret and try to put it out of his mind.

That night, Tres convinced himself he had made the right decision after Joie left open a space on the floor next to her.

Chapter 44

With each mile home, those who decided to return to the delta witnessed increasing ruination. The small fallen twigs the Fryoux wagons rolled upon in Alexandria became hefty branches hurled great distances from their trunks by the time they reached Opelousas. The branches they picked their way through in Opelousas became treetops clipped by fiendish winds and uprooted stumps that were once mother trees in Lafayette, where the Fryoux' were forced to wait a day and allow creeks to further subside and become passable before heading further east.

For five days, they had packed themselves into distant cousins' homes and did nothing but sit, dazedly willing the clock's hands to turn faster. All Joie wanted was to get home and say *hello house, hello Live Oaks and cypress knees and baby crawfish ditch*. But to what house might she say hello? Where would they live? The land looked like what she had seen in Hammond, from the train on her way home for Christmas. Except this was no path of a tornado; it extended as far as the eye could see.

* * * * *

Hours later, their journey led them along the northern skirts of the Atchafalaya swamp, where the immense road planks that had lain upon forever mushy land were now a discombobulated jumble of lumber. Only days before, they floated freely, but when the water receded, they clumped together in piles taller than a man's head.

The men walked before the carriages, replaced those planks not suctioned end over end into the mud, and hoisted the carriages over sections whose planks couldn't be recovered.

Joie begged Tres to stop. "Let me get out to help."

Tres' eyes flew wide. He inhaled a huge gulp of air.

But she grabbed his arm and looked him in the eye, saying, "I have to calm the horses. Trust me."

The strange-looking carnage, unsure footing on mud-slick planks, hooves that sank into the ground in the crevices, and the shouting of directions from their owners and from all the others in surrounding carriages, challenged the animals' normally clement character. The best thing Joie could do was be a kind and reassuring voice, though her own self-assuredness had crumbled back when Itsy had collapsed.

To allow herself to think of life without PawPaw was inconceivable. To allow herself to think about anything that was happening or of what would become of her family in the future was equally unthinkable. She had lost Itsy, held no hope for the remainder of her equine friends, and couldn't envision living some place, any place, remote to the paths over which she and her horses took to the air. Not without her PawPaw.

* * * * *

When they reached Port Allen and stopped for food at a Red Cross shelter set up at the train station, President Coolidge's radio address was playing over the loudspeaker:

"The sun warmed the day of October 21, 1927, only to sixty-one degrees, eighteen degrees short of its normal high. South Louisiana's delta was smothered beneath the clouds and waters of The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927..."

But Tres was trapped inside his head again, thinking about how he almost lost Joie, that he had lived an all-too-brief moment of hope and glory, then lost himself. He *had* to open his eyes to the fallacy of what his family called life, had to hold on to the vision of the day of the storm and the sound of his parents' voices rising above the howling wind and clattering shutters to refuse to leave sticks of furniture, horses, cows, and a house already groaning its surrender.

His mother had gone on and on about how she wasn't going to allow thieves to ransack their belongings in the way looters had raided homes a year ago when yet another hurricane hit Miami, how it ravaged South Florida without slowing down. "That storm," his mother cited, "dropped over two feet of rain in a handful of hours and killed almost 250 souls."

"So why aren't you packing!" he yelled.

His mother only explained that the storm cost nearly one and three-quarters of a billion dollars.

Six years earlier, a hurricane that missed most of Louisiana hit the little islets of Texas and killed a whopping 600. Five years before that in 1915 New Orleans, 275 lost their lives. And in 1900, the biggest of all the storms, *The Twentieth-Century Storm*, took the lives of 8,000 men, women, and children in and around Galveston. Tres' mother had wondered aloud how much that storm cost.

Understanding his parents' mentality about their belongings and their motivation not to flee eased the pain during the long trip home. He tried to think about his new family, how they had trudged their way southeast through almost ninety miles of mud, wondering where they might lay their heads, and knowing, also, that their strong faith had likely already settled them to

the idea of pulling off the tarps that covered the wagons and pitching makeshift tents in a city of refugees.

... the flood overtook 27,000 square miles from Illinois and Missouri down through Louisiana and the Gulf of Mexico..."

The radio address ended, and they started on the last leg downriver to Iberville Parish.

On the small bluff at the base of the peninsula, Joie and Tres stood with Jules, MawMaw, and the boys. They reached for the closest hand to hold when their gazes settled in a way they couldn't before, all the way to the opposite end of what was once a forested peninsula, half of it now a lake, the other half only the barrenness of defiled trees and trash. The Fryoux woods were now a milk-chocolate lake, a memorial to the land of children's games. The stilts of their homes were toothpicks, their paddocks floating trash pastures. Not even an occasional bark from a displaced dog or the low of an alienated calf broke the silence.

Joie kept an eye on her grandmother, wondering how she had managed the last days, how she had stopped crying when her son and Joey had finally showed up in Ville Platte. She had kissed and hugged them, instructed Joie to bring dry towels, and had seemed to suddenly settle into her new role as widow. Even now, MawMaw was holding fast to that same strength that had supported her through past heartaches. With her wisdom, in the midst of such desolation and ruin, they would begin a new history, a history for those of their people yet to come, those to be told the tale of their ancestors' last resting place. And the tale would tell how, after the storm, they no longer maintained their family unit or its culture, but rather were spread about like fallen leaves in November winds.

Though they were all separated, the faith of displaced cousins and aunts and uncles remained intact, and they reminded themselves that March winds blow in April showers, and April showers bear May flowers. They would wait for their gardens to bloom with the riches of their future, a future that could not yet be seen, even through the eyes of faith. Not yet.

* * * * *

After they left the bluff that overlooked the remains of the peninsula, they started toward the Duchande acres. Tres drove the car almost at an idle, same as he had for the route home from Alexandria, but he had followed the wagons on that leg of the trip. Now the wagons followed close behind Tres, none of them anxious to see the destruction of Joie's home in the shadow of the DDR mansion.

But the home the Fryoux men built stood strong and tall.

And on the hill beyond, only the front entryway and pediment of the Duchande mansion still stood. A ghost of its former glory, its white walls glowed gray under the remnants of *Valerie's* clouds, while the wooden walls of Tres and Joie's home seemed to simmer warm and golden though not even a smidgeon of sun showed itself. The fencing, including Itsy's paddock, hadn't a single break.

Tres wanted to see the condition of the barns, but they were further downhill behind the remnants of the mansion, and he decided to drive to Plaquemine first. He wanted to see if Annette had returned from Natchez so she could be with him, and he wanted to see the Iberville Parish sheriff.

For now, they would unpack and assign extra rooms—one for MawMaw, one for Jules, and the third for the boys to share. The men transferred extra beds from MawMaw and Jules's rooms to the boys' room while MawMaw and Joie went to cook.

Tres stood at the open door of the linen closet in search of extra quilts. He was thinking about those long months after Joie went to the doctor's office that last time, how he had opened the door of the food closet to retrieve coffee beans only to notice for the first time in his life that the sugar Joie had stored before her miscarriage was bagged in the flowered cloth Joie wore in the rolling hayfields. The hayfields were flat now. How full and ripe they looked the day of the storm, when they were ready to be harvested, the final cut before winter. How sweet they smelled. He had taken a deep gulp of the aroma before he walked into his parents' home and tried to convince them to leave DDR.

Tres' head was bowed. Joie touched his arm. "What is it?"

"Nothing." He jerked up his head. "I have to go get Annette, then I have to find Jessel."

The day of the storm, his mother had said that they would have had less to worry about if Tres had done his duty and ran against current Parish President Mitchell Ourso. "Man's just like the Lowlanders. No respect for tradition, spelling his name in a new way. A family can't know who they are if they don't know who they've been." Mr. Ourso's grandfather's name had been *Orseau*.

Tres couldn't believe his mother was talking about such nonsense. "What does Mitch have to do with anything?"

"He won't know how to care for the parishioners after the storm." One hand was on a hip and she shook a finger as she spoke. "He won't know what he's doing."

"He's a fine man. I studied law under his daddy." Mitch Ourso was now the beloved, respected, forward-thinking parish president, and his father, Jessel, the sheriff of Iberville Parish. Tres couldn't imagine better men for the task of managing a disaster area.

Incredulous that his mother had spoken of something so trivial at such a time, Tres couldn't get the conversation out his mind as he drove into Baton Rouge to find his sister. Three out of every four homesites lay barren of their structures, and only the thickest Live Oaks still stood. Near the river, the surviving double-brick walls of downtown buildings lay dark, most of them windowless. He found Annette at the old Capitol Hotel and took her to find Jessel.

They followed the sheriff back to the remains of DDR, and Jessel escorted them through the rubble of what had been their birthplace, where Annette debuted and their mother had eliminated so many unworthy debts. Now, long strips of unfinished floor outlined the previous locations of walls. Tres, amazed about the absence not only of the structure, but also of all the material that had once been his home, held his sister's hand to step through the large chunks of roof timber, columns, and crushed marble. There was no sign of the framing, and not even a leftover splinter of furniture. The chests and armoires where they stored their clothes, the china and its cabinet, the demilune where his mother stored their picture albums, not even a pot or a pan remained.

Jessel pointed out the beam that crushed the wind and life from Tres' parents. "Prob'ly a tornado. Your father was there," he said, then, pointing a few inches to the left, "lying next to her. They were holding hands."

His father would never have left his wife, not for anything. It was the one life lesson that he had taught Tres well.

"Jessel, take the girls home. I'll meet you there in a few minutes.

"I'm not leaving you here alone." Joie touched her husband's forearm. "Honey?"

When Tres insisted, Joie walked with Annette and Jessel back to the car but made them leave without her. "I'll just wait out here and walk back with Tres."

* * * * *

When a being of light such as Joie flows into a man's life, it leaves behind the traces of its journey, a trail of lost love like a jumbled rainbow longing to be reshaped into the natural beauty God intended. Nonbelievers may deny the existence of that kind of love, but those who do experience it expect a time will come, at any given moment, *now, they'll see, they'll finally understand*, the moment when the nonbelievers are forced to accept its existence, when the light bulb in their head gives them a big *Ahaa* and they simply *must* renounce life in the abyss.

Tres waited for his parents to find a place in their hearts where they could recant their condemnation of Joie, but it never came. He waited for them to open a piece of their souls to expected grandchildren, but that moment never came no matter how diligently Tres begged God to step in and make it happen. He believed they probably didn't acknowledge it even in those last seconds when they grasped each other for their final breaths, but, still, he did hope God had stepped in and offered the opportunity to see that mankind's sense of being and selfness is drawn not from the land upon which their lives depend, nor the material goods it yields, but from the fabric of their souls. When he heard his parents' denials of the realities of the approaching storm, it was into Tres' mind that He wove the clarity of Joie's beauty, a lusciousness of inner being that he had theretofore never quite fully acknowledged. God exposed the nonfacts and revealed the truths of Tres' life and his parents', lucent truths that emanated from somewhere deep within like shiny, flawless pearls, a glimmering example of the transformation of God's hand. It was Tres who experienced the *Ahaa*.

He left the remains of his parents' home knowing he had to get the story out from behind the walls that had hidden it for so many years and acknowledge it both to himself and to Joie.

He had held the story secret even though he had vowed complete and open honesty at Quilted Bay.

He could only hope that uncovering the truth would give him a solid foundation for a real life that he could rely upon, that God would help tie together his life's strings of enlightenment and with them style closure that would foster self-forgiveness, or some kind of realization, or opportunity to move forward, or whatever else God might intend to reveal. Whatever it was, he had to be brave and strong now, not a coward if he wanted a life with Joie—telling her his secret was the key to his future.

He stepped back over the rubble that had once been his home, through the standing doorway to see Joie there, pulling at her fingers and rubbing her hands together.

The moment was now.

He took her hand. "Quilted Bay?"

Chapter 45

“It’s a long story.” Tres’ forehead was wrinkled with tight lines.

“Okay... What?”

His face looked the same as all those times he’d end up faking a smile to Joie if she asked about his mood. His face dark, his gaze not meeting hers.

“I should have told you before.” He reached for Joie’s hands. “Forgive me?”

“For what? Tres, what’s wrong?”

“Say you’ll forgive me.”

“I will. You know that.”

He finally faced her. “I’ll ask again after I finish.”

Joie squeezed his hands. “Tell me. Whatever it is, we’ll get through it.”

He inhaled deeply. “It was nighttime, but it was really bright outside. I was looking out my bedroom window at a full moon, yellow and huge on the horizon, and I was watching the long shadows long, and everything was so quiet. I was only six, but I remember thinking about all that when then I saw a piece of darkness move in the woods.

“Nadine was gone for the day, and my father had taken his banana Ford to town. Did I ever tell you he painted all his Fords banana yellow? Anyway, on town-meeting nights even back then, the leaders of our community do just like they do now,

passing the night divining the town's commerce, planning its future, and washing it down with fine cognac and scotch. When I was older and started going to the meetings with Father, I found out he parked the Ford in the same spot every time, had for years he said, right in front of Town Hall. It would stay there most of the night. I've often wondered if those men had known that."

At the mention of *those men*, Joie's hand clinched.

Tres looked up and spoke to the clouds. "Anyway, all I saw was that shadow moving through the trees, getting larger as it made its way to the edge of the woods by the corner of our lawn. It turned into the shape of a man when he stepped out of the woods, and he sprinted to my window so fast I couldn't find my voice until he was just a few feet away. I could only scream the first syllable of 'Mommy' before he got to the window and reached through and caught my face with a giant hand. I can still feel how his thumb crushed my left ear, how his palm smashed my lips into my teeth and flattened my nose, and his fingers reached under my jaw all the way across my neck and under my ear." He slid a finger under the back of his jaw. "Where pain knew no limit. He slid through the window, pinned me between his elbow and his hip, and dragged me behind the door. I heard Mother's heels striking the floor harder and faster than normal, then it sounded like she hesitated, just for a moment, before she flung open the bedroom door hard enough to hit the wall, were it not for the Negro and me on his hip." He still couldn't look Joie in the eyes.

"That's when my body flew across the floor and Mother took my place. And that's when I saw he had a knife, a large wing-tipped knife, the kind hunters use to disembowel deer out in the woods. I remember how the knife wasn't shiny. It looked

dull and pitted, like it had been rusting for years, and I remember thinking about how it was so black and old that I wondered whether it could really cut anything. But even a dull knife can slice an abdomen. That's when I started to cry.

"The man said, 'It's only a game.' He grunted it in my mother's ear, said, 'Tell him stop crying,' and when I couldn't stop, he poked me in the stomach with the toe of his boot.

"Most of what happened that night is a blur and could have been a dream if not for the bleeding I suffered when I sat in the outhouse for weeks." Now he took a quick glance at Joie. Had to see just how repulsed she was. But her face was still soft, like normal.

"With no servants in the house," he went on, "and ranch hands in their quarters down the hill, already drunk from whiskey and too far to hear, I suppose the man figured he keep us quiet enough us. That's another reason why I thought maybe he knew Father was in town, like maybe he had been there before.

"Anyway, he shoved my mother across the room and she landed on the edge of my little bed, right next to me. I remember really looking at him for the first time, there at the edge of the bed while he was looking down at us. He was so huge, and he had the biggest, burliest, black beard I've ever seen, even to this day. Then he dropped to his knees and started kissing Mother. Joie, his mouth covered half her face. Mother hated it when Father didn't shave, said it scratched her face, so I told him to stop but he screamed, 'Tell him shut up!' right in Mother's ear.

"He pulled me to my feet, slid the knife into my waistband, and sliced off my underpants." Joie gasped and reached for his hand.

Underpants was all Mother ever made me sleep in, and he did it so fast that I wasn't really aware of what was going on. I was thinking about how Mother's skirt had hiked up and I could see the lacey underpants I had seen only on the drying line, hidden between rows of sheets and towels. Then I thought, maybe if I would have worn something more than underpants, then maybe he couldn't have made me naked so fast and easy, then maybe Mother could have had a chance to knock him over or something. And I was thinking about all of that when I looked down at his nappy head and he was rolling his tongue around it." Tres' gaze led Joie's to his lap. "And it stood up like when I played with it under a rag in the washtub.

He took a deep breath and told Joie, "I guess you're starting to get an idea why it's been so hard for me to tell you about this, but, really Joie, it's not that I was embarrassed to tell you. I think I've just hidden it so deep inside that it was easy to keep it a secret, like it didn't even exist, like it never happened.

"When I looked over at Mother her mouth was hanging open and her eyes were big as coat buttons, and she kept trying to close her legs but they couldn't because the Negro was kneeling right there. Then it didn't stand up anymore, and he started screaming *come awn, come awn*, and he grabbed me around my neck and pushed me back onto the edge of the bed beside mother, and I could hear her breathing, 'The Lord delivers him in times of trouble. The Lord will protect him and preserve his life... and not surrender him to the desire of his foes.' And then he just unbuttoned the straps on his coveralls and we saw he wasn't wearing any underpants. I had never seen any man's private parts, and he grabbed a big handful of mother's hair and forced it down.

“When she had come in the room, that first instant when she saw the man before he pitched me away, I saw her lips mouthing words like she mumbled in church when she inched her rosary along, and before he filled her mouth, she had been breathing her prayers even more silently than a whisper, but after he let go of her hair, she started saying the words out loud and he slapped her face. He laughed, Joie, and he kept laughing even when he lifted me by my neck and turned me to face my mother, and that’s when he tore my flesh.

“He put the knife between his teeth so he could use both hands. He held my shoulder with one hand, and used the other to push himself inside, and my mother reached over my head and she grabbed the knife’s handle and sliced the man’s jaw from his face to where his mouth flapped open. He fell backward and we left him on the floor and ran to the kitchen so we could get to the back door and call for the ranch hands. Except we never got there.

“He had a friend in the house the whole time, a white man, bagging up our silver. The black man was screaming, sounded like a goat cry, and we heard the clang and rattle of our silver when the white man dropped his bag. We met up with him in the hall where it opened up to the foyer and the kitchen. Mother slung me toward the front door and lunged at the sideboard with the ice box. She was just about to reach the pick we left on the box when he tackled her and they hit the floor. The ice pick tumbled down and out of reach and they scrambled for it until Mother flicked it and it slid into the food closet.

“She looked up and told me, ‘Run and hide! Go! Go!’ When I got to the door, I looked back and saw him dragging her down the long hall to her bedroom,

backward, with an elbow locked under her chin. He didn't care a bit about his friend, just kept dragging her down the hall.

"I ran outside and hid in the bushes outside her window. After a while I heard her begging, just pleading with the man to let her pray before he killed her.' It hadn't occurred to me that we could die, and I guess I was too young to realize what he wanted with her. I was just thinking he was going to beat her. And all I heard was Mother asking God to forgive these men, and the man's grunts.

"Vigilantes tracked the open-mouthed black man down to The Point and found him dead. His name was Francis, and he didn't live on The Point, but I guess Mother reasoned away that fact. In her mind, the intruders were Lowlanders, and you all suffered for it.

"The white man, Charlie, was found the following day and hanged for theft and battery—the only part of the story my parents ever told—and the secret of my little sister's conception was never spoken of. I guess at some level I must have known that's why Mother was always so indifferent to Annette. You wouldn't know it, to look at Annette, to think she wasn't my full sister. And maybe Father couldn't ever relate to me because of what happened, because I was a boy.

"There's more. This morning while you and the boys were moving furniture, and I went to check to see if Nadine was back in Addis with her folks, she pulled me aside. She said, 'You got a brother.' She just blurted it out. I guess she didn't know how else to say it. She said, 'He mongoloid.'" Tres stopped, and cried.

When he collected himself, he said, "Turns out, my parents had traveled to Europe for the entire summer two years after they were married, and Mother was four

months pregnant before they sailed. They left the States because my father's mother miscarried two mongoloid babies late in pregnancy, and my mother was petrified with fear. Other than Father, Mother only told Nadine she was pregnant and when it was born five weeks early they left him in a small Sicilian town, in a home. Nadine said that because nobody else knew about the boy, she had to tell me so I could make sure he was taken care of.

"Father and Nadine were the only ones who knew the horror Mother faced when she became pregnant with me and Father refused to abandon his home for the duration. It was the last time Nadine remembers my father really standing up to my mother, refusing to leave town again. Nadine said she thought Mother had matured by the time Annette was due, but she doesn't know about the rapes.

"I guess it was hard for Mother to love a child borne of such violence, but at least I now know what my father meant when he talked about things between man and wife, and about how hard Mother's life had been. I can't say that I agree with them leaving my brother behind, but I think I'm coming to terms with what happened that awful night, and maybe I can see past my mother's cruelty and understand why she was so desperate to control everything she could. I do believe that the violence of that night stole whatever was left of her goodness. And I think that's made me see and understand a lot better about all the pain that plagued you in your loss of everything you ever had.

"I think I've found acceptance of my blindness, and maybe now I can allow my parents to posthumously accept their role in the disaster they crafted. I want to love them postmortem. From our homeland site and the soil of their death I know there can

be a rebirth. Maybe that'll be God's way of answering my earnest prayers that he tell me or show me what to do about our love and the unhappiness I've inflicted on you.

"I promise to do my best to help you now. I know you believe the wisdoms that P'Paw always seemed to draw upon, and though I could never pretend to help to that extent, I do know that P'Paw would never want his beloved granddaughter to rest her head on his grave. And I promise I'll do my best to live wisdoms myself.

"Please forgive me, my sister, my bride."

* * * * *

Joie had lifted her brows when Tres said it was a long story. What could be so important to take his attention away from the scene of his parents' death? She had sat quietly as he spoke, trying not to look shocked about what he was saying, trying to stay calm and let him finish while he could, while the words flowed without censure.

She had let her eyes widen when Tres first mentioned the man in the woods. Her lips parted with a gasp when he got to the part about the knife. But she held her face straight after that when Tres started watching her.

When he finished, he again asked, "Will you forgive me?"

Tres was dark and sullen as he had been all those times Joie couldn't reach him, couldn't find out what was haunting him. Now she couldn't find words for a response. She was still reeling from the story of what Tres had been through, the brutality, and the way it had altered his life, and his mother's.

She choked back her tears, confused about what she would have done had she known sooner. How could she have left Tres if she knew what had shaped him, if she understood what made Mrs. Duchande what she was, but also that the woman would have ruined her family? Life

had brought Tres to the only possible circumstance where he could share the story: His mother was dead.

When she reached out to embrace her husband, she felt his body convulse in great waves of sorrow—and relief, she expected. They cried for an hour, Tres' head on her shoulder.

“Nothing to forgive, my love.”

Chapter 46

Joie knelt beside the coffins of Tres' parents, each in their final yellow satin bedding. She couldn't stop staring at Mrs. Duchande's immobile hand. It wasn't pointing or directing, and it would never again greet people palm down or set itself upon a hip in indignation. It lay unflinching under the massive gold-banded ruby that meant so much to her. For that, Joie wept, that the woman should live so many years while missing the whole point of living, probably until the last moment, when her husband took her hand and held it through the torturous seconds when marble and wood collapsed on top of them.

Joie felt PawPaw's presence, re-heard the clicking of his tongue between wooden teeth and cheek with that slow grin that curled only the corners of his mouth, and his reply when Joie asked as a child, "Don't you hate to get old and have to die?"

"Only people 'fraid to get old and die," he told her, "is the ones ain' found the true meanin' of life."

She reached over to hold MawMaw's hand, felt the ruby ring she wore only for the most special of occasions. Joie was always mesmerized with the fingers of flame it cast across her hand when the sun caught even a single facet of the tiny stone.

The following day, MawMaw again wore her small rose of a jewel, elevated far above her finger by five golden prongs connected to a thin yellow band. Father Barbier spoke over the length of mounded earth that more resembled a section of PawPaw's prized garden rows, and Joie had to accept that he was gone and wouldn't be coming back. Still, she felt his familiar

hand, his warm palm smoothing her wild hair then coming to rest on her shoulder just as it had when he joined his granddaughter to make right his garden rows after Patches' carrot spree.

PawPaw understood everything all along. He knew everything and forgave everything. He forgave her for the lie she told when she couldn't admit to sneaking out to drink blackberry wine with her cousins; he forgave the Duchandes for their unprincipled dealings; and he forgave the Highlanders for their misguided pseudo-pride in land and home and culture and family. When Joie was young and drew comfort in the security of his lap at the kitchen table, and PawPaw told her that the end of one's life is only one of many things we can find to distress us, he had taught her that man's focus should be on how to die without having lived unhappily. If a person could do that, if he could discern that intangible yet palpable emotion he would want to feel when he closed his eyes to the world and loved ones for the last time, then he would have discovered what is, in essence, that one true thing in life—his own, singly unique truth. And he would have discovered how to live.

PawPaw's mind saw things with incredible clarity, and Joie wanted to be able to close her eyes just as he had, knowing she would be happy and fulfilled in the afterlife even if heaven were no more beautiful than the magnificent world she lived in. Then she would have no fear of death, thus, no fear of her future.

Chapter 47

Tres tore down the fencing south of the old DDR mansion and helped half of the Fryoux clan build new homes on the high land that was once theirs. Some had remained in Mamou, some started over in Lafayette, and others found construction jobs and homes in Baton Rouge.

On the hill where his parents' house once stood now lay a mixed-class graveyard with no boundaries between Highlander and Lowlander, PawPaw's headstone identical to his parents' and only ten feet away.

Annette moved back to Baton Rouge and married Mitch Ourso. They built a home between Joie and Tres' house and the one they built for Jules, the boys, and MawMaw.

Saved from *Hurricane Valerie* was Miss Cognac, a full sister to Lady Cognac, Itsy's mom. A wild limb nearly disemboweled Miss Cognac—*Valerie's* winds had torn off the roof of the DDR mare barn but the cowhand who stayed had done a good job of mending her. Tres didn't want to tell his wife that the mare survived the storm until he was certain she would live, and only brought the hobbling filly to Joie as a gift the night they renewed their vows, six weeks after *Hurricane Valerie*.

The ceremony was lacking Joie's dear grandfather in body only. She stood before Father Barbier, Annette holding her hand, Joey beside Tres, and memories flooded in from her and her brother's childhood escapades, Patches and Itsy, boy-boat-dog games, and coffee drunk from saucers.

When Father Barbier asked *who so gives this woman in matrimony*, her father's lips formed the words, "I do so give," but at that moment it was Joie's grandfather's voice she heard. "It's all okay, Tooda, *now*, it is time." The warmth of his being settled upon her, a sip of honey tea warming her from the inside out, his hand on her shoulder, comforting her as always.

* * * * *

Four years after the storm, Tres and Joie got a colt out of Allah and Miss Cognac, a half-brother nephew to Itsy and the third baby from the pair since the storm, and the loss.

They named the first two fillies Itsy Too and Itsy Tres, but it was with the coming of the new baby, Allah and Miss Cognac's first colt, that the closure from past years' heartache finally settled in. Their love was again enough, and now an invisible gap was bridged.

With the coming of this new colt came the arrival of another baby. A baby who would not be an Itsy or an Allah or a Cognac, or even a Tres. A baby who is yet another blessing God bestowed upon Joie and Tres, a sweet daughter free from defect. They named her Clairity.

Joie still finds herself very sad at times, thinking about the family she lost, the land they all treasured, the long distances she now lives from kin. And she finds herself lost in thoughts of PawPaw. His battered old hands sharpening an ancient straight-edged razor. The scraping sound as it left his craggy cheeks smooth and soft enough to kiss. The *café au lait* he poured to cool, sitting on his lap at the kitchen table with great aunts and uncles gathered 'round. The kindness of his voice and love in his stories. How grateful she feels to have been in a place and time to have learned from him, to have been shown how to love.

And how grateful she is to have finally come to know her father. When Joie watched Tres watch his parents' coffins slide into their final resting place, and felt the sorrow that seemed to seep through his skin, Joie remembered how Tres had suggested that it must have been really

hard for Jules to look into his daughter's face and only see her mother and his failure to protect her. She hadn't thought about it until now. She had thought only of herself, and only now could she comprehend her father's perspective, the losses he suffered, his pain through the mourning of his wife, and his devastation over the loss of his own father. Her PawPaw, the man she adored, her father's father. Her father had lost his father, and Joie couldn't imagine how difficult it must have been on him that day of the storm, when his father lay in flooding blood on flooding lands. How more difficult it must have been for him. PawPaw had been the rock of Jules's life for twice as long as he'd been for her.

Jules had softened since the storm, his fist now a padded palm that cupped the whole of Joie's infant daughter. She came to adore her father as he had adored her mother, before the wheels of her calash slid across bridge boards slick with wet leaves, and tumbled down into that raging river that was normally barely a creek.

Among the many things Joie regretted about not understanding her father, were her thoughts the morning they evacuated and she surmised MawMaw had hidden that box of sentimentals out of Jules's sight. Her father had packed the pietà he whittled, and it now lay in a tiny chapel built on the hill beside the new family graveyard.

* * * * *

MawMaw died five years after the storm. Jules found her slumped over in her old rocking chair on her new back porch, where she spent most of her days. It had been years since the old woman had needed to slam her ladle on a table.

Joie held her father's hand at the funeral, and before Father Barbier closed MawMaw's coffin, he removed her ruby ring and handed it to Jules. He had taken over his father's leg-

shaving duties, and his mother had touched Jules' shoulder as he lathered a lower leg above a pan of water weeks prior. "I don't want my ring under dirt."

"Maw, don' talk like that."

She had grabbed Jules' hand to make him stop, and stared into his eyes when he looked up, "Give it to Claire."

"Claire'll have her own before you die." He finished his task, turning his face down to hide the glassy eyes he never allowed anyone to witness, not since the death of his dear wife.

MawMaw made him promise, needing only to voice his name, "Jules," as a question.

Jules had nodded, still looking down at his mother's leg, then rose, saying, "Forgot to—"

He handed his mother a towel and walked off, all the way to Quilted Bay, hoping to find the strength of his father.

He finished whittling the wooden sculpture of Madonna and child a year before his mother died, now happy the image didn't resemble his beloved Ariat. Better, he thought, to represent all mothers and their sons.

Epilogue

Joie and Claire walked up the hill upon which the old Duchande mansion once stood. Crystals in the slabs of granite sparkled with the morning sun, and they each laid an envelope on the newest.

My Dearest Husband,

I don't know whether you know this or not, but Claire and I are fine. She stopped having nightmares about your accident about three months after you died, and I no longer dream of running down PawPaw in a cave. Strange, how I stopped having that nightmare after Renee ran you down. Renee is part of the reason why Claire and I came to see you today. Tres, I don't know if you've seen her yet, but she cut her wrists last week, the night before she had to go to trial. Please try to be nice to her if you can.

I don't dream of the wheels of my mother's carriage sliding off the bridge over Bayou Paul anymore, either. My dreams now are those of my daydreams, that each day I might do something that will please you, my beloved, and my God, so that I might become more and more worthy with the passing of that day, worthy of all the beauties in life my

mother and grandfather opened up to me, worthy of all the beauty in nature, my family, and you, while I am still in this life.

However long I am here, I know it won't be long enough for me to find a way to fully express my love for you and our daughter, for all these things, yet, in my soul I know our daughter will carry forward your finest traits, as well as a select few of my own. That's what I hope to leave her with after I leave to be with you. Are you still sad about your mother? You have nothing to forgive yourself for. Isn't that what you told me when I felt so guilty after I found out about what happened to her? I know she's kinder to you now.

Is MawMaw baking biscuits for you? I hope so. I'm so happy she's with PawPaw again.

Joey and Susan finally had a girl. Jordan wants to be a doctor, Conner wants to play football for Coach Dietzel like his cousins, and baby Lindsey can be anything she wants to be, she's so smart and so pretty. My older brothers and their boys still never miss a Tiger game.

Since you left to go to heaven, I've been thinking a lot about my horses, wondering if there's a place like heaven for their souls. I'm sure Itsy would be there. Maybe she'll play games of tag and chase with my old pony, Patches. And when they see each other, maybe they'll have a little powwow, and know each other through their memories of the little peninsula of land we all call The Cutoff now, perhaps remember me, the girl who mucked their stalls and flew with

*them through the woods, laughing, loving being together with them
better than anything.*

*Claire has her own letter for you. She won't let me read it.
You'd be so proud of her. She's so smart, and beautiful, and sweet.
And she's so sentimental I worry about people trampling her tender
feelings. I tried to buy her a new car when she graduated from L.S.U.,
but she wanted to keep the one you gave her after high school. I'll try
again when she finishes law school. She's so much like you, Tres. We
miss you so badly it hurts.*

Your ever-loving wife,

Joie

Louisiana 1927

It rained real hard, and it rained for a real long time.

Six feet of water in the streets of Evangeline.

The river rose all day, the river rose all night.

Some people got lost in the flood, some people got away alright.

The river had busted through clear down to Plaquemine.

Six feet of water in the streets of Evangeline.

President Coolidge come down, in a railroad train.

With his little fat man with a note pad in his hand,

*President say, "Little fat man, oh isn't it a shame,
what the river has done to this poor farmer's land."*

Oh Louisiana, Louisiana,

they're trying to wash us away,

oh Lord, they're trying to wash us away.

~ Randy Newman

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