



FRENCH QUARTER, NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA
SEPTEMBER 7, 1866

Claire Laurent studied the finished canvas on the easel before her, and though *masterpiece* hardly described it, she knew the painting was her best yet. So why the disappointment inside her? The fiendish fraudulence trickling its way through her like tiny beads of sweat beneath layers of crinoline and lace. She ran a hand through her curls and dropped the soiled paintbrush into a cup of turpentine, full well knowing why. And knowing only deepened her guilt.

Her gaze fell to the lower right-hand corner of the canvas, the one reserved for the artist's signature. She hadn't yet been able to bring herself to sign this one. Not with *that* name. Because of all the landscapes and still lifes and portraits she'd painted, none had truly felt like hers . . .

Until this one.

A breeze, moist and swollen, heavy with the certainty of rain, wafted in through the open second-story window, and she peered from her bedroom over the town, breathing in the tang of salty air moving in from the gulf. She viewed the Vieux Carré below, the Old Square she'd painted so many times she could close her eyes and still see every detail—the rows of pastel-colored buildings clustered together and edging the narrow streets, their balconies of decorative black cast iron boasting hanging baskets that cascaded with late summer blooms. The combination lent a charm and beauty unique to this part of the city.

No wonder she'd fallen in love with New Orleans so quickly, despite the hardship of recent months.

The steady *tick-tick-tick* of the clock on the mantel marked the seconds, and she released her breath with practiced ease. She rose from her stool and stretched, paying the toll for retiring so late in recent evenings and for rising so early, but there was no avoiding it. This painting had taken longer to complete than she'd estimated.

Much longer, as her father kept reminding her.

Almost half past two, and she needed to "take leave of the gallery no later than three," as her father had insisted. She knew she shouldn't allow his request to bother her. It wasn't the first time he'd demanded she leave while he "conferred" with gallery patrons. And it wasn't as if she didn't know what he was doing during that time. What they did as a family business.

His increasing agitation in recent weeks wasn't helping her attitude toward him, however. Though not a gentle man, by any means, he wasn't customarily given to a sharp tongue. But in recent days a single look from him could have sliced bread hot from the oven.

"Claire Elise? *Où es-tu?*"

She stiffened at his voice. "*Oui*, Papa. I'm up here."

She glanced back at the canvas, fighting the ridiculous urge to hide it. Something within her didn't want him to see the painting. Not yet. And—if it had been within her control—not ever. Maybe she could tell him it wasn't finished yet. But one look at her, and Papa would know. Pretense was a skill she'd never mastered—not like he had.

Hurried steps coming up the stairwell told her there wasn't enough time to stash the painting in the empty space behind the wardrobe, and throwing a drape over it was out of the question with the final brushstrokes only moments old. Maybe if she told him how much this particular painting meant to her, he would let her keep it.

But she had a feeling that conversation would go much like the one six months ago, following her mother's passing—when she'd told him, as forcefully as she dared, that she didn't want to paint "like this" anymore. Her father had never struck her, but she'd sensed he'd wanted to in that moment, and she hadn't considered broaching the subject again.

Until now.

"Ah . . ." His footsteps halted in the doorway behind her. "Finally, you have finished, *non?*"

His tone, less strident than earlier that morning, tempted her to

hope for an improvement in his mood. “Yes . . . I’ve finished.” Ready-
ing herself for his reaction—and critical critique—she stepped to one
side, a tangle of nerves tightening her insides.

He stared. Then blinked. Once, twice. “*Jardins de Versailles* . . .
again.” A muscle tightened in his jaw. “This is not the painting upon
which we agreed.” He looked at her, then back at the canvas. Keen
appraisal sharpened his expression. “But . . . it does show *some* im-
provement.”

Claire felt her nerves easing at the merest hint of praise. Until
she saw it. . . .

That familiar flicker in his eyes. Her father appreciated art, in his
own way, but he was a businessman at heart. His pride in her artistic
talent ran a losing footrace with the profit he hoped to make through
selling her paintings.

Her paintings . . .

The irony of that thought settled like a stone in her chest, which
sent an unexpected—and dangerous—ripple of courage through
her. “Papa, I . . .” The words fisted tight in her throat, and he wasn’t
even looking at her yet. “I need to speak with you about something.
Something very important to me. I know you’re not—”

His hand went up, and she flinched.

But he seemed not to notice. “This isn’t the landscape we agreed
for you to paint this time, nor is it what I described to the patron,
but—” He studied her rendering of Louis the XIV’s palace and the
surrounding gardens, then gave an exaggerated sigh. “Given we are
out of time, and that the patron very much desires to own a François-
Narcisse Brissaud . . . it will have to do.” He nodded succinctly, as
though deciding within himself at that very moment.

“Yes. I’m certain I can convince him of its worth. After all”—he
smiled to himself—“the larger galleries in Paris often ship the wrong
painting. But next time, Claire . . .” He looked down at her, his gaze
stern. “You must render, to the smallest detail, the painting upon
which we have agreed.”

Claire searched his face. His words stung, on so many levels. But
the most disturbing . . . “You’ve secured a buyer for this painting?
Before they’ve even *seen* it?”

A satisfied smile tipped his mouth as his focus moved back to her
work. “I told you this would happen. Word is spreading. After two

years of tireless effort, our humble little gallery is finally earning the recognition it deserves in this city. As well as our patrons' trust, as I knew it would, given time. And *my* negotiating skills." His head tilted to one side. "Though I must admit, your mixture of lighter and darker shades, the hues in the garden, the way you blended them this time . . . I see you took my advice to heart."

Claire said nothing, having learned that was best when it came to comments about taking his counsel.

His expression turned placating. "If I were to stand closer"—he did just that—"I am almost certain I could catch a whiff of lilac warmed by the noonday sun."

He stilled, and she followed his gaze to the lower left corner of the painting. The added detail was subtle, so subtle one might miss it if not looking. So she wasn't surprised it had taken him so long to notice.

"Abella . . ." His voice barely audible, her mother's name on his lips sounded more like a prayer than any Claire had ever heard. Not that she'd heard many, and never from him. "Y-you . . . painted her," he whispered.

Emotion stung Claire's eyes, prompted as much by the halting break in his voice as from missing the woman in the portrait. She'd painted her *maman* barefoot on the cobbled pathway, half hidden behind a lilac bush, a basket of flowers dangling from one arm. Her chin was raised ever so slightly as though she were looking for someone, waiting for them. And her cascade of auburn curls, mirrored in Claire's own, lifted in the imagined breeze.

Claire stared at the image of her mother until the delicate brushstrokes blurred into a pool of color. Ten years had passed since that afternoon at Versailles, their last visit to the palace before leaving Paris, and France, forever. She'd been nine at the time, but the memory of afternoons spent there with her parents—wandering the gardens, nurturing childish dreams of what it would be like to live in such a place—had nestled deep, and were still so vivid to her senses. The air fragrant with blossoms, nature's symphony in the rustle of the trees, the thriving sea of color—every detail locked away, secure.

Memories of those days were the happiest of her life. And those of the past six months . . . the loneliest.

She thought she'd been prepared for her mother's death. For over a year, she'd watched the sickness devour her from the inside out. And

while she felt relief knowing her mother wasn't hurting anymore, there were days when a void, murky and dark, yawned so wide and fathomless inside her that she feared it would swallow her whole.

"She was so beautiful." Her father's voice was fragile, weary beyond his forty-two years. He reached out as if to touch the painting, then stopped. His hand trembled.

Claire looked at him more closely. The shadows beneath his eyes . . . How long had those been there? And the furrows in his brow. Etched by regret, perhaps? And worry, most certainly. But worry about what? Rent being late again? Selling the expensive pieces of art he'd purchased on credit, and against her better judgment?

She looked back at the painting. "I didn't plan on including her in the painting, Papa. She just . . . appeared . . . from the tip of my brush."

For the longest moment, he said nothing. Then his breath left him in a long, slow sigh. "The truth of a painting must first be birthed in the artist's heart before it can be given life on the canvas."

Claire felt a quickening inside her. Her mother's first lesson in painting . . . but from long ago. She couldn't believe he remembered. She, on the other hand, remembered everything her mother had taught her. If only she'd inherited Abella Laurent's giftedness. Her mother had insisted she had, and more so. But Papa had made it clear she hadn't.

He'd never said it outright, of course—that nothing she did was ever quite good enough. Yet she knew he thought it, just the same. She knew it by what he didn't say.

Her father's hand moved at his side, and in a briefly lived dream, Claire imagined he was going to cradle the side of her face, as she'd always wanted him to do, as her mother had told her he used to do, but Claire couldn't remember back that far. She waited, breath trapped in her throat, feeling less like a woman and more like a child.

He turned away. "I miss her too," he whispered. "Never think that I don't."

Feeling foolish, telling herself she should have known better, Claire bowed her head to hide the hurt. "I don't think that, Papa."

There had been times in earlier years when she'd questioned the love between her parents. But mainly her father's love for her mother. In the final days, especially. When it became apparent that the medicine wasn't working and the doctors had given up hope, and when

Claire had pleaded with him to send her mother to a sanitarium. “People like Maman go there and some of them get better,” she’d told him. But his anger had erupted. “Those places cost money, Claire Elise! Money we don’t have. Unless you can paint in her stead. Faster and better than you’re doing now.”

So she’d worked, night and day, for months on end. Caring for her mother as her mother continued to instruct her—just as she had since Claire was a little girl—sometimes from bed, when her mother was too tired to sit or stand. But in the end, no matter how much Claire pleaded or how much she painted, Papa had held his ground, and her mother had died in this very room.

Her father cleared his throat. “Fortunately for you, of the seventeen times Brissaud painted *Jardins de Versailles*, he included a different detail in each.”

Claire nodded, aware of that fact, as he well knew. And also aware that every one of the seventeen original *Jardins de Versailles*—plus the four she’d painted before this one—were in circulation. If anyone ever devised a way for those four, soon to be five, proud owners of a François-Narcisse Brissaud “original” purchased from the European Masters Art Gallery in New Orleans to know details about the other seventeen . . .

Her father gestured to the clock on the mantel, then looked pointedly back at her before descending the staircase.

Claire retrieved her reticule and turned to follow him, then glanced back at the painting. Not giving herself time to think about the consequences, she grabbed a brush, dipped it in paint, and signed the portrait—with *her* name—hand shaking as she did. She’d have to change it later, she knew.

But for now, seeing her name on something she was so proud of—and knowing Papa wouldn’t like it—felt good, if not a bit rebellious.

As she passed through the kitchen, she saw that the door leading into the art gallery had been left open—something Papa never permitted. Stepping through that door was like stepping into another world. Plush rugs and bronze chandeliers, oil paintings and sculptures, burgundy silk paper lining the gallery walls that matched the velvet cloths draping the tables. Every item purchased on credit when they moved into this building two years earlier, and purchased with the intent of creating an air of affluence and wealth, however flimsy and paper-thin that veneer.

Confronted again by the stark differences between the gallery and the living quarters, Claire paused at the back door. Hand on the latch, she summoned courage. “Papa . . . about the painting I finished today. I’d very much like to discuss with you about keep—”

“No. It’s out of the question.”

Unexpected heat shot up through her chest. “But this one is special. To *me*, at least. I’ll paint another one, faster, exactly as you detail. Whatever you—”

“The answer is *no!*” Anger darkened his features. “The painting is already sold.”

“But it has Maman—”

“We need the money, Claire Elise! Creditors are waiting to be paid, and your dawdling has cost me dearly. Yet again.”

Knowing she was already treading dangerous ground, she pushed a little further. “I have another painting, Papa. One of my own, which I haven’t shown you yet. Perhaps the patron might—”

“He wants a Brissaud! Have I not made that clear enough for you?” Fury mottled his throat a deep red. “Our patrons are not interested in the trite, inconsequential renderings of a—” As though hearing the harsh bite of his own voice, he exhaled and shook his head. “I’m sorry, Claire. But it’s done. There’s nothing left to discuss. In time, perhaps we can sell your own paintings. But for now, your talent simply lacks any . . . unique quality. Nurturing talent takes time. You’re best served to stay with copying for now. You do that quite well.”

Bitterness tinged her mouth, and Claire felt an unexplained severing deep inside her. She wanted to respond, but she wanted not to cry even more, and if she opened her mouth now—

“You must understand . . .” He squeezed his eyes tight. “This is what we’ve been working toward all these years. Having our own gallery, making a name for ourselves.”

“Yes, Papa. A name. But *our* name. *Our* work. Not someone else’s, where we—”

“Think of your mother and how hard she worked. For us as a family. For *you*.”

His expression took on a tenderness Claire barely recognized, and one she didn’t fully trust.

“Your *maman* sacrificed so much to give you this gift, Claire. And a

better life in America. Why do you think we came here? Why do you think we both worked so hard all those years? It was all for you. . . .”

She’d heard all of this before, and while she was grateful for everything her mother—and father—had given her, she also knew their efforts hadn’t been *only* for her benefit. They were for his. Her mother had said as much. Her mother had said a great many things in those last days. Whether it was the laudanum speaking or the truth finally breaking free, Claire couldn’t be sure.

But she wanted to believe that her father had her best interests at heart. After all, he was her *papa*.

Staring up at him, seeing the hard set of his shoulders, his iron resolve, she felt the fight within her drain away. She opened the door, then remembered and held out her hand, feeling like a beggar and resenting him all the more for it.

Her father pressed three coins into her palm. One more than usual. She turned without a thank-you or a good-bye.

“Enjoy your time at the café, but don’t be gone overlong. We have work to do this evening.” His tone had lightened, falsely so. It always did when she acquiesced. “And be sure to bring home a sweet for Uncle Antoine and me.”

Claire halted midstride. “Uncle Antoine is back?”

He nodded as though the news were inconsequential, when he knew it was anything but. “He’ll be here shortly to assist me. I’ll ask him to stay so you can say hello, if he has time. Now hurry on.” He gave a swift wave. “Leave the business details to us. That’s where *our* talents lie.”

Claire cut a path across the brick-paved street, pushing down the well of hurt inside her, like always. She dodged wagons and carriages as they rumbled past, hoping to reach her destination before the swollen skies delivered on their steely threat.

They’d lived in New Orleans for two years, the longest they’d lived anywhere since arriving in America, and the city had finally begun to feel like home. Which probably meant they would be moving soon. Just the thought of moving stirred a dread inside her.

Uncle Antoine had promised her he wouldn’t let that happen again, that he would dissuade her father from making that choice. But she knew only too well how strongheaded Papa could be.

Uncle Antoine.

Feeling a portion of her angst drain away, she waited for a carriage to pass before crossing the street. Uncle Antoine had a way of easing the tension between her and Papa.

Close to her father in age, Antoine DePaul was no more related to her than she was to Louis XVI, but she adored him as though he were family. He traveled frequently, and business had called him back north for well over a month now. Too long. She could hardly wait to see what latest fashion boot he'd purchased. Alligator boots were his trademark, but upon a recent trip to New York, he'd purchased ostrich and anaconda. Only Uncle Antoine . . .

Turning the next corner, she purposefully inhaled, and wasn't disappointed. The comforting scent of yeasty beignets and chicory-laced coffee strummed the heartstrings of her childhood home and triggered such vivid memories. And that with Café du Monde still over a block away.

Her spirits began to lighten, as they always did when she ventured outside and took walks, when she was away from the gallery.

She recalled the first time she'd laid eyes on Antoine DePaul—in New York City, upon their arrival in America ten years ago. She'd thought him so tall and dashing. He could make her laugh without even trying. Such a lucky twist of fate, meeting him as quickly as they had after disembarking. And he having recently arrived from France as well. "A small world, even in this very large and new one," Papa had said. An experienced art broker himself, Uncle Antoine had a charm about him that seemed to draw patrons—and female admirers—by the dozens. He had soon become her father's business partner.

And, eventually, like a member of their family.

With a crack of thunder, the gray skies unleashed their weighty promise, and Claire made a mad dash for the café's striped awning. Feeling a little like a drowned rat and knowing she probably looked the part, she shook the moisture from her skirt and tucked her damp curls into place as best she could.

"*Bonjour, madame!*" She smiled at the woman behind the counter and placed her order, glad to see the café wasn't overcrowded.

Balancing two beignets on a plate along with two bagged for home, she grabbed her coffee and found an empty table. A previous patron

had left behind the day's paper, so as she scanned the news, she relished the pastries between sips and licked the powdered sugar from her fingers, careful that no one was watching.

After a while, she folded the paper and laid it aside and enjoyed the last of her coffee. She brushed the powdered sugar from her lap, but the black fabric of her only mourning dress was reluctant to give up the dusty white. Had it really been six months since her mother had died? It seemed like much longer, and yet also like yesterday.

Seeing the rainfall had subsided, she started for home at a leisurely pace, surprised at how quickly dusk was approaching and at how warm and heavy the air still was. With purpose, she turned her thoughts toward which piece of art, if any, her father might have sold in her absence.

She thought of her *Jardins de Versailles* but knew it was safe for another day or two, at least. Because a painting from François-Narcisse Brissaud, a lauded “master artist of Paris” whose work was highly sought after, couldn't very well be sold in a New Orleans art gallery with the oils still tacky to the touch.

The majority of their patrons came into the gallery requesting copies of famous paintings. Once Papa received their deposit, she gladly filled their requests, signing her own initials—all that he would allow. Americans seemed to love anything and everything European, and owning a well-rendered copy of a renowned European artist's work was quite in vogue.

Doing that didn't bother her. In fact, she enjoyed it. Because those people *knew* they were buying a copy. A fake. A forgery.

But when someone came in and purchased the work of acclaimed artist François-Narcisse Brissaud—whose style her mother had studied relentlessly and learned to imitate, as had Claire—they believed they were getting something of real worth.

But in truth, the artist's name on the canvas was as counterfeit as the documents her father and Uncle Antoine forged attesting to the painting's authenticity. What they did was wrong, and she knew it. It was stealing.

She never understood *why* her mother had agreed to do it in the first place. Maman had never said, and Claire hadn't forced the issue, even at the end. It had seemed a trivial question as life painfully and surely ebbed away.

She still remembered, some years back, the first time she'd seen a landscape her mother had painted, but with someone else's name on it. At the age of eleven, she thought someone had made a mistake. Or that the man—whoever he was—had forged her mother's work.

Shortly thereafter came a series of boarding schools. But by the age of seventeen, she knew the truth. And when her *maman* had grown too ill to hold the paintbrush herself, Claire had forged her first painting—and the name François-Narcisse Brissaud at the bottom—with her father standing close behind her.

The weighty mantle her mother had worn for so many years had been bequeathed to her. And the *responsibility*, as her father called it, hung heavy and rough on her shoulders.

With every step closer to home, she felt herself tensing.

When she was away from the gallery, away from her father, she almost felt like a different person, living a different life. When, for the rest of the time, she only wished that were true. She had to find a way to make him listen, to make him understand.

Surprisingly, she didn't have to think long about what she wanted to say. "*Papa, I've decided I'm going to keep this painting of Versailles. I'll pay you for it, if you insist.*" Though she didn't know how she would manage that. He handled the finances, and earnings from the gallery had been slow in past months, he'd told her repeatedly, even though paintings were selling. "*But I'm keeping it. And what's more, I won't be party to this any longer. I'll paint whatever you want me to paint, as long as it's my name I sign on the canvas.*" There. She exhaled. The words flowed so easily when she wasn't standing in front of him, when he wasn't staring her down.

She entered through the kitchen. The building was quiet, and she felt a stab of disappointment. Had Uncle Antoine already left? Had she missed him entirely?

She plunked her reticule down on the kitchen table, along with the bag of beignets. Dinner needed to be started, but she wasn't hungry. Yet she knew Papa would be. She opened the door to the gallery and peered inside. A single candelabra flickered on a bureau against the wall, leaving the bulk of the room to shadows and dusk. "Papa?"

She noticed that *The Duchess of Orléans*—a reproduction of Alexandre-François Caminade's original that she'd painted two months ago, signed with *her* initials—was absent from its easel. The

pedestal beside it displaying *Nydia, the Blind Flower Girl of Pompeii*, a small-scale original statue by Randolph Rogers, renowned sculptor and her personal favorite, was also empty.

Apparently, it had been a very profitable afternoon.

She'd scolded Papa when he'd bought the Rogers statuary. It was much too expensive a piece for them to purchase without a confirmed buyer, yet he'd done it anyway, saying that it was wise to have a true original on hand every now and then. And it would appear he'd made a sound decision for once, selling it in only a week's time.

She shook her head, turning to go find him. How smug he would be about it all too, reminding her how he'd—

Something crunched beneath her boot. She looked down. Shards of glass, everywhere.

Then she heard a low moan coming from somewhere behind the door.

Slowly, she gave the door a push, the creak of hinges sounding overloud in the silence. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dim light. Then she spotted him across the room, lying facedown on the floor.

"Papa!" She ran to him, broken glass splintering beneath each step. "Papa, are you all right?" She bent close and gave his shoulder a shake. No response. "It's me, Papa. Claire . . . Can you hear me?"

His breathing was labored, as though he were in pain.

With effort, she turned him onto his back, as gently as she could. He groaned, and she flinched, afraid she was hurting him. She shoved her hair back to keep it out of her face, and felt a dampness on her hands, something sticky.

She looked down, and felt the room tilt.

A dark stain soaked the front of her father's shirt, the same stain slicking the palms of her hands. Her head swam. Dreading what she would find, she tugged the hem of his shirt from his trousers to reveal a gash in his abdomen. Judging from the loss of blood, the wound was deep. *Oh, Papa . . .*

"Open your eyes," she whispered, heart in her throat. "*Please, open your eyes.*"

He didn't.

She raced to the bureau and grabbed a stack of fresh polishing cloths from a lower drawer, and then the candelabra. She needed

to apply pressure to the wound—she knew that much. The arc of candlelight followed her movements, flickering and sweeping across the burgundy-papered walls. Wherever the light fell, the room took on a pinkish glow.

Something caught her eye, and Claire stilled.

She squinted and raised the candelabra higher, wanting to make sure that what she was seeing—or wasn't seeing—was real. But it was.

Every piece of art in the gallery was gone.



Claire shivered, feeling as though she and her father weren't alone. Yet clearly, no one else was in the room. She worked to stanch the blood flow, questions pressing. Who had robbed the gallery, assaulted her father? Who would chance such a bold undertaking on so busy a street? And where was Uncle Antoine?

But the most disturbing question, the one she couldn't silence—like the pounding at the back of her head—was what had her father done? What kind of *deal* had gone wrong that someone would do this to him?

Based on experience, she knew better than to think him innocent.

Wetness slicked her hands, and she knew she needed to get help. To get a doctor. But she couldn't leave her father alone.

"Claire . . ." Her father's eyelids fluttered open.

"Yes, Papa." She slipped her hand into his. "I'm here."

He blinked as though having trouble focusing.

"What happened, Papa? Who did this to you?"

His grip tightened with more strength than she would have thought possible. Uncertainty furrowed his brow. "You're not . . . hurt?"

She shook her head. "No, Papa. I'm not hurt."

The briefest trace of a smile . . . then he tried to sit up.

"No, you need to lie still," she urged. "Don't move. You're bleeding. You need a physician."

"What I need"—he winced, each breath hard-earned—"is for you to leave here. Now! It's not safe for—"

"I'm not going anywhere, Papa. Except to get you a doctor."

Despite her efforts otherwise, he pushed himself up to a sitting

position. Sweat poured from his face. “Men . . . were here, Claire. Men”—he grimaced and huffed a humorless laugh—“who were *less* than satisfied with their purchase of one of the Brissaud paintings.”

Claire tried to read the look in his eyes. “Do you mean . . . they *know*? About . . . the forgeries?” She could barely say it aloud.

“They suspect.” He stared hard, his jaw rigid. “They asked who painted them.”

The air left her lungs. “W-what did you tell them?”

“No one knows about you—yet.” He exhaled. “Which is why you must leave. If they come back and find you here—”

A floorboard creaked above them, in her bedroom, and Claire went cold inside. “Papa, what should we—”

“*Shhhh!*” he whispered, his expression fierce. “I told you it’s not—”

Footsteps pounded the staircase. Coming down. Fast. Fear widened her father’s eyes. She’d never get him out by herself, and she couldn’t leave him behind. She *wouldn’t*. Not like this. No matter what he’d done. She stood and looked for something to brandish as a weapon and reached for the candelabra.

The door leading from the kitchen to the gallery flew open.

“Uncle Antoine!” Claire released her breath in a rush. “Where have you been? Papa’s hurt. He’s bleeding and needs—”

“I know. The physician’s on his way.” Three long strides brought Uncle Antoine beside them. His clothes, always pressed and stylish, were rumpled and stained. A gash marred his upper left cheek. The skin around the cut was swollen and purpling.

Claire rose, her legs none too steady beneath her. “What happened? Who did this?”

Uncle Antoine shot a look down at her father, who looked away.

Claire scoffed. “One of you needs to tell me. I deserve to know what—”

Uncle Antoine grabbed her wrist, hard enough to make her wince. “You must listen to me, *ma chère*. Very carefully. We have little time, and none for your foolish questions.” An unfamiliar edge razored his voice. He let go of her and pulled a leather pouch from his coat pocket. “Everything you need is in here.”

She stared at the pouch, then back at him, realizing what it contained. What it *meant*. Her mother always carried a similar pouch

whenever the two of them left on “surprise adventures,” as her mother had called them when Claire was younger.

“No,” Claire heard herself whisper, the word out before she could think better of it.

Surprise sharpened Uncle Antoine’s expression.

Claire hadn’t moved an inch but she felt off balance, as if the rug had been ripped out from beneath her, yet again. Ironic . . . This life she would have traded away just an hour earlier suddenly held meaning and familiarity she wasn’t eager to throw away, despite its many unhappy parts. “I’m tired of running, Uncle. Of moving from place to place.” She included her father in her stare. “I know I can’t stay here, but I don’t want to do this anymore. I’ve told you that, Papa. And you said yourself that no one knows I’m the one who paints them. I could move somewhere else in town, and—”

“You’re not listening, Claire.” Uncle Antoine’s voice lacked any trace of warmth. “We don’t have time for this conversation. They could be back any moment.” He glanced at the door. “It’s not safe for *any* of us here. Not after today.”

Claire squared her shoulders and willed her voice to be as strong and as certain as his. “And I don’t think you’re listening to *me*, Uncle. I know Papa never has.” Her throat suddenly felt like sandpaper. “If you and Papa want to go and do this somewhere else, then go. But I’ll no longer be a part of it.” She swallowed, nearly choking on the words, and at the fury she saw in her uncle’s face. “I’ll make my own way. I’ll—”

His hand came from nowhere, hot across her cheek. Claire would have fallen had he not grabbed her arm.

“Listen to me.” Uncle Antoine pulled her close. “You’re going, *ma chère*. It’s for your own good. You must trust me in this. Your passage has been arranged. Now stop acting like a spoiled child and go pack your satchel.”

Her face on fire, Claire felt as though she were looking at a stranger. Never had he spoken to her in such a manner, much less laid a hand on her. His gaze was flat and unyielding, and slowly, the pieces of an all-too-familiar puzzle jarred painfully into place. “You knew. . .” Truth narrowed her eyes, and she saw it reflected in his. “That’s why you were gone so long this time. Back north . . . You *knew* we were leaving again. And yet you—” He’d lied to her. Just like Papa. “You

promised,” she whispered, tears knotting her throat. “You promised we wouldn’t—”

“Antoine’s right, Claire. You’re acting like a child.”

Tears blurred her vision. She dragged her gaze back to her father.

His features were stony, without the least hint of remorse. “You’ve known this day would come again.” He clutched the blood-soaked rag to his side. “I’m only grateful your *maman* isn’t here to see this. Your selfishness would have pained her.”

Claire blinked. *Her* selfishness? And this from her own father, who hadn’t said a word when Uncle Antoine slapped her.

Uncle Antoine loosened his hold on her arm. “Family was most important to your mother, *ma chère*. She would want us to stay together. You know that.”

Claire looked down to where he held her and, as she had earlier that day, felt something rend deep inside. Forcing a nod, she looked back, hearing again what her mother had whispered over and over in her fitful laudanum-induced sleep—“*Be careful who you love . . .*” Whether her mother had meant it as a warning for her, or perhaps as a reminder to herself, Claire didn’t know. But for the first time in her life, she realized it was possible to love someone whom you *thought* loved you in return. Only to discover . . . that they didn’t. And maybe never really had. “Where are we going . . . Uncle?”

Uncle Antoine relaxed, his expression conveying relief that she’d come to her senses. “Far from here, *ma chère*. Your father and I will follow shortly. We have . . . business to attend to first.” He raised his hand, slowly this time, and touched her cheek. It was all Claire could do not to turn away. “*Je suis désolé*,” he whispered. “I lost my temper. But only because I’m so worried about you.”

Claire said nothing.

Finally, he motioned. “Now go, pack a satchel. Only what you need. A carriage will be here anytime. And, Claire . . .” He gave her a quick downward glance.

Claire did likewise and cringed at what she saw.

“. . . be sure to change your dress.”

Upstairs in her room, Claire lit an oil lamp, her hands shaking. She fumbled with the buttons on her bodice, mindful of the clock on the mantel.

She caught sight of herself in the mirror, and the reflection was

one she wouldn't soon forget. Betrayal, anger, and hurt darkened her eyes. And a weariness that went bone deep.

She stripped down to her chemise and underskirts, then scrubbed her hands and face in the basin on the wash table. The water was tepid, the air warm, but still she felt a chill. Wishing she owned another mourning dress, she searched the wardrobe for the darkest dress she could find. A deep russet would have to do. She made a mental list of items to pack in her satchel.

How could she have been so foolish? So gullible. So . . . taken in. She should have seen this coming. She expected such behavior from Papa. But from Uncle Antoine? His actions resulted in a whole different kind of hurt.

And what of the men who had attacked her father and stolen the art? What if they came back? Or discovered she was the forger? What would they do to *her*?

Hurrying faster, she wrestled with the tiny pearl buttons on the front closure of her dress, finally choosing to leave the ones at her collar unfastened. She pulled another dress from the wardrobe, rolled it up and shoved it in the satchel, then pushed down the swell of emotion rising again inside her.

Hands shaking, she hurriedly tucked the remaining items from the bureau drawer into her satchel, along with her mother's locket watch. Then she turned to get the painting.

But her *Jardins de Versailles* was gone.

An hour later, standing on the deck of the *Natchez*, Claire watched the lights of shore grow dimmer, swallowed up by dark of night. The boat shuddered, its enormous paddlewheel churning the murky waters of the delta, its steam engines roaring, sending vibrations through the wooden deck beneath her as it forged a steady path northward up the Mississippi.

She gripped the boat's side rail, numb with exhaustion and fear. Hot, silent tears slipped down her cheeks. She sneaked furtive glances at the passengers around her, her mind still on the men who had pillaged the gallery earlier.

But no one even looked her way.

All the art—gone. No telling how much money it represented. How would her father and Uncle Antoine recover from such a loss?

Maman had tried to persuade her father to take out insurance on the more expensive pieces, but Papa had said that would only encourage inquiries, which could lead to suspicion, which could lead to their ruin.

But it seemed ruin had found them anyway.

The moon hung full and bright, its light stretching out across the water, rippling and breathing in the wake. The air was so redolent with brine she could taste it in the back of her throat.

A part of her had wanted to stay and take care of her father. Though, as she'd waited at the gangplank with Uncle Antoine standing beside her—she lifted a hand to her cheek, the sting long gone but not the hurt—she'd realized that the desire sprang more from a sense of obligation than from tenderness. The stark truth of that distinction had been sobering. Still, she prayed he would be all right.

The physician had arrived only moments before the carriage. “Your father’s lost a great deal of blood, Miss Laurent. But he’ll be fine, I assure you.”

“You’re certain?” she’d asked.

The physician nodded. He wasn’t the same doctor she’d seen in town before. He was younger, more succinct in manner. “I’ve no doubt. So journey without concern, ma’am.”

Claire frowned, listening to the waves lap the hull. How had the physician known she was readying to travel? Then again, she guessed he’d overheard her conversation with Uncle Antoine. Their exchange had been revealing.

Tennessee.

That was where he’d said they would find their new start. And in Nashville, of all places. She’d glimpsed parts of that city two years earlier, when they’d passed through Nashville on their way to New Orleans, and it had hardly seemed like the Athens of the South, as Uncle Antoine called it. Her clearest memory of Nashville was of how despondent the people appeared. Discouraged and beaten. Even the land itself had seemed in mourning, if that were possible.

The rain from earlier in the day returned, and she found refuge inside the steerage cabin. The cabin was long and dimly lit. Rows of benches bracketed narrow aisles, making the space feel smaller than it was. There were few passengers, and most of them male.

Claire sought a bench on the far end of the room and claimed

a spot near the only family—a father and mother with four small children. She folded the coat she'd brought along and used it as a makeshift pillow, then closed her eyes, feeling the sway of the boat and imagining she was in a hammock, the kind her father had promised for years that he would buy for them.

But never had.

A day and half later, the *Natchez* steamed its way into port in Mobile, Alabama. Parched and famished, her food supply depleted, Claire disembarked and located the train station. After taking care of personal needs, she hurried across the street to the general store.

The first train whistle hadn't sounded yet. She still had time.

She chose a sleeve of crackers wrapped in brown paper and a drink, and a wedge of cheese from a case on the counter. Thinking better of it, she turned and discreetly counted the money in her change purse, then started to put the cheese back—and paused.

She was so hungry. . . .

Almost two days remained before she would reach Nashville. She'd *told* Papa and Uncle Antoine she needed more money, but they'd insisted they'd given her enough.

She glanced around but saw no one. She looked at her open reticule, then back at the cheese. Then at the store's fully stocked shelves. Surely the proprietor did well enough that he wouldn't miss—

With swift decisiveness, Claire returned the cheese and withdrew her hand as though it might be burned. *I will not do this anymore.* No more deceit. No more stealing. Or lying.

“Will there be anything else, ma'am?”

Startled, Claire turned. The apron-clad proprietor wore a smile, but something in his features told her he'd seen what she'd been about to do. She lowered her head. “No, thank you. This will be plenty.” Face heating, she counted out the coins, with a penny left over.

The train whistle blew. Twice.

Twice? Looking out the window, she saw the porter hoisting the step stool onto the passenger car. She turned to grab her purchases and her reticule slipped from the counter. Its contents scattered across the floor.

Gritting her teeth, she knelt and snatched up the items, then grabbed the cloth bag the gentleman held out. “Thank you, sir!”

His kindness never dimmed. “God be with you, ma’am.”

Claire ran for the train, calling out to the porter. He gave her a low-browed warning, and by the time she found an empty bench in the last car, the train had long pulled away from the station.

Shaky with hunger, she reached into the cloth bag for the package of crackers and—

Her hand closed around something.

Slowly, not trusting her sense of touch, she withdrew a wedge of cheese wrapped in wax paper, along with the crackers and her drink. Still feeling a slight weight at the bottom of the sack, she peered inside and saw the coins she’d paid.

Tears threatening, she recalled the proprietor’s parting words. “*God be with you, ma’am.*” She ate the crackers and every morsel of cheese, vowing to repay his kindness. She didn’t know how or when, but someday, she would do something kind for someone else, the way he’d done for her.

She leaned her head against the window, the rhythm of steel wheels against iron rails lulling her to rest. She wondered how her father was, all while wishing her ticket could take her far, far away from both him and *Uncle Antoine*, though it was difficult to even think of him as such anymore. She touched her cheek, a spike of anger returning. With each passing minute, as the distance separating her from them mounted, so did her resolve to stand up to them both, and to make a fresh start for herself.

She withdrew her mother’s locket watch and checked the time, then touched the miniature likeness of her mother’s face. So pretty . . . She’d always liked it when people had said how much they favored each other.

The rocking of the train gradually conspired with her full belly until her eyes slipped closed. “*God be with you, ma’am . . .*” She hoped what the proprietor had said was true. That God was with her. But even more, that He knew where she was headed.

She wished she’d thought to pack the Bible she’d read from to her mother during those last days, the one she’d been issued at boarding school. But she hadn’t even thought about it. Until now. Although she couldn’t remember the Scriptures themselves, she remembered how the words, the promises, had comforted her mother. And her too.

Sleep swam toward her, and as the waves of drifting consciousness carried her farther out, she found herself wanting to trust that remembered peace, wanting to believe that the Author of Life had a plan for hers.

And the following afternoon, when she stepped onto the station platform in Nashville, she wanted to believe it more than anything else in the world.