

## *Chapter Twelve*

We'd been her tenants better than a week before Mrs. Hanrahan come down her garden path to see how we were doing.

We'd settled in by then, Delphine and me. It was just evening, and we'd turned up the lamp. We had mending to do for the boys. The widow provided us wicks, but charged us extra for the lamp oil.

We heard her before we seen her, coming along the path. It seemed she was with Dr. Hutchings. "Ah declare, Doctor," sang out a Southern accent thick enough to plant cotton in, "Ah been remiss in my duties to them young ladies. But then nobody knows better than yourself how worked Ah am."

Delphine settled her skirts, took up her needle, and made quite a pretty picture of herself there by lamplight when I opened the door.

On the porch Mrs. Hanrahan clung to Dr. Hutchings's arm in an unseemly way, or so I thought. She was twice his age and gaunt under her shawls. But sharp-eyed.

She'd have breezed straight in, but the doctor detained her on the threshold to introduce me. "May I present Miss Tilly Pruitt of Grand Tower," he said in that formal way he had.

"Ah declare, ain't you pretty, honey," she said, looking past me. She wore a noisy silk dress. A big cross of ebonized wood swung from a chain around her neck.

Delphine glanced up from her work in the glowing room. Mrs. Hanrahan's hard gaze fell on her and jarred something inside me. Her eyes scanned the place—the hanging dresses, the portrait of Delphine's papa. Then she was looking at Delphine again.

Drawing away from Dr. Hutchings, she propped a fist on her hip and said, "Well, well, what have we here?"

Another silence fell while the doctor saw he was in a room with too many women. She turned to him, showing us her hawk's profile. "Ah declare, Doctor, just see what you have brought me. A colored gal."

What had she said? I reached out for something to hold on to.

Delphine put her mending aside. She didn't rise. She

settled back and sighed, as if this had been a long time coming.

"I am of the *gens de couleur, madame*," she said, calmly proud. "The free people of color, if you speak no French."

"I know what you are," our landlady snapped. "I've lived down in New Orleans."

"You have been in New Orleans, *madame*," Delphine said, "but you are not of it. Irish, are you, from the name?"

"And no quadroon wench is going to talk me down like shanty Irish. I know New Orleans better than what you think. Enough to wonder what a picture strongly resemblin' Jules Duval is doin' on the wall of my summer kitchen."

"He is my *papa*." Delphine struggled with herself now, holding on to the chair arms.

Mrs. Hanrahan grinned, like Delphine had given herself away. "I thought so. Big planter, ain't he, with holdin's up along the False River? And a white family up there?"

Delphine looked away from the light.

"And you're one of his colored family, ain't you? Seems like I seen your mother, very high and mighty, in her carriage on Royal Street."

"She would hardly go on foot," Delphine remarked.

"And she's sent you up here, ain't she? Because if the South loses the war, you'll be nothin' better than a freed slave. You're not much higher in the world than that right now. If the Yankees take New Orleans, that fancy life of yours'll come crashin' down. You'll be no better than them they sell on the auction block. Up here you're light enough

to pass. But, gal, you don't fool me. I'm no Yankee. I ain't that dumb."

Another silence. Dr. Hutchings stood like a figure carved in stone.

"Do you want me off your place?" Delphine said without a trace of accent. And ready to go.

"Lands, no," Mrs. Hanrahan said. "I want your rent money. And you're in an outbuilding at the back of my property where you belong. Doctor, if you'll be good enough to see me back to the house."

She waited, then turned to him, her eyes narrowing.

"I think I won't, Mrs. Hanrahan," he said.

We waited until she banged the door to behind her.

I was as near to Delphine as I am to you, but I didn't want to put out my hand if she didn't want to take it. All I could think of was what a terrible place the world is. What a mean, ugly, hard place. I swore if I ever got back to Grand Tower, they'd have to bind and gag me and drag me behind a mule to get me out of town again.

The quiet went on and on until Delphine said, "They hate us, you know. The Irish. They come hungry and work cheap. The yellow fever lays them low. And we were there before them. Our roots are in New Orleans mud. We people of color make the city work. It is like no other place because of us. We were there from the earliest times. They despise us for our ease, for our silken lives. They don't understand how people of color can be free." She looked away from us. "Almost free."

That explained something, though very little. I drew the doctor into the circle of light. Without thinking about it, I took his hand and pulled him nearer. And now I reached for Delphine and took them both in hand.

"Delphine, tell us who you are," I said, hoping she'd trust us enough. But she was Delphine, so she had to spin a romance tale out of it, or try her best to.

"My *grandmère*, she was one of *Les Sirènes*. Legends are told of these beauties who flee the slaves' uprising on the island of *Saint-Domingue*, years and years ago. She is carried by her *maman* to Cuba, then *Nouvelle Orléans*. And ev'ry white man is at her feet. She choose one and my *maman* is born, lovelier still.

"My *maman*, she choose Monsieur Jules Duval, and I am born."

She opened her hands, presenting herself. I blundered into this silence. "But you said, 'We never marry.' You said that on the train."

The doctor made a move to still me.

"We cannot marry white men," she said, patient with my Yankee ignorance. "The Spanish make a law against such marriage. The French make a law. There is a law now. But New Orleans prefer its customs to the law. Our white fathers buy our mothers fine homes in all the best streets, in Chartres Street. And if there is a daughter, she is brought up by her mother to find a future with a white gentleman of her own. A man of substance. We have a name for this. It is *plaçage*. A respectable arrangement."

She looked at me then, her worldliest look yet. "If this

war did not threaten ev'rything, I would have my own home now. My own protector. Perhaps . . ." She looked down at herself and fell silent.

It was a gate swung open on yet another world I didn't know. Was there no end to what I didn't know?

"That woman called you a name," I said.

"Quadroon? Our society is often called that. There are the quadroon balls, you know, each Wednesday night at the Salle d'Orleans where gentlemen—white gentlemen—come to pay us court.

"Quadroon, octoroon. There are these names." She shrugged grandly. "I am a *femme de couleur libre*, a free woman of color. French blood flow through me and Spanish blood and African blood. It is the African blood they despise. Is it not curious?"

She saw me gazing at her arm resting there on the table in the lamplight. I'd always thought her skin was the color of a peach, warmed by the Southern sun.

She drew back her sleeve. "I am nearly as white as you, *chère*. There are others like me paler than yourself, blue-eyed, yellow-haired. Yet as our saying goes, there is a tignon in the family."

My head whirled, at all this, and her bravery.

"If all is lost for us, I go find another life. *Maman*, she would give me up to give me my chance. I am her treasure." Tears beaded her lavish lashes. "If it is my fate, I go among those who know nothing, who cannot speak to me as that woman does tonight."

"You were going to St. Louis," I said, "when—"

"*Mais non, chère.*" She shook her head, weary. "I have no aunt. We know no one beyond our world. We free people of color live on a kind of island, lapped by a sea of slavery. Beyond that sea is this territory up here." She gazed around the room. "Like the mountains of the moon to us."

"We would have gone ashore at Cairo because we hear the North begin here. But we take fright when the boat is boarded."

"And they robbed you of your pearl-handled pistol," I said.

"Yes, they do that. We dare not come ashore, even before we know what kind of place this Cairo is."

"And so—"

"Your Grand Tower is the next stop of the boat. It is, perhaps, fate?"

And that was something else I didn't know.

I felt my way along now, word by word, though it was too late to be careful. "Delphine, seems like your people need a lot of help, the way you live."

She nodded absently.

"Do your people own slaves?"

"It happens."

"Is Calinda your slave?"

The great fringed violet eyes turned on me. "Ah *ma chère*, she is my sister."