

# ECHOES ACROSS THE PRAIRIE: SECRETS BORNE IN SILENCE

Marguerite's Story  
New Orleans, 1867

## CHAPTER ONE

"All the men of quality are dead," Marguerite said, shaking her head vigorously enough that her bell-shaped earrings tinkled in rhythm.

"That's not true." Octavia replied, exasperated. She followed her charge through the crowded banquette along the narrow streets of the Vieux Carré, the French Quarter. It rained the night before and the irregular stone blocks that created the banquette were slick with mud. Even though the sun was bright now, it did not take the rawness out of the weather. It was a bone-chilling January day for New Orleans. It matched Marguerite's mood.

As one of the most beautiful women in New Orleans, Marguerite grew into her beauty even as the Civil War ravaged the Louisiana countryside, and the blockade and subsequent Federal occupation demoralized the city. The surrender of the South sent her inhabitants into a deep depression that scarred and dispirited them, but to Marguerite, it was a mere inconvenience in her life. Marguerite Cheval, who turned eighteen a few months before, felt secure and confident in her beauty and her position in society. She was a Creole of color—and wealthy. She came from two generations of *gens de couleur libres*--free people of color, as they were known before Emancipation.

Marguerite Cheval was an octoroon who had one-eighth Negro blood running through her veins. This she got from her mother's side. Her insouciant attitude and wealth

came from her father's side. She was the illegitimate daughter of a wealthy Louisiana planter whose largesse provided for her every need. Although she did not know who her father was, she accepted without question, the privileges his status provided her.

"If they're not dead, then they're old and fat or have no money," Marguerite petulantly continued, pushing her way through the crowd and lifting her Lapis-Lazuli colored walking dress.

"You're being unreasonable," Octavia said as she splashed through the mud puddles, caking her brown muslin frock while trying to keep pace with Marguerite. "There are still good men out there even now. Men who are gentle and kind. Men who will make a good lover for you," Octavia whispered so as not to be over heard by passersby.

"How would you know? I mean...I mean...well, it just seems to me that you're so...so...self-possessed that I didn't think you would know these things," Marguerite amended.

Octavia tried not to take offense. After all, Marguerite was only a Catholic school girl months before, now she was a young lady. But still Marguerite's comment smarted. *Spinster*--Marguerite's unspoken word echoed in her head. At twenty-six, Octavia was unmarried with no prospects.

Marguerite tried again to express the gnawing feeling that churned in the pit of her stomach but she only made matters worse. "No, no Octavia. What I meant to say was that you have never been with a man, so how could you tell if a man was good for you?"

Octavia, who stood a few inches taller than her charge, straightened her spine and gave Marguerite a scathing glance. "And I suppose you have?"

They were still on Royal Street heading toward Canal when Marguerite pointed to a grey cottage with white shutters. "Behind those white shutters is a placée hidden away like a beautiful songbird. Her only escape is her garden courtyard. Royal Street is populated by these beautiful solitary creatures who sing their song for only one man."

Octavia reached out and pinched Marguerite on the arm. "Beautiful solitary creatures who sing their song for only one man," Octavia mimicked Marguerite's sad, dramatic tone. "If you're going to be dramatic, then do it on the stage where you can get paid, and not in the streets."

"Stop making fun of me," she said, rubbing the sting.

"I'll stop as soon as you come to your senses."

Marguerite clumsily played with her closed parasol, twirling it in her gloved hand. She glanced away, pretending to be fascinated by the traffic along Royal Street. A mule-drawn wagon was carrying bales of cotton to the wharf, a clatter of carriages moved endlessly in a stream while the cries of street vendors and a far off calliope from a steamboat added to the bustle of the French Quarter.

"No, it's just that, well, Maman told me that when she and Tante Thérèse were doing their charity work at the church, Tante Thérèse told her that there was this young woman who was presented not too long ago. And she took this lover who...who beat her within a month of their arrangement and he...he...left her and their child and now she's despondent. That's how Tante Thérèse described her...despondent. And I...I..."

Octavia could see the fear edging Marguerite's eyes. She took Marguerite's hand and led her to a sheltered doorway where they wouldn't be overheard. "If this is true, and I can't say that it is, knowing your Tante Thérèse's penchant for dramatics as well, then

the match is the fault of that young woman's mother. Her mother should have never allowed the union. And your mother has more common sense than anyone I know. She would only choose someone suitable for you." Octavia gently rubbed Marguerite's arm to calm her as she had done when Marguerite was a child and was in the throes of a tantrum.

Marguerite batted away her tears. She held her head down. "Yes, I suppose you're right. Maman would only want the best for me."

"Of course I'm right," Octavia said, matter-of-factly.

Marguerite sighed and muttered an apology under her breath. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean...."

"Of course you didn't." With that, Octavia took Marguerite's hand in hers and they proceeded to stroll, peering into shop windows. "Remember the story of Eulalie Mandeville. She was a placée to Eugene Macarty and look how long that union lasted. Over fifty years and five children," Octavia said.

"Ah, yes, but what happened? The minute he died and left her money in the will she had to go to court to claim it."

"That was a long time ago," Octavia said, impatiently.

"It's just that I don't want to be given away to someone who wouldn't...couldn't..." her voice trailed off. They were standing in front of a bookstore, where on display, was "*Infelicia*" a book of poetry by Adah Issac Menken.

Marguerite ruminated dreamily, "Maybe I should be like Adah Menken. An actress, a poet—to reject being a placée. To leave my white lover and be a woman of the world," Marguerite ended in flourish.

"And to be deemed outrageous and completely unsuitable for fit company. To have many husbands and many more lovers. All of them discarded like dirty laundry. No, Mademoiselle Marguerite, I do not think your lot is that of an outcast or rebel. Just stop worrying. You'll get yourself into a nervous state and then we will have to tell your suitors how high strung you are. And how nervous and irritable you get. And then they will run from you. You know how men are. They don't like anyone who is too delicate. If they wanted that, they would have wives instead of lovers. Leave everything to your Maman. She would never allow you to be given to a man who didn't come up to her standards."

"What about my standards? Don't I have anything to say about what I want?" Marguerite whined, defiantly.

Octavia sympathized with her, but her patience was running thin. "In this case," Octavia said, shrugging her shoulders, "You'll just have to trust your Maman's judgement. You know how these things are. You've known about these arrangements most of your life. Why are you complaining about them now?"

"I don't know," Marguerite sighed.

"Come, let's go. We have much more to do."

"Mademoiselle Marguerite," the familiar voice called.

Marguerite pretended not to hear him and crossed the street and Octavia followed.

"Mademoiselle Marguerite," a voice yelled louder.

Marguerite closed her eyes, and forced a smile. She turned and looked into the flushed face of Georges Emile Villere, a fair-skinned Creole Negro whose light hair and eyes made it seem as if he were disappearing in front of her.

Georges Emile Villere tipped his hat and stiffly bowed his acknowledgements. "Mademoiselle, how fortuitous. You are just in time to see me place my sign," he said, catching his breath and pointing to an engraved wooden sign he held in his hand that read simply, 'Villere--Broker'.

"Monsieur Villere, so creative, how clever." Marguerite said with a hint of sarcasm. Octavia, on the other hand, put her gloved hand in front of her face to hide her smile.

Georges Emile Villere stood even with Marguerite. He was a man of small stature, except for a widening waistline, but he carried himself as if he were a giant among men, which gave him the appearance and walk of a strutting turkey.

"I felt that simplicity was the most elegant statement. I think that my services will speak for themselves," he said, hooking his thumb in his vest pocket.

"I'm sure they will, Monsieur."

"Please, I would like you to come see my place of business. I've rented the downstairs. Maman and I have moved to a cottage in Faubourg Marigny. It is quite modest," he said sadly. "Perhaps my Maman and I could visit, or you us? My duties at the Freedman's Aid Association have consumed most of my time. I'm afraid I have not been as...as...prominent and attentive as I should be."

"Your absence has not been noticed on my part," Marguerite said flatly.

"Well...you see...with me opening a new business and all... I do feel that one can make one's fortune as a business owner as opposed to working for others, even though these are unpleasant times. My Maman has always told me that even the worst of times yield unexpected opportunities."

"That is an enviable philosophy," Octavia opined.

Georges stared at her as if she had spoken an unfamiliar dialect, then he turned his attention back to Marguerite. "I would like to discuss with you the various services I can provide. Estate planning, crop brokering, property acquisition..."

Marguerite didn't let him get further. She held her gloved hand up. "Monsieur you flatter me. These are things I know nothing about."

"Then your Maman," he said, handing her a card. "A woman of her means needs her assets protected. The coming years will be very trying for those who have been used to certain...luxuries." He leaned over and lowered his voice, "Mademoiselle, you would not believe the impoverished financial state of some of New Orleans' prominent families. The war has left them virtually paupers. I shudder to think how it has affected you...and your Maman."

"Monsieur Villere, Maman has always said that discussing finances should be as private as discussing one's intimate affairs. Both are vulgar when spoken aloud."

Marguerite took pity on him. "But, since it is you, she will be more than interested. On the other hand, I have not a head for figures or money." She tilted her head coquettishly, accepting his card.

"Of course not. Why should you? These are things best left to men. That is why your Maman may be in need of someone like me who can honestly guide her. Perhaps I may call on her sometime?"

"I'm sure she will appreciate your kind gesture. And I will make sure that she gets your card. Goodbye, Monsieur." Marguerite opened her parasol, signaling that the conversation had ended.

"Goodbye, Mademoiselle." He tipped his hat once more, watching Marguerite as she moved on.

They turned a corner and walked in silence. Octavia watched as Marguerite tossed the card and let it float in the path of an oncoming carriage.

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They stopped in front of D. Mercier & Sons Emporium of Fashion and Fair Dealing.

"Do you wish to try on that hat?" Octavia said.

Marguerite shrugged. "No, I don't like that color," she said listlessly.

"You love that shade of green."

"No, I don't. Not any more. Let's move on, I'll be late for my fitting. It will take me hours anyway just to get into the dress. Why Maman chose that particular period of dress is beyond me. I would have rather gone as Empress Joséphine. At least I wouldn't have to wear so many clothes. You know they say that Empress Joséphine had Negro blood in her, being from Martinique."

"I'm sure they didn't say it to her face."

"Octavia, what am I to do with you?" Marguerite laughed, and pushed her way through the crowd of people mingling on the street.

As she passed an entranceway, she did not notice the reed-thin black man with the scraggly beard growing down past his uniform collar. But he noticed her. He leaned lethargically against a building and scratched lazily at the growth on his face. His dark



eyes hidden underneath the cockeyed Yankee hat, took in the sway of those hips, and the tilt of that head underneath her parasol.

The dark complexioned, former Federal soldier brushed the tattered filthy remnants of his Northern blue uniform, fitted his military hat securely on his head, and followed the sound of the earring bells as the two women walked into a shop. He gazed into the window as Marguerite greeted the proprietor and walked toward the back for her fitting. Once she was out of his sight, he leaned against the building and waited, ignoring the way some pedestrians gave him sideways glances, turned up their noses at him, and walked on with burning resentment in their eyes.

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Inside the shop, Marguerite was being fitted for a costume to attend The Ball Parée et Masquée--The masked ball--that would be the night of Mardi Gras and would be the one that signaled Marguerite's plaçage arrangements. There were other, lesser balls earlier in the season, but this one would bind her fate. Her mother would see to it that the man presented his gift at the grand ball. This was what Celeste had been grooming Marguerite for all these years.

Octavia occupied herself by inspecting the bolts of material, wondering if she should buy herself fabric to make into a dress even though she barely went any place. She noticed a grey muslin, held it against her face and turned toward a mirror. It did nothing for her. It washed out her complexion, made her dark hooded eyes even smaller. And yet, this is what she normally wore because it was suitable for a woman of her position.

She put the muslin back and wandered the shop, inspecting other material.

Octavia spied a crimson piece of muslin, dark enough to be somber, but rich enough to bring out the red highlights in her skin. She hesitated and glanced up once and noticed the uniformed man waiting by the door and thought she had seen him before, but she couldn't remember. There were so many of them now, aimlessly wandering the city. This one though had the affront to still wear his Federal uniform. He probably had no other clothes, she thought. Most of them didn't.

Octavia clutched the bolt of red cloth in her arm and strolled toward the counter. She listened while Marguerite bargained down the price of her masquerade gown because of a small stain on the silk skirt that was hardly visible, but would cause embarrassment if anyone were to look closely. Back and forth they bickered in French until the shopkeeper relented under Marguerite's insistence.

As Octavia listened to the banter and waited to buy her cloth, her eyes once again strayed to the street. The soldier was still there. His position hadn't changed.

"Excuse me, Mademoiselle, do you have a few pennies to spare?" Octavia asked.

"Is there something you wish to buy?" Marguerite replied.

Octavia nodded toward the street where the soldier stood. "For him."

"What is he to do with us?"

"He is a soldier in need of money."

"He is a Federal soldier and Northern interloper in need of a bath. That's all."

Octavia leaned closer to Marguerite and whispered, "Certainly, you wouldn't deny a few pennies to a man who fought for the coloreds' freedom?"

Marguerite whispered, "I was always free, Octavia. It was you who were the slave. If you want to reward your hero, then give him *your* pennies." Marguerite turned back to the shopkeeper.

Several minutes later, Marguerite and Octavia strolled back into the New Orleans bright winter sunshine. Octavia held the red bolt underneath her arm. As she passed, she slipped the pennies in the soldier's hand and then fell a few steps behind Marguerite as they crossed Canal street, dodging wagons and buggies. Both disappeared inside another shop.

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They were out shopping the next day when Octavia noticed the soldier again.

"Don't turn around, that soldier from yesterday is following us, like a dog on the scent," Octavia said.

"It's all your fault," Marguerite hissed at Octavia as they turned off Chartres and onto Canal Street. Marguerite halted and looked back to see the colored soldier standing a few feet away. "If you hadn't felt sorry for him, he wouldn't be sniffing around us now, looking for another hand-out," she said peering from underneath her parasol at the weary soldier.

"He's just another piece of riff raff. Ignore him and he'll find something more entertaining to do."

"Like slit our throats?" With that, Marguerite went into a shop lined with masquerade masks. Octavia followed her charge into the shop where Marguerite was enjoying the prospect of finding the perfect mask for her costume. Marguerite pointed to

one that was so full it occupied its own case. The shopkeeper reached in and carefully pulled it out. It was made of white ostrich feathers outlined in seed pearls and glittering stones. The mask was a foot in diameter. It covered her entire face and her neck. She held it up and turned, only to stare at the soldier who stared back at her.

"A face like yours don't need to be hidden behind something like that. That's for ugly women."

Marguerite slipped down the mask and boldly stared into the man's unlined face. Although he seemed older from a distance, Marguerite guessed the man was only in his early twenties.

"Monsieur, I feel you're being impertinent."

His smile broadened. "You might be right, if I knew what that meant."

"And ignorant as well," she snapped back.

His good-natured grin turned lopsided, his full lips bared brilliant, even white teeth. "That I am. Just a soldier come to New Orleans to taste his first drops of freedom."

Marguerite turned back to the shopkeeper and shook her head. She pointed out another mask more decorated than the first. "And does it leave you intoxicated?" she asked, referring to the wafting smell of whiskey on the man's breath.

"Drunk as a skunk, ma'am---and broke. Can't seem to find a good job around here. But I don't need your friend's charity quite yet, so I'm returning her money." His dark brown, rough hand uncurled and he placed the pennies on the store counter. Marguerite looked at the money and back at him and then at Octavia who was hovering nearby.

"This man says he'd rather do without your charity."

Octavia nodded, but didn't move to take the money back. Marguerite brushed the pennies aside as she continued to survey the masks. "You should consider keeping it, not as charity, but as a loan. There are too few jobs for too many people. You don't want to be caught as a vagrant."

"Folks can't get used to paying for what they had free."

"You Federals have stolen our land and property, bankrupted our wealthy, and turned our former slaves against us. What do you expect?"

"Somebody who can use an extra hand?" He said, laughingly.

"You are insolent, Monsieur."

"And you need to have more charity, ma'am." he said, tipping his hat.

Octavia quickly interceded. "You might try down at the docks and along in there if you don't mind vying with immigrants. But if the police catch you, you'll be rounded up and sent away."

The soldier nodded her way. "They won't catch me, ma'am, and I appreciate the advice. "You have a kind heart," he said. And then he looked pointedly at Marguerite. "Unlike your friend here."

Marguerite angrily turned her back on him and to the shopkeeper said, "Monsieur Duchamp, you should be careful who you let into your shop."

"Yes, ma'am," he nodded to Marguerite and then turned on the soldier. "You must leave, sir unless you plan to buy something. You're making the women uncomfortable."

Marguerite smiled, smugly. "Thank you Monsieur. I've decided to take this one."

But from the doorway she heard: "That one makes you look like one of them big, white skinny-legged birds with all those feathers, if you don't mind me saying that."

She whirled around. "I do mind. Especially coming from a man who has as little fashion sense as he does manners," Marguerite snapped.

"Mademoiselle, if you wish, I will hail a policeman," Monsieur Duchamp said, trying to avoid a situation that was turning more volatile by the minute.

"No need, Monsieur. We are leaving. Octavia will come back with the money and pick it up."

Marguerite walked passed the soldier and couldn't resist one last comment. "Good luck, Monsieur. And please let me give you another piece of advice, if you don't mind. See that you take yourself to a public bath and sober up before you present yourself in public again. We have enough disease-ridden drunkards in New Orleans." With that she brushed passed him. Octavia followed.

Monsieur Duchamp scooped up the forgotten pennies and put them in his pocket.

## CHAPTER TWO

John Drummond watched as the two women disappeared in the crowd then he stuck his hands in his woolen uniform and walked away, smiling. It was the first time in many days that he'd actually enjoyed himself. The woman was arrogant, cruel and stunning. It took his breath away just to gaze into her eyes.

John passed a store window and looked at his reflection. The image he saw startled him. His clothes were worn and dirty. His face was haggard. He'd spent his last money on beer instead of food. He looked like the hundreds of other displaced persons in New Orleans. He decided to take her advice. Maybe there was some work he could do. He wasn't afraid of hard work. He'd been doing it all his life.

The Port of New Orleans was not just a place, it was a life form. The Mississippi River was the blood that kept it alive. And as long as it thrived, so would New Orleans. The levee stretched for miles with steam boats, barges, and flat boats lining its docks. The steam boats belched black smoke from its stacks and turned the air a grey fog that mingled with the pungent odor of river bottom. Day or night immigrants, Negroes, and children, worked to unload or load cargo onto the ships that navigated the river and fed the New Orleans economy. Bananas from Central America, sugar and molasses in barrels and hogheads, and tons and tons of cotton in bales cluttered the wharf. The clatter of dray wagons, the shouts of longshoremen, the hawking of street vendors, the strains of a calliope, the tinny sound from an organ grinder, the arguments of ship captains and sailors all contributed to the beat and breath of life.

He spotted a couple of light-skinned Negro men who had gathered a crowd of colored people around them. These men who were well-dressed and well-spoken, talked to the straggling and weary crowd about signing up at the New Orleans Freedman's Aid Association. One of the two men was adamantly urging the crowd by waving a piece of paper in his hand.

"My name is Georges Villere. I'm here to tell you about how you can farm your own land instead of starving here in the city," he said with intensity. This is a way that you can better yourselves. A way to make a living for your families and to own what used to be the white man's property.

"If you stay in New Orleans, without the prospect of work, without shelter, without good medical care, you and your families will perish. What good is freedom now, if you die?"

John looked around at the people in the crowd. A flash of hope appeared on some faces, while others merely walked away disillusioned. These people were just like him, worn out from slavery. Some of them were old and infirmed. Most of them had no money and no where to go. Drifting. That was freedom's legacy.

John wandered off before hearing what Villere proposed. He passed a man hawking patent medicine who claimed his medicine would cure the dreaded yellow fever. The sounds on the wharf faded as John headed down a crowded unpaved street, passing beer gardens, shops, and brothels. At each place he stuck his head in the door and inquired about work. He stopped at a tobacco factory where the white man behind the table gave the same negative reply, but as he stepped back into the New Orleans street, he heard someone hiss. He stepped into the alley and saw a middle-aged Negro man motion



to him to come closer. The man buttoned his trousers after relieving himself and wiped his hands on his dirty apron. His fingers were tobacco-stained, and his remaining teeth were yellow from the stuff.

"Ya'll lookin' for work I hears?" the old man said as he coughed a wad of brown spit onto the ground. You care who you works for?"

John shook his head.

"Well, there's a gal, name Leda, she been lookin' for someone. Maybe you can talk her into hirin' you. Live 'round the corner here, down the alley. Knock on her door. Maybe she give you some odd and end work. Maybe she don't. But, if she do, tell her ol' Tyler sent ya. And if'n she do, tell her she owe me a favor. You tell her I wants me some powerful ju-ju." And then he nodded and disappeared through the back door.

John followed the old man's directions, down a muddy narrow path that bisected rows of lean-to wooden shacks with patched roofs and crumbling stucco two-story brick buildings where the shell ginger bushes grew unattended through the wooden courtyard walls. It was one of these structures that John found himself knocking on. Hearing no response, he knocked again. He was about to turn around and walk back when the door swung open and a woman dressed only in a corset and a sheer wrap draped over her shoulders, stood boldly in the entrance. Her black silken hair, that reached down her back, was disheveled. She brushed strands from her face and stood seductively in the door frame one hand on her hip, the other on the door. A small gold cross lay sparkling between the curve of her breasts. John's eyes automatically were drawn to the cross and then to the fullness of her olive-skinned breasts that peeked over her corset. His eyes reluctantly pulled away to meet her piercing black eyes that brazenly scanned his body.

The woman's features looked white, but her skin was dark and her accent confused him. He remembered overhearing a phrase about the colored people passing for white in the city. 'You could take a pound of red beans and feed all the pure white people in New Orleans.' If that were true, John suspected that the woman in front of him wouldn't be eating. But he gave her the benefit of the doubt and avoided staring at her.

"What you want, cher? " she demanded, with a lilting voice. "If you sellin' somethin' I don't want any." She started to close the door, but John wedged his foot in the way.

"Ma'am, an old man name of Tyler says you may be lookin' to hire someone. Maybe do some jobs 'round your place?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Yeah and why you think Leda need you?" she demanded.

John looked at the crumbling facade of the building. "Well, ma'am, you may not need me, but it do look like you need somebody."

"Who is that? Get rid of 'um, Leda. I only got so much time," came a raspy Northern voice beyond the door. Through the space between her upraised arm, John could see a fleshy white man with his shirt unbuttoned and his pants off.

"Didn't mean to disturb you, ma'am." John said, embarrassed.

The woman named Leda looked over her shoulder at where John was staring. She turned back to him and stepped out of the doorway. She leaned in toward him. "You right. This place fallin' down around me. Next thing you know the water come and wash it away. No loss, but 'till that happen, I guess Leda got to live here. I got stuff to do in and around the house. You good with your hands?"

John opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

She looked at his long tapering fingers. "I need a carpenter. You can do that, can't you?"

John nodded.

"You come back, maybe in a hour. Then we talk," she said, shutting the door in his face.

John walked a few paces away then slid down the wall and sat on a crate, waiting. His stomach growled from hunger.

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Leda shut the door against the afternoon sun and walked back into the darkened room as her eyes adjusted. She looked around, waiting for familiar objects to emerge in relief from the gloom. She hated this place. She hated the dinginess. The sun never seemed to filter through the tiny windows, but it was always hot and dank. She smelled the herbs she kept in jars that lined the walls. She smelled the man whose cologne overpowered the sweet herbs, but didn't mask his stringent body odor. She did not like his smell, but she was attracted to it, like a child mesmerized by fire; it was the danger that attracted her. The man's natural scent was that of an animal waiting to pounce; he was an animal whose only instinct was survival. She was compelled to move toward him. He lounged on the corner of her settee with his legs crossed and his shirt unbuttoned so she saw his white beefy torso. A hiss came from the same corner of the room. She did not know if it was the man, or her snake.

"Don't just stand there you witch. I got a business appointment," the man said.

"I have to feed my snake, cher. He's getting impatient," Leda said as she knelt down to look at the creature curled in the corner of his cage. Leda took a mouse from another cage and dangled it in front of the snake, just high enough so that he'd have to stretch to reach it. She watched him strike the cage, once---twice---his head hampered by the bars. She smiled, this was a game she often played with her snake until he became so frustrated that he struck repeatedly, unheeding of any danger to himself. That's when she would grab him by the back of his head, and milk the venom to use in her potions.

"He's not the only one that needs feeding. Stop playing your games and come to me. I'm the one that's paying you. And I want what's coming to me," he said, not moving.

Leda opened the cage and threw the mouse in. She watched as the snake cornered the small terrified animal, then struck and in one swallow, devoured the mouse, sucking the last of the tail down its throat. Leda then walked toward the man and stood with her unkempt hair around her shoulders, her wrap open so he could see the curve of her body. He reached and grabbed the gold chain around her neck, forcing her to bend down, inches from him. His pale hooded eyes that were set deep in his face, reminded her of her snake, waiting to strike. His breath blew hot against her cheek.

"I wanna get the kinks outta my system before I leave," he said in his flat, Yankee tone. Leda curled her body around the man's. One leg balanced on the couch while the other wound itself around his outstretched body. She inched closer to him, easing herself on top of him and let her tongue lick the side of his cheek.

"Who you gonna rob today, cher?"

He grabbed a fist full of hair and pulled her head back so he could see her face. He smiled. "I meet with Joubert in a couple of days and I'm going to show him how to

get rich." He forced his lips against hers until she couldn't breathe. His weight shifted and she found herself underneath him. His heavy torso pressed against hers, forcing her to take shallow breaths while he planted more kisses on her breasts. His lips moved lower. He freed his other hand and pulled her corset down further until both her breasts were free. He fondled one breast in his hand, pinching the nipple until she cried out.

"You're hurting Leda."

"I need your help."

"Is that the way you ask, Monsieur Pursell?"

Charles Pursell loosened his touch and rubbed her nipple with the flat of his palm.

"I need your help," he repeated.

"With Joubert?"

Pursell bent over and let his tongue playfully massage her nipple. Her head fell back on the pillows, her body relaxed. "Cher, don't stop."

"Will you help me?" he said as his hand moved toward the inside of her thighs.

Leda knew all about Charles Pursell and his trouble. He had come to her several months before to get his fortune told. She had sat him down at the table and taken an object of his, a pocket watch. She rubbed it in between her hands and was about to give him the same standard line as she gave the rest of her clients when she felt something dark pull her under. Her eyes closed and she fought this darkness, as if it were a wave engulfing her, trying to drown her in its evil.

She struggled to the top of her consciousness and then, without warning, a feeling of sadness also swallowed her. She felt, rather than saw a little boy, a bright innocent youth, being dragged from a wagon and strapped to the spokes with leather bindings. She

saw a man with a book in his hand, preaching over the youth, preaching a sermon from the book, daring the youth to cry out and scare the horse for fear it would gallop away with the boy strapped to the wheels.

She saw this boy being stripped of his clothes and being made to stay in a dark cellar for days at a time. The boy clawing at the wooden cellar door; his fingernails imbedded in the wood as he tried to escape from the dark, dankness of the cellar. She saw the boy reading dutifully from the Bible, trying not to miss a word or a phrase for fear that the older man, the one with the black coat and hat, would punish him for a transgression in the reading. She saw the boy made to watch as the older man made love to a woman. Then later, this same man would strip off his clothes and flay himself with a leather strap. And in a flash her vision of the boy washed red. The color of blood. The color of anger.

All this she told Charles Pursell in their first meeting. He sat stunned, with tears running down his face. He listened to her; he writhed in agony. He vowed he would not be tormented anymore. He vowed that he would conquer the demons. He asked for her help and she gave it, knowing that it was a dangerous game he was playing. She knew that to conquer a demon, you had to resist it, or become it. And she did not know whether Charles Pursell was capable of resisting.

"What can I do?" she moaned, as he continued to rub his hand over her body.

"Do what you always do. Do that mumble jumble you're so good at. Tell Joubert that a good business opportunity awaits him. You know what to do. You're a bigger crook than I am."

He found her opening and placed one finger between the soft flesh, and slowly moved his finger back and forth until an involuntary moan escaped her lips. Her next sentence was barely audible as waves of pleasure washed over her.

“And what is in it for Leda?”

“More of this...and much, much more money.”

She let him stroke her until the waves came faster and with force. Then she grabbed him by the hair and pulled him down into her, letting his smell and his cologne engulf her, smothering and pushing her toward oblivion.

In the corner of the darkened room the snake, now sated, was coiled in the corner of his cage, his eyes closed, but his body alert.

## CHAPTER THREE

"I want you to wear some jewelry. I think it will enhance your coloring," Celeste Cheval said, while sipping delicately at her coffee and chicory laced with brandy. Her salmon cambric morning robe trimmed in various shades of brown was spread around her as she lounged on the settee.

"Octavia, get my jewelry box from my room."

Octavia nodded and left.

Marguerite sat restlessly on the couch. She fidgeted under her mother's intense gaze. "What is it now?" Marguerite said petulantly. Marguerite, for all her airs and arrogance among outsiders, could be shaken by a disapproving glance from her mother.

"Don't use that tone with me. If I choose to look at you, let me look."

"It's not so much you look at me, as you inspect me, Maman," Marguerite protested. "I feel like I'm being marketed," Marguerite balked.

"And so you are," Celeste said matter-of-factly.

Celeste Cheval was in her 40's, but looked ten years younger. Celeste prided herself on that fact. She blushed like a schoolgirl whenever someone commented that she and Marguerite looked more like sisters than mother and daughter. With appropriate humility, Celeste would glibly remind the admirer that Marguerite was indeed her one and only daughter and that Marguerite was far more beautiful. But inside, Celeste relished the flattery because Celeste, with her exotic looks, had always been a beauty in her own right.

More than twenty years ago, she had been a belle at the quadroon balls. Celeste had attracted the attentions of many a white man in New Orleans, making every white



woman in New Orleans frenzied over the prospect of competing as a rival. But Celeste was no fool. She selected wisely and with an eye toward future security. A young man who courted her may not have seemed the most promising prospect then, but she looked at his potential earning income. Most women would have been satisfied to have been courted by a man with inheritance. Celeste looked at whether that man was capable of doubling what was given to him.

Several young men who thought they owned her heart had fought valiant duels to possess her body. And when those men lost their lives on the grassy park outside of New Orleans, Celeste wept pitiful tears, but consoled herself by taking the survivor as her lover. She reasoned that the deceased would have wanted her to be happy and secure rather than in mourning.

If men were soldiers on the battlefield, Celeste was a general in the boudoir. Her maneuvers were just as effective and as deadly. Her wealth and prominence increased because of it. She owned several houses and property in the French Quarter as well as in Faubourg Marigny and Tremé.

The house that she and Marguerite occupied was on Esplanade Avenue among the wealthy white Creoles. She bought it for cash, which she kept locked in her room. Like most Creoles, she distrusted banks, particularly after the bank failure of 1837 when many of the Creoles lost their money and property. The house had been built by an American businessman who mistakenly thought that living amongst Creoles would invite him into their culture. Unfortunately, the Creoles were not as accepting. His family lived in virtual isolation surrounded by the French speaking Creoles whose men preferred sipping absinthe at their club or local saloons while their women preferred to socialize at their

charitable organizations. The American packed his things and family and moved on before the war, preferring to be with his own kind. As a parting shot, he sold the home to Celeste, knowing it would infuriate his Creole neighbors. Unlike the Creole cottages where one room led into another, this house had a foyer and main hallway. The parlor and dining room were on one side. The master bedroom and Marguerite's summer bedroom were on the other. But like most Creole houses, the garden surrounded the house. The back of the house opened onto the courtyard. A stairway led to the second floor where Marguerite's winter bedroom opened onto a wrought-iron gallery, balcony, that faced the courtyard and Octavia's room was nuzzled next to hers.

The original slave quarters, kitchen, and old stables were in a separate building that was perpendicular to the house. The courtyard was very much Creole. It was laid with a circular brick pattern and shaded by two live oaks and banana palms. In the center of the circle was a fountain surrounded by terra cotta pots of flowers. During the spring and summer the courtyard was a profusion of wild flowers, daisies, wisteria, and several shell ginger plants whose flowers hung like grapes. Octavia had an herb and vegetable garden that lined the perimeter of the courtyard.

Celeste did not believe in wasting money on decorative furniture, so her house was not a showplace, but it was functional. The few pieces that she did possess were all in the Louis XV style; rich mahogany, inlaid in bronze and exquisite. The salon settee was covered in heavy champagne damask. The large oriental rugs were placed in the center of the polished hardwood floors. There were a few paintings on the walls along with large gilded mirrors strategically placed so that Celeste could see her reflection

wherever she sat. The decor was functional as opposed to decorative. Celeste preferred that if there were any decorative accents, it should be her.

As a Creole of color, she was a social outcast among the white Creoles. Neither black nor white, she could only imitate their lifestyle. The white women shunned her, but men adored her. And she never let the women forget that. Nor did she have friends among the Negro population, for she considered herself above the status of former slave. Her few friends were those who had been free people of color before the war. They were Creoles of color and only socialized within that narrow stratum.

One time she had sailed to France on a ship named after her by a doting benefactor and been invited to dine with ambassadors and diplomats in the most ostentatious surroundings. If there were conversations about her color at these soirees, it was in reference to the luminescence of her skin, the natural rose blush of her cheeks, or the brilliance of her tawny brown eyes. But never, not in the presence of her possessive lover nor in her presence, was there mention that her skin might indicate she was of a lower cast. Celeste had lived a good life; she made no apologies for it, and she was determined to make her daughter's equally as rich.

Octavia glided back into the saloon with Celeste's gold encrusted musical jewelry box and presented it to her mistress. Octavia then sat in one of the damask covered straight-back chairs and watched quietly as Celeste opened it and listened to the tinkle of a waltz that evoked long ago elegance.

Celeste took the box and sat beside her sulking daughter, the better to see how each piece complimented her daughter's skin. She selected a necklace with a large round-

cut ruby raised from its setting by an elegantly sculpted gold hand. Its chain was made of heavier gold and fastened with a smaller ruby clasp.

"Are you nervous?" Celeste asked, as she fastened this piece around her daughter's neck.

Marguerite turned around and felt the weight of the piece lay like a stone against her throat. Maybe it was just her imagination, but Marguerite thought the ruby necklace was choking her. Marguerite was full of confusing feelings, but she'd never voice her ambivalence in front of her mother.

"Stand up, let me see it in the light," Celeste said, before Marguerite could reply.

Marguerite obeyed and walked toward one of the windows where the light hit the ruby and sprayed rainbows around the room.

Celeste shook her head. "That is not right for you. It overwhelms you. Jewelry should enhance not diminish someone's beauty. All right, come back. Let's try something else. That was my favorite piece." Celeste sighed. "I remember when I was given that necklace. It was a peace offering from your father. Did I tell you that story? Never mind. It's of no consequence. Uh, maybe this one," Celeste said, holding up a multi-strand necklace of perfectly matched pearls. "Yes, let me see you wear this."

The pearl necklace hung lighter around Marguerite. The shortest strands covered Marguerite's neck and cascaded down around her breastbone. Celeste smiled, "Uh, that's it. Pearls are perfect for you. I like the way they play up your skin and your innocence. Always wear pearls. Remember that when a suitor asks you what kind of jewelry you prefer."

"Maman," Marguerite interrupted, as she adjusted the necklace. "What if I have no suitors?"

"Don't be silly, of course you'll have suitors. Everyone knows you are the daughter of Celeste Cheval. Suitors are inevitable. It is the right one that we must concentrate on," she said, emphasizing this with a wag of her jeweled finger.

"Now, if he wishes to give you diamonds, then I wouldn't refuse. But, if he really cares what you like, he'll ask you. If you say pearls, he won't feel as if you're taking advantage."

"Maman," Marguerite fidgeted as Celeste unclasped the necklace, "Do you think this is proper?"

"Pearls are so modest," Celeste said, not picking up her daughter's train of thought, "You see, he'll think, perhaps he can do better. He will try to impress and he'll present you with diamonds. Isn't that right, Octavia?"

"Yes ma'am, Octavia said, noncommittally.

Celeste picked up the ruby necklace and held it high so that the sun hit the stones and again sprayed the room with dotted rainbows. She then held it to her throat. "He was so apologetic when he gave this too me. So...contrite."

"Maman, about him..."

Celeste looked uncomfortable and with a wave of her hand, dismissed the conversation. "He was a good man. Old fashioned in his way." Celeste then placed the necklace on the table. "He was much admired here and abroad. You should be proud to be the progeny of such a fine French family. You have nothing to worry about. You will have suitable admirers and make a good match. I'll see to that." She sighed, shaking her

head. "These arrangements are expensive propositions. But, they are investments for the future, no?" She poured herself another coffee and splashed brandy in the China cup. She relaxed in her chair.

"That reminds me Maman, Octavia and I met Monsieur Villere. He has a new business...a brokering business...and would like to call on you."

"I have no need of his services," she said defensively.

Marguerite sat beside her mother. "He says that many prominent families are poverty stricken because of the war."

"That is quite true. But I think he has something more on his mind than just my financial well-being," she said with a wave of her hand. Then she turned to Octavia: "Octavia, take the rest away. We've found what we need. Make sure you put them back, safely. There are too many rogues now in this city. Just the other day, I heard that several women had their purses stolen by white vagabonds. Next, they'll be coming into our homes and stealing our silver settings."

"Maman, there was a man today. He followed us. A former Union soldier---a colored soldier."

"I hope you had the good sense not to talk to him."

"Well..." Marguerite began sheepishly.

Celeste turned Marguerite's face toward her and raised one delicate ringed finger to admonish Marguerite. "What have I told you about talking to people on the street? This city is getting more and more dangerous by the day as these people wander in looking for handouts."

"Maman, I dismissed him. He was looking for work. I told him he might find it down on the wharf. That's all I said. I didn't give him any money, Octavia did. And he didn't want it. He gave it back."

Celeste released her daughter and shouted for Octavia. "Octavia, come in here, please." Octavia reappeared in front of her mistress and stood erect before her.

"I asked you to chaperon Marguerite and to make sure that she does not disgrace herself in public and then you have the affront to give money to rouges who beg on every street corner and endanger my daughter?"

"It was my money, Madame," Octavia said, flatly.

"And this is my daughter. Certainly you, of all people, should know better not to encourage these people."

Octavia looked directly at Celeste. There was no anger in her gaze as she said, "Madame, these people are my people. They were slaves. They are now free and trying to build a new life for themselves. It will be very hard for them. I was only doing a charity."

"Then do it when Marguerite isn't around. How you spend your money and your time is your business. But when I've charged you with my daughter's care, I expect that you follow my orders."

"Yes ma'am."

"You can go outside to the kitchen and begin dinner preparation. We'll not talk about this anymore." Celeste waved her away and turned her attention back to Marguerite.

"Now, I want you to go lie down so you can be refreshed, and then you can eat. I'm going to have company tonight and I don't want you under foot, understand?"

"Yes, Maman." Marguerite walked from the room, leaving her mother alone to ruminate on her past affairs, as she seemed to do so often now.

\* \* \*

Still smarting from Celeste's chastisements, Octavia put on her apron and lined up her cooking bowls so that she could easily reach them when she needed them.

Celeste and Octavia had a nebulous relationship. No longer her slave, she sometimes still felt like one. And yet, Celeste made her privy to every secret in the Cheval household. Octavia kept those secrets out of loyalty and love. Celeste's quick temper was legendary. Octavia ignored most of her outbursts and patiently let them blow over. She had lived with Celeste too long to be bullied by her. As her hands measured, pounded and stirred, her mind wandered.

Octavia had been a slave on a plantation one day's ride from New Orleans. It was a large plantation that worked both cotton and cane. There she toiled with her mother in the kitchen. Her daily routine was dictated by her mistress. Her punishments were meted out by that same mistress who resented little Octavia for being her husband's offspring. Little Octavia's mistress was Madame Alexander, a thin-lipped, pale shrew of a woman who chose to ignore her husband's dalliances until she was confronted by them in the form of bastard children. Madame Alexander waited until Octavia was old enough to work before she took her revenge. She became her task master, her driver, her overseer. Nothing Octavia did was ever right or proper.

Little Octavia was accused of stealing and she was whipped. She hadn't polished the silverware properly and she was punished with no food for two days. The stitches for



the lace table cloth were too big and Madame Alexander ripped them out and made Octavia re-do them until exhausted; Octavia's eyes burned, her tiny hands trembled over the fine needle work.

Her poor mother could do nothing more than comfort her. Madame Alexander held a threat over their heads greater than any fear Octavia had of the woman. In fits of anger, venom spewing from her tight-curved lips, Madame Alexander threatened to sell Octavia away from the only home and the only love she had. The mention of this would send Octavia cowering behind the protection of her mother's skirts. Mother and child lived in constant fear that Madame Alexander would carry out that threat. As it turned out, she never did. Octavia's mother died when Octavia was thirteen. What Madame Alexander threatened to do, God had done for her.

Shortly after her mother's death, Master Robert came to the kitchen, a separate building from the main house. He gently awakened Octavia shortly before dawn and told her to take whatever she had. He gave her a blanket to wrap around her thin dress as protection from the early morning damp that perpetually covered the low lands of Louisiana's countryside, and they set off in a wagon for the long ride to New Orleans.

Octavia remembered looking back at the plantation, watching it stir into life as the wagon rolled along the dirt path toward the main road that led to the city. She remembered knowing that this would be the last time she would see the plantation or Madame Alexander and she felt relief. She settled down on the seat, closed her eyes, and thanked the spirit of her mother for continuing to protect her.

It was during that ride that she realized the significance Master Robert had over her. This man, who she rarely saw because of his business away from the plantation, was

taking her away from her home. She had not asked to go. She had not told him about her unhappiness there. Yet, he carted her off without explanation. As she shivered in the dampness, the blanket wrapped around her bony shoulders, she looked furtively at the man who was her father and her keeper.

His keen features stood out in sharp relief against the dawning sky. Those same features were duplicated on her face. Thin nose, eyes narrow and set apart, high forehead and elongated fingers with their half-moon cuticles. She watched his fingers as they gracefully held the reins that navigated the horses. She looked down at her own brown hands, spread her fingers apart and duplicated his movements.

"Would you like to take the reins for awhile?" he said, mistaking her gesture for one of restlessness. She nodded and he handed the reins over to her.

"Now, don't pull too tight, keep them loose, but grip them firm enough to let the horses know who's guiding them."

Octavia did as she was told, gripping the reins in her hands and feeling the sweat and warmth from his hands on the leather. They progressed in silence while Octavia maneuvered the wagon down the muddy road.

"You'd make a good horse woman," she remembered him saying. "You'd cut a good figure on a horse." And then he tipped his hat down over his eyes, slouched on the seat and dozed lightly.

As she steered the horse-drawn wagon along the country road, she felt how much in control she was. It was the first time in her life she experienced that emotion. She was in charge of where they would go and how they would get there. She wondered if everyone except slaves felt that way all the time.

They hit a rock in the road that tipped the wagon and spooked the horses. Master Robert awoke from his doze. He tried to take the reins from her.

"That's all right, Octavia. You did a fine job. Now, let me have them."

"I'll do it, sir. Let me do it." She tightened her grip and pulled back until the horses calmed themselves and continued their moderate pace.

"You a stubborn child, gal. You must take after my side." He laughed. It was the first time he'd ever made mention of his paternal link to her.

As they neared the city, he insisted on steering because of the increased traffic. Octavia reluctantly gave over control of the wagon and resigned herself to watching the sights.

She had never been to New Orleans or to any city. She remembered how, as they approached, the air smelled of sweet and sour; garden flowers and river bottom decay. She could not stop turning her head to see the shops, and clustered houses attached to each other. Their shuttered back doors faced the street while their front doors faced elaborately landscaped gardens. The houses were like the people inside, hospitable yet saving their best for their own kind.

She watched the people as they made their way through the crowded streets of the Vieux Carré. She saw her first Indian that day; a woman peddling herbs out of a basket. She saw a man carrying a bunch of saplings across his shoulder trudging along the street. She later learned he was the Clothespole man who sold the slim branches for women to use in holding up their clothes line.

Master Robert tethered the horses, picked her up and set her feet down on the granite grey and sage colored banquette. It was the first time her shoeless feet touched

anything as hard and cold as that sidewalk. He held her hand while they walked up the step and presented her to Celeste Cheval.

It was a long time ago, but Octavia remembered how Master Robert and Madame Celeste---not Mademoiselle--as Celeste so often corrected her--embraced. And how, Madame Celeste took her hand and guided her into the immaculate parlor and forbade her to sit on any of the furniture until she had bathed. Celeste and Master Robert then went into another room, leaving her.

Octavia had stood in the middle of the room, her head down, her toes gripping the rug, listening to their whispered conversation and Celeste's laughter.

"You raised a ruffian, Robert. How on earth am I to train this urchin?" she heard Celeste say.

"You'll find a way."

"You expect miracles," she laughed in a light musical voice. "Ah, cher, your indiscretions will get the better of you."

She remembered how Master Robert's face looked as he held Madame Celeste's hand when they re-entered the parlor to see her still staring down at the Oriental rug. She saw him kiss Celeste and how she playfully pushed him away and told him, "Not in front of the girl."

He knelt down in front of Octavia and took her small hand in his: "Madame Celeste is your mistress now. You do as she tells you and be a good girl. She will be good to you," he said, patting Octavia's head. He took some papers out of his frock coat and handed them to Celeste. Then he was gone.

The clock over the mantel ticked loudly in the quiet house. Octavia dared to raise her eyes and look at Celeste who was staring at her. There was no more smile on her face. No more laughter in her voice. The gaiety and carefree attitude she had displayed for Master Robert was replaced with a cold, stern look.

"Do you understand why Master Robert brought you here?" she asked Octavia.

Octavia only shook her head.

Celeste walked around her as if she were a horse to be inspected. "You have no one. Your mother is dead. Your mistress no longer wants you. Master Robert brought you here because he knew that I would take care of you. Take better care of you than if you had been sold to someone else. But don't think that you can take advantage of my kindheartedness."

"No, ma'am."

"And don't think that because Master Robert is your father that you have privileges."

"No ma'am," Octavia said quietly, averting her eyes.

"In this house, we keep our secrets. What goes on in this house is no one else's business. Do you understand?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Just in case you don't," Celeste held up the papers that Master Robert had given her. "These papers say that you are now my property. At any time, and for any reason, if you transgress my wishes, I can have you sold. Do you understand?"

"Yes ma'am."

Octavia, gaunt and gangly, dug her toes deeper into the rug and clenched her fists. Her body tensed as Celeste once more circled around her like a bird of prey and felt her dress.

"I shall have to get you some clothes if you are to be a servant. Nothing fancy, mind you, but suitable for your station and much better than most. But don't get any ideas. You may be Master Robert's child, but you are still my slave. If I dress you well, it is a reflection on me."

"Yes ma'am."

From then on Octavia became Celeste's companion while being a caretaker and playmate to Marguerite.

Celeste believed that Marguerite's education should start young. The child had a succession of tutors who taught her a variety of subjects; French, English, music, as well as comportment and etiquette. Marguerite was an indifferent student. Octavia was an avid one.

At times, Celeste would charge Octavia with taking care of Marguerite for a week at a time while Celeste went away. It was at those times that the line between caretaker and playmate were blurred. One moment Octavia would reprimand Marguerite for not having completed her lesson, and the next they were playing dolls.

But the line became more rigid as Marguerite grew older and was sent to private school. It was Celeste's wish that Marguerite understand the class structure that separated a *gens de couleur libres* from a slave. Celeste would reprimand Marguerite for treating Octavia as an equal rather than as a servant. She would punish Octavia for allowing it to happen. Octavia could not help but be envious of Marguerite's status and her freedom.

She wondered why it was that her lot was cast as slave, when Marguerite's was cast as mistress.

Celeste would discreetly see several suitors, all of whom were white men. Once her suitor was comfortably ensconced enjoying Celeste's attentions, Octavia would retire to Marguerite's room where she told Marguerite stories until the child went to sleep. She would tuck Marguerite in and bed down beside her and pretend to be asleep, all the while listening to the love making that was going on in another part of the house.

But with all of Celeste's suitors Octavia knew that Master Robert was the one she most favored. He would stay for weeks at a time and then be gone for months. Octavia always knew when her father was scheduled to arrive. Celeste would find some excuse to have her take Marguerite to an amusement that would last for hours so that the two lovers could have the house to themselves. When they returned home, Celeste kept them out of sight unless Master Robert specifically asked to see them. And that was rare. One time Master Robert arrived unexpectedly while Celeste was away. Octavia answered the door and he smiled down at her.

"Why gal, if you haven't grown." he said, taking his hat off and handing it to her.

"Turn around. Let me see what you're made of."

Octavia did as she was told.

"Well, you still need filling out a bit. But I bet you catch the eyes of the boys by now."

Octavia could only blush and look away.

"How old are you, anyway?"

"I'm almost eighteen, sir." Octavia said, escorting Master Robert to the parlor.

"Eighteen. Yes, I suppose that would be right. Have you made any plans, gal?"

"Plans sir?"

"Yes, plans. What do you plan to do with yourself, when you come into your own?"

"Why...I...," Octavia looked directly into his eyes. Something she was taught a slave shouldn't do.

His eyes met hers. He saw only confusion. "Has Madame Celeste talked to you about your eighteenth birthday?"

Octavia shook her head and followed with her eyes as he stood and paced the floor. "She's said nothing to you?" he demanded.

"No, sir. Not that I can remember."

He whirled around and faced her. "Gal, I want you to fix me a very tall drink. Then I want you to leave and don't come back until I tell you to, do you understand?" he said.

"Yes sir."

She did as she was told, taking Marguerite to the French Market and along the wharf, trying to amuse the eight year old. Octavia returned only after Marguerite became fretful and in need of a nap. They returned to find Celeste and Master Robert in a heated argument.

"I will not do it. You can't make me do it." Celeste shouted.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Master Robert said, pacing the floor.

Octavia led Marguerite by the hand and told her to be quiet while they snuck back into the house and hid in Marguerite's room as the lovers continued to quarrel.



"What is happening?" Marguerite whispered, frightened while Octavia tucked her in bed.

"I don't know, but it is none of our business."

"Maman is very angry."

"Yes," Octavia said, pulling the drapes over the window to shut out the light. "But right now it's time to go to sleep," she whispered. "Let the grown people take care of their problems while you dream of fairies and princesses," she said gently.

Marguerite turned her head to the wall. "What do you think the problem is?"

"I don't know, Mademoiselle Marguerite," Octavia said, tucking Marguerite's arm underneath the sheet. But she was determined to find out. When Marguerite was asleep, Octavia crept to the door and carefully opened it enough so she could hear why they were talking about her.

"I pay you to do as I wish." Octavia heard Master Robert say.

Octavia opened the door wider, hoping to see as well as hear.

"We had an agreement." She heard him say.

"The agreement was that I was to take her in and treat her well. I think I've fulfilled my terms."

Octavia peeked her head out.

"I will pay for whatever legal fees or monetary transactions need to be undertaken."

"Is this how you get rid of your guilt?" Celeste said, vindictively. "I'm so glad that I am a free woman. And my daughter is too. I don't have to be bothered with you," she spat out.

There was silence as Octavia leaned out farther, trying to see what was going on. She could only see the shadow of Master Robert cast on the wall as he swiftly crossed the room. There was a slap and a cry.

"Is that why you have other suitors? Is that why every man from Natchez to Baton Rouge knows of Celeste Cheval?"

"I am a free woman." Octavia heard her say. "If I choose to be with a man, then that is my business," Celeste said. "You do not own me. Nor am I your wife." Her voice grew increasingly contemptuous. "And if it were up to you, I never will be. So, don't tell me what I can do in my own house."

"You forget Madame, that had it not been for me, you would not own this house, or the property you now possess, or the clothes on your back," he said.

Octavia heard a ripping sound while Celeste struggled and screamed at him.

"Put me down, leave me alone."

"Don't think that I won't. I gave up loving you a long time ago. If it were not for them..."

"Get out of my house," Celeste screamed.

"You will not see me again."

"Empty promises."

Octavia heard Celeste laugh, but the laughter was tinged with fear.

"You will be back. You always come back," Celeste yelled.

"Not this time. I realize how precious life is. And how much I've wasted it."

Octavia heard sadness in his voice. She sensed that Celeste heard it too because in the next breath Celeste recanted.

"I was foolish to say those things. Of course this is your house to do as you wish. I'm sorry, cher, please forgive me," she said with unction.

But Master Robert's voice remained controlled. His manner was unyielding. "I expect a copy of those papers. You can send them to me by messenger. I'll be looking for them."

Octavia closed Marguerite's bedroom door before Master Robert could see her. She heard a door slam and Celeste crying out after him.

She had lain on the floor beside Marguerite, pretending to be asleep when Celeste walked in. She heard Celeste checking Marguerite and she felt Celeste watching her. Then she heard the door close.

She never saw Master Robert again. That was eight years ago.

\* \* \*