



SWEET
UNREST

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prologue

My parents met during the battle of Clarksville. My father was shot only a few minutes after the first charge and lay dying in the tall grass to the west of the main fighting. Acrid smoke from discharging rifles filled his nostrils, and the sound of cannon fire made the ground quake. He was supposed to die there, but he took one look into the clear blue eyes of the Union nurse who bent over him and decided to live.

My mother, always a stickler for accuracy, was not amused when he smiled at her and said, “There you are,” instead of expiring silently as the battle waged on. She scrunched up her nose, or at least I imagined she did, because that’s what she does when she gets irritated with my brother and me, and told him he was messing up his lines.

My father was only an enlisted man and, therefore, not entitled to lines.

He could have been a general, but he always told us that the bravery of the enlisted men was what won or lost wars, and the egos of their leaders were what prolonged them. It was in the trenches, he said, where the real event lived and breathed. He should know, since he probably knows more about the Civil War (or the War of Northern Aggression, if you prefer) than anyone around.

When he met my mom that brisk fall day, he was already a professor of American history. She was ten years younger, barely out of college and starting her first year as an English teacher at a local high school. She didn’t hold his ad-libbed lines against him, though. She says she was too surprised by the blunt declaration to do anything but laugh.

A few months later, they were married on the same field before a different battle began.

They don’t have many pictures from their wedding, but they do have one of the moment just after the minister has pronounced them married. The blue sea of Union infantrymen flank their left and the gray of the Confederates are at their right. My dad, with his shock of bright red hair and thick, square glasses, is grinning madly at the camera, and my mom is looking up at him, wonder

and joy softening her sharply perceptive eyes. They look completely happy to be in that moment, there with each other and newly wed.

In the bottom right corner of the photo is a strange white smudge. It looks like a sweep of light.

When I was little, I heard my dad tell someone there was a ghost in the photo. I liked that idea—that one of the battlefield's dead had come to share such a happy day. Later, when my dad heard me telling a friend about the ghost and showing her the picture, he corrected me. It wasn't a real ghost, he said, just a trick of light or dust on the negative when it was developed that made the funny smudge. Ghosts aren't real, he told us. The past is only as alive as we keep it by remembering.

Years later, as I stared at the picture I'd just developed, the one with the streak of light where a certain guy should have been, all I could think was that it seemed like my dad should have known better.

One

As I stepped out of the air-conditioned van, the bright heat of the Louisiana June felt like a solid wall. Humidity hung in the air, and for a moment I wasn't sure I was going to be able to breathe through it. I could practically feel my hair starting to frizz. A trickle of sweat eased down my back as I lifted my camera to focus on the view in front of me. All I saw was whiteness.

I checked the camera again and realized the lens had fogged because the heat and humidity were so intense. I sighed and slumped against the car, but as I studied the house in front of me, I knew there would be plenty of time in the coming months to document every pitch of every roof. Maybe some of those pictures would make their way into my dad's new book.

My mom stepped up next to me and slung a cool, bare arm around my shoulders. Squeezing me briskly, she positively tittered with excitement. "We've finally made it, Lucy! Just look at how beautiful it is, and it's all ours."

I didn't share her excitement.

The car door slammed, and my brother T.J. shrieked, "We get to live in there?" as he launched himself toward the mansion in front of us. With its stately columns and overwhelming size, it looked like something straight from *Gone with the Wind*, and I could almost understand why he'd be so excited.

But I didn't share his excitement, either.

He was only seven. He wasn't old enough to understand what we'd left behind. He didn't have to give up his classes at the Art Institute or his spot as lead photographer for the school paper. For T.J., this was all just one big adventure.

For me, not so much.

No matter how beautiful the house was, with its stately gate formed from intricate swirls of wrought iron or its gracefully arching alley of oaks, it was still going to be my own personal form of hell. At least for the next few months, anyway. If I played my cards right, though, my parents had promised

that at the end of the summer they would consider letting me go back to live with my Aunt Dani in Chicago for my senior year. The deal was that I'd give life in Louisiana a real try this summer—no burying myself in a virtual world or living on my cell phone.

If I didn't play nice, I'd spend my senior year in a new school, far from home.

My brother ran toward the house, but my dad plucked him up before he could tromp across a flower bed and swung him around. "Not so fast there, Squeak," he laughed, ruffling T.J.'s dark hair. "We don't live in the big house. We live there." He pointed out a smaller cottage peeking from a wooded path to the left of the long drive.

T.J. looked sufficiently deflated as he looked from the cottage to the mansion and back. It made me feel a little better. I wasn't the only one not getting what they wanted.

My parents certainly were. After spending almost twenty years as a professor in Chicago, my father had gotten the chance of a lifetime—to curate and direct *Le Ciel Doux*, an antebellum sugar plantation outside of New Orleans.

"Living history," he'd told us when they sat us down to tell us about the move. "No stuffy books and maps, Lucy. This is what real history is. The places and people who shaped nations, and we're going to live in it and help to shape and preserve it for the next generation." He'd been vibrating with excitement.

I couldn't blame him, really. He and my mom had been avid re-enactors since before they met. Much of my childhood had been spent sleeping in a tent in some national park or local field, waiting for a battle to happen. It was an odd childhood at times, to say the least, but until the job offer at *Le Ciel Doux*, it hadn't been a problem. Until that point, I'd just disappear for a weekend and then come back to my reality. My friends barely noticed I was missing. No harm, no foul.

Now, my parents' little obsession with keeping the past alive had changed everything. Their decision to move us to Louisiana had fundamentally changed the pattern I saw my life taking. I could only hope that if I played by

the rules all summer, the move would just be a tiny imperfection in the larger fabric. I couldn't let myself think otherwise.

I pulled my bag out of the trunk and stared at the house again. The huge, thick columns that supported the mansion's roof looked like they'd been taken from an ancient Roman temple, and its deep veranda kept the windows on both levels in shadows. It was a gorgeous old thing. Stately and commanding, it was the kind of place a little girl could build fairy tales about. It looked like a house that held secrets.

For the first time in days, I felt my mouth kicking up into a grin. I could work with secrets. I checked the lens of my camera again, and this time when I raised it, the dense shadows battled with the stark white columns in my viewfinder. Light and dark, angles and soft curves. The house was going to make one heck of a subject for my senior portfolio.

Looking at the photographic possibilities the house presented, I felt like I could do this. For the first time since we'd crossed out of Chicago's city limits, I could put on a happy face and give my parents what they wanted for the summer. I'd hold up my end of the bargain just fine, and in three short months my life would return to its regularly scheduled programming.

My shoulders relaxed as I scanned the house for a good shot, for the perfect balance of darkness and light. There was something menacing about the place, even with its almost pristine beauty, and I wanted to capture it. I could see the project now—a study in shadow. Finally, the angle I was searching for came into the frame.

If the big house was elegance and mystery, our little cottage was nothing but charm. I probably shouldn't say little, since it was bigger than our townhouse back in Lincoln Park, but compared to the sheer size of Le Ciel Doux, the overseer's cottage was cozy.

Like the big house, it had a large, deep porch. But where columns dominated the mansion, the most distinctive feature of the cottage was a large, pyramid-shaped roof that looked like an umbrella protecting the rest of the structure from the heat of the day. Where the mansion was starkly white and pristine, our cottage was a soft yellow stucco, accented with dark, worn timbers and slate-blue shutters framing large, airy windows. There were no shadows there, no secrets.

But when I walked inside, my knees buckled in shock. There, among the softly colored walls and high ceilings, was our life. Our ancient Chesterfield sofa was already in place in the front parlor. My mother's heirloom highboy was holding court on the far wall, and I knew with a sinking feeling that if I looked at the neat lines of books in the glass-encased shelves, they would be her collection of first editions.

My parents were delighted that our stuff had beaten us there and were admiring how well everything fit. T.J. was bouncing happily on his favorite club chair, and then suddenly, with one of his usual bursts of energy, he raced to the back hallway to look for his room.

I was afraid to move.

I didn't want to see our things in that house. Wasn't ready for it. I didn't want the old canopy bed that used to be my fairy-princess bower, or the pretty carved dresser my parents had brought home for my tenth birthday to be there. I wanted them back in Chicago, where they belonged. Where I could return to them.

Seeing our stuff in this place made everything far, far too real.

I clutched the strap of my bag tighter. It was all I needed. My cameras, laptop, and gear, some art supplies and a few changes of clothes. This was only a temporary stop, I told myself, like a really long weekend at a far-off re-enactment. When this purgatory ended, I was going back to my real life. The one that made sense to me. My parents might want to live in Louisiana, but it wasn't going to be permanent for me. Couldn't be.

Until that moment, I hadn't really realized what moving meant for my family. It was more than just some furniture. I wondered how we could be the same people in this place. How *I* could be the same person I'd been before. But my thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door. Still in a bit of a daze, I turned to watch my parents greet the visitor.

She was a tall woman, maybe in her early forties, with dark hair pulled away from her elegant face. She had high cheekbones, a generous mouth, and beautiful dark eyes. She wore soft linen pants in a drab green and a flowing black shirt. Against her throat and wrists, clunky antique jewelry clinked musically.

“I see y’all got in okay,” she said in a smooth-as-cream voice and with a wide smile. She stepped through the door and set the rumpled paper sack she was carrying on the floor.

My dad walked over to embrace her. “Mina, you did a great job with the place.”

“I just supervised. Some of the guys we have working on the sugar mill came over and did all the heavy lifting.” She looked at me and winked before turning back to my dad. “I don’t lift. I delegate.”

“We’ll have to give them something to thank them,” my mom said, coming over to hug her as well. “You’ve done marvelously. It seems like our stuff was all meant to fit here.” She shook her head and looked around, clearly delighted with everything she saw.

My mom was right. Our things did seem to belong in those spaces like they were made for them, unlike in Chicago. There, they’d always looked more like some sort of a collection than furniture a family lived with. If I had friends over, they were usually afraid to touch anything. But in the cottage, the effect wasn’t of a museum or collection, but of a home. It was almost like my parents had been accumulating the stuff of their lives just for that place. I didn’t like the idea one bit.

“Come meet the kids,” my dad told her. He shouted for my brother and then motioned me over. I came on leaden feet.

“Lucy, this is Amina Sabourin. Her family has lived in this area for more than a hundred years. She’s the business operations manager here at Le Ciel.”

She held out her hand, and I took it. Hers was warm and soft, and surprisingly strong. When she squeezed my hand gently, I swear I felt a jolt of recognition. It was like I’d met her before, even though I knew that was impossible.

I was startled at the direction my thoughts had taken, but she seemed unaware. Her eyes were a deep, dark brown—the type of eyes that broadcasted emotion clearly. Now they were smiling at me, clearly pleased to meet me, but then, for the barest whisper of a moment, I thought I saw something move in their depths. Something that made me think she recognized me too.

“Very nice to meet you, Lucy,” she said interrupting my thoughts and shaking me from my delusions. “You look about my daughter’s age—eighteen?”

“This October.”

“Ah. Close, then. Chloe’s a few months older than you. She’s in town picking up some supplies or she’d be here to meet you too.”

I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to say to that, but my brother saved me when he tore into the room right at that moment. I swear, the kid doesn’t do anything unless it’s at top speeds. My dad scooped T.J. up effortlessly when he leapt, and T.J. clung to him like an overgrown spider monkey.

“This little imp is Thomas.”

“T.J.,” my brother corrected, giving him a stern look. He’d decided sometime last year that he wanted a nickname. He wanted to be T.J. because there already was a boy named Tommy in his class. My parents resisted for a while. They’d named him after a founding father, after all, and they didn’t think that sort of name should be shortened. But T.J. is irresistible, all energy and innocence and light, and it’s impossible to deny him anything for too long. And I had to agree with him—T.J. fit him much better than the name my parents had burdened him with.

Not that I told them that. I was just glad that they hadn’t named me Martha.

Mina laughed, a low chuckle that was as smooth as pebbles on a beach. “Delighted, little man,” she said, holding out her hand so T.J. could shake it solemnly. “You have quite a family here, Leonard. I’m happy to meet them.” She smiled broadly at us, and then nodded toward the bag she’d brought in. “I brought you some housewarming gifts.”

At the prospect of gifts, T.J.’s face lit up and he ran over to Mina’s bag. He rustled around a bit and then lifted out a slim blue bottle, but he frowned when he realized it was empty.

Mina lowered her voice to a soft cadence. “It’s gotta be empty to catch the bad spirits,” she told him, crouching down to his level. “You see, little man, down here by the river, the air is filled up with the spirits. Most are good enough. They help the crops to grow and keep the waters back. But a few of

them,” she whispered as T.J.’s eyes grew wide, “a few of them are mischievous. Devilish things that like to cause all sorts of troubles.

“But do you want to know a secret?” she asked with the air of a fellow conspirator.

T.J. nodded earnestly.

“Well, I’ll tell you.” Mina tapped a long, manicured finger against the blue glass. “Those bad spirits get distracted easily. Something like this shiny bit of glass here, and they forget their mischief. They want to see what it is that makes the pretty colors, and when they go to explore, they get all tangled up inside and can’t get out. So what you do is you put this here bottle out in your trees, and any of those bad spirits that happen to be wandering by, looking for mischief, will get lost inside.”

T.J. looked at my parents. I could tell he wasn’t sure whether to be scared of the idea of spirits hanging around outside our new front door or what the possibilities might be if he could manage to trap one.

“It’s just a story, Squeak,” my dad told him.

“And a lovely tradition,” my mom murmured, coming to take the bottle from him. She held it up and, when she turned it in the sunlight, blue light spilled across the floor. “I’ve seen the bottle trees that some people have in front of their houses down here. They’re beautiful. Thank you for such a lovely gift.” She smiled at us and then turned back to Mina. “Come on back and let me make you some tea,” she said to her. Linking arms, they turned to walk back to the kitchen. Mina pointed out some of the features of our cottage as they disappeared down the hall, leaving us standing alone in the front parlor.

From the back of the hall, I heard my parents talking in that way that means they’ve forgotten about the kids and were busy with something else. Political moves or forging bonds or whatever.

“Come on, Teej,” I said, flipping him up over my shoulder like a rag doll. Soon he’d be too big for me to lift like this, I realized.

Things change too fast.

Two

I'm falling, sinking.

There's something heavy dragging at me, pulling me down into the blackness. The water is cold around me, filled with dirt and the muck of something putrid that makes the dirt seem almost clean. I struggle up, frantic to get to the surface, but every move brings pain. Sharp, ripping pain. So sudden and absolute that I almost gasp. Almost, because the moment my mouth opens to scream, the cold, fetid water rushes in and I clamp down instinctively.

I have to survive this. There's someone who needs me. I can't die here.

But I'm still sinking. I'm heavy. So heavy. Something is dragging me down to the bottom, like cruel hands that won't let me go. Pain and darkness and the cold wet of death surrounding me.

I'm sinking.

I look up, and the dim light of the surface gets farther away.

My lungs are burning and I know I only have moments, seconds, to think about what it is that brought me here. To remember.

But before I can, my lungs spasm with my body's instinctive need for air, and I feel the water rush in. Burning and heavy, it fills me. And the darkness takes me in.

And then I'm sitting up in bed, clammy with sweat, my face wet with tears.

The Dream is back. Waking me with a feeling of such utter terror and regret that it leaves me gasping and shuddering. Waking me in a cold sweat, tears burning my eyes, knowing that drowning is so much less than I deserved.

And I have no idea what it means.

Three

On the second day of my new life, I watched the sun rise over the Mississippi. It came up slowly, struggling through the dense trees, painting the sky with orange and crimson before it made its appearance on the horizon. I used to watch it come up over Lake Michigan when the Dream woke me back in Chicago. Even on bitterly cold days, I'd bike down to the shoreline and watch the sun transform the polluted lake into a pool of diamonds. Watching the sun climb into the sky and erase the darkness had always helped to ease the tightness in my chest left by the Dream.

I'd been having the Dream ever since I could remember, but right about the time my parents decided to take the job at Le Ciel, the Dream stopped. It had been a couple of months now since I'd had it. Months since I'd woken in a silent scream, unable to go back to my bed. I thought maybe I'd finally grown out of it.

I thought wrong.

The Dream came roaring back my first night at Le Ciel, and with it came a reminder of the countless nights it had happened before. The darkness. The soul-chilling cold. And the terrifying knowledge that there was something else, something that made the drowning feel like a walk in the park.

I shook my head and finished the last of the coffee I'd brought out with me. It had grown cold and bitter as I waited for the light to peek up over the tops of the distant trees, but I choked it down anyway. I was running on only a few hours sleep and needed every bit of the caffeine it provided.

From where I was sitting on the grassy levee, I could see miles of fields on the distant bank gradually emerge from the shadows of night. The rising sun glinted off the river but didn't transform it. As the sky lit up, the water remained a muddy brown, and the tightness I'd been fighting remained lodged solidly in my chest.

Suddenly, I was angry. Livid.

I flung away the mug I was holding and watched it thump onto the ground without shattering.

Figured. I couldn't even throw a fit properly.

My camera was sitting next to me, and I picked it up, the familiar weight in my hands calming me as nothing else could.

I'm not sure what drew me to photography, but I've loved taking pictures ever since I can remember. When I was little, before digital cameras were as cheap as they are now, my parents would buy me those disposable cameras to play with. They weren't much more than a piece of plastic wrapped in cardboard, but I liked the way the viewfinder narrowed the world down into a neat little square. It became like a game for me to find the perfect combination of things to put inside that square—the right arrangement that could encapsulate a story.

When I turned twelve, my parents gave me a real camera—a thirty-five millimeter—along with art classes at the Institute and all the equipment for a real darkroom, so I could work on my prints. When I turned sixteen, they gave me my baby. She was a thing of beauty, a professional-grade Canon SLR model. I carried her everywhere with me, even though she was a lot heavier than the smartphones that everyone seems to think are cameras. They're not. Real cameras aren't point and click. They certainly don't ring or text or let you play games on them. They take pictures. Period.

Just holding the camera up to my eye made me feel better. I aimed it at the sunrise. I knew exactly how I wanted the picture to look: I'd overexpose it, so the sun would be a white-hot hole in the page, obscuring everything else.

Later that morning, I learned that the heat of summer in Louisiana was different than any other heat I'd ever experienced. No matter how clear the night, the sticky warmth never really dissipated. In the glow of the early morning, it still radiated up from the pavement, out from the walls. It swirled through the ancient trees and hung heavy in the air. By mid-morning, the day was already as hot as any August afternoon in Illinois had ever been, and it only promised to get worse.

Walking to the mansion, I was infinitely thankful that the bargain I'd struck with my parents didn't include the hoop skirts and bonnets the tour guides and other historical interpreters were required to wear at Le Ciel. I was doing an internship, or what my dad had called an internship, with the preservation expert. My uniform consisted of my camera, my gear bag, and whatever I

happened to throw on for the day—some shorts, a graphic tee that a guy in my art class had made for me, and my favorite plaid Chucks. I'd given up trying to fight the humidity and settled for pulling my unruly auburn hair into a messy knot.

People were already milling around the yard in front of the big house, waiting for my dad to get the staff meeting started. If I hadn't grown up around the strangeness of re-enactments, seeing twenty or so people standing around in wide skirts and old-fashioned suits might have been odd. For me, it seemed almost normal, and with the house lurking above us, it felt a little like stepping back into the past.

I lifted my camera and captured a few shots of the crowd. If I did the final images in a sepia tone, maybe burned in and blurred it a bit, it probably would look like it had been taken on a day more than one hundred and fifty years ago. Past and present colliding on the same ground.

I found a place on the outskirts of the crowd and gazed up at the house again. It stood at the end of the wide alley of gracefully twisting trees like a silent monument in the morning sun, but I knew the only thing it could be a monument to was greed and death.

The plantation had been established in the early 1790s, by a Frenchman who had come from a family of sugar growers in Haiti. Jean-Pierre Dutilette was close to forty when he came to Louisiana, bought his first plot of land in the Delta region, and started to cultivate it. He soon learned that growing sugar in Louisiana was a trickier proposition than it was in the Caribbean, but he was ruthless enough to be successful. By the time his son, Roman, took over in the 1830s, the Dutilettes owned the most property in the area, and by 1840, Roman had become wealthy enough to build the mansion his wife eventually named *Le Ciel Doux*. The name roughly means "Sweet Heaven," and looking up at the gorgeous old structure, I could see why she picked it.

After the South lost the Civil War, the original family struggled on for a while, losing bit after bit of land before they lost the house, too. It sat empty for a long time, and then it was purchased by a series of private owners, but none of them seemed able to hold on to the property for long. Then, about five years ago, the house and remaining land were purchased by the University of New Orleans.

That's where my dad came in. Under the university's guidance, the plantation was going to become a living history museum, complete with researchers and historians to study the social and economic conditions of the Antebellum South. There would also be actors working as interpreters, who would live on the plantation most of the year and perform the work that needed to be done to keep it running. The goal was to eventually get the place to function as a real, working sugar plantation, just like it had been before the Civil War.

Well, almost like it had been. This time, the workers would have the option of quitting.

My dad gave a shrill whistle to get everyone's attention. After introducing himself, he launched into his plans for the property, the new developments that would be coming, and some of the changes the university was going to make.

I couldn't help but grin as I watched him go on and on. My dad had been waiting for an opportunity like this since before I was born, and I could tell by the way his whole body seemed to come alive as he talked that he was finally where he needed to be. My own discomfort this summer, I realized, was a small price to pay for the happiness we were giving him.

I lifted my camera to document the moment, but as I centered him in the viewfinder, my vision blurred, and for a moment, the picture changed. My dad's lanky body and mop of reddish hair shifted ... into someone else, someone broader, with dark, hooded eyes and a tight, angry mouth. I blinked and the scene shifted back.

Dizzy, I put the camera down and stared at my dad again, but everything was as it should be. The sun was hot and the sky was a clear blue. Yet a feeling of dread still pricked across my skin. I shook my head to clear it, and then I looked over the crowd to see if I could find any better shots to distract myself from the strange sensation that had washed over me.

That's when I saw him.

He was standing slightly apart from the rest of the employees, leaning against one of the ancient, tangled oaks that lined the wide alley leading out to the Mississippi. Maybe it was the way he held himself, apart and confident,

but where most of the other guys in the crowd wore the styles of an earlier century like kids playing dress-up, this guy's clothing seemed to suit him.

And then I really looked at his face, and my breath caught in my throat. Above sculpted cheekbones, his eyes were fringed by dark, thick lashes that softened his otherwise angular face. His lazy tumble of honey-colored hair glistened like molten gold in the sun. He had an almost aristocratic beauty. It might have been a cold beauty, but the warmth of his sun-bronzed skin balanced the rest of his features.

But he was tense. The slash of his mouth, set in a hard line over his strong, sharp chin, was completely at odds with the way he casually lounged against the tree. Occasionally he would grimace in what might have been irritation ... or maybe pain.

Then he looked up and saw me, and our eyes locked.

And I felt my world shift. I couldn't look away from him.

His face softened then. The tension left his jaw, his lips parted slightly, and he tilted his head to the side as he examined me. He seemed confused, like he was trying to put together a difficult puzzle as his gaze swept slowly over my body—down my rumpled outfit to my worn shoes and then back up again. His eyes narrowed as they met mine again. I was about to turn away, uncomfortable under his scrutiny, but all at once, his eyes—a green so vibrant and true that the color was clear even from that distance—danced with amusement.

Embarrassed to be caught staring, and even more embarrassed by the laughter in his eyes, I turned away so I could breathe again. I willed my heart to slow back down, took a few deep breaths to steady myself, and turned back.

But he was gone.

My dad's voice droned on in the background as I looked around for the guy. Suddenly, the day felt too bright, the crowd too close. No matter where I looked, I didn't see him. His absence felt like I'd just lost something important, but I didn't know why. I was so lost in my thoughts, I didn't hear my dad finish or notice the crowd begin to disperse. I was too busy thinking about the guy with the startling green eyes.

He'd looked a year or two older than me, which made me wonder if he was one of the college students my dad had invited down from Chicago to work on the plantation for course credit. If that was the case, maybe I'd seen him before—maybe on campus?—which was the only way I could think of to explain the strange sense of familiarity I'd experienced when he looked at me. That would also go a long way toward explaining his small smile and the laugh in his eyes when he caught me staring. He probably thought I had a crush on him. Some silly high school girl shooting higher than she had any right to aim.

But a guy that striking ... It seemed like I would've remembered him.

I was berating myself for my own stupidity at looking so, well ... stupid when I realized my dad was trying to get my attention. I mentally shook myself and headed over to him.

"Lucy, I want you to meet Chloe. Mina's daughter," he added, in case I'd forgotten. "She works here at Le Ciel as a tour guide."

Chloe had the same wide mouth and dazzling smile as her mother, and when she turned it on me, I couldn't help but smile back. She was every bit as beautiful as Mina, and almost as tall, too—much taller than my average height. Her skin was a bit darker than Mina's, and she wore her hair braided into long, smooth dreadlocks that moved like water when she turned her head. Some were tipped with silver beads that chimed happily when they clinked together.

"I'm here to rescue you for the day," she told me, never breaking her smile, her eyes shining impishly with delight.

"Rescue?"

"It's my day off, and I'm heading into the city. I thought maybe you'd want to come."

I looked up at my dad. Heading off to the city sounded wonderful. I'd never been to New Orleans, and after the night and morning I'd had, I wanted to get away from the plantation. But that wasn't the deal—I expected to start working that day. Surely my dad would want me to start cataloging things with my new boss, and I had every intention of fulfilling his requests to the letter. It was my ticket home.

That's why it surprised me when he smiled and said, "Well, you girls have fun." He kissed the top of my head and walked off.

"Quick," I told Chloe. "Get me out of here before he changes his mind."

She laughed, a musical sound that reminded me once again of her mother. We took off for her car, and I resisted the urge to look back.

Four

Our drive into New Orleans was a study in contrasts. One minute, we were traveling through a landscape overgrown with tangled trees shading hidden bayous, and then suddenly we were crossing the wide breadth of the Mississippi with a modern city rising before us. From the interstate, New Orleans looked like any other moderate-sized city: big buildings loomed over the horizon and told the story of progress. As we drew closer, the worn-out houses peppering the view along the highway showed the effects of such progress on everyday lives.

Once Chloe turned off the interstate, she drove into an area that looked vaguely European. It reminded me of some of the historic places my parents had taken me to for one family vacation after another, places like Charleston, Williamsburg, and Annapolis. The narrowness of the streets and alleys reminded me that this was an old city, not one built for cars and busses. The buildings seemed to tumble over one another, evidence of years and years of growth and development butting up against what was already there.

I loved it instantly, in the same way I secretly loved the old towns I've been dragged to every summer. I always pretend to want to be at a beach or an amusement park, but the truth is those old places speak to me. They always have. I love the way I can walk down certain streets and leave the modern world behind. They've always felt like places where time has been standing still, waiting for me to catch up. New Orleans had that feeling, too.

Chloe knew the French Quarter as well as I knew the Loop. She navigated easily through the twists and turns of the narrow streets, giving me the lay of the land as she pointed out important tourist spots. If she was at all irritated about having to play tour guide for the new girl, she didn't show it. Instead, she seemed genuinely happy to have someone new to talk with, and I could tell in an instant she was one of those people that others gravitated to. You couldn't help it. With her wide smile and easy demeanor, Chloe's friendly nature was infectious. In the worn seat of her ancient blue Chevy, I found myself relaxing.

Finally, we turned down Decatur Street, and she wedged her boat of a car into a small spot near the French Market. As we wandered down the crowded

sidewalk, Chloe told me about growing up in the area and pointed out her favorite shops. She was chattering happily, when suddenly she squealed and took off running.

I watched, unsure of what to do, as she flung herself at a tall, dark-skinned man, kissing him with more enthusiasm than was maybe entirely necessary in the middle of a crowded sidewalk.

The man, who towered over her, immediately wrapped her in his arms and lifted her up, as easily as he might lift a child. His head was shaved smooth, and his right arm was tattooed down to his wrist in an intricate sleeve of primitive-looking designs. He looked like some sort of warrior clad in a lemon-yellow polo shirt. The two things just didn't seem to make sense together.

"Lucy, get over here!" Chloe called, her arm still around the man's waist. "Y'all come meet my man, Piers Dumont."

Piers smiled and the warrior disappeared, revealing the charmer.

I held my hand out. "Lucy Aimes."

"Lucy's father is the professor taking over out at Le Ciel," Chloe told him.

Piers seemed surprised and opened his mouth to speak, but Chloe beat him to it.

"I'm so glad you made it!" She squealed again, a sound that was both irritating and charming, and completely in character with the vibrant person who hadn't stopped chattering since I'd plopped into her car. "Piers goes to Vanderbilt, up in Nashville," she told me before kissing him again, soundly.

I shifted uncomfortably, wondering whether I should leave to give them some privacy.

"Lord knows why Tulane wasn't good enough for him," she added a little breathlessly as she gazed up at him. "I wasn't sure if he'd get back in time to meet us today, but he did." She wrapped her arm around his waist and snuggled into his bulk.

Together, we walked to the Central Grocery and ate muffulettas dripping with garlicky oil while Chloe chattered on about the wonders of Piers. She barely let him get a word in edgewise until the alarm on her phone went off.

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