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THE BEAUTIFUL

Also by Renée Ahdieh

The Wrath and the Dawn

The Rose and the Dagger

Flame in the Mist

Smoke in the Sun

THE BEAUTIFUL

RENÉE AHDIEH

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To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

From "Auguries of Innocence"
by William Blake

J'ai voulu ce matin te rapporter des roses;
Mais j'en avais tant pris dans mes ceintures closes
Que les noeuds trop serrés n'ont pu les contenir.
Les noeuds ont éclaté. Les roses envolées.
Dans le vent, à la mer s'en sont toutes allées.
Elles ont suivi l'eau pour ne plus revenir.
La vague en a paru rouge et comme enflammée.
Ce soir, ma robe encore en est toute embaumée . . .

Respires-en sur moi l'odorant souvenir.

I wanted to bring you roses this morning;
But I had closed so many in my sash
That the knots were too tight to contain them.
The knots split. The roses blew away.
All blew off to the sea, borne by the wind,
Carried to the water, never to return.
The waves looked red as if inflamed.
Tonight, my dress is still perfumed . . .

Breathe in the fragrant memory.

From "Les Roses de Saadi,"
by Marceline Desbordes-Valmore

PRINTEMPS DE 1872

RUE ROYALE

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

New Orleans is a city ruled by the dead.

I remember the moment I first heard someone say this. The old man meant to frighten me. He said there was a time when coffins sprang from the ground following a heavy rain, the dead flooding the city streets. He claimed to know of a Créole woman on Rue Dauphine who could commune with spirits in the afterlife.

I believe in magic. In a city rife with illusionists, it's impossible to doubt its existence. But I didn't believe this man. *Be faithful,* he warned. *For the faithless are alone in death, blind and terrified.*

I feigned shock at his words. In truth, I found him amusing. He was the sort to scare errant young souls with stories of a shadowy creature lurking in darkened alcoves. But I was also intrigued, for I possess an errant young soul of my own. From childhood, I hid it beneath pressed garments and polished words, but it persisted in plaguing me. It called to me like a Siren, driving me to dash all pretense against the rocks and surrender to my true nature.

It drove me to where I am now. But I am not ungrateful. For

it brought to bear two of my deepest truths: I will always possess an errant young soul, no matter my age.

And I will always be the shadowy creature in darkened alcoves, waiting . . .

For you, my love. For you.

JANVIER 1872

ABOARD THE CGT *ARAMIS*

Not What It Seemed

The *Aramis* was supposed to arrive at first light, like it did in Celine's dreams.

She would wake beneath a sunlit sky, the brine of the ocean winding through her nose, the city looming bright on the horizon.

Filled with promise. And absolution.

Instead the brass bell on the bow of the *Aramis* tolled in the twilight hour, the time of day her friend Pippa called "the gloaming." It was—in Celine's mind—a very British thing to say.

She'd begun collecting these phrases not long after she'd met Pippa four weeks ago, when the *Aramis* had docked for two days in Liverpool. Her favorite so far was "not bloody likely." Celine didn't know why they mattered to her at the time. Perhaps it was because she thought Very British Things would serve her better in America than the Very French Things she was apt to say.

The moment Celine heard the bell clang, she made her way portside, Pippa's light footsteps trailing in her wake. Inky tendrils of darkness fanned out across the sky, a ghostly mist shrouding the Crescent City. The air thickened as the two girls

listened to the *Aramis* sluice through the waters of the Mississippi, drawing closer to New Orleans. Farther from the lives they'd left behind.

Pippa sniffed and rubbed her nose. In that instant, she looked younger than her sixteen years. "For all the stories, it's not as pretty as I thought it would be."

"It's exactly what I thought it would be," Celine said in a reassuring tone.

"Don't lie." Pippa glanced at her sidelong. "It won't make me feel better."

A smile curled up Celine's face. "Maybe I'm lying for me as much as I'm lying for you."

"In any case, lying is a sin."

"So is being obnoxious."

"That's not in the Bible."

"But it should be."

Pippa coughed, trying to mask her amusement. "You're terrible. The sisters at the Ursuline convent won't know what to do with you."

"They'll do the same thing they do with every unmarried girl who disembarks in New Orleans, carrying with her all her worldly possessions: they'll find me a husband." Celine refrained from frowning. This had been her choice. The best of the worst.

"If you strike them as ungodly, they'll match you with the ugliest fool in Christendom. Definitely someone with a bulbous nose and a paunch."

"Better an ugly man than a boring one. And a paunch means he eats well, so . . ." Celine canted her head to one side.

"Really, Celine." Pippa laughed, her Yorkshire accent weaving through the words like fine Chantilly lace. "You're the most incorrigible French girl I've ever met."

Celine smiled at her friend. "I'd wager you haven't met many French girls."

"At least not ones who speak English as well as you do. As if you were born to it."

"My father thought it was important for me to learn." Celine lifted one shoulder, as though this were the whole of it, instead of barely half. At the mention of her father—a staid Frenchman who'd studied linguistics at Oxford—a shadow threatened to descend. A sadness with a weight Celine could not yet bear. She fixed a wry grin on her face.

Pippa crossed her arms as though she were hugging herself. Worry gathered beneath the fringe of blond on her forehead as the two girls continued studying the city in the distance. Every young woman on board had heard the whispered accounts. At sea, the myths they'd shared over cups of gritty, bitter coffee had taken on lives of their own. They'd blended with the stories of the Old World to form richer, darker tales. New Orleans was haunted. Cursed by pirates. Prowled by scalawags. A last refuge for those who believed in magic and mysticism. Why, there was even talk of women possessing as much power and influence as that of any man.

Celine had laughed at this. As she'd dared to hope. Perhaps New Orleans was not what it seemed, at first glance. Fittingly, neither was she.

And if anything could be said about the young travelers

aboard the *Aramis*, it was that the possibility of magic like this—a world like this—had become a vital thing. Especially for those who wished to shed the specter of their pasts. To become something better and brighter.

And especially for those who wanted to escape.

Pippa and Celine watched as they drew closer to the unknown. To their futures.

"I'm frightened," Pippa said softly.

Celine did not respond. Night had seeped through the water, like a dark stain across organza. A scraggly sailor balanced along a wooden beam with all the grace of an aerialist while lighting a lamp on the ship's prow. As if in response, tongues of fire leapt to life across the water, rendering the city in even more ghoulishly green tones.

The bell of the *Aramis* pealed once more, telling those along the port how far the ship had left to travel. Other passengers made their way from below deck, coming to stand alongside Celine and Pippa, muttering in Portuguese and Spanish, English and French, German and Dutch. Young women who'd taken leaps of faith and left their homelands for new opportunities. Their words melted into a soft cacophony of sound that would—under normal circumstances—soothe Celine.

Not anymore.

Ever since that fateful night amid the silks in the atelier, Celine had longed for comfortable silence. It had been weeks since she'd felt safe in the presence of others. Safe with the riot of her own thoughts. The closest she'd ever come to wading through calmer waters had been in the presence of Pippa.

When the ship drew near enough to dock, Pippa took sudden hold of Celine's wrist, as though to steel herself. Celine gasped. Flinched at the unexpected touch. Like a spray of blood had shot across her face, the salt of it staining her lips.

"Celine?" Pippa asked, her blue eyes wide. "What's wrong?"

Breathing through her nose to steady her pulse, Celine wrapped both hands around Pippa's cold fingers. "I'm frightened, too."

A Study in Contrasts

Twenty-three passengers disembarked from the *Aramis*, each bearing a simple trunk filled with their worldly possessions. After consulting the ship's manifest, the officer stationed in the customhouse allowed them onto American soil. An hour later, seven girls boarded a humble equipage and proceeded through the darkened city streets toward the Ursuline convent. The rest had their futures awaiting them at the docks.

The open-air wagon trundled along the cobblestones. All around them, boughs hung heavy with brightly colored blossoms. Cicadas and click beetles droned in the shadows, whispering of a haunted history. A tropical breeze stirred through the branches of a live oak abutting a small square. The warmth of its embrace felt strange against Celine's skin, especially when contrasted with the slight chill of an early spring evening.

But she knew better than to complain. Outside her home in Paris, snow likely dotted the pavers, and it would be weeks before she could don the comfortable muslin dress she now wore. Celine recalled when she'd fashioned it last June, from the remnants of an elegant tea gown she'd designed for a wealthy woman known for hosting infamous salons. At the time, Celine

imagined attending one of these gatherings and mingling with the chicest members of Parisian society. She would dazzle them with her love of Shakespeare and Voltaire. She would wear this exact dress, its rich aubergine hue a lovely contrast against her fair skin, the overskirt replete with elaborate frills and flounces. And she would style her black curls in a mass atop her crown, the latest coiffure to grace the city's fashion plates.

Celine laughed to herself, amused by the memory of the seventeen-year-old girl she used to be. The things this girl had dreamed of experiencing. The things she'd wished to have and hold: Entrée into the society of elegant young women she fitted for gowns they would discard days later. A chance to fall in love with a handsome young man who would steal her heart with poetry and promises.

Now she sneered at the very idea.

After weeks at sea—buried deep in a timber trunk—the rumpled gown Celine wore tonight reflected the sharp turn her life had taken. It wasn't fit for Sunday Mass, much less a salon. At the thought, Celine adjusted her position on the wooden seat, her corset digging into her ribs. The whalebone pinched her breasts as she took a deep breath.

And was met with a scent so delicious, it left her distracted.

She scanned the square for its source. On the corner opposite the live oak stood an open-air bakery that reminded Celine of her favorite boulangerie on the Boulevard du Montparnasse. The smell of fried dough and slowly melting sugar wafted through the waxy magnolia leaves. Nearby, a set of balcony shutters slammed shut, and a trellis laden with bright pink

bougainvillea shook, the blossoms trembling as if in fear. Or perhaps in anticipation.

It should have been beautiful to behold. But the lovely tableau felt tinged in something sinister. As though a pale finger had slipped through a drawn curtain, beckoning her into a dark abyss.

Wisdom told her to heed the warning. Nevertheless, Celine found herself enchanted. When she glanced at the six other girls in the wagon—seated four on one side, three on the other—Celine caught an expanse of wide-eyed gazes, their expressions a study in trepidation. Or perhaps excitement? Like the bougainvillea, it was impossible to be certain.

The wagon paused on a bustling street corner, the large draft horse at its lead tossing his mane. People in all manner of dress—from the wealthy with their golden watch chains to the humble with their threadbare linen—crossed Decatur Street, their steps focused and harried, as though they were on a mission. It felt unusual for a time of day marked by endings rather than beginnings.

Since Pippa was situated closest to the driver, she leaned forward to address him. "Is there something of note occurring tonight? Something to explain the gathering crowd?"

"The parade," the gruff man replied, without turning around.

"Pardon?"

He cleared his throat. "There's a parade gettin' started near Canal Street. On account of the carnival season."

"A carnival parade!" Pippa exclaimed, turning toward Celine.

Antonia—the young woman seated at Celine's left—looked

about excitedly, her dark eyes round and bright, like those of an owl. "Um carnaval?" she asked in Portuguese as she pointed toward the sounds of distant revelry.

Celine nodded with a smile.

"It's a shame we'll miss seeing it," Pippa said.

"I wouldn't worry, lass," the driver replied, his tongue rolling over the words with a hint of Irish burr. "There'll be plenty o' parades and celebrations all month long during the carnival season. You'll see one, to be sure. And just you wait for the masquerade ball on Mardi Gras. 'Twill be the finest of them all."

"I heard talk about the carnival season from a friend in Edinburgh," Anabel—a lissome redhead with an attractive smattering of freckles across her nose—exclaimed. "The entire city of New Orleans rings in the time before Lent with soirées and balls and costume parties for weeks on end."

"Parties!" the twins from Germany repeated as soon as they recognized the word, one of them clapping her hands with delight.

Their glowing faces struck Celine. Moved something behind her heart. An emotion she'd banned herself from feeling ever since the events of that dreadful night:

Hope.

She'd arrived in a city amid celebration. One with weeks of fêtes to come. The crowd was filled with that same spirit of anticipation she saw in the girls who now shared her fate. Maybe their expressions did not have to be about trepidation. Maybe the bougainvillea was simply jostled awake instead of trembling with worry.

Maybe Celine did not have to live her life in fear of what might happen tomorrow.

As they waited for the streets to clear of passing pedestrians, Celine leaned forward, her spirits on the cusp of taking flight. She tried to catch a bit of ivy dangling from an intricate wrought iron railing. The clattering of footsteps to her left stole her attention as the crowd parted to allow their wagon through.

No.

It was not to allow them passage.

It was for something else entirely.

There—beneath the amber haze of a gas lamp—stood a lone figure poised to cross Decatur Street, a Panama hat pulled low on his brow, shrouding his features.

Without hesitation, their driver granted the man immediate deference, dipping his head in the figure's direction as though he were bowing . . . or perhaps keeping his eyes averted.

The man crossed the road, moving from light to shadow and back again, gliding from one street corner to another. He moved . . . strangely. As though the air around him were not air at all, but water. Or perhaps smoke. His polished shoes struck the cobblestones at a clipped pace. He was tall. Broad shouldered. Despite the evening silhouette about him, Celine could tell his suit was made of exquisite material, by a practiced hand. Likely Savile Row. Her training at Madame de Beauharnais' atelier—the finest couturier in Paris—had granted her a particular eye for such things.

But his clothes did not intrigue Celine nearly as much as what he'd managed to achieve. He'd cleared the street without ut-

tering a single word. He'd scattered women with parasols and children with powdery beignets and men in elegant top hats, with nary a glance in their direction.

That was the kind of magic she wished to possess.

Celine craved the idea of wielding such power, simply for the freedom it would afford her. She watched the man step up to the curb, envy clouding her gaze, filling her heart, taking place of the hope she'd barely allowed purchase a minute ago.

Then he looked up. His eyes met hers as though she'd called out to him, without words.

Celine blinked.

He was younger than she'd expected. Not much older than she. Nineteen or twenty, perhaps, no more. Later Celine would try to remember details about him. But it was as though her memory of that moment had gone hazy, like oil swiped across the surface of a mirror. The only thing she remembered with distinct clarity was his eyes. They shone in the flame of the gas lamp as though they were lit from within.

Dark grey. Like the barrel of a gun.

He narrowed his gaze. Tipped his hat at her. And walked away.

"Oh, my stars," Pippa breathed.

Murmurs of assent—spoken in several languages—rippled across the rows of seated young women. They leaned into each other, an air of shared excitement passing over them. One of the twins from Düsseldorf said something in German that made her sister titter behind her hands.

Only Celine continued staring at the rapidly receding figure,

her eyes narrowed, as his had been. As though she were in disbelief.

Of what, she did not know.

Their wagon continued making its way toward the convent. Celine watched the boy fade into the darkness, his long, lean legs carrying him through the night with an otherworldly confidence.

She wondered what made everyone at the crossing yield to him without question. Longed for the barest measure of it. Perhaps if Celine were someone to command such respect, she would not have been forced to leave Paris. To lie to her father.

Or murder a man.

To the Stars

I shouldn't be here.

That thought rang in Noémie's head like an endless refrain.

It was dark. Late. The water lapped along the pier at the edge of the Vieux Carré, the sound lulling. Hypnotic.

She never should have agreed to meet anyone in this place, no matter the enticement. Noémie knew better. Her parents had taught her better. The church had taught her better. She drew her light spring shawl around her shoulders and straightened the pink silk ribbon around her neck. When she turned, her garnet earbobs struck the sensitive skin along her jawline.

Earbobs and silk ribbons, on a pier in the middle of the night?

What was she thinking?

I shouldn't be here. Whom did she expect to impress with such fripperies?

Not this kind of man, to be sure.

Any young man who asked to meet her in the dead of night was not a gentleman. But Noémie supposed the kind of woman who agreed was not quite a lady either. She sighed to herself.

Martin, her erstwhile beau, never would have invited her to a clandestine meeting long past sunset.

Of course Martin had never made her skin tingle or her breath catch in her throat.

Not like her mysterious admirer had.

But if he didn't show his face soon, Noémie would go home, sneak back through her mother's wisteria, and slip into the window of her bedroom before anyone was the wiser.

Noémie paced along the length of the pier, swearing to the stars that this was the last chance she would give him. Beneath her skirts, her booted heels struck the warped wooden boards, her bustle bobbing in time with her steps. A breeze swept along the bay, bringing with it the stench of spoiling fish—remnants of the day's catch.

In an effort to ward off the smell, she pressed a bare finger beneath her nose.

I shouldn't be here. The pier was too close to the Court's lair. These streets and everything surrounding them were controlled by its shadowy denizens. Never mind that they routinely donated to the church. Never mind that Le Comte de Saint Germain had box seats to the opera and hobnobbed with New Orleans' best and brightest. The Court brought with them the worst kind of people, those without scruples.

And here Noémie was, waiting alone in the dark, in the thick of their domain.

She touched her throat, her fingers grazing the soft silk there. The color of her ribbon—pale pink, like the petals of a peony—was all the rage right now. Empress Eugénie had first ushered it

into fashion not long ago. Now countless young ladies of New Orleans were keen to put their long, swanlike necks on display. Supposedly the gentlemen favored it.

With a bitter smile, Noémie faced out to the water for her final trek along the pier.

Damn her impressive admirer and all his lies. No amount of sweet words or scintillating promises should have drawn Noémie from the safety of her home.

Just as she was about to reach the end of the pier, the thud of solid footsteps resounded behind her. They slowed as they neared, moving at their master's leisure.

Noémie did not turn immediately, wanting him to know she was angry.

"You kept me waiting a long time," she said, her voice honeyed.

"My sincerest apologies, mon amour," he breathed from behind her. "I was caught up at dinner . . . but I left before dessert."

A smile tugged at Noémie's lips, her pulse racing. She turned slowly.

No one was there. The pier looked deserted.

She blinked. Her heart skipped about in her chest. Had Noémie dreamed the whole thing? Had the wind played a trick on her? "Where did you—"

"I'm here, my love," he said in her ear, behind her once more. She gasped. He took her by the hand, his touch cool and steady. Reassuring. A jolt passed down her spine as he nibbled along her earlobe. Shockingly. Teasingly.

Martin would never do such a thing.

She reached back to caress his face, the scruff on his jaw abrading her skin, the blood soaring through her veins. He kissed her fingertips. When she pulled away, her hands were warm. Sticky. Wet.

Stained bright red.

"Je suis désolé," he murmured an apology.

A horrified scream began to collect in Noémie's chest.

Her swanlike throat was torn out before she could utter a sound.

The last thing Noémie saw were the stars winking merrily above.

Your Name Is Marceline
Béatrice Rousseau

Seven girls took up residence in the dormitory of the Ursuline convent: Celine; Pippa; the twins from Düsseldorf, Marta and Maria; Anabel, the redhead from Edinburgh; Antonia from Lisbon; and Catherine from Liverpool.

The Catholic Church had sponsored their passage to New Orleans, and in return, these seven young women were expected to help run its attached hospital, teach the young girls who attended school there, and assist in any efforts to raise funds on behalf of the diocese. That is, until the sisters of the convent were able to find appropriate matches for them.

For Celine, the day following their arrival was a day marked by consternation.

A day marked by the choices of others.

More than anything, she did not want the sisters to place her as a teacher. It was such a vaunted position, with so much responsibility. Celine had never been an appropriate role model. She laughed too loudly at bawdy jokes, and enjoyed eating at social events at which girls were to be seen rather than sated. She'd never understood the notion. Turn her back on a pain au chocolat? Sacrilege.

But all too expected.

For these reasons, Celine was relieved to learn that Catherine had been a governess for a family of four in Liverpool. The spectacled young woman smiled when told she would essentially be resuming her duties.

Celine would not have minded being placed in the hospital, but Pippa informed her that Marta and Maria had assisted a midwife in Düsseldorf; thusly, they were recruited there along with Antonia, who was an expert in herbs and other natural remedies.

Soon Pippa, Anabel, and Celine found themselves in a shared predicament. All three girls proved difficult to place within the whitewashed walls, as their respective interests did not naturally segue into life at the convent. Anabel possessed a head for figures and a knack for business, neither of which were qualities to admire in a young woman.

Pippa had studied art history most of her life and was an accomplished violinist and painter, but the school already had a teacher specializing in the arts.

Though no one could deny that Celine's work with ruched silk and delicate Alençon lace was unmatched, it did her no favors here. Knowing how to design gowns for the Parisian elite was not exactly high on the list of achievements at a convent.

Which was why Pippa, Anabel, and Celine were sitting in the shade of Saint Louis Cathedral a week after their arrival, peddling their wares beneath a lace of oak leaves in Jackson Square. Despite the lovely spring day, Celine could not help but feel forlorn. Every place she went, life insisted on confining her.

Perhaps she deserved it. Her sins were many, her pardons few.

On the corner of the square farthest from Celine, beignets were being served alongside steaming cups of café au lait, the scent an intoxicating mixture of butter, sugar, and chicory. At her left, the cathedral's spires rose into a blue sky offset by the kind of clouds Celine most loved, for they resembled chiffon. To her right sat a row of artists and traders and purveyors of mystical goods, their merchandise positioned along the tines of black iron enclosing the cathedral's courtyard.

Celine wanted to stroll the lanes and peruse their many offerings. Take in the city's sights and relish this newfound chance at life. But—as she'd come to realize in the past week—the things she wanted and the things expected of her were like oil and water in a baker's mixing bowl.

The day the other girls were placed in their respective positions, Pippa, Celine, and Anabel had been instructed to raise money for the expansion of the parish orphanage. They'd devoted the following week to its preparation.

Pippa had painted delicate teacups with religious vignettes, like the time Jesus had turned water to wine or fed a crowd of thousands with nothing but seven loaves and fishes. Anabel had designed their booth and devised the best way to attract people to it. And Celine had embellished small squares of pressed linen with a scalloped edging that mimicked the finest needlepoint lace.

Since their arrival in port last week, none of them had been permitted to attend a parade. Instead, every night—once they'd

completed their designated tasks—they were directed to read scripture aloud to each other before retiring to their cells.

Yes. Their rooms were called cells. It was the reason Celine had stitched a cheeky set of letters into the edging of each handkerchief she'd fashioned.

GTTAN

A nod to her favorite Shakespearean tragedy, *Hamlet*.

"Get thee to a nunnery."

Celine studied the five letters of script hidden in the complicated swirls of lace, a flicker of joy warming through her. Then she glanced across the rickety wooden table, her heart growing heavier with each passing second.

Was this all she could expect of life?

Her features hardened. Celine sat up straight, the whalebone of her corset catching her breath as it stretched across her chest. She should be grateful to be here. Grateful to have a place among decent people. Grateful for another chance at life.

Determination took root inside her. She smiled brightly to a potential patron, who failed to acknowledge her presence. Celine swallowed her looming scowl before shifting her attention to a pair of young women critiquing the glazing on a porcelain cup Pippa had completed days earlier.

"Lovely, don't you think?" the girl on the left murmured to her friend.

The other girl glanced about distractedly. "It's not bad, if you favor that sort of thing," she drawled, tucking a strand of way-

ward brown hair beneath her straw hat. Her voice faded to a hush. "But did you hear what the dock workers discovered at the pier yesterday morning?"

The first girl nodded once. "Richard told me. Her name was Nathalie or Noémie something-or-other." Unease marred her expression. "He suspects the Court might be responsible, since it happened near their domain."

Court? Celine wondered. As far as she knew, there had never been an American monarchy.

"Like an animal had mauled her!" The brunette shuddered. "Poor soul," she tsked, though her eyes gleamed with unspoken thoughts, "left to rot in the sun alongside the day's catch. If the Court had anything to do with it, they've become even more ruthless than before. Not that it matters. They'll curry the right favor, as they always do."

Despite Celine's better judgment, her interest was piqued. She craned her neck toward the pair.

The brunette continued, her words breathless. "Did Richard tell you what happened to her head?"

"N-no."

"I heard it was completely severed from the poor young woman's body."

The first girl gasped, a lace-gloved hand covering her mouth. "Dear Lord."

With a solemn nod, the brunette picked up one of Celine's embroidered handkerchiefs. "Her face was all but unrecognizable. Her father had to identify her based on her earbobs alone."

At this, Pippa cleared her throat in an unmistakable attempt

to dissuade the two women from continuing such salacious talk. A frown cut across Anabel's face, her look turning peevish.

"Ladies, can we be of any assistance?" Celine offered the pair of young patrons a pointed smile.

The brunette's eyes narrowed as she dropped the handkerchief with a careless flick of her wrist. "No, thank you." She reached for her friend's elbow, looping her arm around it, directing them away from the rickety table.

Once they were beyond earshot, Anabel harrumphed. "Gossiping about a murder in the shadow of a church . . ." she muttered. "Dinna they ken better than to provoke the spirits in such a brash manner?" Her Scottish brogue deepened with her disdain, her fingers batting away a fat honeybee buzzing about her brow.

Pippa sighed, then caught Anabel's hand, preventing her from swatting at the hovering insect. "That poor girl." She sat up straighter, her petite features gathering. "I hope her suffering wasn't prolonged. Who could do such a thing?" Lines formed between her brows. "What kind of monster could take a human life like that?"

Anabel nodded crisply. "I hope the fiend responsible burns in Hell for all eternity. 'Tis the only justice for a murderer."

A hint of color threatened to creep up Celine's neck. She rolled her shoulders back, calming the storm in her chest. A bead of sweat collected in the hollow of her throat before sliding between her caged breasts. "I completely agree," she said lamely. The words felt ashen on her tongue. Celine twined her fingers together, praying for an end to the discussion.

Thankfully, it appeared both Pippa and Anabel were in agreement. The trio recommenced their efforts to raise money for the church with renewed vigor, standing in tandem to greet another group of potential patrons.

Most of the passersby paused to consider the jars of mayhaw jelly and lemon pear marmalade the girls stationed in the kitchen had finished preparing yesterday. Not a soul cared to while away a moment perusing the painted cups or the elegantly folded handkerchiefs.

Gloom took refuge on Celine's shoulders, like a beast settling in the shadows. She glanced about, searching for a source of comfort. At least none of the people assembling before them mentioned the ghastly murder that had occurred within sighting distance of Jackson Square.

Celine supposed that reprieve—at the very least—was something for which to be grateful.

After three hours of little success, Celine's gloom had become a thing with teeth. Rays of sunlight continued to slide ever closer, the heat growing oppressive, making her long for the comfort of nightfall. Even the branches above felt burdened by the weight of the sultry air, their blossoms like eyelids, growing heavier and sleepier with each passing moment. Pippa's blond curls began to frame her face like a damp halo. Anabel tightened the yellow ribbon about her brow and sighed loudly. It appeared her patience had run thin as well.

The slender Scotswoman twisted an auburn curl around her

index finger and yanked it straight, her freckled nose wrinkling. "*Och*, it's as hot as a witch's cauldron. And just how are we to meet any eligible young men when all our days are spent raising money and all our nights are spent in prayer?"

There were many things Celine wished to say in response. She chose the least offensive option. "Perhaps it would be better if our nights were spent raising money instead." Her cheerful sarcasm failed to strike a chord with Anabel. The redhead stared at her with a confused expression.

But Pippa could always be counted on to understand her friend's dark sense of humor. She shot Celine a look, her lips twitching. Then she turned her graceful head back toward Anabel. "Maybe finding a husband shouldn't be our only concern?"

"Aye, it shouldna, but I'll tell ye, a sturdy young man would be a nice distraction from all this humdrum."

"Or he could make it worse." Pippa adjusted the slender chain of the golden cross around her neck. "In my experience, sturdy young men don't always improve upon the company."

Celine fought back the urge to smile. This was precisely the reason she and Pippa had been drawn to each other before setting sail. Neither of them harbored delusions when it came to the opposite sex. Of course Celine wanted to know why Pippa did not yearn to find a match, but she knew better than to ask.

A petite blonde with a heart-shaped face and sapphire-blue eyes, Pippa drew ample notice wherever she went. Men often tipped their hat to her appreciatively. Even more importantly, she possessed a mind as sharp as a tack. It should have been the

work of a moment for her to find love. But instead of settling down in her homeland, Pippa had braved the wilds of a new country, far across the Atlantic.

The day they met, this had struck Celine as highly curious. But she kept her thoughts to herself. She had no intention of taking part in the discussion that would likely follow. If she asked, they would ask in return, and these were questions Celine did not want to answer. Any interest in her past—beyond the bare minimum—was a thing to be avoided at all cost.

For numerous reasons.

The afternoon Celine had embarked on the *Aramis*, it had not escaped her notice that all the girls on board were light-skinned, most without a hint of foreign blood among them. Antonia—the girl from Portugal—possessed a complexion that easily browned in the sun, but even she had spent most of the journey below deck to ward away any suggestion of color.

If they knew where Celine's mother was from. If they knew she was not fully of Anglo-Saxon heritage . . .

It was a secret she and her father had kept, from the moment they'd first arrived in Paris thirteen years ago, when Celine was scarcely four years old. Though France was not as infamous for its racial divide as America had been in recent years, it nevertheless harbored a seething undercurrent of tension. One that often implied how inappropriate it was for the races to mix. This notion proved true the world over. In areas beyond New Orleans, there were even laws forbidding people of different colors from congregating in the same room.

Celine's mother had been from the Orient. Upon complet-

ing his time at Oxford, her father had followed his passion for languages to eastern shores. He'd crossed paths with Celine's mother in a small village along the southern coast of a rocky peninsula. Celine had never known where, though she'd often inquired as a child, only to be rebuffed.

"It doesn't matter who you were," her father had argued. "It matters who you *are*."

It rang true then, like it did now.

As a result, Celine knew precious little about her mother. The recollections she had of her first few years of life along a Far East coast were fleeting. They flickered across her thoughts from time to time, but never fully took shape. Her mother was a woman who smelled of safflower oil and fed her fruit each night and sang to her in a distant memory. Nothing more.

But if anyone looked closely—studied Celine's features with a practiced gaze—they might notice the edges of her upturned eyes. The high planes of her cheekbones, and the thick strands of dark hair. The skin that stayed fair in winter, yet bronzed with ease in the summer sun.

"Your name is Marceline Béatrice Rousseau," her father would say whenever she asked about her mother, his brow stern. "That is all anyone need know about you."

Celine had molded this into a motto by which to live. It did not matter that it left half the pages of her book empty. It did not matter one bit.

"Is this for sale, mademoiselle?" a young woman asked loudly, as if she were addressing an imbecile. Her light brown eyes darted to one of Celine's lace-embroidered handkerchiefs.

Startled, Celine responded in a curt tone, the words falling from her lips before she could catch them. "I should hope so, or else I have no idea what in hell I've been doing here for the last three hours."

To her left, she heard Anabel gasp and Pippa swallow a snicker. Celine grimaced, then tried to smile while angling her head upward, only to be blinded by a flash of sunlight.

Undeterred by Celine's rudeness, the girl standing on the opposite side of the rickety table grinned down at her. A jolt of discomfort passed through Celine's stomach when she took in the full breadth of the young lady's appearance.

In a word, the girl looked exquisite. Her features were like those of a doll, her brunette head high and proud. Eyes the color of rich honey gazed down at Celine with steady appraisal. At her throat—pinned to a fichu of Valenciennes lace—was a stunning ivory cameo surrounded by rubies. Across her shoulder lay a delicate parasol with a fringe of seed pearls, its rosewood handle engraved with a fleur-de-lis set in the mouth of a roaring lion. It matched well with the girl's Basque-style bodice, though the entire effect proved a bit outmoded.

The girl let her lace-gloved fingers graze over a handkerchief's scalloped edging. "This is superb work."

"Thank you." Celine inclined her head.

"Reminds me of something I saw the last time I was in Paris."

It was impossible to miss the excitement on Pippa's face. "Celine studied under one of the premiere couturiers there."

Celine pressed her lips together, cursing her pride. She never should have shared that particular detail with Pippa.

"Which one?" The girl raised her eyebrows at Celine.

"Worth's," Celine lied.

"Along the Rue de la Paix?"

Celine swallowed. Then nodded. Already she could feel the urge to run from her skin take hold, and she had not even disclosed anything of significance. Nothing that would tie her to the events of that fateful night in the atelier.

"Is that so?" the girl said. Her doll-like features set with conviction. "I'll take them all." She waved a hand over the handkerchiefs, as though she were casting a spell.

"All?" Anabel sputtered, the ends of her yellow ribbon fluttering in the heavy breeze. "Well, far be it from me to dissuade ye . . . Time and tide waits for no woman, and all that."

While Anabel collected the handkerchiefs to tally the total, Celine gazed at the girl standing before them, perplexed by the sudden turn of events. Something about her unnerved Celine. Like a memory she should recall. A word lost midsentence. A thought unraveling midair. The young woman allowed Celine's perusal, her grin growing wider with each passing second.

"If you studied with a couturier, are you able to design gowns?" the girl asked.

Again, Celine nodded. "Mais oui, bien sûr."

"Merveilleux!" She leaned closer, her eyes glinting like warm chalcedony. "I've been struggling with my current modiste, and I'm in desperate need of a costume for the masquerade ball on Mardi Gras next month. The Russian Grand Duke is to be the special guest this year, and I will need something memorable to mark the occasion. Something bright white and reminiscent of

the French court before the revolution, I believe." She wrinkled her nose, as though she were about to share a delicious secret. "Really—despite all the ridiculousness with the pig chasing and the perfume—I do think it was one of the finest times for women's fashion in recent history, panniers and all." The girl drummed her gloved fingers along the edge of the wooden table, her head tilted in consideration. "I suppose you would need to measure me in order to begin the process?"

Another pert retort barreled from Celine's lips. "Yes, mademoiselle. That would be wise."

The center of the girl's eyes sparkled as though she could hear Celine's thoughts. "You're absolutely delightful. Like Bastien in a dress." She laughed to herself. "That snide fiend."

Lines of confusion gathered across Celine's forehead. Was the young woman insulting her or complimenting her?

"En tous cas . . ." the girl continued, her free hand waving through the air as if to disperse smoke. "Would it be possible for you to meet me later this evening?"

Celine thought quickly. The day after they'd arrived in port, the Mother Superior had cautioned them about venturing alone into the city at night, especially during carnival season. She'd spoken as though they were all foolish little lambs, and the Vieux Carré nothing but a hunting ground for wolves. Not to mention the fact that a violent death had occurred recently along the nearby pier.

Given all these facts, it was unlikely the Mother Superior would permit Celine to go.

With this realization came a surprising rush of disappoint-

ment. Though Celine did not feel comfortable in the presence of this rambling, oddly attired girl, she nevertheless felt . . . intrigued. Even a tad bit reckless.

When the girl sensed Celine's reluctance, her lips puckered with displeasure. "Of course I will pay you handsomely."

Celine didn't doubt it. Her ivory cameo alone was worth a fortune. But it was not about the money. It was about the rightness. She owed herself this second chance. And angering the Mother Superior seemed unwise.

"I'm sorry, mademoiselle." Celine shook her head. "I just don't think it would be possible. The Mother Superior would not permit it."

"I see." A long sigh passed the girl's lips. "Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all."

"Pardon?" Celine's eyes went wide. "Are you quoting . . . Shakespeare?"

And *Hamlet*, at that.

"The one and only." The girl grinned. "But, alas, I must be on my way. Is there no chance you might change your mind? You have but to name your price."

A flicker of bemusement passed through Celine. Hours ago, from a place of insolence, she'd suggested it might be better to earn money beneath the light of the moon. Here was an offer to do so. One without limit.

In that moment—listening to this strange girl quote Shakespeare and tantalize her with possibility—Celine realized she wanted to go. Badly. It was the first time in recent memory she'd felt this particular spark of anticipation ignite within her.

She wanted to create something and be a part of the world instead of merely observing it. Already she'd begun envisioning ways to fashion the wide-hooped, baroque-style panniers. To construct a manteau with dripping pagoda sleeves. Her hesitation now was a last effort to hold firm to her convictions.

To obey. Be a model of humility. Earn a measure of God's forgiveness.

"If money does not entice you"—the girl leaned closer, and Celine caught a whiff of neroli oil and rosewater—"I can promise you an adventure . . . a trek through a den of lions."

That. That was it.

It was as though the girl had found a window into the darkest corner of Celine's heart.

"It would be my pleasure to design a dress for you, mademoiselle," Celine said. As soon as the words left her mouth, her pulse was set apace.

"I'm thrilled." Beaming, the girl withdrew an ecru card with gold calligraphy in its center. The script read

Jacques'

Beneath it was an address in the heart of the Vieux Carré, not too far from the convent.

"Come here this evening, around eight o'clock," she continued. "Disregard the queue outside. When a beautiful man with a voice like sin and a ring through his right ear demands to know what you are doing, tell him to bring you to Odette, tout de suite." She reached for Celine's hand. Through the lace of her

glove, her touch felt cool. Calming. The girl's eyes widened for an instant, her grasp tentative at first. She canted her head, a half smile curving up her doll-like face. "It's lovely to meet you, Celine," she said warmly.

"It was lovely to meet you as well . . . Odette."

With another simpering grin, the girl named Odette sashayed away, the train of her bustle gliding in her wake. The next instant, Anabel turned toward Celine. "I ken I'm the last to go on about making mistakes, Celine, but I'm not sure what came over ye when ye agreed to meet this Odette creature tonight. Are ye touched? Ye canna leave the convent after dinner. The Mother Superior expressly forbade it. She said the happenings in the Quarter after sunset—"

"Promote the kind of licentious behavior that will not be tolerated beneath her roof," Celine finished in a weary voice. "I know. I was there."

"There's no need to be testy." Anabel blew back a tight red curl from her face. "I'm only worried what'll happen if you're caught."

"I thought you were tired of all the humdrum," Pippa teased.

Celine smiled, grateful to her friend for disarming the tension. "Ready to meet a sturdy young gentleman."

"In my mind, he doesn't even have to be young," Pippa continued.

"Or a gentleman," Celine finished.

"*Och*, you're terrible!" Color flooding her face, Anabel made the sign of the cross. "Enough to make me take to church."

Celine feigned ignorance, a black brow arching into her fore-

head. “I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t be the wee hen that never laid away. Not with me, Mademoiselle Rousseau.” Her eyes shifted to Celine’s chest. “And certainly not with that bosom.”

“What?” Celine blinked.

“Don’t play the innocent,” Pippa translated with laughter.

“What does that have to do with my . . . bosom?”

Pippa bit her lip. “It was said in jest, dear. You must know you have a lovely figure.” She patted Celine’s hand like she would a child’s. The motion grated on Celine’s nerves. “Don’t take it to heart. Gifts were bestowed on you.”

Gifts?

They thought her figure was a gift? The ridiculousness of it almost caused Celine to burst into laughter herself. There’d been a time when she’d appreciated her body for its beauty and resilience. But that time had passed. What she wouldn’t give to be lithe and lean like Anabel. The “gifts” these girls chortled about now had brought Celine nothing but trouble.

And they’d left her far from innocent.

A flush rose in Celine’s cheeks. It flared across her skin, hot and fast, as though—even in jest—these two girls could see the truth she labored to conceal every day of her life. The worst of her past washed through her memory. Blood seeped across her vision, the smell of warm copper filling her nose, leaching the light from the air.

But this was absurd. How would Pippa and Anabel know what she had done? Why she’d fled her home five weeks ago? Celine struggled to calm her nerves.

They wouldn't. No one would. As long as she didn't breathe a word.

Your name is Marceline Béatrice Rousseau. That is all anyone need know about you.

"I would never play the innocent, ladies." Celine winked and smiled brightly. "It just wouldn't suit."

Malvolio

Anabel betrayed Celine at dinner, barely an hour after they'd returned to the convent.

It took the Mother Superior the work of an instant to draw out the truth from the loose-lipped girl. As soon as Anabel told the gathered young women that Celine's embroidered handkerchiefs had been purchased full price in one fell swoop, the hawk-eyed nun—with her perfectly pressed habit—had delved for details.

Alas, Anabel proved to be a terrible liar. For all the stories Celine had heard about Scots, she was profoundly disappointed to have met the only Highlander incapable of spinning a tale.

Now Celine was stuck reviewing the scenery in the Mother Superior's office, her dinner of bland stew going cold on the kitchen table. She searched the space for a distraction. All the while, she tried to devise a believable lie for why she should be permitted to wander into the city past nightfall.

It was all so dramatic. So unnecessary.

Why was it that everyone Celine encountered insisted on telling her how to live her life?

Pippa sat in guilty silence nearby, wringing her hands like a

character from a cautionary tale. Celine inhaled deeply, aware that Philippa Montrose could not be counted on to support anything resembling perfidy. Pippa was simply too good. It was a truth universally acknowledged by all those residing at the convent, even the nuns themselves:

Pippa Montrose was trustworthy and obedient. Nothing like the impetuous Celine Rousseau.

In fact, why had Pippa been summoned here at all? She wasn't guilty of any wrongdoing. Was her presence an effort to highlight Celine's misdeeds? Or perhaps intimidate Pippa into betraying her as well?

Her gaze darkening at the thought, Celine scanned the room. On one side of the wall was a large wooden cross that had been donated by one of New Orleans' oldest Spanish families, from a time before the French had taken ownership of the port city. Beyond the partially opened shutters, a slit of waning sunlight bathed the outer reaches of the Ursuline convent.

If only the windows could be opened fully, to let the view of the port seep onto its sloping floors. Maybe it would fill these fallow rooms with life. The second day there, Celine had tried to do this herself, but she'd been roundly chastised ten minutes later; the windows of the whitewashed convent were always shuttered in an effort to maintain an austere atmosphere.

As though it could be anything else at all.

The door scraped open. Pippa sat up straight in the same instant Celine's shoulders fell.

Even before the Mother Superior stepped over the threshold, the wool of her black habit filled the room with her presence,

smelling of lanolin and the medicinal ointment she used each night for her chapped hands.

The combination was like a wet hound in a haystack.

As soon as the door swung shut, the lines around the Mother Superior's mouth deepened. She paused for a breath, then glared down at them, her expression severe. An obvious effort to instill a sense of foreboding, like a tyrant of old.

Though it was inopportune, a smile threatened to take shape on Celine's face. Everything about this situation was absurd. Less than five weeks ago, Celine had been apprenticed to one of the most demanding couturiers in Paris. A woman whose frequent screams of rage caused the crystals to tremble in their chandeliers. A true oppressor, who routinely ripped Celine's work to shreds—before her eyes—if a single stitch was out of place.

And this tyrannical nun with chapped hands thought she merited fear?

As Pippa would say, not bloody likely.

A snicker escaped Celine's mouth. Pippa toed her chair in response.

What could have caused the Mother Superior's hands to become so worn? Perhaps she labored on some clandestine craft, deep in the hollows of her cell. A painter perhaps. Or a sculptor. What if she was secretly a wordsmith by night? Even better if she wrote entirely in asides or things laced with double meaning, like Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*.

Be by my life, this is my lady's hand, these be her very C's, her U's and her T's and thus she makes her great P's.

Celine coughed. Creases of irritation formed across the Mother Superior's forehead.

The idea that this nun in a starched habit would say anything untoward caused Celine to lock eyes on the polished stone floor to keep from laughing. Pippa nudged her again, this time more forcefully. Though her friend said nothing, Celine could tell Pippa was not the least bit amused by their situation.

Rightly so. Nothing about angering the convent's matron should be funny. This woman had given them a place to live and work. A means by which to find their way in the New World.

Only an ungrateful, troublesome girl would see otherwise. A girl precisely like Celine.

Sobered by these thoughts, Celine chewed the inside of her cheek, the room growing warmer, her stays pulling tighter.

"I expect you to explain yourself, Mademoiselle Rousseau," the Mother Superior began in a voice that was tinny and gravelly all at once.

Celine kept silent, her eyes cast downward. She knew better than to begin by offering a defense. The Mother Superior had not called them here with a mind to listen; she'd called them here with a mind to teach. It was a lesson Celine understood well. She'd been raised on it.

"This young woman you met in the square, why does she not come to the convent in daylight or consult a local dressmaker?" the Mother Superior asked. "If she wishes to hire you to design garments for her, it seems fitting for her to come here, n'est-ce pas?"

When Celine still did not respond, the Mother Superior

grunted. Leaned closer. "Répondez-moi, Mademoiselle Rousseau. Immédiatement," she whispered, her tone laced with warning. "Or you and Mademoiselle Montrose will regret it."

At the threat, Celine raised her head to meet the Mother Superior's gaze. She licked her lips to bide time as she chose her next words.

"Je suis désolée, Mère Supériere," Celine apologized, "mais"—she glanced to her right, trying to decide whether or not to involve Pippa in this falsehood—"but, alas, her modiste is unfamiliar with the baroque style of dress. She expressed urgency in needing the garments and a schedule that did not appear to be flexible during the day. You see . . . she volunteers each afternoon with a lady's organization that knits socks for children."

Even in profile, Celine saw Pippa's eyes widen with dismay.

It was an abhorrent lie, to be sure. Fashioning Odette as an angel with a soft spot for barefooted souls was among the more . . . colorful stories Celine had told in her lifetime. But this entire situation was ridiculous. And Celine enjoyed prevailing over tyrants, even by the barest of measures. Especially ones who threatened her friends.

The Mother Superior's frown softened, though the rest of her expression remained doubtful. She linked her hands behind her back and began pacing. "Be that as it may, I do not feel it is appropriate for you to travel through the city unescorted past sundown. A young woman not much older than you . . . perished along the docks only yesterday."

In Celine's opinion, *perished* was a rather subdued word for being ripped to pieces beneath a starlit sky.

The Mother Superior paused in silent prayer before resuming her lecture. "During carnival season, there are many revelers in the streets. Sin runs rampant, and I do not wish for a mind as weak and susceptible as yours to be lured by danger."

Though Celine bristled at the slight, she nodded in agreement. "I, too, do not wish to be tempted by anything untoward." She pressed a hand over her heart. "But I believe this young woman to be good and God-fearing, Mère Supériere. And the money she will give the convent for my work would undoubtedly be of great benefit to us all. She made it clear—several times—that cost was not an object."

"I see." The Mother Superior turned toward Pippa without warning. "Mademoiselle Montrose," she said, "it appears you have little to offer on the matter. What have you to say about this situation?"

Celine closed her eyes, bracing herself for what was to come. She wouldn't blame Pippa for telling the truth. It was simply in her nature to do so. And who could blame Pippa for following her natural inclination?

Pippa cleared her throat, her small hands tightening into fists. "I . . . found the young lady quite trustworthy and virtuous as well, Mother Superior," she said slowly. "Of course your concerns are not without merit, especially given what happened along the docks. Would it make a difference if I offered to accompany her? We could take the lady's measurements together and then be on our way. I don't believe we would be gone from the convent for long. In fact, I see no reason why we would have to miss evening prayer."

Time ground to a halt. It was Celine's turn to have her eyes widen with dismay.

Pippa Montrose had offered to help. Had lied for Celine. To a *nun*.

"I have many misgivings, Mademoiselle Montrose," the Mother Superior said after a breath. "But perhaps if you are willing to provide escort . . ."

"I am willing to take full responsibility." Pippa grasped the tiny gold crucifix nestled at the hollow of her throat. She let her voice drop. Let it fill with reverence. "And I trust God will go with us tonight."

The Mother Superior frowned again, her lips unspooling slowly. Her attention shifted from Pippa toward Celine and back again. She stood straight. And made a decision.

"Very well," she said.

A flare of surprise shot through Celine. The Mother Superior had shifted tack too quickly. Too easily. Suspicion gnawed at Celine's stomach. She eyed Pippa sidelong, but her friend did not glance her way.

"Thank you, Mother Superior," Pippa murmured. "I promise all will go as planned."

"Of course. As long as you understand I've put my full trust in you, Mademoiselle Montrose. Do not disappoint me." The nun's smile was disturbingly beatific. "May His light shine upon you both, my children."

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I first glimpse my next victim as she passes beneath the flame of a gas lamp.

Her eyes flash in a most curious way. As though she is on edge or held in suspense. Perhaps in the midst of doing something illicit.

The sight catches my attention, even through the horde of bustling bodies, a handful of them brimming with otherworldly energy. Her unease looks strangely beguiling, for it is the opposite of performative. She is heedless of everything around her, save the task at hand. It is a difficult undertaking for a hapless mortal, to move about a crowd so blissfully unaware. So enviably unaffected.

Crowds fascinate me. They provide demons such as myself with unique opportunities. Occasions to be seen and unseen in the same breath. For are we not always—human and creature alike—performing to some degree?

I digress.

The moment I enjoy most is when I first begin scanning the masses. When I first lay eyes on my target, and they know not

that they are being watched. They act without thought. Smile without agenda. Laugh as though not a soul is listening.

I know what this must sound like. It sounds . . . disconcerting. I am aware. But I am by nature disconcerting. There are moments in which I can be delightful, too. I speak many languages. I have traveled the world twice over. I can sing the entirety of Verdi's *Aida* without the need of sheet music.

Do I not deserve a modicum of consideration for these and many other achievements?

I would like to think so, though I know it to be impossible.

Demons should not be granted the indulgence of men. So sayeth man, at least.

But I'll share a secret. In my years, I have discovered it is possible to be both disconcerting and delightful all at once. Wine can be delicious though it muddles the mind. A mother may love and hate her children in the span of the same afternoon.

And a predator could abhor itself even as it relishes its evening meal.

I understand my behavior might be construed as odd. Unseemly. But I am a thing of oddity. A creature born apart from this world.

Don't fret on my account. I have never been one of those immortals who enjoys toying with its food, nor do I particularly like stalking my prey. I am not looking for their weaknesses; rather, I am understanding their humanity. There is something . . . wrong with treating a living being as though it exists purely for my own sport. Every action I undertake has a pur-

pose. It is the characteristic that distinguishes me from many beings of the Otherworld.

My convictions.

I feel keenly the loss of any life taken. The kill two nights ago along the pier did not thrill me in any way. It was necessarily gruesome, in a manner I typically eschew, especially for such an indiscriminate death. I brought about the girl's end simply to see what was possible. To see what kind of attention it would draw. Alas, it did not have the effect I hoped, for my enemy remains above the authorities' notice. It appears a more lasting impression must be left with my next victim. A more direct assault, upon my enemy's doorstep.

Each death to come will be felt all the more keenly. That is of primary importance.

For though I may disdain wanton bloodshed, I am not impervious to the draw of the hunt. A friend from childhood used to say she knew when an animal had perished in agony. She could taste it, and it ruined the meal for her.

I find I am inclined to agree. There is also a certain allure to knowing what will happen next, before anyone else does. Perhaps it is a result of my unconventional upbringing. Or maybe it is simply human nature.

And I was human. Once.

A part of me still longs to be.

Maybe that is what draws me to the liveliness of the French Quarter. I avoided hunting in it for many years, because its corners contained memories not soon forgotten. Images of pain and loss and heartbreak. But I've returned to my old haunt af-

ter too long a time, for I have an ancient score to settle. A final performance to give.

Sacro fremito di gloria / Tutta l'anima m'investe.

A sacred thrill of glory / Runs through my heart.

Perhaps I am still human after all.