

Watermark



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Prologue: "A Chance Encounter"

St. Louis, Missouri
February 1828

"You've the look of a woman down on her luck. Care to earn a bit of coin?"

Juno Brock spun around. The smiling man standing at her elbow was unremarkable in appearance save for the thin scar that disfigured his left cheek. Her imagination, always fanciful, likened it to that of a scythe. From there, her imaginings took flight. She checked for a black hooded cloak, but there was nothing sinister in the lines of his greatcoat to indicate Death personified lurked beneath.

Even so, her instincts had always been strong, and she would be unwise to ignore them now. The wistful vigil she'd set up alongside a food cart would have to wait. Sometimes the pliable young lad left in charge during the noon hour could be persuaded to sell her a sausage pastry for half-price, but she could always try her luck again later.

"I don't want any trouble, sir." Juno hurried away, assuming that would be the end of matters.

"Trouble? Who said anything about trouble?" Booted footsteps calmly pursued her through the noisy landing district. The stranger's melodic drawl had little difficulty penetrating the calls from hawkers peddling their wares. It was one of those voices that mysteriously grew stronger without rising in volume. Nor did the general commotion inherent to loading and unloading the ships along the landing seem to lessen the ease in which his voice carried through the crowd. "I'm a gentleman offering a young lady a change in fortune, if she's so inclined."

"I'm not inclined." Hoping to appease the persistent fellow, she stopped and bobbed a quick curtsy, her clunky brogans slipping on the dirty slush and turning the act into an ungainly affair. She forced a smile. She didn't enjoy the company of strangers, and this particular stranger made the skin between her shoulders itch. "I thank you, however."

“Walk with me.” A hand gripped her upper arm, insistent.

Stunned by his forwardness, she jerked her shoulder to remove his grip, but her shawl was the only thing to get dislodged, a humble article of plaid rubbed thin in spots. She tossed back a rearward glance; a corner of her wrap trailed through a muddy puddle swirling with rotten cabbage and horse manure.

Irritation instantly surpassed fear. This brazen stranger had bothered her enough.

“Let me go, or I’ll call out to the watch,” she threatened, referring to the armed citizens that patrolled the riverfront and chased off undesirables.

“A marvelous idea! Call over the watch. I’ll tell them all about my silver snuffbox I just found in your possession.”

Aghast, she watched the stranger dip his hand into her apron pocket and extract a small silver case. Or at least he gave the skilled appearance of making it seem so. A sleight-of-hand trick but one that could see her hanged.

“It’s my favorite one,” he chided gently, angling the little case to reveal embossed artwork of Adam and Eve in the garden with the Serpent. “It depicts the Fall of Man. Exquisite detailing; do you not agree?”

Juno studied the stranger’s countenance. Such an ordinary face. Round cheeks that were deceptively youthful, though the lines scoring his forehead indicated he was closer to thirty than twenty. Pomade kept his stick-straight dark hair parted carefully down the middle. Close-set eyes, brown and commonplace. Overall, his was a very nonthreatening appearance, a cunning disguise for the villain skulking shrewdly within.

“The word of a fine gentleman versus the word of a ragged street girl?” he resumed in his pleasant-sounding voice. “Whom will the watch believe? Do I have your attention now?”

“You have it,” she whispered.

“Excellent. Let’s talk as we promenade.”

Juno walked docilely at his side as he steered her away from the waterfront, but internally she was unraveling. Five weeks. She’d kept to herself and survived on her own for these five weeks following her husband’s death. Mindful of always keeping her head down, she’d skillfully avoided attracting any unsavory attention as she’d tried to devise a plan to journey to Fort Crawford and reunite with her mother.

Until now.

She swallowed uneasily as the man passed her a folded slip of paper.

“Put this in your pocket,” he ordered. “It’s the address of my business associate.”

Her fumbling fingers made a mess of the simple task.

“Now deliver this package to that address without delay,” he instructed, withdrawing a paper-wrapped parcel from inside his greatcoat. Much like the sleight-of-hand trick from earlier, he moved without detection. One moment her hands were empty; the next, they weren’t.

Juno hid the parcel beneath the folds of her shawl. “What is it?” she blurted, immediately horrified by her curiosity. The small brown package was heavy with the weight of sin. She didn’t need to know more.

He smiled admiringly. “I’m surprised you have the boldness to ask.”

“Forgive me.” Her breathing took on a wheezing quality. “At least tell me...if I’m caught with it, will I hang?”

“Possibly.” He carefully loosened the fingers of his left glove. The soft leather cuff slid up and over the back of his hand, revealing a perfect letter “C” branded into his skin. “In the very least, you’ll receive one of these.”

Concurrent thoughts presented themselves to Juno. Firstly, that the branding itself appeared dark brown and leathery, but the surrounding tissue was still reddened and scabbing along the edges, which attested that the placement of the hot iron had been as recent as a week ago. Secondly, that such a branding was the penalty often meted out to criminals caught with counterfeiting papers. And thirdly, that such criminals would be hanged if caught with such condemning items a second time, which was undoubtedly why she’d been recruited to go in his stead. Though the package was too compact and heavy to be paper; steel counterfeiting plates, perhaps?

She put an immediate end to that inquisitive line of thought. She truly didn’t want to know.

Much too late, Juno turned her face away. “I didn’t see anything,” she insisted inanely, keeping her eyes to the muddy street.

His willingness to share such incriminating information with her was alarming. Possibly because she wouldn’t be alive long enough to share it with anyone?

He smiled to himself as he carefully tugged the glove back into place. “You did see it, and now you know I’m a very bad man. That knowledge will motivate you to deliver my package and keep your mouth shut about it. But if it doesn’t—”

“It will! I’ll say nothing.”

“If it doesn’t,” he continued, his previously jovial tone hardening at the interruption, “I’ll find you. I’ll find you and do bad things to you.” His commonplace brown eyes were no longer commonplace as they took on a malevolent gleam. “I’ll kill you in the same manner that the river pirates kill their victims. I’ll slice open your abdominal cavity and fill it with rocks,” he decided cheerfully. He reached out a single finger and traced a horizontal

line across her stomach. She nearly jumped from her skin. “That way your feeble little body will have the decency to sink to the bottom of the river when you’re sewn back up and tossed in.” He leaned close and confided, “The procedure can take considerable time; hopefully, you’ll have already died from blood loss by then.”

Juno was suddenly glad she hadn’t the opportunity to charm a sausage pastry from the impressionable lad at the meat cart. It would have been little more than vomitus on the street by now.

“Nevertheless, bad man or not, I can be generous to those shrewd enough to follow my instructions. This will be waiting as your reward when you get back.” He reached out and seemingly pulled a \$2.50 gold piece from her ear, as if she were an impressionable youngster he wished to amaze. “Off you go, darling.”

Juno briefly stared at the coin. Its temptation was as seductive as any snake in Eden. She bolted away, the package of sin pressed desperately against her pounding heart.

Juno’s damp fist closed around the slip of folded paper. Terror had reduced her brain to cotton, and she hadn’t the presence of mind to tell the stranger she couldn’t read. A written address was useless to her.

More precisely, she could write her name and pick out simple words, but the name of the business and its address didn’t divulge itself beyond the random letter or two, no matter how hard she stared at it. She could ask someone to read it for her, but she was afraid the man was still watching her and would follow through on his promise to sink her body in the river. If she couldn’t make the delivery, what use was she?

And so there was nothing to do but try and fake her way through. Her mad dash toward the cobbled streets of the business district was guided by the assumption that the odds were in her favor that her destination lay there.

Despite her illiteracy, or perhaps even because of it, Juno had always been unusually observant. She was clever and adaptable and perceptive, which was how she knew that the streets running east and west in St. Louis were named after trees, while the streets running north and south were given number designations.

She felt a sliver of optimism. She was good at sums. She peered again at the scribbled address. The numerals there might indicate a street. Or not. They might indicate a block of buildings. Or not.

The sliver incinerated like a wood shaving exposed to flame.

There were simply too many possibilities. She needed an alternate plan, and quickly.

Juno turned down a random street. She glanced fearfully over her shoulder but noticed nothing amiss. The stranger probably thought she was too terrified to defy him. And then there was also the money he'd promised. In hindsight, he'd obviously selected her because of her destitute appearance. Perhaps he truly believed she'd come back for the gold coin, negating any reason to follow her.

A tradesman sign above her head creaked on its iron bracket, drawing her eye and solving all her problems in the next instant.

Like most barber-hairdressers, this one provided shaves, haircuts, and styled hair. It also offered tonics, pomades, perfumes, and powders, but none of those toiletries were responsible for the slow smile that spread across Juno's face.

The source of her smile and the funds for her journey to Fort Crawford was found in the barber-hairdresser's window display: hairnets and tiaras with false curls and braids were arranged attractively on a strip of velvet, superior examples of false locks that weren't fashioned from bristly goat hair but from soft, human hair.

But first, she had to free herself from the package of sin.

Next door was a millinery, and outside stood a restless errand boy who kicked at a clod of loose dirt.

The conversation that had taken place twenty minutes ago hummed inside Juno's head. It hadn't woven its appeal on her, but the boy looked eager enough.

"You've the look of an enterprising lad," she greeted, pulling her remaining three pennies from her pocket. "Care to earn a bit of coin?"

The youth grinned enthusiastically. "Absolutely, miss."



Chapter 1: "River Pirates"

Michigan Territory
March 1828

"That hair of yours is a real fright. I still can't get over it."

Juno didn't look up from the stack of yard goods she was reorganizing, mostly because she didn't want her mother to see how affected she was by her tactless remark. "Selling my hair to buy passage on a steamboat traveling north was more important than preserving my vanity," she reminded, but that didn't stop Juno from self-consciously touching the simple linen cap that covered her hair while it grew out. "How else was I to meet you at Fort Crawford?"

"You did what you had to do," Eloise agreed. "I simply haven't become accustomed to it yet. That's all I'm saying."

The folded creases in the patterned calicos and muslins grew more and more precise. Unfortunately, there was no easy way to escape one's insensitive mother while on a small storeboat floating down the Mississippi River.

"I think it was mighty resourceful of Juno! A woman's hair is worth its weight in gold," Cecil bellowed from his position at the steering rudder. "Especially blond hair."

Juno was untrusting of his speculative tone. Cecil Payne was her mother's third husband, and he was as resourceful as he'd just proclaimed Juno to be. An excellent purveyor of goods and gossip, his livelihood floating from one remote settlement to another provided a satisfactory income that maintained her mother's desire for a new dress and matching bonnet every spring. Even now he was probably devising ways to turn false hairpiece-making into a lucrative business, and with her own head as the yielding crop.

"No one offered me any bags of gold," she repudiated, hoping to deter such outlandish expectations, "but it did pay for deck passage, if not much else."

“That’s because you didn’t negotiate terms correctly!” he stressed, conveniently forgetting that Juno’s life had been at stake and negotiations hadn’t been foremost on her mind. Cecil lived to haggle and quibble with his customers. “I reckon we could get a fair price for your blond hair, Eloise, if you’re so inclined.” He chortled. “There’s scarcely any gray in it at all!”

“Oh, you!” Eloise laughed delightedly, apparently pleased with Cecil’s stanch readiness to turn a profit even by mercenary means. Her smile immediately fell when she turned back to Juno. “It’s a shame, though. It really was your prettiest feature.”

Only her mother could give an insult bundled inside a compliment. Juno’s mouth flattened, but she didn’t say a word of protest. It wasn’t in her nature to push back, though she secretly grieved her lack of resistance. She was a grown woman of nearly twenty-one years and a widow besides, but that didn’t prevent Eloise from speaking to her as if she were still a child.

“I have to disagree,” her cousin Agnes suddenly interjected.

The storeboat wasn’t particularly large, but the space was utilized well. Shelves, bins, and cupboards comprised the outer aisles, while a long oak counter—the storeboat’s crowning glory—extended the length of its interior and was outfitted with a series of clever little drawers and cubbyholes underneath. Agnes smiled from her place at the far end of the counter where she entertained her teething and thereby fractious fourteen-month-old son with a corn husk doll. Delmar was industriously gnawing away on the gooey head, his round face screwed up in concentration.

“Juno’s eyes are a very pretty color, like ripe hazelnuts. Frankly, I think her eyes are her best feature, Auntie Eloise,” she contended, “and so her shortened hair really doesn’t signify.”

Eloise waved an indifferent hand. “Her eyes are pretty enough, I suppose.”

Juno tossed her cousin a grateful smile. Agnes winked, ever the stalwart defender.

“Menacing strangers aside, I sometimes wonder if it would have been wiser to remain in St. Louis,” she muttered sourly, sidling up to Agnes a few minutes later and immediately earning a chiding shoulder nudge.

“But then we wouldn’t have been able to have all this time together! We haven’t spent this much time together since we were girls.” Agnes administered another nudge, this one to direct Juno’s attention downward. “I took this off the bookshelf. It’s a hymn booklet,” she explained, stealthily extracting it from her apron pocket before quickly returning it again. “Come find me this evening when we set up camp. I’ll say Delmar’s sore gums are making him fussy, and we’re going to take a walk. We’ll review long and

short vowel sounds.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, grinning. “The sore gums will make for a credible excuse.”

It was disappointing that subterfuge was even necessary, but Eloise’s dismissive attitude toward schooling was the reason Juno had never learned to spell and read in the first place, hence the secret lessons. The incident in St. Louis had stressed the need to rectify her ignorance as soon as possible. Luckily, Agnes had been reared to make the most of her intelligence and was happy to offer her tutelage, albeit covertly.

Not that Juno had any misconceptions that she would learn how to spell and read in the few weeks required to escort Agnes to a distant relative of her husband’s living in Natchez, Mississippi. Like Juno, Agnes was a widow. As Juno could attest, Eloise and Cecil were a temporary refuge, not a permanent one. Soon enough her only cousin would set her roots elsewhere, but Juno would savor her dear friendship until then.

“At least he seems to be feeling better today.” She tickled Delmar on the fat rolls of his neck. Spit bubbles and laughter oozed from his lips. The masticated corn husk doll must be working, because this was the happiest he’d been in two whole days.

“Which is fortunate because I’m at the end of my rope,” Agnes despaired, but it was more for dramatic effect considering she commenced her own cheerful attack on the toddler’s fat rolls. “That pesky tooth needs to finish poking its way through, doesn’t it, jelly-belly?”

Delmar crowed in agreement, exposing his two bottom incisors and three top incisors, the incoming upper fourth being the pesky culprit.

“Eloise! Hide the strongbox!”

Juno glanced up, her heart in her throat. A single glance was all it took to determine that the crew of the keelboat bearing sharply in their direction wasn’t interested in buying a hunting shirt or a fine set of boots. Cecil swore stridently and repeated, “The strongbox, Eloise! Stop gawping and hide it!”

“What’s happening?” Agnes cried. “Who are they?”

“River pirates,” Juno blurted, horrorstruck by the dangerous circumstances and to a slightly lesser extent, Cecil’s poor decision-making. “Forget the strongbox, Mother! Fetch Cecil his rifle!” The priority should have been obvious, and she wished she were bold enough to yell at Cecil for his stupidity.

Juno didn’t wait to see if Eloise listened to her. She fell to her knees and desperately started plowing through the kitchenware. Pots and kettles went flying. A water cistern tumbled off its shelf and promptly rolled away. The set of elaborate copper molds used to make puddings and jellies that

Cecil could never manage to sell skittered across the decking, and Juno still couldn't find what she was looking for. More pans went airborne, her growl of frustration hurled along with them.

The hunting knives were displayed with the hatchets on the other side of the boat, but the selection of kitchen knives and choppers were just as lethal. Juno issued a gladdened cry when her fingers seized hold of a paring knife, the handle of which she quickly pressed into Agnes's shaking hand.

"For protection!"

Her cousin's complexion took on the sickly undertones of sulfur.

"Hide behind the counter!" Juno hissed, pulling Agnes down beside her.

"This is the end." Firearms erupted as if to underscore her tremulous statement. She closed her eyes and hugged the screaming baby to her breast. "They're going to murder us all."

"No, Agnes. No!" She rapidly patted her shoulder, begging her cousin to open her eyes. "I'm going to try and get to the hatchets on the other—"

The keelboat rammed into them and pushed the storeboat onto a sandbar, the impact flinging Juno backward. Glass pickling jars and bottles of peach brandy and cheery bounce shattered in their crates, but those weren't the loudest sounds. Screams were everywhere, ricocheting off the towering limestone cliffs that entrenched the river, their origins constantly changing. The woolpack clouds in the sky above her head spiraled dizzily, disorienting her further. Her mind was a maelstrom, the blood whooshing fearfully inside her veins.

The screams coalesced into a single voice. Juno immediately sat up, Agnes's audible terror refocusing the world again. The keelboat passed within inches of the stranded storeboat. A disreputable individual with curly black hair and discolored teeth was trying to drag her cousin over the side of the boat. Delmar howled pathetically in her arms. Agnes kicked and shrieked, desperately clutching the baby with all the strength she possessed, but the devastation slashing at Juno's heart cried out their abduction was imminent.

Delmar's howl reached a deafening pitch, and a look of profound irritation flashed across the pirate's face. Juno shouted a useless warning. It was clear in that moment that he wanted Agnes, not Delmar.

The pirate grabbed the toddler by a chubby leg, wrenched him from her protective grasp, and threw him in the river.

"No!" Juno cried.

The action didn't require conscious thought: Juno immediately flung herself overboard to save him.

The current had already whisked Delmar away, but Providence had mercifully intervened and snagged his smock on a fallen tree limb dangling out over the water. Juno aimed for him as best she could, but the current slammed her into the tree limb with considerably more force than it had Delmar. It took a moment to catch her breath and then that breath was expended on a panicked gasp: The keelboat was quickly bearing down on them!

She snatched the screaming toddler by his smock and thrust him with all her might toward the riverbank just as a hand reached down and fisted itself in her shorn locks, the current having ripped away her linen cap.

The violence in which she was pulled from the river was shocking. It shouldn't have been, but it was. She'd witnessed his brutality firsthand, and still her brain froze in stunned disbelief as she was lifted bodily from the water, his other hand hauling her up by the front of her dress when her short hair wouldn't provide an adequate grip.

The ripping sound of linsey-woolsey didn't bode well, but Juno could be thankful it was the sound of tearing fabric and not hair loosened by its roots. Her breathing increased threefold then fourfold as he dragged her across the decking, a splinter stabbing neatly into her flailing right foot. A line of men watched the ignoble procession. Her obvious fright gained neither outrage nor cruel laughter from the pirate crew but cursory glances of disinterest, as if a young woman savagely pulled along against her will was an unremarkable, everyday occurrence.

The pirate paused in front of a bolted door. He maintained his firm hold as he angled Juno's face this way and that for inspection. He shook his head resignedly, like that of a fisherman displeased with the river's lack of bounty. Such a puny specimen, indeed. Should he throw it back? Or chop it into smaller pieces for bait?

"Shit." He sighed angrily, his shoulders sagging. "This is disappointing."

Disappointing? Her breathing increased fivefold. What did that mean?

"Piracy is hit or miss, sweetling." He smiled humorlessly. "By the heft of you, looks like we missed."

Her mouth trembled for what he was about to do. "Please don't."

The pirate drew back a calm fist and punched her, immediately rendering Juno insensible.



Chapter 2: "A Dearth of Heroes"

Juno's eyes fluttered open. A man's face hovered mere inches above her own. She grew riveted by his stare, for the light was murky and his eyes were the only feature she could make out clearly. They were an uncommonly bright shade of green that reminded her of rain-soaked grass, and she knew no alarm.

"You're alive. Excellent." Those captivating eyes tightened distastefully. "A dead body would befoul the place."

Juno sat up in a flurry of movement, his words scattering her oddly serene state and restoring recent events in a swift rush of brutal imagery.

"Delmar!"

The green-eyed man quickly reared back, narrowly avoiding an unpleasant collision involving her forehead and his nose. "The boy was plucked out of the water by your people," he announced.

Her gaze sprang wide and hopeful. "I got him close enough to the riverbank? He didn't drown?"

The man retreated and became a formless shadow that blended in with the timbered walls. "He was bawling loudly enough to lead one to believe that his lungs worked fine."

"And the rest of my family?" she pleaded, stretching out a trembling hand in appeal. "Did you see what happened to them? Did they get away?"

"Apparently so." He granted her a three-quarter view of his profile as he turned and peered through a split in one of the milled boards. "Look around you, girl. Do you see anyone here besides the two of us?"

It was an obvious question that required no answer. He added nothing further as he continued his quiet reconnaissance of the world outside, evidently having exhausted all interest in the events surrounding her capture.

The silent scream inside Juno's head suffered from no such indifference. The distinctive fluctuation of movement beneath her feet confirmed the worst, but she needed to see the proof for herself. She hastened forward to peer out the same serrated crack. A defect in the wood,

it ran down the board a length of perhaps ten inches and placed her in close proximity to the stranger, uncomfortably so. He objected equally to her nearness. The man's elbow shot out and nudged her aside almost instantly.

"This is my lookout. Find your own."

She firmed her resolve and surged forward again. Despite her inhospitable companion, she needed to assess the situation. Her inveterate need to fidget when positioned too closely to others only worsened given the worrisome view outside. She was presented with no more than a thin sliver of sky, but it was enough to acquaint herself with the movements of the pirates' keelboat floating unchallenged downriver. Cecil's storeboat was nowhere to be seen.

"I don't like repeating myself." The man's elbow issued another forceful prod when she didn't skitter away quickly enough.

The scream inside her head was growing louder. As best she could tell, the interior of the airless chamber measured roughly eight feet squared. It was a stiflingly small area that was barren of even a simple chair or chamber pot. Presumably they were imprisoned inside a section of the cargo box. There were no windows for light or ventilation, the split in the wall being their only source of illumination. The door was barred solidly from the outside, as she quickly discerned for herself by rushing forward and ramming her shoulder against it.

"Clever," he lauded. "I hadn't thought to try the door."

She yanked on the latch once more for good measure, overlooking her fellow captive's disparaging comment but finding her gaze involuntarily straying sideways to observe the man himself. The gloomy surroundings complicated particulars like face and form. He had to stoop upon standing, but the ceiling was low, and from this she discerned he was likely of average height. She had an elusive impression of dark blond hair with a hint of wave. It was tied back or had been at one time, but now several hanks had loosened to graze his cheekbones. Beyond those vague details, she was at a loss.

"Who are you?" With concern for her family's immediate safety lessened somewhat, Juno's sluggish survival instincts realized she was alone with a male in a small, darkened enclosure, and she couldn't yet determine if he was friend or foe.

"I'm no concern of yours, girl," he rebuffed coolly. "It would be far more prudent of you to concern yourself with the men on the other side of this door." His apathetic gaze flicked over her person. "Have you bothered asking yourself why they pulled you from the river? You might want to make peace with your Maker while there's still time to do so."

She shrank away from his cold perusal. "If they planned on killing me,

they would have done so already,” she resisted, a noticeable quiver in her voice. “You’re lying.”

“Am I?” He approached in one menacing step. Her entire skeleton contracted and attempted to press itself into the farthest wall. “Frumpy little tadpoles are scarcely worth the risk of a hangman’s noose. You’re insignificant,” he judged, reaching out and distastefully flicking a shorn loop of her hair. Juno’s fidgeting became squirming. “It’s difficult to sell a white woman, though not impossible,” he noted, “especially if they already had a buyer in mind, but you lack the obvious attributes that would make such a venture worthwhile. Clearly, they were trying to capture the mulatto woman who shared your vessel. They would have sold her off to a soul driver or one of the sugar plantations if not for your interference.”

Juno cleared her throat nervously. “Agnes is my cousin. She’s a freewoman. They couldn’t have.”

“Are you truly that naive?” he admonished. “These men don’t make the distinction between enslaved or freed.”

No, Juno wasn’t that naive. Thomas, Eloise’s only brother, had fallen in love with an ex-slave who had emigrated to Louisiana from the French colony of Saint-Domingue. After Charlotte died in childbirth, Thomas raised Agnes by himself and never remarried. He was overprotective of his mixed-race daughter up until the day he died and with good reason; even so, no one had ever tried kidnapping Agnes before today.

“You thwarted a profitable afternoon of pillaging,” the man continued.

“Me? I thwarted nothing but Delmar’s drowning.”

“Exactly. I suspect the pirate threw the boy in the river to force the mother to jump in after him. She was fighting him tooth and nail. He could have collected her easily enough had she jumped, but you foiled his plan.”

“Agnes can’t swim,” Juno replied feebly. “It had to be me.”

His expression remained unmoved. “They would have received a minimum profit of seven hundred dollars for your cousin. Likely more. Do you think they’ll just unlock the door and say you’re free to go? They’ll want to make an example out of you,” he decided ominously.

Eyes expanding with horror, she reached up and clasped her torn bodice together with one hand, concealing the exposed chemise beneath. She stood momentarily paralyzed, the images he conjured with his matter-of-fact words hastening fears that had already begun gnawing away at her. “What sort of example?”

His unsympathetic gaze took note of the gesture. “I can only presume revenge compelled them to pull you from the river. Bad luck for you, tadpole.” He shrugged gracefully and returned to his previous vantage point

at the front wall. “Pray they do you a small mercy and decide to kill you outright.”

Juno’s white-knuckled grip loosened. Her hand dropped numbly at her side. She tried not to give credence to the frosty assuredness of her companion as he predicted her probable defilement and gruesome death and all while standing cool as a cucumber, but how could she not?

“Yes, I’ll pray,” she murmured, but that wasn’t going to happen. She hadn’t been much for prayers since the summer she’d attended a revival meeting, and her secret pleas had provided her the good-for-nothing that became her spouse.

She and God had been on poor terms ever since.

Her eyesight had adjusted to the dimness by now, and she was better able to identify details about this stranger who shared her fate. Unlike Agnes, he didn’t seem to possess the mixed blood that would have made him susceptible to slavers, which had her wondering what fate awaited him at the hands of their captors. By outward appearance, he was a man of some consequence, his attire that of a gentleman. His trousers were made of fine wool, his boot leather recently shined and buffed. His white shirt featured deep cuffs and wide sleeves over which he wore a costly vest of figured bronze silk. The high collar and black satin stock encircling his throat further supported an arrogant lineage far removed from her own humble origins.

He presented too faultless an image to be a man accustomed to mundane labors. And though the words he spoke were harsh, his inflection was not; warm molasses flowed through his cultured speech, affirming he hailed from the environs of New Orleans. It was a voice made to read poetry, Juno determined, but was instead wasted on barbed words.

It was clear this man was no ordinary river merchant and would be ransomed at some later date. Unlike herself, who would be butchered for sport.

“You are overfriendly in your gaze, madam,” he rebuked. His reproach came without the slightest glance in her direction, his senses uncanny in the near-dark. “We are not allies.”

Foe it was. Her attention immediately cut away, flustered and intimidated, but swung back just as quickly. “You’re a riddle I’m trying to solve,” she admitted. A little thrill of defiance sped up her heartbeat, which was already pounding dangerously fast because of her abduction. “Why did they even capture you? They can’t sell you. You’re white, so why did they take you?”

“You’ve obviously spent little time in New Orleans. There are

quadroons and octoroons aplenty with light skin and hair.”

Surprised, she posed, “Are you saying African blood runs in your veins?”

“And have all of my property and liberties taken away? I would hardly admit to it if I did.”

Juno’s fleeting sympathy expired. This man had no African blood in him, at least no discernible amount that could be proven and exploited by slavers. His value must lie elsewhere.

“Do you think they’ll ransom you? Is that why you were captured?”

“I won’t be here long enough to be ransomed. And you presume they took me. Perhaps I allowed myself to be captured. Or more intriguing yet, perhaps I’m not a captive at all. Perhaps I’m one of the pirates, and I’m tasked with manipulating you into a false lull.” A tight smile pulled at his lips, an unpleasant expression intended to disquiet. It promptly fell into its previous flat line, a mouth so unaccustomed to smiling—even mockingly—that its malleability couldn’t be sustained. “Save your conjectures for someone interested in them, girl.”

Juno began to shiver, both from the damp frock chilling her skin and the complete lack of empathy staring back at her. His disdain for her was baffling. “Have I done something to offend you, sir?” she inquired cautiously.

He faced her fully then, each vertebra in his spine straightening with aristocratic affront. “Has that been in doubt up until now? Your ignorant relations allowed themselves to be run aground like inexperienced fools, and yet, by way of your person as example”—here he raked his gaze up and down her in the same unflattering fashion as before, concluding with her dirty feet—“they are the lowest of river folk and should therefore be adept at evading such predictable traps. I’ve been shut inside a room no bigger than an animal stall, breathing in the fragrance of previous captives’ piss and shit for three hours now, which is exactly two hours longer than I originally planned to be here, and all thanks to you, so yes,” he denigrated, “everything about your person offends me.”

Obviously, her earlier comparison to a gaze as green as a lush meadow had been too rash and nothing more than a product of her insensibility. Juno had been reared to be biddable and unassuming, and she was docile by nature, but his derision was enough to make even her passive temperament stir.

Yet mostly she felt humiliated. She retreated into one of the darker corners and stared down at her unshod feet. She’d foolishly removed her brogans earlier because they’d rubbed a blister on her heel, and now she had

a splinter in that same heel.

Fate was against her today.

Truly, it had been against her for a while now.

“You were captured first,” she blurted unexpectedly into the silence. “We’re both in the same perilous situation. It seems you’re no better at evading predictable traps, or you wouldn’t even be here.”

“Have you been mustering your courage this entire time to voice that trifling retort?”

“No.” She sandwiched her hands between the wall and the small of her back to prevent her fingers from twirling nervously together. “I was simply pointing out the similarity of our situations.”

He slanted a superior look her way. “Our situations are in no way similar.”

Juno leaned back harder on her hands. “I don’t like you.” She had never delivered such an impudent remark in her life. The sensation was heady.

He actually smiled, as if she’d finally done something right. “Perhaps we do share something in common. I don’t like you either.” Yet his tone had grown distracted as he took a second look at something outside. Unexpectedly, he announced, “I’m here by my own design. There, now, tadpole. Does that quash that vulgar curiosity of yours?”

“You let yourself get captured on purpose?” Frayed nerves made her uncharacteristically oppositional. Her voice climbed a fractious note. “That flouts common sense. I don’t believe you.”

“Believe what you want, but do it silently,” he dismissed. “My crew is due to arrive, and your drivel is a distraction I can ill-afford.”

“Your crew?”

“Was I unclear about the need for silence?”

A surprised curse rang out in the vicinity of the bow, successfully diverting Juno’s attention. She strained forward to try and see out, but the breadth of his stance prevented her from doing so.

Frustration unlocked her voice. “Something’s happening! I need to see.”

“You need do nothing but be silent and wait.” His own voice came out sounding calm.

The report of a gun swiftly followed, its implications changing her heartbeat from nervous palpitations to hard, arduous thumps. There was a stunned moment of bewildered silence beyond the locked cargo hold before a swell of voices burst free, a confused jumble of blasphemous yelling and infuriated orders that culminated in running footfalls and heavy thuds.

Juno studied her brusque companion more closely. He’d remarked

upon the arrival of his crew. Was this a rescue or something more nefarious? Was he a Trojan Horse, perhaps, inserted deftly inside the city gates? If so, she had unexpectedly made the acquaintance of one more river pirate and was soon to make more.

His air of self-possession only seemed to strengthen as he examined the developing scene outside, which further solidified her suspicions. He sent Juno a sharp glance. "Might want to brace yourself, girl."

She had no time to do so as the keelboat collided with something of significant mass. The shuddering impact wasn't strong enough to splinter timbers, but the reverberations that ran beneath her feet were enough to upset her balance and add to a steadily increasing sense of impending disaster.

"Or not," he amended, watching her spill against the wall. "Happily, our captors aren't particularly adept pirates. I'll be saying my farewells now."

She sprang up as he chose that moment to abruptly turn around. They knocked into each other, the cramped confines making independent movement awkward.

"Listen to me and listen well, for I've the time to say this only once." He didn't waste effort maneuvering but impatiently seized her by the upper arms and set her aside. "My men are taking control of this vessel. Soon one of them will unbolt the door and set us free. When he does, keep out of the way," he warned. "Men in the midst of battle don't always distinguish the innocent from the enemy."

She flinched as another gunshot sounded. "Shall I wait here, then, until you come back to fetch me?"

He unwound the strip of rawhide confining his hair and secured it between his teeth, raking back the loose strands and gathering the mass again with an efficiency long put in to practice. Juno watched unabashedly, and for a brief moment, forgot the direness of their circumstances. A heavy throb visited her womb when he glanced up midway through his grooming and fixed his green eyes on her, the leather still caught between his teeth.

"Or should I follow you out?" she proposed, fighting the misguided desire to smooth her hand over his crown for a final pass.

"I dressed in my finest and allowed this trivial pack of animals the pleasure of detaining me for one reason and one reason only: I seek a meeting with someone of much greater consequence than any of them. And of much greater consequence than you. You are of no value to me," he stated unemotionally, taking up a position beside the door.

Juno stared at him in disbelief. "You won't help me?"

His eyebrows slammed together, clearly annoyed by her feeble plea. “Find someplace to hide. Flee while everyone is otherwise occupied. Beyond that advice, there’s nothing I can do but bid you my compliments for a successful escape or a swift death, should your luck prove unfortunate.”

Juno repressed the urge to slap his face in parting. She glanced absurdly around them instead—where, exactly, was she to hide?—and even opened her mouth to protest the sheer inanity of his counsel, but the mayhem outside quickly became the greater concern. She couldn’t rightly say the order of things, though there were plenty of angry shouts and weapons discharging, and the air was thick with gunpowder before she realized she was cowering in the farthest corner from the door.

It took a long moment before she realized aforesaid door was miraculously unbarred and hung ajar, beckoning freedom. It took her befuddled senses a considerably more extensive length of time to comprehend the figure taking it up on its offer by escaping beneath its lintel, and that he was shamelessly deserting her without a single backward glance.