

Let the Ghosts Speak

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Published by Mountain Brook Ink under the Mountain Brook
Fire line

White Salmon, WA U.S.A.

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ISBN 978-1-943959-61-7

Published in association with Cyle Young of the Hartline
Literary Agency, LLC.

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The Team: Miralee Ferrell, Alyssa Roat, Nikki Wright, Cindy Jackson

Cover Design: Indie Cover Design, Lynnette Bonner Designer

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Printed in the United States of America

Reader Take Notice Translator's Admonition

When my good friend in France asked me to take on this translation assignment, I did so without hesitation. I found the mysterious relic irresistible. After all, the manuscript was discovered in a time capsule unearthed in Paris in 1962, part of a police-case dossier, and my passion has long been nineteenth-century jurisprudence.

Now I wonder if the document should have been left buried, forgotten forever. When you read it, perhaps you will understand my newfound reluctance to let it see the light of day. Yet, since I made a commitment to complete the assignment, I did so to the best of my ability and without prejudice.

The first portion, which is the lion's share of the manuscript, was written by a hasty hand in English with an occasional French word or phrase. Because of its progressively illegible script, I did more than simply copy it into a decipherable form. I translated it into something modern readers of English could understand while keeping the more easily recognizable French words the author chose to employ.

I did not, however, alter the author's measurement conventions. Although he lived in France, which used the metric system at the time, he provided distances in Imperial units, most likely for the sake of his mother, an Englishwoman. In contrast, I opted for American spellings of words, since I am providing this translation for a largely American readership, as my friend requested.

In addition, at all times, I was careful to be true to the author's style, his mindset, and his apparent madness. And herein lies my admonition to readers. Be careful to avoid becoming entranced by the author's hallucinations. After working long hours to decipher his meaning in various passages, I found myself suffering from

nightmares in which phantoms visited my own bedside, and I awoke in cold sweats. I fear that the same might happen to readers who spend too much time wandering in the hallways of this author's illusions.

The second portion of the manuscript, a police inspector's addendum, was written entirely in French, and I employed the same method in translating that author's words. Although this officer was clearly in possession of his faculties, as you will see, the madman's fantasies etched their shadows even in the good inspector's mind.

As you can imagine, I find the story contained herein to be highly doubtful. Yet, because of my commitment to my friend, I respectfully submit it for public review, faithfully preserved with appropriate chapter divisions to facilitate easier reading.

Henri M. Bellamont, translator

Chapter One

I have forgotten love. My chains have driven it from me. Loneliness has leached it from my bones and left behind only regret.

It is daylight once again, and I am sane today. This time I am certain of it, though the hauntings of the night continue to test my confidence. Therefore, while my mind is clear, I must take pen and ink, so kindly provided by my only friendly visitors, and begin my story. I cannot say how long this season of sanity will remain with me, so I will write quickly and continue during every day of clarity until I finish this account for the court.

Although you might be dead by now, dear Mother, I am including occasional personal side notes to you, and I dedicate these recollections to your memory, for your lullabies echo from these bare walls. Perhaps you alone knew what love really is. The ghosts tell me that few remember.

I see a world of children who walk in darkness, their bony hands stained with blood not their own, the blood of the innocent. I have been led by such hands, the frail hands of schoolboys in this realm of shadows. Will the rest of the world learn from their schoolmasters?

Alas. Forgive me. I am getting far ahead of myself. A sane man begins his tale at the beginning, so I shall relate where this story of heartbreak has its origins, in Paris where I, Justin Trotter, shared a one-room flat with Marc Noël.

You would have approved, Mother. The room was austere and clean, only a bed and a desk for each of us, situated above a police commissary and within walking distance of the theater and our university. Although Marc's family could have afforded more opulent lodging, he chose a simple life, often to his mother's vexation.

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As part-time students with thespian hearts, we spent our waking hours working for our employers, attending a class or two, studying for exams, and rehearsing our respective roles in whichever play the community theater offered. Regarding employment, Marc conducted research for a law firm, while I translated manuscripts from English or Gaelic to French for a publisher in Paris.

Our jobs were tedious, often mind-numbing, but they provided income that I sorely needed, especially because of my dear sister, Justice.

On a fateful day in early November of 1860, Justice visited my flat, hoping to escape her dismal fortunes, at least for a few hours. As always, we laughed together and wept together. The respite provided solace and hope for her and joy for me. Her smile brightened any room, and her eyes danced with delight, in spite of their blindness.

Mother, I realize this is shocking news, but Justice went blind at the age of ten after a bout of smallpox, which almost took her life. If she had died, I would have been lost, alone. She always remained my best friend, my closest ally during our trials when we had to leave England. Even blind, she was the steady guide who kept me on the pathway of sanity. And I adored her.

Late afternoon rain threatened as I helped Justice walk toward the carriage that would transport her to Montreuil. Fortunately, it was covered, so she would stay dry during the journey. Earlier storms had left deep puddles scattered here and about, forcing us to step over or around them in a meandering path.

When I boosted her into the carriage, I tucked the skirt of her dress inside to keep it from getting caught in the door. Loose threads dangled at the hem, and a gaping hole in her knitted shawl revealed a sleeve that had been mended with darker thread, obvious to anyone but a blind seamstress, though Madame Dupont probably noticed and never said anything. The shrewish woman couldn't be bothered with even the smallest act of kindness.

How could I once again send Justice to such a heartless caretaker? She demanded complete obedience to her insufferable

and constantly changing rules while steadily increasing the charge for Justice's care. Still, I sent the money each month without fail, though it left me with barely enough to survive.

When I leaned in and kissed Justice's pale cheek, she broke into sobs that shook her thin frame. "Justin, I don't think I can stand another moment in that horrid woman's house. When will we be able to have a place to ourselves?"

I stroked her long, dark curls. "I don't know. Without Marc's help, I couldn't afford anything outside the beggars' slums, and I would never take you there."

"Or the institution."

"No. The rumors I hear are ... well ... rife with nightmares. You need not worry about going there."

She gestured with her hands as if making something. "My basket weaving is much improved, and I am learning how to cane chairs. I also learned how to sew well enough to repair clothing. I can earn money now."

Her determined brown eyes sent sparkling tears down her sunken cheeks, stabbing my heart without mercy. "I'll find a place we can both live. Give me some time."

"How much time? Every day with Madame Dupont gets worse. Yesterday she spilled scalding water on my hand." She showed me a red welt on her thumb. "I think she did it on purpose, though she claimed it was an accident."

Anger burned within. I had to get Justice away from this evil woman without delay. "Give me two days. Then I'll come for you. I promise."

"Thank you, Justin. I can survive that long." Her smile chased away the stabbing daggers. "I almost forgot to tell you. I have been having good dreams lately. In most of them, I am with Father. I am a little girl, and I can see. It's so wonderful to talk to him again and enjoy our walks together."

I slid out my pocket watch and looked at the face in the light of the waning sun. We had kept the carriage driver waiting far too long. "That's wonderful. At least you have good memories to help you wake up happy."

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Her smile wilted. “I miss him so much. I still don’t believe the horrid story about him. It can’t be true.”

I put the watch away and brushed a tear from her cheek. “Just keep dreaming about him. Remember him for the good man he was.”

She nodded. “I love you, Justin.”

“I love you, too.”

I closed the door and extended the fare money to the driver, but he shook his head and brushed his own tears from his aged face. “No charge. Going to Montreuil anyway.”

“Thank you, Monsieur. Thank you.”

When Justice’s carriage rolled down the street, the clouds gave way. Rain fell in sheets. A splash turned my attention to an alley entry. A little girl, perhaps seven years old, had fallen into a puddle. Propped by hands and knees, expression forlorn, she stared at me, her coat splattered with mud. Raindrops pelted her uncovered head, plastering dark curls against her pale cheeks.

She seemed familiar, but in the blowing rain, I couldn’t be sure. One truth was certain. No one was coming to her aid.

The moment I took a step toward her, a wheel on a swiftly moving carriage hit a puddle and sent a spray of muddy water my way. I spun and dodged in time to avoid getting hit. When I turned again toward the alley, the girl was gone.

I ran to the spot and looked around. She was nowhere in sight. How could she have run away so quickly? In any case, there was no sense conducting a search. I would soon become soaked.

As I hurried toward my building, the girl’s face stayed on my mind like a haunting specter. Somehow I knew her from a time long ago, perhaps my childhood, but that would have been before she was born.

Shaking off my ponderings, I rushed into my building and bounded up the stairs to my flat. The room was empty. Marc had not yet returned from the law office.

Today, his absence was fortunate. For the past week he had been goading me into attending a party this very night, and during

the morning he had chattered like a little boy, announcing that the masquerade ball in the old schoolhouse was upon us.

After removing my cloak, I sat heavily in my chair, lifted the fountain pen donated by my publisher for translation work, and opened the book I had been working on. Considering the promise I had made to Justice, I couldn't afford to halt my work. In fact, I had to work harder, faster, even on a holiday like today.

Le Jour des Morts they call it, All Souls' Day, a morbid holiday in my view. With the heavy rain giving us an encore from yesterday's performance, the street was again turning to mud, the slimy sort that brings horses to an untimely end. If it continued, flooding was sure to follow.

I stared out our window at a two-horse fiacre splashing through turbid water and imagined my own tumble in the mire and a painful journey to the physician, something I could ill afford, especially now. Yet, even that would be tolerable compared to dressing up in whatever ghastly costume Marc had in mind for me. With his imagination, I doubted that I would survive the shame.

After I had worked on the book for a few minutes, Marc entered with a quick stride and brushed water from his cloak, his ever-present smile widening his full cheeks. Lacking facial hair, he often looked like an exuberant child. "The rain is heavy, but my spirits are high. We're going to a ball tonight."

I fidgeted on my tattered seat pad, my knees under my desk. "*You're* going to a ball. I have work to do."

Marc shook his head hard and slung water from his short, dark hair. In his wet state, he reminded me of a bear who had waded in from a swim. Stocky, muscular, and grinning like he had just caught a fish, he was ready to celebrate. "You can't back out, Justin. My mother purchased your disguise, and refunds are not allowed. Besides, the music will be grand. The evening is guaranteed to be festive and fun."

Awkward and embarrassing were closer to the truth, but I held my tongue. I wrote something forgettable about the Renaissance era translated from the tedious history book. I needed to appear

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busy—disconnected from Marc’s make-believe world of romance, a world in which people lived happily ever after. I knew better.

“Marc, I need to finish this. You know how it works. No money until I deliver the final product.”

He tiptoed close as if sneaking up on prey. “Will you go if I offer you an advance?”

I stared at him. “An advance? You mean in full?”

He shed his cloak and draped it over his arm. “Payment in full for the book. You can reimburse me when you deliver it.”

“But that will take weeks.”

“I know.” Marc looked at his nails in a nonchalant manner. “What do you say? Are you going?”

“Give me a moment to think.” I set the pen down and closed my eyes. Maybe Marc’s offer was my opportunity to get a place for Justice and me. With that much money, I could rent a decent flat for at least three months. Of course, I would have no income until I finished the book, but if her confidence in her weaving abilities was justified, we might be able to eke out a living.

Besides that, the frequent rain had kept Marc and me inside for too many hours and sometimes at each other’s throats. The morning’s rehearsal had been canceled due to our director’s sudden illness, the wretched fever that had stricken so many who had reached her advanced age. At least this malady wasn’t as deadly as the cholera that broke out soon after Justice and I, a pair of frightened twins, arrived in France at the age of seven. When the disease struck our adoptive parents, we had to lean on each other to survive, thereby sealing our unbreakable bond.

The combination of my passion to help Justice and my need to break away from this tedious text overwhelmed my distaste for social gatherings. Yet, before I agreed to go, I could use my pretended hesitance as leverage to gain more information.

I opened my eyes, picked up the pen, and began writing again. “Why a masquerade party on a night that we’re supposed to pray for the souls of the dead?”

“My mother’s idea.” Marc laid his cloak over the back of his desk chair. “People dress up in your homeland for All Hallows’ Eve, do they not?”

“They do, but your mother has no English or Celtic roots. Or does she?”

“Indeed she does, on her paternal grandmother’s side, but costumes are not uncommon here on any holiday, including prayerful ones.” Marc sat on his chair and pulled off his wet shoes. “You need not worry, though. We’ll have the traditional chrysanthemums, candles, and prayers for the dead. You can add something yourself, if you want, maybe a Gaelic prayer. That would impress everyone.”

“I’ll think about it, but why the old schoolhouse?”

“Our dear Monsieur Haussmann plans to destroy it during the next renovation phase. Mother wishes to preserve it as a museum and a venue for social gatherings, so she decorated it and invited all her aristocratic friends, including Monsieur Haussmann himself. Maybe he will join us and see the building’s potential.”

“That’s all fine for your mother and you, but give me one good reason why *I* should go.”

“Besides the money?”

“Yes, otherwise you will think me a mercenary.”

Marc lit a lantern and turned up the wick. “Francine will be there.” His voice was low and sultry, as if he were playing a scripted role.

My pen paused over a misshapen letter *R*. His mention of Francine raised a shiver that I am not sure I hid from him. She never failed to make my heart race. Her beauty, her wit, her generosity, combined to create an angel on earth, though a sharp-tongued one. And I, probably along with a dozen other men, was in love with her. “What difference does that make? I am far from deserving a spot on her list of potential suitors.”

“So little you know.” Marc plucked away my pen. “I keep singing the praises of my brilliant roommate.”

“Brilliant enough to stay home on a night like this.” I nodded at the droplets pecking at the window panes. “You don’t need my gloomy face spoiling the fun.”

“You’re an actor. You can put on any face you choose.” Marc patted me on the back. “Close that stuffy old book and get ready. I won’t take no for an answer.”

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I rose, pushed my hands into my empty pockets, and pulled the insides out, palming the carriage fare to keep it out of view. “Your mother would never approve of me courting Francine.”

He waved a hand. “Now, don’t go speaking ill of my mother again. Ever since Papa died she’s trusted my judgment in these matters. Potential trumps poverty, and she knows I wouldn’t guide my own sister toward a scoundrel. And you are no scoundrel.”

Marc was right. I was hopelessly virtuous, but mostly because women scared me to death, especially Francine. Every time I looked at her, those bright blue eyes made my legs shake. “Is Francine going in costume?”

“Of course. She’s been looking forward to this for weeks.”

“Let me guess. Joan of Arc.”

Marc nodded. “In full military battledress, a copy she made of the museum piece. We are descendants from the family line. She is quite enamored with her heroine.”

“So Francine is a seamstress extraordinaire and a war general. A study in contrasts.”

“It will take a strong man to tame her.” Marc thrust at me with a pretend sword. “Just stay at the safe end of her blade, if you know what I mean.”

“All too well.” I let my gaze drift back to the window, though a curtain of darkness had fallen. Marc knew of a past spat between Francine and me, a minor dispute about politics that ended in laughter. He seemed not to know, however, about a more recent, harsher skirmish that left me fearful of reentering her presence.

That topic, dear Mother, I will address at the proper time when I hope to dispel any thought that Francine is a hot-headed shrew. It was my own foolish tongue that invited the lashing I received.

“I’ll go on one condition. If Francine spurns me, you’ll help me invent an excuse to leave on socially acceptable terms.”

“Of course, of course. I’ll simply say that you took a stroll in the library on the second floor. I’ll explain how bookish you are.”

“A fair plan, but I hope you’ll invent a better word. Bookish is not what I would call a masculine trait.”

“Adventurous, then.” Marc withdrew a tailcoat from a trunk next to his bed. “Have you seen the library? It is fabulous, filled with ancient books and maps, perfect for your escape should you need one.” He held the coat up to my chest. “You’ll be a navy captain. I have a hat to go with it and a mask.”

I touched one of the coat’s brass buttons. “So if Francine turns against me, I can embark on a voyage to the island of books.”

“Exactly.” Marc laid the coat and a pair of white breeches in my arms. “Get dressed. We have to catch our ride at the carriage house in half an hour.”

The getting dressed part proved to be easy. The coat and breeches fit perfectly. In fact, if our mirror reflected truth, I looked rather dashing ... relatively speaking, of course. I knew better than to swallow the forbidden fruit of self-admiration.

Marc, now wearing a priest’s cassock, set a simple black mask around my eyes and began tying it behind my head. “I know this mask won’t hide your identity. The idea is to be recognizable while playing along with the masquerade.”

“You want Francine to know who I am.”

“Correct, and my mother wants us all to be easy to identify while still playing the game.” He tightened the knot, set a cocked Napoleon hat on my head, and stood in front of me, scanning me as if I were a painting. “Perfect. Cuffed, creased, and pressed. Not to mention handsome. You’re sure to catch her eye.”

“Not her tongue, I hope.”

“That will be up to you.” He tied on a mask of his own. “Let’s go.”

After donning our boots and hooded cloaks, we sloshed through rainwater trenches and muddy streets while intermittent gas lamps illuminated a winding path that led us past squalid habitations. The rain kept the prostitutes inside, and the street children had run for cover, allowing for unaccosted travel, though the usual stench worsened. Urine, feces, and an occasional rat carcass saw to that.

Perhaps someday Monsieur Haussmann’s renovations would reach our section of the arrondissement, but until then, we had

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to endure the sad estate of crippling poverty as well as winding narrow roads, missing cobblestones, and dilapidated buildings.

Throughout the journey, I kept watching for the pitiful little girl who had taken a spill at the alley, though surely she wouldn't be wandering alone at this hour. She was safe somewhere, warm and dry. Yet, her haunting ways continued. At the moment I could have helped her, I was more worried about soiling my cloak than rushing to her aid. Guilt rode my shoulders without mercy.

We arrived at the carriage house and caught a covered fiacre that took us to the outskirts of the city. Along the way Marc chattered about his mother's obsession with his decision to live in humble circumstances and pursue acting instead of banking. Her latest diatribe included a threat to remove him from her will, but he shook it off with a laugh. She had many years left to live, plenty of time for him to prove that he had made the right decision.

A rattle interrupted Marc's monologue. Horse hooves and carriage wheels clattered across a wooden bridge that spanned a brook, now swollen by the frequent rains. If the current storm failed to break soon, the brook might transform into a raging river.

As the fiacre drew within a stone's throw of the Seine, the schoolhouse came into view. Long abandoned, the school could easily pass for a museum—stone construction without, arched entries leading to a covered breezeway on the ground floor, tall windows lining the walls on the second, and tiny peek-through windows on the third.

Candlelight shone through one of the first-floor windows, providing a view of minglers inside who were about the business of evaluating each other's upper-crust costumes while sipping blood-red wine from Bordeaux glasses. I had pretended to be rich in a recent theater production, so being in costume felt natural. I could play this role.

After leaving the fiacre, we entered the main door, strolled into a parlor-like anteroom, and took off our wet raingear. Potted chrysanthemums of yellow, white, and purple lined the floor along a path toward an assembly room to the right, a friendly gesture to

most people, though to me it felt like the path of a death march. My social ineptitude saw to that.

From somewhere inside, a violin played Mozart in the midst of ambiguous conversation. Warm air flowed, carrying the aroma of perfume, tea, and wine. “I know everyone here,” Marc said as he passed our cloaks to an attendant. “Stay close to me for introductions. Then you’ll be on your own.”

The moment we entered the assembly room, dozens of eyes turned toward us. The display of costumes was dizzying—kings and queens, knights, clowns, animals, and even a wrapped gift box.

Yet, one little girl wore only a simple white dress with a black sash tied in a bow at the back. Her dark curls and piercing eyes were unmistakable. She was the very girl who had fallen at the alley. Now that I had a moment, I studied her features more closely, allowing me to solve the haunting familiarity. She looked like my sister when she was that age. The resemblance was striking.

My conscience relieved, I breathed a sigh and smiled at her, but she just stared without smiling in return. Maybe she was angry at me or simply curious. No matter. She was safe and warm. I could be at peace.

I broke eye contact and looked around. The room itself spanned sixty feet in length and width. Portraits and landscape paintings hung on the walls, separated by lanterns mounted on brackets that provided plenty of light. A violinist dressed in medieval garb stood on the left side, blissfully stroking his bow across the strings. Near the back, a spiral staircase wound through a gap in the ceiling, perhaps the path to the library Marc had mentioned earlier.

Francine separated from a clutch of ladies and approached in full Joan-of-Arc array—boot-leather trousers and an armor-plated vest. A thin mask surrounded her eyes, and makeup hid her telltale freckles, a shade that made her look sun baked, a natural tone for a hard-working peasant girl who had transitioned to a soldier.

The makeup also covered a distinctive birthmark on her neck, an oval spot that she usually didn’t mind showing. She also wore a dark wig that resembled the style of an English pageboy,

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concealing her long, ginger hair. Yet, no one could mistake her for anyone but Francine Noël.

She smiled at Marc. “Bishop Cauchon, so good of you to come in peace, especially considering your animosity toward me at other venues.”

Marc bowed. “Joan, it is a time for song and dance. Far be it from me to spoil this occasion by burning you at the stake.”

“That would be unpleasant.” Francine shifted her gaze to me and tilted her head in a comely fashion. “And who is this young captain of the seas?”

“Joan, Maid of Orléans,” Marc said with a formal air, “allow me to introduce to you Captain William Ashford ... Captain, Joan.”

I kissed her hand. “I’m pleased to meet you.”

“Ah. An Englishman. And polite as well.” Francine touched an insignia on my coat. “How did such a young man become a captain?”

I smiled, though I felt the urge to retreat. “How did such a young woman become a general?”

Her own smile brightened. “Well struck, Captain. Well struck.” She turned to Marc. “Bishop, if it is all the same to you, I would like to take this officer around to meet the other guests. We want to make sure he feels at home among our countrymen.”

Marc gave her another bow. “He’s all yours.”

“Come along, then.” She curled her arm around mine and led me deeper into the room. Her touch sent tingles up my arm, but I stayed calm. She seemed to be at ease with me. I needed to be the same. Maybe she and I could be a couple after all, at least for the evening.

Although the violin continued playing, no one danced. Perhaps they would change their minds later when the wine had taken effect and numbed the participants into thinking dancing was actually fun.

“Tell me, Captain,” Francine said, “how long have you been in France?”

“I immigrated here with my adoptive parents fifteen years ago.”

She halted and turned to me. “Justin ...” Her tone was gentle but firm. “My mother requested that we stay in character the first hour. It’s a parlor game, of sorts, and she wishes to play it to the hilt. I assume Marc failed to inform you.”

Warmth flooded my face and spread to my ears. “He alluded to it, but I didn’t catch on.”

“I see.” She cast a glance Marc’s way. He was chatting with two young ladies dressed as cats, apparently twin sisters vying for his attention.

I had a brief desire to learn how the cats would stay in character, but I brushed it aside. “If we play this game, aren’t introductions rather counterproductive?”

“You are the only stranger here. After I introduce you to someone, I will whisper that person’s real name to you. The last thing I want to do is get a tongue lashing from my mother.”

I nodded. “I want to avoid sharp tongues as well.”

“Then stay on my good side tonight.” Again guiding me by the arm, she took me to a female court jester dressed in full motley, including a multi-colored hat with dangling bells. “Captain William Ashford, this is the court’s designated fool, Astaude du Puy.” She then turned to me and lowered her voice. “Jacqueline Noël, my mother.”

I gave Madame Noël a head bow. “Pleased to meet you.”

She laughed. “An English captain has come to dock his ship in a foreign harbor.”

“Well, not exactly. I have been—”

“How many harbors have you visited, Captain?” She scanned me from head to toe. “A man with your decorations has certainly been around the world.”

“Decorations?”

She set her fingertips on my cheek. “Dark, curly hair, stunning brown eyes, a firm jaw. Surely you have dropped your anchor in many a port.”

Francine hissed, “Mother, you’re going a little too far.”

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“Nonsense.” Drawing back, Madame Noël shook her head, making the bells jingle. “It is impossible for a fool to go too far.” She looked me over and winked. “Then again, maybe I would like to try.”

“Mother!” Francine balled a fist. “How much wine have you had?”

“Not a drop, Joan. And why are you calling me Mother?” She waved a hand. “Be off with you now. Show the captain a good time. That is, if a woman wearing trousers and armor is able to do so.”

Francine’s cheeks turned crimson. Maybe this was my chance to take a permanent place on her good side. I offered Madame Noël another bow. “A woman wearing trousers is much to be preferred over a fool who flaunts her loose skirts.”

Madame Noël slapped my face. “Get out.”

The bluntness of her words overwhelmed the sting of her slap. “Get out?”

“You heard me.” Her lips tight, she pointed toward the door. “Leave. Now.”

“Very well.” I tugged at my coat to straighten it. “It seems the game playing is quite one-sided.”

Francine grabbed my arm and ushered me toward the door. “Justin Trotter, you said you wanted to avoid sharp tongues, so I will keep mine sheathed.” When we arrived, she took a deep breath and looked me in the eye. “Did you really think insulting my mother was the best way to endear yourself?”

Blood rushed to my cheeks, inflaming them, but I managed to keep my voice low. “She was playing the fool, so I went along. You said she wanted to play the game to the hilt.”

“I know. I know.” She blew out a sigh. “Like you said, it’s one-sided.”

I spread my hands. “So what do I do now? She wants me to leave. It’s her party.”

Francine looked out the window. Windswept rain continued falling in sheets. Lightning flashed, followed by a thunderclap

that shook the building and rattled glass. “It would be inhumane to send you out in this weather.”

“May I offer assistance?” Marc asked as he approached, hands pressed together in a priestly fashion. “No need to tell me what happened. The story is already a gossip windstorm, and it’s growing into a capital crime.”

I nodded. “Yes. Help. What can I do to salvage this disaster?”

Marc patted me on the back. “Go upstairs to the library while I smooth things over with my mother. Take a candelabrum. Read a book. One of us will come to see about you when the time is right.”

“Yes, yes,” Francine said. “That will do fine.”

Although Marc and I had envisioned such an escape, now it felt like a coward’s retreat. Still, it couldn’t be helped. “Very well. I will go.”

After Francine fetched a candelabrum with five tapers—four surrounding a higher one at the center—she escorted me to the spiral staircase while Marc distracted their mother. When I set a foot on the first step, I turned back and gave Francine a thankful nod. “I hope to see you soon.”

“You will.” She shooed me away. “Now, go.”

With one hand on the stairway’s central pole and the other clutching the candelabrum, I climbed the stone steps. As I ascended into darkness, the flickering flames created an undulating aura around me that prompted an even darker memory.

Mother, I refer to our last hour together, the fateful night we walked single file up our own spiral staircase, the night we heard the crash and Father’s shout. You limped, as usual, and I slowed my pace so you could keep up, though I wanted to rush ahead and learn the reason for the noise. My sense of dread then was the same as I felt now, though not because of the darkness above but because of the darkness below. I had caused pain, and I left others to suffer in its shadow.