

THE LEGACY: A NEW WORLD LEGAL THRILLER

Marjorie Florestal
m_florestal@yahoo.com

DRAFT: NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

Part One

Chapter One

Notice

December 12, 1995

The scream came from her daughter's room.

In the depths of a nightmare, Renée François jerked awake. Her mind was in a tangle, but her body went on high alert. Her ears pricked, hunting for sound. A gust of wind rattled the windows. The house creaked and moaned in a familiar rhythm.

Her gaze ricocheted around the bedroom. Shadows danced across the ceiling in the pale dawn light. Nothing was out of place.

She had almost convinced herself the scream was a remnant from her nightmare when the yelling started.

“No! No! Stop!”

Renée leaped out of bed and raced from the room. The hallway was dark. No more than four yards separated her from her child. It felt like a football field.

Her bare feet hit the cold tile in an urgent rhythm. She ran to the end of the hall and flung her daughter's door open. Her gaze scoured the bedroom, hunting for the

monster who made little girls scream.

A night-light illuminated a figure writhing on the bed. Arms and legs churned. Head rolled as though possessed.

A piercing wail shattered the room. “Noooooo!”

Renée ran to her daughter’s side. “Wake up,” she said, fighting to keep the panic out of her voice. “Marie-Thérèse, wake up.”

“No! No! Stop!” Marie-Thérèse yelled.

Renée perched on the edge of the bed and gently smoothed the little girl’s brow. “It’s all right, choupite. Wake up.”

Two soft brown eyes opened to stare up at her. “Mommy? What are you doing here?”

With a sigh of relief, Renée gathered her daughter in her arms, rocking the nine-year-old as though she were a baby.

“You were having a bad dream,” Renée said. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Marie-Thérèse burrowed against her neck. “No.”

This was a surprise. Marie-Thérèse shared everything. “Are you sure?” Renée stroked her daughter’s hair. The beads on the ends of her cornrowed braids tinkled. “It might help if you did.”

Marie-Thérèse raised tear-soaked eyes to stare at her mother. “You have bad dreams too, Mommy, and you never talk about them.”

It was the truth. Renée had battled nightmares for a decade. Talking about them was the last thing she wanted. Did that explain why her daughter was suffering? Had she caused her own child to have nightmares?

Swallowing a rising tide of guilt, she said, “It’s different for mommies, choupite. We are here to listen.”

Marie-Thérèse considered that for a moment. Finally, she said, “There was a lady. She looks like Pocahontas.”

Pocahontas was her daughter’s favorite movie. They had seen it in the theater three times, and Marie-Thérèse had begged for the VHS for Christmas.

“Tell me about the lady,” Renée said.

“She was swimming in the ocean *naked*,” Marie-Thérèse whispered.

Renée smiled despite herself. Like most kids her age, Marie-Thérèse considered nudity *icky*. “She was?”

The little girl nodded. “Mm-hmm. Then a bad man went after her. I tried to tell

her, but she couldn't hear me."

Renée could hear the anxiety in her daughter's voice. She slid a soothing hand up and down the little girl's back. "It's all right, choupite."

"No, it isn't, Mommy. The bad man hurt the lady. He . . ." Marie-Thérèse's voice trailed off.

"He what?" Renée prompted.

"He touched her private parts."

Renée's heart thumped. *Oh god, had someone hurt her little girl?* She was always so careful, so protective. Surely nothing bad could have happened to Marie-Thérèse? Surely not.

She tilted her daughter's chin to gaze into her eyes. "Choupite, has anyone touched your private parts?"

Marie-Thérèse scrunched her nose and shook her head.

Was she telling the truth? Renée didn't know how much to press. "Do you remember what to do if a bad man bothers you?"

"I should kick him where it hurts and run away," her daughter replied. "Do you think that would help the lady in my dream?"

"She's not real, choupite," Renée said gently. "It's just your imagination."

Marie-Thérèse squirmed out of her arms. "I don't want to talk about it anymore, Mommy."

"Honey, I need you to—"

The doorbell rang. Renée glanced at the clock on the nightstand with a frown. 7:00 a.m. Barely sunrise in a Boston winter.

"I'll get it!" Marie-Thérèse scrambled off the bed.

Renée caught her daughter's arm and forced a reassuring smile. "I'll see who it is. You get dressed. Then you can help me with breakfast. Ok?"

She left the room before Marie-Thérèse could protest. By the time she made it to the entryway and flipped on the light, her uninvited guest had abandoned the bell and was knocking insistently.

Renée pressed against the door and stared out the peephole. A man stared back at her.

"Can I help you?" she demanded.

"Delivery, ma'am."

He looked harmless enough. Medium height, medium build. He wore a puffy

coat with the logo of a well-known courier service. Still, Renée hesitated. “It’s early for delivery, isn’t it?”

“We start at seven, ma’am.”

“Can you leave it at the door?”

“I need a signature,” he said with thinly veiled impatience.

She made sure the chain guard was in place before she cracked the door open. A blast of wind and snow greeted her, making her shiver despite the long-sleeved T-shirt and jogging pants she wore as pajamas.

The courier thrust a business size envelope at her. She grabbed it, noting the sender: The Flatbush Psychiatric Hospital. Sweat beaded her forehead. She bit her lip, holding back the whimper that threatened to escape.

“Please sign the top form,” the courier said as he held out a pen. This time, he made no effort to hide his impatience.

She signed the form and returned it to him. Then she shut the door and slumped against it. Her body slid to the ground, as though her legs could no longer support her weight.

The envelope fluttered in her hand like a trapped bird.

It was here. The day she’d been dreading for a decade was actually here. She should have been prepared, but she wasn’t. She didn’t want to open that envelope. Didn’t want to see the words spelled out in black and white. She should throw the damn thing out. Or burn it. Or shred it to pieces.

But it was a legal document, and she was a lawyer. She couldn’t ignore it.

With shaking hands, she tore open the envelope and scanned its contents. It was a Notice of Hearing.

Darkness crowded her peripheral vision, and her chest tightened. She put her head between her legs, struggling to breathe.

The man of her nightmares was about to be set free.

Chapter Two

Justice

The city of Boston groaned under the weight of a particularly nasty Nor'easter. Overnight, Arctic air had traveled south from the Canadian plains to crash into a warm breeze traveling north from the Gulf of Mexico. The collision unleashed a perfect storm of gusting winds, bitter cold, and endless snowfall.

On the deserted streets of Braddock Park, Renée trudged through the storm. It was not a good day to brave the outdoors on foot, but her office was only a few blocks away. She needed the distraction only her work could provide.

It had been two hours since her life came tumbling down. She had gone about her morning routine just like any other day: Shower. Dress. Breakfast. By the time the babysitter arrived, Renée had almost convinced herself it *was* just like any other day. But she knew better.

She shoved a hand in her coat pocket. Her fingers grazed the envelope like a moth singeing its wings on an irrationally tempting flame.

He was being released.

No, she quickly corrected herself. He was being *considered* for release. There would be a hearing next week. She let out a small, bitter sound. At least he got a hearing. She had been imprisoned in her own private hell for a decade. No possibility of parole.

Ten years. It was a long time. She'd gotten married in that time. Divorced too.

Finished law school. Started a legal practice. Had a baby.

Ten years *was* a long time. But not long enough.

Even now, she could feel him pressing her into that threadbare mattress with its sharp metal coils. The coils dug into her back so deep they'd left scars that had never disappeared.

She had cried that night. Cried at the feel of his hands ripping at her panties. Cried at the smell of urine stinging her nostrils. Cried until her insides shattered.

She hadn't allowed herself to cry for a long time after that.

She didn't cry when the cop down at the station all but yawned while she made a report. She didn't cry as she packed her bags and fled Brooklyn. She didn't even cry during those long hours of pain that followed nine months later.

It wasn't until she'd held her beautiful, squalling newborn that she allowed the tears to fall. She had stared into Marie-Thérèse's innocent little eyes and vowed to protect her child with her own life. It was a promise she intended to keep.

Ten years ago, she had buried the past. It would damn well *stay* buried.

The storm intensified. By the time Renée arrived at the five-story row house that served as her office, she was chilled to the bone.

Kelly, her assistant, sat at the front desk sorting mail. "You're popular today," she said with an eager smile.

Renée hung her gear on the coat rack and reached for her messages. "Clients?" she asked, flipping through an impressive stack of pink sheets.

"Some," Kelly said, "but mostly people are calling about this." She pulled a magazine off her desk and handed it to Renée. "You're on the cover of *Breeze!*"

Renée took the magazine, but her focus was on her messages. Her ex-husband had called. What did he want? She was afraid to guess.

"Aren't you gonna look?" Kelly's smile dimmed.

Renée glanced down and saw her own face staring back at her. It wasn't a bad picture. The lighting accentuated her flawless brown skin and softened the shadows in her eyes. With her long black hair tamed and her arms crossed, she looked the part of a smart and capable thirty-something professional.

Beneath the iconic *Breeze* logo, the headline read, *Lawyers Who Change The World*. Change the world? Hardly.

"This should help increase billings," she said.

"I wouldn't worry about no billings if I was on the cover of a magazine," Kelly

said. “And my Ma would grab every last copy, she’d be so proud.”

Pain stabbed at Renée. Would her mother have been proud of her work with Haitian refugees? She doubted it. Both of her parents had been born in Haiti, but they severed all ties when they immigrated to the United States.

You’re an American, her mother had always insisted.

“I’ll be in my office.” Renée headed down the hall feeling the weight of Kelly’s disappointed stare at her back.

She stepped into her office and closed the door before allowing herself to sink into her chair. Normally, she’d welcome the exposure a spread in *Breeze* would bring. Public attention could only help her human rights work in Haiti, which was why she had agreed to the interview. But today, it was hard to focus on her professional life. She practically had to force herself to open the magazine.

Three years ago, the Haitian military overthrew Jean Bertrand Aristide, Haiti’s first democratically elected president. After serving only seven months in office, Aristide was thrown into exile. He fled to Venezuela then on to the United States.

The island plunged into chaos. Mobs cornered Aristide’s supporters and strapped gasoline-drenched tires to their necks. With a single match, they watched their victims dance to death.

Thousands of terrified Haitians fled the country. They took to the ocean in vessels so rickety, they could not properly be called boats. The refugees didn’t get very far. The US coast guard intercepted most of them at sea and detained them on the US naval base, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Renée had watched the crisis unfold with paralyzing helplessness. She’d wanted to do something, but she had a good job at a prestigious Boston law firm. She also had a daughter to raise.

It took her daughter to spur her to action.

Marie-Thérèse had stumbled on a news broadcast she should never have seen. A little boy her age stood on a hollowed-out street in Port-au-Prince, Haiti’s capital city. He held a hand to his head, as though struck by an *aha* moment—the kind that made the inexplicable suddenly make sense. But nothing made sense to this little boy. He was only trying to staunch the flow of blood spurting out of his forehead.

He was scared and alone, screaming for his mother. No one came.

“Do something, Mommy,” Marie-Thérèse pleaded.

Renée quit her prestigious job and headed down to Guantanamo’s detention

camps. What she saw there broke her heart. Women, children, men—all corralled behind steel and barbed wire. They lived in tents on barren strips of land where flies feasted on their misery. But that wasn't the worst of it. Camp Bulkeley was the worst.

She sued the Federal Government all the way to the Supreme Court and won.

The *Breeze* article made her sound like a cross between Harriet Tubman and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. It was nice to be hailed a hero, but she knew the truth. She had lost far more battles than she'd won. The last few years had been a series of failures that had left her bruised and broken.

So much for changing the world.

The blinking light on the console snapped her out of her dark thoughts. She reached for the phone with a sigh of relief.

"Your ex is calling," Kelly said. "Claims he tried your private line, but you wouldn't pick up."

She hadn't heard the phone ring. Her throat suddenly felt like sandpaper. "What does he want?"

Kelly snorted. "You know he doesn't explain himself to The Help."

Paul was the pampered child of a prominent Haitian family—both of his parents were diplomats. He had the irritating habit of treating everyone like The Help.

"I'm sorry," Renée said.

"The only thing you did wrong was to marry that guy. Want me to tell him to piss off?" Kelly's tone made clear she would relish the task.

If only, Renée thought. "Put him on, please."

When Paul came on the line, he wasted no time with idle chitchat. "I need to cancel dinner tonight."

Her ex-husband still had the power to inflict so much pain. "You canceled last week. Marie-Thérèse is really looking forward to this. Please don't disappoint her." She didn't allow herself to say *again*.

"I've got a client in crisis." His tone was clipped if not exactly cold.

"You're a corporate lawyer. What kind of crisis can't wait a single night? Maybe it's your paralegal who needs your help?" The words sounded more bitter than she'd intended. She had stopped brooding over Paul's lovers when she walked out on the marriage.

"Jealous?" He sounded almost hopeful.

“I don’t think so.”

“You always did give up too easily.”

She closed her eyes and silently counted to ten. “Could you come for just an hour? Marie-Thérèse is having a tough time. She needs your support.”

Renée hated the pleading note in her voice, but her daughter would be devastated. Again.

“Perhaps we could help each other.”

He spoke amiably enough, but she wasn’t fooled. She knew what was coming.

“I saw the *Breeze* article,” he continued. “Great stuff. It should bring in a lot of business. How about sending some of that my way?”

“Sure, Paul. I’ll send all the *pro bono* asylum cases you can handle.” She didn’t bother to hide her sarcasm.

“Not those cases,” he said, dismissively. “I’m talking about the lucrative clients you’ve gotten from your work with President Aristide.”

After winning her Supreme Court case, she’d received a call from Aristide’s legal team. She spent months helping to broker a deal with the Clinton Administration to return Haiti’s president to power.

Last October, US troops escorted Aristide back into the National Palace after three years in exile. It was a bittersweet victory. Aristide would be allowed to serve just 16 months—the remainder of his five-year term—though he would be free to run again in the future.

Paul must have assumed her silence was a rejection of his proposal. Like any sleazy salesman he couldn’t take no for an answer.

“The partners are on me to bring in some new cases,” he said, “but the more time I spend rainmaking the less I can spend with Marie.”

“Her name is Marie-Thérèse,” she snapped.

Paul ignored her correction, as he always did. “Come to dinner with me and the client tonight. You can see how I operate.”

She already knew how he operated. “Thanks, but I’ll be eating with my disappointed child.”

She hung up and massaged the pain at her temples. What had she ever seen in him? He was a lousy husband and an even worse father, but when they’d met at Harvard Law School he had seemed the answer to her prayers. He was smart, handsome, and rich—even more, he had been loved and protected his entire life.

She'd wanted a little part of that for herself. It explained why she had been dumb enough to marry him just six weeks after they'd met.

She was paying for her mistake. Worse yet, so was her daughter.

The phone rang once more. She picked it up with a flick of her wrist. "Paul, if you think—"

"Ms. François?" a woman interrupted. "This is Nadine Reed. I'm a lawyer for the New York Health and Hospitals Corporation."

The blood drained from her face. "How did you get this number?"

If Nadine was put off by the chilly reception, she did not let on. "I'm sorry to call you at work, but I'm afraid I have some difficult news—"

"I know why you're calling," Renée said impatiently.

"You do?" The woman sounded surprised. "In that case, you understand why you must attend the hearing."

"I can't help you."

"I know this is a delicate situation, Ms. François, but it's also about justice."

"Justice?" Renée nearly spat out the word.

"Mr. Colon is a danger to society," Nadine said. "He hurt you. If released, he'll hurt others. Is that what you want?"

"What I want is for you to leave me alone."

"Ms. François—"

"Please don't call me again." She slammed the phone down on its cradle.

Chapter Three

Can You Teach Me?

Renee raced through the storm. A gust of wind whipped the falling snow into tiny missiles that attacked every inch of exposed flesh. She put her head down and kept moving. She had to get home. She needed to be with her daughter.

He hurt you. If released, he'll hurt others. It's about justice. Nadine Reed's words rang in her ears. Justice? What the hell did that woman know about justice? On a single night, Renee had lost both her parents and suffered the most devastating attack of her life. There had been no justice. Not for her.

The past is dead. She repeated the words over and over like a mantra. *The past is dead.*

She cast an eye at her surroundings, as though to verify the point. A cluster of Greek and Italianate row houses with soaring columns and grand entryways flanked both sides of the street. Surrounding them was a forest of skeletal trees that stood guard like shivering sentinels. She felt safe here. The South End had survived its own turbulent past.

The Panic of 1873 decimated more than a few used-to-be-rich families, banishing them to the suburbs. Their stately old homes were converted into boarding houses for the immigrants and Blacks who flocked to the neighborhood. The new arrivals drove the rest of Boston's blue bloods away. They fled to posh Beacon Hill or Back Bay to escape the strains of jazz floating out of tenement

windows.

Each new wave of arrivals to the South End added something unique to the culture. The mishmash of styles should have struck a discordant note, but the whole created a surprisingly harmonious unity. The neighborhood had changed and adapted through the years even as it continued to welcome misfits of every stripe. She felt more at home here than she ever had in Brooklyn.

Brooklyn. She dug into her coat pocket and pulled out the envelope. *The past is dead.* She tore the envelope into tiny pieces and allowed the wind to carry them away. *Let the dead bury their own dead.*

By the time she stepped into the entryway of her home, she had banished all thoughts of the past from her mind. Her daughter's laughter filled the house. It was a joyful and innocent sound—the best thing she'd heard all day.

She shed her coat and scarf. With each layer gone she felt lighter, less constricted. She could breathe again. “Anybody home?” she called out as she followed the sound of laughter.

“Mommy!” Marie-Thérèse came charging out of the kitchen to greet her.

Renée knelt to pull the little girl into a bear hug, showering her with kisses. “What are you up to?”

“We’re making *ak . . . ak—*”

“*Akasan,*” a softly accented voice offered.

Renée glanced up to find her nanny, Rose Fleurie, standing in the kitchen doorway. She was an imposing figure. In her late fifties, and nearly six feet tall, she had the body of a dancer—rail thin and full of grace. It was wrapped around a steel core. You did not want to get on the wrong side of this woman.

“You’re back!” Renée launched herself at Rose while still holding on to her daughter.

They stayed like that for a few seconds, which was about as long as Marie-Thérèse could manage without squirming.

“Mommy, let me go,” the little girl demanded. “I have to get everything ready for the *ak . . . ak—*”

“*Akasan,*” Rose repeated.

“Yes, that!” Marie-Thérèse tugged free of Renée’s grasp and ran to the counter to fuss over the ingredients for Haitian porridge.

Renée laughed for the first time that day. “You’re home early,” she said to Rose.

“Your vacation doesn’t end until next week.”

“The Spirits told me it was time to come home.”

When they’d met three years earlier, Renée had found such comments evidence of Rose’s mental illness. These days, her views were not so rigid.

“I’m glad you’re back,” she said.

Rose gave her an appraising look. “You too are home early.”

Renée only shrugged. She wasn’t ready to talk, not even to Rose. “How was Miami?”

The older woman’s dark eyes missed nothing, but she didn’t press. “Miami was full of sunshine, *meci Papa Bondye*. Winter is too hard on these old bones.”

Renée snorted. Nothing was too hard for Rose. She had been President Aristide’s chef and was in the National Palace on the night of the coup. A mob stormed the building, threatening to “necklace” her with an old tire and a gallon of gasoline. She fled Haiti but found herself stranded in a leaky boat on the high seas surrounded by 18 dead bodies.

The US coast guard rescued Rose only to warehouse her on Guantanamo. She had fought for her life and her freedom, and she had won. The woman was practically invincible. No Boston winter would get the best of her.

“You could beat a thousand Boston winters,” Renée said, “but I’m glad you finally took a vacation.”

Rose’s eyes lit up. “I have pictures. I will get them for you.” She ran out of the kitchen, putting to rest any claim of having *old bones*.

A flash of movement caught Renée’s eye, and she turned to watch her daughter. A kerchief hid the little girl’s long braids, and her face, a sun-kissed golden yellow, was streaked with sugar. Her brows were furrowed, but her eyes sparkled with delight. This morning’s nightmare seemed to have vanished without a trace.

She watched Marie-Thérèse measure out each of her ingredients with military precision: cinnamon, star anise, milk, sugar, vanilla extract, and cornmeal ground to a fine powder.

“Very good, *choupite*,” Renee said.

The little girl threw her a proud smile. “Tantine Rose taught me. She said before you do anything, you have to be prepared. It’s called *mise en place*.”

“*Mise en place*?” Renée couldn’t help but grin at her daughter’s oh-so-serious tone. “Is Aunty Rose teaching you French?”

Marie-Thérèse shook her head. “Not yet. She says I should learn Kreyòl first cause it’s the language of my ancestors.”

Her daughter dropped five tablespoons of sugar into a mixing bowl and sang, “*Youn-de-twa-kat-senk.*” She turned to Renée with another gleeful smile. “See? I speak Kreyòl.”

Renée clapped. “Excellent. Can you teach me?”

“Don’t be silly, Mommy.” Marie-Thérèse giggled. “I’m just a kid. I can’t teach you anything.”

Renée’s insides melted. This little girl, with her gap-toothed smile and amber eyes, had taught her everything about love.

She cleared the lump in her throat. “What happened to the mac and cheese you were going to make?” It was her daughter’s favorite dish.

Marie-Thérèse added milk to her bowl and stirred. “Tantine Rose said Haitians love *akasan*, so I thought Daddy might like this better.”

The lump in her throat was back. “He’s not coming, *choupite*. He has to work late tonight. I’m sorry.”

Marie-Thérèse glanced up with tears in her eyes. She quickly blinked them away. “That’s ok, Mommy. We can save some for him.”

“That’s a good idea, honey.” She wanted to fold the little girl in her arms, kiss the boo-boo, and make it all better—the way she had when her daughter was younger. But this was not the kind of pain a kiss and a Band-Aid could heal.

It was her daughter who broke the hurt-filled silence. “Tantine Rose said *akasan* is a part of my heritage because the Tainos invented it.” She wrinkled her nose. “What’s a Taino?”

“They were Haiti’s first people. They lived in the Caribbean before Columbus arrived.”

“What happened to them?”

“They died, *choupite.*”

“All of them? Why?”

Renée searched for an answer. How did you explain colonialism and genocide to a child?

Luckily, Rose returned in that moment. The kitchen was soon filled with laughter and the spicy-sweet aroma of porridge.

“No! No! Stop!”

Renée launched out of bed and raced down the hall before she was fully awake. She nearly crashed into Rose, who had just stepped out of her own room.

“What is happening?” Rose demanded, belting her robe and running a hand through her wild hair.

“It’s Marie-Thérèse. She’s having a nightmare.”

Rose didn’t waste time with more questions. “I will make tea,” she said as she headed for the kitchen.

Renée ran to her daughter’s room and headed straight for the bed. Marie-Thérèse hurled herself into her mother’s arms. The little girl’s heart was pounding so hard, Renée could feel the reverberation in her own body.

“Was it the bad dream again, *choupite*?” she asked.

Marie-Thérèse nodded.

“Talk to me, honey. Let me help you.”

Marie-Thérèse pressed into her as though searching for a place to hide. “I tried to tell her she’s not real. She won’t listen.” The little girl burst into tears.

Renée smoothed her daughter’s hair and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “What happened?”

“She wants me to help her, but I don’t know how.”

“Help her with what? The bad man?”

“I don’t know. I just want her to leave me alone!” Marie-Thérèse wailed.

Renée rocked the child in her arms as she tried to make sense of what was happening. She no longer believed someone was hurting Marie-Thérèse, her daughter would have told her by now. So what next?

Damn it. How could she feel so helpless when she was an expert in nightmares? She had even seen a therapist, for all the good that had done. The woman had prattled on about “confronting the dream images,” which, as far as Renée was concerned, meant giving these imaginary figures a piece of her mind.

Maybe it was time for Marie-Thérèse to do the same.

“*Choupite*, have you ever had a friend you didn’t want to play with anymore?” Renée asked.

Marie-Thérèse paused mid-sob. “Miguel Parker,” she said, rubbing the tears from her eyes. “We used to play together at recess, then he started pulling my hair and calling me names. I told the teacher, but she said he was only doing it cause he

liked me.” Her expression turned mutinous. “That’s silly. People who like you don’t hurt you like that.”

Renée pressed a kiss to her daughter’s nose. How had she gotten so lucky to be the mother of this child? “So what did you do?”

“I told Miguel to leave me alone. I told him I didn’t want to be his friend anymore.”

“The woman in your dream sounds a lot like Miguel,” Renée pointed out. “Maybe if you stand up to her, you won’t be scared anymore.”

Marie-Thérèse stared up at her wide-eyed. “Is that what you do when you have a bad dream, Mommy?”

“Well, I . . .” Renée fell silent, absorbing the impact of her daughter’s words.

Part Two

Chapter Four

The Beautiful City

The train barreled from the station like a wild horse bucking its rider. Renée stumbled against an old woman to her left who shot her a murderous glare. She inched away only to bump the young woman on her right who held a little girl in her arms.

“Sorry,” Renee said, tightening her grip on the handrail. Neither woman responded.

Welcome to New York City.

The subway car was packed so tight even the air had trouble circulating. It hung tantalizingly above her head, forcing her to rise on tiptoes to catch a whiff. Like a drowning victim gulping her last breath.

She could have taken a taxi, but it would have stalled in the morning rush hour. The train was faster and had the added benefit of being familiar. She had been taking this route since she was five years old.

The train stopped, and a small crowd jostled its way to the exits. Renee heaved a sigh of relief at the sudden expansion of air in her lungs. An empty seat opened in front of her. She was about to slide into it when she remembered her manners.

“Please take the seat,” she said to the young mother holding her child.

The woman's eyes widened. "You're sure?" she asked with a touch of suspicion. New Yorkers rarely gave up such a prize.

Renee nodded, but before the young mother could act a man elbowed his way into the seat.

The young mother's face fell. "Thanks anyway," she said to Renée, hitching the little girl on her hip.

Renée stared at the child who couldn't have been more than five-years-old. She was decked out in her Sunday best—a red velvet coat with navy blue trim and gold buttons running down the front. Her thick, curly black hair had been tamed with pomade and flattened into two braids, each tied with a starched red ribbon. She had a wide mouth, a strong nose, and eyes too big for her face. They were not the eyes of a child. Something old lurked within them.

The little girl looked familiar. Renee racked her brain, trying to place her. It took a moment for realization to dawn. This child reminded her of herself. How many times had her own mother decked her out in Sunday finery and forced her on this train ride to hell?

She turned to the man now slumped in the seat with his thighs spread wide. He looked to be in his early twenties with smooth brown skin the color of expensive leather, a stubbly beard, and a pair of headphones attached to his ears like surgical implants. He held a Walkman in his hand and bopped his head in time to the music oblivious to the world around him.

Renee waved a hand in front of him. "Excuse me. This seat is taken."

He glanced up with eyes as ancient as the little girl's. "I don't see your name written on it."

Renee took a deep breath and strove for patience. "It's for a mom and her child. I'm sure you want to do the right thing."

His eyes flicked over the young mother and her little girl before turning back to Renee. "You snooze, you lose," he said with a shrug.

She let her gaze linger on his jawline. Ten years of self-defense training had taught her a thing or two about the human body. A quick jab to his chin, and his brain would be rolling around in his head. Couldn't happen to a nicer guy.

"I'm going to need you to move," she said.

"Who gonna make me?"

She stepped forward, but someone grabbed her arm. It was the old woman

standing beside her. The woman's grip was surprisingly strong and her message unmistakable: stand down.

When she spoke, the old woman's voice rang with authority. "Young man this lady asked you to do the right thing for a mother and her child, and this is how you act? If you're still on this train, it means we're going to the same place. We're in the same mess. Give charity to your fellow sufferers. Let's not tear each other down like crabs in a barrel."

The man rose. "Bitch," he muttered under his breath as he brushed past Renee and sidled away.

Mother and child took their seat. Each of them gave Renee the biggest grin.

The train lurched through the underworld. Finally, the conductor announced over the static-filled public address system: "Flatbush Avenue. Last stop."

Like a finely-tuned swarm, the crowd made its exit in a single wave. Renée hung back, watching people march up a broken escalator. Her steps dragged. She was last to emerge from the subway tunnel.

Clouds hung low and dense in the sky. The morning gloom warned of a coming snowstorm. She pulled her scarf close to ward off the chill and trudged south.

It was hard to believe that just a few blocks away, Flatbush Avenue teemed with life. The north end was full of the quirky shops and dodgy neighborhoods that kept Brooklyn gritty even as Manhattan transformed itself into a Disney theme park.

The south end was another world.

She stopped in front of a chain-link fence to take in a view she had hoped never to see again. A Neo-Gothic redbrick building sprawled across thirty acres of barren land. Over the years, additional wings had been added to the central structure in a v-shape, giving the building the look of a bat in flight.

The Flatbush Psychiatric Hospital was built in 1854 to house the city's "lunatics." Almost immediately, the hospital became known as Belleville—the Beautiful City. The name allegedly came from one of its earliest inhabitants, a Frenchman who was committed to the asylum for murdering his wife.

"*Quelle belle ville*," he mocked as hospital attendants tightened his chains and pumped him full of morphine.

"First day on the job?"

Renee blinked and found herself staring at a young woman in blue scrubs shivering behind the chain link fence. She was smoking a cigarette, blowing smoke

and fog in the same breath.

“I been here two years, and it’s as bad as they say,” the woman continued. “Don’t nobody tell you different. These people are animals. I’m just making time ’til—”

“I don’t work here,” Renée interrupted.

The woman dropped her cigarette, crushing it beneath her heel. “Sorry,” she mumbled. “You don’t look nothing like the kinda people that got folks up in here.”

She walked off, leaving Renée alone for the long march to the front entrance. Each step felt heavier than the last, until she practically had to drag herself to the security gate. The guard glanced at her ID, and with a wave of a hand ushered her inside.

It was worse than her nightmares.

The lobby sported peeling paint, dirty floors, and old furniture full of suspicious-looking stains. The French residents of Belleville had long since departed, leaving behind a clientele of Latin American and Caribbean immigrants in various stages of psychological distress. One woman held a complicated discussion with her imaginary lover; another pounded her fists on her head like a drum. Several patients sat on a dirty couch staring into the void. The smell of urine was everywhere.

She took a shallow breath hoping to slow the passage of rancid air into her lungs.

“Can I help you?” The receptionist, a woman wearing a Brooklyn College sweatshirt, pulled absently at one of her long micro braids.

“The Colon hearing?” Her own voice surprised her. It sounded like the young, frightened girl she had once been.

“Director’s Office. Room 23.” The receptionist pointed vaguely to her left. Her tone made clear she had no intention of showing the way.

Unfortunately, Renée didn’t need directions. She walked down a narrow corridor toward the administrative wing of the building. An old woman shuffled past, her eyes vague, her gait slow and labored—victim of the Thorazine shuffle.

Room 23 was at the end of the hall. Renée stood in front of the closed door for what felt like hours, her sweaty palm resting on the doorknob, her heart sounding a wild, syncopated beat. She forced herself to breathe deeply once, then again. Finally, she turned the knob and stepped inside.

“Ms. François?” A woman in a navy blue pinstripe suit approached. Her shock of red hair was an exclamation point in an otherwise drab room. “I’m Nadine Reed. We spoke on the phone.”

“Where—” Renée’s voice emerged as a hoarse croak. She cleared her throat and tried again. “Where would you like me to sit?”

The Director’s Office had been transformed into a makeshift courtroom with plastic tables and metal folding chairs. Nadine pointed to a seat. Renée took it before her legs gave out.

“Are you all right?” Nadine asked, eyeing the beads of sweat that clung to Renée’s brow and the slight quiver to her lips. “Would you like some water?”

“Please.”

Nadine gestured to the guard standing a few feet away. A moment later, the young man handed Renée a bottle of water. He hovered over her until she had swallowed half its contents.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice soft and tremulous. He nodded and walked back to his post.

“Better?” Nadine asked.

Renée tried to smile, but her lips wouldn’t cooperate. “I was feeling a bit lightheaded.”

“This place has a way of doing that to you,” Nadine said wryly.

“How long will this take?”

“A few hours. We’re calling some of the medical staff, but you’re the only civilian. We’re lucky to have you.”

Lucky? Nothing about this situation is lucky! she wanted to shout, but all she said was: “I’ll do my best.”

Nadine smiled earnestly before taking her own seat. Only then did Renée allow herself to turn to the pair of eyes that had been staring at her since she’d walked in the room.

She expected to find a monster. What she saw was the face of the man she had once loved.

Chapter Five

The Bogeyman of Belleville

“All rise.” The security guard played the role of bailiff with aplomb, his enthusiasm undaunted by the makeshift courtroom.

The judge walked in. Her presence lent an air of professionalism to the room. She had forgone the traditional black robe in favor of a tasteful blue suit and a string of seawater pearls that glowed against her copper skin. With a nod to her court reporter, she took a seat at the long rectangular table in the front of the room and said, “Please be seated.”

Renée’s knees buckled. She slumped in her chair and tried to still her trembling limbs. It was as if she’d swallowed a tornado.

I can do this.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then she forced herself to look up. He was still watching her. She matched him stare-for-stare.

The years of confinement had taken their toll. He looked older than she’d expected, and thin to the point of gauntness. His complexion, once the color of a golden sunset on his beloved Santo Domingo, was pale and wan. Only his eyes were the eyes of her memory—a kaleidoscope of greens and browns flecked with gold.

Those eyes stared at her now with a mixture of sorrow and longing. She wanted to slap him.

His lawyer whispered something to him, breaking the spell. She leaned back in her seat and waited for her equilibrium to return.

The judge cleared her throat. “This proceeding is to determine whether to release from confinement the petitioner, Mr . . .” She checked her notes. “Cristóbal Colón.”

She looked up, her no-nonsense gaze taking in each person in the room. “I am Judge Kathleen Booker, and I will be presiding over this matter. First, the ground rules: This hearing is sealed. Nothing that is said here can be shared outside the confines of these four walls. Second, this is an administrative hearing, not a jury trial.” She shot both lawyers a loaded glance. “As such, I expect no grandstanding.”

The court reporter’s fingers flew across the stenotype machine, keeping pace with Judge Booker’s words.

“Mr. Colón, I need to ask you a few questions for the record.” The judge fiddled with an expensive-looking onyx pen trimmed in gold. “On July 4, 1984, at the age of twenty-five, you were confined to the Flatbush Psychiatric Hospital under an extended and involuntary civil commitment order. You have resided here continuously for eleven years. Is that correct?”

“Yes.” Chris’s voice was huskier than she remembered, though the hint of an accent was familiar.

“You understand that your confinement is for an indefinite term?”

“So I have been told.”

Judge Booker gave him a warning glance but continued. “By order of the State of New York, you will be held until such time as a fact-finder determines that you no longer pose a threat to yourself or others.”

“I have never been a threat,” Chris insisted.

Renée nearly jumped up to denounce him, but the judge would probably consider that *grandstanding*.

“We are here to make that assessment, Mr. Colón,” Judge Booker said with a frown. “Please limit your answers to either *yes* or *no* for the record. Is that clear?”

“Yes,” he bit out.

“You will have the opportunity to testify, if you so wish, and to bring forward witnesses and evidence in support of your petition. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Very good.” Judge Booker turned her attention to the lawyers. “Counsel of record is Ms. Nadine Reed for the hospital, and Mr. Diego Pinzón for the petitioner. Ms. Reed, are you ready to begin?”

Nadine rose. “Yes, Your Honor.” She remained standing, a bit unsure of herself. The judge gave her a sideways glance, which was her cue to sit down.

“And you, Mr. Pinzón?”

Diego Pinzón buttoned his suit jacket as he stood. He was a short man, but heavily muscled. In his Brooks Brothers suit, he looked like a prizefighter dressed for church.

“Judge, before we begin I ask your indulgence so that I may read the claims against Mr. Colón into the record.”

Nadine’s chair scraped the wooden floor as she popped out of her seat. “Your Honor—

“Sit down, Counselor.” Judge Booker didn’t mask her irritation.

“I’m sorry, Your Honor.” The chastised lawyer took her seat. “However, I must object—”

Judge Booker waved her to silence. “As you are aware, Mr. Pinzón, the nature of those charges are under seal. They *shall not* be referenced in these proceedings.”

Diego nodded then immediately launched into a rebuttal. “Your Honor, my client is being illegally detained. What happened to him is a travesty of justice. We ask for a small measure of latitude to right a fundamental wrong here.”

The judge leaned forward to give Diego what would become her signature non-nonsense glare. “Let’s not play with each other, Counselor. Do you have any *permissible* motions?”

“No, Your Honor.” He quickly reclaimed his seat.

The exchange puzzled Renée. Why wouldn’t Judge Booker allow the reasons for Chris’s confinement to be entered into the record? It was standard procedure.

Almost as soon as the question entered her mind, she pushed it away. Maybe there were privacy considerations she didn’t know about—mental health law was not her speciality. Besides, she wasn’t here as a lawyer.

The judge continued, “Both parties have waived opening statements. Therefore, Ms. Reed, please call your first witness.”

Nadine whispered something to the security guard. He left the room and returned a few minutes later with a thin bird of a woman, delicate and small, but

with a tilt to her chin that hinted at strength. She took the witness stand, her back ramrod straight.

Renée felt a shock of recognition. This was the nurse who had taken care of her father in the last year of his life.

Nadine began. “Ms. Jones—”

“It’s *Nurse* Jones.” Agnes Jones’s rolling Jamaican accent held an unmistakable bite.

Nadine smiled nervously. “Ah yes. If you prefer to be called Nurse—”

“I prefer to be called what I am.” Agnes Jones jutted out her chin. You could almost see her ruffled bird feathers. “I am a nurse.”

“My apologies, Nurse Jones.” Nadine cleared her throat. “It is the hospital’s contention that Mr. Colón poses a grave danger to himself and others. As his primary nurse, can you speak to his propensity for violence?”

Nurse Jones shot Chris a surprisingly tender glance. “He is not a violent man.”

Nadine’s eyebrows shot up. “Excuse me?”

“Chris is a good man. He’s no threat.” Nurse Jones directed her answer to the judge.

A flash of anger lit Nadine’s eyes. She grabbed a document off her table and marched up to the witness stand. “Do you recognize that?”

Nurse Jones glanced down. Her eyes widened but she remained otherwise expressionless. “It is an incident report.”

“And is that your signature?” Nadine tapped the bottom of the form.

“It is.”

“What’s the date on that report?”

“April 1, 1985.”

Renée dug her fingernails into the palm of her hand and focused on that tiny shard of pain. April 1, 1985, was her *before*. It was the day that had shattered her to pieces. Everything that came after was her attempt to put those pieces back together.

“Can you please describe the events memorialized in the report?” Nadine asked.

Nurse Jones perused the report once more, as if she might have missed something. “If you would let me explain—”

“Please answer the question.”

There was a pause. “It says Chris Colón threatened me with a steak knife.”

Renée's head snapped up. This was news to her.

"*Knife?*" Nadine had a flair for the dramatic. Her mouth formed an *oh* of shock so perfect, it could only be feigned. "Did that actually happen?"

Nurse Jones looked at Chris, her eyes full of concern. He calmly met her gaze and nodded, as though granting permission.

"Yes," Nurse Jones said.

"Sounds pretty violent to me." Nadine stole a glance at the judge to see if her comment had hit its mark. It had. "Now that we've refreshed your recollection, please answer my question—truthfully, this time."

Anger colored Nurse Jones's cheeks a dull red. "If you want the truth, I will give it to you. Chris never showed any violence, except on that day. There was an error with his medication."

"You're testifying the wrong medication caused Mr. Colon to become violent?" Skepticism dripped from Nadine's voice.

"Yes."

"If he received the wrong medication, wasn't that due to your own incompetence, *Nurse Jones?*"

Nurse Jones remained silent, though her pursed lips and glaring eyes said plenty.

Nadine's smile was equally expressive. She waited a beat, then said, "While in your care, has Mr. Colón exhibited any delusions?"

"I suppose his story about Christopher Col—" Nurse Jones caught herself mid-sentence, but it was too late. Her response electrified the room.

Nadine said, "Your Honor, I ask—"

"Strike that!" the judge barked to her court reporter before Nadine could finish the sentence. She then turned to Nurse Jones. "The witness has already been made aware that certain information in this case is under seal. Any attempts to breach that confidentiality *will not be tolerated*. Is that clear?"

"Yes, judge." Nurse Jones said meekly.

"Continue, Ms. Reed."

Nadine turned her back. "I'm done with this witness."

Judge Booker glanced over at Chris's table. "Mr. Pinzon?"

"We have no questions, Your Honor," Diego said.

A moment later, Agnes Jones walked out of the room. Her feathers drooped, but

the tilt to her chin remained.

“Call your next witness, Ms. Reed,” the judge said.

Once again, the security guard left the room and returned with another long-time hospital employee: the Bogeyman of Belleville.

Renée clenched her teeth so hard her jaw popped. Pain exploded in her head.

Dressed impeccably in a hand-tailored Saville Row suit, the bogeyman had not aged well. His ice-white hair, now thinning, was brushed back to hide his bald-spot, and his face was red and bloated—though that might have had more to do with his penchant for fine wine.

He strode to the witness stand and made a show of straightening his tie and flicking an imaginary speck off his jacket before taking his seat. He managed to look out of place in his own office.

To the rest of the world he was Dr. Winston Andrews, Belleville’s well-respected Medical Director. To Renée, he would always be the Bogeyman of Belleville. He had terrorized her father since the day Sebastian François walked into this hellhole.

“Good morning, Dr. Andrews,” Nadine said.

“Good morning.”

Like everything else about him, Dr. Andrews’s pitch perfect British accent was a façade. He had grown up just a few miles away in Canarsie, a hardscrabble, working class Brooklyn neighborhood.

Nadine launched into her examination. “We’ve heard testimony that Mr. Colón is not a danger to himself or others. Is that your opinion as well, sir?”

“Certainly not. Nurse Jones allows her emotions to rule her head. It is an unfortunate trait for a medical professional, but then again *some people* are not well-suited to this line of work.”

“Yes, well . . .” Nadine cleared her throat. “Can you tell us why you believe Mr. Colón poses a danger?”

“Mr. Colón is a paranoid schizophrenic who will stop at nothing to get his way.” The look Dr. Andrews shot Chris was pure venom. “We know how to handle his sort, but I cannot vouch for his behavior outside of our care. He understands only violence. I suppose it is to be expected, given where he comes from. These people—”

“Thank you, Dr. Andrews. I have no further questions.” Nadine scurried back to

her table.

“Your witness, Mr. Pizon,” the judge said.

Diego fairly leaped out of his seat to circle the witness stand. The two men eyed each other with unconcealed rage.

“You testified my client is schizophrenic?” Diego asked.

“I did.”

“What is the basis for your diagnosis?”

“Pardon?”

Diego gave him the smile of a predator sensing fresh prey. “Is there a blood test for schizophrenia?”

“No. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual establishes the criteria, and I made the diagnosis based on years of experience.” Dr. Andrews crossed his arms. “As a skilled clinician, my considered medical opinion is that Mr. Colón meets several of the DSM criteria.”

“And what are those?”

“He is delusional, for one.

Diego’s smile was friendly. His eyes were not. “What is the nature of his delusions, doctor?”

Dr. Andrews glanced at the judge, but she did not intervene. With no reprieve from that corner, he said, “Mr. Colon claims he is being persecuted by the government.”

Diego had his own dramatic flair. He put a hand to his heart like a Southern Belle with a bad case of the vapors. “If fearing the government makes you schizophrenic, you’d better find a bed for me too.”

“Objection, Your Honor,” Nadine said. “Is there a question?”

Dr. Andrews didn’t bother to wait for the judge’s ruling. “Of course, there are additional factors. I am simply not at liberty to discuss them.”

Diego nodded like a playful puppy. “I see.”

He walked back to his table and picked up a single sheet of paper, which he promptly handed over to Dr. Andrews. “Is that your intake form? The one you completed when Mr. Colón was first admitted to Belleville?”

Dr. Andrews shifted in his seat. “It is.”

“What does it say about Mr. Colón’s psychological condition?”

Dr. Andrews made a production of pulling his reading glasses out of his breast

pocket. He settled the glasses on the bridge of his nose and studied the form closely.

“I can highlight the relevant portion, if that would be helpful,” Diego offered in a tone so saccharine it made Dr. Andrews squirm.

“You must understand, we are a busy hospital. We sometimes make regrettable errors.”

“This hospital makes a lot of regrettable errors,” Diego agreed. “But what does the form say, Dr. Andrews?”

Dr. Andrews laid the document down on the table. “It says: Patient exhibits no symptoms of schizophrenia.”

Diego allowed the words to hang in the air for a moment. “Were you lying then, Dr. Andrews? Or are you lying now?”

“Who you callin a liah, you little shit?” Dr. Andrews demanded between clenched teeth. The boy from Canarsie was ready for a bare-knuckle throw down.

The courtroom was silent for what felt like an eternity. Finally, Judge Booker said, “You will watch your language, sir.”

Dr. Andrews smoothed his tie, which only called attention to the red stain creeping up his neck. “My apologies, Your Honor.”

“As for you,” the judge fixed her gaze on Diego, “I’m running out of patience, Counselor. This is not Court TV.”

“I’m sorry, Your Honor, I—”

She held up a hand, stopping him in mid-sentence. “You will refrain from any further personal attacks on the witness.”

Diego turned to Dr. Andrews. “My apologies, doctor. Allow me to rephrase the question. You would agree that your diagnosis of Mr. Colon came well after he was committed to Belleville?”

Dr. Andrews gave him a wary stare, conscious now that he was a mouse under the paw of a very big cat. “It can take some time to recognize the symptoms.”

“Almost a year?” Skepticism dripped from Diego’s voice. “According to the records, you didn’t diagnose him until April 1, 1985.”

“You’re missing the point. Regardless of when he was diagnosed, the man is schizophrenic. He is also a violent degenerate. He’s had many altercations with my staff.”

“Altercations?”

Dr. Andrews glared at Chris. “On numerous occasions, this man has tried to escape our facility. We’ve had to impose extraordinary measures to control him.”

Muscles bunched beneath Diego’s fitted suit. “What sort of extraordinary measures?”

“Restraints, padded room, sedatives. The usual.”

“How about broken bones and internal bleeding?” Diego asked in a deceptively soft voice. “Are those *the usual*? Because my client’s medical records indicate he’s suffered an *unusual* amount.”

“Mr. Colon is exceptionally clumsy,” Dr. Andrews said with a dismissive shrug. “In any event, his actions merely prove my point. The man has no home and no family, yet he persists in trying to flee. Where does he think he’s going?”

Diego the hunter was suddenly on full alert. “In your view, his escape attempts are evidence of mental illness?”

“That’s right. He’s not rational.”

“Dr. Andrews, are you familiar with the term ‘*drapetomania*’?”

The doctor stiffened, throwing an uncharacteristically helpless glance at Nadine. “I am.”

“Please explain it to the court.”

“I fail to see why this is important.” Dr. Andrews cleared his throat. “Drapetomania was the pseudoscientific ramblings of a man from the antebellum South. It has long since been repudiated, and—”

“Please, answer the question,” Diego said.

Dr. Andrews’s discomfort was palpable. He fiddled with his tie and glanced at Nadine, who remained silent. “Dr. Samuel Cartwright coined the term in 1851 to describe slaves who repeatedly tried to escape from their masters. Cartwright said this was a form of mental illness.”

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. Finally, Nadine said, “Objection, Your Honor. Relevance?”

“The relevance,” Diego said, “is that my client’s actions are a rational response to his situation. The so-called violence was his attempt to escape a nightmare.”

“You a goddamn liah!” Dr. Andrews’s thick Brooklyn accent cut through the legal squabble. “Colon wasn’t tryin to escape a nightmare when he raped that woman.” He pointed to Renée, his finger piercing the invisible veil that had been her shield.

The weight of all those eyes fell on her. She trained her gaze on a spot two inches above Judge Booker's head and willed herself to breathe.

Chapter Six

Museum of the Insane

The judge mercifully called for a lunch break. Renée burst out of the courtroom and ran from the building. Outside, the wind cut to the bone. It was only then she remembered her coat draped over her seat in the courtroom. No way was she going back. Not until it was absolutely necessary.

Her breath formed broken tendrils of gray fog. She wrapped her arms around herself, hunting for a safe place to nurse her wounds. In a landscape of dead trees and boarded up buildings, she spotted a dilapidated workshop and ran to it. The door was closed, but when she turned the knob it gave way beneath her hand. She wasn't surprised. Who would steal from the Museum of the Insane?

The smell of leather and stale perfume greeted her as she stepped inside. Light seeped into the room from windows caked in grime. Metal shelves shoved against the walls sagged under the weight of old suitcases and stacks of cardboard boxes.

It was almost exactly as she remembered.

The workshop had been a sanctuary for her and her father. They played dress up and imagined themselves a king and a princess trapped in a garret waiting for the hero to save them. They spent countless hours digging up buried treasure: leather suitcases worn smooth with age, clothes, family photos, old perfume bottles, books and dolls and teddybears, a shattered clock, even a gold locket with tufts of hair hidden inside. It wasn't until years later that she'd learned the truth about all those

treasures.

She shivered against the damp chill, rubbing her arms to restore circulation. It was so cold. She tried to catch her breath, but her lungs seized in a fit of coughing. She stumbled to a bench and sat down.

“Are you all right?” a voice called out.

She swung around to find Chris’s lawyer in the doorway. “What do you want, Mr. Pinzon?”

“Diego, please.” He stepped tentatively into the room, watching her closely, as though she was a wounded animal ready to bolt. “You left your things in the courtroom. I thought you might need them.” He held out her coat like a peace offering.

She took the coat and burrowed gratefully in its warmth. He had also brought her purse, and the half-empty bottle of water she’d been drinking. She took a swig, her lungs suddenly on fire.

“Thank you,” she said grudgingly.

He gestured to the space next to her, and she nodded. “I’m sorry for what happened in there,” he said, taking a seat. “Dr. Andrews is a *cabrón*—a dumbass.”

True, but this man wasn’t exactly a friend either. “How did you find me?”

“Chris said you’d be here.” He glanced around. “What is this place?”

“A museum.”

“It looks like a pile of junk,” he said.

“This *junk* represents decades of Belleville’s history.” She was protective of the space. The objects in the room might not be treasures in the usual sense, but they *were* artifacts. They needed to be preserved for future generations—if only as a cautionary tale.

“Families used to lure their loved ones here with the promise that it would only be for a few days,” she added. “The patients came with their favorite things—just enough to remind them of home.”

“They didn’t take their possessions when they left?” Diego asked.

“They never left.” Neither had her father.

Diego was silent for a moment. “I wanted to talk to you about Chris.”

No kidding. Why else would he be there? “You don’t mind tampering with a witness?”

He gave a croak of nervous laughter. “This isn’t a criminal trial. I want to make

sure you have all the facts. I know you and Chris were close friends once.”

She smiled, which only served to bare her teeth. “You think I shouldn’t testify because of our so-called friendship?”

Diego sighed. “I’m not explaining myself very well. Could we start over?”

“Please.” She raised her empty water bottle in a mock salute.

He eyed her warily but continued. “I have known Chris most of his life. We moved here from the Dominican Republic together. He’s like a younger brother to me. My job has always been to look after him. That’s what I’m trying to do now. He doesn’t deserve what’s happened to him.”

“From where I sit this is exactly what he deserves.”

“Do you really believe Chris is a threat to himself or others?”

“I don’t have to believe it, Mr. Pinzón. I was there.”

“I’m not denying what happened to you.” He loosened his tie and pulled at his collar. Diego Pinzon would never be a man completely at home in a suit. “But you’ve heard Nurse Jones’s testimony. Chris was given the wrong medication.”

The sound she made was a cross between a growl and a curse. “I should chalk it up to a mistake?”

“Frankly, I think it was deliberate,” he said.

The blood rushed to her head, leaving her woozy. She hadn’t expected that answer. “You’re claiming someone *wanted* Chris to attack me? I don’t believe you.”

It wasn’t possible. No one could have known she would be in Chris’s room that night. Dr. Andrews had called her into his office to report her father’s death. Her first instinct had been to run to Chris.

“No, that’s not what I meant,” Diego said.

“Then what?” The room had gotten hot. She threw off her coat and stood up, taking a few shaky steps to lean against a pillar.

“Is something wrong?” Diego’s voice registered genuine alarm. “You look like you’re about to faint. Can I get you anything? Maybe some food?”

She hadn’t eaten much since that fateful knock on her door a few days ago. Food would probably help, but she brushed Diego’s concern aside. “You’re claiming someone deliberately gave Chris the wrong medication. Why?”

Diego looked around, as if expecting the bad guys to jump out of a cardboard box. “I don’t think you were supposed to be involved. They wanted him to hurt

himself or one of the staff so they could use it against him.”

“Who exactly are *they*?”

His eyes grew wide. “I can’t say anything about that right now, but I can tell you this goes beyond the walls of Belleville.”

She almost expected the *Twilight Zone* theme song to start playing. “I’m supposed to take you at your word?”

“Why not?” he demanded. “Does this whole setup seem normal to you? I’m trying to tell you something is wrong here.”

“And I’m trying to tell you I don’t care.” Even as she said the words, she knew she was lying. How many times had she tried to convince herself there was an explanation for Chris’s behavior? The guy she’d known—and *loved*—couldn’t have done that to her. Pathetic.

“You don’t care what this place does to people? What it did to your own father?”

“Leave my father out of this.”

A look of resignation settled on Diego’s face. “Sorry to have bothered you. I made a mistake.” He glanced at his watch and stood up. “I’ll see you in the courtroom.” He was gone as quickly as he’d arrived.

She leaned against the pillar, dizzy from the force of old memories rushing back. She remembered the first time she had met Chris. It had felt like destiny smiling down on her.

She wasn’t supposed to be at Belleville that day. In truth, her visits had grown less frequent over the years—it was hard to watch her father shrivel into nothing—but on that day, she’d gone to share some good news. She had aced the LSATs. With her grades and extracurriculars, she could expect to get into an excellent law school. Finally, all of her hard work was paying off.

At some point in the nearly two decades of her father’s confinement, she had realized no hero was coming to save them. They would have to save themselves.

The only option was for her to go to law school—the best in the country—and return to Belleville with a gold-plated law degree. She would sue the pants off Dr. Andrews and anyone else who tried to keep her father in this glorified prison.

One more year of college and three years of law school, and the ordeal would be over. “Hold on, Dad. I’m coming to save you,” she’d whispered to the thin corpse of a man withering away.

Less than a year later, her father would be dead. But on that day he smiled at her, and something like hope gleamed in his eyes.

When she stepped out of her father's room, she ran smack into Chris. He reached out to steady her. The feel of his arms and the instant attraction that lit his eyes gave her courage.

"Who are you visiting?" she asked with a flirtatious smile.

He was young and strong and handsome, and his eyes were so *alive*. No way someone like that belonged to Belleville. She assumed he was like her—a kindred spirit connected to this hellhole through family.

"I am the crazy one," he replied.

In the end, *she* had turned out to be the crazy one. She had trusted him.

The door to the workshop opened once more, bringing with it a blast of cold air that made her teeth rattle. So much for her sanctuary, this place was more popular than Grand Central Station.

"Ms. Francois?"

It was the security guard from the courtroom. The lunch break must have ended.

"I'm coming," she tried to say, but the words came out a garbled mess. Her tongue felt heavy in her mouth, and her head was spinning so fast it made her nauseous.

"I—I . . . coooo—" Was that her? She tried again, but this time no sound came at all.

She staggered and was grateful when the guard caught her before she could hit the floor.

"I'm sorry about this," he said.

She passed out.

Chapter Seven

The Element of Surprise

Renée yawned and stretched her limbs, feeling surprisingly well-rested. She couldn't believe her daughter had let her sleep through the night. Ever since Marie-Thérèse's nightmares began . . .

Marie-Thérèse.

Her eyes flew open. She wasn't at home with her daughter. She was in bed in a room she'd never seen before.

She bolted upright and promptly regretted it. The room swayed. Bile slammed in her throat, and she fought the urge to vomit.

Deep breaths. In through the nose. Out through the mouth. She followed the mental instructions, forcing down the rising tide of nausea and panic.

Every frantic bone in her body screamed for her to run, but first she had to calm her roiling stomach.

In through the nose. Out through the mouth.

Three more deep breaths, and her stomach declared an uneasy truce. Only then did she allow herself to focus on the questions swirling in her mind.

Where was she? How had she gotten there? What was behind that closed door?

Panic threatened to overwhelm her, but she shoved it down and forced herself to think.

Where was she? In someone's bedroom.

How had she gotten there? No idea. The last thing she remembered was passing out in the workshop at Belleville. She wasn't in Belleville anymore, of that she was certain. The telltale odor of urine was gone.

As to the last question—what was behind that closed door?—she was terrified to find out.

A glance at her watch revealed that it was after 2 pm. Almost five hours had passed. How?

The only way to find her answers was to get the hell out of that room.

She swung her legs to the ground, moving slowly this time, allowing her stomach time to adjust. The queasiness abated, but now a jackhammer pounded into her head. She squeezed her eyes shut and massaged her temples. The pain slowly unclenched its grip. She stood up and willed the room to stop spinning. When it did, she opened her eyes.

Her gaze traveled from the diamond-shaped patches of light scattered on the floor to the window a few feet away.

There was a window!

It was covered by a security gate. Diamond-shaped openings in the heavy-duty metal frame filtered light into the room. The gate was secured to the window casement, which was actually good news—or at least not terrible. Far worse would have been a stationary grille attached like the bars on a prison window. At least this gate was designed to be opened and closed.

She had found her way out.

The urge to run consumed her, but her pounding head and queasy stomach allowed for only a shuffle. As she moved, the cityscape came into view. Brownstones huddled in the shadow of low-rise apartment buildings. A lone tree swayed, its gnarled limbs beckoning her forward. She was still in Brooklyn.

A knot of tension eased. In the hours she'd been knocked out, her kidnapper could have taken her anywhere; she had dreaded finding herself in an isolated backwoods cabin. By some stroke of luck she was still in a city where two million people roamed. If she could open that window and get just *one* person's attention

—
A fire escape. The security gate covered a fire escape!

Her heart thudded. She could have danced with glee, if only her stomach would let her. All she had to do was get that window open and climb down the fire escape

to freedom.

She grabbed hold of the gate and shook hard. It barely moved. No surprise. She hadn't really expected it to be unlocked, but it never hurt to check.

As a child, she had lived in an apartment with barred windows. Her mother claimed it was to protect them from burglars, but Renée knew the truth. It wasn't about keeping anyone out. It was about keeping her father *in*. Even before he was institutionalized, Sebastian Francois's will to live had been a tenuous thing.

She shoved the memories aside and focused on the window. The thing about gates over fire escapes was that you needed the key close at hand. If a fire roared, the last thing you wanted was a locked exit and no key.

Maybe her kidnapper had left the key behind. Criminals weren't necessarily brilliant strategists.

She ran her fingers along the top edge of the window, then the bottom and sides. Nothing.

She surveyed the room. It was small and sparsely furnished with an old wooden chair, a battered nightstand, and a full-size bed. Where would you hide a key?

Shuffling to the nightstand, she rummaged through the drawers. There wasn't much: a bible, a few T-shirts, and several pairs of men's boxers. She forced herself not to think about what that meant.

Next, she tackled the underside of the chair. Nothing was taped to the heavy wooden bottom. Same for the inside and outside slats.

The bed? She turned the mattress over, ran her hands under the box spring, the headboard, and along the edge of the bed frame. Nothing.

The jackhammer bore into her head, but she ignored the pain and searched every inch of that room.

No key.

Maybe she could find something to pry the gate open? A crowbar would be nice, though the bed frame might do in a pinch. It was thin but made of steel. She took the frame apart and got to work.

Fifteen frustrating minutes later, she had to admit defeat. The lightweight steel of the bed frame proved no match for the gate. The frame bent like a soft pretzel.

There would be no escape—at least, not from that window.

She sank to the floor with a hand to her temples. How was she going to get out of there? *Think!* she silently commanded. Her pounding head made that difficult.

She could try to open the door, but there were so many unknown variables: Who was on the other side? What did they want? What weapons did they have?

It wasn't fear that stopped her. She had studied self-defense for a decade and knew how to protect herself. Her arms, legs, teeth—her entire five-foot-six, 130-pound body—could be turned into a weapon. But without knowing who was behind that door, or how many opponents she'd have to confront, she was at a distinct disadvantage.

Still, she couldn't sit there and wait to be saved. No one back home would sound the alarm. She had closed her law practice for the week, and Rose knew she was in New York wrestling her demons. It would be at least a few days before anyone started to worry.

A lot could happen in a few days.

An image of her body floating in Sheepshead Bay flashed in her mind. What would become of her daughter? Tears welled up. She blinked them away. Crying wouldn't help.

The closed door mocked her. She had to get it open. It was her only option.

She was so queasy she practically crawled to the door. There was a lock, but it was nothing like the sophisticated one on the security gate.

Studying the knob, she thought back to a few years ago when Marie-Thérèse was just a toddler. The little girl had locked herself in her bedroom. Renée had been frantic until she figured out how to force the lock open with a couple of bobby pins.

Could she do that now? Why not? The keyhole was on her side of the door.

She took two bobby pins from her hair and got busy stripping the rubber knobs from their tips. She bent one of the bobby pins at a right angle and shoved it into the lock. The pins in the barrel of the lock shifted. She poked the second bobby pin into the hole and gently pushed up once, twice—

Footsteps. She pressed her ear to the door and stopped breathing. More footsteps. One set. Headed her way.

She scuttled away from the door, her frantic gaze searching for a weapon. *The chair!*

With a surge of adrenalin, she grabbed the chair and hoisted it over her head.

The knob turned. The door opened. Chris stood in the doorway.

She lost her bearings. Was this another one of her nightmares?

He looked equally stunned, freezing mid-stride with a teakettle in one hand and a Bob Marley mug in the other.

Chris was first to recover. “You should not—”

She swung and hit his chest. The mug and tea kettle crashed to the ground.

The element of surprise is your best defense. Use it. The words of her self defense teacher rang in her head. They’d been drummed into her so many times, she moved without pause. Dropping the chair, she lunged at Chris and jabbed two fingers in his eye sockets.

He grunted and fell to his knees. This was what she’d been waiting for. She struck the carotid artery on the side of his neck.

He was out in seconds.

From where she stood, she could see the front door. It was a straight shot down the hall. She ran to it and rattled the knob.

The damn thing was locked from the inside. *Where the hell was the key?*

She looked back to where Chris had fallen. He was still passed out, but he wouldn’t be for long. She had to find that key.

Her gaze scanned the room. A combination living/dining room. Couch, recliner, TV, table and four chairs.

No key.

She ran to an open doorway and found herself in a small kitchen. She hunted through every drawer and tossed all the cabinets. Pots and pans clanged to the floor. A ceramic dish shattered.

No key.

She was about to run out of the kitchen when a small hook mounted on the wall by the doorway caught her attention.

It held a keyring. She grabbed it and sprang for the front door.

There were three keys on that ring. *Which one?* Her fingers shook as she tried key after key. On the third attempt, the lock clicked. She breathed a sigh of relief and turned the knob.

Chris's arms closed around her.

“Let me go!” she screamed, struggling to free herself from his grip.

To her surprise, Chris swung the door open.

Standing there was a security guard from Belleville. She went limp with relief. They had found her.

The guard's gaze collided with hers before skittering away. "You need something, Chris?"

She could only gawk at him. An image from the workshop came flooding back. She had stumbled. The guard had caught her before she fell. *I'm sorry about this*, he'd said, as if he had stubbed her toe or cut her off in a supermarket checkout line.

Chris handed over his keys. "Lock this door and don't open it unless you get the order from me."

"Sure thing." The security guard pulled the door shut and turned the lock with a shattering click.

Chris said, "There's no way out. Now will you listen to me?"

Bile rose in her throat. This time, she didn't try to stop it.

She threw up all over his shirt.

Chapter Eight

I Don't Even Know You

Renée rattled the bars of her prison. The security gate refused to budge. Below, a line of cars inched through mid-afternoon traffic while bikers and pedestrians weaved in and out of the choreographed chaos. There must have been fifty people on the block. Freedom was only a few flights down. But she was right back where she'd started. Trapped

Chris had let her clean up in the bathroom, then he'd put her in the room while he ran off to shower. At least she'd gotten the pleasure of seeing him covered in vomit. He deserved it—and her stomach felt better.

He had kidnapped her. A guard from Belleville had helped him.

As much as she tried to make sense of it all, nothing was falling into place. What did he hope to accomplish? Was this some elaborate plan to stop her from testifying? Or was it something worse?

An image of her bloated corpse flashed in her mind. She brushed it aside. Chris was many things, but he wasn't a murderer.

Then again she'd been wrong about him before.

A voice rang out from the living room. The guard must have come back into the apartment while she was brooding. She moved to the door to listen.

"What were you thinking?" It was not the guard, though the voice *was* familiar. It was Chris's lawyer.

“You went behind my back and put us all in danger,” Diego said. “We could lose everything.”

“I know what I’m doing,” Chris said sharply. “*Tei toca.*”

They continued in a language she couldn’t understand. It wasn’t Spanish. She frowned and pressed her ear to the door. Finally, Diego said in English, “My family has proudly served yours for generations, but right now I don’t even know you.”

The words gave her hope. She tried the door knob, and it turned freely. Chris must have assumed there was no point in locking it. He had, after all, blocked every avenue of escape.

Maybe he’d missed one.

She stepped into the living room. Chris paced the floor in a wrinkled T-shirt and fresh jeans, his hair still wet from the shower. Diego sat on the couch with his head in his hands.

Chris was the first to notice her. He stopped pacing to stare at her, his face impassive.

Diego looked up. “Ms. François—”

She didn’t let him continue. “I’m being held against my will. Call the police.”

“I can’t tell you how sorry I am.” Diego held up a hand in supplication. “You must believe me, I would never have allowed this to happen. I didn’t know.”

“You’re an accessory after the fact. Is it worth ruining your career? Going to jail?”

“No one else was supposed to be involved,” he mumbled.

A piece of the puzzle fell into place. Diego had known about Chris’s escape plan. He was in on it. But by involving her, Chris had raised the stakes—not just for himself, but for his lawyer.

“I can help you,” she said, softening her voice. “I’ve got influence, and I can get you out of this without too much damage.”

He looked at her with pleading eyes. “I know this looks bad, but you’re safe. Chris would never hurt you.”

A flash of rage shot through her. What did this man know about her pain? Where had he been when Chris had all but destroyed her?

“Will you help me?” she demanded.

He hung his head. “I can’t.”

She glared at him until he was forced to meet her gaze. “Then know this, Mr.

Pinzón: I'll make sure you rot in a cell next to this man."

Diego opened his mouth and closed it several times. "I'm sorry," he finally managed before fleeing the apartment with his coattail between his legs.

Chris had remained silent since she'd walked into the room, but now he gave a soft chuckle. "I have never seen Diego without words. You were incredible."

She glared at him. "It wasn't enough to make him do the right thing."

"He and I have known each other a lifetime. You were never going to win." Chris gave her a look of appraisal. "You knew this, but you pushed anyway. You fought even when you could not win."

"Who says I can't win? You're the one who needs to worry. The police will be here soon enough."

He didn't seem particularly nervous. He had taken a seat on the leather recliner and looked for all the world like a host entertaining his guest. "You were always a fighter. Do you remember when Andrews rationed our supplies? No razors, very little toothpaste or soap. He claimed it was to protect us—we might overdose on Colgate or slit our throats with a disposable razor. He was lining his pockets, we all knew that."

Chris looked at her in a way that could only be described as admiring. "You went after him. You challenged the Bogeyman of Belleville, and you won."

She hated that he knew her secret name for Dr. Andrews—hated the memories they shared. It was easier to think of him only as a monster. "Is that what this is about? You want me to go after Dr. Andrews?" She shook her head. "You really are crazy."

He didn't speak for a long time, and when he did his voice was low. "I think we can help each other."

"I don't need your help. I don't want anything from you."

Pain darkened his eyes. "You will never know how sorry I am. I have lived with the shame of that night all these years."

"*You* have?"

"It was always my shame," he said. "Never yours."

"Did you know I went to the police that night?" She watched him closely, though she wasn't sure what she was expecting. "I wanted them to bury you under that jail."

"It was your right," he said.

“My right?” Her laugh was almost a sob. “The cop who took my statement didn’t care about my rights. I was a nobody, and you were a Belleville mental patient—the lowest of life forms. No humans involved. He told me to sleep it off, as if I’d had a bad dream.”

She stared at Chris, the past a festering wound between them. “I’m not that girl anymore, but you’re still the lowest of life forms. And now, you’ve kidnapped a well-respected lawyer. You think the police won’t come looking for me? You think the media won’t be all over this? Your face is plastered on every television screen in America right now.”

He stood. She fell back a step.

“No one is coming for you,” he said. “Nadine Reed got your note.”

“My note?”

“That you have returned to Boston. Who could blame you after Andrews’s behavior?”

He took a step forward, but this time she refused to budge.

“As for the media,” he continued, “the people who are after me will make sure my face is not plastered on any television screen. It does not serve their purpose.”

The mix of emotions coursing through her—rage, pain, and confusion—made her queasy again. She tried to take a calming breath but abandoned the effort. Nothing was going to help.

“What the hell do you want?” she demanded.

“I will tell you,” he said, “but first I think you need to eat something. You will feel better.”

She felt lightheaded, and her thoughts were sluggish, but she didn’t want anything from him. “I’m not hungry.” Her stomach chose that moment to grumble.

“It will calm your stomach,” he added with a smile.

In the last 24 hours, she’d barely eaten enough to keep a bird alive. Food would help her think rationally. She relented. “Fine.”

The first thing she noticed when they entered the kitchen was that someone had cleaned up the mess. All the drawers and cabinets she’d upended in her search for the keys had been put to right. The kitchen, like the rest of the apartment, had a homey, well-cared for look. It was painted a cheery yellow with bright-white trim. The windowsill was a garden of thriving herbs. On the wall hung a large print of a turquoise beach full of palm trees and seashells, and lining the counter were

several Bob Marley mugs stamped with the words *One Love*.

This was a home, not some gangster hideout. Who owned it? How had Chris gotten access? She started to ask but stopped herself. This wasn't a tea dance. He had kidnapped her. She wouldn't normalize the situation with idle conversation.

There was a bistro table against the far wall. She took a seat and kept a careful eye on Chris. From the refrigerator, he pulled out two eggs, a slab of cheddar cheese, spinach, and butter. He rifled through the cupboards and came up with garlic, a scotch bonnet pepper, and an onion, which he diced with quick, efficient strokes. For a man who'd been institutionalized the past 11 years, he knew his way around a kitchen.

Her thoughts turned to her daughter. Marie-Thérèse had made *akasan* with the same attention to detail. *It's called mise en place*, she'd explained in her grown-up voice. *You have to be prepared*. Renée wasn't prepared for any of this. She had wanted to put the past behind her, yet here she was.

This had to end. She'd managed to fashion a new life for herself, and she'd be damned if she would allow the burnt ashes of the old to intrude. The past was dead. It would stay dead—even if she had to bury it herself. *Again*.

A few minutes later, Chris approached with a plate of scrambled eggs so fluffy and aromatic her mouth watered. But when he put the food in front of her, she made no effort to eat.

He read her mind. Dipping a fork in the eggs, he came up with a healthy mouthful, which he chewed and swallowed under her watchful eye.

“Satisfied?” he asked.

She took the fork from him. “You know what they say: Fool me once, shame on you. I'd be a damn fool to ever trust you again.”

He took the seat opposite her. “I am not American, but I don't think that is how it is said.”

“Close enough.” She took a bite of the scrambled eggs. It was delicious, light and well-spiced. The man knew how to cook. She hadn't known that about him.

Weariness overtook her. She was tired of this trip down memory lane. Brooklyn had nothing left for her. She wanted to get back to Boston—back to her daughter and her real life. “What do you want?”

He must have sensed her weariness because he didn't try to stall. “It is as you said. I need your help.”

“I’m not a criminal lawyer.”

“I don’t need a criminal lawyer.”

“You *definitely* need—”

“I am Cristóbal Guacanagari de Colón. I am a descendant of Christopher Columbus, and I intend to prove this in court. There are those who would do anything to stop me. If you will take my case, I will help you find the men who killed your father.”

Chapter Nine

History

“Columbus?” A harsh, ugly laugh escaped before Renée could stop it. She tried to get herself under control, but it proved impossible.

The man really was crazy.

This shouldn't have been a surprise—they had met in a psychiatric hospital, for goodness sake! But Belleville was full of lost souls no crazier than she was. They had been forced to exchange their freedom for a warm bed, three square meals, and enough medication to keep them anesthetized to reality. Just like her father.

She had never asked Chris why he had been committed. In Belleville's topsy-turvy world that question was considered rude. She had assumed that, like her father, he was perfectly sane but depressed. Obviously, she had been wrong.

“You're claiming to be a direct descendant of Christopher Columbus?” She barely managed to swallow more laughter.

He watched her intently. “You do not believe me?”

“What are the odds of finding a Columbus descendant in a psychiatric hospital on Flatbush Avenue?”

Chris shrugged. “I don't know the mathematics. I only know what is true.”

She pushed her plate away, having suddenly lost her appetite. “Columbus had two sons—one from his Portuguese wife, the other from his Spanish mistress. One of his son's had children, but none of his descendants ended up at Belleville.”

“You know much about Columbus?” There was a question in Chris’s voice.

“I study history.” In fact, she loved history and was more than a little obsessed with Christopher Columbus. At some level, the modern world was built on the back of his first voyage. All things good and bad could be traced to that moment.

“My family and I do not show up in your history books. I am descended from the union between Columbus and Yaguana, a Taino maiden.”

He was good, she had to give him that much. He didn’t blink or squirm or look away—none of the telltale signs of lying. But he *was* lying. He had to be. “What do you want?” she demanded. “Fame? Money?”

“None of those things means anything to me,” he said. “I want the truth to be known. It is important for my people, and for the generations to come.”

She crossed her arms and leaned back in her seat. “What’s your proof?”

“What proof would satisfy you?”

He smiled, and for a moment she was transported back to the day they’d met. He had smiled like that—so open and honest. She had trusted him, and look where that had gotten her. “On second thought, I don’t care what evidence you claim to have. I need you to keep my father’s name out of this.”

He picked up her discarded fork and helped himself to the eggs on her plate. It was a disconcertingly intimate act.

“You do not wish to know of the people who killed him?” he asked.

“My father killed himself.”

“I never believed that. He would not have left you alone.”

It was exactly what Sebastian Francois had done. He hadn’t been willing to hold on after a drunk driver took his beloved’s life.

A part of Renée would always blame herself for her father’s death. The night before he killed himself, she had called him to let him know she was authorizing the hospital to pull the plug on her mother in the morning. So, in the course of a single day, she had lost both her parents. In the morning, she had stood by her mother’s hospital bed and watched the machines that sustained her life go dark. And that evening, she had stood in Dr. Andrews’s office while he told her of her father’s suicide. He rattled off a condolence as fake as his British accent.

I’m all alone. The words had played in her head on an endless loop. With a mother who was always working, and a father too fragile for this world, she had often felt alone. Yet the reality of her new status as an orphan was terrifying.

I'm all alone.

But she wasn't alone. She had Chris.

Dr. Andrews was still talking when she walked out of his office. She needed Chris.

She snuck into his room without any trouble. Belleville's employees were used to seeing her around and barely noticed her movements anymore.

Chris was asleep. She crawled into his bed, muffling her sobs as best as she could. When he stirred, she moved into his arms, seeking refuge.

He pressed his mouth to hers, and at first she accepted the kiss. She wanted to feel loved. But when he deepened the pressure, she resisted.

No, she said.

He didn't stop.

No, she said again, pushing against him.

He bit her ear, as if that would stop her cries. The more she struggled the more he pressed down, until she felt his teeth, like sharp razors, skimming across flesh and cartilage.

She cried now for this new pain, and for the feel of his hands ripping at her panties.

“Stop!” The word echoed between worlds.

In that moment, she wasn't in some apartment in Brooklyn anymore. She was in Belleville on that terrible night. Trapped.

Breathe, she silently commanded, focusing on the weight of her body in the chair. The chenille cushion beneath her was a fuzzy green and gold with black trim. The wrought iron table in front of her was cold to the touch.

She *wasn't* in Belleville. She *wasn't* in Chris's room. And she damn sure wasn't the naive young woman who had run to him for protection.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She glared at him. “How dare you try to bring my father into your sick game?” Her voice was loud, even to her own ears. She took a steadying breath. “He was your friend, and this is how you repay him? You really are a monster.”

Chris flinched. “I know this is hard for you, but I am telling the truth.”

The sound of his voice—so calm, so soothing—was enough to set her teeth on edge. “You've been lying to me since the moment we met.”

“I have never lied to you.”

Rage flooded her. It was too much. She lunged at him. They crashed to the ground, and the sound of her fists pounding against his flesh filled the kitchen.

On that terrible night so long ago, she hadn't fought hard enough. She hadn't known how to protect herself from this man she'd loved. But in the past decade, she had learned a great deal about pain—not just how to deal with it, but how to inflict it on others. She used that knowledge now to her advantage.

She kicked in all the right places, and jabbed at his most tender spots, feeling a grim satisfaction at his grunts of pain.

She wanted him to hurt. She wanted his heart to shatter and his guts to twist and convulse. She *needed* him to suffer. Just like her.

He didn't even try to deflect the blows.

She used her best pain-inducing techniques, but it wasn't enough. Hurting him did nothing to heal her.

She rolled off him and let herself sink to the ground, her head resting on her knees. She lay there immobile, her ragged breath cutting the silence.

Chris stirred. She heard the sound of running water but didn't bother to move. A moment later, she felt him crouch beside her.

"Here," he said.

She looked up to find him offering her a damp paper towel. After a slight hesitation, she took it and wiped her face, trying to restore her dignity.

The winter sun was already setting, casting long, gloomy shadows on the kitchen floor.

Chris said, "A few weeks before your father died, he came to me for help in quitting his medications. He said he wanted to get off the drugs because he didn't want you to be without a father anymore. Does that sound like the actions of a man planning suicide?"

She wiped a trickle of blood off her knuckles. His blood or hers? She didn't know. If only she could wipe the memories as easily. "Why would he go to you?"

"I knew how to avoid Andrews's drugs."

She slumped against the wall, giving in to the lethargy that consumed her. "My father killed himself after my mother died from a car accident. He couldn't handle life without her. It's that simple."

Chris also leaned against the wall, though he was careful not to encroach on her space. "I have copies of your father's medical records, and the coroner's report.

The coroner said Sebastian died of heart failure brought on by an overdose of Thorazine, which is a drug used to treat schizophrenia. Your father was never prescribed Thorazine.”

“What difference does that make? He lived in the biggest drug den in New York City. He could have gotten anything he wanted at Belleville.”

“On the day your father died, Andrews diagnosed me with schizophrenia and prescribed Thorazine. This is some coincidence.”

It was indeed coincidental, she had to admit, but coincidences did happen. “How would my father have gotten a Thorazine overdose meant for you? And why would Dr. Andrews go after you merely because you claim to be descended from Christopher Columbus?”

“Andrews was not working alone. There’s a group—” He paused. “I am perhaps moving too fast. Let me start over. What do you know of your parents’ life in Haiti?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” she demanded. What was his game?

He shrugged. “If you knew their story, you might understand why your father would never have committed suicide. He would not have left you alone.”

“What do you know about their story?” she asked.

He didn’t answer. Instead, he left the room and returned a few minutes later with a manila folder, which he held out to her. “I promised you something in return for your help. Consider this a deposit.”

She eyed the folder suddenly afraid to take it. “What is that?”

“Their history,” he said. “*Your* history, if you want it.”

Did she? A part of her had always known that something terrible had happened to her parents in Haiti. She sensed it in my mother’s silence and in her father’s tears. But she had never dared ask questions. She hadn’t been sure she could bear the answers. Was she ready now?

“I want it.” She took the file from him and watched as he walked out of the kitchen.

Chapter Ten

The Past is Dead

Long after Chris left, Renee sat on the kitchen floor unmoving. It was only when the not knowing became unbearable that she cracked the file open.

A black and white photograph stared up at her. There must have been at least 50 people in the picture—men, women and children, all laughing for the camera. They stood in a courtyard under a huge banner that read: *L'hôpital du peuple*. The People's Hospital.

It took a moment for her to recognize a face in the crowd. Her mother. Except Renée had never met *this* woman. It wasn't just that the woman in the picture was young and quite beautiful with her short 'fro and curvy body. She had a carefree air, a lightness of spirit, that made her a different person. Renée stared at the image, wishing she could imprint it on her soul.

She shifted her gaze, and what she saw surprised her even more. There was her father, clear-eyed, without any of the pain and confusion that usually marred his features. How she longed to meet this version of her parents. They seemed so different from the shellshocked humans who raised her.

There were no more pictures, but what she found in the rest of the file gutted her.

A letter poked out from the stack. Renee pulled it out to scan its contents. The letter was written in French, penned in her mother's neat script. It revealed yet

another surprise. Her parents had been doctors.

It didn't make sense. Why had they never told her? And why hadn't they taken the medical licensing exam that would have allowed them, as foreign-trained doctors, to practice in the United States? Instead, her mother had worked as a nanny and sometime-housekeeper, and her father, before his confinement, had driven a cab.

Renée slowed her reading, allowing herself to take in each small revelation. Her parents had opened a maternity hospital in the Artibonite region, and her mother had written the Minister of Health to plead for medical supplies.

The woman who had drafted that letter contradicted everything Renee thought she knew about her mother. Who was this impassioned optimist determined to save her country? The woman who had raised her was someone who'd abandoned all hope—and she had explicitly rejected her Haitian roots. What had happened to so radically change her mother?

The two newspaper articles Renee found in the file answered that question. The first was an op-ed in *Le Combattant Haïtien*, one of Haiti's most important dailies at the time.

December 20, 1965

We the women of the Artibonite region call on our government to support its people!

We are your sisters, your wives, and your mothers. Leaders like Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and our great president, The Honorable Doctor François Duvalier, were once no more than cherished embryos held safe in our wombs.

We gave birth to the great leaders of our dear Haiti, and we fed them at our breasts. Yet too many of us die in childbirth. Have we not done our part? Do we not deserve the dignity of every human?

We demand the government give our hospitals the resources they need to save our lives.

As we witness the struggles of our brothers and sisters in Africa to break the chain of their colonial oppression, we rejoice in the fact that *we* are a free people.

We demand our rights!

The op-ed was signed *The Association of Medical Professionals of the Artibonite Region*, but it was clearly written by her mother, its style reminiscent of her letter to the Minister of Health. The accompanying photo was the one of her parents and their friends standing in front of The People's Hospital.

It would have taken an act of great courage for her mother to write that op-ed. In 1963, François “Papa Doc” Duvalier’s reign of terror was in full swing, and he allowed no detractors.

Papa Doc became president in 1957 with the demise of Haiti’s previous strongman, Paul Magloire. Magloire once graced the cover of *Time* magazine, promising to root out communists and to govern Haiti by the seat of his “iron pants.” When a coupe dispatched old Iron Pants, the hopes of a generation came to rest with Papa Doc. He was an educated man who had served the rural poor and championed a more equitable distribution of wealth. He also vowed to stamp out colorism—a pernicious relic of colonialism that privileged mixed-race over dark-skinned Haitians.

But it wasn’t long before Papa Doc proved himself yet another intolerant dictator.

The Duvalier regime’s response to her mother’s op-ed was predictably swift and brutal. The newspapers called it The Christmas Day Massacre. Renée read the details with dawning horror.

On December 25, 1963, a brigade of Tonton Macoute, Duvalier’s secret police, swept into the town of St. Marc. They raided the office of *Le Combattant Haïtien* and tortured the newspaper’s editor. When he refused to give up any names, they slit his throat and left him tied to his office chair. Death must have been a mercy.

In a few hours, the Tonton Macoute raped and tortured their way through the city until every smiling face in that op-ed had been identified. It was then their sadistic cruelty really began.

They rounded up the families and killed them—not the parents but their children.

The Tonton Macoute killed every single one of the 20 children in that

photograph—and they forced the parents to bear witness.

Her own parents watched in helpless agony as their three daughters were raped and murdered before their eyes.

No wonder her mother had severed the connection to her homeland. No wonder her father had welcomed the haze of depression.

No wonder.

Renée curled up in the fetal position on the kitchen floor and allowed the newspaper clipping to fall to the ground. Memories from childhood came fast and thick. She was five years old. Her father had been carted off to Belleville, and her mother was a stoic presence in their apartment, sweeping broken dishes off the floor. One of their neighbors fluttered around, pretending to help. Even Renée could read the relief in the woman's eyes. No matter how tough this woman's own life might be, she could take comfort in the fact that Renee and her mother had it worse.

“Marie-Thérèse, someone has sent an evil spirit after your family,” the neighbor said. “I must take you to the *bokor*. He will drive it out the way we do in Haiti.”

Her mother shot the woman a baleful glance. “The past is dead. We do not carry these old traditions into a new world.”

Renée lay frozen on the kitchen floor as waves of memories and anguish washed over her. Tears pricked her eyes, but she couldn't seem to shed them.

Chris returned. She sensed his presence when he crouched on the floor beside her. “I had sisters,” she said. “I had a family I never knew.” Deep, guttural sobs tore through her body.

Chapter Eleven

The Old Ways

Renée came back to herself in slow measure. First, she tasted the saltiness of tears on her tongue. Then she felt the gentle caress of air on her wet cheeks. She took a deep breath. The flow of it was foreign to her. When had she ever breathed this deeply?

“Are you all right?” Chris asked.

She sat up and wrapped her arms around herself. “Why did you show me that file? So I would take your case?”

He stiffened and a shadow fell across his face, but when he spoke his voice was calm. “I gave you the report because I have found ignorance to be more painful than the truth.”

She stared intently into his eyes. He did not so much as flinch. “How did you get it?” she asked.

“Cesar tracked down the information. I knew of your father’s history, and I wanted—”

“He told you?” Her father had felt more comfortable sharing his story with Chris than with his own daughter. What did that say about her?

“He told me only that he had been in trouble with the Tonton Macoute and had to escape Haiti,” Chris said. “I wanted to make sure his death was not related.”

“You thought the Tonton Macoute killed my father?” The improbability of the

accusation made her leery once more. Was Chris playing with a full deck?

“I considered the possibility,” he said with a shrug. “It would have been difficult for them to carry out an assassination on U.S. soil. They also would have no reason to disguise his death as a suicide. Groups like the Tonton Macoute do their work in the open. It is about fear for them.”

She was relieved at the logic of his thinking. As far as she could see, logic had not been a priority for him up until now.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice raspy with tears. “You’re right—not knowing was worse than the truth.”

The front door opened, and the security guard strode into the kitchen. He stopped dead in his tracks, gaping at them.

They must have made quite a sight. Chris’s T-shirt was ripped, and he sported a red mark on his cheek that would probably ripen into a bruise. She looked no better. Her hair had fallen out of its bun into a wild, tangled mess. And after the scrubbing her face received, she probably looked like she had taken makeup lessons from a raccoon.

Chris broke the silence. “Yes, Cesar?”

“Uh . . .” Cesar looked momentarily confused, as if the sight of them had emptied his memory. He shook his head and tried again. “Ride’s here. We gotta go.”

“Thank you,” Chris said.

Cesar seemed inclined to stay, but Chris stared pointedly at him until he got the hint and walked out of the apartment.

Chris turned to her. “I have proof of all I am saying to you, and I promise to share it. Right now, though, we must leave.”

“Leave?” Nothing in her world made sense anymore, but Cesar’s interruption had been enough to restore her to sanity. “I’m not leaving with you.”

“We cannot stay here,” he said, carefully measuring each word. “It is too close to Belleville, and I do not wish to bring trouble to the owner of this apartment. We have a place a few hours north. It is there that I can show you proof of all that I am telling you. I have no right to ask, but please: Will you come with me?”

She would do well to get far away from this man. But part of her could not let go until she had gotten answers to a myriad of questions—some that had dogged her for the past 10 years, others that had come light in the last 10 minutes.

What if he was telling the truth about himself? This man was the father of her child. He would never know it—she would make sure of that—but did she have the right to keep that knowledge from her daughter? Her own parents had kept so many secrets from her. They had denied her the opportunity to connect to her roots and to know her own history. Could she do the same to Marie-Therese?

And what if Chris was telling the truth about her father? What if he *hadn't* taken his own life, leaving her alone in the world?

What if had to be the two most dangerous words in the English language.

“Let’s go,” she finally said.

The ride down the elevator was almost comical. Renée stepped into the small metal box, which tipped and groaned before finding its balance. Chris and Cesar followed, sending the elevator into a bouncing frenzy.

She held her breath as the doors began to close, praying this contraption would get them down seven flights in one piece.

“Wait, please!” a woman’s gravely voice called out.

Renée expected Chris to ignore the request, but he reached out to block the closing doors. An elderly woman stepped inside the elevator, trailing a shopping cart behind her. They squeezed in, trying to make room.

“*Perdón*,” the woman muttered as she pushed and shoved the cart, nearly crashing into them in the process.

“*Abuela*, please allow me to help you.” Chris mercifully intervened, folding the woman’s cart and holding it above his head.

“Thank you, my son,” the woman said. “The old ways are lost on this generation. I am pleased that you remember.” She smiled at him as if he had parted the waters of the Dead Sea.

The elevator made its grumbling descent with the woman chattering to Chris in rapid-fire Spanish. When the elevator doors slid open on the first floor, Chris escorted her through the lobby, gallantly holding the door open until she had shuffled out of the building. They followed behind her.

Diego was waiting for them by a black van parked in front of the building. “We have to hurry,” he said.

“Renée and I will ride in the back,” Chris replied.

Diego shook his head. “It’s safer if we split up. We have two vans. Cesar can drive Ms. Francois.”

Chris stared at her, considering the idea. “It is better for you this way.”

“Fine.” She met his gaze, and whatever he saw in her eyes made him nod.

He turned his attention to Cesar. “I am entrusting her to your care.”

Cesar seemed to grow a foot taller. “Don’t worry, I won’t let her out of my sight.”

A few minutes later, Chris and Diego were gone, and she and Cesar had settled into yet another black van.

She felt a prickling at the back of her neck and turned to scan the block. It was a few minutes past four o’clock—too early for the office crowd to have made its way home, but a few straggling school kids ran down the block, laughing. Parked cars lined both sides of the street. The occasional car horn blared. Nothing looked out of the ordinary.

“Something wrong?” Cesar asked as he turned the ignition.

“No.” She leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes, signaling an end to the conversation.

The van eased into traffic and drove past a dark blue Ford truck. The driver of the truck hunched low in his seat and waited for the van to disappear around the corner.

Then he followed.