

Shattered Loyalties

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In 1825, New Orleans plantation life is flourishing when Miranda Croteau marries Morgan Hightower and moves to Hightower Plantation, where she quickly and efficiently begins her new life as mistress of the largest plantation in the state.

Although she was born and raised in the south with slavery a normal, legal and accepted part of life, Miranda's conscience and compassion always caused her to question the rational purpose and morality of slavery. Then after only a few months of marriage she learns of her husband's involvement in illegal slave matters and begins to feel her loyalties divide between her marriage, their traditional southern ways, and her Christian principles.

Eventually her husband's actions cause her life, the life of her unborn child, and that of her personal slave, Megie, to be threatened and she calls upon the help of her brother, Jake, hoping God will somehow lead her to make the right choices and back to the arms of the only man she's ever loved.

CHAPTER 1

1824

In the warm October climate of New Orleans, that first cool breeze customary to the month is always anticipated, pushing away the heat of the summer and bringing with it the hope that the fall season has finally arrived.

In the gazebo, nestled among the shade of the tall plantation live-oaks and evergreen shrubs, such a breeze touched Miranda and gently blew loose strands of fine, deep auburn hair into her face. Free of hat or bonnet she reveled in the unexpected coolness, smiled, and closed her eyes to savor it. Then with long, graceful fingers she patiently pushed the loose strands of hair back into place.

She sat, as she often did, looking out over her papa's beautiful land towards the road. To her left were the many acres of sugar cane crops that had been harvested and where three sugar houses sat; each a two-story brick structure with sixty foot chimneys, which were currently in service.

On the other side, to the far right of their plantation home - which sat back from the road a good quarter of a mile - sat the cotton fields where the cotton had been recently gathered, ginned, baled and sent down the Mississippi River for transport.

In front of the fields sat the River Road and beyond that the Mississippi coast where one, if so inclined, could stand on the levee and view an awesome site when the cotton was full and the cane had grown tall, showing their beautiful sea of uniform color.

Down the lane that separated the house from the cane fields were the slave cabins. Miranda went down there often to talk with the slaves or to walk or ride her mare in the cool of the evening, sometimes waiting until the slaves were on their way in from the fields. Since she had gotten older she would on occasion, as she had that afternoon, help her mother with a slave that had become ill and needed nursing or even a birthing if necessary. She enjoyed helping her mother, helping the slaves, and was glad to be a part of it.

Her papa was a kind man and a good master and made sure his slaves, although there were only sixty-two - including two new babies, were well cared

for. Each of the twenty-two cabins were sturdy wood single structures, not duplex as was a common practice, which sat two feet off the ground in case of flooding; with a large fireplace, cooking utensils, table and chairs, beds with moss stuffed mattresses, a pillow and two blankets for each occupant. And the overseer was not allowed undo violence or liberties with the slaves. Her papa saw to that. He wanted no mulatto children born on his land. Her slave, Megie, was the only one to have come from such a union, which caused the overseer to promptly be fired and forced to leave the plantation.

Miranda's thoughts moved to the evening. Her papa was having a party, but this wasn't to be just any party, it was to be one of the biggest he had ever given; a gala for all the area plantation owners and their families, for the elite of society. It had been a prosperous year for the planters with their various crops of sugar cane, corn, tobacco, and cotton and her papa was in especially high spirits; something her mother was always happy to see. Many would show up in their finest attire and eat, socialize and dance until well into the night.

Although his land holdings were among the smallest in the area, only three hundred and fifty acres, her papa, Davis Croteau, was a well-respected planter. Known for his honesty, good business sense, and hospitable traits, he was often sought out for his advice and company. Planters would come for miles around on a lazy day just to sit with the good natured, heavyset man, smoke one of his imported cigars and talk of such matters as current events, crop rotation, slave revolts such as the New Orleans revolt of 1811 where sixty-six slaves and two whites were killed, rebellions, and eventually to argue politics – especially that which concerned President James Monroe and the coming presidential election in November with John Quincy Adams. Miranda had often heard her papa's infectious laughter coming from his study when he was entertaining someone and knew he was not to be disturbed.

She was very proud of her papa and enjoyed his company herself. There would only be one person whose attention she would be seeking on this night though.

Morgan Hightower had been calling on her for well over a year and it had been obvious for some time that his affection was genuine. His family's plantation sat down the Mississippi coast fifteen miles from their own towards Baton Rouge; across the river from New Orleans city as theirs was.

Despite his high social status and the many responsibilities to care for their large seven hundred acre plantation, he had proven himself a caring and attentive man with honorable intentions. He was highly educated and at twenty-eight years old had never married, confessing to her on a cool Sunday afternoon buggy ride

after church, that with his father's heart problems and assuming many of the cares of the plantation practically alone, he simply hadn't had the time to seriously consider it. Miranda had been to Hightower Plantation with her papa and was overwhelmed with its enormity. She could easily see why socializing was difficult for him.

Upon saying this he had then taken her hand and admitted he was glad it had worked out the way it did. He said it had given her time to grow and become a woman so that he could court her. Miranda had blushed furiously but could do nothing to stop it.

She enjoyed her time with Morgan, always looking forward to it with great anticipation. She had grown to love him, so much so that she had dared to hope that he would ask her papa for her hand in marriage. The only one who knew how deep her feelings had become for the tall, handsome planter was her younger sister, Christine. Her fun loving, lighthearted sister who looked up to the more mature, older one with respect and a little of the awe that often comes from younger siblings. Miranda had that same respect and awe for their handsome twenty-seven year old brother, Jake, who eight years her senior, lived in the city and had established himself as a successful lawyer.

Christine, who was sixteen, only three years younger than herself, had followed Miranda around tirelessly when they were children, wanting to mimic her every move. At times she didn't mind but at others she needed her solitude and would seek the refuge of *her* gazebo as she thought of it, to be alone, talk to God, and ponder her world, just as she was doing now.

The sun had begun its decent and the crickets were singing their magic when she heard her name being called from the distance. She wanted to ignore it but then she saw a blond head and the rustle of long skirts making it her way. The afternoon hour was getting late so reluctantly she rose from her comfortable seat to greet her sister.

"Miranda...Mother is looking for you. It's time to dress for the evening!"

Miranda met up with her on the well-worn path, they locked arms and headed towards the house.

"I'm not surprised. I did lose track of time." Something she admitted was a habit.

"Well, Mother couldn't find you and is having fits so I told her I would. She had Megie lay out your red gown."

"I'm not wearing the red one. I'm wearing my new burgundy one. Mother knows that. The red one brings out too much of the red in my hair, something I don't especially want on this night."

Miranda felt exasperated. She loved her mother dearly and respected her

greatly. She was a strong confident woman who ran the household and basic care of the slaves efficiently, but the two of them often didn't see eye to eye, not even on something as simple as wardrobe; often berating her as well for being without her bonnet to protect her skin from the harsh southern sun, just as she was today. She was often reminded that pale skin, void of freckles was the most desired thing among women and the only way to attract a suitor. Her mother was not only a confident woman but head strong, especially in her pursuits to be heard, a trait her eldest daughter had inherited from her.

"Well, you know how Mother is. When she gets something in her mind, as far as she's concerned the course is set."

"Yes, I know, all too well," Miranda said in full exasperation, "but she often forgets that I'm no longer a child and I'm just as determined as she is."

Christine threw her sister that *how well I know it*, glance but didn't voice it. Instead she said, "Yes, and the two of you keep Papa quite amused."

"Yes, I suppose we do!" Miranda admitted.

The two picked up their pace, walking as quickly as could be done with long skirts. *Unladylike* their mother would have said had she seen them, a slower pace often being a necessity in the Louisiana heat. But pushing thoughts of her mother's propriety aside she coaxed her sister along and they finally made it to the veranda.

Abe, a house servant as well as personal servant to their father, had seen them cross the lane that reached the slave cabins, quickly making their way towards the house. He met them at the door, his big white smile showing a stark contrast against his smooth ebony skin. He was always a welcome sight to Miranda.

"Miss Miranda, yur mama be lookin' for you!"

"Yes, Abe, Christine told me. Do you know where she is?"

"She in de kitchen checkin' on de cookin' for de party. Rose be keepin' eber one mighty busy in dere makin' sure eber thin' just so. It sho smellin' good!"

Miranda didn't doubt that for a second. Rose was an excellent cook. Her papa had been given many an offer by other planters to sell her, many who had come to dine with them. But he wouldn't budge. Rose had been born on the plantation over thirty years ago and he never sold any slaves that were good and loyal servants as Rose had been.

"Thank you, Abe."

He held the door open for the two girls and they quickly made their way up the staircase to the second floor. Miranda was relieved that her mother was busy. It would give her a chance to get ready without confronting her.

Christine entered her bedroom across from her sisters and whispered, "I'll see you in a while." Miranda nodded and entered her own room.

The fireplace was lit with a small fire crackling and she saw Megie bent over a large metal bathtub in the corner of the room. She wasn't happy about the fireplace being lit then remembered she'd need it to dry her hair after her bath.

"I got your bath ready, Miss Miranda. Do you want me to help you undress?"

"Yes, Megie. Thank you."

Miranda turned so Megie could undo the many buttons down her back.

"Your mama been lookin' for you and she all in a dither."

"Yes, I heard." Miranda looked over at her bed and saw the red gown.

"I won't be wearing the red gown, Megie. I'll be wearing the burgundy one that Papa bought me last week."

"I figured so, Miss Miranda. I know you not as fond of the red one. I got the red one out cause your mama said so but I got the other one ready for you anyway," she said as she undid the last button.

Miranda turned and faced her.

"Thank you. I knew I could count on you!" she said giving her a tight hug.

Miranda didn't know what she'd do without Megie. The girl knew her so well.

Taken from her mother's side in the cotton fields and given to her as a child on her sixth birthday, Megie had been her servant and companion for nearly her whole life. She didn't even understand until she was ten years old that Megie, this pretty, young girl with chocolate brown skin who did things for her, and who she considered her friend, was her slave. Even then she couldn't comprehend how one could own another human being and since that time it had bothered her. She understood the need for labor in the south but was never able to understand why people had to be owned to acquire the labor.

At sixteen years of age when asking her papa about it, all he said to her was, "That's the southern way, Miranda. Slaves are needed to work the fields and help the family. That's what's done. It's just our Christian duty to see that they're fed proper, to look after their needs and to treat them well. Now don't bother your pretty little head about it." And with a kiss on her cheek he had sent her off.

That was when she also learned that Megie had been tormented by the other slaves who were all of pure black decent; tormented not only because of her white blood but because of a dark birth mark on her left collar bone, shaped almost like a bolt of lightning. The other slaves, superstitious as they were, considered it a curse, leaving Megie, only a small child, chastised for an accident of birth. Even Megie's own mother feared her small child because of the mark and was glad when the Massa took her to work in the big house.

"It's not a curse," Miranda told Megie early on. "It's a blessing. You have

been kissed by God. God creates life, does He not?"

Through tears Megie had nodded in the affirmative. She believed it.

"Then you must believe He touched you there and there is no curse. It's a blessing. One day you will see that."

Megie knew that if Miss Miranda believed it, it must be true. She would not intentionally lie to her.

Because of all the time Megie had spent with her, her English was better than most. She could also read and write, which the two of them had kept a strict secret. Megie was a Christian and Miranda wanted her to be able to read the Bible. They both knew that it was against the law for slaves to learn to read, one of many laws that Miranda opposed. She could not put an end to slavery, she wouldn't even know how to start, but she could provide Megie with her God given right to education. So late at night by the light of the oil lamp, in the privacy of her bedroom, that's exactly what she did.

Miranda was glad that Megie had been saved from the fields and the torment of the other slaves who didn't consider her an equal. She thanked God for that daily, but her papa's words didn't satisfy her and to this day she still didn't understand it. She didn't understand slavery.

Miranda pulled away from Megie's embrace and slipping out of the layers of clothes she was wearing was soon in the warm bath. Megie went to close the window but Miranda stopped her.

"Leave it open, Megie. We finally have some cool air to enjoy."

"Yes, um, I just didn't want you catchin' a chill. I take your clothes down to Mathilda now for washin," and scooping them up she was out the door.

Miranda laid back and soaked her hair, for it needed a good washing too, and quickly got through her bath. She had lingered too long at the gazebo and needed to make up time.



About the Author: Karen Chalfant

Christian, wife, mother, grandmother and employee of the State of Texas, Karen loves to read and write is also the author of *Winter's Promise*, *Shattered Loyalties*, *Deep In Time* and *The Narrow Way: Seeking God Through Poetry*

Life has been a journey with many ups and downs but she firmly sticks to the moto Love God, Live Life and Write It All Down....

