

Prologue

The Mississippi River's levee shelters the New Orleans French Market that offers a bazaar of fresh produce and handcrafted curios to locals and tourists alike. Green bananas bunch overhead, clinging to their stalks as they ripen in the sunlight. Decapitated pig's heads glare dead-eyed in their search for revenge. Dead fish lay as naked cadavers awaiting dissection in a surgical theater. Sugarcane's sweetness cannot camouflage its shame as slavery's catalyst.

Nighttime brings loneliness to the French Market District. Accustomed to the city's nature, those without a roof stake out places they deem safe to slumber alongside creatures that creep and crawl. While peace reigns, local law enforcement leaves well enough alone. In the Crescent City, being poor is not yet a crime.

A French Market denizen beds herself down for the night. Weary from a day of panhandling on the Moon Walk along the levee, Cecilia Nesbitt pulls her blanket up to her chin after concealing herself behind a hedgerow in the French Market's Latrobe Park. She chooses her spot with security and cleanliness in mind. Delicately sculpted street lamps cast an amber glow through the leafy canopy that serves as her ceiling. The trickle of fountain's water provides her nightly lullaby. Seldom has she awakened to the tickle of a bug on her person, or the itch of an insect entwined in her long gray locks.

Cecilia was once the belle of a ball. The sudden loss of a husband who fumbled family's fortune has turned fate against her. Wedded above her station, she soon finds little reward in widowhood. She sees herself as outcast by in-laws as "that woman" who married their son, brother or cousin.

She finds herself somewhat surprised at her ability to survive on the streets of New Orleans. Her fellows are free of critical condemnation of folks who, like themselves, are down and out. They welcome Cecilia into their clan, dubbing her "Cecil." Pleased with the moniker, Cecil is heartened by their acceptance.

A diminutive woman, weakened by age and malnutrition, Cecilia offers scant resistance as a hooded figure forces a woolen scarf against her face, preventing breath and scream. Her tiny fists flail against the arms of her attacker. Her eyes widen in fear. Blood vessels rupture. It doesn't take long for her struggle to cease.

Wrapped in her shabby blanket, she is but a small burden to her assailant, who drags her away without disturbing the others sleeping nearby. Cecilia Nesbitt finds no peace in her eternal rest.

