

At the forge on Saint Peter Street where slaves hammered out iron grillwork and lace-like balconies, sweating and straining before the open hearth, Raven was directed to a small cottage next door. She gave three sharp raps with the iron knocker at the courtyard gate. A servant admitted her to a walled garden where date palms grew thick and magnolia blossoms scented the warm air. From one of the rooms whose tall windows opened onto the garden she caught a glimpse of three figures seated at a table.

Presently, a man came out, wiping his mouth on a linen napkin. He was attired in a coat of bottle green broadcloth with silver buttons and black velvet collar. A stock of white satin was knotted at his throat. His breeches were pearl-colored and buttoned from ankle to knee in the fashion of the day.

At first glance, Marcel Sauvinet did not appear at all dangerous. On the contrary, his manners were charming and fastidious to a fault when Raven introduced herself. Placing a hand at her elbow, he escorted her inside.

She noticed at once that the other two figures she had seen from the courtyard were absent, yet three plates remained half-full on the table. Her unexpected arrival had no doubt forced a hurried departure.

Marcel Sauvinet held a chair out for her. "You must sit and have a cup of coffee while you tell me the reason for your visit." He took a seat across the table, motioning for a servant to clear the plates and utensils. "So, what brings you to my humble cottage?"

Raven began tentatively. "I have been told that you might be in a position to assist me in obtaining the goods I require."

"And what sort of goods would that be?"

"Laborers."

If he was shocked by her blunt disclosure, he gave no indication of it. His dark eyes assessed her thoughtfully. "Dealings of such a nature are usually left to men."

"I am recently widowed," she assured him with a lowering of her eyes, perpetuating the lie she had begun with D'Arcy. "There is no one else to do this. I need the laborers to work my fields. Without them, I face foreclosure."

"But why have you come to me? I am merely the proprietor of a forge, as you can see."

"I am told your accomplishments are more noteworthy than that," she replied, lifting her gaze to his.

Marcel's expression turned mildly suspicious. "And where did you hear such a thing?"

"From my uncle, Maurice D'Arcy." She prayed he did not detect the slight catch in her throat as she uttered the falsehood.

"Ah, Maurice. Why did you not say so at once? Yes, Maurice did speak to me of this. Of course, we can do business. But as I explained to your uncle, there are no slaves available at the moment. The embargo, you see. It will be many weeks before a new shipment arrives."

"*Monsieur* Sauvinet, if I may, there is another matter I wish to speak to you about. My servant has disappeared, and I am afraid something dreadful has happened to him."

He reached across the table to pat her small gloved hand reassuringly. "Do not worry. He will turn up."

"That seems to be the popular opinion, but it has been five days now since I sent him to see you."

"To see me? But that is impossible. I only just returned to New Orleans yesterday."

Raven's alarm grew. "I just know he has fallen into the hands of pirates. There's no telling what they will do to him. I've heard such stories."

“You should not believe everything you hear.”

Truthfully, she said, “Much of what I hear is about your own brother.”

Marcel shrugged knowingly. “No one has a kind word to say about Dominique.”

“I have heard that he is one of the worst pirates there is.” She trembled, conscious of his eyes upon her. Had she gone too far?

His mouth hardened into a tight line that lasted only a moment before disappearing behind an artificial smile. “You have nothing to fear from Dominique. He never even comes to New Orleans. The sea is his home.”

Raven toyed with the silver spoon on her saucer. “Tell me, *Monsieur* Sauvinet, would you consider something other than cash in payment of the laborers?”

This time his surprise registered on his face, but he answered candidly, “You are very beautiful, my dear, and I am, after all, only a man. But as tempting as your offer is, it would hardly be fair payment for what you want.”

Raven’s cheeks flamed scarlet and she gasped. “*Monsieur*! That is *not* what I meant.”

“Forgive me. I did not mean...It was not my intention...I thought you were offering...”

“Myself?” she huffed, putting an end to the poor man’s stammering. “Certainly not. I was speaking of jewels. Would you consider jewels in payment?”

He quickly regained his composure. “Frankly, cash is easier in these types of transactions.”

“And your brother? Would he also have no interest in jewels?” Inwardly, Raven was aghast. Where had she gotten the nerve to ask him such a question? He would surely suspect her motives now.

But he seemed to think nothing of it. “If you had asked me that question a week ago, I would have said no. But now?” He shrugged. “It is difficult to say what would interest Dominique. But we will never know. As I said, he is at sea.”

The tantalizing clue offered Raven scant encouragement when the rest of her questions about his brother were artfully dodged. Unable to glean more information out of him, and wary of arousing his suspicion, she rose to leave. “Thank you, *Monsieur*, for your time. Please send word when the goods are ready.”

“Leaving so soon?”

A richly resonant voice spoke from behind them. Turning, Raven’s breath was taken away by the sight of the most handsome man she had ever seen.

He came forward, boot heels clicking against the sienna tiles. He was dressed casually in a white cambric shirt that was opened nearly to the waist to reveal a bare chest dusted with tufts of hair, and close-fitting buff-colored breeches that were tucked into the tops of high-glossed ebony boots. He moved with the easy gait of a giant cat as he covered the distance between them.

Up close he was even more imposing, giving the impression of a firmly controlled energy. He was tall and dark and had the mark of strength stamped all over him. His lips were full and expressive, yet delicate enough to be beautiful. His nose was straight, almost patrician. There was a dimple on his right cheek, a lingering reminder of the boy lurking beneath the manly façade. But it was his eyes that affected her the most. They were the most curious shade of gold, reminding Raven of the lanterns the servants used to string across the lawn at Bellefontaine for outdoor parties. They twinkled just as brightly in their frame of thick, black lashes. Yet despite their unusual beauty, there was something within them that inspired a tremor of fear to race unchecked down her spine.

As those strangely-colored eyes moved over with the ease of liquid, she felt the flush of embarrassment from their all-consuming appraisal. The dimple on his cheek winked at her almost tauntingly when he smiled with obvious appreciation.

Marcel stepped forward to relieve the tension in the room. "Permit me to introduce my associate, Andre Dumaine. Andre, this is *Madam* Raven De Lys. *Madam* De Lys is the niece of a friend of mine."

"It is my pleasure to be at your service," came that deep-throated voice. He caught her gloved hand before she could hide it at her side and lifted it to his lips, lowering his eyes as he placed a wet, lingering kiss upon it. Releasing her, he grinned and winked at her, as if some secret existed between them.

Raven felt her face growing hot.

He made a soft sound of amusement. "Ah, Marcel, we have made her blush. And such an enchanting shade it is. Rather like the color of a pink rose."

Marcel rolled his eyes and stepped forward. "Andre is here on business. Isn't that right, Andre?" He turned to the other man, but the way those tiger-eyes were fixed on the poor girl, Marcel knew he hadn't heard a single word.

Raven was wishing fervently that she had worn a different dress. The willow green percale left entirely too much of her flesh exposed to his insolent stare. Although it was hardly the thing a widow would wear, it flattered her figure, and she reasoned that it would work more to her advantage than widow's black. She would have put any other man in his place for behaving so appallingly, but there was something about Andre Dumaine that stilled her saucy tongue. Forcing a politeness she did not feel, she inquired, "And what is your business, *Monsieur* Dumaine?"

"I am a planter from Natchez. And yours?" His voice was distinctly mellow, reminding her of the sonorous tones of the organ at the chapel at Bellefontaine.

"I, too, am a planter. Virginia is my home."

"Then no doubt we have both come to see Marcel for the same reason."

"I wouldn't know." With a perfunctory nod toward Marcel and a hasty, "*Monsieurs*", she turned and walked out.

Those amber eyes followed as she disappeared through the courtyard gate. "All your clients should be so lovely," he said, reluctantly tearing his lingering gaze away.

"Why?" Marcel huffed, visibly perturbed by the other man's behavior. "So that you could insult them the way you insulted her?"

"And how, pray tell, did I do that?"

"By the way you stared at her. My God, you would think you'd never seen a woman before."

"Did you see her eyes, Marcel? They are the most extraordinary color I have ever seen. Blue, I think. No, more like lavender. And that skin, so white, so perfect. Her hair is dark, but did you see the way it catches the sunlight in hints of gold? Wearing it swept up off her shoulders like that only accentuates the curve of her neck and her throat. I wonder if she realizes how it makes a man want to take it down from its pins and fill his hands with its richness." His fingers twitched at his sides at the mere thought it.

"She's a feisty little thing, too. Did you not notice how her chin tilted up at me as if she wanted to tell me a thing or two? Oh, she looks every bit the lady, but I'll wager under that proper façade is a she-devil."

He smiled devilishly, the way a man does when he has seen something he wants and knows it is only a matter of time before he obtains it. "My kind of woman, I would say."

“Isn’t it you who always says that a man who falls head over heels in love with a woman is a fool?” Marcel quipped.

“Who said anything about falling in love? If I fall into anything with that little beauty, it will be into bed.”

Heaving an exasperated sigh and hoping his companion’s lusty nature had not cost him the trade, Marcel said, “I presume now that your business in New Orleans is finished, you will be leaving?”

“You presume wrong.”

“You cannot be serious. There are beautiful women elsewhere. This one cannot be so special.”

“Not to you, perhaps,” the other replied.

“Where will you stay?”

“At the *Hotel de la Marine*,” Andre Dumaine replied as he headed for the door. On his way out, he tossed a wink to the pretty girl who entered the room. “Be sweet to your papa today, Zizi. I’m afraid I have put him in a foul mood.”

“What was that all about?” the girl asked.

Marcel’s brows were knit with worry, his mouth scrunched in a frown of displeasure. “He plans to stay in New Orleans for a while.”

“Ah,” she murmured knowingly. “Perhaps it will not be so bad.”

He tossed her a skeptical look. “Do you know the trouble our hot-headed friend can get himself into? He has already insulted a new client, and the day is young. If his temper does not get the best of him, then his arrogance surely will. He is fortunate that he is skilled with both pistols and foils, for if he remains in New Orleans for long, it will surely come to that.”

Zizi’s dark eyes widened in child-like wonder. “Is it true he killed a man in a duel in Natchez when he was just a boy?”

Marcel nodded solemnly. “An affair of honor over a woman twice his age. Do you see what I mean? Trouble follows in that one’s footsteps like a shadow. And in a place like New Orleans he is bound to find his share of it.” He expelled an exasperated breath. “In fact, I think he already has.”

He was thinking of the beautiful young widow with the violet eyes and husky voice. He knew her type. A woman like her could drive a man to poetry...or suicide. A smile spread slowly across Marcel’s lips. Something told him his tiger-eyed companion had met his match.