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# William

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*William*

by

Allison McNutt

Bachelor of Arts  
University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2009

Bachelor of Fine Arts  
University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2009

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## ABSTRACT

*William* is a novel that examines the lives of a pair of protagonists who are separated by approximately three hundred years of history. Liam is a modern history PhD who studies the colonial south, specializing in the years immediately following the pioneering period of Carolana rice cultivation around the turn of the eighteenth century; this is the middle ground after survival in the colony was largely secured, but when social hierarchies and racial allegiances were still in flux as the cash crop best suited to the coastal settlements had only just been discovered. Will is Liam's historical counterpart and lives during the time period that Liam, in the twenty-first century, is studying. Born in Barbados in the late seventeenth century, Will moved with his family when he was a young child (six-seven years old) to the North American mainland where it was far easier for new arrivals to gain footholds and prosper than it was in the already long-established and incredibly insular Barbadian sugar economy. The price of this economic and social opportunity, however, is having to cope with the inherent dangers of an unsettled land, and Will grows up with the constant awareness that everything his family is struggling to build is fragile and that it can easily be eradicated by threats ranging from American Indian raids, to hurricanes, to something as probable and simple as a bad harvest. The constant worry that results from this vulnerability produces in the adult Will a desire to build something that will last far beyond his own lifetime and that will be impermeable to

both the changeable elements and, impossibly, to time itself. The project he ultimately focuses this determination on is the transformation of his family's property—a small sea island several miles outside of Charleston—from undeveloped grazing land to an operational (and profitable) rice plantation.

Going far beyond sharing an emotional and intellectual entanglement (or obsession) with the same period of history, Liam and Will are linked by a shared consciousness as well, and thus both men are essentially living two lives at once. Liam exists in the modern world and is enveloped in academia, but whenever he falls asleep he becomes Will and wakes immediately in Will's body at the turn of the eighteenth century, which is where he remains as Will until Will falls asleep, and thereafter Liam immediately wakens back in the twenty-first century. Neither one ever really sleeps, and by the time my novel opens (when they are in their late twenties), exhaustion from such *incessant living* has started to take its toll.

Both because he is incapable of thinking about anything else and because he has firsthand knowledge that no one else in his field possesses—which thus gives him a leg-up over his peers—Liam tracks down the ruins of an abandoned and previously unheard-of rice plantation on a tiny, uninhabited sea island outside of Charleston, which he believes is where Will is living in the past. Using his unique and unrivaled knowledge of this site, Liam is able to obtain a grant and is working, along with his colleague Bram, to restore and return to working order for educational-tourism purposes the same plantation that Will is struggling to build for survival. While Liam exploits and profits from Will's knowledge of history, Will himself is attempting to profit from Liam's knowledge of more advanced rice-growing techniques

(specifically the controlled use of inter-coastal tidal rivers) that were not used historically until the mid-eighteenth century. There is a symbiotic and mutually abusive relationship via which I hope to raise the chicken-and-the-egg question of which came first: the history or the historiography?

## PREFACE

A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.

-Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940)

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

After my confession, the woman sitting beside me on the flight to Barbados put her left hand on my right knee and entrusted four facts about her life to me in turn. First, her given name was Cecilia, but since she could already tell what good friends we would be, I was to call her Cici. I winced at the indignity of the nickname and the vision it brought to mind of an insipid bubblegum-chewing sorority girl but ultimately agreed. Second, she affirmed that she herself was an insomniac-sleepwalker who, when she did succumb to sleep, often fell victim to a series of vivid dreams in which she herself acted as a favored lady-in-waiting to Marie Antoinette. I remember she used those words exactly—*fell victim to*—because the phrasing struck me as apt. Third, the aftermath of these dreams, during which time it was difficult for her to separate her past from her present self, was a major contributing factor in her recent divorce. I glanced down at the hand squeezing my knee for confirmation, but the ring finger was uniformly white and inconclusive. Fourth, she had encouraged and continued to allow her twelve-year-old daughter to believe that her husband, the girl’s father, was horn-dogging around with his twenty-one-year-old hygienist rather than owning up to the truth of her own nocturnal wanderings.

“Better a clichéd dad than a crazy mom,” she said, “right?” Then she laughed, a short barking seal cough laugh, and withdrew her hand from my thigh.



I turned as far sideways as I could in my coach seat without unbuckling. An armrest punched sharp into my kidney, but I suppressed the wince, ignored it. I wanted to see her better. “Your ex is a dentist?” I asked.

“Orthodontist,” Cici corrected and bared her teeth a bit. They were terribly straight and white, and I immediately felt the urge to run one finger along the uppers’ edge, to test their sharpness, to see if I might graze a canine and draw my own blood. On a whim, I bared mine in turn, peeling my lips as far from my teeth as they would go. She laughed, head tipped back, and it sounded different from before—more bark, less cough, loud and brassy. I liked the girth of that laugh very much.

“Thank god,” she said. “You have crooked teeth.” Then her mouth snapped shut as her eyes popped wide. “*Oh my god*. I didn’t mean—” She held one hand out, flashing a glimpse of tender pink palm, and I thought I would let her ramble for a minute just to see what fell out of her mouth. “They’re not very crooked,” she said. “Only a cuspid here and there, just enough to drive Jerry nuts. Jerry’s my ex, you see. And, oh!—I wasn’t imagining that the two of you might ever meet, or that he’d ever actually *see* your teeth. It’s just nice, you see, talking to someone for once who doesn’t look like they’re right out of a Colgate commercial. It was like being in a room full of jackals sometimes. All those gleaming teeth.” She shuddered, and her eyebrows moved up another notch, causing her already round eyes—hazel, I noted, browner than they were gold or green—to assume even more startling proportions. “Of course,” she breathed. Her voice softened, taking on a tone of sudden revelation, and dropped in volume by several decibels. She repeated, “Oh, of course. You couldn’t have braces, could you? I mean, you just *couldn’t*. Not in

your situation. It would be impossible. Of course it would. How would it look if you just woke up one day with a mouth full of wire and springs, and—”

That was enough. Reaching out, I pressed two fingers to her mouth and was pleased to find that whatever product she used to darken its color wasn't greasy or sticky or slick. Her lips felt like lips, which was a luxury I could appreciate. “I wasn't insulted,” I told her. “And you're exactly right, that I couldn't have braces. But I stopped worrying about that a long time ago. It's fine, really.”

She half-smiled beneath my fingers. Her shoulders relaxed, and her eyes returned to their natural size. Distracted, I didn't move my hand right away. I was thinking instead about how everything really was fine. She didn't know how it worked, didn't understand that everything external to the body—clothing, piercings, nail polish (don't ask)—remained behind, safe while I slept. Only the internal things—illnesses, wounds, my tattoo (I had to know)—carried through. If I'd had braces, it would have worked just fine. Will's teeth would have moved too, he'd have felt the same pain I felt and, moreover, he would've had inexplicable gaps between his back molars around where the rings fit. I figured this all out when I was thirteen, forced my friends to open wide and show me how it worked, pretended I was nervous for my own turn in the chair, but really I wanted to make sure it was possible, that they didn't drill holes and move your teeth from the inside, just in case my parents insisted. Then Daddy was laid off between New Years and Easter and, looking back on it later, I thought he and Mother must have been relieved when I never raised the issue of braces myself. Still, I hadn't lied to the woman beside me. It really was fine. I liked her speckled eyes and her oversized laugh and the fact that I could feel the indurate presence of her teeth through her flattened lips. Those teeth had to

be sharp. And even though she'd lied to me and had failed my first test and was likely no more a maid to Marie Antoinette than I was the twelfth king of Persia, everything was just fine. I'd long since learnt to expect nothing else.

The drink cart rattled to a stop in the aisle beside us, and I ordered two bloody marys— each with an extra pinch of salt and a skewer of green olives—from a sable-haired stewardess with the daintiest wrists I'd ever seen. She didn't look at Cici and me as she deftly mixed our drinks, lowered the seatback trays, served two half-sized cocktails in plastic cups, then walked on. Her thigh-height skirt, I thought, was just the tiniest bit too short.

“Trust me,” I told my in-flight companion, nodding at her drink. “You'll thank me later,” and I took my fingers from Cici's mouth so she could taste how right I was.

She sipped, nodded, said, “Salty, but good,” and drank again. “Quite good, really.” She used her pinky then to spear one of the barrel-shaped ice cubes in her drink, and she twirled it around and around until it had melted enough internally to slide down the length of her finger where it fit like a clear cold ring. She looked at me from the corner of her eye, peering from underneath lashes that were lavish enough to remind me of imported Viennese fans, of a female deer in a Disney cartoon; I recognized the courtly trick but still found it effective, for all that I was aware of the mascara-ad kitsch. “I couldn't resist,” she said, hand raised as proudly as if it were sporting a rare canary diamond. “I always scold my daughter when she does that, for being naughty, playing with her drink and all.” I watched a droplet of water slide from the base of her pinky along the outside of her ringless hand and disappear inside the sleeve of her leopard-print cardigan. If she'd closed her eyes then and shivered, or maybe parted her lips in a silent

*ooh*, I'd have laughed out loud. The batting lashes, the cooing courtier moves—it was all getting to be too much. Instead she quickly slurped the cube from her finger and chomped down with those terrible white teeth. I shivered at the crackling sound.

I stretched my legs, reclined my seat, tried to arrange myself as comfortably as possible without compromising my view of Cici. “Tell me about her,” I said.

Her cup was raised in mid-sip. “My daughter?” She sounded surprised.

“If you like. I'd be glad to hear about her. But I was referring to the queen.”

“*Bien sûr.*” She nodded. “Of course you were.” She shifted then as well.

Maneuvering around the seatback tray, she crossed her right leg over the left and angled her body toward mine. Our knees bumped. Mine was bare below my shorts, hers in grey slacks with a luster just shy of glitter, and we were enclosed in a cubicle of space filled with the thrumming roar of the jetliner's engines. The upholstery surrounding us was geometric, stamped with navy and maroon bars knit together like bluntly entwined fingers. Had we occupied a first-class berth, we might have drawn our privacy curtain and shut the rest of the world out altogether. Then it would have felt much like we were in bed together in an era before canopies were no longer la mode.

“What do you want to know?” Cici asked. “About Her Majesty?”

I didn't hesitate. “Did she really say ‘let them eat cake’?”

She slapped my bare forearm with enough force to emit a *pop!*, causing the heads of several nearby passengers to raise up, to turn in our direction. “She did not,” Cici said, and her voice was tight; her lips barely moved; those wonderful teeth were all but concealed. “Madame is kind and good. She would never say such a thing. She cries over

the plight of her people. I hear her at night sometimes, the sound of her sobs in her pillow. Once, she refused to eat for three days herself, out of pity. She—”

“She wasn’t even in France yet when Rousseau wrote that line,” I interrupted. “I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.” I flexed my forearm, enjoying the sting that still lingered. It meant she was emotionally—perhaps even irrationally—involved which, for me, was a hopeful sign.

“Oh.” Cici’s eyes widened and her darkened lower lip trembled. “You were teasing me. Bien sûr. Of course you were. I should have known. Oh, your poor arm.” She began stroking me, petting the spot she had struck, using her nails slightly and clucking under her breath, as if I were a wrongfully spanked toddler. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m too defensive. I take things too seriously. Jerry always told me that, but I can’t seem to help myself.”

I placed my hand over hers, flattening her palm against the tissue I hoped would bruise. “You protect the ones you love,” I said. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

She laughed, open-mouthed, loud, flashing teeth. “You’re a charmer, you are,” she said. “Telling me exactly what I want to hear. Madame would warn me. She’d say you are très dangereux, tell me I have to watch out for you.” She squeezed my arm hard, then winked. “Especially near any tapestried alcoves.” And I felt as if she’d uncovered a great secret of mine that I’d hoped to conceal for at least a while longer.

“Here.” I offered Cici her cup, still half-full and wet with condensation. “Drink up,” I said, “before the ice melts. Then we can order another.”

She accepted the drink, took a long sip, then asked, “Do you really want to hear about her? About Madame, I mean? About what she’s really like?”

“Very much,” I assured her. “I want to hear everything.”

The details she peppered her account with were very good, excellent even. Her Majesty’s reputation for constantly tipping champagne as she devoured towers of lavish French pastry is undeserved, Cici said. In truth, the queen eats almost nothing but roasted poultry and prefers to drink only water. Her one weakness is strong Austrian coffee, which she takes without any cream or sweetener, albeit from exquisite teacups as translucently fragile as the soft part of an infant’s skull. “But she is Queen,” Cici said. “What should she drink from? A wooden cup with a splintered rim?” I agreed that no rational person would expect any such thing, and she smiled her gratitude. The image people hold of her, all the accoutrements—the ruffles and silk, the towering powdered hair, the mile-wide panniers—that is entirely wrong. She only looks that way for state functions, when she is obliged to. Léonard and Rose, “her hairdresser and her modiste, you know,” have to beg her to spend the requisite hours at her toilette on such occasions. She would far rather appear in muslin with her hair loose, but then her detractors, “les honteux canards”—always criticizing, always quacking—they berate her for disgracing her station, for disappointing the masses, for not styling herself as the greatest lady of Versailles had ought. “She suffers so,” Cici lamented. “Very few people understand how she suffers.”

“What about the king?” I asked.

“Fffft.” She waved one hand in dismissal, and I noted the impressive length of her nails, filed into elongated rounds and demurely polished clear. “Il est un homme,” she said, and her accent was as authentic as any I’d heard. “Madame must be strong for him. When baby Sophie died, His Majesty wept in her lap, and she stroked his hair and dried

his eyes, and never let on how she could barely stand up for her own grief. But I was there,” Cici whispered. “When they painted La Petite out of the grand portrait, I was there. Madame watched the whole time, and she refused to let anyone come near, and the sounds she made when the cradle was finally empty—” Her voice broke off, and she leaned forward to press her brow to my chest. “I’m sorry.” She said this into my shirt, allowing me to feel the damp heat of her breath.

I set down my bloody mary to wrap one arm around her. I stoked her back and felt the ridges of her scapulae—bony protuberances that made me think of a half-completed excavation, the partially uncovered walls of a once-great manor rising inexorably toward the surface. Her susceptibility paired with my knowledge of the brink upon which she teetered both excited and frightened me at once. It was in my power, I knew, to archaeologize the truth of her, to pick at the base of her foundation and see what was really buried underneath. It would be easy. It would take only a few well-phrased question, a handful of inarguable dates. France is not my area of expertise, so I was unsure exactly when Princess Sophie died, but there were other years I knew better. 1789: The storming of the Bastille. 1791: The royals’ attempted flight to Varennes. 1792: The attack on the Tuileries Palace and the massacre of the Swiss Guard. 1793: The king’s execution early in the year, followed by the queen’s own trip to the guillotine in October. These were things I knew, things that she had to know as well, things, moreover, with which she might be confronted. *What year is it there now? What are you going to do when — ? Will you cease to dream, or is that when the real living starts?* These questions and others like them formed a concrete assemblage in my throat that I wanted more than anything to expel. But I was not Will, I reminded myself. He and I were not the same. I

might have been enticed, but I was not intoxicated by the power I held over others. Unlike him, I was a gentleman, and every true gentleman knows that one does not vomit on a woman whom one has only just met.

Backpedaling, if only for a while, I continued to rub Cici's shoulders. "It's all right." I told her, "I understand. You're a mother yourself. It must be hard for you to speak of such things."

She sniffed against my shirtfront, then pulled away and straightened by degrees, unrolling the forward arch of her spine bit by bit. She didn't raise her head until the last, and I thought of a fast-motion shot of a perennial in bloom, of the way a swamp sunflower is always loveliest when viewed in profile so the slender neck of its stem is not obscured by fanned petals. I expected tears or, at the very least, wet eyes blurred with rapid blinking. Neither of these signs were in evidence, and though she sniffed again and used the tips of two manicured fingers to brush across both cheekbones, first one side and then the other, there were no telltale glossy streaks, no clumped and spiky lashes, not even a lone snot bubble to be found. With her face turned wholly up toward mine, narrow shoulders bravely squared, and her mouth pouting and open just slightly, she wasn't teetering on any projected emotional or historical brink. She was radiant.

"Thank you." Cici sniffed once more. "You're very kind, very understanding."

"Like Madame?" I hit the call button for the stewardess.

"No." She produced a half-sized laugh. "Not at all like Madame. She *is* kind, very kind. And she might cry *for* me, but that's different than letting me cry on her, n'est-ce pas? But then—"



“But then, she is queen,” I interrupted. “What can you expect? For her to open her arms and proffer her bosom to every runny-nosed brat who comes along?”

“Exactement.” She began petting me again—the tender spot she had struck—and her touch seemed rasping hot, as if her palms were boll-frayed as a field hand’s.

“Madame couldn’t possibly be so approachable. I’m so glad you see.”

“Oh, I see.” I extracted my arm by reaching again for the call button. “Thirsty,” I apologized with a nod in Cici’s direction. I pressed my index finger into the face of the white-on-orange silhouetted server and faintly heard the polite *ding-ding* chime in the galley.

“I feel like I’ve been doing all the talking.” She put her hand on my knee.

“I don’t mind, really.” I arched my neck, raised against my seatbelt, searching.

“But *I. Do.*” She punctuated each word by tapping my thigh. “You opened up, you shared something *intensely personal* with me—a complete stranger. And what did I do? I high jacked the conversation and made it all about me.”

“You shouldn’t say ‘high jacked’.”

“Oh! I didn’t mean... You don’t think—?”

“No, no. Our conversation’s been so banal. I’m sure no one’s listening. I’m sure no one thinks—”

“Can I help you, Sir? Ma’am?”

We both flinched; Cici’s grip clamped tight on my knee. I turned to see the slim-wristed stewardess, who had approached us from behind this time. “Two refills.” I raised my cup, said, “please,” and I authorized all additional charges without questioning the price.

With her freshened drink in hand, Cici turned to me. “I was serious,” she said, “not just being polite. I want to hear about you too. About where you go. About your plantation.”

If there had been any undue emphasis on the word *plantation*—an indulgent tone or any hint of a julep-scented drawl on her breath—I’d have refused out of hand. But she just said it, the word and all that it implies but without any of the implications. She might have said *farm* or *breakfast cereal* in exactly the same way, devoid of any sociocultural baggage. And, to be fair, I had been the one to initiate this sharing game.

“We grow rice,” I said. “Or we will. Soon. The floodgates and canals are still under construction.”

“Really? Rice? I didn’t know that was a thing.”

I tested my new drink, found it a bit light on the salt, said, “Mmm, yes. Carolina gold. Much better than the Incan kind. We just kept growing more. Pizarro could only dream of doing that.” She smacked my arm again lightly—in reward for my fine wit, I assumed—then used it as an excuse to keep touching me. “Did you know,” I said, “that in the fall of 1700 there was nearly four hundred thousand pounds of rice sitting on the Charleston docks waiting for export, so many barrels of it that there weren’t enough ships to load them all onto.”

“Were you there?” Cici breathed, speckled eyes wide, nails biting my skin.

“Of course not. I read about it. Remember, I told you?— that our canals are still under construction. We haven’t turned out a crop yet.”

“Oh.” She looked crestfallen.

“But it’s only a matter of time.” I said, “Wait,” and reached awkwardly beneath the seatback tray and rummaged through my laptop bag until I found the smooth plastic folder filled to bursting with neatly paperclipped promotional material. “Purple, purple, purple,” I muttered, flipping through the mass of documents. “Lime green. No, that’s chartreuse.”

“*Chartreuse.*” Cici corrected my pronunciation, hocking on the R and making the word’s end ooze. Peering down into my lap, she asked, “What’s all that stuff? Why all the tabs?”

“Bram,” I explained, “my partner. He has this elaborate color-coding system.”

“Partner?”

I looked up to see she had one eyebrow raised impressively high, and I took a moment to admire the smooth shape of the arch. “In business only.” I smiled. “But if either one of us were inclined to an alternate lifestyle, Bram and I would have eloped years ago.”

“Just checking.” She patted my arm.

“Aha!” I cried, then echoing Bram, “Maroon. Maroon for making money,” and Cici’s laugh was as oversized as ever. I extracted a sheaf of papers and pulled from their midst a shiny, laser-print mockup of a tourism brochure. The front panel showed a two-story Georgian plantation home with multiple chimneys and dual staircases curving up to the raised front door. Half-sized casement windows at ground level revealed the fact of the basement underneath. From roofline to foundation, the edifice was brick, perfectly symmetrical, beautiful. “The outer walls are more than sixteen inches thick,” I told her.

“It barely even needs to be air conditioned. We finished rebuilding almost a year ago. Now we’re onto the canals and slave quarters. Here.” I handed it over. “Take a look.”

“It’s lovely,” Cici said, then she immediately flipped the pamphlet over, honing in on the personal information on the back. “There you are.” She stroked Bram’s face first, then mine. Her touch lingered. “Proprietors and Directors,” she read. “Abraham Outlawe, PhD, and William Ayres, also PhD. Very impressive credentials you have there, Professor.” She skimmed one nail down the list of Bram’s and my historical publications.

“Call me Liam,” I reminded her. “Please.” Teasing then, “And you should see my CV. That’s where all the really good stuff is.”

Playing along, beating me at my own game, she said, “I’d like to, Liam,” and her voice was nearly a purr. “In fact, I can’t think of anything else I’d like more.” I rolled my eyes. Her answering laugh was enormous.

We talked a while longer about the plantation and our plans for it, about what Bram and I envisioned having in the end, but when the stewardess announced the imminent projection of the in-flight movie—the most recent installation in the *Harry Potter* series—we both decided we were feeling tired and whimsical enough to partake. Cici popped out one of her earbuds so she could lay her head on my shoulder. I was momentarily startled, then pleased, then I reciprocated, resting my cheek against her hair; it was cool and soft and didn’t smell of anything in particular. By that point, I thought, it went without saying that we’d be spending the long weekend together at whichever one of our hotels levied the cheapest fee for the last-minute accommodation of a second guest. There was unfinished business between us, of one sort or another, and I was not ready yet to relinquish her to the universe.

While an odd-looking redheaded boy was mooning over a milky-skinned girl who I thought would grow up to become quite stunning, I felt myself begin falling victim to an altitude- and vodka-induced nap. The engines' deafening throb became a soothing mantle of white noise. Cici rubbing my arm reminded me of my mother sitting beside me at the dentist's, holding my hand, urging me to relax and to give myself over to the novocain. I tried like hell to fight it, but the two bloody marys—those treacherous bitches—demanded their due.

Opening his eyes to the variegated pattern of moonlight spilling through lace, Will awakens. He can tell by the shadows angled on his wall that it is very late, at least three hours past midnight. He groans, stretches, speaks into the dark: "Better to not get your hopes up, Liam, my friend. You know how this game plays out. Ought to just fuck her and forget her." He throws back the coverlet and struggles to swing his legs over the side of the down-filled mattress. The bed is thick, overly yielding, and hard to get out of. Sometimes at night Will feels as though he is drowning in feathers, sinking beneath the ghostly remnants of waterfowl that will resurrect to smother him in his sleep. But it was expensive, the imported English linen the finest money can buy, and after putting him to bed each night during his childhood on moss and straw ticks with rough stalks obtruding or the dampness soaking through, his mama will no longer stand for him to sleep on anything but the best they can stretch their funds to afford.

"Fuck her and forget her," Will repeats, and rolls his neck a few times before his feet hit the floor. "Not that you ever listen to me." He stretches again, raising his arms

high until his spine pops then, relieved, he walks to the window. It is open, the interior shutters fastened back, and he likes the feel of the cool, slightly damp air against his nakedness. A light wind tangy with the combined scents of salt and dirt trickles through a screen of pinned-up lace. The lace itself is another extravagance, a needless and barely-affordable luxury he sometimes feels guilt over, but he cannot bear being shuttered up on anything but the coldest nights, and the one time he tried the more traditional form of mosquito netting—gauzy panels fastened above and draped over and around his bed—he woke near dawn with his limbs twisted in cloth, one piece knotted around his neck, and the awful uncertainty of both who had done it, himself or Bethia, and of which one of these was the worse possibility.

Stooping, Will leans both elbows on the windowsill and presses his nose to the lace. The moonlit world before him doubles, blurs, and he closes one eye to sharpen his vision. The lace scratches his mouth when he smiles, whispers, “There’s my girl.” Spread before him is a broad expanse of painstakingly cleared land with a half dozen cypresses and live oaks visible in mass silhouette. These are the hugely deep-rooted ones he’s chosen to believe he keeps for ornamentation, to climb when he’s feeling puckish, and to give his mama a shady place to nap with a forgotten needle or book in her lap. The silvery glint of moving water flickers in the distance, and Will imagines he can hear the high-tide river lap the pilings of the newly-refurbished docks. It’s an improvement that should have been made years before, one Will’s deceased father failed to see to, and he feels victorious knowing that he and not his predecessor is the one who has made impossible the continued theft of their property under the guise of wooden cleats rotting and breaking off in the night. In his mind then, Will cranes his neck further, extends it

periscope-like across the intercoastal waterway, past the fields where the subsistence crops grow, and he peers down on his half-finished rice fields with their hopeful canals and parallel embankment-lined ditches.

When he finally straightens, draws back his imaginarily extended neck to reenter the safely aerated room, he has a lace flower's outline stamped on his nose and an erection tenting the front of his drawstring cotton shorts that are the closest Bethia has yet come to approximating boxers with only Will's descriptions to use for reference.

Wills' feet slap planked flooring as he walks to a pallet spread out in front of the cold brick hearth. It is similar to, and perhaps might even be one of, the palliasses he slept on as a child, and he stares for a moment, jealous, before nudging the sleeping figure on top with his bare foot. "Pluto." His voice is low. "Pluto, wake up, boy." The form doesn't stir, and Will squats down, shakes him roughly, says again more loudly, "Pluto, wake up! I swear, you sleep like the dead."

Blankets rustle, and a fuzzy head—freshly washed and razored short the day before by Will's mama—raises up. The eyes set in the dark face are wide enough to show their whites all around, and the plump mouth is open in a startled O; pearly teeth wink bright in the dark. "I'm not dead, Mist' Will." The reedy voice cracks adolescently. "I swear it."

"You were doing a fine impression of it," Will snaps, then apologizes by clapping one hand on the boy's scruff and shaking him affectionately. "Do something for me, Pluto," and Pluto nods but not enough to dislodge the grip on his neck. "I want you to go fetch Bethia. Send her to me, then you spend the rest of the night in her bed."

The request is a familiar one and Pluto responds automatically, rising to neatly fold and tuck away his pallet, glancing just once at his master's impatient body, eyes moving in a helpless sideways jerk that looks to Will like the reflexive cringing-away of a nocturnal rodent from light. He hurries across the room and is unfastening the door latch when Will says his name, "*Pluto*," in a protracted scolding tone that causes the boy—named after the cartoon dog and not the defunct planet—to freeze, hang his head, to turn back around with shoulders hunched up toward his too-large ears. "Bethia came to me," Will says, and approaches the boy slowly. "About the last time you slept in her bed, about the mess you left in her sheets." He pauses then, having drawn close enough to reach out and down and to set one hand on Pluto's pubertal, bony shoulder. "Did you think she wouldn't?" Will asks, "That she wouldn't come and tell me what you did?"

"Nossir." Pluto's head shakes wretchedly as he looks straight ahead at his master's chest.

"Where do animals sleep, Pluto?" Will asks.

"In the hay in the barn, Mist' Will."

"And where else?"

"In the fields."

"Good, Pluto." Will squeezes his shoulder. "And how do they sleep in the fields?"

"Standing up in they own shit."

Will nods his approval. "Are you an animal, Pluto?" His voice is conspiratorially low, and Pluto strains back, his body rocking slightly as he visibly resists the need to lean in closer.

"Nossir."



“Do you want to sleep in the barn? In a field with the other beasts?”

“Nossir, Mist’ Will.”

“Wouldn’t you much rather sleep in a warm, soft bed that reeks of woman?”

“Yessir.” Pluto licks his lips. “I surely would.” His eyes in the filigree shadows are huge black orbs rimmed bluish white.

“Then you’d best clean up after yourself, hmmm?” Will spins Pluto around, swats his rump, pushes him toward the door, says, “It’s the gentlemanly thing to do,” and Pluto scampers out of the room, allowing the lacquered pine door to close too heavily behind him. Will winces at the noise, thinking how lightly his mama sleeps, about how acute her hearing is, and he hopes her habitual evening toddy was laced with just a touch more smuggled rum than usual. Then he hears the soft thud of Pluto’s footfalls pounding up the attic stairs and he sighs, resigns himself to the lecture he’ll no doubt be forced to imbibe the next morning along with his fried hog scrapple and thriftily weak Indian tea. “You think I’m so wicked,” he says to the empty room, “that I’m hard and so cruel.” He stalks to the hearthside corner, flings himself into an upholstered William-and-Mary armchair. The feather-stuffed cushion flattens underneath and puffs up between his thighs. “But I haven’t beat that boy yet.” He challenges, “Have I? I haven’t flogged him once, nor set him to mine out stumps in the swamp. He’s slept safe in this house every night of his life. I am *benevolent*.” Will groans and buries his face in both hands. “I’m fucking Mother Teresa.”

“Who you fucking?”

Will looks up to see Bethia standing in his doorway, arms crossed, occupying the space as thoroughly as if it were a gilded portrait frame. She is substantial, every bit as

tall as Will and strong besides, capable of chopping logs like a man and of lifting baskets piled with three weeks' worth of damp laundry. Her needlework is minute, her pilau is tender, and she can hammer nails at the rate of three per every ten seconds. Will's mama has timed her. If sold she could bring more than £100 sterling or be bartered for three prize Marsh Tacky mares, but to Will her value is incalculable.

“Who's Teresa?” Bethia demands, upper lip raised in a half-snarl. “Sounds Spanish.”

“Nobody.” Will shakes his head. “No one here, I should say. Just someone Liam knows.” He rolls his eyes, waves a hand heavenward. “I was talking to him.”

Bethia's scowl recedes and she lowers her arms, allowing her night rail to drape more loosely around her in semi-transparent homespun folds. Will can see through slack cotton to the mahogany skin beneath—the firm and dark silhouette of her bruising the screen of superimposed white—and he knows she is wearing nothing else. Pluto, he thinks, must have immensely enjoyed waking her.

“Why you do that?” Bethia asks, making no attempt to hold her wrap closed as she saunters across the room. Her accent, which a moment before was barbed with the rough edges of a Creole patois, is now vaguely Parisian. “Soon as you think it, he knows it, right? Why you need to say it?”

Will shrugs, holds one hand out to her. “Habit.” He grasps the fingers she offers that are more slender but wholly as long and rough as his own, then tugs her onto his lap, draws her in close. “When I was much younger,” he pauses to sniff at her jaw, “even before you were born, Mama was sure I was touched, that I was talking to spirits. She wanted to have me blessed, but Father wouldn't permit any such Papist drivel in the house.”

Bethia laughs and circles her hands around his neck. She grabs the queued hair at his nape and begins picking apart the leather knot. She makes no attempt to be gentle. “That sounds like your father. God rest him,” she adds. “And what does Missus Mama think now?”

“Now?” Will shrugs again and winces at a sharp tug on his scalp. He grabs a handful of Bethia’s robe, pulls it aside. “You would know better than I.” He admires the round of her hip, strokes the muscle there that is covered with just a trace of fleshy padding. “But, I suppose, now she must think I’ve outgrown it. Either that, or I’ve learnt to ignore it. I don’t imagine she cares which it is.”

“She cares,” Bethia corrects. “Of course she does. She cares about everything.”

“And everyone.” Will snorts. “Everything and everyone.”

“Don’t be churlish.” The muscles in Bethia’s arms go rigid, and an instant later Will’s hair is freed. She drops the leather thong along with a handful of still-rooted strands onto the floor, where a light wind sends them tumbling into the empty hearth. Will shudders in the ripping aftermath of their loss. “Your mama loves you,” Bethia scolds.

“I know.” He shakes his head, wiggles his eyebrows to relieve the sting. “And I her. There’s no need to scalp me.”

“I am part Carib,” she reminds him, moving to straddle his thighs. “Or did you forget?”

“Forget that you come from a long line of man-scalping cannibals?” He tugs her night rail off altogether, and her shadowy mass hides him from view. “How could I possibly?”

“You have a lot of days to remember.” Her mouth is at his brow, hot breaths wafting down from above. “Twice as many as most. There is much you might forget.”

Will is reassuring. “I have room for it all.” He lifts her then, using most of his strength to do so, counters leeringly, “Do you?”

Withdrawing her tongue from his ear, Bethia asks Will if Liam does anything like this with his Teresa, if Spanish women are as striking as she’s heard, and Will laughs booming, mindless to both his mama’s delicate morals and her highly-attuned ears. He answers in the negative and promises to explain to her later more about Albanian nuns and Calcuttan hospice care. Bethia grunts, claws his back, tells him he makes less sense than a goat-headed dog, and Will is still chuckling when he leans and closes his teeth on the rounded muscle of her shoulder. It is like taking a bite out of an apple.

The fullness in my ears was nearing excruciation when I awoke, lifted my head from Cici’s shoulder, began frantically wagging my jaw back and forth. I swallowed twice, still wiggling, then held my nose and blew. The mild percussion when my ossicles shifted and the worst of the pressure expelled made me sag with relief. “Shit.” I turned to Cici. “Sorry.” I gave my eyes a one-fisted rub. “We’re landing?”

The greater part of Cici’s face was lost behind a light blue gum bubble that smelt vaguely of cotton candy and was expanding by the second. It attained nearly the size of a grapefruit before a tear around the base caused the whole thing to collapse inward.

Instead of allowing it to stick to her nose, however, she employed an expert spaghetti-like

slurp and the whole shriveled wad disappeared behind her unpainted lips and great white teeth. As a kid, I'd always wanted and was never quite able to perfect that move.

"We're landing," she confirmed, and nodded toward the movie screen, which was now lit with the projection of a hugely out-of-scale airplane inching its way across neon water on the eastern edge of a toy-sized archipelago. "We're T minus 20 from Christ Church. I'd offer you some gum for those ears," she said, "but this was my last piece." She opened wide, flashing the blue lump on her tongue. Her mouth around it was faintly lavender. "That is, of course, unless you don't mind sharing. I'd be more than happy to—"

"No, no." I grabbed her hand as she was raising it to extract her pre-chewed gum. "I'll be fine, thanks." I dropped a light kiss on her knuckles. "You're sweet to offer. It just built up because I was sleeping and not popping as we go."

Cici coughed once, then nodded sagely. "You missed the movie," she said.

"I'm sorry. Those drinks must've been stronger than I thought."

"Mmm hmm. They packed a middling punch. I took a quick nap myself."

"That's nice." I made a mental note to look up the etymology of the word 'middling,' to see when it was in and when it had fallen out of popular use.

"Did you have pleasant dreams?" Her tone was as sweet as the bubblegum on her breath.

"So so," I allowed, teetering one flat hand to concede mediocrity.

"Could've fooled me."

I looked at her sharply, dumbly said, "Huh?" and she flashed me a purplish grin, winked, then cut her eyes toward my crotch.

For the first time I noticed the navy felt-textured blanket draped over my lap and tucked securely in on either side of my knees. It was tight and hot, and I felt suddenly confined, as if I'd been whip-stitched into an impermeable bundling bag. Tugging at and lifting the top edge of the blanket, I saw that underneath a child-sized airline pillow had been strategically positioned atop my groin. When I touched it, lightly, with dread, the casing's white fabric stuck like cobwebs to my fingertips. I didn't need to lift it to know that underneath the pillow I'd find the now perceptibly cold and stickily congealing evidence of my appreciation for Bethia's Amazonian buxomness. "Jesus," I muttered, and allowed the blanket to fall back into place. Nothing like that had happened to me in years. "Sweet bleeding Christ."

"Now, now." Cici patted my arm, the tender spot she had slapped and to which she kept returning. "There's no need to panic." She kept her voice low. Her manner was as businesslike as if she were talking to her preteen daughter. "I don't suppose you have a change of clothes in your carry-on? An extra pair of undies?" The glare I shot her was answer enough. "Really? Men are so unprepared. Then...how about a jacket, or a sweatshirt? Something you can tie around your waist?"

"Windbreaker." I sighed. "Okay, that'll work."

Cici blew a small bubble that popped loudly. "See?" She smiled. "It's just like Madame always says: *À cœur vaillant rien d'impossible.*" Her phlegmatic Rs were impeccable.

"Nothing is impossible with a valiant heart?" I translated, amused. "Even sneaking off a plane"—I nodded toward my lap—"in my current state of dishabille?"

"Rien." Cici concurred. "And you can walk behind me if you want."

I cupped my hands on either side of her jaw, tipped her face up toward mine, and kissed her hard. Will, I knew, wanted me to use my tongue, but I forbore and discounted his insolent suggestion. Cici didn't belong to me. But she allowed me to hold her, her face against mine, until her breath was gone, and then she pulled back slightly. Manfully I let her go.

“Was that a ‘thank you,’” she asked, “for not reporting you to the sky cops?”

“I don't think they have those here.” And I realized she had one hand curled around my neck, that her fingers had slid up into the hair between my pigtail and my skull. The hurt was a puzzlement until I remembered—the flexing of Bethia's strong earth-colored forearms, the blood on Wills neck, a tumbleweed of our hair rolling into the fireplace.

“Ah.” Cici's purple tongue flicked over her lips. “I still might've cried Perv.”

“But I'm glad you didn't.”

“I surely am too,” she drawled, mimicking the widened vowels of my accent, then she fluttered her lashes to make me laugh.

When we descended the narrow airplane steps onto the sizzling Barbadian tarmac, I carried Cici's bag and she walked in front of me, slightly too close and too slow for comfort. The sky was Egyptian blue with billowing sugar-white clouds and the heat from the equatorial sun pierced my hatless head, sank deeply into my untanned skin, broiled me gently in a palpable embrace of welcome. I'd only felt that sense of recognition—of *homecoming*—once before in my life, and then I'd been on another island altogether, nearly two thousand miles northwest of Christ Church Parish, five hours away by plane or an excruciating month by ship in the winter currents. There I'd

been high deep in cordgrass with my ankles sunk in mud, my flip-flops lost God only knows where, and was Bram standing nearby, nearly shouting at me though I could barely hear him. He demanded to know why I'd brought him there, on a Saturday of all days, when we might've been beach-bumming on Kiawah or bar-hopping in Charleston, and what could I possibly want with a broken-down islet without even a bridge to get there when the tide was in—"And goddammit, Liam, didn't you drag in the dinghy? For fuck sake"—so we had better get cell service out there, or so help him he was going to force feed me Walter Edgar's *South Carolina: A History* one page at a time until I begged for mercy or puked up pulp, whichever came first—"Where do you think you're going, you scrawny little....Don't you make me chase after you." Then I was steering around dense stands of cedar and ironwood trees with trucks set impenetrably close, and nothing looked as familiar to me as I thought it should, until a bend in a stream, a familiar flat-topped rock that was almost but not quite a boulder, then sprinting west-southwest while Bram tore through the woods at my back, struggling to keep up on this land that he didn't remember he had once known as well as he then knew the current trends in transatlantic historiography—"Dammit, Liam! Wait!" And there was a vertical wall of resurrection ferns before me, their bright green fronds growing atop one another the way they often do up the side of dead or dying trees, and leaves like razors cut deep as I grabbed handfuls and ripped, tossed the detritus to the ground, scraped my knuckles on crumbling mortar and continued to tear free the roots, undaunted, to use my nails and to scratch at chunks of accumulated moss and three hundred years' worth of fungus, until there was Bram by my side, panting, looking over my shoulder, then reaching his black hands to work



alongside mine, to finish what I had begun, to gently brush aside the trailing strands of uprooted half-rotted flora and to whisper, “*The fuck? Are those bricks?*”

Cici had stopped walking to allow a woman in a wheelchair to pass, and I bumped into her, stumbling a bit. I set both hands atop her leopard-print shoulders and apologized, then stared at my reflection in the tinted glass encasing the Christ Church terminal. Long hair. Khaki shorts. Ridiculous red windbreaker tied apron-style around my waist. Squinting against the glare, I wished for sunglasses, because I could’ve sworn the man staring back at me smiled, although I’m sure my own lips didn’t move. *There you are*, I heard this island say to him—to the man in my reflection. *You’ve been gone for far too long.*

## CHAPTER II

### BACKSTORY, IN CASE YOU WERE WONDERING

Cici wasn't the first one I told about me—about us, I should say. Not by a long shot.

I was eight years old when I realized we were the only ones, Will and I. That when most people sleep, they really sleep, and they don't wake immediately to a body that is just like the one they left behind but linked, for Will, to another he was never meant to know and, for me, to one I am not supposed to recall. There was this neighbor kid who lived down the block—taller than me, freckled, named Jeremiah but was always called Jamie—and we were playing one day in the wooded area behind his house, picking up rocks, flinging them at squirrels and birds, bloodthirsty as only two boys with no experience of blood can be. We were unsuccessful at first until, having grown bored and frustrated, I took off my sneaker, tore out its tongue, and fashioned a hunting sling using only it and an overlong shoelace. I tucked a perfectly smooth stone in the Reebok-white pouch, slipped my fingers inside the corded loops, whirred the thing three times—“*More than thrice and you're wasting sweat, Willy-o*”—and brought down a fat grey squirrel on my first try. It was luck more than anything else; even Will wasn't that good a shot. But Jamie crowed and hollered and slapped me on the shoulder, demanded to know how I'd done it, where I'd learnt a thing like that, and I, who'd been taught via Will that one should do nothing from rivalry or conceit but in humility count others more significant

than oneself, told Jamie it was nothing much, that I bet he could do it too, and he need only pay close attention at night to the way they do things *back there* and he'd soon get the hang of it. I'd even help him practice if he liked.

*"Back there, where?"*

*"You know—There. The place you go when you're sleeping here."*

*"You mean like in a dream?"*

*"Maybe. I don't...what do you mean, dream?"*

Jamie moved away about a year after that, and I wondered later if I were partially to blame, if his parents' decision to move upstate had less to do with the hurricanes Jamie's mom—a New Yorker—was terrified of, and more to do with the boy up the road who kept teaching her son how to make and use arcane hunting apparati. At least, so far as I remember, she was never subject to a scene like the one my own mother walked in on when I was eleven and she caught me skinning my pet rabbit in the mudroom sink, using a kitchen knife I'd honed with a dollar-store whetstone to better negotiate the belly flaps. I'd already broken the skin around each ankle and stripped the pelt up both legs, over the hips, back to mid-spine. I changed my grip for the final slice that would bring my blade to the neckline and ready the thing for decapitation, and the door connecting to the garage swung quietly open. Mother didn't scream. Of course, she wouldn't. Growing up on a north Alabama farm meant that it took more than some naked pink meat to make her holler. She did drop the bag of groceries she was carrying. Paper tore and glass shattered. The scents of olive and maraschino-cherry juice combined briny sweet in the air. Then she leapt over the mess to grab me hard by the wrist, to dig her thumb into a

soft tendony spot behind the bone so my fingers went numb and the knife clattered into the basin of the white ceramic sink. There was very little blood.

I was eventually able to convince her and Daddy that I hadn't meant to kill Smokey. The salt lick in July *had* been a bad idea, but wasn't it a sin to waste? And didn't Mother want a soft collar for the new coat Daddy bought her every year at Thanksgiving? (That year saw the next to last Black-Friday jacket before Daddy was laid off and I never did have to get braces.)

Mother said she wanted nothing of the sort. And, moreover, there wasn't any such thing as sin. "*A person can make a mistake or two, Liam, but that doesn't make them a sinner. You hear me?*"

I didn't bother telling her she was wrong.

Jamie and I reconnected years later when we both wound up at the same South Carolina state college. The basic studies for his archaeology and my history coursework had a lot of crossover, and we would pretend to study together, then sneak off into the woods around campus and take out our slings for old time's sake. Jamie was rusty at first, but Will's abilities—and thus mine—were better than ever, so we never spent a hungry night in front of our unnecessary campfire, but feasted instead on the gamey roast meat of twenty-first century woodland creatures while sipping contraband Soco with Rose's lime, until we were full and tipsy and had to stagger back to our dorms to floss squirrel from between our teeth and sleep beside pizza-stuffed, out-of-state Yankee roommates who saw our battered knuckles and caught the tang of pinesap and watched us like we were *those* rednecks, the kind they'd been warned about. In truth I was a Carolina coast kid, a beach bum, and Jamie had spent nearly as much time in Manhattan as he had anywhere

else, but rather than explain that to the guys we lived with, it was more fun to sit in each other's rooms, to clean our nails with oversized pocket knives, and to have low-voiced conversations about *this'un* and *that'un* while casting occasional sidelong glances their way from beneath the brims of our John Deer ball caps.

Will thought this was hysterical. He wanted Jamie and me to invite our roommates out into the woods—as a gesture of goodwill, to prove we really did want to make friends—then he thought we should get them drunk, preferably on moonshine, feed them some gall-tainted possum meat, and leave them to stumble lost on three acres of reforested pine that were as simple for us to navigate as a city built on a grid. I was tempted; I'd toyed with similar ideas myself of having a farcical welcome-to-the-Southland, city-boys' hazing. Will knew this, of course, and made sure to give voice to my thoughts so I mightn't too easily deny their existence. Jamie was the one who ixnayed the plan. *"Too mean,"* he said. *"And you know those soft-skinned Boston babies are the kind who'll go crying to Cameron"*—our RA—*"that tight-assed prick. I can't afford to get kicked out of student housing. Can you?"* I couldn't. So we made nice, and Jamie took to carrying a knock-off Bowie knife in his boot beneath his jeans, while I sucked wads of stale caramel like chaw and kept a cup full of brown syrup-spit on my desk. By Thanksgiving an amicable trade was arranged. My roommate moved out, and Jamie moved in, and one seasonably cool day the week before finals Will's father caught him in the cordgrass with Bethia, who was all of twelve at the time but easily the shape and size of fifteen. Will fainted after the thirty-eighth stripe from the crop, and I woke moaning, gagging yelps on my pillow as the blisters continued to rise phantasmically, one red welt by one until we'd endured the prescribed fifty. *"Holy Christ."* Jamie stood by my bed,

held tight to my hand when I groped blind and squeezed. “*Shit, man. Jesus. Holy shit. You’re for real?*”

Anonymous drifters in bars make the safest confidants. The grizzlier the beard and the darker the corner they’re seated in, the better. As a general rule they like the company, and the sad stories, and there’s always the occasional drunk nut who’ll swear the very same thing happened to him the night before. They say it that way, with emphasis on the *very*.

A postwar U.S.-Grant looking stranger at my favorite Charleston watering hole ordered juleps made with cheap bourbon—“*can’t stand the things, you know, but when in Rome...*”—and told me about his days as a Prohibition-era rum runner ferrying booze across the Mexican border north into Galveston County. He’d obviously seen his share of 1950s gangster movies, and his description of his past self sounded strikingly like Charles Bronson in *Machine Gun Kelly*. But his Bogey impression was so good it gave me chills, and he made a decent drinking partner up until three AM when he began to cry into his green-flecked ice for his Grandpa Jack, who wore pin-striped suits and took him fishing after church on Sundays for trout the size of terriers. I remember asking if Jack changed before going fishing—“*outta that fancy suit and into some coveralls, you know?*”—but my new friend had plunged into sudden sleep, head in hand with his elbow propped on the bar and drool sliding down his chin.

The former Atlantic City showgirl with the Cleopatra shtick was even more overtly artificial. She was dusky and sloe eyed and at least fifty pounds overweight, and when I sent a waiter her way with a champagne-mixed French 75—“*Compliments of the gentleman at the bar*”—she crooked a finger at me in a way I felt from my navel all the

way to the backs of my thighs. Her nails were square-tipped, lacquered red, and she rubbed the seat beside her, called me handsome, asked me why I didn't sit down now and tell Miss Cleo all my problems. When I'd complied, told her what was troubling my mind, what had made me climb in my car upon waking and drive north through two tanks of gas in mileage and a season's change in climate, she set her plump hand atop mine, patted twice. "*Poor baby. You poor dear. Had to whip your best friend, you say? Awful, just awful. But I can do you one better.*" Marc Antony was her one true love, she said, and Octavio [sic.] nothing but a power hungry cretin. As for Caesar, he was a hack, a fool who got what he deserved. Tried to turn a republic into a dictatorship and didn't even think to keep a bodyguard around, the imbecile. But Antony, now that was a *man*—the kind of man a girl'd bear twins for two thousand years before the age of the epidural, then let back into her bed to have at her again. "*What can I say?*" She ate three pimientostuffed olives back to back. "*I'm a glutton for all kinds of things.*" She was philosophical and funny, the aging queen reliving her glory days, right up until the point when I inquired about the asp, about her suicide, how that went for her and what the aftermath was like. Her fingers contracted around the champagne coupe's stem, and her broad frame seemed to deflate, to become saggier, less robust, a burden to endure instead of a vessel satiated with excess pleasure. "*Anyone who needs to ask about that,*" she said, "*won't ever understand the answer,*" and I came to see then why a woman might prefer the lie of a mythically-preserved love to the loss of the true thing. I continued to buy rounds as long as she wanted to drink them, and I kissed her perfumed cheek softly, lingeringly, before we parted and each went our own separate way.

The next night I returned to the same bar.

When I was younger, only two years into my graduate coursework, with a book review already in print and a journal article well on its way toward publication, my department began to dangle me like bait before the more desirable applicants, wooing them with the prospect of having such an early-American wunderkind as myself for a peer-reviewing cohort. The plummest assistantships and a semi-private office were mine so long as I played along, and with the dean of the history department's Mastercard tucked securely in my jacket pocket, I was happy to schmooze and wax poetic and meet up with whomever whenever wherever, so long as the drinks were abundant and free. Over rye Manhattans mixed with a touch too much vermouth, a twenty-something ex-army lieutenant with a newly-delivered wife and a limp and an interest in the North American transition from regular to guerrilla warfare admitted to me that he'd already been accepted elsewhere, but he was mock shopping around, playing hard to get, hoping to eke out a slightly larger stipend and a more comprehensive benefits package from his first-choice school in New England. "*Feel bad as hell for doing it, but I've got a kid, a family to support, you know?*" I told him I understood, that his secret was safe with me, and after we'd had a few drinks and passed time comparing our knowledge of wartime trivia in battles ranging from Thermopylae to Stalingrad, he asked me if I'd ever thought of serving myself, of putting my *good tactical mind*—his words—to specialized use. If there is a way to baldly tell a limping family-man vet that you can't stand the idea of combat, that you sweat and get jelly-kneed nearly pissing yourself at the thought, I couldn't fathom it at the time. Instead I told him the impossible but, I felt, more honorable truth. I told him how the days of my childhood were spent in ridiculous safety, how the worst thing that ever happened to me during the day was when I was play-



hunting and let go my sling too soon and popped myself in the head with a rock, how I got five stitches and a scolding and had a headache that lasted for days, and all this without a lick of real danger. My nights, I told him, were another matter entirely.

Will and his mama huddle in a cabin built thick as a fort, thirty-five by twenty feet, windows bolted with cypress shutters, and a single tallow candle spitting light. Cracks of laser-straight sun delineate the barred door, slice between a few horizontal logs in need of recaulking. Otherwise it is dark as midnight. Will is maybe seven. He doesn't understand what is happening outside, and his Mama refuses to tell him. "*Hush now, my love. Sssshhh. Don't cry.*" He hears shouted commands in an unknown glottal language, then harsh English words he knows but can't decipher. He recognizes his father's voice—sounding far away, muffled, frantic—as well as those of the slaves he's been raised alongside like family. "*Guard your Mother, Willy-o.*" The last command his father gave him before he grabbed the giant musket Will can't even begin to lift, hefted the axe he keeps by the bedstead, told them to lower the bar and not to raise it until he returns. "*Guard your Mother. Keep her safe.*" Will winds the leather cords of his sling so tight around his fingers they swell and begin to throb in quick fluttering pulses like the heartbeat of a wounded bird, like a hugely red hammer-struck thumb on the cartoons he likes to watch when he's Liam. He is first-grade aged, nowhere near old enough even to walk home from the bus or to cross a city street alone, and he is afraid. He doesn't want to be shut up in the dark. He doesn't want his father to die. He wants to go home, to Barbados. Then three driving *THUNKS* slam into the cabin wall, and he screams, buries his face in his mama's apron. "*They can't get through.*" She pulls him close, gathers him shoes and gangly limbs and all onto her lap. She squeezes him too tight, nearly cuts off

his breath as she begins chanting in an toneless litany: *“They can’t get through. They can’t get through. Don’t you worry, Willy my love. I am here, and your father is near, and those arrows cannot, cannot get through.”*

*“It was common for their people to be taken,”* I explained, *“to be sold as slaves. And hogs set loose in the woods to forage, they would often destroy crops.”* Although no one familiar with the land and its ways was likely to starve because of hoof-uprooted crops in the temperate South, the destruction of trade goods was still devastating for the existing pre-European local economy. Will’s family wasn’t involved in the kidnappings, but the marauding pigs might well have been some of theirs—it was difficult to say for sure—and one white family was typically seen as being good as the next in terms of reprisals. Though, the way I remembered it, none of Will’s people were killed in that fight, but afterward he watched his father load the bodies of three copper colored men into a canoe and row them back across the river to return as a peace offering to their families. *“That settled it, for a little while at least.”*

The lieutenant nodded, asked me if they were Yamasees, if this was an early taste of the quarrel that would erupt in 1715 into the great conflagration that would all but destroy the southern half of the Carolina colony. I shook my head—*“The Yamasees were still peaceful then, still allied with us against the Spanish”*—then I rattled off a list of alternate coastal tribes that neither Will nor I had known anything about at the time. *“Wando. Etiwan. Sampa. Ashepoo. Sewee. Cambahee. Kiawah. Wimbee.”* It might have been any one or more groups throwing their lots in together, putting aside old rivalries to join forces against a newly acquired common foe—*“The enemy of my enemy and all that”*—which the lieutenant told me was flawed battlefield logic. He said, *“It’s thinking*

*like that'll come back to bite you in the ass,"* and he countered my story with one of his own. As a British trench sweeper in 1915, he carried a short magazine rifle, used an eighteen-inch billy club for backup, and kept a sheathed knuckle knife in his belt just in case. In the process of clearing out a reclaimed trench in a break between gas attacks during the Second Battle of Ypres, he came across a Frenchman tucked inside a dugout. Half blind with his mask on, the Frenchie said he became disoriented, was separated from his troop, got left behind when the line pushed on, and then was too afraid to peek his head up afterward or move out on his own. He explained all this in strangely accented French that the lieutenant said should've been his first clue that something wasn't copacetic. *"But, hell,"* he shrugged, *"what did I know? I learned French in school. Figured maybe he had foreign parents, or he'd spent time abroad."* Less than ten yards down the trench, taking the lead while Frenchie guarded his rear, he paused to check his weapons before easing around a traverse. *"It happened so fast."* He sensed a brusque movement behind him, then felt a blossoming of inflamed pressure spiral outward from the base of his spine. The bayonet made a wet slurping sound as it was withdrawn, and he realized he couldn't feel his knees. The first pangs of agony clogged the hole where the blade had been. The mud filling his mouth tasted of chlorine.

*"It was a dumb fuck way to die,"* the lieutenant admitted as he rapped the bar top, ordering another double. I said nothing, just stared straight ahead at our reflections in the mirror behind the bottles of neatly categorized liquor. Together we filled the space from vodka to gin to tequila and into the fortified wines. Was there a vague resemblance, I wondered, between the two of us? Something around the eyes—were both of ours equally as heavy lidded?—or in the faint etchings of premature grooves bracketing our mouths?

He had a new baby, I reminded myself. Of course he looked exhausted. He was probably up the better half of every night, walking and rocking and burping and feeding, wiping up spit and shit and puke, and before that he'd been deployed, wounded overseas. *Over how many seas?* I stared at our reflections harder, eyes narrowed. After three midday Manhattans in a dimly lit businessman's bar, it was easy to liken the inscribed weariness on his narrow face to the mirrored fatigue on my own, but it didn't necessarily mean that until recently he'd spent his nights dodging gas canisters in the trenches of one imbruting war and his days in the arid hallucinatory sands of another. And yet—

“*You died?*” I demanded, sure he'd pick up on the teary-edged yearning in my voice which I tried to quell with a sip of rye.

The lieutenant nodded. “*Took a bitch of a long time too. Fucken camouflaged kraut didn't even have the decency to nick an artery along with my spine.*”

“*But you died, and you're still alive? Here, I mean. You're dead there, and alive here?*”

“*Well, yeah.*” Ha laughed. “*Isn't that how it works?*”

“*How what works?*” I spun my barstool to face him. All the colored glass bottles and reflective stemware and the hum of chattering downtowners boozing their lunch breaks away—all diminished, everything faded away until there was only me and this ex-soldier with his limp and his baby and his passion for battlefield minutiae and whose eyes I desperately wanted to believe looked like my own. “*Spell it out for me. Tell me what we're talking about here.*”

He glanced around, leaned in close, spoke in an undertone. “*Well...past lives. I mean, right? That thing you said about the Indians. Man, I thought—*”

I laughed in his face. Clapped a hand over my mouth and howled laughing, wide eyed and shrill as a girl scout. When the lieutenant flinched, brow contracting, his face showing both anger and hurt, I was quick to apologize and I meant every word. Just because he wasn't like me, it didn't automatically make him a liar. "*I'm sorry, really I am. It's just...a past life?*" I couldn't control myself, couldn't stop laughing. "*I wish. Oh man, you have no idea. I honestly and truly in the name of God do sincerely goddamn wish.*"

A few years later, attempting a vinous escape from the 120<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Philadelphia, a fellow colonialist flagged me down, invited me to join him at his secluded booth in our overpriced hotel bar. He was dressed entirely in tweed with horn rims perched on his nose and was stroking an unlit meerschaum pipe as he sipped Glenfiddich from a tulip-shaped tasting glass. I liked him immediately for embracing his cliché. He liked me, it seemed, for daring to *thumb my nose*—his phrase—at the trendy panel of green historians who wanted to label any modification of land for agricultural use as a categorical degradation of the Edenic American landscape. "*Imagine.*" He waved me in close, spoke with a burr that smelt of twenty-one-year-old sherry-casked whiskey. He asked me to imagine a man descended from a long line of silversmiths. His father was a silversmith, his father's father before him, his father's father's father before him, as far back as anyone can remember. And all this man's known his whole life are urns and door handles and candlesticks and porringers. Only he doesn't have the knack. Can't anneal a pot for shit and his work keeps cracking. Debts mount up until he loses his business, gets chucked out of his guild, thrown over by his affianced. Lacking any realistic option, he sells his tools for ship

fare—the tools his father owned, and his father’s father’s father before him and so on, “*you get the point.*” He sells them all, then he nearly dies from sea sickness. And when he’s bony, weak, broke and near broken in a strange new land, he straps himself to a plow because he can’t afford a mule. He hauls out the stumps he can, works around the ones he can’t, and the few bushels of corn and wheat he ekes out are just enough to get him through the winter so he can start all over again, even leaner, in the spring. “*Imagine*”—I worried for the fragile glass he held—“*calling that man a criminal, an environmental defiler, all because he cut down a few trees.*” I could conceive of no such thing, I assured him, and he raised his drink in a silent toast, drained it, then ordered a refill plus a double of whatever I was drinking. I opted for Scotch as well, and about the time our tab rounded \$200 I unburdened myself, confessed to him the fact that as an academic I was, at best, barely mediocre. “*I hardly do any research at all. I’m the next thing to useless in an archive. I sign the log-in forms, piddle dick around, jot down the odd note here and there. But all the really good stuff, all my brilliant and publishable deductions—those are things I just know; I see them when I sleep.*” He set down his pipe to put one hand atop mine. It was raw-skinned and hoary, thickly distended at the knuckles, and there were ridges of callus on his palm that were so hard and so old they felt nearly like bone. He told me, “*I know exactly what you mean.*”

There were other strangers on other airplanes before I met Cici. Some of them even played along with what they surely, and perhaps rightly, saw as the deranged ravings of an overindulged history-buff bookworm. Only a few ever called me out, threw the bullshit flag, dared to challenge the tall guy with the battered knuckles they’d be trapped beside for the next six to eight hours, depending on the weather and any holdups

taxiing or finding a gate. My go-to proof scar—a cauterized snakebite on the inner slope of my left bicep—might just as easily have been caused by a pancake griddle or an enraged ex with a curling iron as by a cotton mouth and Will’s hunting knife fired white hot. “*I can see the scene now,*” a precocious Asian teenager with thick-rimmed glasses and a mini video player told me on a turbulent flight from San Diego home to Charleston. She made a rectangle using thumbs and index fingers, centered it over my face, peered up at me through the frame, squinted. Then complete with character voices:

*“Creepy History Guy: Hey, Baby. Those are some nice looking ringlets you’ve made there.*

*Weirdo-Loving Girlfriend: Hehehe. Thank you. It’s taken me hours to sculpt them. I began work right after I finished darning your socks and marinating your steak for dinner. I, of course, will be having lettuce and a lemon wedge in order to maintain my sleek, small-butted figure.*

*Creepy History Guy: All that sounds great. But, uh, listen Baby, this just isn’t working out for me. I feel smothered. I need my space, you know?*

*Weirdo-Loving Girlfriend: You...you rat bastard!!*

( LUNGE; SIZZLE )

*Creepy History Guy: AAAHH!! My bicep. Not my beautiful bicep! AAAHH!!”*

I didn’t bother asking about the scenario involving the pancake griddle.

Of the ones who played along, who went beyond humoring me to add their own stories to the mix, Cici was the best, the most convincing I’d ever seen. Even though she took a misstep in assuming I could not have braces and thus didn’t seem to understand the rules of internal versus externality—what carries through versus what remains

behind—she possessed the kind of fly-on-the-wall knowledge that went beyond the memorization of trivia and spilled over into the intimacy of acquaintance. That bit about the baby being expunged from the painting (this was a state portrait, I later ascertained, *Marie-Antoinette et Ses Enfants*, painted by Madame Vigée le Brun in 1787), it was so beautiful I nearly wept. She received bonus points, moreover, for her ardent contradiction of the most common popular-culture portrayals of the doomed queen Maria Antonia. Roast chicken and black coffee, muslin over silk, even the name of the dress maker who, as per Cici's account, had to browbeat Her Majesty into donning the frothy confections that would contribute unfairly to the portrayal of her husband's reign as extravagant, wasteful, corrupt. An association with a lesser-known historical figure would have been preferable, of course, more likely in its feasible obscurity, but after all she wasn't claiming *to be* Marie Antoinette, merely to know her, similar to the way in which Will's father had briefly known Henry Morgan, the notorious retired pirate who was acting Lieutenant Governor of Jamaica when William Sr. first arrived in the Caribbean in the 1670s. The strangest paths can cross, there are more things in heaven and in earth, an unlikely historical connection is not an impossible one. I knew this better than almost anyone else and determined that, despite my misgivings, there was reason to give Cici the benefit of the doubt. It was possible, even plausible that she was telling the truth. It was so very plausible.

Immediately upon entering the blessedly air-conditioned terminal, Cici flagged down a red cap and slipped a folded grey bill into his subtly upturned hand. The exchange was smooth as if it had been rehearsed, and she said there would be an orange bill in it for him if we made it through customs in less than an hour. The porter nodded,



pocketed the scrap of grey, transferred both of the bags I was carrying from my shoulder to his own, then he took off at a lope toward baggage claim, calling back in a New York accent for *Sir* and *his lady* to please keep up. His island lingo clashed with the non-rhotic Bronx intonation so that, instantly and helplessly, I constructed his story.

Born in the Senegambia region of West Africa sometime in the mid seventeenth century, he was captured by Portuguese slavers as a young man and held for weeks at their naval base in the Canary Islands until a large enough number of captives had been amassed to justify the financial risk of the middle passage. Aboard the *Madre de Deus* he ate boiled mush, which he threw up then ate again when the winds were high, and flung himself twice against the suicide-preventive nets encircling the upper deck where he was let up once every other day to stretch his legs and to keep from devaluing his worth due to muscle atrophy. He'd have tried a third time and likely a fourth and fifth as well, but a sailor with a missing left canine and lash scar bisecting his face pointed toward a small group of women kept secluded at the stern of the ship and told him via a scoliosis-stricken Fulani translator that for every continued attempt he made at self-murder, one of the women would be selected and given to the crew to rape one time apiece before casting her into the sea regardless of whether she survived the assault or not. He cooperated afterward, ate his gruel and exercised as directed, and when the *Madre* laid anchor on the windward side of Barbados, he and three of his fellows were sold to an up-and-coming sugar baron who valued strength and youth above all else and who fancied himself handy enough with a scourge that even the proof of rebelliousness evidenced by his acquisition's double-weight shackles did not dissuade him from handing over the requisite pounds sterling and completing the transaction. As a new-bought slave, he

worked the fields while being seasoned, dug trenches, planted sugarcane cuttings, hauled baskets of manure as big around as barrels up the inclined slopes, fertilizing the young plants by hand as he went. He remembered the lesson taught him by the scar-faced sailor, and the fear that his actions would harm those around him was his unrelenting companion. As a result he was whipped only twice, once when the first trench he ever dug was not bone straight but meandered slightly like a snake of lazy winding water, and again when he took the blame after the bottom of his manure basket tore through, said he'd carelessly set it down atop a sharp rock and drew the overseers anger away from the group of women weavers. One of the women—medium skinned and small breasted with a halo of hair encircling her head—risked her life to visit him in the night, to thank him by stealing through the rear entrance of the hut he shared with five other men and by raising the dank strip of cloth he wore around his loins, washing him first with the mouthful of water she'd carried for that purpose, and doing her utmost to ensure that his grief from the ulcerated pulp of his back was at least counterbalanced by what she did to his front. Having survived his first year with neither a fever nor a serious injury, he was moved to the wind-powered mill and charged with feeding harvested cane stalks back and forth through the stone crushing rollers, repeating the same motion endlessly, learning to time it just right so he mightn't lose a limb or worse in the begassing process. He heard stories of this happening—of an overworked slave grabbing a stalk too low, letting his fingers get too close, and the next thing you know here comes his arm shooting out the back end of the mashers, whole thing flat as a flapjack; slave's dead for sure and, what's worse, a whole batch of cane juice is spoiled with bloody bone, so there'll be double-time work and no food for no one til the difference's made up. He heard these tales but he

never paid them any mind, and he never saw the worst happen until the worst did happen, only he didn't see it then either but rather heard about it after the fact. He was working the mill, offering cane stalk by stalk to the gnashing maw of the rollers, keeping time with stamped feet to a drum only he could hear, and a series of wailing shrieks carried up from the boiling house. The woman'd been made to work for a half day straight, his surviving shipmate from the *Madre* told him later, kept in the boiling house for hour upon hour skimming flocculated impurities from atop the sugar magma until the combination of heat and hunger and exhaustion became too much for her. She went in silent, he heard, and didn't nobody notice she was gone til the head scarf she wore clogged the drain between the coppers and her vat began to overflow, spilling hot pinkish-brown syrup onto the boiling house floor. It was his woman, of course, the one with the teak-colored breasts and the nimbus of fleecy hair, and she was *his* sure as certain even though he'd not spoken to her or touched her since the night she'd come to ease his pain. Their paths had crossed from time to time, and it was evident in the way their eyes sought and caught and clung to each other's that they both knew without it needing to be said that he was hers and she was his and as soon as he'd proven his worth, made himself invaluable in one way or another, he would ask to sleep beside her at night. In the wake of her loss he ceased to take such great care with both his and others' wellbeing. He committed many small infractions and was whipped more frequently, though not so cruelly as he'd been before since the overseer was an experienced man himself and he recognized the look a slave acquired—made up of equal parts weariness and rage—when he could be pushed only so much further before he shattered altogether and cost the overseer's employer a great deal of money, both in the loss of a skilled worker and in whatever that worker

chose to take with him in his self-immolation. So when a merchant arrived to fill his bi-monthly molasses order, and he was carrying with him broadsides from the new-founded city of Charles Towne that was then experiencing a dearth of cheap labor, the overseer went to his employer and recommended a handful of slaves who might be gainfully sold for the advertised price of £30 per head. The grieving Senegambian was among those chosen for resale, and he did not care to see the island of Barbados diminishing behind him on a fiery horizon any more than he cared when his ship came to dock in a marshy Carolana port and he was quickly bought, branded, and set to work raising hogs on a primitive farm several miles upriver from the burgeoning city. This was gentler work than what he'd grown accustomed to, and in his free time he enjoyed fishing and target-shooting with the musket he was given to defend his passel of hogs in case of a wildcat or Indian attack. Helping clear the land, he became renowned for his ability to fell a tree that was sawed only an eighth of the way through, using the force in his shoulders and hands to rend the wood bit by bit until down it came in a thundering upsurge of tearing roots and hailing mud. With a portion of the logs he chopped he was able to build a cabin of his own, so that when the kitchen girl began to bleed and he asked for and was given her as his wife, he had a roof to shield her and a real bedstead to lay her down upon, and though they never had children he was happy with her and she with him, and many years passed before the Indians finally did attack and he was killed near instantly by an arrow to his upper arm that ruptured the artery he didn't even know was there. He didn't live to see the great saga of his race unfold—the rebellions and the mass executions and the wars and lynchings and court ruled Jim Crow regulations, all leading inexorably up to the Great Migration when millions again uprooted their lives, willingly this time, eagerly,

escaping the Caribbean of the South for the Carolana of the North, choosing the lesser of two evils and surviving again for generations, until, one day, a tall Bronx-born man who's seen his fair share of misery but who has never dug a trench or felled a tree or buried a woman in his life is standing in front of a travel agent's window when he sees a glossy poster-sized ad for the white sand beaches and the ghostly ruined plantations of Barbados. He stares at it for a long time without knowing why. He wonders if perhaps he read a book about this place or saw it on a television special long ago. He stares even longer, and his heart doesn't pound or skip a beat or gesture to him in any audible way, but he does know that an ache for something he never knew he'd lost is somehow assuaged when he opens the travel agent's door, seats himself in a cracking upholstered chair, and books a round-trip vacation from which he'll never return.

“Sir. Lady. This way. Please.” The red-capped porter was ten yards ahead of Cici and me, our bags' straps crossed over his body, one arm waving high as he beckoned for us to hurry before we missed our chance at easy entrance into the country. We caught up, Cici hanging on my arm, and he bent his head toward ours to whisper quickly, “You're visiting the island for however many days. You fill in the blank. You have nothing to declare, only personal items for your vacation. Don't hesitate if they ask what those are—sunscreen, bathing suits, flip flops, whatever. You don't have any booze, no smokes, no fruit, no other weird shit. Comprende?”

“I'm actually here on business,” I said. “A research trip for—”

“Doesn't matter.” He jerked his head in the negative. “They think you're a tourist here to spend all your money on Tiki beads and umbrella drinks, they won't give you a hard time. Don't wanna piss off the cash cows.”

“I like to think of myself as more of a cash canary,” Cici interjected, preening a bit.

He cracked a smile. “You’re funny, Lady. But don’t be funny with them.” He cut his eyes toward the uniformed customs officers. “Try to be funny, they’ll think you’re trying to distract them from something. Next thing you know, you’re spread eagled against a wall with a drug dog sniffing your can, your bag’s upended, underwear all over the counter. And me, I’m out fifty bucks. Capiche?”

Cici nodded, echoed, “Capiche.”

“Bueno.”

The red cap preceded us in line and less than a half hour later handed us into a car with our luggage already stowed in the trunk. Instead of the orange bill she’d promised, Cici slipped him another grey, which I assumed was a higher local denomination from the way his eyebrows spiked, raising his entire face along with them.

“Thanks, Lady,” he said. “Me and my girl will be living large tonight.”

“Take her to Naru,” Cici directed. “The baby octopus is to die for.”

He nodded, “Sure thing, Lady,” and our driver accelerated as the door clicked shut.

I felt as if I knew him, as if I ought to have said goodbye, and I wanted to turn around in my seat and look back, to watch the man in the red cap fade away until he was only a smudged matchstick wavering in the distance. But I’d felt that way about such a great many people that I’d learnt well by then to let them go. To keep from turning back, I hunkered down in my seat, craned my neck to see the sky out the window. Though I’d not seen the island in years—nearly twenty-five of them or more than three hundred,

depending on how I wanted to count—not since Will and I were small and he was still a wild Barbadian sugar baby, it looked somehow just as I expected it to. If I took my memories from Will’s first six years and added them together with my own knowledge of what the Caribbean in the twenty-first century has become, this place was the perfect average of the two. Even without having left the airport’s driveway, I was willing to bet that the high-rise resorts, the fine-dining nightclubs, and the cultivated lines of roadside palm trees had done little if anything to lessen the island’s accumulated weight, its unmitigated sarcophagal depth. I angled my neck, stared up at the sky, and assured myself that the backdrop had not changed in the slightest. As I tracked a plane’s descent through a bank of swelled Rubenesque clouds, I remembered how Will had never been sure what name to give that crisp impossible blue, how nothing he was ever taught seemed just right, so he took his cue from my box of 64 Crayolas with the built-in sharpener that did fuck all and settled on cerulean. It is the one place in the world, I thought, where that color exists in nature.

Cici scrunched down beside me, burrowed in close, lay one hand on my windbreaker-draped knee. My shorts were stiff as cardboard but mostly dry, so I might’ve taken the thing off, but any movement I made would’ve forced me to both look down from the sky and to pull back from Cici, neither of which I wanted to do just then.

Her breath was warm on my neck when she said, “I would normally ask if you’d prefer your place or mine, but I’m partial to my hotel. Do you mind if I insist?”

“Not at all.” The window glass felt cool against my temple. “I didn’t realize you knew the island so well. Do you come here often?”

Both Cici and the driver in front laughed. This time, I told myself, her laugh was huskily melodic, not at all like a barking seal, and I closed my eyes briefly to match the sound against what I could recall about eighteenth century French Rococo painting: Fragonard's pink-clad lady on a swing in a garden, her legs coquettishly revealed as she kicks off a shoe for one of her admirers to catch; Boucher's odalisques sprawled face-down on tufted chaises, plump derrieres exposed for their owners' perusal. Cici's laugh was buttery and abundant and just a little too much. It fit, I decided, quite perfectly.

"Oh my." She let out a peal of crystalline giggles and snaked her arm through mine, causing our bodies to become even more thoroughly entangled. "I'm sorry, Liam dear. We're not laughing at you, I swear. It's just funny. You see, I come here so *very* often, and I can't believe I didn't tell you, but I suppose our thoughts were elsewhere, hmm? Polynice," she nodded toward the driver, who waved one backward hand in greeting, "why, he's practically the man in my life these days. Ever since my husband—well, you know about Jerry. But since Jerry and I stopped being Jerry and I, I've been flying down on the weeks when he has my daughter. Figured I could either sit at home all alone and mope, or I could catch some sun and welcome Sophie home with a nice tan. I was so sad, but then I liked it so much the first time I visited that...well, I just kept coming back."

*Sophie, Will's voice taunted me. Her daughter's name is Sophie. Get it? Just like the poor dead princess. I told you she was making it all up, that you ought to just fuck her and forget her, that you shouldn't get your hopes up about her.*

*Shut up, I told him. It doesn't mean anything. People name their kids after dead loved ones all the time. You know that, don't you, William Orton Ayres IV?*



*But she said her daughter is twelve, right? How long ago could it have been when she “dreamt” about the princess’s death? I bet it has to be less than twelve years. You may not know yet exactly when that baby died, but you damn well do know that if twelve years have passed, the Revolution’s happened and the Queen’s dead and gone. Listen, this Cici chick, she seems nice enough, but she probably had a messy divorce, maybe she lost her kid for a while, then she—*

*Shut up. Just shut the fuck up.*

*But—*

*Shut. The. Fuck. Up.*

“Liam?” Cici was squeezing my arm, nearly wringing it in her urgency. “You’re not mad are you? Liam? I didn’t mean—”

“No,” I interrupted. “No, I’m not mad.” I turned away from the window to face her, patted the hand that was wound through the crook of my elbow. “Why would I be mad when I know now I’ll have an experienced tour guide at my disposal? I just got distracted.” I glanced back at the window, then frowned at the sight of my faintly visible reflection. *Shut your god-damned mouth, Will.* “It’s so beautiful here.”

“Good.” Cici sighed, grinned, hugged my arm to her breasts. “That’s settled, then. And you’re right that I’ll make an excellent tour guide. I’ve—”

“You?” I broke in, feigning confusion. “I meant Polynice. I thought he and I—”

“Oh!” She play-shoved me against the door, wrenched her arm from mine, then just as quickly reclaimed it and reeled me back in close. “You’re a tease,” she scolded, then looked up at the rearview mirror. “Polynice, isn’t he an awful tease?”

“He surely is,” and that voice reminded me of boiling cane juice, of spiced rum and molasses, of priceless white sugar and hundred-pound stone grinders capable of hewing a man’s limbs from his body. “Mister, you stick with Miss Cici.” Polynice stared straight out the windshield as he maneuvered the car through the thick weekend-tourist traffic. “She’ll show you a time like you’ll not soon forget.”

“I don’t doubt that, Polynice.” I said, “I don’t doubt that at all.”

## CHAPTER III

### (FINALLY) A FULLY CHAPTER IN THE PAST

Will blames Liam for the foul mood he's in when he joins his mama at the breakfast table. First of all, he is late. His mama likes to dine just past daybreak and the sun is now an inch above the horizon, which is Liam's fault for staying up until dawn copulating and drinking with that Cici woman. Although the transference is imprecise—each minute in Will's life is not necessarily one stolen from Liam's—any extreme behavioral change cannot but have tangible repercussions. Liam and his blonde spend hours reenacting the Queen's toilette using a wide-tooth comb and a bottle of duty-free French perfume, among other things. They order jerk chicken and liters of Bajan punch from room service. Liam feeds Cici by hand, refusing all food himself, and he lets her lick spiced fat from his fingers. The sky is mauve when she dons a 1930s peignoir, crawls onto his lap, asks him to keep her awake for just a little while longer. *“Madame is so thin, so sad, it breaks my heart to see. I know you understand. Please, let me stay here with you.”* And Bethia grabs Will by his shoulders, shakes him until his head snaps back and forth, pinches him red to no avail as she tries every trick she knows that has sometimes worked but perhaps not and perhaps just coincidentally matched a time when he was going to open his eyes regardless. This time when he finally does awake, he is groggy, drunk, aching all over. He can drink rum like water, but the cherry spiced melon sap that Liam spent the night imbibing clings to his limbs and the edges of his vision,

causing him to lean heavily on Bethia as he struggles up from his trap of a featherbed and into a suit of acceptable morning clothes, one that is stodgy enough to please his mama and light enough for him to endure wearing—breeches, linen shirt, open waistcoat, no jacket. Each step he takes might as well be atop a floating dock, and the only thing between him and a fall down the stairs is Bethia, who takes him by the wrist and draws his arm across her shoulders and half carries him as far as the wall adjacent the breakfast room. Here she abandons him, slaps his face rousing before she leaves him to face his mama alone. Will moves his jaw, working his sore cheek, and he knows he has twenty seconds at best before his legs fold up beneath him and he collapses. For this reason he does not take the time he normally would to straighten his cuffs, to tie his shirt closed at the throat, to push back the clump of sweat-matted hair that has escaped his queue and fallen into one eye. *The hell with it.* He shoves off the wall for leverage and steps into the doorway.

“Good morning, Mama.” Will heads straight for his chair, weaving only slightly, eying the palmetto-frond seat as if it were Bethia’s throat or thigh. “I apologize for my tardiness.”

“Not at all, William,” but the overloud clink of her cup against its saucer reveals the extent of her irritation. Each of her fifty-four pieces of delftware is a treasured showpiece, valued all the more because she arranged herself for the set’s illegal shipment via a Dutch trader based out of St. Eustatius. “*My mama, the smuggler,*” Will praised her upon their arrival, and she laughed, proudly ebullient. “I am afraid, however,” she says, “that I’ve drunk all the tea. You’ll have to get by without.”

Having reached his chair, Will accepts his punishment with equanimity, nodding very slightly to signal his mama he received her message and is duly chastised. He envies Liam the rich Costa Rican coffee he will no doubt indulge in upon waking but is soothed by his knowledge that Bethia will have a mug of double-strength Assam steeped and waiting for him in the kitchen after breakfast. He knows, moreover, that his mama is aware of this too, but she will pretend she isn't, and when she weighs their tea supply at week's end she will record the loss without comment, then drink her own tea weaker, for days if necessary, until the difference is made up.

Will keeps his eyes on the tabletop, tries to avoid raising his head. Twin glass-pane windows—the first ones in the newly expanded house—let in too much light, making the painted walls with their half-finished orientalist cherry blossom motif (which will be all the rage in eighty years) come alive, swaying in an imperceptible giddy wind all around the room's periphery. Even his mama is a blur of white he doesn't dare gaze directly at: the snowy piping on her pin-striped morning dress, the column of her perpetually sunbonnet-protected neck, her blonde hair lightened to ash by moderate and gentle aging. He knows she is watching him, but he doesn't respond, just stares at the covered dishes before him until even their soft cream background seems to blaze with all the wattage of an interrogator's lamp. He focuses on the dull sheen of a knife, refuses to blink, tries not to groan.

“For heaven's sake, William.” A serving utensil is thrust into his line of sight. “Do try to eat something before you fall out of your chair.”

Will complies with his mama's request, handling the platters as if they were spun glass and not tin-glazed ceramic. He fills his plate with modest portions of scrapple, fried

amberjack, stewed squash and onions, a piece of rye bread. Steam rises from all the food, so he knows his mama must have given the first setting to the slaves and requested fresh when she heard him moving abovestairs. He takes a cautious bite of fish, finds it surprisingly restorative, eats the filet in two bites and reaches for more.

“William?”

His mouth is full. He looks up, swallows. “Yes, Mama?” From across the table, she watches him over the rim of her teacup with eyes the same delft blue as its patterned fruit and birds and vines. Laser blue, he called them once, meaning it as a compliment, and she’d frowned at him, baffled, demanded to know what a laser is.

“I know we have an agreement, William, unspoken though it may be.”

“Mama—” He puts down his fork.

“No, William.” She holds up a hand, beseeching; it is slender and well shaped but red-knuckled, moderately chapped. “Please, let me speak. I’ve been sitting here for an hour, waiting, so I believe I’ve worked out what I want to say.”

Will nods, wipes his mouth, yearns more than ever for a pot of coffee. “Yeah. Okay.”

“I wish you wouldn’t talk like that,” she snaps. “It sounds so common, so vulgar.” Her teacup clanks hard into its saucer. “Something you’ve picked up from your slut, no doubt, along with Lord only knows what else.”

Will says nothing, then he shoves back from the table and begins to rise.

“No! Will.” Half standing herself, she reaches out to him with both arms. Short falls of ivory lace hang around her wrists—the scraps leftover from the costly yards Will pinned up, used to ventilate his bedroom windows. “Please, I didn’t mean that.” She

speaks too quickly, nearly stammering. “I spoke in anger. You do know, you have to know that I love Bethia, almost as if she were my own child.”

Will straightens to his full height. He is feeling nearly sober. “You’d like to believe that,” he says, “wouldn’t you?”

“I delivered her.” She stabs a finger up at him, chin tilted high to meet his gaze. “I was the first one to hold her, even before her own mother, Lord grant her rest. Tiny thing, I rubbed her back until she breathed, and I owned that first breath. And after your sister—” She presses a hand to the front of her dress, shuts her eyes briefly before she glares back at him. “I nursed her myself, so don’t you tell me I don’t love her.”

*Laser blue, Will thinks, and so fierce. Maybe it came through the milk.* And he wants to lash out at her for a reason he cannot name. He bows, assuming a posture of concession, says, “If that’s the standard for motherly affection, then she is indeed your child as I will never be.”

She snorts, drops back into her seat. “Don’t be absurd, William.” She says, “Things were different when you were born. We were—”

“Rich?” he interjects.

She shrugs. “I was going to say we were still a part of my parents’ household, but have it as you will. It was my mother’s wish, not mine, that you be put out to suck. I was so young, still a child really. It never occurred to me that I might stand up to her. Anyway,” she hides her face for a moment in her teacup, “I hardly see what difference it makes now. You’re a grown man, William, and my milk-bearing years have long since passed.” She gestures at his chair, smiles just enough to crease the white skin around her

eyes. “Now, will you please sit back down? I do have something I want to discuss that has nothing whatever to do with my breasts.”

“I should hope not,” Will mutters, but he grabs his chair, pulls it back to the table, begins eating again as soon as he’s seated. He can tell by taste alone that the bread was Bethia’s and not his mama’s work. “What must we discuss?”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full, William.”

“Yes, Mama.” He swallows.

She sighs. “Fine. Have it as you will. Eat like a field hand. That’s what our descendants are going to be, anyhow.”

Will wipes his mouth with the back of a hand, reaches across the table and snags his mama’s half-full cup of tea. She frowns but says nothing. “Say what you mean,” he directs.

“Nothing of consequence.” She shrugs again, and Will notices that the line along her collar bone and out to her shoulder is as well defined as if she were a girl. “I mean only that all of your hard work—all of *our* work, rather—is going to be for naught if you don’t have an inheritor.”

Will laughs around a mouthful of scrapple. “Don’t worry, Mama.” He swallows, then throws back the remaining tea in one gulp. It is too weak for him and cold beside, but he savors it nonetheless. “I am not yet thirty. I have plenty of time to produce a grandchild for you.”

“With whom?” she demands, leaning forward in her chair. “With Bethia?”

It is Will’s turn to shrug. “Perhaps.” He peers closely at his food, rearranges his quash with his fork, says, “A son by one woman’s as good as one by another.”



“Generally speaking, that may be true.” Her voice is sardonic. “But the woman we’re referring to is a mustee slave. You know what that means.”

He smiles, glances up without raising his head. “That she is bound to love and faithfully serve me all the days of her life?”

“William, you’re being a *child*.”

He take a deep breath, resists showing anger. “Such things happen,” he says, and he knows this is true not from personal experience, but because Liam has done the research for him, ferreted out the handful of cases in which a white Carolinian successfully left his holdings to one or more of his mulatto children. Or *will leave*, rather, as none of these instances have happened yet. But he, William Orton Ayres IV, might be the first. And any son of Bethia’s will surely be a man to be reckoned with, a giant of a man who will defend his property with blood and teeth and steel, and a skillet or a rake, if need be. Will would enjoy watching a piddling muckworm of a civil servant give a son of Bethia’s an order, try to tell him that he is not a man, that he must surrender himself and turn over his legacy. He would dearly enjoy it, and he tells his mama, “If Bethia and I were to have children, I would free them, legitimize them. It’ll be proper as you like and perfectly legal besides.”

*It won’t be in forty years, Liam reminds him, but gently, regretfully. Not after Stono.*

*Then I’m damn lucky it’s now and not forty years from now, aren’t I?*

*You’re not thinking ahead, Will. You—*

*Hey, Liam. Shut the fuck up, eh?*

“Willy, my love.” His mama’s made her tone as soft as eiderdown. She reaches a hand across the table, but she’s too small to reach him and he doesn’t reciprocate the gesture. “I’m afraid,” she says, “that you’re not being realistic. We’re fairly isolated now. On the whole we can do as we like. But you know that can’t last. You were too young, you don’t remember what it was like in Barbados—all the regulations, how inflexible everything was. It’s one of the reasons we left, and it’s only a matter of time, Willy, you know—”

“Don’t infantilize me, Mama.” He shifts to sit chimney straight in his chair, tightens his grip on the silverware he holds until his knuckles bulge and whiten. “I am a man, and this is my house now, and you would do well to remember it.”

*Don’t Psych 101 your mom, you asshole. She doesn’t know what you’re talking about.*

“Infantilize? William, I don’t—”

“It means to treat someone like a child, like an infant.” *There. You happy now? Not really. You’re still being a giant—*

“I wouldn’t have to treat you as a child if you weren’t acting like one, would I?” She retracts the hand she’d offered, and when it disappears beneath the table Will knows she’s grabbed a fistful of her skirts and that she’s twisting the cloth into a hard knot that Bethia will later spend a half hour ironing out. “It may be difficult for you to hear,” she says, “but there are relevant facts that you’re not taking into consideration,” and Will recognizes that deliberately soothing, patronizing cadence from the therapy sessions Liam’s parents forced him to attend after they caught him dressing out his pet rabbit. “What you say is true. Bethia’s son could be made your legal heir. For now,” she allows.

“But who can say about ten years from now? Twenty? You’re a young man, William. If the Lord’s willing, you’ll live for a long time yet. How can you know what the laws will be like when you die? Things like that changed in Barbados. They can change here just as easily.”

*Your mama’s good, Liam applauds. You sure she’s not like us, that she doesn’t have her own version of me out there somewhere?*

Will ignores him, keeps his attention on his mama. Her eyes are glossy, as if wet with tears, and if he didn’t know better he might have misread the expression on her face for one of heartfelt supplication.

“And legality be damned, William,” she continues. “Who would do business with such a man? Do you honestly think Henry Brisbane would ship his harvest? Do you think a manumitted slave would have any hope of finding a reliable factor? Do you think he wouldn’t be implicated out of hand in the first rebellion or uprising? Even if he managed to hold the land, he would still be ruined. William, you have to see that.”

Will leans back in his chair, folds his hands over his stomach, asks, “I must see it because you say it is so? Who are you to divine the future?”

“You must see it because it is common sense.” She half-rises, grips the table’s edge, leans forward so their bodies comprise the two sides of a rhombus—his retreating, hers advancing. “And I say it as someone who has seen more of the world than just this place. You’ve been isolated here, William, sheltered for most of your life. You can’t possibly know what is coming, while I—”

Will begins to laugh, chuckling at first, but soon there are explosive bursts roaring from his chest that he makes no attempt to stifle. He finds her hilarious, ridiculous. He

can't help himself. He bangs his fist on one knee, hooting louder, then he feels a jolting impact and opens his eyes to a great many furniture legs, the elm bottom of the breakfast table, his own chair toppled beside him with upturned legs splintered and dangling. His mama, he realizes, has kicked him over, knocked his chair out from under him. Despite the renewed throbbing in his head, this only makes him laugh harder, and he pinwheels his arms, trying to catch her off guard and bring her down as well, but the only thing he comes into contact with is his chair, which he hits solidly enough to send careening across the room in three distinct pieces. Bethia will mend it, he tells himself, then he spies the hem of his mama's dress in his peripheral vision. She knows him very well. She has removed herself from reach.

“Are you done laughing at me?” she asks when he falls silent. She sounds cool rather than angry, as if he were a stranger of whom she'd made a polite inquiry.

Lying prone on thin woven carpet, Will has one arm bent, its hand pillowed beneath his head, his other arm folded across his middle. He is quite comfortable. “I suppose so,” he replies, and groaning, sits upright. He presses both palms to the base of his spine, pushes inward, groans again when his vertebra crack and resettle. “Are you done arranging my life for me?” He does his best to match her tone.

“I had hoped it wouldn't come to this, William.” She is turned away from him, looking out the window, her body a hazily dark shape in a square of postdawn amber light. “With all my heart, I hoped for it. You are my only living child. I don't like to cause you pain.”

“Do spit it out, Mama.” Will Stands and busies himself adjusting his shirt, yanking his waistcoat back into place.

“Have it as you will.” She turns to face him, but she comes no closer, and she looks at his chest rather than his eyes. “You need a wife, William. A real wife, and a legitimate child.”

“I will take a wife,” he says, “if and when I choose.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “You will begin looking for one immediately, in earnest.”

“And if I don’t?” He assumes an empty seat at the table, retrieves his partially-full plate, begins eating a cooled piece of amberjack. It is less crisp than before but still perfectly seasoned.

“If you do not,” she licks her lips, “I will sell Bethia.”

Will laughs, wipes his fingers on the edge of the tablecloth. “There’s a slight problem with that plan,” he says, reaching for another piece of bread. “You don’t own her, remember.” He jabs a finger at his sternum. “I do. As you’ll recall, father deemed you an unfit mistress. You can’t sell Bethia any more than you could sell me.”

“I didn’t say I’d do it legally.” She is angry now and braver because of it. “Pirates don’t often ask for bills of sale, do they? Can’t have all those substantiating papers lying around, accumulating, showing up at inconvenient times.” She comes two steps closer. “As far as they’re concerned, if I have the key to her shackles, well then I must own her, mustn’t I? There’s not one man in a dozen would turn me away, especially after seeing how strong and well formed she is.”

Will takes a bite of scrapple, gestures widely with his fork. “And you think I’ll just stand by and let you lead her away? That I’ll not make a move to stop you?”

“You would if you were here,” his mama allows. “But you’ve been travelling so much this year, off to Charles Towne once or twice a week, as of late—inspecting slave shipments, paying your respects to Mr. Brisbane.” Her eyes flick briefly up to Will’s, then away again. “You can’t stop what you’re not here to see.”

“You wouldn’t.” He throws down his napkin, rises, begins to move toward her. “You said so yourself. You love her. You nursed her. You’d not see her sold to a sugar factory. Or worse.”

She bows her head but holds her ground as Will closes the distance between them. “As much as it would pain me to do so,” she says, “I would. If you forced me to it, I would.”

Standing before her now, close enough to touch, he asks, “You would do that to me?”

“No *to* you, Willy.” Fingers pleated in her skirt, she squares her shoulders and looks up. “*For* you. I would do it for you. For you and for our family and for everything we’re trying to build here.”

He steps in so they’re toe to toe and she must tilt far back to see him. “If you do this,” he says, “If you push me, I’ll stop it all. There will be no more digging, no more building, no more fancy purchases. I’ll be a hog farmer like father. I’ll make good enough money. We’ll get along fine, and there will be nothing to pass on anyway but a too-big house and a fallow field and a handful of piglets.” He points his finger at her chest, but higher than he intended, into the notch at the base of her throat. “You think my imaginary white son will be an assemblyman, wearing damp wool and stinking of pig shit? You

think that boy'll ever be invited to the Governor's house? That he'll be hardy and affluent and married to a fat merchant's daughter?"

"I do," she nods, "he will," and her eyes are like lasers. "That's just what he'll be because, William, you know you won't stop. No matter what I do, you won't stop." She draws out these last three words like whole notes in a song.

"And what makes you say that? More of your otherworldly insight? You can look inside my mind now and tell the future both. Is that right?"

"Something like that." She raises her hand to his face, pushes back his sweat-damp hair, traces the clenched line of his jaw. "I know you, Will. Better than anyone else, better than Bethia even. Don't you suppose that gives me some kind of forethought?"

*Maybe not better than everyone,* Liam notes, and Will can sense his enjoyment.

"If you know me so well," he challenges, discounting what he knows Liam is thinking, "then you must know exactly what I'm going to do next."

She doesn't blink. "Hurt me as best you can, I expect."

*What do you know, Liam? She can play our game.*

And Will doesn't hesitate to turn on his heel and take the three steps necessary to bring him alongside the breakfast table. Once there he picks up the sugar bowl, weighs it in his hand for a moment, then throws it with tremendous force at the prescient cherry-blossomed wall. Sugar's gone like so much sand, and ceramic chips too small even for Bethia's eyes slip between fresh-hewn floorboards while larger pieces clatter behind, naked white, pallid on their insides. Pitcher comes next, then two bowls and a platter, and Will mourns for Bethia's bread—inedible now, dusted with pottery shards—but heaves the squash right after to crash in a pool of milk and sodden fish. He reaches next for a

teacup, and part of him can't help but hear his mama's pleas, feel her gnat-like weight on his arm until he shakes her off, less gentle even than he'd be with Pluto. Mostly, though, what he feels, the thing he hears is Liam—caressing the lobes of his brain, elbowing hard the soft backs of his eardrums, reciting lines read years ago in a library book with a cracked red cover and the checkout stamps spilled over the pages' edge. He (Liam) brought the book back to his dorm room and learnt the lines by heart twice over so that he (Will) mightn't ever forget they exist:

*The children of Parthena, a Negro woman, were bequeathed an Ashley River estate by their white father, Joseph Pendarvis. In his will of 1735 Pendarvis devised the valuable property on Charlestowne Neck to Childermas Croft and John Hyrne as trustees for the children, but Croft appropriated the land to himself and the rightful inheritors fell back into obscurity, and perhaps servitude.*

He finds Bethia in the summer kitchen, bent over the hearth, turned away from the door, sweat visibly adhering cloth at her underarms and the small of her back. Will grimaces when he steps inside and the temperature spikes a quick twenty degrees conservatively, but the gamey smell of raw overheated meat is at least not too offensive yet, and the yellow flies have not massed as they will by late afternoon. He takes off his waistcoat, folds it so the outside's in, then drops it atop a long pine work surface dyed rust with various animals' juices and nicked all over by cleaving blades. It was not a good choice of wood, he notes, and will soon need to be replaced.



“Don’t put that there,” Bethia says without turning around. She is stoking the coals, trying to build up flames beneath a hanging stewpot—rabbit, Will guesses by smell and licks his lips to taste steam. “I’ll be kneading new bread there shortly, since someone saw fit to do in my last batch.” She hangs up her poker. “Get flour on that vest, just one more thing’ll need cleaning.” And she sticks her hand in her apron pocket, uses the cloth as a hot mitt to open an iron door built into the fireplace wall. Heat bulges out of the mailbox-sized oven, and Bethia hocks spit, nods once in satisfaction when it lands true and sizzles. “Or you want to throw it in the fire,” she asks, “save me some time scrubbing?” She stirs the stew, clangs the heavy spoon twice to knock off gravy, turns grim-faced to a cloth-covered bowl nearby Will’s folded waistcoat. “Mon dieu!” And the square of cloth goes sailing through the air to land in the corner atop a stack of kindling and sectioned logs. When Will looks back at Bethia she is wrist-deep in dough, the muscles in her arms visibly jumping as she squeezes, pounds, flips the soft whiteness, punches. “I told you,” she bears down hard and a rivulet of sweat bleeds from her temple, “not to put that there.”

“Bethia—” Will puts his hand on her shoulder and is rewarded with an elbow to the solar plexus. “Jesus, Bethia.” He rubs his stomach, frowns, but doesn’t move away. “If you were listening,” he struggles to catch his breath, “and you were obviously listening, I don’t know why you’re angry with me. I’m not the one threatening to sell you.” He touches her shoulder again. “I’m the one trying to keep you, trying to protect you.”

“Some man I’ve got protecting me.” She shrugs off his hand, hits the dough with a 1-1-2 combination that Will taught her when she was thirteen, back during Liam’s brief

foray into college boxing. “Throws a tantrum like a six-year-old because he can’t best a tiny old woman.”

Will snorts. “She may be tiny, but she’s meaner than she is old,” and he moves fully behind her, grips both shoulders, starts in with his best corner-man’s ringside rubdown. “Take it easy there, champ.” He says, “You’ve already beat the poor guy bloody.”

“He had it going.” She drops her head, bettering his access to her neck. Her hands go still.

“Coming,” Will corrects. “He had it coming. And I’m sure he did. The bastard. You want me to knock him one for you?”

“Non,” she says, and this is her Parisian voice, the one Will likes best. “I can handle him myself.” And he imagines her on a beach in the Côte D’Ivoire, white bikini against her skin, pineapple flavored slushy rum drink in hand, and fashion photographers from Cannes calling her name, posing her just so, film whirring and flash bulbs exploding as they offer her obscene sums of money, anything she wants, everything and anything at all, if she will just reach back and grab that string and—“Qu'est-ce que tu fais?” Grabbing him by the wrist, she extracts his hand from the front of her dress, says, “I am busy and hot, and I do not want to be pawed right now.”

But Will doesn’t let her pull away. He takes her by the waist, pins her to the table’s edge, uses the weight of his body which is only just greater than hers to hold her still. “Is that any kind of thank you,” he asks, “for the man standing between you and the cane fields, between you and the boiling house? I’ve heard stories.” He rubs his chin against the side of her face, burning her on purpose with his whiskers. “They make it

sound most unpleasant. Has my mama ever told you about the one slave of her father's? The one who got careless, slipped and fell in the sugar vat? She says he swore his men to secrecy, that he processed that batch anyway, then he sold it at a discount rate and his buyers loved him for it, praised him for his fair dealing and his munificence. Do you ever wonder," he asks, "just who you're drinking in your morning tea?"

A log collapses in the ten-foot hearth, emitting a burst of sparks and a wave of intensified heat thick with the oily too-rich smell of braised rabbit. The first yellow fly of the day lands on Bethia's neck. Will watches it bite her. She doesn't flinch. Then, saying nothing, she arches her back, pushes her hips against his, and she is forceful enough so that he must retreat a step in order to keep from losing his balance. When she has the room to do so, she bends at the waist, lowers herself like a drawbridge, like the needle on a pressure gauge rising toward red, until her cheek is flat against the discolored tabletop and she widens her stance and reaches back for a handful of fabric, and she raises her skirts in a billow of sweat and yeast and caustic hog-tallow soap. She grips the edge of the table, and Will touches her exposed and offered-up skin. He uses his palm first, then only his fingertips, and he notes how the parts of her nearest the fire shine rust-tinged mahogany, while her other side nearer the door and the sun is closer to oak. He strikes her then, hard on the thigh, but he cups his hand before it lands so the blow is much louder than it is painful. There won't be a bruise.

"You know I hate that harem-slave act." He yanks her dress down and covers her. "And you know you're not fooling anyone." Pinching his shirt at the neckline, he flaps it to create a breeze against the redolent heat of the kitchen, which helps only a little. "As

God and my mama and every man in this parish can well attest, you're about as helpless as a pit viper."

"Every man?" She unbends, reels about. "What men?" Her nose is barely an inch from his and Will wonders if she's going to bite him. He half hopes she'll try. "You think I go near other men?"

"No." Will sighs. "I don't. Calm yourself." He puts his hands on her broad shoulders. "I think they come near you. And I think you use those boxing tricks I taught you to send them packing." He pinches her chin, tips it up a quarter inch. "Just try not to draw blood, hmm? It's a likely miracle I've not wound up in court already, begging some powdered-wig fop to have you beaten rather than hanged."

"Before that ever happens," she returns to her kneading, says blithely, "I will run away."

"You could try." Will fans himself, unconcerned. "But remember, the tribes around here like me. I keep my hogs penned in and I don't kidnap their women. You'd not get far."

"As you say." She punches the dough once more and covers it with a cloth for its final rising, then she walks to the hearth, her outline wavering mirage-like against the nucleus of cultivated heat. She grabs a spoon, stirs her stew. It will be lunchtime soon.

"I've got to get out of here." The smell of the rabbit has become nauseating.

"Ça va." She's moved on to paring bad spots from the dregs of last season's sweet potatoes, her knife reflecting firelight as it severs rot. "Get on with you then."

Having retrieved his waistcoat, Will pauses at the door. He turns back, watches her work for a moment, and he thinks then of a painting by Vermeer, of the homely

domestic interior and the shadowed interplay between light and flesh and cloth and the woman going about her mundane daily tasks oblivious to the fact that she is a masterpiece. “Bethia.” She looks up. Her tongue is stuck out in concentration. This startles Will and he laughs. “I’ll be gone for the rest of the day.” He hesitates. “I’m sure that I’m being overcautious, but I don’t want you alone with my mama. I know she’s half your size, but keep Pluto with you? Please?”

Bethia smiles, nods, grumbles, “Boy’ll stare at me and be underfoot and eat half my food before it ever makes it on the table, mais bien sûr, whatever I can do to make you happy, Maître.”

Will snorts, says, “Master, my ass,” and he hears Bethia laugh as he leaves the kitchen house behind, stepping out gladly into the comparable winter of the mid-September sun.

Thirty-eight strides on a west-northwest line separate the kitchen from the rear entrance to the main house. Will knows this because he has paced it out many times, marked the sun’s angle as best he can without a compass, measured it faithfully so Liam’s reconstruction might be precise. The packed dirt underfoot is smooth and firm, neat from recent rain, but Will wishes nonetheless for crushed seashells, both for their aesthetic appeal—he imagines the aerial view of his home as a tributary system of immaculate paths—and for the sound they make, gravelly announcing each visitor’s arrival. In anticipation of this change Liam has skipped dirt altogether, gone straight for the shells, and it makes Will jealous to think he can be beaten in this way, that Liam is carrying out his plans before their initial execution, that the work might be completed

first from the opposite end of time. But, if all goes according to plan, he will soon have tools at his disposal that Liam does not.

Veering left off the kitchen path, Will cuts through the half-cleared land behind the house, kicking long grass and dodging stumps as he goes. Unlike the front lawn, there was no time to complete work here before the slaves' efforts were needfully redirected toward harvesting and slaughter, but Will does not plan to let the winter months go by wasted. By spring, he anticipates, the only trees that remain will be the sturdiest ornamental ones he's chosen to keep. He pulls up saplings along the way, hurls the carcasses with their invasive trailing root structures as far as he can, and wishes that for just one day he might have the use of a backhoe. He stops then, turns a full circle, laughs as he surveys the maritime forest around him. Trees tough and old enough to help stabilize an island are not ones that easily give up the ghost, and Will is amused, vindicated even, by the fact that Liam, although technically able to access and use such machinery, is bound by the agreement made with his financial backers. A historical recreation, as authentic as possible, only period-appropriate techniques to be used, no exceptions even for heavy lifting and digging. They did air condition the house, of course, and wire it for electricity and install modern plumbing, but there was no sense in making the kids piss themselves or in inviting lawsuits from doddering octogenarians who are as likely to stroke out as they are to survive a mid-August plantation tour. Will forgives Liam these bits of hypocrisy, but he does so mostly because every modern convenience installed is one more boulder in the way of completion. Liam is free to squander time fighting with his eighty-dollar-an-hour "historical" electrician about the

proper way to wire a light fixture for the most authentic candlelit feel, and he, Will, will just light some damn candles and get down to the real work.

Rounding the back side of the house, Will approaches the original kitchen garden first planted by his mama more than twenty years ago. A row of pumpkins, three of squash, pole beans, green and purple cabbage, a hedge of rosemary, sage and thyme. Every vegetable they ate their first year on the island came out of this plot, and Will still cannot smell rosemary without remembering the darkened cabin—now the basement of the enlarged house—door and windows barred, burrowed face-first in his mama’s lap while arrows pinged off the cypress shutters and a pot of herbaceous meat stew bubbled in the hearth. In terms of survival the garden has been superfluous for years now, with their larger subsistence crops of maize, sweet and white potatoes, and barley having been moved across the river to the comparatively storm-sheltered mainland, but Will’s mama insisted they keep the old plot going, said she’d grown accustomed to looking out the window and seeing for herself the hard fact of the food’s existence and knowing that because of it her son wouldn’t go hungry that night. Either this coming spring or the next, Will plans to tear it out altogether, to plow the soil fresh and to begin cultivating a pleasure garden. He would like to have camellias, but he knows the seeds won’t make their way from Asia to England until—if he remembers correctly—1739, and he is not willing to wait that long. He also expects that if he is still alive at that time—as his mama would say, Lord willing—he will be sufficiently busy defending his slaves against any hint of involvement in the Stono Rebellion, and he will have little if any time to spend arranging the importation of Asiatic flowering shrubs. Azaleas and rhododendrons, he

thinks, will do nicely instead, along with crepe-myrtles and chinaberries to add height and variety.

A small head pops up between rows of pumpkins and squash, and Will moves in its direction, walking silent between channels of fertilized dirt. He steps over a discarded hoe, eases around a trellis of purple and yellow beans ripe for the picking, and looks down on Pluto, who is down on his knees with a trowel in hand digging fat earthworms from the damp garden soil. A hollowed-out butternut gourd at his elbow is half full of shiny, Gordian bodies and attests to the length of time he's spent neglecting his chores.

Will crosses his arms, spreads his feet wide, asks, "Planning to do a spot of fishing?" and Pluto flinches, severing the worm's body he was in the process of excavating. When he looks up, however, he is bland faced, smiling.

"Nosir, Mist' Will." He says, "I'm weeding."

"Weeding out worms?"

"Yessir." He nods, bobble-heading. "Missus Mama, you know how she likes to pick the beans? But she doesn't like the worms, not a bit. So I thought—"

"I see, Pluto." And he is thinking, *My mama scalped a man once, she used her kitchen knife and raised the skin flap high and she screamed like an old Scotch demon, and I've seen her make hog's blood pudding with the leavings under her nails and hot juice splattered on her face, and she licked her lips and then her fingers, and if you want to be a house slave you will need to be a better liar.* "That's very considerate of you."

Pluto shrugs and looks down, aw-shucksing as he adds the half-worm to his gourd.



“The worms’ll have to wait, Pluto.” Will says, “Terrifying as they are, no doubt, I have a very important job for you, one that must be carried out with the utmost discretion.”

Pluto sits up straighter, his curiosity secured by his master’s businesslike tone. “For sure, Mist’ Will. Only, I don’t know what that means, utmost dis—”

“Discretion, Pluto. Utmost discretion. It means you’ll need to be careful and quiet and not let anyone know what you’re up to. Can you do that?”

“Yessir.” He is nearly quivering with excitement. “I can be sneaky when I need.”

*I am a bad master to you, Pluto. You are not half so scared of me as you ought to be.* “Good, Pluto. I knew I could count on you. You’ll make me a first-rate body man one day. Now, what I need you to do is to stay with Bethia. All day until I get back, no matter what, you stick by her side. Can you do that for me?”

Pluto is looking cautiously joyful as if he’s afraid Will has clean lost his mind, as if he can’t think of anything he’d like to do more nor comprehend why his master would ask such a ridiculous question, as if he’s waiting for the catch.

*Smart boy.* “Now, listen to me, Pluto, listen carefully. This is the hard part. First, you do whatever Bethia asks, help her out in any way she wants, hmm? Good boy. But, whatever she says, don’t let her send you away. Not to get water or kindling or I don’t care what else, not even for an instant. She needs to relieve herself, you turn your back and plug your ears, but you stick right with her, you hear me?” Pluto nods, his eyes wide as a guppy’s. “Good. And this is the most important thing—If my mama comes near her, if Missus Mama tries to take Bethia anywhere she doesn’t want to go, you run as fast as you can and find your father. Abraham will know what to do.” And Pluto grins proud

agreement. “But if you can’t find him, Pluto, you’ll have to fetch me yourself. You get in your canoe, and you don’t let anyone stop you. Paddle to Charles Towne, and when you get there you holler loud as you can for Mister Brisbane. You remember the way, don’t you? Good, now say it with me.”

And the two speak as one: “Two miles down til the river gets wide, then right toward the hand I like best. Hug the shore around the harbor, paddle hard across the Cooper.”

Will makes him say it twice more—“*More than thrice and you’re wasting sweat, Willy-o*”—then has him do the same with Brisbane’s name. When he’s sure Pluto understands, that he knows what’s expected of him, he spins him around and gives him a shove in the direction of the kitchen and his guard duty. The boy’s legs nearly blur he runs so fast, and Will watches him until he disappears around the back side of the house, having left both his worm-gourd and the misplaced hoe behind. Will collects them, shaking his head, and moves on in the direction of the slaughter pens.

It is a two mile walk to the northeast end of the island, but Will doesn’t mind having the chance to survey his domain, to walk alongside the river, to check the cleats on the boats and be sure none have rotted or are being gradually filed through. This is something he thinks his father should have done more often—put his ledgers aside and step out into the world and turn up every now and then where his slaves didn’t necessarily expect to see him, rather than counting on his wife and son to fill that supervisory capacity alone. Nearing the docks, Will sees a thin slave dressed in loose trousers and homespun linen who is like-aged with his mama but seeming much older. He has a dugout canoe out of the water propped upside down on two sawhorses, and he is

examining a patch job from the outside, then ducking underneath to compare, then out he pops to slosh water over the wood before couching again to see if any finds its way through. He rubs a hand over his work, stroking it with his eyes shut, searching for flaws by touch, and Will thinks he sees him lean in close and seem to whisper, but it is a language Will doesn't know or maybe it is just the wind through the cordgrass, and Will calls to him, "Joe!" even while he can half-hear Liam in his head, chiding him to use the man's true name, saying it is, after all, the least he can do, but for some reason Will can't get the name *Cujo* past his lips. Partly this is because the image of the docile old man with his bad eyes and his gummy near-toothless smile is wholly at odds with the ferocity implicit in his name. Then there is the fact that, having named Pluto on a whim when he was seventeen and given permission by his father to do so, Will failed at the time to consider the absurdity in having a proliferation of slaves named after twentieth-century fictional canines. He imagines the reaction of hypothetical school children in the future who, after being handed an illegible photocopy of his yearly inventory to examine as a primary-source document, will giggle and nudge one another when they see *Pluto* and *Cujo* listed among the slaves, and then ignore everything else as they scour the rest of the catalog, leading with their sticky index fingers as they hunt for *Snoopy* and *Odie* and *Balto*, among others. And lastly, although Liam finds meaning in the fact that *Cujo* was the name given Joe by his mother, Will himself sees no tenderness or compassion, only enforced indifference, in the act of a female slave naming her infant son after a day of the week—*Monday* in her own language—because that is the day he is born, and she cannot withstand imparting a real name, a family name, and because she fully expects that by

Tuesday he will no longer be hers. *Joe* may be an Anglicization, a bastardization, but it is, Will thinks, a merciful one.

“Joe!” he calls again, and the old man hears him this time and turns with his pink smile to greet the boy he once bundled and held close through a squall in the roiling bowels of a ship when his parents were too ill to do so. “Catch!” And Will tosses him Pluto’s hoe, knowing that Joe can’t see the thing until it is inches from his face, but that he will detect the iron whirr through the air and unerringly raise a hand in the precise spot it needs to be to catch the wood handle with firm-gripped slap. “Put that away for me, will you?” And Joe queries, “Pluto?” and Will shouts, “Aye,” and Joe says, “That boy,” and Will waves back as he continues on his way, jogging along the marshy riverbank-shore.

Leaving behind the inhabited part of the island for the side given over to the hogs, Will crosses a stark demarcation. There is the cleared land between the house and the docks marred by nothing but long grass and residual shade trees, and buttressing this developed space there is a split-rail fence bisecting the island, separating livestock from people. Built double thick and reinforced with large river stones at the base, this fence is not impermeable to the hogs which have been known to root underneath and break free upon occasion, but the foraging is good on the wild half of the island and as their population is controlled with regular hunting, they rarely stir themselves to rummage elsewhere. Will’s mama once proposed building a coral-path along the riverside, making a safe trail through the woods leading back to the slaughter pens and smokehouse, but his father eschewed the cost and said, moreover, that the slaves wouldn’t use it, that they enjoyed walking among the beasts in a dark and perilous forest and testing themselves

against the descendents of enraged Spanish boars, that it was in their blood to do so and it would be a sin to deny them a mere sniff of their former lives. For a long time Will put no stock in this, assumed instead that it was yet another instance of his father pinching pennies, cutting corners, but the first hunt he participated in at age fourteen put an end to that belief. Abraham with a spear in his hand is a fearsome thing, and Will ceased to wonder then why, as a child, his parents had put him in the older boy's charge, made Abraham swear a blood oath to protect Will against all trouble, cut his hand and chest and had him vow that he would smite out his own eye before letting any harm befall his white brother. According to Abraham's last report, all the largest boars of the season have been brought down already, so Will doesn't hesitate to set both hands atop the fence, to vault-scramble over the wood and stone wall, to leave behind the human side of the island and step into the forest.

While he's been tramping through these woods for many years now and thus technically knows his way as well as he knows his own name, Will finds it easy at times to confuse his forest with Liam's, to see trees similar in appearance but different in location and to become completely turned around until he happens across some more permanent landmark and reclaims his orientation—a boulder, a creek bed, a slanting rise in elevation. Because he has business to attend and doesn't want to lose time getting lost, today he sticks close to the edge of the island, keeps the river always in sight, doesn't venture into the interior as he cuts around the ironwoods and the cedars and the stands of palmate resurrection ferns. It is dim and cool, perhaps thirty degrees cooler than inside the kitchen house, but muggy enough that his clothes stick to him like cellophane and his hair feels unbearably heavy where the queue lays against his neck. A fox darts across his

path, and he hears the occasional stifled-machinegun bursts of a sapsucker's bill drilling into hardwood, but the closest he comes to a feral hog is when a nearby swamp dogwood begins to sway, its branches arched out pregnantly to conceal the girth of a rooting adolescent, born the previous spring. Will walks on, unconcerned, and a mile later he reaches a beachside clearing where the northern tip of the almond-shaped island juts out into the forked intercoastal river.

Two fresh-killed hogs are hung up by their rear legs in front of the smokehouse, one a sow, the other a boar, both with their throats cut into gaping scythes and the sandy ground beneath them black with the drainage from the body cavity. A thin dark red stream still trickles from the discernibly larger male, and Will watches as one of his slaves—Quashey, a recently acquired pidgin Spanish speaker first owned on Hispaniola—castrates it easily and throws the testicles to one side, adding them to the pile of offal he's reserved to have Bethia fix for him special. Nearby, Abraham is working on a third hog, one that is empty of blood and already through, Will figures, the first two burnings of its hide, as the carcass is charred with seemingly cooked ears and hooves that are peeling away at the ankles. Crouched over it, Abraham uses a sharpened oyster shell to scrape off the remnants of burnt hair, the sweeping motion of his hands brutal and reflexive, and Will knows that when he's through he will detach the legs, split open the head, peel off the fatback, and ready the segmented meat for the smokehouse. The end result won't be fully cured, but the vulnerable outside layer will be dried through and the interior rancidity delayed enough to allow for exportation. And Will, as always, will be proud to see it loaded onto boats and shipped off to feed the residents of his grandfather's plantation in Barbados, proud to know that the food he supplies is the true

enabling force behind the family's prosperity and the sole reason they may continue to devote every last inch of tropical land to sugarcane, while leaving none for the cultivation of food crops or livestock.

Not wanting to startle him into severing a vein, Will hails Abraham, shouts a greeting from the forest's edge, and without looking up from his work Abraham half-waves in Will's direction, letting him know that he was, of course, aware of Will's presence all along, but that he's busy now and Will must wait a moment to be acknowledged. Will is in a hurry, though, and he doesn't care to await Abraham's convenience, so he cups his hands over his mouth and yells, "Pluto," knowing that the mention of his son's name will secure Abraham's interest like nothing else can. In response, Abraham drops his oyster shell without making even a final pass over the hide. The speed with which he closes the space between them is the same as if he were running, but his limbs never seem to move in any way but languidly, gracefully, and it is this skill, Will knows, that makes him such a good hunter. It is also an ability Will himself doesn't possess, and when he stands before Abraham, although not visibly dwarfed in either height or in breadth, it's hard for him not to think of the fact that, while his survival skills may have served Liam well in his goal of impressing sucrose-huffing twentieth-century suburban eight-year-olds, they pale to insignificance when regarded alongside Abraham's capabilities.

"Here." Will thrusts Pluto's worm-gourd into Abraham's hand, which is speckled with burnt hog hair and clots of drying blood. He says, "I found him digging for those in the garden."

Abraham accepts the gourd, inclines his head slightly. He says, “I’ll have a word with him about that,” his English near-perfect beneath the Caribbean accent—choppier, more harshly rhotic than its lilting Harry-Belafonte counterpart—and Will feels an immediate stab of regret. He didn’t mean to earn the boy a beating.

“It isn’t important.” He waves a hand in dismissal, hoping Abraham will forget about the worms, knowing he won’t. To distract him, to give Pluto his best chance, Will launches into his real reason for having sought Abraham out—not to report on his son’s misdeeds, but to inform him of the threat made against Bethia, of Pluto’s role as impromptu bodyguard, of the possibility that someone must intervene on Will’s behalf if his mama takes advantage of his absence to set all or part of her plan in motion. Abraham frowns when Will raises the possibility of Pluto making the trip to Charles Towne alone, and Will’s first impulse is to backtrack and explain, the same way he’d have once apologized for a spear throw gone awry or for a too-large cobia breaking free of his fishing line. He stamps down on the urge, however, reminding himself that Abraham is no longer his keeper, that there is no one on the island to whom he is accountable, that from swine to crops to trees to human flesh, he is the lone proprietor of everything he sees. It is a heady reminder, more potent even than Liam’s Bajan punch, and Will is reeling a bit, rocking back on his heels as he completes his address with a terse, “Is that understood,” making it clear by his inflection that he is not asking for agreement.

Abraham doesn’t look Will in the eye, but stares at the space in between them, at the spot just above his nose. He says, “I understand,” and his own eyes are almost crossing, and Will remembers how it felt to wield a lash against him, pulped skin like rotten fruit, how he threw up in the middle and afterward and how he couldn’t stop his



hands' shaking the rest of the day, and his father was ashamed, and Bethia refused to offer him comfort, and it took Will a good week to realize that she was not mad at him for beating his slave but rather disgusted with him for doubting his prerogative to do so. *"What use is a powerful man who don't know he has power, n'est-ce pas?"* And now, Will thinks, he could unhinge Abraham's jaw, punch him hard in the gut, 1-1-2 his kidneys and it would be more than he deserves because the damage would be done hand to hand, skin to skin, man to man.

When he waves Abraham back to his work, Will is feeling magnanimous, like a kindly sovereign having issued his pardon—pressed his ring into the firming wax and signed on the designated line—and he takes a moment to draft a mental inventory of his wares. Bethia and Pluto in the kitchen, old Joe patching boats at the docks, Quashey and Abraham skinning hogs, and that leaves two unaccounted for. "Quash," he calls out, "¿Dónde está Scipio y Jem?"

Quashey is gnawing a cooked ear torn from Abraham's hog, and he looks up, spits out a piece of gristle. He jerks his head toward the river, says, "Patatas," then holds the ear between his teeth as he helps Abraham begin cleaving off the animal's limbs. The two work in coordinated silence, not hindered in the least by the language barrier between them that frustrates all but the most basic exchanges. Quashey forces down the fire-constricted leg, Abraham axes through the joint in a single blow, and the bloodless hock erupts pink around a nub of exposed bone oozing marrow. Will thinks of newly shelled peas, of corn dogs just out of the fryer, of greens simmered for hours in broth rich with bacon and herbs. His stomach growls; he feels himself salivate.

“Muchas gracias.” He says this too low for either Quashey or Abraham to hear, then he turns, disappears into the woods, and he is feeling both famished and oddly replete at once, like he could devour a side of pork raw or perhaps never eat again and it doesn’t matter which it is. He wants to yell or climb a tree or have Bethia underneath him, on her stomach, facing away. Instead he starts to run. Oaks streak by and he hurtles a fallen log, dodges an impassable wall of salt-spray resistant cedar, and he doesn’t need to think if this is Liam’s forest or his forest because that is beside the point, so when he loses sight of the river he doesn’t hesitate but sprints unerringly onward, straight-soled archless shoes pounding soil, and he wishes he were barefoot, or naked altogether, that at the very least he might feel the mud and the spongy layer of leafy-pine-needle decay oozing up between his toes. He would smear loam on his skin like a Celt, learn to fight like a berserker, finally hunt as well as Abraham.

He jumps a freshwater stream, lands hard on both feet, bends his knees to absorb the shock, and when he looks up the hog is just there—ahead of him and to the left, a three-hundred-pound long-haired colossus where an instant before there was just bark and earth and green. He can tell from its breadth and tusks it’s a boar, one of the large two-year-olds Abraham assured him had all been culled, and while the canines don’t look like much at no more than five inches curved up rather than protruding, Will has seen firsthand what those teeth can do. Designed by nature to fend off large carnivores like a tiger or a lynx, they are the perfect tools for an upward thrust gore-rip to the stomach. *Phibbi’s body on the ground beneath Will’s father, who tried to save her, who loved her like a daughter, the same as his mama loves Bethia. But he’s already sick, half dead, too weak to bring it down. And Abraham thirty feet too far behind with a spear he never*

*threw, and Thank You, God, Pluto is inside not here to watch his father try to put the shiniest most vital parts of Phibbi back on the inside.* This hog is not cornered, not in rut, not threatened in the slightest, and Will can in all likelihood sneak off if he moves cautious and doesn't offend it with any provocation. Or on the off chance it does resolve to charge, he might run five steps, grab a low-hanging branch, pull up his legs and wait out the beast until it grows bored and departs.

*But what would be the fun in that?*

*For once, Liam my friend, you and I are in perfect agreement.*

Will runs. More than that, he runs a wide clockwise arc that cuts within the boar's reach, and he bellows like a rival male swinging both arms as roundly as if each held a battle axe, so there's more than six feet of limbs whirligigging through space, stampeding forward in an overt challenge that is howling more loudly than does any animal indigenous to the island. It works like a charm. The boar doesn't paw the earth or snort or shake its head, hair ruffled up in a Elizabethan mane. It simply attacks. Will jumps back, body sucked into a C as he draws in his stomach to miss the tusks' first advance, and he stumbles, almost trips on a desiccated log, but he rights himself at the last instant, and then he is off, tearing through the woods in earnest. He doesn't think about his breathing, forgets everything Liam's track coach taught him, just swallows mouthfuls of air as he propels himself onward, dodging trees as nimbly as he can, knowing his oversized feet have no advantage over the boar's seemingly dainty yet responsive hooves. A sapling's branch catches him in the cheek, he barely registers the sting, and the sound behind him is vast, an immense upheaval of trembling earth. He wants to look back because it is instinctive, because that is what people do, but cold-hearted as his mama can be, she has

taught him his Bible well and he knows the tale of Lot's wife is more than mere parable. When he thinks it must all be over, that he can feel the boar's fetid breath circling his calves and it is only a matter of gasps before he is seized by its tusks in a rending pitchfork-lift, this is when he sees the wall—four and a half feet high, and it is a lovely sight, and he strains toward it even though he can no longer feel his legs at all, just trusts from the wind tearing his eyes that he is indeed moving forward since the wall gets no closer, but instead keeps retreating until the last second when he is right up on it. Without breaking his momentum, Will dives, hurls himself over, tuck-and-rolls to absorb the impact and can only hope the boar won't follow.

He opens his eyes to sky. After a quick inventory of Liam's crayons, he elects cornflower as the appropriate descriptor. Not a cloud in sight, and isn't that too bad because they could use a bit of rain; millpond's in need of replenishing and the barley will be in soon. Will rises, brushes himself off. He notes some scratches and a likely bruise, mud splatter, what feels like a strain in his right quad, but all in all nothing a bath and time and Bethia won't be able to restore. Counting himself victorious, he turns back toward the wall to gloat, but the wooded façade is quiet, unstirred, not a hog or even a squirrel or bird in sight. "Have Abraham hunt you tomorrow." He warns the trees, "You'll be delicious cooked with some apples and onions." Then he swears. There are no apples, won't be for some time yet, not until the backcountry is settled and its orchards mature or until the New England farmers begin shipping their harvest south. "You lucky bastard," Will says to Liam. Then he adds as an afterthought, "Not that you'll eat one, anyway." And he shrugs, heads down the gently sloping lawn and toward the water.

Joe has finished his work on the dugout and moved on to another vessel, this one

a canoe as well, but a larger model closer in style to the voyageurs used up north by Samuel de Champlain and his men in their exploration of the Great Lakes a century before. Twenty feet long with higher sides and a flat-bottomed hull that provides enhanced initial stability, this is the boat Will uses to carry his mama to Charles Towne. No matter what restrictively fashionable costume she has donned, she can climb easily aboard, and the cocooning gunwales keep her dry, while there is plenty of room leftover for purchases, even allowing for the two men needed to wield the oars. Its keel was damaged by a traveling sandbar on their last venture out, and in addition to performing the needed repairs, Joe is taking the opportunity now to give the hull a thorough careening and a fresh coat of waterproofing tar. Will thumps him on the back as he passes by, says, “That can wait, Joe. Why don’t you check out the dory?”—a short, narrow-transomed fishing boat—“I know Pluto’s got a gourdful of worms he’ll be eager to use, and we won’t have need of this beast,” he slaps the side of the voyageur, “for a good long while.”

Joe looks up, squints blearily at Will, smiles at the shape of his outline. “If you don’t mind, Mister Will, I’ll be finishing this one first.” He daubs more tar on the hull, his stiff-jointed arm hinged at the wrist like a raven’s claw brandishing a paintbrush. “Don’t like the idea much of Miss ’Lizabeth’s boat sitting here broken. What if she needs to go somewhere?” And his pronunciation is English, something approximating Cumbrian with a hint of a brogue in his *broken*, which he picked up as a child after being assigned the task of chaperoning Will’s mama at her lessons with an expatriate Lowland-Scotch tutor.

“She won’t need to go anywhere,” Will assures him. “Happy as a queen where she is, and don’t I bring her everything she needs?”

“Yessir,” Joe nods, “that you do. Same as your father did before you,” and he keeps brushing on tar as rhythmically as his arthritis will allow. It is a wonder to Will that his joints don’t actually creak. “But it is storm season, after all, and I know I’ll sleep better when this job here is done.”

The implicit critique is clear, but Will is not fazed by the offense Joe takes at his apparent lack of concern for his mama’s safety. He stares at the voyageur’s broken keel, at the fresh tar pooling around its base, and he is thinking, *You see her still as a little girl frowning over her inkwell and sneaking molasses cookies out to the slaves in the cane fields. You forget the beating you took when she was sixteen and turned up pregnant, when she got married and you got half-killed, whipped to the bone and then some, or so I’ve heard.* He slaps Joe again on the back, harder this time than before, and Joe hunches into his work.

Will says, “If it’ll help you rest easy, Joe, then carry on, I suppose,” and he moves on, stepping out onto the cedar plank dock.

From among three available dugout canoes, Will discounts the one old Joe has only just repaired and settles on the smaller of the remaining two. It is a thirteen footer with a v-shaped bottom and an elongated bow, an easily maneuverable craft that sits high in the water and can hold three more than comfortably or as many as five if the passengers are packed close and immobilized. He checks it for paddles—“*Always be sure to bring a spare, Willy-o*”—then hops onboard and releases the mooring line from the cleat. Joe calls out, “You take care, Mister Will,” and the water grabs the dugout, pulling

it downriver and out toward the sea until Will cuts in with his paddle, forcing the bow to thrust perpendicularly into the current.

Abraham made him train as an oarsmen—fastened a rope between two trees on opposite sides of the river and then had Will practice rowing back and forth until he was adept at maintaining a straight line, at crossing from bank to bank without allowing any part of his canoe to overlap the wavering shadow cast by the rope. More than ten years later he has not lost this skill, and now he unthinkingly angles his paddle, works his arms like the pistons in a steam engine, shoots across the water and less than twenty seconds later pulls up along the field-side dock. He grabs an available cleat with his fingers, doesn't bother to tie up, then he whistles shrill and loud enough to upset a flock of white ibis dining on fly larvae a short way down the bank. They stagger into flight, two dozen of them at least with bodies like gangly long-beaked chickens, and Will watches them lurch across to the other side of the water, where they land and immediately begin picking again through silt.

Thick-soled shoes pound hollow on the dock that emerges from a bed of cordgrass and sea oats, extending back thirty yards or so before it meets with dry land. The disembodied steps continue, and Will half rises in his seat, craning to see above the waving flora. He hollers, "While I'm still young, Jem, if you please."

"Yeah, yeah." The young Irish indenture approaches the dugout. He is tall, red-haired and freckled; he carries a knife with a hog-bone hilt in his hand-me-down riding boot; his favorite food is roast squirrel, and he is a dead shot with a hunter's sling. "I heard you." He says, "No need to get your knickers in a twist." And this is a phrase he's picked up from Will, one he understands the tone of but whose actual meaning he's never

much pondered. When he lowers himself into the back of the canoe, he lands too hard, rocks the vessel on purpose, flails his arms and cries, “Oh! Oh! Oh!” as the river plashes up over the gunwales. “Save me, Master! I’m too handsome to drown.”

“Too stupid to drown, more like.” Will lets go the cleat and uses his paddle to shove off the dock. “Head full of air like you’ve got, you’d just keep bobbing back up.”

Jem laughs, chooses an oar of his own, says, “Cut me to the quick, that one did. Won’t shock me at all if I never recover.” He checks the oar’s balance by weighing it in his hand, then he frowns, drops it, picks up an alternate.

“On peut seulement espérer.” Will’s accent is atrocious.

Jem digs in with his paddle, synchs the rhythm of his strokes to match Will’s, and the canoe accelerates. “You and your Frenchified jibes.” Green trees and white birds and stalks of golden barely flash by. “What do you say,” he asks, “we seek out a lovely young lady for me? One who can teach me some fancy foreign tongue of my own? Then we can pass all day trading barbs with each other, neither of us having a clue what the other one’s saying.” He pauses, cocks his head. “Might be good fun at that, come to think of it.”

“We’re not in the market for women,” Will says. “You know that.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He hocks a glob of spit over the side. “I know that. But a man can dream, can’t he?”

“Let’s try a little less dreaming and a little more rowing, hmm?”

“As you say, Sir.”

They paddle in silence for a while, slipping into a wordless groove, and the dugout’s speed tops out at around ten miles per hour without requiring that either



oarsman overexert. On his own, Pluto can just manage four miles per hour, Will seven, Jem six; if Jem were replaced with Abraham, they would easily break twelve, but since Phibbi's death Abraham has made the trip into Charles Towne only once. He is afraid to leave Pluto, Will thinks, afraid of what might come to pass in his absence, and he is nonsensically blind to the fact that he was nearby when Phibbi died, that he was less than an eighth of a mile away and armed besides when that boar cut loose, and there was still nothing he might have done to save her. Will shrugs.

He asks Jem about progress being made on the potato harvest and Jem, serious for once, assures him that they will more than meet their quota, putting aside eight bushels each of yams and white, with perhaps another four bushels combined to be shipped gratis to Barbados along with the next scheduled delivery of hog meat. Not that two hundred pounds of potatoes will put even a dent in the feed cost for his grandfather's eighty-plus slaves, but Will knows that every bit he sends is greatly appreciated, and he hopes, moreover, that this gratitude might one day be reflected in the old man's bequeathings; well-seasoned slaves fluent in English and proficient in both fieldwork and rum-making are ones he will give a home to any day. Which brings to mind their barley, and while Jem is not sure yet about the exact measure of the crop's yield, there's no cause, he tells Will, to doubt its abundance, as the plants are tall and healthy and there's been nary a trace of blight all season. "Plenty of beer and bread for everyone," Jem concludes.

"Good." Will nods. "That's good."

They soon exit the narrow channel of the intercoastal waterway, and the path before them widens into a large bowl at the southwestern point of Sullivan's Island, its bent shape providing an almost-enclosed coral-less atoll of sheltered water. Liam aced

geometry, and Will is in a rush, so they cut straight across the basin and pop out less than a half mile later in the scooped out concavement of Charleston Harbor. Were it necessary for him to make the trip, Will has ordered Pluto to hug the shore around the harbor, then cut behind Shutes Folly Island and paddle hard across the mouth of the Cooper River, causing him to approach the Charles Towne docks from the east. Although safer, this circuitous route would add a half hour to the expedition, and Will has no intention of taking his own advice.

“We’ll go in straight,” he tells Jem. “Water’s calm and there’s not a ship in sight.”

“As you say,” and the canoe rocks a bit as Jem shifts on his plank seat, adjusting his body’s arrangement for the final two-and-a-half-mile haul. They have traversed nearly a third of this when Jem, not winded at all, says, “Hey, Master?”

“What?”

“You think today will be the day? The day we finally get your imaginary magic slave?”

“Hey, Jem?”

“Aye, Master?”

“Shut the fuck up and row, eh?”

“As you say, Sir.”

And the two work in unison, helping their canoe displace water at the fastest rate possible, both accelerating for sheer joy as the harbor flies beneath them and the seabirds caw overhead, and Will realizes then that he’s not worn a hat, so won’t Liam be pissed when he awakes pink as a lobster with a blister on the bridge of his nose. But no matter. Will whoops just to hear the sound, and Jem echoes him because that is what he does,

and up ahead, growing closer every second, the docks and the wooden and brick buildings and the medieval fortified walls of Charles Towne beckon them in with the intoxicating draw of civilization.

## CHAPTER IV

### WELCOME TO THE ARCHIVES

There were feathers in my mouth. Quite a few of them in fact, and my first thought was of Bethia, of the way she plucks a chicken, half tender and half brutal, holding the strangled body close to her chest and rhythmically stripping the bird of its plumage, fluffy down clinging all over while blood from the arterial pinfeathers stains her hands and dressfront burgundy. With my eyes still shut, I watched her like this for an instant, then this image—one which Will has often encountered and at times found erotic—faded away, intersected with and blurred into every anachronistic half-accurate Santerian curse scene I've come across on television or in film. The room is dark, and tinny repercussion instruments mark the pulse, keeping time for the harmonized but indecipherable African chanting; small animal skulls litter an altar-top alongside the ribs of something bigger, and dozens of glass-pillar saints candles illuminate Joan of Arc, Luke, Barbara, Francis Xavier, Saint Catherine broken on the wheel from the inside out. I notice a tureen of chicken's blood that a long white feather is being dipped into, then pull back and watch the other hand enter the scene; it holds a lighted taper to the feather until smoke explodes; pull back more and see dark wrists and arms, a body clad all in white with multicolored glass beads looped in countless strands around the neck; then pull back fully and realize that the Voodoo Queen is Bethia; she is standing beneath a crucifix, and she is smoking a cigar.

“Jesus.” My eyes opened, and I extracted the sleeve of Cici’s peignoir from my mouth. There was no arm inside it. I flopped back against the mattress, shut my eyes, repeated, “Jesus Christ,” then, “Godammit, Will, what have you done now?” and I felt exhausted. I wanted to sleep—not the slumber that would put Will back in the driver’s seat, but the actual kind when my eyes would close without immediately opening and I would cease to be for longer than in an instance of half-waking nightmare, which is the closest I’ve ever been to real sleep, to an actual dream. “Twenty-nine years and counting,” I told the ceiling. Twenty-nine years without a wink.

I rolled over then, expecting to find Cici out cold, dead to the world and still recovering from the four pitchers of Bajan punch we’d shared the night before. I thought I might observe her for a while, see if she moved, if she spoke, if any inexplicable marks appeared on her body. I had the sequence of events all planned out in my head: I would roll over carefully, find her facing me, folded hands pillowed under her cheek, and I would note with appreciation the contrast between her childlike pose and the eruption of cleavage around and behind her forearms. Her makeup would have smudged off in the night, but that was fine because I wanted her to look old, a little swelled around the eyes perhaps and prematurely wrinkled, as old as I felt, as old if she hadn’t slept in decades. And while I watched, she would shift occasionally, murmur, go through the motions of swallowing her doppelganger’s champagne—or black Viennese coffee—until suddenly she would gasp, flinch, and a small red handprint would materialize on her face. She danced with the wrong man, angered her judgmental Queen, was struck for her impertinence, and I would kiss the bruise to ease the sting.

Instead I found the bed empty but for a severely maltreated pillow and the feathery violet Old-Hollywood robe that Cici was wearing when we'd finally dozed off. A room service tray and a pitcher and two hurricane glasses were on the bedside table, chicken bones and both of the goblets stained with orangey-red lipstick, and—*Ah yes*. We'd played French toilette, I recalled. First I'd done her, then quid pro quo, and I reached up to see if any bobby pins were still bouffanting the front of my hair. "*Volume is good. You must have big hair. Big! De grands cheveux, c'est très merveilleux.*" I found three pins in a quick search and flicked them across the room, heard one ping off some metallic surface, and when I sat up I purposely avoided raising my eyes to the gold framed mirror that I remembered was across the room, directly opposite the bed. This also caused me to miss Cici.

"Hubba-hubba." I found her sitting beneath the mirror and slightly to the left in an expansive white leather armchair-cum-throne. She'd showered, dressed, made herself up. Her hair was frizzed out in a way that I supposed was island-chic, while her body was covered from neck to feet in a loose, one piece romper-type thing. Pieces of fabric looped up behind her neck, and I could tell without her having to stand and turn that her back had been left exposed. Her arms too were bare, and she hadn't skimped on the mascara. "You," she said, "make one ugly woman. If that whole historian-plantation-keeper gig doesn't work out, I'm not sure you have a fallback on the Vegas stage."

"Daddy will be so glad to hear that." My resolve broke. I looked in the mirror, then recoiled, cringed away. If Courtney Love and a young Abraham Lincoln could have somehow produced a hard-living hermaphroditic lovechild, I'd have been the homelier of us two.

“Daddy?” She said this incredulously, one eyebrow arched high. She did have beautifully shaped brows, I noted again—not too thin, maybe just a touch longer than they needed to be.

“My father. Dad. Whatever.” I dragged a hand down my face, only making things worse, said, “It’s a southern thing. What do you call yours?”

“Nothing.” She shrugged, deepening the hollows around her clavicles. “He’s dead,” she said. “Has been for years.”

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” She got up from her chair, lifted her hands above her head, stretched and rose so high on her toes that I wanted to jump out of bed and catch her. “He was an asshole.”

“Oh—Ah, that’s too bad, I guess.” She looked like an Emmy Award statue.

“I suppose it might have been.” She was nearly en pointe. “But my mom was spectacular. She made up for the loss. More than made up for it.”

Then the soles of her feet were on the ground again, and I sighed, felt my pulse begin returning to normal. Her whole demeanor was making me nervous, jumpy. I told myself this was a good sign, like stuttering in front of your high school crush, but then I had to force myself to leave the sheet behind when I got out of bed, to not cover myself and to stand before Cici, naked and unashamed. “What time is it?” I glanced around the room—a blur of white furnishings, teal accents, silver and gold metalwork—without seeing a timepiece. I didn’t know what to do with my hands. “I have an 11:00 appointment.”

“Crap. Sorry.” She walked over to a double-width armoire, opened one of the cabinet doors, and pawed through a tangle of gauzy mesh and see-through fabrics until she’d unearthed a roman-numeral faced clock in an abalone frame. “I hate clocks,” she explained. “Can’t sleep when they’re around.” Then she looked down at the time and winced, said, “It’s twenty to 11:00 now. Where’s your appointment?”

“The national archives.” I crossed my arms, uncrossed them. “Shit, I don’t even know where they are. Or where we are, for that matter.” I looked at Cici. “Where are we?”

She was all reassurance. “We’re just south of Alleyne’s Bay, St. James Parish.” She dropped the clock on the bed, walked over to me, reached up and began chafing my upper arms with brisk up-and-down strokes. “The archives are just down the road, seven maybe eight miles, near Paradise Beach. Polynice can get you there. Can you shower and get dressed in ten minutes?”

“Umm—yeah.” I looked around, located my hanging bag, said, “Yes. Yes, I can.”

“Thatta boy.” She spun me around, gave me a locker-room smack on the ass. “I’ll buzz Polynice,” she said, “then lay out some clothes for you.”

I paused at that, started to tell her not to bother, that I was a big boy and I’d been dressing myself for quite some time. Then I shrugged—*What the hell; why not?*—figuring her lady-in-waiting impulses must run deep. So long as she didn’t break out a strop and straight razor and offer to shave me herself, I determined to step back and follow her lead, to see exactly what it was she wanted and where she was going to take me.



The hotel bathroom was the size of the living room in the first apartment Bram and I had rented together, and the shower with the mosaic tile floor could have held a full-sized dining table for six. “You have my condolences, Jerry.” I cranked the lever all the way to *hot* and was immediately bathed in a fiery monsoon pouring from dual-side massaging spigots. “Those alimony checks must be a total bitch.” And I didn’t notice until after I’d showered there a half dozen times that the pattern on the ceramic floor was a cane field—that the multi-tone green squares which at first seemed like abstract tessellations were the harvested stalks, and that the pinkish-brown grout showing through was the same color as the juice boiled out of the redcap’s woman, the same color as body parts cooked in molasses and rum, and the same color as the meat of Abraham’s back after it was fully tenderized by thirty strokes from the lash.

The clothes weren’t mine. They were very nice—light grey pants, matching jacket, blue silk shirt, a discrete brand-name label, the name on which I didn’t recognize—but they weren’t mine. The suit was laid out across the foot of the bed when I exited the bathroom, and I laughed when I saw it, started to pass it by for my own hanging bag, which was stuffed full of khaki and only my lesser-worn, going-to-church chambray. After a quick tour of the room, however, I was unable to find it. It wasn’t draped across the white leather ottoman where it had been just a little while before, and neither was it tucked away in a closet or hanging in the giant armoire. Cici too was nowhere to be seen, and I picked up the abalone clock, then swore. Seven of my ten minutes were gone, and she hadn’t even left me my underwear. She hadn’t left me any

underwear at all, for that matter, although upon further inspection I did notice the narrow black belt and the matching loafers, sans tassels. “Jesus.”

It all fit. Even the sleeve length on the shirt was perfect, showing just a slice of blue at the cuff, and when I stepped into the bathroom to comb and tie back my still-dripping hair, I didn’t look at my reflection below the throat.

*You do realize you’re free-balling in a stranger’s suit, right?*

*Shut up, Will.*

*And that she’s dressed you like a Colombian drug lord?*

I spoke out loud then, looked myself in the face, pointed at my nose—which was pink, I realized for the first time, badly sunburnt with an emerging blister. *You bastard.* “You don’t get to have an opinion. You just bought a person, *on credit.*” Somehow that made it worse. “You charged a human like I charge a latte.”

*She’s comely, though, right? I know you noticed.*

*You’re a sick sonofabitch. You know that?*

*Oh, and speaking of lattes—You should get one. We need the caffeine.*

Three raps sounded on the bathroom door, and I turned to see Cici standing there, head cocked looking at me as if I were a parade float in need of more bunting and rosettes. “Don’t you look nice.” She walked over, straightened my shoulder seam, brushed an imaginary fleck of lint off my sleeve, then she yanked my shirt collar out and folded it over the jacket’s lapel.

*And now you’re a singer in a doo-wop group.*

“Uh, Cici?” She’d turned to the mirror, bared her teeth to check them for lipstick. She wiped a smudge off a canine, and a I recognized that bright paprika color. “The suit

is great, and I don't want you to think I'm not appreciative. But I was just wondering about where—ah—where my clothes are.”

“I hung them up. They're in the closet next to the armoire.” She said this without moving her lips, without looking away from her teeth.

“No. No, they're not. I checked in there, and—”

“I'll show you when we get back.” She turned, grabbed my wrist, began pulling me toward the door. On our way, I just managed to snag my laptop bag off a wall hook intended for hats. “Right now we've got to get moving, or else *somebody*”—she glanced back to waggle a finger at me —“is going to be late for his big meeting.”

I followed her out of the room, heard the bolt engage electronically behind us. “It's not really a *big* meeting.” The carpet in the hallway was so thick it felt like walking through sand. “It's with an archivist who's gone over some documents for me. He's agreed to—”

Cici made a *tutting* noise. “Every meeting is a big meeting. My mother told me that, and yours should have too. And just in case she didn't, I'm telling you now.”

“Ah...okay.”

We were only on the second floor and the elevator moved too fast, so when we stepped out into the lobby my empty stomach felt as if it were two inches higher than it ought to be. Cici dragged me along, and the surroundings were as I remembered from my first impression the day before—bamboo-colored floors, tasteful rattan furniture with brightly colored pillows, a fountain trickling meditatively into a koi pond studded with cattails and water blossoming flowers. I thought I glimpsed the hotel bar through an

adjacent domed hallway, but the pace Cici set didn't allow for a closer inspection. I determined to explore later on my own.

We spun through a revolving door, both sharing the same pie-slice cubicle, Cici's bare back pressed to my front, and her hair fluffed up enough to touch my chin and lips. It smelt familiar, faintly herbal, and it took me a moment to recognize the scent and to connect it with the bottle of shampoo I'd seen in the shower, green with a commingled graphic of vines and shrub-fronds climbing the front.

*Rosemary mint; no wonder you can't stand her.*

*That's not it, and you know it.*

"There's Polynice." Cici grabbed my arm and pointed right, up the row of cars parked beneath the shaded entranceway pavilion. "Hurry. Hurry. Come on." And she dragged me past the line-up of chauffeurs standing at attention by their rear passenger-side doors, dressed to the last man in three-piece suits and black caps. Polynice, I noticed, had livened up his ensemble by adding a grey pin-striped ascot. When I glanced down, I was relieved to see his hands instead of white liveryman's gloves. "Polynice, you're an angel." Cici went high on her sandaled toes, leaned in to peck him on the cheek. "Can you get Liam to the national archives by 11:00? He has a very important meeting, one he absolutely cannot miss."

Polynice glanced at his watch. I'm bad with brands, but it looked shiny and large with plenty of metal around the opalescent face. His expression didn't change. "There's a chance, Miss Cici." And he opened the door, waved me inside, turned back to Cici, asked, "You riding along?"

“No, I’m not.” She bent down, looked in at me. I’d scooted all the way across the seat, expecting her to follow. “You don’t mind, do you?” she asked. “I have a video chat with Sophie at noon.” She looked very far away, as if I were seeing her through the opening in a long cylinder, looking the wrong way through a ship captain’s telescope. “Of course, I can reschedule...” She lowered herself, began to sit.

“No. Stay.” I waved her back. “I’m sure I’m in good hands with Polynice.”

“You are.” She nodded, and her hair reacted like a barley field in the wind. “The best.” She slammed the door, stepped back, and the car was in motion an instant later.

As we pulled away I realized that I didn’t have her cell number, her business card, any way of reaching her. I didn’t even know her last name. I didn’t know the name of our hotel either, and I turned back, looked out the window, examined the sandstone colored building as it faded away behind us until I located an unobtrusive sign nestled in a bed of hibiscus and something else thick-petaled and tropical pink: The Fairmont Royal Pavilion. *Snazzy*. Confident that, if all else failed, I could take a cab and find my own way back, I settled into my seat, sliding a bit as the suit afforded no friction against the smooth tan leather. I buckled my seatbelt.

“Coffee’s in the cup holder,” Polynice intoned from the front. “Down by your feet.”

The cup was tall and white with a brown paper sleeve and steam rising in a thin line of haze from the mouthpiece. “Bless you, Polynice.” It was black, near scalding, superb.

Polynice laughed. “Figured you could use it,” he said. Then, “After the night you must have had.”

I met his eyes in the rearview mirror, nodded agreement. “Tell me, Polynice...” I began.

“Oh, no no.” He laughed again, interrupting. “I beg your pardon, sir, but I won’t be telling you a thing. Especially not if it’s about Miss Cici. I know who butters my bread.”

I corrected him without thinking. “On which side your bread is buttered, you mean.”

He accelerated, snuck through a light at the end of the yellow. “You’re a bit of a know-it-all, aren’t you?” he asked.

I tipped back my head, took a sip of hot coffee with my eyes shut. “I suppose I am,” I said. “Sometimes I think I know more than any two normal men combined.”

“You ask me,” he said, “normal’s overrated. Take my girl, for instance. You know what she does?” He paused rhetorically. “She smokes cigars. Can you beat that? Says they make her feel powerful, like she’s doing something she ain’t supposed to do, liking something she ain’t supposed to like.”

“You sure she’s not a Voodoo Queen?” I said this facetiously, thinking about Bethia and my half-waking dream from earlier that morning.

“Wouldn’t surprise me if she were.” Polynice shook his head, and there wasn’t a trace of humor in his voice. He said, “Wouldn’t surprise me one little bit.”

I read a book about the archives a while back; I don’t mean any one place specifically—the world’s archives, the archives of the world. In it the author describes the breakdown of leather bindings on old documents and the various toxic dusts that are

emitted in this process of gradual attrition, up to and including the production of motes that in the mid twentieth century were verified as carriers of the anthrax bacillus, which if inhaled in large enough quantities can result in the inflammation of the outer layers of the brain that is known today as meningitis. As such, the scholars of generations past who cloistered themselves in musty attics and dank basements in order to spend months or even years at a time pouring over the paper trail of history, only to fall ill at some point from an unspecified imbalance in their bodily humors—generally labeled as “brain fever”—these were not in fact the victims of their study habits or of the lack of clean air and proper nutrition, but rather of the actual sheets of paper over which they labored, desperately trailing lost scraps of humanity they might play some small part in resurrecting. They were killed by those they’d hoped to save. This information disturbed me profoundly, and after learning it I was never again able to handle an old document without regarding it as a harbinger carrying forth the unwanted detritus of the past. What else, I wondered, might be hiding in the creases of its hand-sewn binding, what skin cells and hair follicles and microscopic slivers of hangnails might I be imbibing along with each sip of bacterium-laden air. Of course, archivists, scholars, and casual researchers alike all wear masks now whenever the danger is real, but a rational preventative cannot cure a neurosis that is itself inherently irrational. But I digress.

Polynice got me to the archives at only two minutes past 11:00, and I thanked him, tucked a business card with his cell number on it inside my pocket, then I dashed across a parking lot that was hot enough to sear meat on. After signing in at the front desk and providing credentials verifying my ID and affiliation with an institute of higher learning, I was asked to stow all of my belongings in a repurposed high school locker, keeping

nothing with me but the permitted laptop and a legal pad for note-taking. After a quick scan with a metal-detecting wand, I was led by a young woman in a purple linen suit through a maze of hallways, zigzagging back to the cubicle-sized office of the archivist with whom I had an appointment. He was about my age, thin, pale, red haired. In looks, he reminded me a bit of Jamie and thus, unavoidably, of Jem. After I introduced myself, I asked him how he managed to stay so white, living as he did in sunny Little England, and he remained deadpan, said he was a big investor in SPF 75. Then he eyed my pinkly blistered nose and suggested I give it a try, and I determined to like him from that point forward. I admire a little snark in my archivists. He got down to business then and waved me into the chair opposite his loaded-up but seemingly organized desk, said that he thought we might begin by confirming exactly what it was I was looking for, and then we could determine the direction in which I wanted to proceed from there.

“I’m sure I hardly need to tell you this”—he had the vaguely British intonation of an upper-crust American who has spent years studying and working abroad—“but there is almost no chance that we’ll be able to uncover the record of sale of the specific slave for whom you’re searching.”

“I understand that.” It wasn’t my first rodeo. “It’s more than just the one slave, though. It’s true, I’m most interested in the boy, Abraham, but I gave you four other names as well.”

“Yes.” He flipped through a battered legal pad, its pages made voluminous by clipped-on tags and document insertions. “Ah...there’s also the two women, Phibbi and May”—Abraham’s future wife-in-practice and Bethia’s mother, respectively—“and then the other men—Scipio and Joe, or Cujo. Is that right?”



I nodded, “Yes,” and scooted forward in my chair. “Especially Joe.” I said, “I have reason to believe he was a trusted man, that he guarded his owner’s daughter, right up until—”

“All five from the same plantation?” the archivist interrupted. “And all sold to Carolina between 1680 and 1682?”

“Yes,” I repeated. “That’s correct. But about Joe. You see, it was a great scandal. Surely there must be—”

He snorted and then caught himself, covered his smile with one hand. “I’m sorry.” He said, “Truly. I don’t mean to scoff. It’s just... There was a scandal involving a slave and his owner’s daughter, and you think someone recorded it?”

“It wasn’t like that,” I clarified. “There was another man, a Scotsman. He was her tutor. It was all put right in the end, except for Joe. He was badly beaten, flogged and then sold. But the daughter, she found him, tracked him down and brought him with her after she’d married. So in all that maneuvering, I’d hoped....”

“You seem awfully sure about this.” He was regarding me over the top of his legal pad and then again over the top of his wire-frame reading glasses. “If you’ve already verified all of this information, then why do you need to—”

“It hasn’t been verified.” I stared at a coffee mug on the corner of his desk. It was full of pencils and highlighters and read, *World’s Best Uncle*. Another one beside it was filled with paperclips and stamped with a historic watercolor map of the island. A circle around the general vicinity of Bridgetown had a line coming off it and was labeled, *You are here*. “I have...educated guesses,” I said. “From sources I trust but that I can’t credibly name.”

“Then you ain’t got butkus.”

This surprised me into a half-laugh. “I know.” I said, “Hence my presence here.”

“Fair enough.” He put down his legal pad then took off his glasses. Looking at me directly, he said, “The problem is that you’re talking about one specific plantation, which means it’s either feast, or it’s famine. Either a whole slew of stuff survived, and *we do* have many things from that time period that did survive. But it’s just as likely that everything got lost in the same house fire or the same hurricane, or that it was all in the same cardboard box that got trashed when the archives flooded back in the thirties.”

“I know.” I said, “It’s a needle in a haystack.”

“It’s a tenth of a needle in ten thousand haystacks,” he corrected.

“Yeah.” I sighed, fiddled with the strap on my laptop bag which I only then realized I was still wearing across my body, wrinkling Cici’s—or whomever’s—undoubtedly pricey suit. Summoning up my best triple-dog-dare-you grin, I asked, “Are you game?”

He blinked twice, owl-like, then laughed. “Hell, yeah.” And he reached out to shake my proffered hand. With the deal sealed, he began picking necessary materials off his desk: his glasses, a handful of number two pencils, some note cards, his legal-pad jottings on my case. Then he stood, said, “Come on. I’ve spread out some stuff in one of the private reading rooms.” He glanced around his claustrophobic office. “Not even enough room for one of us to fart inside this crapper.” And this was a good line, but he didn’t quite pull it off. It seemed out of character, forced, as if he’d once heard the cool guy say it in a movie and had wanted to try it out himself ever since.

He closed and locked his door behind him, and I followed him down a hallway paved with thin institutional blue carpet and lined with framed photos of multi-colored people, obviously civilians, grasping scanned photocopies of documents and grinning as broadly as if the sheets of illegible paper they held were oversized Publishers Clearing House checks. We made four left turns, a right, another left. “This place is a hedge maze,” I observed.

“You get used to it.” Two more rights, then, “Here we are. At last.” It took a good thirty seconds of thumbing through his key ring for him to locate the one he needed, and then he hesitated before fitting it inside the lock. Turning to me, he asked, “I am correct, Dr. Ayres, in assuming that you’re familiar with the protocol?”

I nodded. “Wear the gloves. Wear the mask. Pencils only, but laptops are okay. No food, no drink, no flash photography. Gently grip at the corner and turn, don’t flip.”

He looked like he wanted to kiss me, said, “God, I love academics.”

When the door was unlocked, he pushed inward, revealing a Spartan but moderately roomy cell lit by overhead fluorescents. There were no windows since all of the available wall space was devoted to deep built-in shelves but also, I assumed, because we were at least thirty yards inward from the building’s exterior. A dinged-up conference table occupied most of the available floor space, while the rest was consumed by stacks of olive green humidity-impeding document boxes, each one with a safety-deposit-sized keyhole on the front. More boxes filled the shelves, creating a drab wall of bricked-in green, and even more were massed in round-back swiveling office chairs which, at my best guess, were discards from the mid 1960s. I did a quick tally of boxes per shelf,

multiplied this across the height and circumference of the room, added the ones on the floor and in chairs.

“Jesus,” I said. “There are more than a hundred of the things.”

“One hundred and thirty-nine, to be exact.”

I stepped into the room, angled myself sideways to fit between the table and a pair of chest-high towers. “How many ledgers in each one?” I asked.

“Anywhere between one and four, depending on size.” He stood watching me from the door. “Most with some loose papers and leaflets thrown in besides.”

The shelves went up higher than I could reach; I would need a stool or a ladder. “Any organizational schema?” *Please, God, let there be an organizational schema.*

“Roughly by date and geography. These are from plantations on the eastern side of the island, mostly ranging between 1675 and 1700.”

I was stunned. “They’re not broken down by plantation?”

He shrugged, half apologetic, half as if to say, *what do you expect?* “For our serious researchers, evidence is evidence. One plantation within a given time period is generally as good as the next. And this is not our most popular era,” he explained. “We mostly get tourists who want to know about Bussa’s Rebellion, about the years leading up to emancipation. They want to fudge their genealogies and snag an ancestor among the great brave few. If you wanted to know about something that happened in 1816, assuming, of course, the document exists, I could have it in front of you in ten minutes flat. The 1680s on the other hand....” He shrugged again, let his voice trail off.

I sighed. “How many boxes have you made it through so far?” I’d first contacted him via email the week before.

“Six.” He added, “But I’ve been organizing them and cataloging the contents as I go. I’ll stop that.”

“And have you found any papers from Brown Bay?” This was the name of the sugar plantation owned by Will’s maternal grandfather—where Will was born, where his mama had grown up, where Abraham learnt to speak English and first acted as playmate to his future master, where the woman whose name I never knew was cooked into a batch of reducing sugar, where Joe was flogged then propped up and made to watch the wedding between his little mistress and her unfit title- and landless Scotch tutor.

“None have turned up yet.”

“Jesus,” I repeated. Using a series of tiptoe maneuvers, I’d managed to weave my way across the room and make it to the opposite end of the twelve-person conference table. Looking back at the archivist through a city of boxes, I sighed, said, “You’d better call me Liam. My guess is we’re going to be here for a while.”

“All right,” he replied. “And you can call me Doug.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Doug.”

“Likewise, Liam.”

Before I was allowed to touch anything, Doug produced a clipboard and had me sign a standard liability release form. “The leather we’ll be handling is a little too early for red rot,” he said, “but it’s SOP. Got to keep the donors happy, governmental and otherwise,” and I signed on the designated line without protest, without even skimming the bulleted list of minute-fonted disclaimers. I’d have done the same thing if he told me all one hundred and thirty-nine boxes were confirmed to be crawling with anthrax spores. He filed the document away inside an upright cabinet built into the wall, then he handed

me an aqua dust mask, a pair of white cotton gloves out of the box labeled *extra large*, and a charm-bracelet sized key that I assumed was the master for the locked document boxes. I donned the mask straight away and was relieved to see that it had both an upper and lower elastic band and that the piece above the nose was a strip of aluminum edged with rubber, designed for a better fit and an improved seal. I pulled the straps as tight as they would go and welcomed the nearly painful way they cut into the skin along my cheeks and jaw. I wouldn't have cared if they bruised.

Faced with the task of finding a logical place to begin, I asked Doug what his plan of attack had been this far, and he confessed, blushing, that after the fashion of his eight- and nine-year-old nephews, he had been using eenie-meenie-miney-moe. "Not very professional, I know." He said, "But it seemed as good a way to pick as any." I agreed and remained at the far end of the table, while Doug took the seat at the foot nearest the door, which he'd closed and locked behind us. Not bothering with the rhyme, I picked a nearby container at random, but was amused to see Doug's index finger jump from box to box as he mumbled the words to himself before settling down with the winner. The key I'd been given fit neatly into the lock, the lid rose without a creak, and salvaged bundles of three-hundred-year-old paper lay before me—items that had no right to have endured for so long in a humid and oft-flooded island climate; pieces so fragile that the mist from a spray bottle of water might cause them to dissolve altogether, leaving nothing behind but ink-stained pulp and mold-nurtured pathogens.

The script on the first sheet I saw wasn't flowery and thin with ornate serifs and cortinate descenders, but was rather thick and sharp with a perceptible stress on the vertical downward strokes. Each Y was a curve and a slash. Lowercase Gs had been

granted only nominal loops. I could tell at a glance that the writing implement was a duck quill instead of a metal-tip pen and, moreover, that it had needed trimming. I pictured the man who'd done the writing—and it was obviously a man; that went without saying. He wore woolen undergarments because that's what he'd done all his life, and what was good enough for northern England was good enough for Barbados, never mind the heat rash and constant itching. He was disproportionately broader than he was tall, and he bedded down each night with a bosomy wet nurse who reminded him a bit, in manner if not in looks, of his father's second wife—a ruddy-skinned teenager who moved into the house when he was eleven years old and whom he'd often watched bathing through the crack in their shared bedroom wall. His wet nurse used her frayed and callused heels to scratch the backs of his thighs while they copulated. He liked that. And sometimes when he was walking the fields, supervising the slaves at their work, he would gnaw young stalks of sugarcane, spitting out woody debris as he went, and he was literate out of necessity, not for pleasure. When he signed receipts for foodstuffs, for hempen cloth, for the raw materials needed to make and repair tools, he would do so against the nearest flat surface, whether this was the side of an outbuilding or the back of a half-seasoned slave. The fully broken ones were no good, too bent and trembly for his pen to write true.

His name was Ned Brandtford—short for Edward, I assumed—and he'd worked and then died, I saw, in the summer of 1695 on an inland plantation in St. Philip's Parish, the victim of seasonal fever, no doubt. His wet nurse, I thought, likely sponged his brow and tried to save him for a while, but she'd have abandoned him near the end after he turned maudlin. I turned a page and saw he was just one of many who succumbed that year, and a quick perusal of the rest of the box's contents revealed nothing at all of

interest. Bills of sale for brown and more refined sugars, for kegs of rum and hogsheads of molasses; lists of new slaves purchased direct from Africa, and many of their fabricated names glaringly absent from subsequent inventories compiled months or a year later; all of this the seventeenth-century equivalents of grocery lists and movie ticket stubs. Ned Brandtford's replacement had more effeminate handwriting—he was a nobleman's younger son, I decided, who'd foolishly spurned joining both the army and the clergy in favor of some naively romantic desire to establish himself as a self-made man in the islands—and by 1698 he was dead as well, replaced by an unpronounceably-named Welshman, and then I lifted the last page and found myself staring at green metal.

I glanced at my watch as I began repacking documents, saw that I'd made it through the lives of Ned et al. in less than twenty minutes. That wasn't nearly fast enough. I'd need to do much better. Glancing up, I saw Doug's lips moving as he flipped—not turned—back and forth between multiple pages in a calfskin-bound ledger, comparing figures, doing the math, pondering all the myriad implications of whatever micro- or social-historical question he'd zeroed in on. He was wearing noise-cancelling headphones so as not to break his concentration, and I decided right then that he would be the next thing to useless in my struggle to make it through all those boxes in record time. I shut Ned away; he locked automatically; I set him and his well-endowed wet nurse and his never-to-be-resolved Electra complex aside to be rediscovered and reinterpreted by someone else on some other day.

Nine boxes and three-and-a-half hours later, I'd turned up a handful of references to Brown Bay—dealings between it and other plantations, supplies received from, slaves traded between or sold to (for reasons that were only occasionally explained)—but



nothing that was produced on or directly about the property itself. Had I cared to take it, to slip it beneath the pages of my legal pad when Doug was caught up in his work, not looking, I'd have had proof then that the place did indeed exist, but that was really beside the point. Neither Bram nor Jamie had ever doubted my claim that a plantation named Brown Bay was founded on the coastal edge of St. Joseph's Parish in 1658 and that it was still actively producing sugar and sugar-related products as late as 1704. Although nothing about that specific plantation had yet appeared in accessible publications, scholarly or otherwise, the fact of its physical existence was not the implausible part of my claim. Maybe if its name were more esoteric—Toucan Bazooka Plantation, perhaps, or We Sing of Thee Sweet Caroline Hills—then finding a mere reference or two would have been a realistic mark in favor of my truthfulness, in favor of my sanity. But with a moniker as ordinary as Brown Bay, I was going to need a great deal more in order to provide adequate evidentiary corroboration.

Having had nothing since waking but Polynice's coffee, I felt enervated, famished, dizzy from prolonged concentration and eyestrain, and this condition was only made worse by the records of shipped and delivered provisions that comprised the majority of the documents I'd unearthed. In the subtext of a novice overseers unsteady penmanship, I read: three hundred pounds of organ meat for the cheapest available protein, five barrels of turnips to eat mashed with scooped fingers, a dozen bushels of yams to cook in the coals and devour through ash-covered jackets with dripped-on sweat for seasoning. This was enough food to maintain a small army of moderately well-fed slaves through a few weeks of cane picking, and I nearly salivated at the thought of it. Then I reminded myself that I didn't need anything. Better men than I had done more

work on less fuel, and the food Will consumed would sustain me for a while—just as my mother’s jarred spaghetti sauce, instant grits, and ketchup-glazed meatloaf had nourished him through more than one lean crop-blight winter in his childhood. And then for a while, after Bethia’s skill in the kitchen was discovered and encouraged, just as her inevitably fresh and typically more refined cuisine enabled my survival through years of synthetic dorm-room food. On nights when the hunting was bad or when studying got in the way of an outing, Jamie and I would eat Dinty Moore and Pop-Tarts with a Ramen-broth chaser, and, still mentally hungry and far from satisfied, I would wake as Will to a four-course breakfast with bread hot from the oven and shellfish less than an hour removed from the sea. Over time, however, the pleasure I took in Bethia’s cooking waned as I came to recognize the times when Will most wanted to eat—the days when he feasted and the actions he most wanted to venerate.

In honor of his long-sought-after acquisition, Will orders a celebratory meal that is served in the main dining room at a table set for three and prepared by a seemingly apathetic Bethia. He demands his mama’s presence and seats her across from a gaunt young woman with darker skin than any of the other slaves on the island, and who knows only three words in English: *no*, *soup*, and *more*. Will takes inspiration from this last word and decides that she is to be called Moira. He tests it out as he offers her the stoneware platters Bethia has had Joe retrieve from storage. “*Moira, would you like some boiled shrimp?*” She accepts. “*Moira, might I offer you some of Bethia’s excellent pilau?*” She hesitates before taking a bite. “*Bethia makes it with bacon and fresh peas. You like bacon, don’t you, Moira?*” Will smiles and raises a fork to his mouth, inserts it slowly, *Mmmms* with exaggerated relish. Moira follows suit, handling the fork just a bit

awkwardly. When she tastes the pilau she goes still for an instant, then begins chewing as if the food on her tongue is the last morsel on Earth. She takes another bite, and another, and she drops her fork so it clatters against a spoon and knife and she makes her four fingers into a shovel and raises the bowl halfway to her mouth as she scoops rice inside like a blacksmith delivering coal to his furnace. When her bowl is empty she asks for more, and Will gives her a double portion before serving himself seconds as well. He tells her that tonight she can have as much as she wants, and Moira digs in again with her hand. *“You’ll have to forgive her manners,”* Will says to his mama, who hasn’t touched the food and who he knows will eat later in the kitchen with Bethia; the two of them will sip weak rum-tea and gossip about things they think he won’t know. *“For two years now there’s been a great famine in her land,”* he explains. *“In fact, she volunteered herself to be sold so that her family might have the money for food. Mr. Brisbane assures me that she will be the best of slaves, very biddable indeed, that she thinks the people who bought her rescued her family from certain death.”* His mama says nothing to this, doesn’t so much as nod, and even when the meal is over—the platters cleared and the food gone but for three kernels of market-bought rice that cling wet with buttery lard to Moira’s chin—even when Will takes a small leather pouch from his inside vest pocket and invites Moira to perform her trick, still his mama remains silent. She says nothing, but her expression changes, loses its indifference, when Will tugs loose the pouch’s drawstring and pours its granular contents into his opposite hand. The seeds are thin, perhaps a centimeter long each, brownish-green along the hull with the yellow thread of the awn extended off the tip. More than one hundred of them don’t fill his palm, and Moira, who was told by Henry Brisbane’s translator what would be expected of her come spring, sits straighter in

her chair when she sees them, rattles off several long sentences in a language neither Will nor his mama nor any of the other slaves on the island can understand. She points at the seeds, then at her own chest self-importantly, says, “*More,*” and Will’s mama turns to him as if to say that he is the only man in her life who has ever mattered, who has ever kept his promises, and whatever difficulties may have risen between them as of late are likely her fault and are immaterial besides when compared to the magnitude of this most recent and unexpected gift. “*She knows what they are? And how best to grow them?*” and Will nods, carefully siphons the rice seeds back into their pouch. He cinches the drawstring tight and reaches out to stroke one knuckle down the concavity of Moira’s cheek.

There was a knock on the door, and I looked up from a delivery receipt for six English oxen—to be used, no doubt, to power the mill on days when the trade winds failed—one of which broke two legs on the crossing and had to be put down soon after reaching port. A bit of oxtail soup for the slaves that night, I surmised. With his headphones securely in place, Doug could hear nothing, and I crumpled a blank sheet of paper from my legal pad and pitched it down the length of the table. The ball rose, arched, fell to whack him squarely in the chest, and I blew imagined smoke from my fingers, buffed my archival-glove-covered nails on my borrowed lapel. Seventeen years since my little-league debut, and I still hadn’t lost my touch. If only Will hadn’t given me yellow fever the week before the championship game; I might’ve been great. Doug looked up, cocked a brow above his aqua dust mask, obviously unsure whether there was a reason behind my assault, or if I’d merely grown bored and beaned him on a whim.

Skinny redheaded bookworm that he was, he'd probably spent the greater portion of his life dodging projectiles of one sort or another.

He was effectively deaf, and my mouth was covered. Not wanting to remove my mask, I opted for charades. I pointed at the door, pantomimed turning a key in the lock, then shrugged, pointed at my chest, shook my head.

The knock came again just as Doug removed his headphones, and he flipped through his key ring, counting and mumbling as he did so.

“Why do you need a key to open the door from the inside?” I asked. “Why not just have a deadbolt, or one of those knob buttons?” The thick filtering material of my mask dampened my voice, made it sound even to my own ears as if I were speaking from a long way off. I imagined dozens of bacteria pinging off the surface with each indrawn breath.

“SOP,” he explained. “We’ve had a few tourists cut and run, find what they want and decide it would make a good souvenir.” He was still hunting through his keys.

“We’ve lost some important documents that way.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“It’s hard to believe someone would actually do that.”

“You’d be surprised.”

The knock sounded again.

“Yeah, yeah.” Doug shouted loud enough to be heard through the door. “Hang on a sec.”

He found the key he needed, then rose, taking off one cotton glove so he could grip and turn the knob. He opened the door to the same purple-clad young woman who had led me back into the archives—I glanced at my watch—more than five hours before. She was very dark skinned and thin, and there were slight hollows underneath her cheekbones.

*Does she remind you of anyone?*

*Give it a rest, Will.*

“Penny,” Doug said. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Mr. Hammond.” She had a Southern accent and was from central Georgia, if I wasn’t mistaken, a good ways south of Atlanta. “But there’s a woman here.” She glanced at me over Doug’s narrow shoulder. “She’s insisting that she needs to see Dr. Ayres right this instant. I tried to tell her—” She bit her bottom lip, which was plump and mauve, and her teeth were very white.

“Blonde?” I stood. “About yay high?” I gestured below my shoulder. “Enough hair to lose a hand in?”

“Yessir.” Penny nodded, said, “She seems, ah, upset.”

“Sorry.” I grimaced, shoved my still-gloved fists inside my pockets, tried to assume an air of boyish malfeasance. “My girlfriend,” I said. “I was supposed to call. She worries, you see, when she doesn’t hear from me.” And the suggestion was: *You don’t need to fret because there is not a thing to trouble yourself about. I am not strange, nor am I associated with strange people. I am a nice and normal guy, and you can trust me with your priceless and desirable documentary evidence.*

“Ah, yes,” Doug said, and I could tell this was feigned understanding. “Why don’t you go and...soothe her ruffled feathers. And, if you don’t mind, I will just stay here”—he waved at the document box he’d been laboring over for most of an hour and that he was, at best, a quarter of the way through—“and keep working. Penny will show you the way.”

“Thanks.” I threaded my way through the stacks of boxes and filled-to-overflowing chairs. “You’re a pal, Doug.” I removed my mask and gloves, thumped him on the back as I passed by. I said, “Be back in a flash.”

Penny half-smiled up at me, then looked away, adorably shy. “Dr. Ayres,” she said, “please follow me,” and she peeked back over her shoulder every five steps to make sure I’d not fallen too far behind.

Will wanted me to look down, to check out the shape of her ass and thighs, which he bet were like underripe half melons set above polished dowels of pignut hickory. Her pantsuit was loose, but something had to show through, and he couldn’t touch anyone but Bethia—she’d kill him if he did—but that didn’t mean that I was subject to the same code of behavioral restrictions. Cici didn’t have any claim on me, and, besides, it was starting to look as if she shackled up with a different guy every time she visited the island. *Watch it, Will.* What would it matter? Why would anyone need to know and, moreover, what right would they have to care if tomorrow night I stayed late at the archives. Doug would feel as if he knew me by then, and he wouldn’t mind leaving me his keys. He would first give me a lecture, of course, about responsibility and solemn trust, and I would cross my heart and hope to die that I might smite out my own eye before I let anything unsavory come to pass in his dragon’s trove of paper bullion. He would believe me because I am

believable, because that is the kind of face we have. And he wouldn't bother with that whole unsexy janitor's ring of clinking metal, just give me the two or three I'd need, one of which would be the key to the break room, where I might bum a diet soda from the fridge or make a cup of shit instant coffee if I liked, having duly sworn to not bring any liquids near the easily-disintegratable documents. Around 9:45 I would grow suddenly thirsty. As I approached the break room I'd notice an unforeseen beam of light spilling beneath the door and through the inlaid crosshatch window. Upon entering, I'll see Penny on her hands and knees beneath a table, the back part of her hanging out. She has changed into something short and white. She can't find her keys, but she thinks she remembers dropping them in here before, and she hopes I might join her, that I might be willing to help her find—

*Jesus, Will. I should've never let you talk me into renting porn.*

*Yeah, because I had to do a whole lot of convincing. Look down, you prude.*

I stared at the spot between Penny's shoulder blades where the braided tips of her hair ended in a blunt and perfect line. She made a sharp left turn, glanced back at me, nodded to see I was keeping up and, no doubt, that my eyes were at an acceptable height.

"This place is a hedge maze." I repeated my line from before.

Without looking back she drawled, "You get used to it."

I opened my mouth to say something else, something that was, I hoped, considerably more suave, but the pocket in the suit I wore began to vibrate, buzzing continuously as my forgotten cell phone registered incoming text-messages at an unprecedented rate. I dug out the gadget that Will and I in a rare instance of accord both agreed did more, generally speaking, to complicate my life than to simplify it. Flipping



back the screen and tapping a few too small buttons with my comparatively gorilla-sized thumbs, I saw that the ten new messages I'd received were all sent from same number. It wasn't one I knew, but the texts' contents clearly identified their author: *Liam, how'd the big meeting go? Did u blow them away? I just know u blew them away; R u about done, Liam? I thought we might do a late lunch; Liam, I'm worried. I'd expected 2 hear from u by now; Liam, why don't u answer me?; Liam? Liam?*

"Jesus," I said. I didn't know how or when Cici had gotten my number.

"That happens a lot." I'd stopped walking, and Penny did the same. Turning back to face me, she explained, "There's no service in the center of the building. Too much concrete and too few windows. But when you get closer to the outside walls, everything you've missed comes flooding in at once."

"Oh." I nodded. "Oh, good. I see." I checked the timestamps on a few of the incoming texts and was relieved to find that each one had been saved for later delivery with at least a half-hour between it and the next. The picture I'd briefly entertained of a crazed Cici—pacing among the dehydrated ficuses in the archives' plasticine lobby, thumbs and teased hair flying as she feverishly shot out message after message—faded away to be replaced by one of a woman who was needy, no doubt, and demanding besides, but who was at least a few steps shy of *Fatal-Attraction* female psychosis. Needy and demanding, I decided, were traits I could live with, even ones I could appreciate when regarded in a certain light. After all, hadn't I experienced a moment of panic myself upon driving away from the hotel that morning and realizing that, should Polynice choose to abandon me, I would have no way of easily returning to her. She was older than me too, I guesses, somewhere between ten and twelve years, so if I was exhausted and half

mad with desperation at twenty-nine, how much more so must she be with an extra decade at least of this never ending tearing between of lonesomeness and mistrust and self-hate under her belt, with half the people she knows—even those to whom she’s never confessed—believing that, at best, she’s a pitiable eccentric, and the other half doubting her right to walk free among the sane, law-abiding citizens of the world; doubting her right to grow confused at times and to become frustrated living with a man who, even if he wanted to, could never understand; then, for the last straw, doubting her right to keep and raise her own daughter.

Jesus. I couldn’t imagine. I forgave her all.

After a final array of logic-defying turns and switchbacks, Penny opened the door to the lobby and waved me through ahead of her. When I held it—a four-inch thick slab of plywood—and looked back, expecting her to follow, she was gone, having faded away back into the carpeted, catacomb-like tunnels of the archives. Before I’d taken two steps, Cici’s arms were around my neck, dragging me down, bending me forward. She kissed my mouth twice, then my cheek, my earlobe. I felt warm tongue and a nip of teeth, and I reached around to touch skin above the low-cut back of that thing she was wearing, whatever the hell it was.

“I’m sorry.” She smelt of rosemary and her breath was minty as she spoke into my ear. “I can’t imagine what you must think of me. All those texts.” She tucked her nose beneath my chin, and I realized I’d unbent, that I had lifted her, that her toes were inches off the floor and nudging against my shins. “You never came back, and you didn’t respond to my messages. It’s been six hours. I thought...I didn’t know what to think. I—”

“Hey.” I said, “Hey now,” and I’d have liked it if she cried. “I should’ve been more clear. I told you I had a meeting. I didn’t say it would be an all-day affair. I just figured, you know—historian visits the archives, it goes without saying he’s not coming back anytime soon. But I guess you don’t know a lot of historians, do you?”

“I’ve known a few.” She seemed content to dangle, to speak against my throat, made no move to indicate that she’d like to be put down. “I even employed one for a while, some kid just out of school. I sent him to Paris, then I decided I’d rather not know,” and, if anything, she clung to me more forcefully.

I tried to keep the urgency from my voice. “Rather not know what?” I’d been patient with her, I hadn’t pushed, but I wanted my reward. “What is it, Cici, that you’d rather not know?”

“He didn’t listen to me.” It was as if I never spoke. “I called him off, but he didn’t listen. He did the research, paid for his hotel, did it all on his own dime. Wanted to prove himself, I guess.” I felt her mouth rasp against my unshaven neck. “Showed up a month later on my porch with a whole dossier about Cécile de Clément.”

I set her down then, forced her back at arms’ length with my hands on her shoulders. No tears, but there was this look on her face that brought to mind Abraham, kneeling over Phibbi with strands of her bowel like thick yarn between his fingers, the kind of look that says: *You tell me I am wrong, that this is a lie or, better yet, a dream, you tell me and I will believe you no questions asked.*

“Is that you?” I shook her a bit. “Cécile de Clément? Is that your name when you’re there?”

“Madame calls me Cécily. Cécily, my pet. Even though I’m too old, I know, to be anyone’s pet.” She reached up to adjust the tie-around-the-neck part of her outfit and touched my hand in the process. “Cécile. Cécily. Cici.” She shrugged. “No matter.” Then, “That researcher kid? He was very thorough, left no stone unturned. I let him use me as a nonacademic reference. He works for some big library now, I think.”

*Holy Christ.* We were getting somewhere. I glanced around the lobby—Unyielding furniture, brown potted plants drooping with thirst, tourism photos of plantation ruins hanging in cheap poster frames on beige walls. Although thankfully empty of other archival patrons, it was still not the place I wanted to have this conversation. I wanted impenetrable solitude, fortress walls around a deserted beach, a tall rum drink, and an extra-wide striped towel to lay her down upon. My hands were on Cici’s shoulders, directly on skin, but the door leading back to the collections kept drawing my eye. If there were any fragments of black-and-white proof, I knew, if they were anywhere on Earth, they were locked inside that room. Since exhausting all of the mainland archives between Charleston and Albemarle, then fruitlessly contacting repositories in cities as far up the eastern seaboard as Wilmington, Delaware, Barbados was all I had left. I had three more days—the better part of a four-day weekend—to make it through approximately 127 document boxes, give or take one of Doug’s negligible efforts. That was far more material than I’d anticipated having to work with, and I already felt paranoid, nearly beside myself with the gut-gnawing rat of worry that I’d gone too fast, turned a page too quick, that I’d missed a scrap of Abraham or Joe or May, Phibbi, Scipio calling out to me silent in faded brown ink. With a couple of business meetings scheduled-in besides, which Bram would kill me if I canceled—and Jamie, as

our on-site archaeological consultant, would doubtless hold me down and help Bram out—this left very little time for me to become distracted. So there was Cici, Cécile, Cécily, whoever: erratic and dry-eyed and annoying, with her oversized hair and ridiculous clothes and her mysterious wealth, looking up at me with that emergent swamp-sunflower hope as if to say that she is anything—perhaps everything—but a distraction.

I made my choice quickly and asked Cici to wait just one minute. Then I walked over to the reception/sign-in window where Penny was nowhere to be seen, and neither was there a bell to ring for attendance. Reaching through the waist-high alcove, I snagged a thick memo pad and a pen wrapped in green floral tape with a neon orange polyester daisy affixed to the non-writing end. Its petals fluttered as I wrote: *My Apologies. An unforeseen conflict has arisen. Back at 9:00 AM sharp. Signed, Dr. Ayres.*

I propped the note where it couldn't be missed, and when I turned back to Cici I had the vague idea in mind of executing some flippant chivalrous gesture—clicking my heels together, affecting a stiff quarter-bow, offering her my arm on the way to the parking lot. And she, I thought, would laugh, curtsy in turn, take my arm only after adjusting it to the neurotically correct Parisian angle. I found, however, that rather than gazing after me, begging me with hazel-flecked eyes to choose her, to go with her, promising me she'd be worth it and that I'd never have cause to regret this decision, instead she had turned fully away and was examining a mounted-up plantation photo, one in which the first sunbeam after a late-morning rain was caught hazing a white streak through a boiling-house window. The whole building was tumbledown, but charmingly so, the window misshapen from crumbling mortar and teeming besides with lush

vegetation. A white bird with a red bill sat perched on the miraculously intact roof, and the Caribbean shoreline glinted tourmaline in the distance.

“Do you ever think,” Cici asked—she was looking up with her back facing me and hands on her hips—“about how awful cameras are?”

I was startled, in complete agreement. My own impulse upon seeing the photograph was to reach into the staged composition, shoo that gaudy bird away, and tear aside the plants choking full the window so that it might be revealed what, if anything, remained of the massive interior cauldrons and their elaborate network of interconnecting drainage pipes. “At least it’s not in black and white,” I offered. “Or worse, shades of sienna.”

“No.” She took my comment seriously, continued to study the image. “That might be better, make it so romantic it would become ironic. Like plantation noir.”

“Maybe so,” I allowed. Then I approached her from behind, and when I drew close enough to smell her herbal shampoo, I squatted a bit, bent low enough to rest my chin on her shoulder and to reach one arm around her waist. “Hey, sweetheart?” I put on my best Philip Marlowe accent, which consisted mostly of checking my drawl and biting down hard on the consonants. “Suppose we blow this joint? See the sights, paint the town red, have us a time getting into some gen-u-wine old fashioned trouble? Whaddya say?”

I felt her laugh but didn’t hear it. She said, “Don’t you know you oughtta have more sense than to take chances with strangers like this,” and, Jesus, it was like I was hanging onto Veronica Lake.

I got the reference, supplied the next line: “It’s funny,” I quoted, “but practically all the people I know were strangers when I met them.”

“Very good,” she said, and I felt like I’d aced a pop quiz. Then she let out her too loud French Rococo three sticks of butter laugh, and Veronica was gone for the moment. I wondered when she would return. “You do realize,” she asked, “that you took the woman’s line, right?”

“You took the man’s first,” I pointed out. “What’s a poor dame to do but follow suit when her fella’s in the wrong?” and she patted my hand where it rested against her stomach, said silent, *That’ll be enough of that*, and I agreed. Then I relaxed my jaw, laid it on thick as Lou’siana gumbo when I asked, “You bout ready to be moving on, Ma’am?”

“You idiot,” she said, and I could hear her eyes roll. “Please, yes, let’s go. Before you start speaking in tongues.”

As I had suspected it would, her hand fit perfect in the crook of my arm, and I swung the door wide so we could both angle through at the same time. I could feel the bottled-up heat in the pavement even through the soles of my—or whoever’s—loafers, and Polynice chirped the horn twice, directing us to his location on the far side of the parking lot. Cici shifted her grip to my upper arm and took off at a leap-skipping jog. I ran to keep up.

## CHAPTER V

### SURPRISE SLAP ON A PRIVATE BEACH

Cici slipped into her mothering role once we were inside the car and insisted she buy me food, “An honest to goodness feast,” seeing as how it was going on 6:00 and I’d not eaten all day, and she couldn’t believe she let me run off for a hard day’s work without a thing inside my stomach. I checked my need against everything Will had consumed the night before—three servings of Bethia’s pilau, nearly two pounds of fresh-caught shrimp, a whole pile of yam fritters, and half a corn cake sweetened with both molasses and honey—then I lied, told her that Doug and I ordered in for lunch. Cuban sandwiches, I said, with thick pickles, mayonnaise, mustard, the works. Potato salad on the side and passion-fruit iced tea, which was a little sweet for me, but Doug swilled nearly a gallon of the stuff, which made him pee like a racehorse all afternoon. She cut her eyes at me sideways, and I thought I might’ve gone overboard describing all the liquids and condiments around the archive’s gossamer documents, but she patted my knee, said all right, if I was sure, then she directed Polynice to take us to *her* beach.

“You have a beach?” I asked, “A beach of your own?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

She would say nothing else about it.

We drove for more than a half hour, cutting east across the interior, and with the shoreline out of sight for so long, I knew we must be on the southern half of the island—



the more bulbous gourd part of the butternut squash, as opposed to the five-mile-wide neck of the north. After leaving the vicinity of Bridgetown, buildings were spread farther apart, the resorts were smaller and obviously catered to a less affluent clientele, residential neighborhoods became more abundant and could be seen peeking between tamarind and bearded fig trees off the side of Highway Number Four. Houses were of varying sizes, many of them stucco with porches and painted white, and almost all had roofs of either green ceramic or terra cotta tile. Cici sat close to me but seemed generally disinclined to speak. She would hum a few bars of a song now and then, one that was familiar but which I couldn't name, and a handful of times she pointed out specific items of interest she wanted me to take note of. A spoonbill was out of place perched in a breadfruit tree, and she hoped he wasn't injured, that he hadn't blown inland and gotten stuck where he wouldn't be able to feed. Then there were five crosses made of greying brown wicker that marked the spot where a man-she-knew's whole family was killed in a head-on collision with a melon truck. On the first anniversary of their death, she said, he'd been planning to return and set them all alight as a last grand gesture of farewell, but he came to his senses at the end and decided that incidentally provoking a race riot was not the best way of commemorating his family's loss. Polynice caught my eye in the rearview mirror, and I didn't know if I believed her story, but the crosses were real enough—one large, four small, and all of them tattered around the edges by the almost unceasing buffeting of the trade winds. I turned around to see them again before we crested a shallow rise and they disappeared from view.

The beach, when we arrived, was a secluded alcove that Cici said was just south of Congor Bay, which meant nothing to me until she used her tilted right hand as a map

to explain our position on the lump of her northeast-facing thumb bone. Then she pointed to the base of her pinky and showed me where our hotel was in comparison, about twenty-three miles away, give or take a half inch of palm. When I asked if that meant we were in St. John's Parish, she nodded, and I knew then we were just a ways down the coast, perhaps as little as three miles, from the former site of Brown Bay. My first instinct was to jump out of the car and make the trek up the beach, knowing that in an hour or less I might be there, at the site of Will's birth. Even if there was nothing left to see when I got there but reforested cane fields and the occasional scattered brick or—worse—the cordoned-off edges of a ritzy oceanfront community, it still seemed like a worthwhile pilgrimage to make. And this just on the off chance there was an outbuilding or a storehouse yet standing, and a forgotten loft overhead, and hidden in the darkest corner up above, covered with dust and straw and rat droppings and mold, a cedar chest filled with oilskin-wrapped documents placed there for safe keeping when the lowlands all flooded during a hurricane in the late 1680s, and which was then forgotten about, never retrieved, presumed lost in the aftermath of the storm. It was impossible, I knew. Things like that didn't happen. Except for the times when they did.

Cici asked Polynice to take a drive, said she'd call when we were ready to be picked up. Then she climbed out, rapped twice on the trunk, and Polynice popped it so she could remove a pre-packed straw bag, which she handed immediately to me before taking my hand and dragging me toward the water. "Cici, wait." I had no traction in my loafers and, after my first step off the asphalt, sand was already spilling inside, getting trapped between leather and my sockless-ankle. I toed the shoes off and left them near the roadside. Cici dug briefly inside the bag I carried, then handed me a pair of thick-soled

rubber flip-flops that were far sturdier than the convenience store models I typically bought one or more sets of each month. “Thanks,” I said, flexed my foot to test. The fit, of course, was perfect.

I held Cici’s right hand with my left, so I couldn’t look north toward Brown Bay without seeing her profile superimposed against an early evening sky that was indigo mixed with just a touch of plain old blue. Leaving her, I knew, would be a jackass move, and still I wanted to drop her hand, drop the bag, turn left and run. The temptation stuck with me right up until we drew within a few yards of the shoreline and she reached back with one hand to jerk loose the slipknot that had all day managed to hold the upper part of her clothes in place. The wall of fabric collapsed, gravity took it the rest of the way past her hips, and she was as bare in that moment as any man has ever wanted every woman to be. And then I realized that the contrast between pink-brown and white that I’d assumed delineated skin that often saw sun from that which didn’t was too sharp, too extreme. I’d seek her naked, so I knew firsthand that from head to toe she was evenly covered with a midgrade level of melanin. That stretch of midwinter Nordic white that comprised her torso was a swimsuit, and the best kind of one, as far as I was concerned: an old fashioned one piece, strapless and scooped low in back. Veronica Lake indeed.

She stepped out of her sandals and fallen clothes at once, left them puddled on the sand, then she left me behind as well to walk straight out into the sea, not testing it with her toe then jumping back or losing her balance when the surf roared around her ankles, calves, knees, higher. She walked in direct and she didn’t stop until she was up to her chest with shoulders, neck, and head all that remained above the undulating surface. Clear water reflected that sky, and she stood in the middle of it all, head tipped up, hair

wet on the length and spread around in dark blonde floating petals, lit from behind by the electric ocher sun that would set before too long on the opposite side of the island.

Standing behind her, I couldn't see her face, but I knew her eyes were closed because why would they be open, and she tipped her head back further and then further still until I thought painfully of a lid coming unhinged, comically of a Pez dispenser, and there was another half-formed simile on the tip of my brain when she plunged, or perhaps just sat, and was gone.

I couldn't get my clothes off quickly enough. Not because I was worried about her—no need to worry about a woman who walked into the water like that, like she owned it, like it was her name and no one else's on the notarized bill of sale—but because I recognized in the proprietary nature of her movements something that reminded me both of Bethia and of Will's mama. They were two of the most stubborn, difficult, sometimes even the most hateful women I'd ever met, capable of stroking your hair so gently in one moment it wasn't like they had hands at all but rather wings, enchanted feather dusters where their fingers should be, and in the next instant they were shrieking, weeping, tangling you in bedsheets to tear at your skin with their nails and teeth or vainly threatening to sell something so invaluable, so precious, irreplaceable, the belonging by which you define your very existence. A species apart from the twenty-first-century bitch who can and does own everything but who still gropes ravenous for more, Will's women owned nothing, controlled nothing, and out of pride or the need for recompense or the sheer stupid belief that they might fake it til they make it, bluff their way to strength and trick any man necessary into believing it as well, they acted as if the exact opposite were true. Bethia in a kitchen she doesn't own, cooking with skill that goes far beyond

proficiency for those who own her, and perhaps she has a vial of nightshade-laced arsenic in her pocket that she often fantasizes about using—turning it over and over between her fingers as she thinks about which dish will best camouflage the taste—but which she knows that she never actually will use because her love is like a clubfoot. Will’s mama residing queenlike in the house she might have inherited if only her son weren’t on his best behavior for the six months preceding her husband’s death, making empty threats nonetheless, still desperate to stake her moral—if not her legal—claim to the life she made but that she didn’t anticipate having when she was sixteen and all but promised to a sallow-faced rum merchant with rotten teeth, and she reached out on a whim for the broad ink-stained hand of a man whom she hoped might be different. And Cici: the rounding-forty divorcée hiding in Barbados on the weekends when she can’t be with her daughter, plying a strange man with alcohol and designer clothes and all-inclusive access to both her hotel room and her body, excusing the imprudence of this decision with her belief in their commonality, the single absurd thing they perhaps have in common, then walking with her arms wide and her eyes closed straight and unhesitatingly into the sea, as if there is no need to keep watch or, more likely, as if there is no purpose her due diligence might serve even if it were maintained. The actions of the three women seemed parallel to me, roughly analogous, the three sides of an equilateral triangle. All of them ridiculous and, at the same time, strangely and tragically brave.

I shed my expensive suit and I didn’t care about seams or buttons or the quality of silk fabric. I took the coat and shirt off as one and inverted the sleeves, left them inside-out beside the pool of Cici’s discarded clothes, then my pants as well with the white hip pockets flapping naked in the shorefront wind. I’d never had underwear, but if I did I’d

have lost them too, and I knew that if I hunted inside Cici's straw bag I would most probably find some high-priced swim trunks of my own—probably the kind worn by competitive swimmers the world over—but I didn't bother with the search. This small bent alcove of beach was deserted and, if Cici were to be believed, hers. Whether this ownership was figurative, literal, or merely sentimental seemed immaterial to me when compared to the significance of the attitude it proclaimed. She owned the beach like Bethia owned her kitchen, like Will's mama owned their plantation along with everything and everyone on it. It didn't matter if it were true; I cared only that she'd said it.

Cici saw me coming when she surfaced from her dive and she didn't smile, which felt exactly right. She held out her hand and I struggled to reach her through the rough water, and when I got there she made me turn around and she touched the crop scars on my back that she must have noticed the night before, or perhaps that morning in the sunlit hotel room. Most of the marks had lightened over time to silver veins that resisted tanning; only a couple dozen or so of the deepest ones still were raised and hard like tiny walls enclosing skin more than ten years after Will's last beating. When she had finished her inspection she patted me twice as if to say, *That's fine and you will do; it's not so bad as I had feared*, and she drifted around me then in chest high waves, grabbed my hands, brought them to her waist. At first I didn't know what I was feeling for, if anything. Her bathing suit was slick, vaguely textured, and I could feel her ribs beneath the snug material like shallow grooves in insufficiently plowed earth. I held her in place because I thought that was what she wanted—an anchor—but then she put her hands atop mine and moved all four together insistently from breast to hip, dragging firm over the same

terrain a half dozen times before the line my palms traveled began to assume gruesome consequence.

The shape of her, I finally noticed, was all wrong. She did not arch in smoothly in the middle as she ought, but was rather nipped-in too severely, as if a bite of flesh were missing. Her waist was a divot. Inches of width separated her hipbone from the innermost curving gouge. The V-shaped ribcage just barely flat at the bottom and, Jesus, I didn't want to think about the position of her internal organs—the raised compression of her lungs, the abridgement of her stomach, the distortion of her bowel. My fingertips didn't meet when I tested whether or not I could encircle her, but it was a damn close thing.

Whatever my expression was, it must have been awful because Cici laughed—barely a shot glass worth when I was used to foaming-over pintfuls—and set her hand on my cheek. “It's not like foot-binding,” she said. “Nothing's stunted or broken. Just...shifted.”

“It's barbaric.” I felt guilty for liking it.

“It's been necessary.” She shrugged. “For her, for Cécily.” She looked me dead in the eye and, so help me, I believed her, and she said, “I just wanted you to see.”

I saw. I was elated, and I wanted to vomit. “Okay.” I said it three times. Then again, “Yeah, okay.” And I knew my grip on her already-pinched waist had to hurt, but I didn't want to let go. It felt good somehow to squeeze, and I didn't know, moreover, what to do next. Was that it? All the proof I needed, tangible in her maltreated, corseted flesh? If so, now did we elope? Settle on the plantation in the semi-private rooms on the fourth floor—the former house slaves' quarters—just me and her and Sophie, with Bram down the hall banging on the wall at night for us to fuck more quietly. But that, of course, only

when Sophie was with her father, and we'd make it up to Bram in the morning with Bethia's foolproof recipe for weightless griddlecakes. Then one day would Cici and I have a few tall, blonde, overly pensive children of our own who would tease their hair and fear clocks and walk the streets of Pompeii or the moors of Celtic Britain while they slept. God, was what we had genetic, like female hemophilia—nearly impossible with just one or no tainted parent, and all but inevitable with two? And was that what I'd been looking for all these years: someone to settle down with? Did I know how to stop doubting, or would I be constantly gauging every gesture, every move, every hint of French intonation in her clothes and dress and manners for the rest of our earthbound lives? Hell, did I even like her?

“Hey.” Cici's hand was still on my cheek. “Calme-toi,” she said. “Ce n'est pas si mauvais. You look like you're going to be sick,” and the fact that she said this while the two of us were flopping around like bobbers on top of the waves didn't help. Then her faced changed, hardened, mouth pursing and cheekbones seeming to expand as she assumed the same dangerous quality that I remembered from the plane when she'd struck my arm after I asked if Marie Antoinette had indeed spoken the words, *Let them eat cake*.

“It's me,” she demanded, “isn't it? It's the shape of me, the way I look.” And the hand against my cheek moved only a few inches, but the pop when it snapped back was hard enough to make my eyes water. “You're just like Jerry. He said it disgusted him, how unnatural it is.” She hit me again, moving her whole arm this time, and I turned into it, wanting the contact to be stingingly direct. “He couldn't fathom the explanation, didn't believe me even though I swore that I wasn't lacing myself up when he wasn't around.” She spoke loudly, but her words were barely audible over the surf. “The doctors told him



it was the only way, the only possible reason for me to look the way I do. They said I must be doing it to myself, that I have some kind of dysmorphic disorder. They warned him I might start in on Sophie next. She's only twelve," she said, "and she's so beautiful." And those tears, I thought, were real. At last, the genuine article and not salt spray because they were trickling down and not splashing up. "Well, the hell with you all." She drew back her hand as if to strike me a third time but then let it fall, balled fist thumping into the sea. "Screw them, and screw Jerry, and screw you too." I found it endearing that she didn't use the word *fuck*.

She tried to get away from me then, but my hands were still on her aberrantly-curved waist, and if Will's years of numbing physical labor were good for nothing else in life, they at least gave me the strength to hang onto her no matter what, even when she thrashed like a caught striper and tried her best to dig pointed toes into my groin. I don't like to mark women, not even in play; I like to think it is one of the things that separates me from Will—his readiness to knock down his mama, to slap Bethia's thigh, to bite her and leave the brand of his jaws imprinted for days on her shoulder. "*The burden that goes with being big, Willy-o, is that you've got to learn not to break things.*" Will never did learn this, whereas I liked to think that I had. But when Cici tried to nail me again in the crotch and bared her teeth—those terrible, white, orthodontially correct teeth—as if she were thinking about going for my jugular, I hit her. I should have just let her go. I know that. But I saw the chain of events unfolding. If I released her: Cici, faster and more nimble than me, running out of the water, just ahead of my reach. By the time I made it to shore, she'd already have her bag, and her cell phone retrieved from the inside waterproof pocket. She'd leave her clothes behind, and she would dial Polynice as she ran up the

beach, and before I had even one leg inside my borrowed suit pants, he'd be pulling up, ushering her into the back seat, telling me to step off, to just stay the fuck away, and when the tires spun, churning out rocks and pieces of shell, I'd be naked and reaching out from the side of the road.

I saw it, and I couldn't stand it, and so I hit her.

She went immediately still, as if she couldn't believe it either. She cradled both hands to the side of her face and, to my mind, her eyes were as huge as a cartoon character's. My palm stung, so I knew I'd hit her hard, and the worst part was that I wanted to follow through with the backhand, to finish off the second part of the 1-2 move. Her left cheek was already flushed from the impact, and it occurred to me that it might look nice if she had a pair to match. Instead I shoved her away, stumbled back a few steps myself, then I lost my balance when a large wave broke against the side of my head, and a second later I tasted salt and sand and pebbly applesauce-like grit. The head-over-heels spinning helplessness that followed was second only in extremity to how I felt whenever I awoke knowing that Will had just had sex with Bethia and that, vicariously, I had enjoyed it.

I washed up on shore, ass in the air, tumbled into a heap of fallen palm fronds at edge of the tide's reach. I spent a few minutes gagging, coughing up saltwater, and I realized that someone was pounding me on the back none too gently, helping me to expel the gallon or so of the sea that I'd imbibed. Turning my head, I recognized Cici's legs and feet, which I knew right away were hers because I'd painted her toenails that coraly-orange the night before. It was the perfect shade, she'd determined, to match our French toilette lipstick.

“When did you eat shrimp?” she asked, and I realized what the solid objects were that I’d felt rise up in my throat.

“I didn’t.” I sounded half-strangled. “Will eats them whole.”

“Gross,” Cici said, but she sounded interested, as if she’d learnt something new.

“You’ve never thrown up Cécily’s food?” I could barely get out the words.

“Not that I recall.” She hammered me on the back twice more, then plopped down beside me. I worried she’d get sand in her swimsuit and that she’d be horribly uncomfortable later. “But even if I did,” she said, “I’d never know. Ladies of the court chew their food to paste, you see. At least fifty chews per bite. It helps us eat very little.”

“Ah.” I spat out a tiny seashell. “Good to know.” I managed to turn over onto my back. Water washed back and forth, spuming up as far as my chest, and if a single seabird had cawed overhead, I’d have been nervous about being naked. “Then why the need for the corset?” I asked, “Since you eat so very little?”

“On peut toujours être plus mince.” She sounded blasé, and I imagined these words were accompanied by some dismissive and utterly French hand gesture.

I tried to laugh, choked a little instead, replied, “No. I really don’t think you could be much thinner.”

“Don’t be silly.” Her tone was scolding. “Of course I could.” Then she said nothing for a long while.

The sky in the direction we were facing was darker by then—midnight blue instead of indigo—and I thought briefly about sharks coming in to feed at dusk. Cici seemed unconcerned, though, and she knew these waters, and however mad she may have been at me, I didn’t doubt that she would warn me if she saw a triangular fin or a

dark spot moving amid the waves. Not that death by sea beast would be an unfitting end for me. It would, I thought, perhaps even be poetic in a way for the shared body of a man who orders the importation of slaves to be devoured by the creatures who learned to follow the ships. “Remember, you reap what you sow, Willy-o.” And I thought, *If it happens now, I won’t resist*, even while I knew this was a lie—that I would punch snout and gouge for eyes and try every other worthless Shark-Week trick I’d heard of. Finally, when I didn’t think I could get any sicker with guilt or self-loathing, when I was a second away from rolling back onto my stomach and losing some more of Will’s gulped-whole shrimp tails, Cici very gently and lethally added another straw.

“You hit me,” she said.

“Yes.”

“And you liked doing it.” This wasn’t a question.

“Yes,” I said anyway.

“Why?”

*Jesus. Why indeed?* It’s the *why* that’s the bitching elusive part of everything, but I decided that I owed it to her to try and logic my way through. “Because you were being a pain in the ass”—I stared up at the darkening sky—“flying off the handle, losing it, like you seem to do at least two or three times a day. Because you tried to kick me in the balls. Because you put your ex-husband’s words in my mouth. Because you hit me first.” I paused for a moment, thought, then decided to admit: “Because you were trying to run away, and my brain does this thing where I see possibilities, the cause and effect of events rolling out in front of me. I didn’t like where that running-away chain ended”—I shrugged, which dug me an inch deeper into the sand—“so I changed it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Cici said and, I’m sure, waved her hand again dismissively. “I get all that. That’s why you hit me. And, hell, maybe I even deserved it. I was, as you said, ah...flying off the handle. Again. I’m French, so I do that. What I asked,” she paused for emphasis, “was why you liked it.”

She was brutal. “Hell.” I raised an arm, dragged a hand down my face, and I liked how every movement I made caused me to sink further into the beach. “I don’t know.” I shut my eyes. “Because I’m bad, I suppose. Because I’m like him, just the same as Will. I enjoy being masterful and commanding, the biggest man in any room. Owning people, controlling things, ordering and moving them around like chess pieces. I get off on that. Because I’m a sick, slave-raping bastard.” And I saw the jaws of the shark rising up to consume me in a surge of foam and blood and teeth and mawkish self-pity.

Cici snorted, and when I opened my eyes she was staring down at me, leaning over, one arm on either side of my head, still-wet hair dripping salt on my face. “You know,” she said, one of her lovely eyebrows raised, “I don’t believe any of that for a second.”

“You should.” I reminded her, “I hit you.”

“You smacked me,” she corrected, seeming to perceive a distinction. “I’ll maybe have a bruise. You didn’t knock my lights out or rearrange my nose. Which is good.” She smiled. “I like my nose. Madame says it’s charming. She thinks hers is too hawkish.”

“It is,” I said. “I’ve seen paintings.”

“Be nice.” She laid down beside me, fully on top of the sand, while I was at least half under. But soon, I knew, she would begin to sink as well. “You have to see her in

person.” She said, “All those paintings—grey haired and frowsy with feathers sticking out all over the place—they don’t do her justice.”

“I bet you could pull off feather hair nicely.” I felt the nearness of her laugh and *this*, I realized, was the conversation I’d been wanting to have all my life. It was why I did most of the things I’d ever done, up to and including hitting her. “I’d pay money to see you in panniers with an imported bird glued to your head.” She howled, and something occurred to me then. “Have you—has Cécily—ever been painted?” I asked. “If so, I want to see it.”

“Just once,” Cici said. “An intimate scene with some of her favorite ladies. We’re in her sitting room. She’s wearing her muslin, playing the harp. And all of us are in our fifth-best dresses, just as Madame requested. Some just listening to the music, others talking or sewing. I’m off to one side, mending the lace on a sleeve. Gabrielle, the lady beside me, she’s reading sheet music—something by Chédeville, I think. She always loved Chédeville.”

“Who painted it?” I asked.

“Ah...Gautier d’Agoty, if I remember correctly.”

“I’ve never heard of him.”

“You’d recognize his work if you saw it,” she said. “Madame’s portrait in the blue coronation robe, flounces and bows everywhere, standing by the globe, and she’s covered in fleurs de lis? That’s one of his too.”

I nodded. I knew what she was talking about. “And your painting”—I tried not to sound like I was begging—“Did it survive? Can I see it?”

She shook her head against my shoulder, and we both sank a bit deeper. Water lapped around my neck. It was almost fully dark. “I’ve never seen it here.” She said, “I’m sure it was burned. We were meant to look modest, you see. Dressed simply, enjoying simple pleasures. But no one would believe it. They said it was propaganda, that we borrowed clothes from the servants and hid our diamonds in our pockets. Either that, or we bribed the painter to leave them out.” Then a small coughing laugh that sounded a little tubercular, and her orangey nails bit into my arm under the sand. “But bribed him with what? Now that’s the real question. Royal gold, perhaps? Our jewelry? The painting commission itself? Or did we take turns—”

“Hey,” I interrupted. “I’m sorry.” And I’d have put my arm around her if moving were that easy. “I didn’t mean to bring up something painful.”

“That’s what happens,” she said, “when you go digging for evidence.”

“Busted.” I shifted to the left, a pachyderm half buried in sludge, trying to jostle her playfully. Instead I turned myself half-sideways, created a softened and exposed spot between us that the pulling-back water began instantly to erode. I scooted through it, naked in the muck, then solved the problem by tugging her down into the gulley beside me. My mouth was in her sand-clogged hair, water leaching in around us like the flooded moat in a sandcastle, and I said, “I don’t mean to give you the third degree.” I really did, of course, but I knew better than to underestimate the value of denial partnered with a tactful lie. *I don’t care how much you hurt, so long as I get at the truth*—that didn’t have quite the same ring to it and, moreover, I wasn’t even sure if it were true as far as Cici was concerned, although it always had been in the past. “It’s just”—I chose my words carefully; I’d already fucked up enough for one night—“I mean, have you ever met

anyone else who's like us? Who can do what we do? Because I haven't, and I've been looking for most of my life."

"Why?" She sounded genuinely perplexed.

And just like that I doubted her again. "Because...." I groped for but couldn't come up with an answer to such an unfathomable question. "Just because." I clasped her gritty shoulder, squinted at her through the deepening night. Her bathing suit was a white smear, and the rest of her was lost in foamy shadow. "Haven't you ever wondered if you were insane? If you had a giant and inoperable brain tumor? If you needed to be lobotomized, or—or committed?"

"Of course." She shrugged into my hand. I saw her chest move as she sighed.

"But doesn't everyone feel that way at one time or another?"

I let go of her and struggled to sit, forced my body up from the rushing sand. "Not like this," I said. "Not like us," and I really meant, *Not like me*.

Cici sat up too. She was sunk deeper than I was and, as a result, seemed even smaller than normal. The wisp of her arm reached out toward my face, and I could tell she was straining to touch, that her fingertips just barely made contact. They were cold. "But we're so awful." She breathed thick emphasis on these last two words, and I thought maybe there was a catch in her throat. "Haven't you done terrible things? Behaved badly? Hurt people you didn't mean to hurt because somebody pissed you off two hundred years ago?"

Will is eleven and more than anything else he wants to join in the hunt. His grandfather has just turned out a bumper crop of sugar, made a more-than-handsome profit, and eight hogs have been ordered so the overworked Barbadian slaves might be



replenished with fatty hocks and beans stewed with bacon fat. Despite being ordered by Will's father not to do so, Abraham, sixteen at the time, spends hours teaching his young charge how to throw a spear in secret, how to lead with both his eye and his arm, how to aim not where the boar is when he sees it, but rather where it *will be* three seconds into the future. Will knows all about the future, he thinks; he has had practice reading it; he is naturally adept. They are training in the cornfield—Abraham zigzagging through the stalks, Will hurling blunt-tipped spears just ahead of the shifting mass of agile shadow—when one of the trial throws goes awry, is released an instant too soon and, as a result, veers hard to the left instead of charting a straight course through the soon-to-be-harvested stalks. A pained bellow informs them that the spear has found its mark, although not the one they'd intended, and the two boys turn as one, plucking an armload of almost-ripe corn as they make a run for the forest that begins on the opposite side of the grain fields. A couple of days, they think, will calm Will's father—give him long enough to grow worried, and give both his bruise and his temper a chance to deflate. When they emerge nearly a week later, they are tired and replete, having gorged themselves on squirrel meat and campfire-roasted corn while Will related tales about William Clark and his body-slave York, who will one day accompany Lewis and Clark on their great expedition west and who will become known for saving his master's life on more than one occasion. "*Would you rescue me from a grizzly?*" Will asks this in earnest, his mouth smeared with grease, and Abraham pretends to mull it over, chews slowly, bobs his head from side to side until eventually he says, "*That depends, I suppose. Would it be a big one or a little one?*" Will throws a corn cob at him, and Abraham says, "*No, no. Really. Are we talking about a hot-blooded young he-bear, and you're standing between him and*

*his missus? Or is this a beast older than Joe with only one claw left and two, maybe three teeth?"* They bring a young deer as a peace offering—killed by Abraham with one deft throw and dressed out by both boys laboring together—and the first people they come across are Phibbi and Bethia at work in the vegetable patch. Phibbi is weeding, trimming herbs so the shrubs will grow full and not spindly, and Bethia is following her around, thumb in her mouth, a handful of the older girl's skirt clenched tight in her fist. She is not yet five, and her mother has been dead just a few months, and Will knows as soon as he sees her that all is not well. She only sucks her thumb when she's nervous, when the adults around her fight, and he reaches for Abraham's arm, starts to say that maybe a few more days in the woods are called for, and he sees Phibbi—eyes wide, shaking her scarf-wrapped head. It takes him a moment to realize she's looking at Abraham. The blow comes out of nowhere, and Will is on the ground, on his hands and knees, his lip and gums bleeding, and the crop begins to fall, he doesn't know how many times, how long it keeps up after he's flat on his stomach and his mouth is full of garden dirt and his father is looming above him, bent over gusting breaths with his hands on his knees, having finally spent his initial rage. Later Will's mama deems his shirt beyond mending; she rips it up for use as rags. And his father makes him watch while Abraham is stripped to the waist and tied arms overhead, secured to a low-hanging tree branch just high enough for the stretch to hurt. Will doesn't look above Abraham's toes, which retract scrunching in contortion as the whip cracks until they're sprayed red, and the next day Daddy popped my mouth for back-talking and opened the cut inside my cheek. Without thinking, I bent over, screamed, and head-butted him hard as I could in the gut.

The next time Abraham was badly beaten—for bedding down with Phibbi, impregnating her without his master’s consent—Will’s father forced him to wield the lash himself. Will threw up after the fifteenth stripe, and I was in my freshman year of college at the time, quietly dating one of my history TAs—this twenty-two-ish girl named Erin who wore gauzy skirts to class and latex gloves while grading snot-covered undergraduate papers and whom I’d first impressed with my *freakishly insightful*—her words—oral presentation about the social implications of the task versus the gang systems of slave labor, during which I’d gone off on a tangent about the further need to consider indentured and slave labor side by side in order to weigh the validity of the reasons as to why the latter eventually won out over the former. (Will’s family had just recently acquired Jem, and I’d been reading up on the issue.) She liked me because I’d cheated and made her think I had a well functioning brain. I liked her because she wore this old-fashioned hat with flowers on the brim and because her hair smelt like yeasty rain, like fog over a millpond. In addition to her work as a TA, she was also an intern at a house museum where a colleague of mine has since assumed the curatorship. I wanted to see it but hated the idea of a scripted tour, so we used her keys to sneak in one night just before campus shut down for Christmas. The decorations on the tree were all wrong, Erin said—“*You know those were made in the 1860s, if not later. Just look at the angels’ faces. They’re porcelain. German bisque porcelain.*”—but they were pretty and sentimentally accurate and didn’t concern me. What bothered me instead were the props used to convey an artificial sense of frozen timelessness, made even eerier because they were only illuminated by our pair of low-watt flashlights. A leather-bound book lay split at the spine, face down on the sideboard where the faux brandy decanters were kept. A

half-eaten cookie was glued to a saucer, trailing plastic crumbs beside a cup of simulated tea. A silk shawl tossed over the back of a chair awaited the woman who might sweep through at any moment to retrieve it, weaving it through the crook of her slender arms before she checks her appearance in the nearby mirror and hurries to join her escort, an older mustachioed man waiting impatiently by the carriage. When Erin took my hand and led me toward the broad, subtly winding stairs, I knew she was taking me to the master suite above—to a four-poster canopy bed that wasn't really but was very much like the one in which the original owners had slept and born their children and nursed each other when sick and likely died. I knew their names had been Faith and Henry Brisbane, that they'd hosted week-long harvest parties for their shipping clients that Will's parents had liked to attend, and that they'd had a son named Henry Jr. with whom Will had been good friends until he died of smallpox in an isolated Charles Towne outbreak in the mid 1690s. At the time I didn't know that Will would one day take the elderly Mr. Brisbane as his own agent, using him to track down Moira and to sell his rice in London—when he had rice to sell, that is—but I did know that Erin's throat would be white as Barbadian sugar in the pale glow of my flashlight and that the shadowed troughs on either side of her clavicle would taste nearly as sweet. I knew too that Will was jealous, that he'd never bedded a white woman, and he didn't like me being first in anything. But he still wanted me to follow Erin abovestairs and to take all that she would offer me and then some. I could feel the want in him, bridging three hundred years and still as thick in my veins and as heavy in my balls as if it were me who was one shot of spiced rum away from raping a twelve-year-old slave girl. Everything went according to gorgeous plan until Erin lost her nerve when I removed her underwear. She pushed at my shoulders, frantic, gasping that

she'd changed her mind, she was sorry so sorry but she'd changed her mind and Will whispered in my ear: *Like hell she has, the cock tease.* We'd whipped a man the day before, gripped the leather hilt with worn-in finger grooves that were as yet too far apart for our hand to reach, but we'd cracked our knuckles and made it fit, and flecks of our best friend's blood were dried under our nails still, embedded unscrubbably in our rope-tying oar-rowing calluses. She was older; she was the one who'd brought me to that house in the first place; she knew beforehand what she was getting herself into, and I discovered that my hand may have been too small for the whip, but it was exactly the right size to span her throat, to hold her down against that facsimile of Henry Brisbane's mattress—not so tight that she couldn't breathe, but just tight enough to keep her quiet and to keep her still. I let her go eventually, and I didn't harm her. Not really. I told myself that at least a hundred thousand times—*She'll be fine; she will recover; at least you didn't cause her any lasting harm*—and every single time Will would smile inside my head, lick his lips and say, *Not nearly enough.*

“Three hundred years,” I corrected Cici. I had done terrible things, hurt people I didn't mean to hurt because someone had pissed me off three hundred years ago. “Not two.”

She said, “It's more like two for me.”

And I nodded. “Right. Sorry.”

“No,” she said. “No need to apologize.” Then she stood, struggling only a little to free herself from the sand. She tried to brush off her legs and stomach and succeeded only in blotching herself worse with clumped beach grit. She extended a hand down

toward me then bent her knees, as if bracing for some great effort. “Come swimming with me.” This was not a request.

I took her hand, allowed her to think she was helping me rise, but I pushed up with my legs and gave her maybe a tenth of my weight. “In the dark?”

“It’s best in the dark.” She tugged on my hand. “You’ll see.” I resisted still, hanging back, imagining grey torpedo shaped bodies fringed in white, fins and bared teeth slicing through inky water. “What’s the matter?” Cici asked.

“It’s night.”

“And?”

“And aren’t there—?”

“Sharks?” She laughed, another bare shot-glass worth which I figured she’d intentionally stifled to keep from wounding my pride. “No. No sharks.” She explained, “The water’s a little warm for them, and the reef keeps the big ones from coming in close.”

“Oh.” I let her lead me a few steps further into the sea.

“They’d need a good reason to risk getting torn open on coral,” she continued. “Some strong incentive drawing them in.”

The water was warmer than the air, rising inch-by-inch past my waist and occasionally splashing as high as my neck. Cici swam alongside, already just barely able to reach the bottom, and she bounced up occasionally in the lull between waves when she touched down, stood briefly, then pushed off with the balls of her feet. If she weren’t so close she’d have been wholly invisible with the moon not yet risen, and I tried not to imagine the sharks, I honestly did. I turned my head up, looking for the faint gleam of

emergent stars, of which there were none. I concentrated then on the loamy ocean floor between my toes, how it felt impossibly, otherworldly soft, like shifting wet velvet. When that thought didn't stick I turned instead to how different Cici's hand was from the one I was most used to holding, from Bethia's, at perhaps two-thirds its size and devoid of callus, with nails that were allowed to grow long instead of being sheared down even below the quick. In spite of—or, perhaps, in part because of—the predilection for temper it contained, Cici's hand struck me as tiny, ineffectual, weak, and I thought then of the unfeeling gravity-impelled blade of the guillotine, of the Princess de Lamballe's head severed from her no doubt callus-free body and mounted high on a pike, of Jacques-Louis David's overly sympathetic painting of the justly slain Marat, completed months after his executress—that angel of assassination who was herself anything but ineffectual or weak—had already been murdered, dissected, buried in a mass grave along with hundreds of her fellow victims. With these sadistic images in mind, I turned with relief, even with something approaching pleasure, to the memory I had initially tried to suppress.

This time Will is six years old, and he has been told by his parents that they're leaving Barbados forever, but he does not have a good sense of how long *forever* is. He holds Joe's seemingly enormous hand, the two of them standing on deck of the ship that will bear them away, and he asks if they will come back home in a week, in a month, in a year, or in two. Joe answers, “*Nossir*,” to every question Will asks, his adopted brogue rolling hard on the Rs, and he tries to keep the boy back a ways from the rail, to keep him from peering over the chin-high beam and seeing what the cause of all the commotion is in the water below. “*Let go, Joe.*” Will tries to pull his hand free. “*You hafta be nice to*

*me. Mama said.*” And Joe’s love for the child he guards is considerable, but he has only of late been repurchased by his much-adored Miss ’Lizabeth, and he is still bitter, both that she let him be sold in the first place and that it took her so long—more than five years—to track him down and miraculously retrieve him. So when Will pulls hard enough to wrench the wrist that was broken three years ago and never properly set, Joe lets him go. Will runs forward, puts both hands on the rail, goes up on his toes to peek over. He starts to scream, and Joe is instantly contrite. He grabs Will beneath his arms, picks him up, spins him away from the railing. Rubbing the boy’s back, Joe tells him to *“Hush, hush now, sir”* and promises that *“None of yon monsters will be getting near you.”* Will continues to sob, and he stuffs two fingers inside each of his ears while Joe hums a nonsense song in attempts of drowning out the rest of the noise, but it will be ten years at least before Will hears a heavy splash without remembering the disposal taking place onboard the slave ship newly arrived from Dahomey—the wasted bodies tossed overboard by sailors with their faces wrapped in ventilating linen, and the grey-finned masses waiting just under the surface of the water, circling expectantly, ready to do battle for scraps.



## CHAPTER VI

### A STRANGE AFFAIR FOR A MAMA'S BOY

Contrary to her usual practice, Bethia is still in bed with Will when he awakes, and he ponders this fact as he blinks against lace-stamped morning light to examine the furrow of spine bisecting the two halves of her muscular back. He drags a finger through this groove, and Bethia stirs groaning but doesn't wake, and Will decides to interpret her presence as a reminder of dominion, one intended to reaffirm her ownership of him. There is a part of him that wouldn't have been the least bit surprised if he opened his eyes to a tiny conquistador's flag embedded in his chest. Nothing too injurious or deep, but likely barbed on the tip to prevent easy extraction, made of royal plum twill and stamped with a calligraphical *B*.

Were he to marry as his mama wants and bring home a lawful helpmate to join and aid in the expansion of their household, Will is fairly certain that Bethia would sulk for a day or a week, she would perhaps leave a mending needle in a tenderly placed seam for him to discover when he sat or mounted a horse, and then she would likely befriend the woman. Before long the two would be comrades in arms and Bethia her new mistress' greatest champion. She would teach this hypothetical wife all about his foibles, his penchants, his weaknesses, and then there would be three gossiping women sipping weak rum-spiked tea in the kitchen, plotting behind his back to enact their vision of what they think his plantation ought to become.

And this is if he brought home a genteel English-born wife—a woman whom for appearance’s sake he might hang on his arm on those rare occasions when the family ventures en masse into polite society, who might be relied upon to produce the requisite male heir plus a spare as insurance against childhood fever, and who could then be expected to recede politely into the woodwork, assuming the de facto sisterly role of an orphaned cousin or an elderly spinster aunt. Such a woman could be easily pitied and safely obeyed. Bethia might bow her back and acquiesce to the whims of this mistress, and every time she handed over a cup of tea or ironed an undergarment or provided aid during childbirth, she could assure herself in secret that she, Bethia, is the one whom Will truly wants, and it is only necessity that has granted this interloper the legal name of *wife*.

Moira, however, is another matter entirely. Since Phibbi’s death the year before there have been only the two women on the island—Bethia and Will’s mama—and even before this, Phibbi never presented Bethia with any real competition, since she was as good as married to Abraham long before Will first noticed the alluring quality of breast sweat, and even in his randiest most unthinking adolescent moments it never once occurred to Will that he might challenge Abraham to so much as a strong-arm contest with any hope of emerging victorious. As a result of circumstance, Will thinks, Bethia never had to win him, has never had to capture his attention by standing out amongst a group of her peers. She has also never been forced to share, and, what’s more, he has already noticed the fact that Moira is even younger than Bethia is herself—that she is slimmer in her youth and daintier, far more petite—and that in this way she looks quite similar to how Bethia did when Will first cast his eye upon her when she was twelve, nearing thirteen, that long-ago autumn when their romance first bloomed.

A certain amount of jealousy on Bethia's part is only natural, Will decides, and so is this overt display of possession evidenced by her continued attendance in his bed. As a result, he thinks it might be nice to reassure her by spooning up to her back, by arranging her topmost thigh so that it drapes over his hip, by entering her from behind and letting her wake to the day free from any doubts regarding his continued affection. But he can tell by the angle of sun through lace that dawn has passed, and he knows his mama will be expecting breakfast soon, if she isn't already. Part of their unspoken agreement—Will's and his mama's—is that he doesn't interfere with or stand in the way of Bethia's chores. While he would normally not mind provoking the lady of the house by delaying the delivery of her scrapple and tea, or even by forcing her into the kitchen to serve herself, as she has done less and less frequently as of late, Will thinks there has been enough enmity between them in recent days to render such a jibe unnecessary, even foolish. He believes his mama is bluffing about her willingness to sell Bethia to the sugar islands. It is, after all, Bethia: the child she delivered and helped raise, whom she taught to speak English and nursed herself with the milk intended for her own stillborn daughter after May's supply ran dry. His mama may have scalped a man once, cutting in deep with her kitchen knife and taking a strip of neck along with the scalp which she then waved high, grasping the long hair and swinging the fleshy end like a bat lure, all while she shrieked and used her wide-skirted body to conceal Will's hiding place in the corner by the hearth where it was dark despite the banked coals and where the air was thick and stinking with fatty meat and rosemary—she may have done all this, but Will doesn't believe she is lacking a reservoir of tenderness equal to or greater than that which conceals her ferocity. He tells himself she could no more sell Bethia than she could've

stepped aside and let her seven-year-old son be bludgeoned to death, but her Scotch-demon shriek rings in his memory, and Will recalls his father's pet name for her—“*Bess, Bess my Basilisk*”—and how years later he is still unsure if this was praise or a condemnation.

Bethia, he thinks, must maintain her close relationship with his mama; she must serve her mistress well and continue to be regarded as invaluable. With this in mind, Will seeks to wake her gently, to praise her for her devotion even while reminding her of her duties. He returns to the groove in the middle of her back—that furrow between twin mounds of earth that denotes the gorgeous strength of a Judith, a Bathsheba, a Delilah. He uses fingertips and tongue, traveling up and down the length of her from shoulder blade to hips and back again, until she transitions from squirming, to abrupt tension, and finally awakens.

“*Mon dieu.*” She jerks upright and doesn't bother to grasp the sheet maidenly against her front. She blinks, shoves back the hair that escaped during the night from her braid—a tightly intricate rope normally worthy of the ablest seaman. “You didn't wake me.” Using one hand, she pushes off Will's chest for leverage against the pillowy restraint of the feather mattress, and she is out of bed. “Why didn't you wake me?” She stalks the room, naked, looking for the night rail that was all she wore when she snuck down the stairs in the hour just after midnight to evict a more-than-willing Pluto once again from his overfirm pallet bed. “*Merde.*” It is not in the chair by the hearth, not tangled in the unmade blanket-nest on the floor. She goes on hands and knees to search under the bedstead, and Will watches her for a moment, appreciating the effects of gravity on the more pendulous, fleshy parts of her. To his eyes the rose-colored dappling

of the post-dawn through lace paints her in an especially flattering light, and he dangles a bit of sheet over the far side of the mattress, flashing fabric, tempting her with possible victory so she reaches, straining, all but the back half of her having disappeared under the bed.

When he has looked his fill he whistles, two quick notes, and Bethia crawls backward to peek up and sees her wrapper clasped in Will's tauntingly extended hand. "Quel crétin." She rises, snatches it away, quickly dons the yards of encompassing white. Then at the bedroom door she pauses to glare back at him and flings an extra yard of homespun cotton up and around her, draping it over one shoulder as if the thing she wore were a coronation robe instead of a giant square with sleeves made from a badly stained tablecloth his mama deemed unfit for continued use. All that is missing, Will thinks, are the embroidered fleurs de lis. "There will be no fish this morning," she says. "No fresh bread either. Griddlecakes, perhaps, and you'll be lucky to get those. I'll have tea made directly, if you'll sit with your mama, distract her. Food'll be out as quick as I can manage."

Having received his orders, Will nods, sits up in bed, and he rubs the spot on his chest where his imagined conquistador's flag has slipped to graze an artery. He loves it when she gets bossy, perhaps all the more so because he knows that she knows it means nothing—an empty threat issued in all seriousness. This is their foreplay. But before Will can extend the charade by coming up with a suitably humble response, yielding to Bethia's authority while simultaneously managing to half-apologize for letting her sleep in, she mumbles under her breath—something in French that he doesn't quite catch—then she opens the door and is gone. He expects her to let it slam behind her and to

thereby notify the rest of the house via wordless communication of the facts that she has just left his bed and that the commencing rituals of the day will proceed slightly behind their customary schedule. Instead, however, the inches-thick slab of lacquered pine shuts with a barely audible click, and Will laughs, lets himself fall back against his mattress. The slabbed feathers accept his impact with a solid THUD, and Will groans, but he is still laughing when he says to Liam, “Can you believe it? What a terrible flirt she is? Refusing to share the blame? Throwing me at our dear Mama’s mercy like that?”

He stretches, back arched as he sprawls amid the sheets, and he leans up to look down his body toward his toes, which he wiggles briefly. His stomach, he thinks, is noticeably sunken in, the lower ribs prominent, and his hipbones like cleanly defined spades ready to be kicked down with a heel and used to turn up his innards. He is all for being trim but this, he thinks, is getting ridiculous, and he wonders just how much longer Liam’s hunger strike is going to continue. “I feed my slaves more than sweet potatoes, as you damn well know,” he says to the ceiling. “So you’re not proving anything. I hope you realize that.”

He struggles up from the bed and dresses quickly, ties his cravat in a simple bow because that is all he can manage without Bethia’s or his mama’s assistance. His stomach growls as he fastens the wide buckles on his shoes, and he mumbles, “Man cannot live on yam alone,” and he is thinking of pork belly braised in beer, of pole beans stirred into mashed white potatoes, of corn charred and smeared with tablespoons of herbed butter and the way the kernels will pop between his teeth, opaque juice exploding to dribble starchy over lips and chin. After he has eaten his fill of griddlecakes, he will request a large midday meal to be followed by an elaborate supper. Perhaps he will invite Moira

again, just to see if she can beat her previous night's record of three helpings of each dish. He imagines her reaction when she tastes fried chicken—a recipe he begged Liam to memorize and which he then repeated to Bethia in exacting detail—her eyes going wide when her teeth pierce skin, then she'll chew slowly, dark eyes darting back and forth between him and the loaded-up platter of chicken parts, and she won't begin eating more rapidly until he has selected three more pieces—a thigh and a meaty wing and a drumstick—and lined them up beside her plate, nodding that she might progress to them when she's ready. She will suck the bones, he predicts, and she will eat the cartilage, and he lets his bedroom door slam behind him, announcing his movements to the rest of the house.

His wooden-soled shoes echo thuddingly in the hallway, as if he were walking on a dock, and Will reaches up, taps the overhead beam with both palms before he steps onto the landing at the top of the great staircase. The stairs themselves are honey-stained maple, the accompanying baluster painted white, and although the entranceway below is not yet furnished as he knows his mama wants, Will likes the effect of the house's austere greeting. Before too long, he imagines, when there are neighbors living nearby enough to pay regular visits—new arrivals to the colony who will want to curry his favor, be introduced to his London factor, be given a tour of his fields or permission to examine the mythically innovative design of his trunks and rice dikes—he will request that they be kept waiting in the front hall for as long as it suits him to do so. They can stand and admire the scrollwork on the outside edge of each step, painstakingly carved by Joe, the completion of which likely accelerated his blindness by at least a half-decade. When they grow bored of that they can count the individual glass panes on either side of the front

door, which will be all in place by then, no longer waiting to be imported in piecemeal installments. And when the plebs become tired, feet aching in their formal shoes, covetously watching the slaves hustle to and fro while they strain for any clue that might indicate master's arrival, they will wait longer, and they will stand, because he will not give them a place to sit.

Will comes down the stairs slowly, stepping deliberately, placing his weight firm on each descending level. He is looking forward to the day when Liam starts eating again so that he will be even more substantial—bluffly, heartily so—and the house itself will shift around him, announcing his presence long before he comes into view. He thinks he might try wearing full-length pants, see if he can't jumpstart that fashion trend early, because it's hard to look formidable in britches and stockings, and he pauses on the sinistral landing to look up and examine the wrought iron chandelier with its leaves and clustered berries and twisted blacksmith-forged petals. Liam's, he knows, is ormolu and lit with crass electric bulbs, and the beauty of his molding is spoiled with air-conditioning vents, and that Bram man whom Will can hardly bear to think of in relation with his Abraham has insisted on using green-tinged glass in the doorframe rather than the intended crystalline panels. Will shudders, and he says out loud to the rafters, "Is it any wonder then, Liam, that you've been jealous of me all these years?"

Breakfast that morning is a quiet, speedy affair. True to Bethia's word there is tea on the table when Will arrives, and his mama is already seated at her place, her chair set squarely between the two flour-to-ceiling multi-paned windows. The light pouring in is



gold, and her dress is a shade of pink that is not quite red—bittersweet, perhaps, courtesy of Crayola—and the partially complete cherry-blossom fronds surround her, towering up on either side, making her appear like the largest perennial of them all. She greets him warmly, rises to move around the table, to strain up and kiss him on the mouth, and Will realizes that the acquisition of Moira, in addition to neutralizing his lack of firsthand experience in a rice field, has purchased him a great deal of leeway where his mama’s temper is concerned. She hands him a cup filled to the rim with black tea, and he knows she would like to acknowledge in some way the fact that the mug she offers is faded and chipped and awkwardly large—a far cry from the patterned delftware she’d owned just the day before—but she remains silent on the issue. She offers Will sugar heaped in an uncovered saucer. He politely refuses, commenting instead that he would much rather have lemon. One brow arches over a laser blue eye: “When in the past twenty years have you had a lemon?” And Will shrugs, burns his lip on his tea, says, “One day.”

Bethia doesn’t speak when she delivers a platter full of steaming griddlecakes, nor when she returns a moment later with seared ham and a dozen two-minute eggs. His mama turns her face away when Bethia fills her plate, and Will knows she hasn’t missed either the hastily prepared food or the way Bethia’s hair fluffs loosely around her face, straggles all down her back, still in need of its daily rebraiding. Will thinks she looks charming, and he nudges her leg with his when she serves him. She ignores this, but before she can move away Will grabs her wrist, carefully pulls her back to his side so he can claim another short stack and an extra piece of ham. His mama clears her throat, and Will refrains from patting Bethia’s backside, and he knows that later tonight she will hurt him—she will use her nails and her teeth and he will lose a handful or two of hair, and he

will enjoy this all the more because Liam will try and fail to read it as punishment.

“Thank you, my dear.” He says, “This looks delightful,” and he doesn’t need to look up from his plate to see that both of the women in the room with him are furious. He tastes crisp butter and air trapped in the crevices of the griddlecake and syrup made of late summer berries stewed with rum. He looks at his mama with his cheeks full and smiles.

After breakfast Will discards his cravat, puts on older shoes, changes into a greying oft-mended shirt that is one tear away from becoming Pluto’s. The temperature outside is not too oppressive yet, and he thinks about paying a visit to the kitchen where he might watch Bethia fix her hair, pilfer a heel of day-old bread, maybe even sweet talk his way into some honey and jam to go on top. Then he remembers that she is mad at him, and he thinks it might be better instead to keep his distance for a while, to not further provoke her when she has fire, cast iron, and an array of cutlery at hand. There’s no sense, he believes, in annoying her to the point of committing some serious act they will both later have cause to regret.

Will veers right off the cookhouse path even while he detects Bethia moving behind the oiled brown paper she keeps tacked in the kitchen windows—both to let in some much needed light and to deflect the worst of the mosquitoes and yellow flies. He sees the mass of her shadow, how generous it is, how tall and how solid, and he imagines her easy use of a cleaver, how her thumbs pull strong to separate white flesh from delicate bones, and the way her whole body gets in on the act when she kneads dough or beats up eggs. Will moves away, but he keeps glancing back as he goes, weaving between the stumps he plans to have extracted and the ornate trees he’s willing to let stand, and he catches a glimpse from time to time of some half-imagined motion to which

he assigns unlikely importance. She is bent over; she is sharpening a knife on her small whetstone, and he wonders if she has taught Pluto yet how to do that. She holds up an item to the brown-paper-strained light, which appears to be globular, fat with multiple lobes; if it's a noxious mushroom, if the meat of its cap tarnishes a scrap piece of testing silver, it will be saved for insecticidal compost, and perhaps a slice will be added to the vial of nightshade-laced arsenic that she most certainly does not keep inside her apron pocket, just for the extra paralytic effect. She raises a hatchet, and it is surely for kindling, to provide a snack for the always-banked coals in her hearth, something that can be efficiently devoured without flame.

“You're doing this on purpose,” he accuses Liam, “making me invent things, making me be paranoid.” He hears singing, and he walks faster.

Rounding the side of the house, Will comes upon Pluto and Moira working together in the vegetable patch. She waves a thin arm when she sees him, and the music stops, and she bares her teeth in what would be a grin if only there were enough meat in her face to shift, reshaping in pleasure. Her jaw lowers and her lips raise. She says, “More,” and Pluto touches her wrist. He shakes his head, points to his mouth. “Mister Will.” He enunciates with care, and Moira says, “Yes.” Then she turns away and begins singing again, and there is a soaring tone to her voice that reminds Will of a seabird sighting prey, of a watchman's cry upon spying land after a windless month at sea. She uses her bare toes to rip up weeds, smoothes back down the loosened earth with her heel, and she is wearing one of Bethia's old dresses—brown print calico pinned up with a quick basting seam and cinched at the waist by a man's belt Will thinks must have belonged to his father. It winds around her twice with a bit of extra leather sticking out in

back like a bobbed tail, and she has taken off the head rag she was wearing when he bought her the day before so Will can see for the first time how her head has been shaved and is covered with open, clearly infected blisters and puffed-up abscesses.

*All kinds of nasty things living below decks on a slave ship. Liam reminds him, And the healthcare's not worth shit. She's your first one direct from the dark continent. Not fever-proofed, not even half-seasoned, and weakened besides from years of famine. I'll bet you a week's worth of food she's not going to make it.*

Will moves in closer, wanting to get a better look, and he steps over a row of half-grown purple cabbages, skirts around the hedge of rosemary, holding his breath by reflex. There is a spot high on Moira's neck—a brick red yolk circled in rust—that he can tell has been freshly lanced, and he recognizes Bethia's work: a small x made with a paring knife where the pus was drawn, the greasy salve daubed on top of that which he knows smells like oversweet honey and bitter herbs. It's his mama's recipe, well tested and usually more effective than not, but Will remembers the one set of crop welts he had that festered for weeks despite the balm's frequent reapplication paired with whatever over-the-counter antiseptics Liam could obtain without exposing his anomalous injuries. Finally there was nothing left to try but alcohol and near-boiling water, and Liam had no one to help him, no one who believed, so the task fell to Will, and Bethia—barely ten at the time—thought he was insane, but she followed his instructions to the letter, and when the steam rose from the pot and she could no longer touch the surface of the water without swearing, without saying the filthiest words Will taught her for fun but told her she must never repeat, she thrust the knotted rag between his teeth and spooned great ladlefuls over his back until the liquid flushing down his sides turned from yellow-green

to red to white to clear. Then came the douse of rotgut rum, 200 proof and almost unbearable. Will isn't sure, but he thinks he remembers Bethia crying. Then afterward, split like a sausage casing and afraid to move, he sat up too straight at the dining room table and Liam took cool, careful baths and kept his t-shirt on at the beach, and his mother complimented him on his improved posture, and Will thinks now, *I will hold her down if it comes to that; Bethia will help me, and I will not lose her.*

*If she lives—if she is alive two months from today—I will eat three meals a day for two weeks. Big ones, plus sugary desserts. I'll take milk of magnesia, and I will try not to throw up. You have my word on it.*

Moira continues down a row of underripe anemic-looking pumpkins, singing to herself—or, more likely, to Pluto and Will or perhaps even to the pumpkins, considering how loud she is. She weeds with her toes, and if she could only write down the things she knows as an indemnity against sepsis, Will would mortgage everything he owns, guarantee even the most exorbitant fee for a reliable translation to be furnished on future credit. In two years money will be a plaything, bits of tin and bronze he won't need for anything but fishing lures, and just his word—the promise of repayment from within the mercantile system—will be enough to secure the importation of any wares available on the planet. All the glass panes he can use, spices and teas and endless yards of silk for his mama, enough dish sets so they might break one piece a week and never come close to feeling the loss. And slaves: five times at least the number he currently possesses, a small army's worth, all of them trained to bear weapons and, moreover, predisposed to loyalty for reasons he'll take care to ensure—as Bethia is because she loves him, and Abraham because he keeps Pluto safe, and Pluto himself because Will snared him before he knew

any better, and Moira because she believes he saved her. But she must make it to spring, through the winter and at least one growing season. He needs her experience, for the yield of his initial crop to be staggering, two or three times what other planters have thus far been able to wrench from a similarly-sized plot of land. Then if the second year is even better, if a tenth or more of the rice awaiting shipment on the Charleston docks is stamped with his mark, his reputation will be made. Just his signature alone will be worth infinite pounds sterling, and he will secure his place in the record books; Liam will look again and this time he will discover his own name written in a familiar hand listed among the top grain exporters of 1705, 1706, and onward into the precarious century.

Will looks again at Moira, and she seems impossibly fragile, as if the proverbial strong wind might not only blow her away, but fracture her once and for all. Thinner even than Pluto, whose body aspires to his father's height but whom no amount of calories can fatten, with wrists and ankles nearly the same width, and that head with its invaluable, inaccessible contents—scabbed, infected, swollen with prominent ears like a half-rotted melon. Liam fears for his Parisian blonde because her hands are not callused, because he imagines that soft white skin set to brawl against a pike-and-lance armed Jacobin mob. And this is a potentiality, Will thinks, not even a likelihood, just something that might happen, one of a thousand or more possible outcomes, when Moira is already weak, a mosquito bite away from incurable fevered death. So, as far as Will can tell, Liam doesn't know what worry is. He has no use for it, no cause, no justifiable reason to fear so heartily for the life of another, when he, Will, might know precisely what Moira needs but have no way of providing her with it and be thus forced to watch her slip away regardless.

*You dread that for all the wrong reasons.*

*Fear is fear. You want to pretend that you're in love with Cici? That that's the fount from which your noble worry springs?*

Will feels a presence at his side, a pointed shoulder nudging into his forearm, and he glances down, sees Pluto. He is watching Moira too, the wisp of her precessing up the gourd row, and at this angle—looking down and from one side—Will sees a harshness to the boy's still-developing jaw that is reminiscent of Abraham when he spots a boar, looses a spear, ignites the beast's carcass before scraping off blackened fur and eviscerating it. He also notices a bruise high on Pluto's cheek, a puff of swollenness beneath his eye, a hairline split through his meager eyebrow, and Will remembers the worm gourd he turned over to Abraham the day before, its dozens of wriggling inhabitants attesting to the length of time Pluto spent neglecting his chores. Will sets a hand on Pluto's outside shoulder, pulls him in close to his side. He really hadn't meant to earn the boy a beating.

"She'll be fine," Pluto says. It takes Will a second to realize he's talking about Moira and, even then, he isn't sure if the boy is reassuring himself, or his master, or if he's seeking confirmation. "Bethia said," which for Pluto, he knows, is as good as gospel.

"If you notice she isn't fine, if anything looks amiss, you let someone know—either me or Bethia or Missus Mama. Right away. You don't wait for anything. Do you hear?"

Pluto nods, says, "Yessir. I hear."

Will is half-hugging him, and he tells him he's a good boy, that he trusts him implicitly. Then before he has a chance to ask, Will repeats the word *implicitly*, explains, "It means completely, Pluto, totally, without any reservations. It means I trust you like I

trust your father.” And he feels the boy’s shoulders straighten, feels him stand more fully erect. “We’ve got to take care of Moira,” Will says. “Feed her well and help her get strong. Can you help me with that?”

“Yessir. I will, Mist’ Will.” And he giggles, Will assumes, from the proliferation of all those *wills*. Seemingly just for fun he says it again, more sing-songy this time: “I will, Mist’ Will.”

“Thank you, Pluto.” Will palms the top of the boy’s head, ruffles the hair that is too short to be ruffled. He says, “You’re a good man.”

Pluto nods again but says nothing, no doubt aiming for stolid masculine agreement, and Will looks down at the top of his razored head, up at the waifish Moira whose hair is also shorn, down again at Pluto, then up once more at the girl in the pumpkin patch. Pluto leans into Will’s side. Moira bends to pluck a stubborn root she couldn’t get a hold of with her toes. She nibbles the weed she pulled, and Will hopes it’s not toxic, that the dangerous plants here are the same as those in her homeland, and he shoos Pluto, swats him on the backside, tells him to be a gentleman and go help and to make sure she doesn’t eat anything that’s bad for her. It occurs to Will, watching them work side by side, that if Moira does indeed survive—if she makes it to spring and then some, grows stronger and lives for years instead of months—she might prove to be additionally useful by providing an outlet for some of Pluto’s more difficult-to-suppress adolescent urges. Bethia would approve no doubt, and Abraham, Will thinks, will welcome a grandchild, and, from what he can tell, Moira even seems to like the boy. Such an arrangement would also keep Pluto from stealing off the island, seeking out an Indian girl and getting himself killed, or worse. Will is fairly certain that nothing could



possibly be done to incite the Yamasee War a decade ahead of schedule—there are, after all, myriad contributing factors to consider—but he is also loathe to take any chances, at least not until the island is better fortified and his overseas fortunes are secured. For Pluto, Moira will thus have to suffice.

*So, you're a pimp now too?*

*I wasn't planning on holding her down or paying her, but have it as you will. Man can't live by wet dream alone. That's something, Liam, that you of all people ought to know.*

The voice inside his head goes quiet, and Will sees Moira spin around, gesture widely at the sky, then trip over a green cabbage. She would surely have fallen, and Will jumps, reaching out with both hands from a futile distance, but Pluto grabs her elbow and steadies her. His smallish hand circles her arm entirely, and he scolds her, finger wagging in his best imitation of Bethia, until Moira reaches out to touch his mouth and stop it from moving. A moment later she is singing again, making those strange towering sounds that seem altogether too large to be coming out of her fawnlike body, and Pluto follows in her wake, not paying half so much attention to the blade of his hoe as he does to Moira's tottering progress through the vegetables. Will starts to correct him out of habit, has his mouth open to reprove Pluto to watch what he's doing, but then he changes his mind. Moira, Will decides, is well worth the loss of a pumpkin or two's roots, and if Pluto comes to notice while observing her the delicate bows of her unplumped calves or the potential for softness in her malnourished hips, so much the better.

*They will make a good match, he thinks to himself, one day soon. She will live; after she's strong, and he nods.*

Will spends the afternoon wrist deep in mortar, working on the floodgate for the rice fields' central canal. On the mainland, past the maize and the yam and barley fields, where the marshland prone to excessive storm-surge flooding gives way to an increased number of freshwater creeks and tributaries, this is the promised land: where the rice will grow. While Quash and Scipio tended the new-planted crops, Will and Jem and Abraham spent the summer months clearing trees, uprooting stumps, strapping all three of themselves into the harness when necessary—when the mules slipped, unable to get their footing in the wet shifting earth despite the hoof-covering iron boots Liam directed him to have forged, inciting first scorn then mocking agreement from the most skilled of the Charles Towne blacksmiths—and, more often than not, it was Abraham who provided the last surge of tendon- and bone-straining force before the roots stretched, gasped, and finally released. Only one such stump resisted all attempts at extraction—from shovels, to mules, to pulleys, to Abraham himself—but, according to Liam, this commonly occurs and will not be overly problematic. He has also read that such immovable behemoths are to be called “Joe Fullers,” although the history books remain silent as to why.

He has assisted in building gates before. The cornfield, for instance, would be under eight or ten inches of water if the land hadn't been reclaimed and drained with a walled dike. But the mechanism needed for the rice fields is altogether another species of beast. This is not about reclaiming the land, keeping it high and dry for good. This is about reshaping it, harnessing the available water and storing it, nurturing it, holding it in reserve until it's needed and can be unleashed, washing over the sensitive rice plants at key points during their complex development, only to be withdrawn a week or a day later when its presence is no longer advantageous. At this time, the process must then be

reversed—the land redrained, the water restored, and it must wait again to be called forth cyclically, indefinitely, immediately, responding to the simple raising or lowering of a lever. Standard practice among Will’s contemporaries is to use plug trunks: a section of cypress log hollowed from top to bottom, drilled out in a tapering funnel, then buried as deep as necessary in a creek bed; when the field needs to be dry, the log is corked; when more water is desired, the cork is popped. This, Will thinks, is the agricultural equivalent of tapping a beer keg, and he will not have his future livelihood dependent upon the whims of something so primitive and so notoriously prone to failure.

Coastal planters can use tide-controlled gates and work with only the small tracts of storm-vulnerable land for which this method is effective. Or those attempting inland cultivation can bankrupt themselves and max out all of their foreseeable credit buying too many slaves too soon to do too much work by hand. Will himself has settled on a large inland plot and an easily operable floodgate design that is nearly a century ahead of its invention. When construction is complete, brick walls as tall as a single-story building will line the creek bed on either side for more than forty feet. In between, a timber floor will overlie the delicate intersection of the dikes—shielding them from erosion caused by wind and rain—all but for a diamond-shaped void in the center where the gate is to be positioned. Standing over this hole, Will will be able to look down and see the wooden blockade separating the wet from the dry. The redirected water will be backlogged, waiting impatient and hungry on the creek side, and when the time is right, at a nod from Moira, he will engage the lever and flood the fields.

He works, scooping on and smoothing trowels full of mortar, fashioning the left creek-side wall until his arms feel equally as heavy when he’s holding a brick as when he

isn't. The bricks themselves are leftover from the expansion of the main house, and this continuity appeals to him, makes him feel as though everything constructed of this orange-umber material is distinctively his—better than any brand or stamp of ownership because it's omnipresent and can't be erased. He enhances this effect by recreating the pattern here in which the bricks were laid for the house: alternating wholes and halves by row, making sure the joints line up evenly and that each half brick sits squarely in the center of the whole one atop of which it is placed. He starts at one side, moves to the other, then fills toward the center so the symmetry can be maintained. *“Strong men build straight walls, Willy-o. Let it slant askew, you might as well be French.”*

At supper that night he eats enough for two men, and he invites Moira to join him and his mama so that he can count each bite she devours, pressing even more upon her when her pace begins to slacken. His mama nibbles a drumstick and all but ignores Bethia's succotash, while Will and Moira together polish off bowl after bowl of the corn-pea-bacon-fat mixture along with the better part of two good-sized fryers. Moira ends up with smeared chicken grease all over her face and a pile of sucked-clean bones before her, and when she looks up at Will, grinning her fleshless, cheekless grin, he cannot decide whether he finds her angelic or bestial. And he thinks then of Bethia, sitting astride his lap, ripping out chunks of his hair, reminding him that she is a man-scalping cannibal, that her father was half Carib and that she comes from the same line of warriors purported to have eaten the Italian explorer Giovanni da Verrazzano back in the mid sixteenth century. Will imagines the tall, brown nearly-naked bodies as if they were figures straight out of a Gauguin painting—adorned with strings of beads and puka shells, dancing and coupling and sickening and dying under a neon tropical sun. They eat fruit

and shellfish and various other dolphin-safe products and give for all the world the impression of untouched bucolic innocence, right up until the day when they smile and reveal the fact that overnight their teeth have been filed into points. And if this is the last thing Verrazzano knew before the spears and butchering and the postmortem island-spiced cook pot, Will thinks it might not have been such a bad way to go, that he himself would turn up his throat to the blade with pleasure, and he would close his eyes hoping that a woman would consume him first.

## CHAPTER VII

### THAT DIDN'T JUST REALLY HAPPEN, DID IT?

Cici woke again and rose before me, and I told myself I didn't mind, that it didn't matter. I had touched her misshaped ribs and hit her face, and she forgave me for whatever her rash, brave, foolhardy reasons were—which, I decided, likely included but were not limited to a mix of guilt and self-incrimination resulting from all the chambermaids Cécily had ever slapped, all the newly-arrived-at-court demoiselles she'd ever taunted to the point of tears, perhaps a kitchen boy or two who, distracted from his work by the cut of her gown, earned himself a whipping when he forgot to crank the spit and burnt the grouse. Objectively, I knew this last scenario was better fit to a dank castle in medieval Gaul than it was to late-eighteenth-century Versailles, but I overlooked this discrepancy and retained the example nonetheless. Anachronisms have never bothered me much and France, after all, falls outside my geographic realm of knowledge.

Since I already had my evidence, there was no reason for me then to watch her sleep, to hear what Cécily might say, to wait with baited breath for some inexplicable substantiating mark to blossom upon her ever-so-lightly-tanned skin. If the opportunity to witness such a thing were ever granted to me, I knew I would pounce on it, miserly hoard the results, retain whatever bits of proof ensued as added insurance against my tendency to doubt everything. In lieu of this moment of firsthand discovery, however, I had my empirically and painfully collected data—the salt I'd licked from her skin, the scent of

rosemary in her hair, the words I heard her speak, and the shape of her I'd felt as well as seen—each piece of which was ample, convincing, far more than I'd ever had before.

The hotel room was familiar to me now, so I knew where I was immediately upon waking. I also knew where I was likely to find Cici, and I sat, avoided myself in the mirror across the room, let my eyes drop straight to the white leather armchair underneath it and to one side. She was there, of course, legs crossed, waiting for me. The leavings of day-old makeup were smudged around her eyes and, from what I could see, her dress was sleeveless, a dark shade of magenta, tight on top, fluffy on the bottom. Her hair was piled high atop her head in a great yellow ball of yarn, and her earrings were small, tasteful, but brilliantly reflective. Somehow it all worked together, and I greeted her: “Anna Pavlova, I presume?”

She shrugged, sniffed, turned her head away disdainfully, very French. “I was going for Yvette Chauviré,” she said. “Those Ruskses just think they know about la danse.” She winced, shuddered. “Clod-hopping beet-eaters, the lot of them.”

“I've always admired Pavlova.” I threw aside the sheet, rose onto my knees. “You know that photo of her with the swan? Can't tell where feathers stop and she begins. Very sexy.”

“That's the kind of thing that turns you on?” She arched one of her well-shaped brows to heights the likes of which I'd never previously seen. “A half naked woman twined around a honking goose?”

“Not a goose,” I corrected her, crawling across the bed. “A swan. There's a difference.”

“And a big hulking Russian woman, at that.” She continued as if I’d not spoken. “Beefy all over, with sideburns. A little mustache. Hair on her legs you could make wool with.”

“I don’t think you can actually make wool.” I’d reached the foot of the bed, swung my legs around to sit facing her. “It grows. It just is.”

She made a tssking sound, asked, “What kind of historian are you, anyway, to not know about wool-making? Different wools comes from the fur of different animals.” She ticked the options off on her fingers, said, “There’s sheep, of course, and goats. Angora comes from rabbits. And there are certain kinds of camels—you’ve heard of camelhair, I’m sure. Even a muskox—”

“You seem to know a lot about it.” I couldn’t help but laugh.

She shrugged again, said, “Madame is a great fan of textiles. And it gets cold in Paris in the winter. She can’t wear muslin all year round. She’d freeze.”

“And you?” I leaned forward, reached out to touch her leg at the ankle.

“What about me?”

“What do you wear in the winter, in France, as a lady of Versailles?” Her shoes were flats with stretchy straps across the top, easily removable.

“Not much,” she said.

“Do tell.” She’d repainted her toenails at some point. Instead of the orangey shade I’d applied two nights before, they were blue and sparkly with bits of green confetti mixed in.

“Sometimes I don’t wear anything except a goose.”

“A swan, you mean.”



“No, no. Mine’s a goose. We can Google-search later for the painting, and I’ll prove it to you.” She pointed her bare toes, stretched, said, “And then I have these stockings—”

“Knit from the leg hair of female Russian peasants?”

“Peasants?” She jerked her leg out of my reach, pressed an affronted hand to her chest. “You think I would wear the body hair of peasants?”

“Of course not,” I soothed, and sank down to kneel before her. “I do apologize. The leg hair of Catherine the Great? Or Princess Anastasia? How about Rasputin? He was the mad monk, right? Or is it the black monk?” She cocked her head and looked like she might offer to coach me, as if I were an actor who’d suddenly forgotten his lines. “I’m sorry,” I confessed, “but my knowledge of Russian history is total shit.” In grad school I had, of course, focused primarily on the American South, and my secondary field was Atlantic Europe, specializing in the dominance of England, France, and Spain in the colonial Caribbean. The French Revolution had been especially important in my studies because it kicked off a whole chain of events in Haiti, à la Toussaint Louverture. I told Cici, “Everything I know about Russia I got from the History Channel.” I shrugged. “And they favor the Romanovs.”

She laughed her hugely baroque gold-plated laugh and eased forward in the chair, tipped herself over bit by frothy bit until she’d joined me on the floor. “Just to clarify,” she touched my face, “you’re telling me there’s something—Wait, this makes two things. There are *two things* that you don’t know absolutely everything about?”

“Russia is my Kryptonite.” I added, “That and, apparently, the history of wool.”

“In that case”—she shoved against my shoulders, knocked me flat onto the carpet—“I take it all back.” She crawled on top of me, and that skirt was scratchy as hell. “I am not a lady in waiting to Marie Antoinette. I am Anna Pavlova, the greatest Russian prima ballerina of all time.” I found it amusing that she didn’t drop the *Russian* modifier. “And you can’t quiz me, or weigh the things I say, or stare at me, just waiting for me to slip up. Because I am from Russia, and you don’t know jack about my people.”

It made me sad when she said this, made me feel as though I’d been cruel to her, prodding and deliberating and examining her like a pink-eyed lab rat when she herself hadn’t subjected me to anything approaching an equal level of scrutiny. But she was bare beneath her dress, and I didn’t know how she could stand having that fabric against her skin. I also didn’t have the presence of mind to apologize, to make up some inevitably deficient excuse for treating her like an anthropological case study—an excuse she would no doubt accept, smiling in that strangely mothering way of hers, as if to say, *I know you are impossible, beyond awful in more ways than I could ever count, but I know those ways because your ways are also mine; I knew them long before you did, and I swear it can get better.* Her skirt was on my legs, my stomach, circled around me, and I forgot all about whatever it was I’d wanted to apologize for in the first place. I called her *Anna*, *Anna my Russian swan*, and she used her teeth on my neck and chest and she slipped her arms beneath me, pulled, straining to lift until I caught the hint and sat up. It took me a minute to realize what she was doing, the thing she was after, because her arms were around me, her fingers moving over my crop scars with tracing insistence. These were barely more than butterfly touches, and my cynicism—never deeply buried, even at the best of times—flared up; I started to push her away, to tell her to stop, that she didn’t

need to kiss and stoke my owies and love me whole and, in fact, I would like her less if she tried. Then I felt her nails, the blue-glitter and green-confetti-flecked tearing-in of them, and I yelled into her mouth, relieved to see that she wasn't trying to save me after all. Rather, I grasped, she'd been looking for a bare spot, some smooth and unmarked patch of skin to claim and scar for herself, and I appreciated the sentiment, read this act for what it was: She bared her claws and tunneled deep, and I lost some blood and some insignificant troughs-full of skin, and along the way she helped me say to Will, *Quid pro quo, you sonofabitch; There's more than one type of love bite in the world, and the kind you've picked is the shittiest one of all.*

I didn't make it to the archives until after 10:00. Polynice drove me again, and Cici stayed behind at the hotel for her lunch-time video chat with Sophie, which was apparently a daily ritual, and I asked Polynice in the car—in between sips of the coffee he'd brought—about how long he'd worked for Cici, whether she was his full-time employer, just what his official duties consisted of. “Chauffeur? Body guard? Drug dealer? Personal Shopping assistant?” He refused to comment, of course, admitting when I continued to push him only that he had been the one who bought the new clothes Cici seemed hell bent on providing me with. (That days' selection consisted of a pair of grey-striped seersucker pants that I'd liked fine until I flipped them around and discovered small red lobsters embroidered on both rear pockets. To cover them up I left my shirt untucked—dark orange, breathable linen, exactly broad enough across the shoulders—and Cici lifted a brow when she saw me but said nothing, then she wordlessly tossed me a new pair of boat shoes that clashed trendily with the rest of what she'd given me to wear.)

I felt as if I knew Polynice well enough by then to joke. “So you just have an impeccable fashion sense,” I asked, “and a keen eye for men’s sizes?” He took this as I’d hoped he would—good humoredly—and explained to me that he’d worked in his father’s Bridgetown tailoring shop growing up. He’d learnt, he said, by the time he was fifteen, that the better he got at guessing sizes by sight, the fewer rich men he had to kneel down in front of, shifting their junk around while he measured their inseams as gingerly as possible. “You,” he said, “were no problem at all. About my height, a little trimmer all over. Waistline easy to see because you had that dumb ass red jacket tied around you the first day I picked you and Miss Cici up at the airport.” I mumbled something about having had an accident during the flight, hinted that a bloody mary may have been involved, and Polynice laughed, said, “Whatever, man. Your crotch, your business.” Then, while cutting off a car to turn left into the archive’s parking lot: “Just one of the many mottos by which I’ve tried to live my life.”

Doug was already hard at work when Penny, clad in another loose-fitting pantsuit, led me through the network of hallways leading back to the cell where our research materials were being stored. She knocked for a good three minutes before Doug answered the door, and when it finally swung inward, he looked impatient, frazzled, wearing his aqua dust mask with a yellow pencil tucked behind one freckled ear and his noise-cancelling headphones draped around his neck. He greeted me politely enough, nodded a *good morning* before he stepped back and waved me in, but I could tell I’d angered him, perhaps even hurt his feelings by leaving early the day before. I apologized, told him there’d been an emergency, that my girlfriend’s daughter—“not mine,” I emphasized—back in the states was sick—“not seriously”—and missing her mother, which made my

girlfriend upset, made her feel guilty for not being there with her, and she—“my girlfriend”—had briefly wanted to fly home, but I had ultimately, thankfully, been able to talk her into staying. “You know how these things go, I’m sure.” I shrugged, winked conspiratorially, and Doug lit up like he’d been first picked for kickball. “Yeah,” he said, “women,” and I knew that any archival disregard on my part had been forgiven.

Not surprisingly—because that’s the way these hunts go—we found nothing that day. In eight hours I made it through three shoulder-high stacks of document boxes. With eleven locked and fully-stuffed boxes to a tower, this put my daily total at thirty-three and my complete two-day tally up at forty-five. Doug contributed nine boxes that second day and three the day before, which added up to fifty-seven altogether. So, one hundred and thirty-nine total boxes minus the fifty-seven we’d made it through thus far—that left us with eighty-two boxes in which the evidence I sought might still be lurking. Eighty-two boxes remaining, divided by the two days I had left in Barbados, came out to forty-one boxes a day, at least thirty of which I figured would be my doing while the remaining ten or eleven per day would fall to Doug. It was doable. We would make it—at least cursorily—through them all. Of necessity my perusal technique had diminished to skimming with my eyes mostly unfocused, dragging line by line down the length of the document page and searching for only those key words which, for me, portended meaning: *Brown Bay, Abraham, Phibbi, May, Scipio, Joe, Cujo, Ayres, Elizabeth*. There were plenty of Joes, lots of Bays being referenced, a handful of Elizabeths, even one or two Abrahams, biblical slaves’ names being as popular as they were. None of these, however, were the ones for whom I was searching; none of them were mine, were Will’s; and thus none would provide me with that single sheet of paper I needed to have, to hold

in my hands and to give over to Bram and Jamie, the one sheet of paper that would enable me to say: *I told you I was telling the truth, that I am not insane. I really was there. And, look—I would point—so were both of you. And we're all three of us still there, all together, even now.*

That is a lie, of course, a fantasy. I knew there was no single sheet of paper in existence that would enable me to do all that. For one reason, Jamie, Jem, whomever—he didn't come over from Ireland until more than fifteen years after Will's family had already settled on the island. The paperwork for his term of indenture, if it existed anywhere, was buried, lost forever in the bowels of some underfunded small-town archive thirty miles north or south or inland of Charleston, doubtless hiding inside the same box with the answer to the question of where the Carolina-gold rice seeds came from anyway. From Africa? Madagascar? Smuggled up the coast from Spanish Florida? Or, least romantically of all, imported neatly and legally in the cargo hold of an English ship? Some things are just lost and cannot be recovered. I knew that. Better than anyone else on earth, I'd be willing to bet, I was intimately acquainted with the holes in the paper trail, the gaping voids in the historical record, the absence of things that I knew, 100 percent *knew*, had to exist because I—because we—put them there. Only, they were just gone. So if I could find one unpublished thing, just one impossible there's-no-conceivable-way-on-earth-you-could-possibly-have-known-that thing, then there was hope. I wasn't even sure what for. Credibility, of course, and vindication for my right to be taken seriously, to be regarded with faith and with trust and with compassion, but it had to be more than just that.

Will was right, you see. I had always been jealous of him, only not for any of the reasons he liked to believe. It was undeniable that as a young white Christian land-owning man in a developing territory with unique insight into a burgeoning and immensely profitable industry, he epitomized the concept of being in the right place at the right time. Far beyond having the inside scoop, he knew the Powerball numbers; he knew which horse to bet on and the basket inside which he ought to place each and every last one of his eggs. If all went according to plan, there was no reason to doubt that within five years, ten at the utmost, he would be an inconceivably wealthy and powerful figure in the southern half of the Carolina colony. And he'd done a great deal, moreover, to hedge his bets, to ensure that things *did go* according to plan, first by using all that I knew to design the placement of his fields and the construction of his technologically advanced dike system, and secondly by obtaining Moira, by exploiting his knowledge of the area in West Africa near modern-day Mali where rice had been grown for centuries and all but special-ordering via Henry Brisbane a slave from this region; true, he'd been expecting a man and not a sickly teenage girl, but Moira would do just as well—if she could be kept alive—and beggars cannot be choosers. Will had all of these things going for him and, barring some unforeseen and unrecorded environmental disaster, he would likely live out his days as a king in the very small country of his island plantation. I loved the land, loved the house, every last symmetrical orange-brick inch of it. I loved it so much that I had rebuilt it and orchestrated a way to live there always while eking out a living as a highly qualified plantation tour guide. (I really wasn't much of a scholar anyway; that was Bram's department.) And though I had never wanted—nor did I expect that I ever would want—to live anywhere else, the conditions under which Will lived there did not

appeal to me in the least. He could keep his power and all the implicit paternalistic dominance that was evident in his role on the island despite the fact that not one of his slaves had ever called him *Master*. I wanted his home but not his life and, so help me, I wanted Bethia. Not her body; Will could keep that. I knew every inch of her, and she was resiliently, achingly lovely, but if Will never again summoned her to his bed, that would be just fine with me. I would prefer it that way. I was, however, jealous of her belief in him. Will told her about me when she was eight years old, when he was fifteen and in desperate need of a confidante after the smallpox-caused death of Henry Brisbane II, and Bethia believed him even though she had no good reason to do so; then she continued to believe him afterward, even when she was twelve and he was eighteen and he took her as his mistress and he was beaten for it and she treated his wounds; she loved him irrationally and unconditionally when reason, when sound logic dictated she ought really to hate him more than she hated anyone else in the world; she knew and she believed and she forgave him because of it. That, I thought, was the only thing Will had that I didn't that was at all worthy of being coveted.

At 6:00 Polynice and Cici picked me up at the archives, and we drove eastward across the island again, passed the ragged wicker crosses on the side of Highway Number Four, and returned to St. John's Parish, to Cici's private beach. Polynice left us, and Cici wore a skirted bikini—red with large white polka dots—and I swam naked in the breaking waves until the sun was fully set and Cici forced me in, worried, she said, that I'd grow tired or develop a cramp and get caught up in the undertow. She rubbed my hair dry with a terrycloth towel then combed it into a neat rubber-banded queue. I let her because her hands on my scalp felt good. The marks she'd left on my back that morning



were stinging from sand and saltwater, and I teased her about this, called her a cougar. She pretended this hurt her feelings, pouted, said that she wasn't all that much older than me and, besides, she actually wore very little animal print. Having seen her in only that one leopard-spotted cardigan—the one she was wearing on the airplane the day we met—I couldn't argue with this, so I changed the subject, partly because I wanted to gain something, to atone for my fruitless day in the archives, and partly because I thought after our long swim that she might be weary, relaxed, that her guard might be down.

I asked her what she'd done the night before.

"You know very well." She blew me a mocking kiss. "You were there, after all. But I can refresh your memory, tell you about it, if you're in the mood to talk dirty."

I told her that's not what I meant, as I suspected she already knew. I wanted to hear about what she'd done in France, in Paris, at Versailles, with Madame.

"Please, Liam." Her fingers were twisted together, thin and light blue in the moonlight reflected off the white-capped Caribbean sea. "I'd really rather not."

I asked her if the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen had been drafted yet, if the Tennis Court Oath had been signed, if the Bastille had been stormed, if the impoverished women of the city already had or if they had yet to organize their bloodless march on the palace, carrying pitchforks and demanding—no longer begging—for bread.

"Liam," Cici repeated, "please," and I thought of Erin pressed flat into Henry Brisbane's reproduction mattress; she was pretty too, and she'd appealed to me with doleful rapidly-blinking eyes, but I hadn't let her off the hook right away either.

What about Robespierre, I wanted to know; had he emerged yet as a player in the game? How deep into The Terror had Cécily thus far lived to see? Had the monasteries

been stripped? Had the briefly attempted constitutional monarchy already failed? Was the king even still alive, or had she, Cici—Cécily—had she held her Madame when she wept over that death as well? Did it remind her of the time when Princess Sophie died? Did it make her feel special, make her feel needed and important to have the most famous of the French Bourbon Queens crying on her shoulder and clinging to her for strength?

Cici stood. She had nothing on but her bikini. Her skin looked vaguely lavender, and I thought that ruffled skirt really was too young for her, too girlish, and that it advertised too overtly the oddly triangular shape of her torso. “I don’t understand why you’re being so mean to me,” she said, “why you’re being so hateful. Did I do something wrong? Did I fail one of your tests?”

I stood too, and I wished I weren’t bare-ass naked, but reaching for a towel, I thought, would only make me look bashful, make me look weak. I accused her, jabbing a finger at her nose, but I was careful not to touch: “You won’t tell me anything.”

A minute earlier I’d thought she might cry; instead she got angry. She bruised my breastbone where she poked me in return, which was especially impressive because she had to reach up so far to do it. “I’ve told you more than I’ve ever told anyone before in my life. *Ever.*” She stabbed me again with her finger. “I’ve told you more than I told my husband in the decade we were married, and this is only the third day I’ve known you, Liam.” She repeated this with great emphasis, digging her finger in more with each word: “*The third day.*” She asked, “Am I supposed to bare my soul just because you asked? Lay down naked before you and show you all my scars?”

I knew she was speaking metaphorically, but, even so, this phrasing struck me as ironic. “Ah, actually you’ve done exactly that,” I pointed out. “I’ve seen”—I pretended to

mull it over, took a moment to glance at various parts of her body and to quietly count—  
“It all. Yes, I’m quite certain that I’ve seen everything you have to offer.”

“You jackass,” she said. Her nail took a bite from my chest, and I braced myself with pleasure for the blow that I was sure was about to land on my cheek. But then she was laughing, and it was unlike anything I’d heard coming out of her thus far. Waves were crashing against the breaking line of the coral reef, and I bet tectonic plates could have moved, volcanoes could have erupted, a cannon might have gone off, and I still would’ve been able to hear the sounds rolling out of her throat. “Too far, Liam dear.” She was gasping, bent over; she could barely speak. “Too much.” She hooted twice more, then seemed to gain control of herself. She said, “I’m sure you pride yourself on having that lothario act down cold.” And she took a step back to mimic me, to look over my naked body from point to point, then she glanced at my crotch and let her eyes pop wide. “But really—and I mean this as a compliment, c’est vrai, I truly do—You wouldn’t last one day at court without some eighty-year-old marquise making you her plaything. Your ulterior motives, they’re just right there, right under the surface for anyone to see. A fifteen-year-old girl fresh out of her convent school would’ve known you were up to something.”

I shrugged, thought about it, decided she was probably right. Will may have been tutored by his mama in the finer points of gentlemanly manipulation, but he was a country bumpkin at heart, a provincial hog farmer’s son, no matter how well-read that hog farmer might have been. And I was an academic—in training and experience, if not in temperament. Ten years’ worth of higher education and one night stands hardly put me on the same level with a twenty-year veteran of the absolutist French court. I realized then

that I was far from being the biggest baddest thing Cici had come up against, and I realized too that I liked that about her.

Partially to save face through self-deprecation and partially just to make her laugh again, to see if it could possibly get any louder, I continued the charade. I tried to saunter as well as I could with only a foot or two between us. I closed that space, put on my best Elvis lip-curl and asked, “If you’re so smart, mamoiselle, then what was I up to?”

“You really are an idiot.” She plopped down in the sand, then reached up and pulled a bit of my leg hair. I saw a flash of color and almost swore out loud, but I got the hint, sat down beside her, rubbed my thigh, and I shut up. She drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. Her hair was a half-dry salty mass down her back and flecks of sand were stuck to her all over, showing up like glitter against her light-reflective skin. “Why’d you want to make me mad?” she asked.

I answered her truthfully, said, “Mad or sad. It didn’t matter which. And to see what you would do, what I could get you to say.”

She snorted, and I feared for all of my exposed body hair, but the dreaded pubic tug never came. “I see,” she said. “Operating on the flawed principle that people slip up when they’re upset? They slip up, or they blurt something out that they never would otherwise, and they tell the truth in one way or another?”

“Something like that.” I felt like a shit.

“What do you want to know, Liam? Just ask me, and I’ll answer if I can.”

There was only one question to ask. “Are you for real?” And I left the words unspoken but hanging like spirits in the air between us: *Please, please, if you have a soul, if you have any mercy in you at all, please don’t lie to me.*

“What do you think?” And here was a failed attempt at nonchalance, as betrayed by the way that her nails—painted blue, nearly black in the moonlight—were embedded so deeply in the minimal flesh of her calves that only a dark stripe of paint remained visible at the cuticle.

I confessed: “I’m afraid you are.”

Then came her barking seal cough laugh, which I knew well by then, and she said, “I’m afraid of that too.”

*To hell with it*, I decided. *Enough. Enough of this, now. Stop.* She rested her head on my shoulder—more leaned it against my upper arm, really—as she had not done since that first day on the plane, and my instinct was to reach behind her, to pull loose the strings on her bikini top. Two quick tugs and she’d be laughing again, hitting me, and we might topple over in the sand together and roll, collecting grit in all the wettest most unpleasant spots, until eventually there’s the sound of tires on gravel and headlights flash, beckon, and we shift sitting carefully on a joint towel in Polynice’s over-air conditioned backseat, trying not to slide around too much as the towel skates frictionless on leather interior, and Polynice glances up in the rearview, catches my eye, nods, then looks respectfully away when Cici begins to toy with the inseam of my hastily donned swim trunks—navy blue, mesh lined with a white stripe down the side—and we cross our arms, sit innocently, but behind the cover of our elbows I’m touching her breast, and I wash her rosemary scented hair shampoo between my hands and lavender bath oil, but our hotel room has only a shower, no tub, no matter, standing will do just as well, and then a dry towel, cold rum, warm bed, more Cici, and in the morning hot coffee in the car with

Polynice. It was a nice play of events, I thought; if it were on the menu I would take it, any day.

Putting an arm around Cici was like hugging a very narrow barrel, one with all its staves in need of recaulking, and even then nothing liquid or with miniscule parts could be stored on the inside. Everything would spill, be lost, like sugar fallen through the cracks in Will's dining room floor. (Mine was better laid with more professionally sealed joints, as I hired a period-trained carpenter and didn't impress a sixty-year-old half-blind slave, forcing him to take on even more labor than normal.) The tide was going out, and we watched the glossy line of wet sand retreat and neither one of us said a word until a long time later when a barely visible wedge of quick-moving light dropped out of the sky and plunged noiselessly into the sea.

"What was that?" I asked Cici. Some kind of bird, I assumed, but I was unfamiliar with the islands' species, and the few names Will did recall had doubtless not stuck over the centuries. The whores' bill, for instance—named for both its color and its predilection for the only sweetest nectar—was a local colloquialism that I would bet had long since fallen from use.

"Night heron." Cici said, "I didn't see its head; either a black or a yellow." Then, "Wait." She pointed, her arm a thin blur in my peripheral vision, and an instant later the bird shot back out of the water. "He missed." She sounded disappointed, and the failed hunter didn't take to the skies, readying itself to try again, but rather lurched through the air a few inches or a foot above the waves and all but crashed into the part of the shore where the tide still surged in with its reaching white-edged tendrils. "He's not a very good diver," Cici observed, and the bird shook itself, more doglike than avian, then began

hopping about, pecking the sand, jerking down with its shoulders and head as if it were playing whac-a-mole. I felt her body move, expelling air as if she were laughing, but no sound came out. “Maybe he’ll have better luck with the crabs,” she said.

“Fingers crossed.” I felt bad for the clumsy thing; I thought I knew how it must feel. “You like birds, don’t you?” This seemed harmless enough, a safe question to ask after all my previous attempted invasions, and I also remembered the spoonbill on the side of Highway Number Four, how she’d all but mourned for it, worried that it was injured and would likely starve, stranded inland so far from the sea.

“Cécily keeps them.” Her mouth wasn’t far from my ear—the nearest sound against the receding layers of surf, wind, breaking waves, occasional cars passing on the adjacent beachside road. “There was a fad,” she said, “five, maybe six years ago, something like that. It only lasted a month or two, just through one cycle of parties. But Léonard—Madame’s hair dresser,” she reminded me, “he insisted she let him style a birdcage into her hair. He pinned it to her scalp, surrounded the whole thing with braids and roses, left it so you could see the door in front and just a bit of the cage showing all around.” She’d transferred her hand to my knee some time before, but now for the first time I could feel her nails. “He put two warblers on the inside, small yellow things with blue wings, shipped over from Haiti. Madame said they made an awful sound, that she could hear them pecking on the floor of the cage, that she worried about them breaking through, getting at her head.” I felt her shudder, seem to stop breathing for a moment, then begin again. “As soon as it caught on,” she said, “it fell out of style. But by then every lady at court had her own collection of songbirds and finches and robins, a set of them to match every outfit.”

“Even you?” I was sorry to interrupt but, for the first time, I felt sincerely curious rather than merely nosy.

“A pair of chickadees,” she admitted. “I only wore them the once. Then I bought a bigger cage and kept them for pets.”

“You kept the others as pets too?” I guessed. “When no one wanted them anymore?”

“Madame had this plan,” she said. “We’d set them free. We’d all gather in the garden and make a party of it. She’d count down from ten, and at the count of one, everyone would open their cage. It would be pretty, she thought. Like fireworks but with birds.”

“You didn’t want to let them go?” I wasn’t sure I understood.

“We were at Versailles.”

“And?”

“It’s very close to Paris.”

“Of course. But I don’t—”

“The people were so hungry.” She sounded further away then. “And the boys in the city, they have slings, and stones.” I saw her hand move, saw it raise to rub a spot on her brow, high on her temple, beneath her hair. And of all the things I’ve done, I’ve only ever hit myself with my sling. Five stitches and a scolding and a scar and no lasting damage to either myself or to anyone else; I was suddenly very grateful for that. “Some of them would have surely flown that way.” She said, “And those kinds of birds—none of them fly very high. I thought—”



“You thought every starving family in Paris that night would feast on song-bird pot pie?”

She snorted, amused, I thought, in spite of herself. “Something like that,” she said.

“And you saved them?”

“I—I made quite a child of myself, really. Sophie—my Sophie,” she clarified. “She went through a phase when she was prone to tantrums. I modeled myself after her. I went to Madame and I threw myself down on the floor. I wept and I begged her not to set the birds free. I told her I loved them, that I’d be so sad without them I’d surely die.” She felt me laugh. I felt her shrug. She said, “With Madame, a little drama can go a long way. So long as she’s in the right mood.”

“And what mood is that?”

“Benevolence,” she said; this wasn’t a mood, but I didn’t correct her. And she added, “It’s her favorite virtue.”

“I’ve often found it to be overrated.” It was time, I thought, to change the subject. “As for myself,” I said, “I’ve always been a great proponent of chastity.”

“Haha,” she said.

Not even a real laugh. I’d have to try harder. “In the Augustinian sense, of course,” I explained. “St. Augustine of Hippo, you know, he said—”

“God grant me chastity and constancy,” she broke in, “but do not grant it to me yet.”

“I thought you might know that one.” I tightened my arm around her, but then I felt the move was a little too proud-papa-esque, and I slackened my hold, said, “Any

woman who can quote Veronica Lake must be at least moderately well versed in Augustinian philosophy.”

“You quoted Veronica Lake,” she reminded me. “I quoted Alan Ladd.”

“Touché.”

“Anyway,” she said, “there’s often not a lot to do, in between parties, between state functions, taking tea.” Then she added unnecessarily, “At Versailles. Cécily—I, we read a lot.”

“Got themselves a library there, do they?”

And there was the laugh I’d been digging for. A teaspoon of butter, barely a fleck of gold, but I felt proud of myself anyway. “Just a small one,” she said. “It’s hardly worth mentioning.”

“What languages do you read?” And again, I was curious and not nosy. I wanted to learn about her rather than to uncover enough either to prove or disprove her, and she seemed to sense the difference.

“French, of course. And Latin, English, German.” Then, a bit wistfully: “Madame likes for me to read to her in German. She’s Austrian, you know, from Vienna.”

*Jesus*—“Yes. I know. L’Autrichienne.”—And I realized that she was not only more cultured than me, more sophisticated, and a superior flirt, she was likely far smarter than me as well, PhD notwithstanding.

“Please don’t call her that.”

“The Austrian woman?” I asked, “Is it an insult?” Will knew most of Bethia’s frequently-used sayings—his favorite being *Je te veux*—enough to taunt Jem and to speak

with Bethia in the present tense about everyday items like socks and cheese and rum, but the subtleties of the language were generally lost on us both.

A small cough. “Break it down,” she directed.

I got it right away then. L'Autrichienne. *The Austrian woman*. L'autre chienne. *The other bitch*. “Oh,” I said. “I’m sorry.” It was a simple play on words, not very clever at all, obviously preceding the more refined journalistic libel of a Jacques Hébert or a Camille Desmoulins, and Will wanted me to ask her, *Who was the first bitch?*

“She says it’s no matter, that it’s just the name of her country”—and the staves of her ribs briefly expanded, then reduced, drew back together—“but I can tell that it hurts her a great deal.”

“Of course it does.” The barrel of her, I feared it was leaking, that I’d broken it, caved in the sides. “It’s only natural that something like that would hurt her.”

Then she whooped, pushed away from me, and she was on her feet jumping up and down in her polka dot bikini, as excited as a child, pointing down the beach and further out into the surf. “He got one,” she said. “Liam, he’s got one.” I followed the line of her arm, thought of a pale unbaked baguette, then I saw the silhouette of the night heron standing ankle deep in sea foam, head thrown back as he gulped down some type of small leg-thrashing crustacean.

“Poor crab.” I stood up as well, brushed the sand off my butt.

“I don’t feel bad for him.” Cici’s tone was matter of fact. She folded her arms across her middle, leaned into my side. I wondered if she were cold. “That bird is the worst hunter I’ve ever seen. Anything that couldn’t get away from him deserves to die. Besides,” she added, “crabs aren’t pretty. Birds are.”

“Not all of them.” I said. “Have you ever seen a white ibis? They look like the bastard lovechildren of a chicken and a retarded goose.”

That earned me a chuckle—two, perhaps three shot glasses’ worth. “You have those where you live?” she asked. “On your plantation?”

“All over the place.” I said, “Like seagulls at a landfill. Squawking, eating, shitting wherever they please. Not quite as many today, at least, as there are back then. Score one point for swamp dredging and deforestation.”

“That’s awful.” She bumped me with her hip. I deflected her with my thigh.

“I’m awful?” I spoke without thinking. “You saved a bunch of songbirds and let dozens of French peasants go hungry.”

She stopped laughing, but she didn’t pull away. “I—Cécily, we try to feel sorry for them, to have compassion.” She paused, all but burrowing into me. “But we know what they’re going to do. It’s hard not to think sometimes, that if one more dies hungry, if there’s one less angry young man with a pike who’ll just die in a riot anyway—maybe that’s not such a bad thing.”

“You know you can’t change anything?” I asked. “Right?” And I turned to face her, grabbed her chin, made her look up so I could see. “That whole butterfly effect thing—It’s just a mathematical theory, Cici. It doesn’t mean you can kill one man and rewrite history.”

“Liam, you’re hurting me.” She tried to pull her face away.

“Charlotte Corday tried it,” I reminded her. “Or will try it. With Marat.” And I didn’t care then that I was being cruel. “It didn’t turn out well for her. Not well at all. And it didn’t change anything anyway. Another man just stepped in to fill his place. It

will always be that way. Not one of us is irreplaceable. There's always another one waiting in the wings who will do the same thing, who will carry on the legacy, and—”

“I know, Liam.” She'd given up trying to break away. She smiled a bit, looked away, then asked, “You think I didn't try—and fail—try and fail to save Sophie?”

I loosened my hold on her chin. I didn't understand. “The Princess? The one who died?”

“Of course.” She shook her head, coughed a barking laugh. “I tried that too. But that's not who I meant. Not Madame's Sophie.” She said, “*My* Sophie. Cécily's Sophie.”

*Jesus.* I couldn't believe I'd never thought of it before. What's on the inside carries through, so, obviously, there was no way she could have been pregnant in one place and not in the other. It wasn't possible. It went against all the rules. So there'd been one conception and two births. *Jesus.* I wanted to sit down. I was not at all well equipped to be having this discussion. I stuttered, groped for words, said, “You mean that she, that you—?”

“She was born with a heart defect. Just a small thing. Something wrong with the mitral valve.” She wasn't looking at me. “It was a simple procedure to fix it. Two days in the hospital here, a little paperwork, and then she was fine. But there....” She shrugged, shook her head. Then she said, “Madame named her Sophie after mine, you know. I asked her to do it. I wanted to have one of her with me always. Then she blamed me for a while. She said the name was cursed, and that I—”

“Hey.” I interrupted, grabbed her shoulders, shook her a bit. “It's just a name. And a pretty name. It didn't cause what happened, and anyway, you couldn't have known—”

“But I did know,” she interrupted. “I read about it. After I asked Madame, but before... and I don’t know if it happened because I knew, or if I knew because it happened, or if—”

“Yeah.” I chaffed her upper arms, tried to smile, but my face felt brittle. “It’s a total mind-fuck, isn’t it? I try not to think about it too much.”

Another cough. “Me too,” she said. “Usually. But then sometimes—”

“Yeah.” I felt choked. “Sometimes.”

And I’ve always resisted playing the paternal role with the women in my life. Just another way, I thought, that I could distance myself from Will, enjoying women while keeping them as unreliant on me as possible, both emotionally and otherwise. But, *The hell with it*, I decided. I gave in, and I folded Cici into the greatest bear hug I could manage, because if you don’t hug a woman who has lost one of her biologically impossible semi-cloned children to a congenital heart defect and who is then made to bear the foreknowledge of a like-named child’s unpreventable death from tuberculosis aggravated by teething pains, then I don’t know who you do hug, ever.

After a long while she pulled away from me, and I asked, “You ready to go home?” Later that seemed incredibly significant to me—the fact that I called our hotel room *home*.

She shook her head, said, “I want one more swim. Just a quick one. I’ve got some sand...” and she did a little hopping dance, raised one leg and shook it. “I’d like to wash it out.”

We swam in the shiny black water, and she took off her bikini bottoms to rinse them, and I didn’t try anything. When she was tired and as clean as possible we called

Polynice, and when he came for us he was wearing tropical-print shorts and a t-shirt instead of his driver's livery, and he asked us if we knew what-the-hell time it was, but he was grinning when he said this, so I thought Cici must pay him well for his flexibility and after-hours driving services. I pounded him on the back, told him I liked his shorts, then I wondered if that meant a similar pair would be showing up in my wardrobe sometime in the next couple days. We made the half-hour drive across the island in near silence, and in our California-king-sized bed that night as I was drifting into oblivion between cool white sheets—when I was part me and part Will and when I had no more control over the things I said than if were drunk, insensible, helpless as a toddler—I turned to Cici then and I asked her what she meant when she said the beach was hers. Did she really own it, or did she just go there so much she'd started to think of it that way, or was it something else entirely?

She didn't answer right away, and I started to think she was asleep, that she'd woken in Cécily's body by then and was already helping her Madame comb her hair or strap on her corset or with some other intimate privy-chamber task. Or I thought that perhaps I'd pushed too hard again, violated her oddly shifting sense of privacy, somehow crossed back over the line she seemed to draw varyingly between prying and a gentleman's rightful concern. "Sleep well," I said, and I touched her hair, which had been towel-dried but was still hugely tangled and damp with salt, and then she shifted, rolled over, began to whisper for no other reason than because it was night, and people whisper at night. She explained to me that she did own the beach in a manner of speaking, albeit temporarily; she'd rented it; she had the paperwork to prove it. It was remote, she said, not near any of the big resorts, and the owner was travelling then, so not using it anyway,

and he was happy to make a few bucks on a strip of sand and water he didn't need for the time being.

*A few bucks*, I thought, *Right*. And I asked, "How long is it yours for?" It had never occurred to me that you could rent a beach.

"A few more weeks," she said, and I could tell she was barely conscious. "Until October sixteenth," and then she was gone, and then she was Cécily.

"That's very specific." I whispered this. I was very nearly asleep myself. I flopped onto my stomach, buried my head beneath two pillows, and then I too was gone, and I was Will.

Will eats breakfast quickly, saying little to his mama. There is fried fish and bread and peas that have been boiled with bacon and smashed to make a kind of porridge, and the tea is hot, abundant and a great deal stronger than he knows his mama likes. She announces her plan to speak with Bethia about it after they are done eating, and Will nods, gives his unsolicited consent, his mouth full of bread with peas scooped on like hummus. It is his fifth slice. Although he would normally intervene and offer to talk with Bethia himself—both to keep the peace between her and his mama and just for the excuse to visit her in the kitchen, where she perspires while she bustles through her work and typically undoes her dress down to the fourth button or more—since she neglected to join him in bed the previous night, even after he sent Pluto to request her attendance, Will wants to avoid her for a while longer, to wait until she comes to him, having realized the error of her ways. This is not because he wants her to apologize, as he knows she won't,



or because he wants to punish her, since he never has, but because there is a scoreboard of small victories in their daytime relationship—as opposed to their nocturnal détente—and Will likes to keep the tally of accrued points weighted heavily in his favor. If she had not laundered all of his good summer shirts at once the week before, leaving him with nothing to wear for two days to breakfast but winter-thick wool and worsted, he would go to her first. But since she had done this on purpose and then laughed about it when he asked—“*Quel est le problème, mon cher? Is it too hot for you in there with your maman?*”—he will wait as long as necessary for her to make the first move toward reconciliation. The longest she has ever held out is five days—after she yanked out a piece of his hair during an argument, and he reached up and removed a strand of hers in kind—so he is not worried about her staying mad at him for even that long. In fact, he cannot even remember what he has done this time to displease her in the first place, ergo he assumes it must not have been all that bad. He may not lament the vast majority of his more serious misdeeds, but he is at least typically aware of their existence.

Once he has kissed his mama’s cheek, excused himself, and changed into his working clothes for the day, Will remembers that he has some unfinished business with Abraham and a certain two-year-old boar—one that should have been hunted down and butchered and sent off to Barbados in half-cured pieces six months ago at the least. But before taking his leave of the civilized side of the island, he devotes a few minutes to hunting down and checking on Moira in order to see if her condition has either noticeably worsened or improved. The first place he goes is the vegetable patch, but he finds its rows of peas and beans and squash unpeopled, the soil dark and freshly turned and wholly devoid of weeds as it has not been since the last time he did it himself, more than

a month before. Moira, he thinks, will perhaps be a good influence on Pluto, causing him to spend less time digging worms and sneaking off to fish and more time completing his chores to both hers and his master's satisfaction.

Remembering something he heard Bethia say about teaching *the girl* to shine silver, he reenters the house, heads toward the dining room, walks stealthy so he can peek in without announcing his presence to Bethia. Even before he eases around the corner with the molded plaster archway where he plans to one day mount sconces—hand-forged iron, not crystal or gold plate—he hears the clinking of flatware and the hummed bars of an old Scotch song that he knows no one sings on the island anymore but his mama. He sets his feet careful on the floor where he knows the wall of the old cabin-fort buttresses it underneath, where the wood is supported and won't resettle or creak. Elizabeth's dress today is white, full skirted, printed with canary flowers blooming off fern colored vines, and this is one of those days, he thinks, when she will stay inside as long as possible, stay in the fine clothes she loves like children but that she only got to wear for the first sixteen years of her life and, more recently, for the last year since the death of her thrifty husband whom Will believes she once loved a great deal but who lost more and more favor in her eyes with each year that passed and he didn't enlarge their herd or experiment with new crops or harvest trees en masse for lumber or—and this was one of her more romantic and nonsensical whims—import grape vines from France in hopes of beginning their own vineyard.

She raises a teaspoon to the light rushing in through a wood-paned window that she has unlatched, thrown open to the day. There's no glass for this one yet, but they eat in here so rarely, taking most of their meals in the breakfast room, that Will has moved

the dining room down to the fifth slot on his priority list for completion—after his mama’s bedroom, his own room, the front hallway, and the parlor. When guests start arriving, he thinks, they will enter through the front door and they will stay for only short visits at first—for rum or tea—before they come expecting a five-course supper, so there will be no need for them to see this room until it is complete and fully furnished. His mama is done with the teaspoon; she exchanges it for a fish fork. She attacks it with her silver cloth and polish, and Will mentally supplies the words for the notes he can hear her humming: *Will ye go into the woods? quo’ Fozie Mozie. Do ye go to slay the wren? quo’ John Rendozie.* Were it not for Liam’s research, Will would have no idea that the wren referred to in his mama’s song was originally Richard II and that the song itself was most likely written in 1381 during the Peasants’ Revolt, when English farmers joked about hunting their child-king down like a game bird and using his no doubt young and tender flesh to feed his hungry subjects. It was only much later that the song moved north into Scotland, where it was reinterpreted as a harmless hunting tune and taught along with his letters to the young William Orton Ayres III sometime in or around the year 1650. Will stays through the third verse, and he is thinking as he watches his mama work that before she ever willingly consents to him selling her flatware for rice seed, she’ll stab him with every fork in the set, sink them tine-deep into any vulnerable bit of skin left exposed during the confrontation. Perhaps he won’t tell her at all, Will decides. He can always just spirit them away in the night, then keep a double-close watch on Bethia in the days and weeks that follow. It is something to think about at least, and he reverses his steps, sticks to the boards set firmly atop the underlying basement wall, manages to back away without being noticed.

Will searches the house quickly, taking special care to look inside the hidden cubbyholes he designed himself, along with Joe's expert help, which Bethia restocks weekly with honey and rum and cheese and bread in case of an unexpected Indian attack. One of these is beneath the parlor floor, another behind a bookshelf in what will one day become Will's study, and a third in a slightly thickened wall between the breakfast room and a more obvious closet. These, he thinks, will be the bread and butter of Liam's house tours—everyone loves a secret passage, after all, even one that leads nowhere—and he has given permission for Liam to assign to these bunkers some heroically utopist and therefore categorically false use. For instance, the scripted narrative might read: *Although the builders of the house kept slaves, this was for appearances' sake alone, and the black and white residents of the island lived alongside each other like family. These three rooms—visible here, here, and another one over there—were used for many years to facilitate the escape of neighboring slaves who were less fortunate in their owners' humanity.* Liam has, of course, rejected what Will sees as an ingenious proposal, countering instead that he will volunteer his own body to demonstrate the brutality of an authentic fifty-lash whipping; Bram can tie him up, hold the scourge, and Liam will give an introductory speech explaining just how the thing was properly done—how much force was applied, the exact moment when an expert would flick his wrist to produce the optimal sting, even how to change angles on the grip so the stripes cross and skin bursts at the junction like an asterisk. In the wake of the ensuing offers and counteroffers, Will and Liam came to a mutually beneficial agreement: He (Liam) will not offer up his body for any such historical reenactment, and he (Will) will never again have Abraham whipped in his life, no matter the severity of his impending misdeeds; this goes double for Pluto.

The so-called Indian cupboards are empty, and Will leaves the house, frustrated, less concerned now with checking on Moira's health and more interested in figuring out where she could possibly have gotten to. He walks on the dirt kitchen-path, then he hides outside the open door, careful to not cast any telltale shadows, but thirty seconds of lurking here is enough for him to ascertain that Bethia is alone in the kitchen, mumbling to herself about cet homme ennuyeux as she alternates between kneading bread and cleaving off shrimps' heads for use in seafood broth. This is an integral ingredient in one of his favorite meals—shrimp soup with cream and rum and a huge amount of butter—and Will wonders if Bethia is preparing to apologize via his taste buds for her irrational prickliness. He hopes so, more because of the soup than for any other reason, and he cuts quickly around the northeast side of the house, at the opposite end from the vegetable patch, where he has already looked to no effect.

Abraham, he knows, is at the smokehouse, and Jem is overseeing the rest of the men at the harvest, so it is with relief that he spots Old Joe sitting atop a sawed-off stump and working on a mangled pile of wood that Will recognizes as the chair he kicked against the breakfast room wall, shattering it, a few days before. Joe responds to Will's greeting with a wave and his gummy smile, and he lays his tools aside, asks his master if there is any way he can be of assistance. Will puts the question to him of whether or not he's seen Moira today, or, for that matter, Pluto.

Joe laughs, waves at his face, says, "You know I've not seen 'em, sir. But I heard 'em a while ago. Canoe going in the water, the boy shouting at her how to paddle—for all the good that will do. That Moira lass, she's got a pretty voice, don't she? For sure, she does. Though, to hear Pluto bawling at her like that, she must paddle even worse than I do."

And Will is in a boat of his own less than a minute later. He cuts hard into the current and shoots across the river, paddling with only his oar's tip and that barely two dozen times. Abraham, he thinks nonsensically, would be proud of him if he'd seen, and the knot Will uses to cursorily fix his canoe to the field-side dock is sloppy, too hastily tied. He'd scold one of his slaves for leaving a boat like that, vulnerable to any shift in the current—and he'd have likely been forced to whip them for such a crime before his father died. He leaves it, runs up the short pier, boots pounding like fists on a coffin lid, and he moves toward the first human sound he hears: his men's voices raised in harmony, bellowing a nineteenth-century sea shanty Will taught Jem years ago (around age fifteen, Liam went through a swashbuckling sea-adventure novel phase) and to which Jem has remained partial ever since. *"Safe and sound at home again. Let the waters roar, Jack."* Corn is almost ready to pick, all around him, taller even than he is, and Will thinks the song is coming from further south. He veers left, running on terra firma between rows, and it was about this ripe, he recalls, when he and Abraham plucked an armload of ears and secreted themselves in the woods for more than a week, hiding from his father. Roast squirrel and campfire corn, and he hears: *"But the best of friends must part, fair or foul the weather. Hand yer flipper for a shake, now a drink together."* Yams; Will changes his mind. It's definitely coming from the yams, and he turns right now, heading inland in the same basic direction as the rice fields. Voices get louder, and he decides he's chosen correctly, but since he's headed the wrong way through the corn, crossing rows instead of moving down them, his progress is slow, and sharp leaves scratch at his face and neck, rip pieces of hair from his queue, cut his palms when he tries to shove them aside. When he finally emerges from the wall of jungle-forest-pine-grannysmith-apple green stalks, he

is waving his arms overhead, shouting, mindless to how he'll alarm his men with his face and hands bleeding, shirt torn, tufts of daffodil yellow silk stuck in his eyebrows and mouth and hair. "*Don't forget yer old shipmate—*" cuts off in midline, and then Jem is speeding toward him through half-harvested yams, hurdling plants, ordering Quash and Scipio to ready themselves, to standby.

"What is it, Will?" Jem's hands are on his shoulders. There is no shit-eating-grin on his face, no *aye-master* mocking lilt to his voice. Under his freckles and potato-digging tan his face is like whitewash, and he asks, "Are we being attacked, then? Indians? The arse-fucking Spanish? Fire? What is it?"

"No," Will gasps, fights to swallow air. "No Indians," he says. "Moira. Have you seen Moira?" And Pluto, he thinks, can go to the devil. If the boy's come up with some feeble-mined idea of running off with his young-lady-love of two days and starting his own maroon colony populated solely with the fruit of his twelve-year-old loins, then he can just stay gone, get scalped by savages, mauled by a wildcat. He can starve to death gnawing on his own tongue, for all Will cares. But for Moira—he'll kill any man necessary, guarantee any unpayable ransom, swap his mama to the leader of a loin-clothed war party if needed. "Moira?" he demands, and he wants to shake Jem, slap his face, pull his nose, do anything to make him respond more quickly.

"Ah...aye." Jem rubs his upper lip. He shakes his head, takes a step back. He waves an arm toward Scipio and Quash to tell them to stand down, that they should return to their work, and he is looking at him, Will thinks, as if he (Will) had just sprouted tits—half curious, half appalled. Will doesn't care; he wants his Moira. "She's with Pluto," Jem says, "fishing, at his stream." He nods inland, in a southwestwardly

direction, not far from the rice fields. “They passed through here together, not too long ago. He said he had your permission, that you wanted Moira to rest, to regain her strength.”

“Did he now?” Shading his eyes with one hand, Will looks up at the woods past the yam field. Mainland trees are different from those on the island—skinnier with more fluffy weak-limbed pines; they can grow singly and not only in tightly-packed copses, since hurricane force winds have been dulled by two layers of barrier islands by the time they reach this place. It is relatively safe here, tame, and Will asks, “Did he say anything else?” referring to Pluto.

“Ah—” Jem pauses to think, dips beneath his hat’s brim for a palmful of grey sweat, then he shakes his hand, flings away grime. He hocks and spits, says, “He seemed excited, jumping about like a puppy. Said Moira was going to show him a trick.”

“How did she tell him that, I wonder?” Will says this more to himself than to Jem, and he is already moving away, not watching where he steps, flattening ready-to-harvest yam plants as he charts a straight course for Pluto’s preferred dry-land fishing spot—a stone-lined bend in a creek that is deeper, more fully stocked and with bigger fish than any other like-sized brook Will has seen either in his time or in Liam’s. He was the one who first brought Pluto there, snuck him away from his work then lied to his father, told Abraham his son was a maestro in the vegetable patch, that he’d planted six rows of beans all by himself in less than three hours. Abraham, who wants nothing more than for Pluto to lead a docile bloodless existence, had beamed.

“Will...Sir!”



Will turns around but doesn't stop. Stepping backward, he trips frequently but keeps going. "What?"

"Everything's well, then?" Jem shouts this, jogging after his master. "It's just the girl you were after? Nothing's amiss?"

"No." Will shrugs, tries to look sheepish. He does like Jem—clownish though he may be—and, what's more, Will needs him to stay on for very modest wages after his indenture is up in the spring. "Nothing's amiss." He smiles reassuringly. "Sorry for the fright."

"Aye, then. Just wanted to be sure." Will is far enough away by now that he can barely hear this, but then comes a bellowed, "All together now boys!" and Jem and Scipio intone as one, "*Long we've tossed on the rolling main. Now we're safe ashore, Jack,*" with Quash's less confident Spanish-inflected voice joining in only on the nonsense refrain of "*faldee raldee raldee raldee rye-eye-doe.*"

Will takes off his boots at the pine forest's edge, knowing from his hunting lessons with Abraham that he can move better, more quietly, without them, and the soles of his feet are like salt-cured ham skins. Nothing short of a razorblade is going to cut through. He thinks of a wraith, a phantom, a ninja, of Abraham as he slips between trees, hedging around the worst beds of pinecones—not because they would hurt him, but because they'd crack and give away his approach. He's not sure what he expects to find when he reaches the creek: Pluto and Moira perched side-by-side on adjoining boulders, holding their sapling fishing rods and waiting in silence for the longed-for bite; Pluto baiting Moira's hook, using this as an excuse to get close enough to smell her all-over female sweetness emphasized by the honey antiseptic daubed on her infected head; the

two of them naked in the streambed, lying still, letting cool water wash over and each looking occasionally in the other's direction, their glances getting increasingly bold; Pluto on top of Moira, holding her down; Moira on top of Pluto, showing him her trick.

Five young loblollies—four of which will die, he knows, their roots choked out, nutrients stolen by the strongest and most dominant—are the last barrier between Will and revelation, and he looks down, makes sure he's putting his foot in a soft-silent spot. He pushes aside the pliable fronds, eases between, steps out on the loamy soil eight, perhaps ten, feet above the creek's edge. He blinks. It takes him twenty seconds or more before he understands what he's seeing.

Moira has pulled the skirt of her dress up and through her doubled-wrapped belt, so the waistband flops over, dangling at mid thigh, and the whole thing is shortened to end in two draping tiers above her knees. *There's the first 1980s mini skirt for the records*, Will thinks. And Pluto has dropped trou altogether, but his shirt is a hand-me-down from Will that more than covers the pertinent parts of his adolescent body. The neckline is so wide one of his shoulders is exposed. Chunks of rolled-back fabric hang thick above both wrists. Will watches them walk careful through the water, high stepping like storks, bending down at least three times a minute to pluck out a fish and raise it in their gently acquisitive hands. After each selection they walk their catch to a shaded place onshore where one of Bethia's rush laundry baskets is overflowing, teeming with fresh-killed silver bodies. Even from twenty yards back, Will can see that the gills of the fish on top are still moving, gasping pinkly in the creatures' dying throes. And as he watches, Moira tosses on another—what looks to Will like an out-of-season shad, a good five pounder. He could eat the whole thing himself, easy, breaded and pan fried with extra

salt. He licks his lips. Then he looks downstream and sees what Moira has done, the genius of her trick.

At a bend in the creek where the water angles southeast, heading out toward sea, the spot with the narrowest distance between shores has been walled off. First with a line of stones, then with what appears to be multiple layers of cordgrass-woven screens. This makeshift dam is likely not quite watertight, but Will is still interested in its design—how she put it together, and so quickly, how fast it might be taken down, then how efficiently reconstructed. Even in the brief amount of time since this wall has been raised, water and its contents have accumulated, ballooning out past the bank's normal line, and doomed fish upstream keep swimming south just like they always do, except this time they're headed straight into the confines of this newly constructed pool-cum-trap.

The real question Will wants to have answered is what she put in the water. He has heard of this before; or rather, Liam has read about it. It's called, or it will be called, drunk fishing: dam up a stream or inlet, add some intoxicating mix to the water—typically quicklime and plant juices, he knows, but which ones?—then, in theory, you should be able to just stoop down and collect the inebriated but still edible fish at your leisure. The problem, Liam has read, is that the effects linger, and, while the tainted water is not likely to be fatal to humans, nobody wants a drunken band of spade- and hoe-armed field slaves roaming the countryside, copulating in roadside thickets, stirring up trouble with the Indians, or hassling white ladies hanging out wash and working innocently in their pleasure gardens. By 1720 the colonial legislature will have a law on its books sentencing any slave who intoxicates a stream to a public whipping—thirty-nine stripes, if he remembers correctly—but Will has never heard of this being done. He has

always thought it must be a legend. One of those things, like the cookhouse slave poisoning her master's stew, that is far more visible in myth than in history.

He looks at Moira, and he thinks, *You little minx. Is all that your fault? And, What else is lurking inside that beautiful brain of yours?* He thinks of *The X-Files*, of *Star Trek*, of all the sci-fi garbage Liam spent his teenage years consuming—Vulcan mind melds, blind psychics taking a peek inside the mind's eye of another, various other memory and soul stealing monsters-of-the-week. *If only*. He thinks, *If only our power were an actual one, one with some kind of practical application*. Instead of letting all that gorgeous knowledge fester and remained trapped inside Moira's skull, he would press his lips to her brow, to her ear, to her navel, to whatever porthole his abilities necessitated, and he would suck and draw her in sip by impossible luscious sip until all that remained of her was the disposable hull. He would give it to Pluto, if Pluto were interested. Or perhaps even to Jem, who for years has been requesting the acquisition of another female slave. Granted, Jem looked askance at Moira upon their first inspection of her inside Henry Brisbane's holding pens, called her a spindle-legged garden rake with even less of an arse than he has himself—*"And don't you think I've not noticed you looking, Master."* Jem had grinned, winked, minced a bit like the high-heeled English fops he so detested. *"I've seen you, whenever you think my mind's occupied, taking a gander at all the fine meat inside my brecks."*—but perhaps after a little fattening up, after some more of Bethia's bacon-rich cooking, once her hair's grown back and her breasts filled in, when she can speak the language, and....

Will shrugs, shakes his head. It is a moot point anyway. His super power is total shit and, as far as Moira is concerned, body and brain are a package deal. If he breaks

one, he loses the other. Still, he thinks he'll let them keep their secret adventure, let Pluto think he's gotten away with something, for he is surely the one of the two who knew better, who knew enough to lie. Will reverses his steps, fades wraithlike into the pines, and he leaves his young peons undisturbed to continue their gently excessive raiding of the stockpiled and poisoned creek.

Will dozed off in the late afternoon sun, crumb-flecked napkin spread in his lap, back propped against a dry section of the half-built floodgate wall, and I opened my eyes to four-and-a-half feet of rumped and empty California-King sized mattress. Cici had stashed the clock again, so I had no idea what time it was, and I could feel my nose tingling. Will was going to burn us again for sure, and I thought that if I weren't dead of melanoma by age forty, it would be nothing short of miraculous. I sat up, swung my legs over the side of the bed. I started to call for Cici, but I stood and turned and then this was unnecessary.

She was sitting cross-legged on the floor in a cordoned-off rectangle of light that pulsed through our floor-to-ceiling balcony windows. Some of this came from the moon; more came from discretely placed floodlights around the pool that the hotel staff left on 24/7, I assumed, to avoid any lawsuits from drunken midnight dippers. She had on her feathery robe, and her hair had dried into a puffed-up web that I immediately itched to comb smooth, and everything around and about her—carpet, hair, robe, skin, faux and natural light alike—appeared to be the same shade of illuminated periwinkle.

“Cici.” I sat down beside her.

“I didn’t wake you did I?” Her chin was raised, eyes closed, hands turned up on each thigh and posed in the gyan mudra, which I only recognized because I’d once gone to bed with a woman who insisted that yoga before sex centered her, made her more limber and focused.

I crossed my legs too but left my hands flat, palms-down on my knees. “You know you couldn’t have.”

Her expression didn’t change. “Sorry.” She said, “Force of habit.” Then, “What’s evil Liam up to tonight? Did one of his slave girls clobber him unconscious?”

I laughed because I thought she wanted me to, said, “No,” but I wasn’t sure how much she’d want me to explain. “He’s building a wall, stopped to eat. He got tired.”

“What kind of a wall?”

I was staring at her face, distracted. Aside from her lips, which of necessity moved when she spoke, she seemed waxy, oddly inert, and I thought uncomfortably of Madame Tussauds, of her rendering of the soon-to-be beheaded Comtesse du Barry reclined on a fainting chaise, one arm flung against the cushion in helpless surrender. “I’m sorry?”

“I asked what kind of wall your other half is building.” She hardly looked to be breathing. “Are we talking Great Wall of China? Small wall of Mexico? What?”

“It’s ah... It’s part of a floodgate,” I explained. “Two walls on either side of river. Or, in this case, a stream. But he’s redirected some other branches of water, funneled them onto the same course. The walls will help protect and control—”

“Liam?” Her tone was flat.

“Yes?”

“I don’t care.”

“I’m sorry.” I was surprised to find that my feelings were hurt. “You asked.”

“I was being polite.” And I felt as if I were meeting Cécily for the first time.

The hollow at her throat’s base looked hugely deep, cavernous, a blotch of plum against her otherwise ubiquitous white-grey-lavender, and I wanted to press a finger into it, to see if I could feel a pulse. If anything, Cici was too much—too curious, too invasive, too loud, too eager to glue herself to my side and to insist that I let her stay there for precisely as long as it suited her to do so. Except for those times when she struck me, knocked my hands down, went for my balls with her toes and tried to shove me away; but that only happened once a day or so. I almost laughed from the sheer absurdity of her, and as I sat watching, staring at her neck, wondering if that lifeless pillar were the same apparatus capable of producing all those sounds I’d hated, cringed from, categorized, measured, and learnt to anticipate, to provoke, almost to love, that’s when another spot—mulberry, I thought; this one was dark berry, near black—erupted into being on the side of her throat. Higher up, to one side, beneath her jaw.

There was pale skin, queerly colored in the half-natural half-simulated light. There was her unmarked throat with its gully at the base. And then I blinked. And then there was something else. I tried to rewind it, to see it appear again in slow mo, as if my eyes had cinemascope and an instant replay function.

The mark is oblong. It has a perimeter at first. Then a flowering of stain in the middle, and the edges keep darkening, keep becoming more prominent. It is smallish, two inches in width, maybe one in height, maybe a little more than that in either direction. It’s difficult to say precisely. The depth of color, the vividness keeps intensifying, and

rectangular points of stress, of emphasis—each one less than a half-centimeter across—materialize at even intervals along the edge, like stars in a pictured constellation with the bull or the fish or the hunter overlaid in silhouette. Then another spot emerges nearby, its growth following the same basic pattern of evolution: stamping around the border, filled in with a diffusion of rotten-fruit color—the apricot lurking at the bottom of the bowl that is weeks gone, not days—and those same hard points of rectangular pressure connecting-the-dots all around the outside.

I'd seen marks like this dozens, maybe even a hundred times—on my own neck and chest and shoulders, and on those of the women who asked me to put them there—and it still took me long seconds to place them, to recognize and apply the appropriate labels, to accept the bruising that came from suction and the brand of human dentition. They were hickeys. Vicious ones, made with more teeth even than I liked myself.

I kept my hands on my knees. I looked up from Cici's throat. Her eyes were open. I was afraid to touch her. She was looking straight ahead out that massive window, and I could tell at a glance that she was on something. She had no irises. Her eyes were all pupil, enlarged to the point that all traces of hazel were gone. And I noticed then a line in her lip surrounded by plump swelling that I didn't think had been there a moment before. I knew it wasn't when we'd gone to sleep. It looked aubergine, but I knew that in different light it would be carmine, scarlet, crimson burgundy red.

*Jesus.*

*Looks like you finally got what you wanted.*

*Go to hell, Will.*



“Cici.” I was on my knees before her, and I reached toward her face, palms out, slow as syrup, ready to draw back if she flinched or cried out. She didn’t. “Cici, honey.” Her skin was cool pliable stone. “What did you take?” I used my thumbs to open her eyes a bit wider. I don’t know why. It seemed the thing to do. “Come on, baby.” I tapped each cheek twice, as if she’d had one glass of rosé too many and grown drowsy at a dinner party. “What’d you take, Cici? Come on. You’ve gotta talk to me now.”

She was looking at me, but not, then she blinked, and I thought maybe she could see me then. “Liam?” She touched my face like a blind man—like Joe—searching for telling features. Her hand was on my jaw, fingertips dragging on the beard neither Will nor I had recently bothered to shave, and she sucked in a quick breath. I glanced down. There were four spots on her neck.

“Yeah, Ceese. It’s Liam.” I put my hand over hers on my face. “You can hear me?”

She nodded. “Yes.” There was a raw scrape on her cheekbone.

“Good. That’s good. What did you take, honey? Or just tell me where it is. You point, I’ll go look.”

She tongued the split in her lip, gentle, probing. “Not me.”

I swore. “Cécily?”

“Yes.”

“That fucking bitch.”

She winced. I didn’t know at what. “It’s not her fault,” she said. “She—”

“I’m sorry.” I pushed back her hair. “You’re right. It looks like she had a really fucking good reason. Do you know what it was she took?”

“Paregoric.” She was looking at me again, but not.

I squeezed her hand on my cheek. “That’s like laudanum, right? But weaker?” It hadn’t been invented yet in 1704; I’d heard of it, but Will was unfamiliar with the percentage of dilution, the correct dosage, the probable side effects.

The other side of her neck was filling in. “Yes.”

“Okay.” I felt slightly better then. I understood what was going on at least. She had enough opium in her system to drug her unconscious, only she couldn’t pass out because Cécily had gotten there first. It had happened to Will and me a few times, typically with whiskey. I drank too much, and he stumbled through the day, wishing for all the world that he could just fall down somewhere quiet and die. Bethia gave him strong tea spiked with thimbles full of rum; once she laid with him naked on an icy creek bed for hours. Neither of these seemed like viable treatments for Cici, and I asked, “How much did she take?”

She choked on a barking laugh. “There wasn’t time to measure.”

“Give me your best guess.” The only thing keeping her hand on my face then was me, holding it up. Her arm’s weight was negligible. “One slug? Two? Four? How many would you say?”

She was frowning, turned inward, ignoring me. It was as if she were thinking about the complex inner workings of her system, and if I had to compare it to anything, the best I might offer is an image of Phibbi—hugely pregnant with Pluto, barely an hour away from going into labor, resting on a fresh-hewn stump and thinking, one hand on her belly the other propped against her spine, trying to describe for a then eleven-year-old

Bethia what it felt like, all the faintly invasive things she could discern happening on her insides.

“Cici?” I used my free hand to tap her cheek. “How much did Cécily take? You must have some idea.” A light slap this time. “Cici! How much?”

She blinked, shook her head, really looked at me, said, “She turned up the bottle when she heard them coming.”

“Jesus.”

We were off the floor. I half-dragged half-carried her to the bathroom. Forced her down in front of the toilet, and I jammed my fingers into her throat. Soft spongy tissue. I thought preposterously of giving a pill to a resistant animal. Her hair was everywhere. She’d had no dinner, so nothing came up, and that was my fault, me being selfish. I don’t eat, so I hadn’t insisted that she ought. I tried a second time, smelt bile, then poured a tooth-brushing size cup of water into her and waited thirty seconds. I tried again. Success.

“Ceese?” I helped her sit up on her knees, shoved back hair, used my hand to wipe her mouth. “You okay? You still with me?”

She looked down, head drooped, not talking. For one paralyzing second I thought she was gone, that she had left me, and then I realized I could see her breathing—heavily, swiftly, her chest bellowing in rapid expansion as if she were sprinting for her life. Erin had been prone to panic attacks, and I recognized the signs; I’d never forgotten them; I couldn’t; I likely owed the fact that I hadn’t raped her to the attack she had beneath the canopy of Henry Brisbane’s Spanish-made bed. He’d had it smuggled up the coast from Florida in a mule cart driven by a defrocked friar. It was a great scandal in Charles Towne in 1698. This is immaterial.

I looked around for something that might substitute for a paper bag. I was ready to force Cici's head farther down, to tell her to breathe, to breathe slowly into the bag and deeply, and that everything would be okay because I had her and I was there. Then I saw what she was looking at, the reason her head was drooped in the first place. In her lap—the thigh-height stain on her 1930s Hollywood starlet robe, and in the merciless overhead fluorescents of the bathroom, this was the true color, the precise one it needed to be.

Keep her warm. That was the only thing I could think to do. Keep her warm and keep her awake, and the shower was right there. I kept the temp just shy of scalding, figuring that if my sunburnt face could take it, she'd be okay. And I left her robe on, because what kind of sick fuck would take it off; not that it mattered once she was wet. Transparent gauze and feathers and both her hair and mine matted around us. Sitting, hers nearly reached the floor. I collected it, gathered it to one side so I'd have a place to lay my chin, and I saw bite marks on her shoulder I had missed before, either that or they were new, and against the pink-brown grout that funneled water between those variegated sugar-cane glazed tiles, it was easy to pretend I was seeing clear liquid, nothing else, that it wasn't tinted in the least. Just the water falling from those thousand-dollar spigots and washing around us in embracive heat and, with the help of gravity and slightly angled floors, being drawn inexorably toward the central drain.

“This wasn't meant to happen.” I was bent in a C, her mouth close to my ear, and still her words were nearly drowned by the shower. “There's nothing about it in the file.” I strained to listen, and I knew she was quoting when she said: *“Until the time of her execution by guillotine on October 16 1793—immediately preceding that of her Queen—Cécile de Clément lived in relative comfort inside the walls of the Conciergerie prison.*

*Although her refusal to renounce her friendship with the condemned Widow Capet classified her as a potentially dangerous anti-revolutionary and, therefore, as a traitor, because of her humble origins she was pitied—considered ‘brainwashed’ by one account—and she was thus safeguarded against the abuse many noblewomen faced at the hands of prison guards.”*

I touched her vertebrae, said nothing. I’d read about the Conciergerie, and the words *relative comfort* were, I thought, a joke, as was the idea of an eighteenth-century French woman having been “brainwashed,” a notion that didn’t exist until the 1950s. I looked this up later for verification. Stockholm Syndrome too, with which I briefly supposed “brainwashing” might have been confused, wasn’t an accepted psychological theory until 1973, and this rationale only worked anyway if an elevated peasant living a life of luxury could be read as having been “held captive” by the court of Versailles—an idea that, to me, seemed ludicrous.

“You see?” Cici said this loudly, more insistently, all but yelling into my ear. “You see that this shouldn’t have happened? Do you see? Liam, don’t you see?”

I shushed her and stroked her wet hair and told her I saw because, indeed, I did see. This shouldn’t have happened, and, if the timing had been right, I’d have offered Will anything he wanted—more hard-to-find dike schematics, tricks I’d refused to read about discouraging the May birds known to eat fresh-planted rice seed, a lifetime’s worth of fried food and sugary desserts, ice cream—I’d have offered him any of these things and more if he would hop the first ship for France, Marseilles perhaps, or maybe Nantes, then he could make his way inland to Paris and slit a few throats for me. He could even bring Abraham to assist; the two of them together would be formidable, if somewhat

conspicuous. *Ninety years too soon*, I knew. Less than a half-drop in the goddamn bucket of time, and it might as well have been an ocean.

When the water turned cold I shut it off, and I wrapped Cici in the biggest terrycloth robe I could find. It was man-sized and it covered her completely, and I wanted to offer her underwear but could think of no way of doing this delicately. I dried her hair, and I thought of the French toilette games we'd played three nights before, and I wanted to vomit.

Sick as I was, though, I couldn't help but think that Cici had fallen prey to a rookie mistake. She had trusted the records. She'd done more than just trust them. She'd wagered the last forty days of her life on them. She employed some nameless kid fresh out of grad school and sent him off to the archives, laptop and legal pad in hand, and even though she later changed her mind and called off the hunt, she accepted what he brought her and she read it and consumed it and she banked her wellbeing and, quite possibly, her sanity on this information's validity. Then it was all shot to shit—her estimable and bravely constructed end, the demise for which she'd been emotionally and physically and, I could see then, even financially prepared—and all because she'd trusted the pathologically lying records.

But then again, I reminded myself, she wasn't a historian.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE MOTHER OF ALL DRUNKEN REVELATIONS

Will wakes against his floodgate wall as the sun is beginning to set, and he lurches onto his hands and knees, retching. The bread and ham and cheese and tomato jam and the three slices of black pudding he ate before his nap—all this is returned to the earth, and he continues to heave, gagging on astringent stomach acid long after his system is empty. “Shit.” He drags his hand along his mouth, says to Liam, “Shit, man. Jesus. Jesus H. fucking Christ.” Then, “I would do it. I would do it too. I would go to France for you. Draw and quarter those goddamn frogs, castration with a dull blade, the whole nine yards. And any scary African shit Abraham knows about”—he waves a hand all-encompassingly—“we would do that too.”

Despite appearances and actions, Will is not unaware of his own moral relativism, and he supplies the words himself with which he knows Liam would confront him:

*Who are you to judge? You’ve done it too. To Bethia. When she was twelve.*

“That was different. She loves me. Told me so that day. She was just young. And nervous. Not a prisoner in a cell, waiting to die.”

*Isn’t she?*

“No. She’s as free as I am. Or nearly so, at least.”

*And Erin? You were mad when I let her go, so disappointed. Remember what you said?*

“Her? I’d totally forgotten. She was a bitch and a cock tease. I still stand by that.”

*She was twenty-two, and I was three times her size.*

“Since when is that a bad thing?”

Whatever Liam would say next doesn’t come to him immediately, and Will spits food-dotted saliva, kneels, struggles to stand. When his knees nearly buckle he braces himself, palm out against the floodgate, and he is thinking, *What I wouldn’t give for a bottle of light blue Gatorade and a stick of spearmint gum.* Then, half bent and leaning as he is, he sees his mama’s cloth napkin lying in the mud where he dropped it, and he stretches, reaching, wanting to spare himself both the cold shoulder that will come with losing it and, worse yet, three days’ worth of retaliatory cold breakfast and weak tea. But he leans a little too much, stretches too far. He loses his balance and topples forward, comes within an inch of slamming the crown of his head against the half-constructed brick wall. Prone on his back in a mud puddle, elbow stinging and shirt torn where he used his forearm to impede his fall, Will laughs at the blue-violet sky. He says, “And that would’ve been an ignominious end, wouldn’t it?”

*A fitting one, more like.*

“Stuff it, Liam. Who asked you anyway?”

*Apparently, you did.*

He stands again, shakily, using the wall for support, and he decides to forget about the napkin. He’ll blame it on Pluto, and there will be fewer consequences for the boy than for him anyway—a scold and a smack, then a thick slice of jam-topped bread in apology. Unless Abraham finds out. But Abraham, Will knows, couldn’t care less about a



cloth napkin. He cares about things like honesty and duty and fortitude in silence, not bits of feminine nonsense.

Will hears a voice calling his name, and he thinks that it must be his mama because it's his full name—"William"—echoing over from somewhere near the cornfield. He is too addled at first to consider the fact that he's not on the island but across the river, and his mama can't cross the river alone. Or at least she doesn't, she hasn't in years, not since Will's father died and she vowed she would never again handle an oar, that for the rest of her adult life she would be treated properly, as a lady should be treated, and she would not be a pioneer wife anymore.

"William." The cry comes again. "*Où es-tu?*"

This, he realizes, is Bethia, not his mama, and he shouts to her in response, begins walking toward her voice, toward the dock. After an unsteady half dozen steps—he thinks of the opening scene in *Bambi*—Will regains his strength and his footing. He strides through the yam field, which is almost fully harvested now. Jem and Scip and Quash put in a good day's work, and he knows they'll be hungry, Abraham too no doubt, all of them ready to sit down around Bethia's work table and fill up as if they were at a trough. But here comes Bethia. She is not cooking and serving. She is moving toward him, and the setting sun is off to her left, making her shadow into a lankily advancing sideways giant. *From a long line of man-scalping cannibals*, he thinks, and he waves.

She jogs to him, holding her skirts up high, not caring what he sees. "Where have you been?" She is ten yards away when she says this, and then that space is closed. Her hand is on his cheek and she frowns, licks her thumb, wipes at a streak of mud around his temple. "Well?" She demands, and brushes off clods from his shirt and pants. "You're

not going to answer me? Your mama's half sick, you know. She's sure a hog got you. That or an Indian."

Will stands still, lets her hands fuss over him. "I sat down to eat." He jerks his head back toward the floodgate. "Dozed off. I guess I slept for a long time."

Bethia frowns, scratches a fleck of dried vomit at the corner of his mouth. "It was bad, wasn't it?" she asks.

"Yes." He closes his eyes. "One of the worst things I've seen."

"Worse than Phibbi?"

Bethia is the only person he knows who would ask this, who would bring up Phibbi's name and force him to make a comparison. And such is the power she has over him that he actually thinks about it, weighing the horrific nature of each scene in turn before he responds. "Maybe." It is the best he can do. "Sicker, at least. More disturbing."

"Then it was a man's doing, and not an animal's."

She loops her arm through his, walks with him to the canoe. He lets her row him across the intercoastal river, and at supper Will eats almost nothing. He plays with his shrimp soup, letting it grow cold enough so the butter congeals, setting into finger-thick film across the top of his bowl. Moira is on her third serving by then, and his mama asks him if he's quite well. To fool her he takes a large bite that turns into fish-scented gruel somewhere between his mouth and his throat. He can hardly swallow. Bethia serves him a heel of bread, touches his shoulder. She doesn't remove it when his mama scowls, and he lays in bed later that night, staring at his lace-stamped wall for a long time while he waits for Bethia to join him. One distorted flower makes its descent from the top of his doorframe to the level of the door handle, its image sinking as the moon rises, and Will

has almost decided that she isn't coming. He will go to her and plead; he is willing to do that. He is almost prepared to fight his way free of the feather mattress, loose from the strangling sheet, when his door swings open. The lopsided flower is on Bethia's stomach. He half sits and extends one hand. She closes the door behind her, and she latches it.

I didn't wake until almost 10:00, and I didn't bother calling the archives to cancel my research appointment with Doug. If I were ever in need of proof that I wasn't crazy, that Will wasn't just in my head, that I hadn't read about the island long ago and then somehow interiorized it, claiming Will's story for my own, I had ample evidence then. More than ample, in fact—a glutted excess of it. And if Jamie and Bram went to their graves without believing I was who I said I was, and they were who I said they were, then that would be fine with me as well. I decided that I'd been kidding myself anyway, believing that after everything they'd already witnessed, a pilfered sheet of three-hundred-year-old unpublished paper would make any difference. Jamie had seen my back ripped open by a crop that wasn't there, wielded by a hand that didn't exist. “*A trick of the light,*” he later said. He must have been drunk. “*It's the only logical explanation.*” He couldn't accept anything else. And Bram chased me across a small overgrown island where it was obvious that no man had set foot in generations, if not longer, and I led him unerringly and with little hesitation to a dense wall of resurrection ferns that looked precisely like a hundred other walls of ferns, only this one concealed the west-facing gabled wall of a long-forgotten Georgian mansion that, for some unknown reason, was missing from the colonial records. Then all along the way during the planning stages of

our reconstruction, I knew precisely where to look for ruins, where to send Jamie with his shovels and picks and brushes and his half dozen undergrad assistants to uncover the richest beds of archaeological evidence: the precise twenty-yard square at the northeast point of the island where countless hog bones were uncovered, many of them burnt, the number of tusks denoting the slaughter of a huge quantity of feral males; the dimensions for the perimeter of the house—roughly thirty-six feet by fifty-eight—along with chimney placement and the existence of a log cabin-fort underneath, the wooden leavings of which had all but rotted away; the thirty-eight-stride line on an east-southeast angle separating the rear right corner of the house from the front left corner of the cookhouse, and the cookhouse itself discovered complete with knife blades and pottery shards and stones enough for a hearth built sufficiently large to roast a ninety-pound hog; and then the small graveyard at the island's center, just outside the remains of an old stone wall, where, at last count, I knew we'd unearth the bodies of Phibbi, May, Will's father, and Will's stillborn sister. The wooden coffins had disintegrated, of course, but human remains were found exactly where I said they'd be. More of them, in fact, than I'd been expecting. Rather than three adult jawbones belonging to one male and two female pelvises, we'd recovered the six jaws of three women and three men. Will's mama, I assumed, was the extra woman, since all three female pelvises showed the effects of childbirth—which isn't to say that Bethia never gives birth, or even Moira—and Old Joe made for a logical second man. The last man, however, remained a mystery, as did the question of where everyone else had gone, where they'd died, where their bodies had been buried. We knew this last unnamed man died in his early forties, that he'd suffered from malnutrition in his youth and had scurvy more than once, but that, in spite of this, he'd

been tall and strongly built, as evidenced by the copious signs of muscle-to-bone connectivity that remained evident three hundred years after the fact. Abraham fit this description perfectly, but then again so did Quash, Scipio, Jem, and even—perhaps one day—Pluto. Since Will never had scurvy, courtesy of my mother’s daily infusions of orange juice and afterschool snacks of ranch-dipped broccoli, I made for an unlikely candidate. For some reason, I never found this to be reassuring.

I paced the hotel room, and I listened to Cici breathe, and I thought: After all this, after I’d led them to all of this, if they still doubted me, if they still judged me for drinking too much and for disappearing sometimes for a couple days or a week and for publishing fewer articles and for spending less time in libraries and archives than they think *a historian of my caliber* had ought—then screw them. I decided this as I waited for Cici to wake. To hell with them both.

Because the shower seemed unbearable, and because the rest of me had been sufficiently rinsed of salt and sand the night before, I washed my hair in the deep bathroom sink. I used her rosemary shampoo despite Will’s aversion to the smell, and then I shaved, and I hunted for clean clothes, sneaking around Cici as she continued to sleep, her chest rising and falling in even intervals, because somehow I thought I owed it to her to be clean and fully dressed and as civilized looking as possible. To my surprise I found my garment bag hanging in the closet near the armoire, right where Cici had said it was all along. I wondered if I’d missed it—although I didn’t see how that was possible—or if she’d had it somewhere else, then returned it. I shrugged. It didn’t matter. The shirt and pants I put on weren’t stylish or expensive and had no embroidered lobsters on them,

but I got to wear underwear and I was respectably covered from ankles to neck, which were really my only two requirements that day.

For lack of anything better to do—or, more precisely, to keep myself from sitting on the edge of the bed and staring at Cici, forcing her to awake to a too-close man looming over her in expectation—I retrieved my laptop bag and settled down in the white leather armchair. It was expansive, like sitting on a cow-scented cloud, and I understood then why Cici seemed to like it so much. Striving to type quietly, I looked up *Marie-Antoinette et Ses Enfants*, painted by Madame Vigée le Brun and completed in 1787. The Queen’s dress, as I saw, was of lavish red velvet but not elaborately cut, with no bows and just a small amount of lace around the sleeves and neck. Her oldest child, a gold-haired girl, is clinging to her arm, gazing up at her in adoration, and the toddler in her lap is chubby, with a Michelin-Man crease at his wrist, wearing a white lace bonnet, and one of his hands is on his mother’s breast. To Madame’s left—the viewer’s right—there is another boy, perhaps five or six years old, whom I know must be the heir apparent, the titular Dauphin of France, and he has wide grey eyes and tiny black-shod feet, and a ceremonial sash tied around his full childlike tummy. It is light blue silk, and his suit is yellow, shiny amber-orange. He is holding aside the draped bunting on a cradle—originally indigo, I thought, but Vigée le Brun returned to this later, took out the iridescence and made the fabric shine black. The bassinette is empty because Princess Sophie has been painted out.

I tapped some keys and followed a few links, and I read that the oldest boy, who suffered all his life from a combination of tuberculosis and scoliosis and who was forced to wear an iron corset in hopes of correcting this latter affliction, died at age seven in

June of 1789 amidst the rising fervor of the Revolution. His mother was not with him, and his tomb was destroyed during the ensuing unrest. The toddler in the bonnet outlived his brother by almost six years exactly, then purportedly died himself in June of 1795 of scrofulous—an inflammation of the lymph nodes, not usually fatal—while being interned in the medieval tower of the Temple prison, where both of his parents were likewise held until each one’s transfer to the Conciergerie for their fixed trials and inevitable executions. Or, alternately, it was thought for a time that perhaps he was secreted out of his cell by a sympathetic guard—a kind-hearted man who was a father himself—and that a fatally ill peasant boy was installed in the prince’s stead. Free from the political machinations of the court, the youngest son of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI lived out his life as a humble clockmaker in Munich, as a baker in Prague, as a cobbler in a seaside village in the south of France where local girls often commented on his fine grey eyes and aristocratic hands, but where nobody ever made the connection. These were nice stories, I thought, and technically all plausible, since pertinent years in the Temple’s records had been destroyed under the Bourbon Restoration for reasons that remain unknown, albeit heavily speculated upon. Then I read further and saw that DNA testing performed in the year 2000 on the heart of the child who had died in captivity put an end to any such romantic hopes for survival. That is, of course, if you care to trust the word of a scientist and his labors over a two-hundred-year-old inexplicably rediscovered heart.

Only the golden-haired girl is known definitively to have lived on, first after being incarcerated along with her entire family and losing each of them in quick succession: her father to the guillotine, her brother to his enforced solitary and ultimately fatal imprisonment, her mother to the Revolutionary Tribunal as well, and lastly her aunt—the

youngest and ever-loyal sister of Louis XVI, beheaded in May of 1794 along with twenty-three other people whom she led in the *De profundis* as their cart drew near to the Place de la Révolution. And while the sixteen-year-old niece was more than a mile away at the time, locked inside her cell at the Temple, and she thus could not possibly have witnessed her aunt greeting the executioner—whom she begged only to preserve her modesty by keeping her shoulders covered once she was strapped to the board—she must surely have heard about this afterward, as it is a tale that lived on and would come to be listed among the leading causes in favor of the former royal princess’ beatification: the courage and humility with which she faced death.

This lone daughter survived the Terror in France, escaped, and lived on in exile, first in her mother’s birthplace of Vienna, then in Latvia, and then in Buckinghamshire. She lived to see her hair darken—or perhaps Vigée le Brun’s had been a generous, wishful depiction—and to endure her stammering cousin in a child- and loveless marriage. Restored with the rest of the Bourbons in 1814, she was urged to run again when Napoléon escaped Elba and rose up in his final bid for global dominion, only this time she refused to flee and remained in Bordeaux to rally the local troops—a lost cause which, if nothing else, earned her the admiration of the diminutive Emperor and his labeling of her as “Le seul homme de la famille,” *the only man in her family*.

Believing I’d followed this tragic history far enough, I changed course, went back in time to pull up Marie Antoinette’s 1775 coronation portrait by Gautier d’Agoty. It was as I remembered, exactly as Cici described. Here are all the flounces and blue silk ribbons and the gold-embroidered fleurs de lis that so irreparably damaged her reputation as a young queen, leaving behind a stain that would prove impossible for any amount of



pious maternity or demurely solid-colored dresses to overcome. She is only twenty as pictured here, not beautiful according to my taste, but so brutally styled and so very much alive. I X-ed out the window. It was difficult for me to see, and, anyway, I already knew the way her story was going to end.

I'd been perusing a database full of chronologically ordered Gautier d'Agoty JPEGs for a good twenty minutes, searching in futility for the painting of his in which Cici herself is depicted, included among the rest of the Queen's favored ladies, when Cici bolted upright in bed, eyes wide, her gaze jumping around the white and teal and silver hotel room as if she couldn't help but follow a rapidly moving particle that was impossible for me to see. She was still wrapped in the terrycloth robe that I'd belted tightly on her hours before, but it had loosened in her sleep and draped shawl-like then around her too-thin shoulders. I saw a wedge of her naked from the waist up, and I felt like a molester.

"Cici." I leaned forward in the chair, and her eyes were on me.

I don't think she'd seen me before that, and I like to tell myself she was searching for me, that I'm what she was looking for in her frantic perusal of the room. Since she didn't flinch when she saw me or scream or react negatively in any way, this theory holds a bit of water, until I recall the way she adjusted her robe after I spoke, how she jerked the belt tight and sat staring at me without blinking.

She looked away from me finally, her eyes shifting up, and I knew she could see herself in the mirror above the chair, gold framed and inescapably huge and directly opposite the bed. I swore. I should've covered it or taken it down. Because she looked

like hell, I thought, and she didn't need to see. I stood, and my laptop hit the floor. "Don't Cici—"

"Hush, Liam."

This was her mothering voice, as if she were seated at her vanity applying lipstick, and I'd made an unwelcome sound, distracting her at a moment of essential and delicate concentration. She touched the dark line in her bottom lip that wasn't as swollen yet as I knew it would soon be, then fanned the collar of her robe, turned her head from side to side as she examined the kaleidoscopic bruising on her neck. She shoved a hand through her hair and a sigh puffed out her cheeks, and I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry when she looked at me and she was still Cici and she said, "I am not ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille."

I let out a sound that was part snort and part sob. Very unmasculine. Will would not have approved. And I said, "Jesus, Cici."

"I know." And there was her sniffling disdainfully self-deprecating French shrug. "I'm awful, aren't I? But if there was ever a time for gallows humor..." She left the rest unsaid, arched one of her slightly too long and not over-plucked and completely beautiful eyebrows.

"That's not funny." I added, "And it's not the gallows I'm worried about." I regretted this as soon as I said it. "*If thine eye offends you, Willy-o,*" or, in this case, mine own tongue—

But if anything her brow went higher. "Guillotine humor, then." She said this glibly, so readily and with such obvious pleasure that I knew she'd been waiting to use this line for a long while, only she'd never been around anyone before who would get the

joke. And right then I knew that I loved her, which made me unaccountably and logically furious.

“Hey. Liam, hey.” She was out of bed then, and she was comforting me, and I didn’t know how to make her stop. Maybe I wouldn’t have, even if I did. One of the marks on her neck was faded, old, mine I knew from days before, and I wasn’t fit to touch her, but she smelled like rosemary, and there was a freckle on her right earlobe I hadn’t noticed before, and, Jesus, her hair was everywhere. Her arms were around my neck and she was pulling me down, and she was stronger than she should be, but then I already knew that, and when I was stooped nearly in half, bent low enough for her mouth to reach my ear, she whispered and she didn’t let me see her and my eyes were closed anyway and she said: “Let’s try not to be maudlin about this. Okay, Liam? I’ve known it was coming for a long time now. Last night was a surprise, but it doesn’t change anything. Not really. It will be quick, when it happens. It will be quick, and I’ll be okay.”

“Who are you?” I said this without opening my eyes, without raising my head, and it was perhaps the most genuine question I ever asked her.

She laughed, fast and sharp. I felt the exhalation of warm breath damp against the side of my face. “One person too many,” she said, then she repeated this, and if she had added the words both she and I knew she had to be thinking—*One person too many, just like you*—I would have put my head down on her shoulder and I would have bawled like a child. Thankfully, however, she left these words unsaid.

\* \* \*

I wanted to call a doctor, to get her checked out. Since she seemed hell bent on blowing all of her money before she died anyway, I could see no reason why she shouldn't spend some of it on a private in-suite visit. If the price were right, I was sure Polynice or I could rustle up the best doctor on the island. Just to make sure, I said, and just because she was going to die soon, that didn't mean she shouldn't be well taken care of until then. And I couldn't believe I was actually having thing conversation—calmly debating the pros and cons of healthcare with a woman who was a month away from decapitation.

“Penicillin. Cici, at the very least—”

“Why?” She smiled as far as her lip would allow. “Are you afraid I'll give something to you?” This was the furthest thing from my mind, and I must have looked appalled, because her laugh was sincere and bigger, more full-bodied than any I'd expected to hear from her again. “Don't worry, Liam.” She wouldn't stop. “I'm not going to force you.” I knew then she was on the brink of hysteria, laughing so she wouldn't break down, taking her guillotine humor to the outrageous extreme of the Nth degree, but this last remark made me angry. If she said anything like that again, I told her, I would leave and I wouldn't come back. “No you won't,” she said. And, dammit, she had me there.

“Speaking of leaving,” she asked, “why aren't you at the archives?”

“Are you being serious?”

“Of course.”

“You actually thought I would leave you?”

“Liam, I'm fine.”

I might have won the ensuing argument if she hadn't remembered that it wasn't just the archives that were on my agenda for the day. Thanks to Bram's ingenious marketing strategy, I had a meeting scheduled for noon with the director of a plantation museum on the northeastern tip of the island. Bram was envisioning some kind of electronically-synced, dual-sided production coordinated between our Carolinian-rice plantation and his Barbadian-sugar. This could be complete with video lectures, live Q-and-A sessions, even simultaneous hour-long boat rides northwest into the Caribbean or southeast into the Atlantic—depending on which island was the tourists' home base—in order to symbolically demonstrate a fraction of the month-long journey that innumerable people, animals, and goods undertook almost weekly in the mutually-supporting decades following the 1670 incorporation of Charles Towne. This was a good idea, I knew, and it was therefore indubitably Bram's and not mine. While I was typically supportive of Bram's ambitions and appreciative of the fact that he was the mastermind of our operation—the one who came up with the ideas that made my historical obsession feasible, livable, and, most importantly, profitable—nothing was as important to me then as staying with Cici. We did, after all, only have a month left.

“Liam, you have to go. Bram is your partner, and you promised.” She slunk over to me, went up on tip-toe, eased her arms around my neck. She winced but tried to hide it when her movements tweaked something that had been recently battered. “If you don't go, Liam, I'll feel guilty.” And Veronica Lake with a fat lip is still Veronica Lake. “If I feel guilty, I'll cry.” Only her pout was even more affecting. “You don't want me to cry. Do you, Liam?”

I didn't.

She won.

Anyway, she added later, consoling me in my defeat, she had her video chat with Sophie at noon. I would just be in the way while she plastered on makeup, found a scarf to wear that wasn't transparent, tried to make herself look presentable. "At least a little less like a horror show." And crap—she only had twenty minutes left to work with.

"Why don't you tell her you fell? It's an oldie but a goodie."

"She's twelve, Liam. Not two. And she's smart. Juste comme sa maman."

"In that case," I suggested, "go with black lipstick, cake on the eyeliner. I know you're good at that. Maybe she'll believe you've gone Goth."

In the car with Polynice, I fidgeted, pinching the creased leg of the suit pants Cici had insisted I change into, and Polynice ragged on me for standing him up that morning. "There I was"—he buffed his fingernails on his immaculate lapel—"all dressed up and nowhere to go."

I apologized for not calling, explained that Cici'd had a bad night.

"You know then, don't you?" His whole demeanor changed. Our eyes met in the rearview mirror, and for the first time since the day we'd met his voice reminded me of pain like boiling cane juice, like hundred-pound stone grinders plucking a man's arms from his body, easy as wings off a fly. And although I was sure that what he knew and what I knew were not by any means the same thing, it seemed silly at that point to quibble over technicalities.

"Yeah." I said, "I know."

"It's a shame." Polynice shook his head. He signaled left and raised a hand, waving at someone he knew, or maybe just being polite, saying thanks-for-letting-me-

cut-in-front. “A damn shame.” His signal clicked off. “She’s a nice lady, Miss Cici is. Strange, for sure. But nice. Awfully goddamn nice.”

Liam drinks more than a half liter of whiskey, warm, with no glass, and he passes out on a grease-stained comforter in a seedy motel somewhere—he’s not sure and he doesn’t care—in the middle of the island.

Will opens his eyes in the hour before dawn to Bethia’s back stamped in lace-carved grey light. *Her skin is in too many pieces*, he thinks, and he tries to reassemble them, starting with the smallest chunks first. This makes sense, he believes, because if he has enough bigger parts leftover he can build another one of her. He can have two Bethias. One for him to keep, one for his mama to sell, and then everyone will be happy.

His nails on her shoulders wake her up, and Bethia rolls over, grabs his hands to hold them away. She asks him what’s wrong, what has happened, and he tells her, “I don’t think those are grease stains.”

She takes him to the beach—past the vegetable patch and through a narrow strip of woods, where their bare feet crack on pine needles and rearrange the previous autumn’s leaves, then down a slight embankment stabilized by the roots systems of cordgrass and sea oats. Will karate-chops a fluffy-headed sea oat and reminds Bethia that she must never pick one, must never chop them down because if she does the island will erode. It will dissolve into the sea, and then where will they live? “Mama won’t start over again, you know. She’d just stay here and die.” He laughs. “Probably get eaten by pigs.”

Bethia says, “Not Missus Mama. She’d eat those pigs raw before they got to her,” and she pulls off the dressing gown she almost hadn’t been able to convince him to wear. She drops it. Then, “Come on, cher. Lie down with me. Lay down in the water.”

Bethia doesn’t know that this is the same thing Liam and Cici did not too long ago, so he tells her about it. He explains to her how Liam dug himself into the sand inch by inch, never once using his hands, and he liked the way the water felt on his crotch, but he didn’t say that to Cici. “He keeps all the good things to himself.” Like how that Erin girls’ hips were wider, softer than you’d think they would be, just looking at her. “Teeny thing all over. But here”—he grabs a handful of Bethia’s flank, the muscle and the meat of her—“nearly as big as you.” And Liam never told Jamie or Bram, his two best friends in the world, never told them anything about this.

“What kind of name is *Erin*?”

“Don’t worry. I like you more.”

“I know, cher. You like me best of all. Je t’aime aussi.”

“She’s dead, you know.”

“Erin?” She sounds disinterested. Will doesn’t think she cares. He’ll fix that.

“No. Cici.” He tries to make a snow angel.

Bethia smacks his leg. “Stop kicking me, you ox.” Then, “The Cici woman’s dead?”

“Yes.” He moves only the arm and leg on the left side of his body, the side where Bethia isn’t, and he laughs because his angel is a gimp. On a ship it would have to serve inside the galley where it could sit on a stool, chop old meat and peel sweet potatoes.



“Dead. Dead. Dead.” As a slave it would be worthless, unless, of course, it were a woman. And, “Liam was right. That does feel good.”

“You’re going to talk nonsense now? Not tell me what happened?”

“Not tell you what happened about what?” The surf washes over him, cool, frothy, embracing. Seaweed tickles, and the sand is wet velvet, cradling all over, like the baby in the bassinette but there’s no baby because she’s been painted out. That’s what Liam called it. Wet velvet. It’s nice, and if he were Liam he’d be worried about sharks. Actually, Will is afraid of sharks too. He remembers Joe—“*Let go, Joe. Mama said.*”—holding his hand then not holding his hand then bodies in the harbor. “Not Bethia.” Someone takes his hand, and he jumps.

“Will?”

“What?”

“Tell me what happened to Cici.”

There’s the water again, rushing back in. “Are you Cici?”

“Yes.”

“All right.”

“What happened to me?”

And drawing back out. “Why do you want to know?”

“If you don’t say, you’ll be bad as Abraham.”

“Is Abraham bad?”

“Yes. Il est très mauvais.”

“That’s too mauvais.”

“Will. Enough. C’est assez. Tell me now.”

And he does.

Will tells her about Liam's meeting for the plantation. There was a man with muttonchops—can that be right?—and glossy paper and something to do with cameras. Bethia doesn't understand what a camera is, so he'll skip that. But he's talking to Cici. Cici understands. Cici is dead. His hair is wet. He's confused. He keeps going. There's the man who drives the car. He is not a slave and he's sad because he thinks Cici is sick. "Like father." He thinks that is why she is dying, and he likes her, so he's sad. He thinks that's why she is so thin, why her ribs look strange. Because she is sick. A car is like a tiny ship that goes on land, only it's metal. Metal is like a fork or a knife or a blade, like a very thin cookpot.

"Je sais. I know what metal is."

"Do you? Est-ce que c'est vrai?"

"You speak French very badly."

"Je sais."

"Go on with it, Will."

Liam sits in the front seat where he usually doesn't, and the man who is black but who is not a slave but who has lived in Barbados for a very long time—"It's true; you think I'm joking, but I am not"—he drives Liam back to the hotel where he and Cici are living in sin. "Like us." A hotel is like an inn, but it is cleaner and the food is not as good and everyone gets his own bed and no one pisses in a pot. "Have you ever stayed at an inn?"

"You know the answer to that."

They drive slow and they talk, and Liam feels badly about this now. Cici is alone. She shouldn't have been alone. They stop and they buy coffee, which is much better than tea. "You've had it before. Mama doesn't like it." Liam will eat coffee. It's one of the things he will swallow. Not like ice cream. "Rocky road." There are no rocks in the road but there are other cars, too many little ships, all headed to the airport because it is Sunday and that's where ships go on Sunday.

"Je ne comprends pas."

"An airport is where cars go to fly."

"I still don't understand. But keep going. N'arrêtez pas."

"I will never stop." Because that is what he always says when she makes this request. Bethia. Not Cici. The car gets to the hotel which is like an inn and the man who is black but not a slave is driving the ship. "Polynice." It is a strange name. There are lights at the inn on top of ships. These are big lights, bigger ships. Lights in bars on top of cars. "That rhymes." Red and blue and white. Crimson and cerulean and ivory. Will wants to think of more ways to say this, but he gets stuck at scarlet. He is getting dizzy, becoming nauseous. Not nauseous. Nauseated. He learnt grammar at Liam's school. He did poorly. Teacher sent home a note to Mother and Daddy.

"What about the lights, Will?"

"It's an ambulance. And police ships. They come with the lights when someone is killed."

"Cici was killed?"

"Yes. Très mauvais."

"Worse than Phibbi?"

“Worse than Phibbi.”

“Tell me now.” *Dites-moi maintenant.*

Liam sees the lights and he knows, knew he shouldn't have left her. Polynice, he doesn't know, but Liam does. He does know. He tries to run inside the inn, but men stop him. They're wearing indigo and one of them has muttonchops. “Yes. Him. He's the one.” He says her name a lot—“Cici”—very loud, and people stare, and some of them are black but not slaves either, and some of them are wearing indigo, and Liam hears things.

*“Raped, they say. And her head cut off. Jesus. Not cleanly. Where's a guillotine when you need one?”* A fat man laughs, and this is what's called guillotine humor. “I don't think that's right.”

“It doesn't matter. N'arrêtez pas.”

“I never will.” Liam has alimony. But that isn't right either. Cici had alimony. One lump payment, Polynice said. She asked for it that way, signed her John Hancock on a lot of papers to get it, promised she wouldn't never ask for more. That's a double negative; wouldn't never; a double negative is bad grammar, and John Hancock means her name. Cici has alimony and a John Hancock and Liam—he has an alibi. “That's different.” Like coffee is different from tea. Liam was with the man with the cameras who doesn't have muttonchops and then he was with Polynice, who is black but isn't a slave and who drives a ship. “One day ships will fly.” And Cici goes by on a stretcher, which is a bed with legs underneath and wheels. It moves. She is inside a bag. Not a paper one. Not the kind you breathe into. She is inside a black bag and there is a space where the fabric goes slack, where it droops between her body and her head. “It shouldn't do that, Bethia.”

“Je sais, mon cher. You’re absolutely right. It’s not supposed to do that.”

The ocean has a push and a pull and it’s rocking him in an empty bassinette. It is soft and he likes the way it feels on his crotch. But he is nauseated, not nauseous, and Cici is inside a bag with her head, and Liam is on a mattress that isn’t stained with grease. How would grease get on a comforter? Do people eat fried chicken in bed? Liam did with Cici, but that was jerk chicken, not fried, and Liam didn’t eat. He doesn’t eat. Will eats. He eats more, he knows, than he really ought, but what choice does he have when he’s eating for two? The only man in history to do so. The surf pulls and pushes and pulls, and it’s not rocking him anymore. It’s driving him. In a car. On a ship. In the backseat. Belowdeck.

“Bethia?”

“Yes, Will?”

“I think I’m going to vomit.”

“It’s all right, cher. Just roll over first.”

And she helps him, and he does.

## CHAPTER IX

### CONCLUSION

I met a woman in a bar who looked like Madame Élisabeth—Louis XVI’s modest and pious sister—only she had black hair instead of dark blonde and really looked nothing like her at all. Of course, this is just going off the available portraits, so it is difficult to say for sure. She looks a little different in each one I’ve seen. Madame Élisabeth, I mean, not the woman I met at the bar. Sometimes she is frowsy and dour, other times round-cheeked and dimpled. In my favorite depiction she is wearing a straw hat with flowers on the brim that I know Erin would have liked, and her eyebrows are too thin and too short, but her mouth is bowed, pink, virginal. She has just a touch of a double chin.

“Napoléon called her the only real man in her family. He said she was the bravest one of them all.” I explained this to my black-haired companion at the bar before taking a drink of soured Bajan punch, and I knew she had no idea that I was lying to her. Madame Élisabeth, after all, did not survive the Terror, and if Napoléon ever knew she existed, I’m sure he never gave her a second thought. She was drawn by cart to the Place de la Révolution, where she recited the 130th psalm with her fellow condemned prisoners and pleaded with the executioner to cover her shoulders once she was strapped onto the board, for him to respect the sanctity of her flesh if not that of her neck. This happened in

May of 1794, nearly seven months after her sister-in-law had already met the same fate—seven months after Cici was supposed to have died as well. But for a princess and a queen, the records had at least a half-shot-in-hell of being correct. Cici, on the other hand—or Cécile de Clément, rather—was a commoner with a common name and a loyal heart and appalling taste in friends, myself included. She wagered big on the validity of her flawed information, and she lost enormously. Then, despite knowing better, I doubled down on a modified interpretation of the same basic facts, and both of us lost all.

“Now, Napoléon,” I said, “you may have heard he was small—the Napoléon complex, and all that. Small dogs who bark big and think they’re danes. But have you ever taken a good look at any of his portraits?” I paused, gave her a few seconds to think. Or not, which actually seemed more likely. “Either every artist living in Europe at the time was trying to suck up by being incredibly generous with his—ah, his masculine endowments, or the guy was packing one massive machete, if you catch my drift.”

The black-haired girl giggled, sucked on her straw, bit a maraschino cherry in two.

I leaned in close, asked, “You know what they say about men with big chins, don’t you?”

Two weighty hands clapped down on my shoulders and squeezed. Tight. I jumped, coughed, choked on mean rotgut rum that burnt my throat and nearly made me spew Will’s last meal into a bowl of stale nuts on the grime-covered bartop—ham and hominy and berries with hand-whipped (by Bethia, of course) cream; it would not have been pretty.

“I don’t know, Liam,” a familiar voice behind me said. “How about big guys with big mouths and even bigger bar tabs who turn off their goddamn phones and disappear for weeks at a goddamn time? What do they say about them?”

The hands spun me around and, fortunately, the stool was one that was built to spin. Otherwise I’d have ended up on the floor, and the impact of falling three-and-a-half feet onto sticky hardwood would’ve surely been enough to joggle things loose inside me. *Jesus*. Just thinking about it was bad enough. I burped, tasted acid. And I thought of my fingers down Cici’s throat, of the spongy fit and the smells of bile and tangy expelled paregoric. *Don’t*.

I looked up, wrenched my mouth into a grin, said, “Bram. How’s Barbados treating you? I can’t imagine you’ve been in town long.” I didn’t wait for a response, gestured without looking at the black-haired girl to my right. “Honey,” I said, “this is my business partner, Bram. He’s a bit of a frowner, as you can see, but just check out the size of that chin. Impressive, eh? And Bram, please allow me to introduce...”—I thought, came up blank, realized I hadn’t the foggiest notion—“Honey.” I made the mistake of nodding affirmatively, and my brain slogged against the front of my skull. The collision of grey-matter-against-bone was staggering.

Bram’s eyes flicked left, and he offered the girl a piece of orange Barbadian currency. “Sorry, Honey,” he said. “But you’ll have to find yourself another date.” She snatched the money from his hand and slipped away, ferret-like, and Bram settled himself onto her barstool. The poor abused thing groaned in protest.

I was facing the wrong way, looking out at the room, and if I hadn’t known better I’d have labeled this place as a dive on the less-ritzy side of Tijuana. The walls were



made of tan particle board, metal-blade fans buzzed overhead like WWI-era fighters' engines, and a nearby stain on the floor looked suspiciously large and dried-crimson-rust. I knew too that the urinal was a painter's bucket with a cake inside, and that the liquor tasted like hooch that had been distilled out back in a bathtub someone previously used to drown their cat. "You didn't have to treat her like she was a hooker." I said this to Bram, to the inhabitants of the room at large.

"You jackass." He grabbed my shoulder, spun me back around to face the bar. Lowering his voice, he said, "She *was* a hooker. Did you fail to notice that fact in between telling your dirty Napoleonic jokes?" He rapped the bar, placed an order for "swill," then he downed in one clean gulp the opaque liquid that the bartender mirthlessly proffered. "She was eyeing you for a John, and for all you know you'd have woken up in some frosty motel room tomorrow, minus one kidney and missing a nut." Bram always did have a way with words. "Drink up," he ordered me. "We've got a plane to catch in"—he checked his watch—"about two hours. You'll be easier to handle if you're plastered."

For as long as I'd known him, he'd had an unparalleled gift for making me feel like a teenager—a knack that Abraham likewise possessed but which he'd ceased to exploit when I, or when Will, was indeed still a teenager. "I don't need to be handled."

"Sure you do." He said this as if it were a given, then raised a hand to order his third shot. "And just in case you're feeling resistant," he added, "thinking about fading away into the genteel life of a white-man's tropical dissipation, you should know that I've put a hold on all the plantation credit cards. You, my friend, are officially cut off from the Visa teat."

“That’s how you found me? By checking the records? Not very crafty, Bram.”

“If it ain’t broke—” He shrugged, left the rest unsaid. Then, “If you wanna stay lost, Liam, don’t leave a paper trail.” He whacked me on the back and it was not, I thought, an unkind gesture. “Either that, or split your time between more than one rat-infested crap hole. That would have at least slowed me down a little, if I picked the wrong one first.”

He had a point and, to be honest, I’d actually been expecting him to find me much sooner. Permitting me two full weeks of radio silence was an uncharacteristically generous move on his part; God only knew what kind of mischief I could get up to in that amount of unsupervised time. “Where’s Jamie?” I asked.

“On his way. He’s hitting your hotel first, busting out your bags and your laptop.”

I rolled my glass between my palms. The brew inside was dark brown and looked vegetal. I didn’t inquire how Jamie planned to accomplish this illegal feat; I just trusted in the fact that he would get the job done. Both in my time and in Will’s, he was the man to go to with a difficult task. “You guys certainly do have rescuing me down to a fine art.”

“Years of practice.” He took my glass away, sniffed, promptly returned it. “To be honest,” he said, “I’m kind of pissed we wasted money on an extra plane ticket. You seem pretty docile this time. I bet just one of us could have tackled you alone.”

“No tackling required.” I sipped, cringed, fought to swallow. “Please.”

“Not like that time in Atlantic City?” He bumped me with his shoulder, nearly knocked me off my stool and onto that terrifying floor.

“I remember.” Cleopatra with the long nails and the champagne and the soft mouth. I’d liked her even though she was a liar and would have stayed with her even

longer if Bram had let me. “There’s really no need at all for us to start recapping my greatest hits.”

“That big woman,” Bram went on regardless, “With all the eyeliner—Man, I thought she was going to fight me for keeps.”

I forced down a mouthful. “What can I say? I am one hunk of tasty Southern man-meat.”

He slammed me on the back again, said, “No argument here,” and he hailed the bartender, arranged payment for our bill, while I finished nursing my punitively rancid drink. Finally I just surrendered and tossed back the remains, knowing that if I ever wasted alcohol, no matter how inferior its quality, Will would never let me hear the end of it.

“Like a nagging grandfather,” I mumbled under my breath. “*When I was your age, Liam, we had to have our rum shipped all the way over from Barbados.*” And Bram glanced at me, then quickly away, in that way he had of letting me know he’d heard me talking crazy but that he was going to do his utmost to ignore it—*For now*, was always the implicit threat. This was the underlying rule that had delineated the boundaries of our friendship for going on eight years by that point, and, despite my initial hopes for this misbegotten pilgrimage, Barbados had done nothing to change this.

We stood outside in a six-inch strip of shade where the metal roof overhung, waiting for Jamie. Bram checked his phone, said Jamie was in the cab, he had my bags, he’d be there any minute. I nodded thanks and we fell into silence. I kicked an empty green bottle and regretted the sound. A child rode by on a yellow bike with neon beads on the wheels, and his younger sister trailed yards behind, arms out, crying. Her brightly

colored underpants showed through her white shorts and Bram took his phone back out, settled against the building's corrugated wall, thumbs tapping. I knew without having to look that he was playing Frogger—the version with original 1980s graphics, where the frog looks like a giant bug—and that he would die at level three. He'd never, so far as I knew, made it past level three. I borrowed his phone once, beat the game in an hour, and the next time I checked, he'd trashed and reloaded the software and was back at square one getting clobbered again by slow-moving trucks.

The sky was cerulean, and the asphalt underfoot felt gummy, and Bram's shoulder near mine was an unnecessary radiator. Usually we had plenty to say to one another, but I felt spent, sucked dry, as if I'd been leached by an overzealous barber surgeon. Will's mama tried to let his blood once when we were puking-sick with yellow fever, but he slapped her hands, sent her and her little knife away, pleaded with Bethia to stand guard over him while we slept.

“You gonna tell me what happened here, Liam?” Bram didn't look up from his game. His thumbs kept moving. The clicks were almost inaudible, then he swore, and I knew he'd died. Jumped off a log into empty water was my guess. “You had appointments.” He must've still had a spare life. “We had a good plan, and we had a deal. You seemed stable enough when you left.”

“As stable as I ever am, you mean?”

“I didn't mean—”

“You've been here before, you know.” And I thought, *In for a penny, in for a fucking pound*, which was one of my mother's expressions, only she didn't normally use

the *fucking*. “It’s understandable that you don’t remember, though,” I added, “seeing as how it’s been more than three hundred years.”

“Please, Liam.” He jerks, hit by a truck. “Let’s not get into this time travel shit now.”

I didn’t even have the energy to fight with him, just said, “It’s not time travel.”

“Yeah, man.” He sighed. *Me or a gator?* “Whatever you say.”

Jamie’s cab pulled up.

I ordered bloody marys on the flight back to Charleston, which was technically cheating because they came with tiny stalks of celery which I ate absently, almost without realizing, gnawing on fiber and all but chewing my cud. I tried but couldn’t remember the last time I’d imbibed something solid other than ice cubes. We were seated in the middle row down the center of the plane, Jamie to my left, Will to my right, and I thought we must have looked to the broad-hipped stewardess like three grizzly bears squashed into toddler-sized car seats holding thimbles full of quickly-drained then frequently-refilled liquor. Jamie elbow-nudged me, asked if I’d seen the redhead across the aisle giving him the eye, and I told him yeah, he should definitely go for that, right up against the cockpit door and I’d give him ten bucks for the floor show. Twenty if she was a natural redhead. “Such crudeness, William.” He tssked, said, “You’re just jealous because we’re going to have beautiful ginger babies, and you’re going to die miserable and alone, still secretly pining for Bram.” Bram’s nose had been buried for the past half hour in the latest issue of *The Journal of Social History*—a special theme edition on the historical politics of suicide which I thought I wouldn’t read for a while, if ever—but he

must have been half-listening because when Jamie said this he reached over, put his hand on my knee, remained deadpan, said nothing. This all happened just as the amply-thighed stewardess was rolling by with the returning drink cart, and she paused, looked at us like we were puppies, asked if us boys had enjoyed our time on the island. Bram glanced up over the top of his magazine, smiled at her in a way Abraham could have never managed. He said, “We always do.”

Will’s ribs are like his body’s siding—bent parallel lines, highly visible that divide his torso into inch-worm segments. Bethia washes his hair, tips his head back into a basin and scoops palmfuls of water onto his brow. Usually she only agrees to do this when he’s ill, but Liam’s most recent bender has taken its toll. It is early morning. They are in the kitchen and the bread is almost baked, and when she is finished with him she wraps his head in an old piece of linen and bids him sit near the hearth. It will be hot enough this afternoon for him to sweat through his shirt—he’ll be knocking down a part of the floodgate wall today that he built off kilter while secondhand-intoxicated—but for now it is still cool-dark and the warmth of the banked coals feels good on his back. Bethia asks him if he can hold some bread down and he says yes, he thinks so, and he asks for jam, the good kind of she’s feeling generous.

On the porch one night after washing down too many Creole shrimp with too many dark ’n stormies that were disproportionately darker than they were stormy, Bram must have been feeling good, satiated, complacent. I was sure the email we’d received that day from the owner of the sugar museum in Barbados had something to do with his

mood. Either that or it was the woman he'd been interested in for a while who had finally agreed to let him take her out for real the following night. I hadn't met her yet, but he said her name was Beth, and I thought, *Jesus I hope not*. When there were only two or three fingers left in our bottle of dark rum, he told me he'd had a feeling about me from the moment we met—opened the door to the office we'd share for the next six years of grad school, arms loaded down with books so he could barely manage it, and there I was, feet up on the desk, playing some computer game neither one of us could remember. It was like he knew me already, Bram said, like we were meant to be brothers. I sucked the fat from a discarded shrimp skull, took a gulp of rum then chased it with a hit of ginger beer straight from the bottle. I asked if I would be the elder or the younger—*You know, would I be the one gettin you into shit, or keepin you outta it?* Bram bounced a shrimp shell off my head, said, *You need to ask? Dumbshit*.

There is a wedding in Charles Towne today and Will and his mama have been invited to attend the festivities after the ceremony. It is a frivolous trip that he would normally refuse to make—there will be time for socializing later, he thinks, once he is rich, after the rice—but his mama pleads with him, then threatens, and to keep her quiet and his tea hot, he loads her into the high-sided voyageur canoe, lifting her because she is ridiculously corseted and can't manage herself, and he brings Pluto along to help him row the flat-bottomed behemoth across the harbor. He meets a woman at the party named Rena who, along with her father, is newly arrived from Williamsburg. He's in shipping, a frog-necked business associate of Henry Brisbane's who has heard that Charles Towne is the place to be, and she wears a round straw bonnet with flowers on the brim and she

holds her punch cup like a man holds a tumbler. Will likes that about her. She reminds him of someone he's seen before, but it takes him five hours of diluted rum to put his finger on the resemblance, and his mama is resplendent in cornflower silk, the slimmest woman there of her age, and she smiles at him over the silver rim of her cup, tells him she thinks Miss Rena looks famished, doesn't she look just famished?, so why doesn't he be a dear and fetch her a plate?, and it is not until after he's in bed that night with Bethia—and she asks him about the party, and he tells her about the cakes and the platters of smoked hog and various kinds of pilau, and Bethia says, *How nice, a father-in-law in shipping*—that Will realizes he's been had.

There was a bastard of an old tree in the middle of the rice field that should have been beautiful but wasn't, since rather than assuming large and graceful proportions it had hulked, bulged, squatted into itself over the years so that in its decrepitude it looked like nothing so much as an overgrown toad with stalagmites bulging out of its head. Jamie turned to Bram, said that since he was our resident expert at frog-killing, he should be the one to devise a plan for its removal, and Bram said screw you, and why are you here anyway?, isn't there a pottery shard somewhere you need to be squinting at? I put one hand on each of their shoulders and told them, boys I think what we have ourselves here is an honest-to-goodness Joe Fuller, and Jamie asked where in the hell that name came from anyway, and Bram and I looked at each other out of long habit, shrugged. Neither one of us had the faintest idea.



Bethia and Will's mama drink tea in the kitchen. He can see only their shadows printed in oiled-paper windows, and he thinks of the very old movies Liam sometimes likes to watch—how whenever things start to get racy, a sheet is raised or the curtains draw shut and all you can see are the silhouettes of two people moving inevitably toward one another, and you know that even before they touch the camera will look away, bashful. Not that Bethia and his mama are leaning in toward each other or doing anything else that is even slightly suggestive. If they were, Will would be watching with considerably more interest. This is just the image that comes to mind. Bethia raises her cup and lowers it. His mama raises her cup and lowers it. After a while Bethia stands and her body exits the scene then returns with the kettle, and it pours, leaves, returns, sits. His mama talks with her hands, and Will thinks of shadow puppets, of birds, and when a third head enters the frame he is puzzled, stumped. It takes him several long minutes to identify it as Moira's.

Looking back on it in the hours when I lay sleepless in Bethia's former bedroom, there were only two possibilities I could bear to consider. The first was that Cici didn't know what was coming. Her records had been disproved once, of course, but that didn't mean they got the main event wrong as well. It does seem pretty cut and dry, after all. A time of death. Something that should be readily obtained. It should be easy to say that Cécile de Clément was drawn to the site of execution at the Place de la Révolution on 16 October 1793; that her cart followed the Queen's, but that she was guillotined first because even amidst the mass social inversions and reorganization taking place, rank still came with its privilege. (Although I'm sure Madame Élisabeth didn't see it this way, that

she would have greatly preferred to face the executioner first rather than turning over the twenty-three people she prayed with one by one to the blade.) Easy to believe in but, as it turned out, all wrong. In this scenario, I like to think that Cici had her last video chat with Sophie, that she did a good job with her makeup, and that the girl didn't suspect a thing. And then she laid down to take a nap, to force Cécily to do her part, and when the prison guards returned to hide the evidence of their work, or when the riot broke out, or when whatever did happen happened—there are no records of this; I've checked—Cici was deeply asleep by then, and she never knew what hit her. I can live with this.

But then there is the possibility that she knew, that she knew or at least suspected. She slung her arms around my neck and she pouted like Veronica Lake and she all but pushed me through the hotel room door, telling me good luck, telling me to go get 'em tiger. And even for Cici and my memory of her over-the-top half clichéd humor, this seems extreme. Just a bit too much, just a bit too kitschy. She should have drooped more, winced a bit when she moved. She should have at least acted reluctant when I left. She should have, would have done something, I thought. Unless she knew. You're in a hotel room with a woman when her head pops off, that never looks good. That ruins the rest of your life.

Unless she knew. Unless she saved me.

Unless she did it—died alone—on purpose.

I was in the basement braiding ropes of garlic for an authentic-looking display on eighteenth-century food storage, and I remembered something half-forgotten, something I'd not thought about in years. A brick around the baseline of the cabin where Will sat one day with a nail when his mama thought he was sick. She insisted he stay in bed, told

her husband that if Will died of fever she was leaving him, going back to her father in Barbados. And Will was only six and he got bored and he had an iron nail, big, like a spike, and— I fling aside the garlic, and stoop, dig with my fingers against the packed-dirt floor. Some of the foundation was sound. We kept it. Original bricks. We liked the idea of original bricks. Very authentic. A good story; just bend down, folks, and see the original bricks; three hundred years old, every last one of them. My nails bend backwards, and I don't care, digging down. I have the wrong spot. I try again. Lose some skin. The index nail is gone altogether. And it's not there, it has to be there because I put it there and it's buried. Things that are buried stay where they're put which, barring an earthquake or some massive upheaval of the earth, is a solid archaeological principle, according to Jamie. But it's gone. It was buried, and now it's gone.

And then I look six inches to the left, and I find it.

Dig around the base, flat on my stomach, grab a flashlight, bend in close.

I trace with my injured finger in the nail-chiseled brick. It is lopsided. It took Will all afternoon to carve. And *Jesus*, I think, *Jesus, oh Lord*. Tap out a last clod of mud and the lettering comes clear. It is misspelled. I laugh, and I am sobbing, and we had only just learned to write, and he never paid as much attention to my name as he did to his own, and so it is misspelled.

It says: *Hi Leeam*.