

LISTON, EMMA ELIZABETH, M.F.A. *The Middle of Emptiness*. (2018)  
Directed by Holly Goddard Jones. 104 pp.

*The Middle of Emptiness* is a work of fiction following Mary Clarke Patrick, an eighteen-year-old high school graduate, as her family moves into a house in New Orleans's French Quarter neighborhood before she begins her first year of college. In the summer between the end of high school and the start of her freshman year, Mary Clarke solves a centuries-old murder mystery that centers around her family's new home and navigates the complicated, closed societies that surround the Greek sororities at Louisiana State University. As Mary Clarke reveals the secrets behind Augusta Lebrun's murder, and discovers the embedded racism of sorority rush, a parallel emerges between the modern era and the past, and Mary Clarke realizes that she and Augusta have more in common than she could have ever known.

This one hundred and four-page excerpt will be included in a fuller version of the novel at large and will be published to the mass market.

THE MIDDLE OF EMPTINESS

by

Emma Elizabeth Liston

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirement for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
2018

Approved by

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Holly Goddard Jones, Michael Parker, and Craig Nova for their time, guidance, and the insights that they gave to this work in order to help me create the best version of this work possible.

I would also like to extend my appreciation to Randall Jarrell and the Jarrell family for the honor of receiving the Randall Jarrell Creative Writing Scholarship in my second year of the Creative Writing program.

## PREFACE

When I started writing this novel, I knew I wanted to address the issues that I witnessed everyday as a young white woman of privilege living in Mississippi and the Deep South at large. However, I wanted to try something unconventional and access a narrative and a viewpoint that I didn't believe was represented fairly in current literature. I decided that my main character would be a young biracial woman, someone coming of age in a time when the political climate surrounding her and the nation was extremely volatile to both people of color and women, discovering the ugly truths of a particular kind of racism that lives within the Greek societies on many university campuses in the United States. As an alumna of a sorority, I have witnessed the execution of the selective process of recruitment and noticed the lack of women of color that have been offered memberships, or purposely shafted so that they are never given the chance to be offered a membership in the first place.

Along with the desire to explore the complicated relationships that come along with being both black and white, I wanted to celebrate New Orleans, a city where the racial spectrum has always been diverse and eclectic. New Orleans is a place where madness is celebrated, where past eras of the city are quite literally layered over one another, and where death and life coexist in a harmony in a way that is foreign in other cities. It is not uncommon to find human remains in the backyard when repairing pipes, and the idea of a dead body so near a house inspired me to create the murder plotline within the novel. By discovering Augusta and her past, Mary Clarke learns that every

woman has to fight for their rights and independence, and that a woman's greatest ally is her fellow woman, no matter their color.

In preparing to write this novel, I did have reservations about creating a biracial character and her family as I have no personal experience in what it is like to be biracial or have people of color in my immediate family. However, the character of Mary Clarke Patrick became an independent spirit within my mind and quickly assumed a will of her own, and I felt that not giving her character life on the page would be a disservice to the world. I approached the topic of race with sensitivity, empathy and kindness, and conducted hours of research to better understand the struggles of biracial people in modern America. I learn something new every day and apply that knowledge to the spectrum of race, sexuality, and income disparity that is present within the novel. I hope that the following work is a fair representation of reality and that I have done the characters justice.

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## PROLOGUE

August 3, 2016

Mary Clarke Patrick woke up for the third night in a row covered in a light sheen of sweat, her sheets tangled around her legs and her arms thrown above her head, crossed at the wrists. Her heart wasn't beating as hard as it had last night, she noted, but the roots of her hair were damp and matted, and all her pillows had been shoved off her bed and lay on the rug by her nightstand. The air around her smelled of old wood and mothballs, an odor her brother Louis called "nasty-ass decrepit house smell", smothering and stale but even more so in the night when the house became unbearably hot. She reached out an arm and slapped her phone on the stack of books by her white noise machine -- it was 2:30 in the morning. The night before she had woken up at one, only an hour after she had gone to sleep. Tonight, she had taken a Tylenol PM and turned off her lights at eleven, thinking she could persuade her brain into calming down with chemicals and responsible sleep habits. But it hadn't worked, just like the Sleepytime Tea she had borrowed from her father two days ago hadn't worked.

Her reoccurring nightmare was about being buried alive. She had done extensive searching on the internet about the meaning of being buried in dreams and had come up with the same content, over and over again. *The things causing you anxiety and stress in your life need to be thrown away*, said one site. *You have let events build up to a point*

*beyond your control, and now you risk being completely destroyed!* Of course, the real reason she had nightmares stemmed directly from the discovery she had made three days before: Augusta Lebrun's body had been clandestinely buried in the Patricks' backyard one hundred and seventy years ago, give or take a few years. She could toss out all of the research that she had done on the house, the antiquated letters and newspaper clippings she had studied for hours, but she could not throw away a dead body, or an entire home. She would tell someone when the time was right, when she did more research, when she found the body, when she had finally calmed down enough to stop jolting awake in the middle of the night.

The nightmares always went like this: someone, probably a man, had whacked her over the head with a shovel. She didn't know why she knew it had been a shovel, but she could feel the massive gash on the back of her skull pulsating blood through her hair -- and even though that kind of wound ought to have killed her, or at least knocked her out, she was conscious. She couldn't see, or couldn't open her eyes, but she could hear the grating sound of the same shovel carving into rocky earth and the grunts of the digger to her left.

And because time in dreams was cyclical and strange, she was simultaneously being dragged into whatever shallow hole the person, the murderer, had dug, while lying still and listening to the shovel slam into the ground over and over again. When the first pile of dirt hit her face, that's when she started to freak out, both in her dream-reality and in her sleeping state -- she tried to move, tried to open her eyes, but she was frozen. From the state of her bed and pillows, she concluded that she was flailing in real time, but to no

result in her dream. With each inch of dirt thrown onto her face, it had become harder to breathe, easier to give into panic, and when she realized that she was suffocating, that's when she tried to scream. She always woke up right after she discovered she couldn't open her mouth, that it felt as if it had been sewn shut.

Mary Clarke pushed the covers off her legs with her feet and glared at the broken ceiling fan above her bed. It was hot as hell in the house – her fan had broken the day before, and the air conditioning didn't do shit. Earlier that week her father had called a repairman, who had mostly stood around and spat into her mother's jasmine in the courtyard. "With these old houses, nothing ever works good," he had said with a shrug. "Even if you try to modernize it, the house structure don't wanna work with the new systems. Sometimes you just gotta live with it."

They were living with a lot of issues – bats in the attic-space-slash-third-floor; a gutter on the side-street that didn't work well when it rained, flooding the courtyard and their garage; a chandelier that wobbled wildly when the back door closed, threatening to collapse on top of anyone who might be unlucky enough to stand underneath it; and someone who was repeatedly taking a leak on the front of their house, who had yet to be apprehended. Her father had wanted to set up security cameras outside by the front door, but her mother had waved that idea away. *They'd just get stolen*, she had said. Why tempt the pedestrians on St. Louis Street to get closer to the front door than they already were?

Mary Clarke had provoked her mother the night before over dinner, when halfway into their chicken picante, Marianne had chosen to complain about how hard it was to renovate the house when the environment and neighborhood around them was so harsh

and chaotic. *Well, you wanted to live in the French Quarter*, Mary Clarke had said. *We're all here because of you*. And oh my god, had she gotten chewed out, to the point that Marianne had started stomping around in the kitchen to prove how mad she was, and her father and brother gave her those looks of *See what you did?*, but it was *true* – they'd still be living happily in Mandeville, unbothered by floods and bats and rogue public urination, if it weren't for Marianne and her #housegoals. And while she was getting yelled at for being unhelpful and snippy, Mary Clarke felt herself float away from the mahogany-dominant dining room and back to her seat at the old battered wooden table in Mandeville, stealthily watching the Saints play on Monday Night Football out of the corner of her eye from the TV in the living room, the crickets in the backyard the only disruptive sound in the night.

Now, the steady noise from the street outside seeped underneath doors and windowsills and invaded their home – the constant wail of sirens as policemen picked up public drunks and petty thieves from Bourbon Street, the laughter and shouts of tourists walking past their front door at all hours, and on a rare day, when the cacophony outside died down during the high noon heat, they could even hear the tinkling calliope music and thundering horn of the Natchez steamboat, reverberating through their walls from where the ship was anchored on the river. It had taken her a week to stop jumping when she heard footsteps outside their front door – thanks to the odd angles inside the house, it often sounded as if someone was walking in their foyer, taking a private tour.

She needed water really bad, her throat was dry and patchy, and she had sweat the equivalent of one barre class's worth of bodily fluid into her sheets. She swung her legs

to the side of the bed and searched the rug for her slippers with her toes, unplugged her phone from the charge cord, and walked over to the French door that gave her access to the balcony over the sidewalk. In lieu of a blackout curtain, her mother had hung a sheet over the thin glass panes to block out the light of street lamps, but it didn't help much – every night, her room was inundated with a harsh orange glow. She pulled the sheet back an inch and surveyed the street – all was quiet. Behind her, the door to the hallway creaked open.

She almost threw her phone at the intruder but recognized her brother's cantankerous expression as he stuck his head through the gap in her door. "The hell you doing?" he said. "Waking me up with all your hollering and banging around, what's going on?"

"I was having a nightmare. Go away."

"Well damn," he said. "Sorry for thinking you were getting murdered and being concerned." He pushed open the door and leaned on the frame, looking over his shoulder at the dark stairwell. "You, uh, need anything from downstairs? 'Cause I was gonna go get a Tylenol or something, if you want to come with me."

She patted her silk head wrap, hoping that it was still tied in place. "Yeah, I need water," she said, walking over to the door and pushing him off of the frame. "You first."

She followed Louis into the hall, stopping to make sure that they hadn't woken up their parents, listening for her father's lawn-mower snores. Louis hesitated on the first step, the weight of his foot emitting a cracking squeak that sounded like a gunshot in the silence. Mary Clarke waved her hands at him, hastening down the stairs before they could

make any more noise, and they tiptoed down the steps, hands gripping the railing. They still weren't used to walking around the house in the dark, still unsure where the sharp corners of coffee tables ended and where doorways began – Louis turned on the flashlight on his phone and led the way to the kitchen, swiveling the light to illuminate the inside of the parlor and the dining room as they passed by. The phone cast the shadows of the furniture and chandeliers into harsh lines, and Mary Clarke thought of the found-footage horror films she liked so much, and decided she liked them a lot less when her new home looked like a potential movie set.

The kitchen was the only room that didn't look like a museum showcasing popular mid-Nineteenth century furniture styles, and therefore it was her favorite part of the house – it was the size of a laundry room, because it had been a laundry room in 1840, or some kind of linen closet, which made it feel cozy, safe. Louis opened the medicine cabinet above the microwave, and she opened the fridge and grabbed the filtered water pitcher. That was another thing about living in the Quarter – the tap water was unpotable, since the house still had lead pipes from the Thirties.

The floorboards in the dining room creaked, and Louis dropped the Tylenol bottle. He was behind Mary Clarke in a half-second, his hand tight on her arm, while the bottle rolled around inside the sink, the pills clattering together as they shifted. They stood there, frozen, listening around the noise for another footstep, and Mary Clarke held her breath, ready to punch anyone who turned the corner in the windpipe.

“Bruh, this house is so fucking haunted, I swear to god...” Louis whispered in her ear.

“Calm down, psycho,” she said as she pushed him off her arm. “Not every noise is a ghost. But it totally could be someone breaking in to rob and murder us, that’s possible.”

In fact, every day since they had moved in at the end of May, she expected someone to be lurking out of sight, whether inside the house or in the courtyard out back, waiting for them to let their guard down just long enough to pounce. Louis, on the other end of the spectrum, had started burning sage and placing protective crystals around his bedroom after the first night in the house. He thought it was something supernatural, claimed that there was a bad energy in the walls, and she had offered to lend him some of her anxiety self-help books and he had slammed his bedroom door in her face when she started to laugh. But Louis was right, in a sense – the old house definitely had its own personality, its own noises, its own quirks. It felt alive without any people inside of it, awake and sentient, but it definitely wasn’t a ghost. It *wasn’t* a ghost. No ghosts at all, nuh-uh, nope.

“You’re walking with me up the stairs, I don’t care,” Louis said, grabbing the Tylenol bottle from the sink and shoving it in the pocket of his pajama pants. “Cause if there is someone waiting to get us, I’m pushing you down and sacrificing you while I run for it.” He held his phone out in front of him like a weapon, shining the flashlight in every corner of the hallway. Mary Clarke downed her cup of water and walked behind him, trying to shake the feeling that something was following her close behind in the dark.

The house was a puzzle, a Nancy Drew book come to life, a mausoleum where the past and the present comingled, where sometimes Mary Clarke would walk into the shed in the courtyard and see the outdoor kitchen that used to occupy the space, and often when she walked into the garage that used to be a stable, she was startled when she saw her mother's Land Rover and not a carriage of some sort. She had let her imagination run away with her when studying the blueprints of the house through the years, seeing the rooms as they had been in her mind's eye, allowing herself to walk into another reality where she wore crinolines and a hoop skirt that barely fit through the doorways. Of course, if she had really lived in the house in the 1800's, she wouldn't be sitting in the parlor – no, she'd be sleeping on a cot in the slave's quarters on the third floor, serving someone their after-dinner coffee, fending off the white men in the house when they tried to corner her in the hallways. She'd be beaten, or worse sold at auction, if she fought back; she'd be shipped upriver to a sugarcane plantation and worked to death in a field, cooking under the sun, dying in childbirth and buried with only a rock to mark her grave, if her owners felt generous that day. Augusta had been murdered and buried hastily somewhere under her parents' nose, which was awful, but not as horrifying as the concept of life as a slave. A white girl had been murdered, a privileged one, who probably thought she had been safe. But Mary Clarke was learning that no woman was safe, not really, not in this world.

And now the idea of Augusta was haunting her – Augusta walking down the upstairs hallway, looking for her maid to help her get dressed for an evening ball at the opera; Augusta sleeping in Mary Clarke's bed, in what used to be her bedroom; Augusta



reading the newspaper in the living room in front of the fireplace, waiting for any afternoon callers; Augusta bleeding out on the bricks in the courtyard, her eyes glassy in the reflection of the sun. She had to tell someone, she was going to tell someone, but she didn't have enough proof yet, the time wasn't right. She wanted to tell Louis, but it would trigger a meltdown and he'd be spilling everything to their parents before she even finished the story. She'd tell her parents, but they'd second-guess her, demand evidence that she hadn't successfully compiled.

She stopped at the base of the stairs and checked her phone. It was 2:45, and she felt more awake than she ever did in the daytime. Louis paused on the third step and waited for her, the orange glare from the streetlight outside shining in his eyes.

“I left something in the kitchen,” she said. “I’ll be up in a minute.”

He squinted at her through the darkness and sighed, glanced at the second-floor landing and took the steps two at a time as best as he could. She waited until she heard his bedroom door close before turning back to the long hallway that led to the courtyard.

She had never been outside their house at night, but she had done it all the time in Mandeville when she couldn't sleep – she'd climb up on the porch swing in their backyard and swat away mosquitoes, play on her phone until the night air became too chilly to bear. There wasn't a swing on their new back porch, but there was a marble fountain wide enough to sit on.

She disabled the alarm and slipped out the back door, catching the screen before it had the chance to slam against the frame. Everything was still except for the fountain and the distant sound of a piano, blending in with the movement of the water from one tier to

the next. She sat on the edge of the bottom basin and looked out across the courtyard. She didn't smoke, but she wished she had a cigarette, just to do something with her hands.

*Where are you?*, she wondered. Under the flagstones under her feet? The flower beds? The garage that was a stable? The shed that was a kitchen? Under the house itself? Somewhere in the walls? She didn't know if she could handle another night of sleeplessness. She had to meet her roommate at Target tomorrow, or today, to pick out matching towels for their dorm room. *Where are you?*

A few streets over, a woman laughed, and the sound echoed in the courtyard and went through Mary Clarke's chest. Ghosts weren't real, but people were real, and Augusta had been real. The door to the shed rattled as a breeze whipped past her ears. *Ghosts aren't real.* Something rustled the jasmine leaves behind her. *Where are you?* It felt as if someone was sitting on the other side of the fountain, but she was too afraid to look.

The woman laughed again, and Mary Clarke felt the wind shift around her.

## CHAPTER ONE

May 12, 2016

There's an unspoken rule in New Orleans: you absolutely do not live in the French Quarter unless you're crazy, or unless you're Brad Pitt or Nicholas Cage or you can afford to have a multi-million-dollar townhome that you refer to as 'your place in New Orleans' over cocktails at the Golden Globes or whatever. Therefore, the entire prospect of buying a rotted, crumbling, three-story brick disaster of a house to renovate and live in as one's full-time home was ridiculous. This was Mary Clarke Patrick's opinion, and she aired it aloud whenever the ludicrous nature of her mother's "home improvement project" was brought up in conversation.

Because the thing about the French Quarter, at its core, was that it was a deeply unlivable rectangle of a neighborhood at the very heart of a city that was already difficult to live in. Normal people avoided it at all costs, unless it was Mardi Gras or if they were going to supper at one of the ancient restaurants that were scattered through the Fourth Ward. For the most part, the denizens of the Quarter were homeless people, runaway kids who had gotten hooked on heroin, old junkies, prostitutes who were sometimes strippers, tourists from Michigan, and the Saints fans who packed the bars on Bourbon whenever there was a game. As a child, Mary Clarke had seen a man held up at knifepoint in Pere Antoine's Alley and had never forgotten the gleam of the streetlight on the edge of the

blade at the poor tourist's throat — it was enough to make her the French Quarter's Number One Hater. And her parents were moving there.

The whole house looked like shit. That was Mary Clarke's first impression — the walls seemed unstable, the roof looked like it hadn't been repaired in ten years, and the chimney top was lopsided. She tapped her fingers on her steering wheel and sighed.

It would never feel like her home, even if her mother negotiated with renovators and mortgage brokers to make the house into something beautiful and clean. The brick facade and second floor balcony felt like a barricade — a grimy, pee-soaked wall between her and the kind of white people that liked to buy antebellum houses and pretend that their great-great-great grandparents had built them. In hindsight, she should have believed her instincts, taken stock of the natural repulsion she felt, and should have refused to move in before she left for LSU in August. But she accepted the fact that she had to play along and act excited to move into the dump. As much as she liked to antagonize her Mom, she didn't want to hurt her feelings.

She pulled up alongside the house after driving through the French Quarter for ten minutes, hopelessly lost in the labyrinth of one-way streets and roads torn up for sewage system repairs, she wondered whether she ought to park her Honda under the second-floor balcony or not -- there was green mold growing on the bottom of the wood planks and it looked as if a stray gust of wind could trigger a collapse onto her car. She sucked her teeth and glanced around the street, looking for a meter or any sort of signage that could tell her the parking rules, but she found nothing, just a man in a cook's apron smoking a cigarette across the road.

She put her car into park and cracked her neck, checked her hair in the mirror, and looked all around her car before opening her door and stepping out onto the oil-stained asphalt. It was wet from being hosed down, but the stench of urine and hot garbage steamed up from the pavement anyway. She locked her car immediately and stepped onto the sidewalk, well away from under the balcony, and tried to take in the outward facade of the house.

“You can’t look at it that way, love,” the man across the street yelled. She glanced over out of the corner of her eye and tried not to meet his gaze, but he was chuckling as if he knew exactly what she was avoiding. “Come on over here towards me and I’ll show ya.”

She grimaced at him and he laughed high up in his nose, waving his cigarette around in his hand. “I ain’t gonna rob and snatch ya, baby, I got work today and I wanna ask you something.”

“Oh Jesus Christ,” she muttered, gripping onto her cross-body purse and looking down the street towards the intersection at Dauphine. It was eleven on a Sunday and there weren’t many people out yet, just her and this man who might murder her and steal her credit cards. He was looking at her expectantly and wearing a cheerful yellow apron — a line cook on a break, probably, just trying to get some ass. She gripped the strap of her purse tightly and crossed the road, reminding herself to stay a few yards away at all times. If her mother drove up and saw her doing this, she’d never hear the end of it.

“You gotta look at these carriage houses from the other side of the street,” he said as she walked briskly. “Otherwise you can’t see all the floors. That one you parked in front of is old as hell and crumbling. Wouldn’t stand under that shit if I were you.”

“Yeah, I see that,” she said as she eyed the place. From the other side of the street, it looked so much worse — the brick near the top of the second-floor windows had been eaten away by years of rain and the shingles were slowly peeling up and away from the roof. She looked back at the man and found him eyeing her.

“What you doing over here?” he said. “Can tell you’re not comfortable ‘cause of the way you parked that car.”

“I’m scoping out the neighborhood,” she said. He didn’t seem too intent on killing her, thank god. He finished off his cigarette and threw it in the gutter, fished out another from the pack in his shirt pocket. “What’s it like on the block?”

“Huh,” he said, lighting his fresh one and taking a drag. “St. Louis is okay, only ‘cause you got Bayona over there on Dauphine, and Antoine’s and the Hermes Bar down the block that way.” He pointed south. “Usually it’s a buncha tourists walking around Bourbon looking for a spot to eat, drink, or fuck. I work this place behind me on the weekends and on Mondays, and then the dive next to it is a daiquiri bar, and that gets rough towards the end of the week.”

“What about northwards?” she asked, turning to look up the street. The man shrugged his shoulders and didn’t make a comment. She sighed and fished her phone out of her purse and took a picture of the front of the house.

“Looking for an apartment?” he asked, and she shook her head. “New to the city?”

“I live in Mandeville,” she said, unwilling to tell him that she was soon to live across the street. She could envision that conversation in her head - she’d tell him that her parents bought the house, and then he’d ask her about it, getting the details of how much it cost and the renovations they were planning on doing, and he’d do some mental math and wait until they moved in to loiter out front and get an eyeful of their stuff coming out of the rental truck. Maybe he’d wait a few days for them to gain a sense of security before he broke in and shot them in their beds, steal all her mother’s unnecessary china and jewelry, and run out the front door.

“A sister like you in Mandeville?” he asked and shrugged when she didn’t offer an explanation. “What’s your name?”

“Mary,” she said. He didn’t need to know her whole name. “What’s yours?”

“Jamarquez,” he replied, reaching out a hand. She gave it a brief shake before stepping back to her spot on the sidewalk. “I’m about to go back in there and get to work, you want a drink?”

“I’m not old enough to drink,” she said. It sounded so lame. “What’s this place called?”

“Bar Mon Cher,” he said, glancing behind him at the door. It was dark inside, lights off and clearly not open for business. “My brother owns it, I work behind the counter. It doesn’t open until two, but I’d make you a drink or something to eat specially

for you. Don't really matter if you're twenty-one or not, nobody checks us since all the wild places are on Bourbon."

She looked at the bar again. It wasn't the worst one she had seen, or the dirtiest, and the inside looked well-decorated and somewhat respectful. Her mother was due to arrive at the house at eleven-thirty, and it was only ten minutes past the hour. She pressed her lips together and nodded. "Sure, y'all got a sandwich or something?"

"Yeah, I can whip something up," Jamarquez said as he turned around and fished a ring of keys out of his pocket. He shuffled them around until he found a gold one and shimmed it into the lock, giving it a wrench and pushing the door open. The frame squeaked as he propped it inward with a stopper. "Come on in."

Jamarquez flipped on the lights and slipped behind the bar. It was cozier on the inside than it looked on the outside - the benches along the walls were lined with dark blue suede and the ceiling was painted an indigo color that made her feel like she had wandered in at midnight. "How long have you worked here?"

"Round about five years," he said. "My brother's owned this place for far longer than that, but I came over here to start bartending and cooking when I got kicked outta the kitchen over at Arnaud's. I didn't arrange a plate the right way or something artsy like that, and after a few times they asked me to leave, politely, but they were mad, I could tell."

She climbed onto one of the barstools and pushed her sunglasses to the crown of her head. He handed a menu over the tops of bottles and she looked at it for a moment; she could tell that he was eyeing her, trying to decipher her origins from her clothes and



her natural hair and her blue eyes. She glanced up at him and he looked down, pretended as if he had been prepping the bar instead of staring. “What do you know about that house across the street, other than the fact that’s it’s a safety hazard?”

“It’s been empty for a couple of years, but before that it was some sorta apartment, like ‘originally preserved historic lofts’ or something like that.” He curled his fingers into air quotes. “I think the man that ran it couldn’t find the money to keep it up. Last I heard someone bought it, but I don’t know for what. I don’t think it would make a good home, you know what I’m saying?”

“No, why?” she asked, swiveling on her barstool and looking back at it. So far there weren't any other cars parked on the street, which was a good sign. She still had time to dig for info. “Is it haunted or something? Do people break in?”

“Nah, none of that,” he said, popping the cap off a Corona and handing it over to her. “It’s a mess trying to live near Bourbon, and it’s too damn big for my taste. I went in there once, back when it was still apartments, before the rooms were rented out. It’s got something like fifteen bedrooms, a couple of bathrooms, a room on the third floor where the slaves lived. It’s also got a courtyard out back. That place would cost a damn leg to upkeep.”

“Slaves’ quarters?” she said. “In the house?”

“Yeah, honey,” he said, as if shocked that she didn’t know by now. “After they showed me that room, I got the hell on out of there. That didn’t sit right with me - someone keeping their people up in the attic, reminds me of that Lalaurie house, ya know? Plus, I believe in vibes, and I don’t want that sort of energy in my domicile.”

She hummed, took a swig of her Corona and raised her eyebrows. Her mother certainly hadn't mentioned that detail about the house. In her mind's eye she saw a cramped, cobweb-filled space where rusted chains hung from the ceiling, rattling in the wind that whipped through a crack in the windowpane. "You think all houses have rooms like that in the Quarter?"

"Probably," he said. "But it's different when it's right across the street and 'preserved' to look like it's 1850 or some shit."

"I'll take a BLT," she said, handing the menu back over the bar. A car passed by outside and she glanced over her shoulder, but it continued down the street. Sunday's silence most likely had a lot to do with Saturday night's drinking — she should have found a way down here last night, she realized. Then she could have really taken the temperature of what an average weekend night's damage would look like.

"So, Miss Mandeville," Jamarquez said. "You never said exactly why you was out here checking out this street." He reached under the bar and pulled a container of fried bacon from a mini-fridge, peeled off the top and sniffed at it suspiciously.

"My Mom decided that she wanted to buy a historic home," she said. "'Take back the narrative of the history of her ancestors', or something. They're gonna move in before I go to college."

He raised his eyebrows and slapped a knife covered in mayonnaise onto a slice of white bread. "And I bet they bought that one across the street, huh?"

She pursed her lips and the man laughed as he shredded lettuce and put it on top of her bacon. "I wasn't going to say anything, considering," she said.

“You did alright, but I have better instincts,” he said. “You shouldn’t be telling no stranger where ya gonna live anyways. Neighbors, that’s a little different, though.” He scooted the BLT across the counter on a purple plate. “I can get you some Zapp’s with that too, if you want.”

“Do you have salt and vinegar?” she asked, and he fished a bag from under the counter. “Thanks.”

She snapped off the ends of the bacon and chewed, recalculating her original assessment of the man in front of her. Jamarquez was quiet for a moment, wiping the bread crumbs off the counter top until he sighed and stared up at the ceiling. “I didn’t go to college,” he said. “My brother did, wasn’t enough money for me to go, too, but my folks moved from the Fourth Ward to the Ninth Ward right after he left. I switched schools and all that. I get your pain.”

“My younger brother Louis isn’t switching schools, but he’s upset about moving away from his friends,” she said after chewing. “He only has a couple.”

“And you mad?” he said.

“Nah, just confused,” she said. “I mean, they could’ve waited until after I left.”

A flash of light darted across the bar’s wall and Mary Clarke turned to see her mother’s Land Rover pull up behind her car. She groaned, looked down at her sandwich and chewed a little faster. Jamarquez leaned to the left and peered behind her and grinned when her mother stepped out of the car.

“Now I know that gotta be your mama,” he said to himself with a chuckle. “Y’all look exactly the same.” Marianne stepped out of the car into the middle of the street and

dug around in her giant purse, probably in search of her own pair of sunglasses, but to Mary Clarke she looked like a prime target for battery and robbery.

“I should probably go, but thanks for the food,” she said, pulling out her wallet. “How much is it?”

“Seven dollars for you,” he said. “Twelve for everyone else. You ain’t gonna finish it?”

She found a ten-dollar bill in her wallet and handed it over. “Keep the change. I guess I can chug it real quick. I can take my sandwich with me.”

“I’ll get a to-go bag for you,” he said. She tilted the beer back and took another swig, took the moment to pray for college to come quickly and soon so she could have a damn beer whenever she wanted and not worry about her parents finding out. She set the bottle on the counter and wiped her mouth with the bar napkin, dug a stick of gum out of her bag and slipped off the stool. Jamarquez came out from around the bar and handed her a brown bag, her sandwich already making a ring of grease on the paper. “Come back when we’re open next time, alright? And bring your ma over so I can introduce myself.”

“I will,” she said, considering all the possibilities of having a bar directly across the street from her new house. “Thanks again.” He waved her off and she walked out onto the sidewalk, squinting her eyes at her mother.

Marianne was standing in the eave next to the wooden door, shuffling keys around in her hand. “Mom,” Mary Clarke said from the other side of the street. “It’s the big silver one.”

“I was wondering where you were,” she said, glancing up and down the street. Her hair caught the sun, illuminating the light brown highlights among her mother’s black curls. “Where did you come from?”

“I got here about fifteen minutes ago, I went into that place for a water and a bite while I waited for you,” she said, smacking her gum. “The key to the front door is the long silver one.”

“Oh,” her mother said, picking it out of the pile in her hand. Mary Clarke looked both ways before stepping back into the street and made her way over to her mother before someone turned the corner and snatched the keys out of her hand. Marianne put the correct key in the lock and jiggled it to the right, and the door clicked loudly. “How did you remember that?”

“I memorized all the new keys, just in case we get locked out,” she said. Marianne pushed the door open and yanked the key out of the lock and walked into the dim foyer. Mary Clarke stood in the doorway and looked in, her eyes taking in the floating staircase and the chandelier wrapped in white cloth. “Wow.”

“I know, isn’t it huge?” Marianne said, and her voice echoed to the top of the cobwebbed ceilings. She stood off to the left, in a room dominated by a white marble fireplace that had spidery black veins running through the mantel. She swiped a finger across the top and came away with a layer of dust that Mary Clarke could see from ten feet away - her mother held it up to her eyes with an excited smile. “It’s gonna take a lot of cleaning, way too much for us to do by ourselves, so at some point we’ll have to hire a crew to do the things we can’t, like polishing the floors and dusting the fixtures.”

“So how many stories is it, total?” Mary Clarke asked, walking into the room. There was an archway that connected the space to another room, one just as long and rectangular as the one they were in. If she had to guess, a dining room, maybe.

“Well, there are two floors, the bedrooms are upstairs,” her mother said, walking back into the foyer and looking up at the stairs. “And then there’s an attic space, which would have been a third floor and a slave’s quarter, probably.”

“What’s up there?” she said.

“A bunch of crap,” her mother replied. “Boxes, spare bathroom tiles, cans of old paint, a few paintings in dust covers, an old bed frame. I’ve already gone through it — I can refurbish the paintings and the bed frame, and there’s a chest full of old receipts that I think the city would like to have for the archives.” Mary Clarke nodded and frowned, looking away from her mother and down the hall that to lead to the back of the house. “But other than that, it looks like it’s been ransacked by hipsters looking for ‘antiques’. Come upstairs first, I’ll show you the bedrooms and you can pick yours out, and then you can explore all you want.”

The wooden stairs creaked ominously with every step she took, and her mother looked back at her and rolled her eyes. “I know what you’re thinking, and I had them checked out. The house inspector said the stairs were old but stable. He thinks they might be original, along with the floors. We’ll have to put down some type of runner, so they won’t get scratched, it’s a miracle that they haven’t been more damaged than they are.”

The second floor was hardly cleaner than the first, with more spider webs and a sense of desolation that the first floor had lacked. The doors stood halfway open, the light

from the windows harsh against the walls of the empty rooms. Her mother walked down the hallway and pushed open the second door on the right.

“Here’s the bathroom. You and Louis will have to share it, sorry about that,” she said. “But you can have your choice of the rooms on either side of it. The one facing the balcony has a French door that opens onto it, but the one at the back has more room.”

“The balcony looks rotten,” Mary Clarke said, walking into the room closest to the stairs. “I saw its underbelly; the boards were covered with green.”

“They are rotten, but they can be replaced pretty easily,” she said, leaning against the doorframe. “That’s one of the first things we can do before we even move in. Do you want this room, then?”

Mary Clarke liked the idea of being able to slip outside whenever she wanted, to be elevated above the street, to spy on the people below. She imagined herself sitting out there at two in the morning, sipping on a coffee and looking very mysterious, even though she hated coffee. “Sure, this can be my room. I’ll let Louis have the one with more space since he’ll be here longer than me.”

Her mother smiled brightly but it seemed off, the brightness not reaching her eyes. Marianne turned and gripped the stair railing. “The contractors are supposed to meet me here at noon, but you can stay and explore if you like. The stairs are safe, and if you want to go to the attic area and poke around in all that junk then you can. Those stairs are around the backside of the house, though.”

“Oh, why?” she said as she followed Marianne downstairs. Her mother shrugged, and she imagined a little slave girl running up and down the stairs, the only way to get to

her bed in a way that wouldn't remind the white people in the house that she lived in their attic.

“They put the stairs back there because they didn't have room for them inside the house. And they didn't want slaves using the formal stairs for anything other than work.”

Marianne's phone rang, and she hurried down the stairs, answering the call with her professionally peppy tone. Mary Clarke took her time going down the stairs, tested each step as she went for weakness and bend, until she walked down the dark hallway and left her mother behind her. She passed the rectangular room and peeked in the next doorway. It was a kitchen, smaller than the one they had in Mandeville but with shiny new appliances. Across the hallway was a laundry room, huge in comparison to the one they had now. The proportions of the house confused her; everything was either too large or too small and none of the rooms seemed to have any electrical outlets. It was as if the apartments had never been disbanded, as if she and her family were going to live amongst the period furniture that her mother would inevitably buy, out of place among the relics of a different time.

The back courtyard was beautiful, and she found it the only aesthetically redeeming part of the house - someone, perhaps the ladies of the realtor's office, had planted rows of climber roses that had inched their way up the brick walls that confined the space from the street. Hedges of blue and pink hydrangea bushes were scattered in the corners, filling up the negative space left by the roses. An ancient-looking fountain was the focal point of the space, its black tiers covered in layers of moss, and an inch of brown water lay stagnant in its bottom basin. A mosquito landed on her arm and she



smacked it, leaving behind a small explosion of blood, probably someone else's -- she lifted the hem of her shirt and wiped it away.

A small brick shed stood off to the side, and Mary Clarke thought about looking inside it before she noticed that it was padlocked. There was a larger brick building with the same slate roof as the house dominating the back left-hand side of the courtyard, and she walked towards the wooden door that faced the rose and hydrangea bushes. It was pitch black inside, but she could smell motor oil and the dry, grassy smell that all garages shared, so she shut the door behind her and turned towards the back porch.

The stairs on the back side of the house were barely hanging on to the brick, and even from the ground she could tell that the steps were warped by water damage and looked just as rickety as the balcony out front. She heard her mother call out from the inside of the house, her voice upswept and overly-joyful, the tone she put on for strangers and unexpected company. She checked her watch - noon on the dot. She walked up the back steps and opened the door to the shotgun hallway, double-checking to make sure her mother wasn't being assaulted. A white man in a polo shirt and khakis stood with a clipboard and a calculator next to the front door, and her mother saw her concern and waved her off.

"Going to the third floor," she said, and her mother nodded as the contractor punched in numbers. She shut the back door with an eye-roll -- she could be thirty and her mother would still give her the "I'm On the Phone" look if Mary Clarke bothered her enough.

She had been right about the warping - the stairs slanted down to the left and creaked as badly as the main staircase in the house. With every step the framework jiggled underfoot she had visions of the whole thing detaching from whatever kept it hitched to the side of the house and hurling her to the stone bottom of the courtyard below. She went faster on the flight up to the third floor, dodged a low-hanging spider web and a dead cockroach and stood on the landing, sweat beading on her upper lip.

There was only one door on that floor, a simple wooden one that looked very much like the door that led to the interior of the garage. It had no lock, just a rusting doorknob that probably had stopped turning sometime in the last fifty years; she gave it a good yank and the door opened with a groan. The doorknob wobbled in its post and she made a mental note to locate a screwdriver the next time she was here.

The inside was bigger than she expected, well-lit from the two attic windows that faced the buildings across the street. The room was packed full of bulky pieces of furniture with white sheets thrown over them, boxes stacked on top of other boxes, piles of tile flooring that had been left over from renovations past, an old refrigerator that looked as if it weighed a ton. Jamarquez's words floated into the back of her mind and they kept her in the doorway -- this is where they kept her people locked up overnight, where human beings were stored until they were needed the next day. Like tools in a shed.

She waited to receive the bad vibes that he had gotten, but to her surprise she felt nothing. There wasn't any sense of pain, or the feeling of being watched that people attributed to haunted houses. There certainly weren't any chains hanging from the ceiling,

either -- there was only the maze of relics from the house's previous inhabitants and her, standing in the doorway. It felt homely and comfortable, snug and safe, which confused her. The rest of the house had felt cold and grandiose, the arrogance of its builders etched into the crown molding on the walls and in the layout of the rooms. This space was humble and harmless, and she stepped inside and began to wind her way through the unsteady stacks.

She plotted the room in her mind's eye -- it could probably fit three or four twin beds comfortably, but there was a possibility that even more people were forced to live up here to conserve space. She grimaced as she waved a cobweb out of her way and wiped her hand on her jean shorts. Her mother had cleaned out the attic considerably -- the only things left were the boxes and pieces of furniture too heavy for one woman to lift by herself. She was tempted to start opening lids and flipping through the contents, but she knew that there were at least a few spiders lurking around there, perhaps a brown recluse or a black widow just waiting to bite a rogue hand. She ventured towards the back of the room towards the windows, where the light was better, and the boxes were replaced by long, low trunks and a few wardrobes.

The furniture looked very old, older than anything she'd seen so far in the house. They were caked with dust and dirt but resembled mahogany or cherry wood, which she knew was extremely expensive thanks to her mother's endless books on interior design. She crouched and examined the one nearest to the right-hand wall -- it seemed relatively spider-free, so she put her fingers under the lid of the first trunk and lifted. It didn't budge, just groaned as she put more force on it, and it was only after a few minutes of

battling the chest that she realized a small key was sticking out of its keyhole. Feeling like an idiot, she twisted the key and rolled her eyes when it clicked smoothly.

Under the lid was an ocean of papers, all yellowed and crinkled with age, some of their edges eaten away by mice or silverfish. She picked up a sheet, trying to decipher the swirling script and the chart that was drawn on it, but she couldn't see shit in the dim lighting. She placed it on the top of a nearby box and dove back in, picking up papers and trying to find a semblance of an order. Most of them seemed to be bills of some sort, written in Italian and English, but some looked like personal correspondence, and she set those off to the side in their own little pile.

There wasn't anything else in the trunk of note and she was a little disappointed. The only interesting things were the papers, and she sorted out the few letters she could find to take with her when she left. She gathered them into the crook of her arm, afraid to put them on the dirty floor and damage them further, but dug for a little while longer, looking for any other hidden treasures but only finding more loose-leaf papers and a few cookbooks from the Seventies. Mary Clarke glanced back over her shoulder at the towers of boxes and at the narrow width of the doorway -- there was no way that anyone would be able to carry the chest down without taking the door off its hinges, and even if they got it out onto the landing, no one could carry the thing down those shitty little stairs. She didn't envy her father or her brother -- no doubt they'd be saddled with that job when the time was right.

Mary Clarke stood up and cracked her neck, wincing at the pops, and whisked the grime off her bare knees. She hadn't found anything valuable, but she was consoled

by the letters -- she'd always been a history dork. She'd add them to her mother's weak little pile of historical data on the house.

"Mary Cla-a-arke!" Her mother's voice echoed up from the courtyard, sounding annoyed and a little concerned. She sighed and stepped as quickly as she could through the boxes and furniture without tripping and falling and dying in the process. She emerged from the room and squinted at the sunlight refracting off the courtyard's stones - her mother stood by the fountain below, a binder in one hand and her car keys in the other.

"Come on, I wanna get back to Mandeville before the traffic starts to pick up," she said, jiggling her keys around her finger. "Whatcha doing up there?"

"There's, like, a shitload of old stuff up there," Mary Clarke said, carefully descending the steps. "There's a really neat chest with a bunch of centuries old letters and bills and stuff, and I took some of the letters, and --"

"Don't say shitload, honey, it's an ugly word. I gotta find a way to clean all that stuff out. I tried to figure out if Goodwill would come and haul it off, but I'm really tempted to just keep it up there and not mess with it."

"But did you see the stuff I found? I had to open the trunk, it was locked, but there's a few other chests like it up there and I wonder if any of that stuff is important, you know?" she said, out of breath after going down the stairs as quick as she dared.

"Who owned the house, who built it? Maybe it belonged to them."

"I've done a bit of research but not much. I've been busy at the clinic," she said, walking through the back door and motioning for Mary Clarke to follow her. "The realtor

told me that they called this place the Lebrun-Scarsi House, after the family that built it and the family that lived here immediately afterwards, and he gave me some information, but I don't know much about the people. Just the architecture.”

Mary Clarke paused after she walked into the hallway. “You mean, you didn't do any research before you bought the house?”

“Of course I did,” Marianne said. “Apart from the stability and physical quality of the structure, I know for a fact that no one was murdered here and that the crime record is impeccable, considering the area we're in.”

“I want to know more about the history, though, the history of the people that lived here,” she said.

“If you want, I'll give you what I got and you can look over it, maybe find out some more details,” her mother replied. “Between my job and working on this place, I don't have time, honey.”

Mary Clarke shook her head, the letters crinkling under her arm. Her mother could tell the difference between ionic and Doric columns, could differentiate between federal and colonial furniture carvings, but didn't have the slightest interest when it came to the historical aspects of the houses she adored, apart from the petty crime records.

“What if this place is haunted?”

“Oh, it's definitely not haunted,” Marianne said with a laugh. “It said so on the ‘For Sale’ sign hanging from the balcony.”

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Mary Clarke had studied French in middle school and high school - it had been the “cool” language to learn among her friend group, and the most popular girls took it rather than Spanish or German or Chinese. She hadn’t hated it, but she also hadn’t excelled in it either; while Madame Guilherme had forced them to fill out charts of grammar exercises and verb tenses, she had been more interested in the cultural and historical studies of the classes. There was no way that she could carry on a conversation about French political history with a native speaker, but she could explain to the minute the actions of the Estates-General during the Tennis Court Oath of 1792.

She was only two weeks away from graduating from Academy of the Sacred Heart, and had a low B average in French IV, the one class apart from Anatomy and Physiology that was dragging her grade down. She needed to earn at least another A- in the course before the final grades and GPAs were tabulated after May 25th, so she stuffed the letters she had found in the attic of the new house into a Ziploc bag and took it to class for Guilherme to examine the following Monday morning.

The weather was uncharacteristically awful as she drove across the Causeway. The water underneath looked clouded and choppy, the wakes on the top of each wave spraying towards the road as the wind whipped around the concrete support beams. She turned up her music and tried to ignore the sounds of the wind that shook her car as she did her best to maintain her speed. She glanced over at the passenger’s seat a few times, making sure that the papers were safely in their plastic bag -- it wasn’t as if she anticipated taking her car for a full-body dip in the lake, but something about the shitty weather made her overly-nervous for their welfare.

Mary Clarke had tried to read the letters when she returned to Mandeville on Saturday afternoon, had spread them out on her desk upstairs and put on a pair of medical latex gloves that her mother kept in the family's first aid kit. She knew that the natural oil on her fingertips could damage old paper and felt very professional when she handled the aged paper with a delicate touch. But they were so fragile that she had almost ripped one in half while trying to turn the page towards the light of her lamp to read the faded ink.

The pages had gone a deep yellow, almost brown from exposure, but at the top of the first letter, she noticed something that she had looked over the first time she had glanced at the papers in the attic. Along the edge of the page was a name, written in a slanted script, so small that she almost had to touch her nose to the paper to make it out. *Augusta* was the first word, once she had surmised that this Augusta had decided to write her A's as if they were H's - the last name was too smudged to make out, but it began with an L, and she logically concluded that it must be Lebrun. That was the family that built the house, the first residents, and the journal certainly looked old enough to be from the 1800's.

She took the left turn onto Esplanade and merged into a sea of Suburbans and Volvo SUVs all heading in the same direction towards Sacred Heart. The bridge had made her tense that morning, and she rolled her shoulders once she realized how high she had held them as she gripped the steering wheel. Her mind wandered back into the interior of that lofty, dirty house on St. Louis and she chewed her lip -- she needed to research the property. It didn't surprise her that Marianne had provided their family with a twenty-page folder on the history of their new home, that had always been her style, but



it did shock Mary Clarke that she hadn't even thought to ask about the people who had lived there, or whether it had been a whorehouse in the Storyville era. That type of information was important to her -- she didn't want to live in a place that had a bad history. Her mother didn't believe in such things, she only believed in what was concrete, but Mary Clarke was superstitious enough to believe that bad history caused bad luck.

She had French for the first period of the day, so she tucked the plastic bag into her North Face backpack and walked through the buildings until she reached the Modern Language classrooms. She took her seat next to Lorraine, as she always did, and pulled out the translations that she had sweated over for two hours the night before until she had given up. Lorraine reached over with her pencil's eraser and slid the homework towards herself, giving it an uneasy look.

"I didn't get that translation at all," she whispered, looking up at her nervously. "I tried to Google Translate this shit and none of it went through."

"Well, if you didn't get my answers, then you're probably in the right," Mary Clarke whispered back. "Mine are always wrong -- I found a website that has some right answers, though, I'll send it to you."

"Thanks, girl," she said, but was interrupted when Madame Guilherme rapped the teacher's podium with her knuckles and spread out her papers. She rolled her eyes at Lorraine but did her best to pay attention through the class, marking off her wrong translations with the pink pen she had swiped from her mother's desk.

She stuck around at the end of class, waiting for most of the girls to get out of the room before she pulled the plastic bag out of her backpack. Guilherme looked up from

where she was shuffling her papers together and eyed the books with a quirked eyebrow.

“And what is that?”

“I found these cool papers in the attic of the house my family is moving into,” she said, rising up and laying the thin bag on the podium. “Could look at them and tell me if they’re worth anything? I tried to read them, but I couldn’t make anything out.”

Guilherme picked up the plastic bag and raised an eyebrow. “May I touch them?”

She wanted to say no, but she also wanted the extra credit. “Of course,” she said.

“I just put it in there to protect it from the weather.”

Guilherme plucked out the letters and flipped through them gingerly, pausing now and then to bring her nose closer to the paper, squinting her eyes at a few places where the ink faded to nothingness. “Well,” she said after a moment. “These were written in 1842. I think you should get them appraised.” She placed the letters down on the table and laid them on top of the plastic bag. “These are personal letters?”

“Yeah, they seem like it. I think they belonged to one of the original owners of the house,” she said, and Guilherme flipped through them again, squinting her eyes at the handwriting.

The woman sighed and held up a page to the light. “It is in French, that much I can tell,” she said. “But there are some words that I don’t recognize -- maybe it’s a different type of vernacular?” She handed the journal over to Mary Clarke. “I don’t think I have the tools to help you translate this, but I do know an old student who works in the public library’s archives who specializes in New Orleans French.”

“Could you give me her email, or her number?”

“I’ll send it to you later when I find it,” she said, putting her gradebook in her bag. “But now I have to go teach the sophomores. Send me an email and remind me later.”

“I was wondering,” Mary Clarke said, and Guilherme paused by the door. “If I did some research on this, and on the history of the house, especially since the author of this letter speaks French...could I write up a report and submit it for my grade?”

“Do you mean, let it be your extra credit to bring up your average?” Guilherme said with a smirk, and Mary Clarke smiled in what she hoped was a winning way. “I will have to think about that. Where is this house again, the one your parents bought?”

“The French Quarter,” she said, trying not to grimace. “St. Louis Street.”

“It could be an interesting thing to write about,” she said, scratching her nose. “I’ll let you know about the extra credit by the end of the day. I must say, I am pleased that you do wish to do this research independently. Are you going to major in History at LSU?”

“Oh, I haven’t really thought about that yet,” she said, putting the pages back in the plastic bag. “But I do like history.”

“It’s what you’re best at. I’d recommend it,” she said, opening the door and stepping out in the hallway. “*À bientôt.*”

The door clicked shut behind her and Mary Clarke gently hoisted her backpack over her shoulder. Now that she knew that she was potentially carrying around rare, extremely expensive letters, she’d have to be a little more careful. She felt confident about Guilherme’s decision on the extra credit -- the woman loved it when her students branched out and delved into personal projects. Perhaps if she got her mother’s

permission to invite Guilherme to the new house, show her around, feed her some sort of French cheese and wine combination...that was a thought.

The rest of the day passed as normal, the rotation between classes feeling more unnecessary the closer they crept towards the end of the school year. She had to resist the urge to take out the old letters, run her hands over them, flip through the pages and try to copy down the words she recognized into a more readable print. She had always loved her Nancy Drew novels, dreamed about exploring mysterious mansions and going on treasure hunts, and as the day wore on the more the papers burned in her backpack, waiting to be translated.

She checked her email inbox three times that day, but nothing ever came from Guilherme -- she had begun to wonder if Guilherme had forgotten, considered sending an email herself to remind her of their conversation, but held off, not wanting to seem pushy. She was walking to her car to go home when she heard her name being called in the parking lot, and Lorraine jogged over with a piece of paper in her hand.

“Guilherme told me to give you this,” she said, holding it out, her blonde hair waving in the wind. “Something about a project.”

“Hell yes, I’ve been waiting for this all day.” She took the paper and opened it up.

*Go ahead with the project. If you can get it done in time, I’ll add five points to your lowest test score. 504-596-2610. Ask for Emily in the Louisiana Division.*

“She’s giving you extra credit?” Lorraine said, reading over her shoulder. “Son of a bitch.”

Mary Clarke tucked the note into the side pocket of her backpack and patted Lorraine on the shoulder, laughing at the dumbfounded look on her friend's face. "You gotta seize the opportunity when you see it," she said, opening her car door. "The project's on the house my Mom bought and the papers I told you about. I think it's kinda interesting, actually."

"If you get them figured out and whatnot, I want to read them too," she said, leaning against Mary Clarke's car. "Also, when can I come over and see this house?"

"I don't think you'd want to visit right now, it looks like Spider Land from top to bottom." She pushed her backpack into the passenger's seat. "But Mom's getting it professionally cleaned this weekend, so maybe next week sometime. We can coordinate our dorm room bedding in the meantime we still have to decide between cream and tan, or blue and gold."

"It's so cool," Lorraine said. "I wish we could live in an old spooky house."

"It won't look creepy after my Mom gets done with whatever she's doing," Mary Clarke replied. "Mom probably wouldn't have bought it if she thought she couldn't change its look. She hates ghost stuff. But come over to the Mandeville house this weekend and let's study for the AP English Lit exam. I need help remembering themes."

"Yeah, I'm down for sure," Lorraine said, batting her hair out of her face. "Also, we gotta talk about the Cookie Party. The one for Kappa Delta at LSU that they're having in the city for rushees."

"What's a Cookie Party?"

“You didn’t get the postcard in the mail?” Lorraine cocked her head to the side.  
“It came last week, I think. Are you sure you just didn’t forget about it?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head, a small tightness creeping into her chest. “How many people got invited?”

“Everyone from Sacred Heart who’s going to LSU,” she said, whipping out her phone and scrolling through it rapidly. “Dude, I’m sure you got it, it’s probably lost in a stack of mail in your house somewhere.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Mary Clarke said, forcing a placating smile onto her face. “When is it?”

“Next weekend at some alumna’s house uptown, in the Garden District,” she said, cheerful once more. “We’ll go together. I’d just get lost on my own.”

“Yeah, we’ll talk about it this weekend,” Mary Clarke replied, looking off into the parking lot. “I gotta go, though.”

“Me too, girl,” Lorraine said, waving as she walked off. “I’ll text you.”

Mary Clarke shut her car door and sat in silence for a few minutes. She cranked the car, checked the time on her phone, and pulled out onto Esplanade. On her way to the bridge, she passed a Mercedes with an LSU sticker on the back - above it hovered a collection of Greek letters that she didn’t understand. The driver was a white woman, her blonde hair piled up into a messy bun, and when Mary Clarke passed her, the woman made an ugly face at her beat-up Honda. She gritted her teeth and tried her best to focus on the road, on the water, on anything but the woman who rode her tail all the way across the bridge.

## CHAPTER TWO

“Oh, look,” Louis said when he got out of their father’s car. “Someone pissed on the front of the house.”

He pointed at a lone streak of liquid that flowed from the brick below one of the shuttered windows. It was fresh -- the urine had barely begun to streak down the sidewalk towards the street and had gathered in a yellow puddle in the middle of the sidewalk.

Jeffrey slammed the driver’s door shut and walked around the front of the car, his nose wrinkled in disgust at the stained street and concrete in front of his new house. “Let’s just get inside,” he said, patting Mary Clarke on the shoulder as he passed. “I’ll come hose off the front in a little while.”

A week had elapsed since she had first walked in the new house, and the amount of progress her mother had managed to make from Monday to Friday had been astonishing. Not only had she called in a cleaning crew to wipe down the place, but the covers had come off the chandeliers and the crystal beads had been dusted and wiped until they shone. They caught the sunlight overhead and cast rainbows against the dirty walls - Mary Clarke intercepted a beam with her hand and admired the tiny colors in her palm.

“Y’all know I hate this part of town,” her father said as he sat down the armful of newspapers he had brought in from the car. “But I think we can make this house into something respectable again.”

“Yeah, with forced labor from your children,” Louis said. He ambled over to the staircase and dropped down onto the bottom step, looking exasperated. “I guess Coach Dees is fine with me skipping practice today to wash windows. Work out these trap muscles.”

Jeffrey tossed an old *Times-Picayune* toward his son. “A work out is what you’re gonna get,” he said. “These windows are high.”

He loved cleaning, more than their mother, more than normal people did. Mary Clarke had formed a theory about his obsession with purity a few years ago, after observing him in his orthodontist clinic for a school project on their parents’ careers. He took such care and time with his patients’ teeth to make sure that everything was just perfect, and he did the same in their home; if there weren’t any dirty dishes in the sink and the counters were cleared of crumbs and old flakes of grated parmesan cheese, then he was content. It gave him a sense of order and peace of mind, she concluded. She didn’t know how he was going to keep his sanity in the French Quarter.

“Remember to wipe the windows in figure eights,” he said, walking over to the one in the parlor that faced the front of the house. “Otherwise it will dry streaky. Louis, go on outside and open the shutters a little bit so we can get some light in here to see.”

“How long are we cleaning today?” she asked, picking up Louis’s newspaper.

“Depends how long the paper lasts,” he replied, spritzing the vinegar water onto the glass. “Why, you got somewhere to be?”

“Nah, not really,” she said, staring outside as Louis pulled back the shutter and stuck his tongue out at her on the opposite side of the window. Her father gave her an



even look before pointing at the windows. She shrugged and picked up his bottle of homemade window cleaner and took it into the foyer with her. She had looked through the stack of mail her mom kept in the laundry room, even went outside and poked through the blue recycling box, but hadn't found the invite to the party Lorraine had mentioned. Maybe it had been delivered to the wrong house and someone had thrown it away. The party was happening now, across town -- she had told Lorraine that she couldn't make it, had family obligations. Thank god her father had decided to drive out to the house at the last minute that morning, turning her lie into a truth.

"It's like medieval Paris out there, man," Louis said when he shut the front door behind him. "Just tons of shit in the gutter. Literal and figurative shit."

"Stop swearing so much, good lord," her father said, already busy wiping the grime away. "At least stop doing it in front of me and Mom."

Window wiping was Mary Clarke's favorite chore. Louis could joke all he wanted about working out his muscles while cleaning, but it really kept her upper arms toned. Lately she had noticed some of the girls at school getting fatter, more fleshy -- their arms slumped out of the tops of their short sleeved uniform shirts like poorly kneaded dough. She had begun to do pushups every morning before taking a shower, stripping off her sweaty pajamas afterwards and examining her stomach in the bathroom mirror. So far, she still had the faint abs from years of track and field. She hoped she could keep it up, avoid losing her figure in college.

"What's the update on LSU?" her father called from the parlor.

“Not really any updates,” she said. “Lorraine and I are still trying to decide on a color scheme for our dorm room.”

“It’s early days yet,” he replied, scratching at a fleck of old paint on the glass. “There’s plenty of time to figure that out. I meant scholastically.”

“Nothing to do yet, just have to wait for orientation in June,” she said. “I can’t even access the course catalog yet. I have to wait until I make a student ID and get programmed into the system.”

“Hurry up and wait,” he said to himself. “That was always my motto, I feel like it’s probably going to be yours, too.”

“Dad, what should I do with the window frame?” Louis said from the interior of the parlor. He was working on the opposite wall with the window that faced the alley between their house and the neighboring building, scowling at the dust that lined the painted wood. “It’s pretty dirty.”

“Don’t wipe the newspaper over it, it’ll make a white streak,” he said. “Just leave it be for now and I’ll go back over it later with a duster or something.”

“Kay,” Louis said, turning back to the window. “Are we gonna keep the downstairs shutters closed? I mean, are people gonna be looking in our windows if we don’t?”

“If we do that, there won’t be any light,” Mary Clarke said.

“Mom’s working on a type of curtain that will let in the sun but won’t let in the hobos,” her father said. “She has all the answers.”

Mary Clarke looked at the street while she finished cleaning the lower windowpanes. On the other side of St. Louis, a black man ambled down the sidewalk, his eyes gazing up at the sky, his hands dangling at his waist. He wore a stained yellow puffy jacket despite the eighty-five-degree heat, and one of his Timberland boots was held together by duct tape. His cheek bones were sharp against the angles of his face and his beard stubble was scattered with white hair.

He stopped by the front door of the Mon Cher, eyed a touristy-looking couple heading down the street towards him. The white man adjusted his baseball cap and gently grabbed his woman by her upper arm, looked both ways before crossing the street and walked towards the new house. The homeless man laughed at them, showing his stained teeth and grey gums.

The couple passed by her window -- the woman's face was contorted into a look of disgust and fear, and the man across the street yelled and gestured at them. Mary Clarke dropped the soggy newspaper into the bucket at her feet and cracked her neck. It was about time for a break, and she reached into her pocket and pulled out the paper Guilherme had given her. She had yet to call Emily from the library; she really hated talking to people on the phone.

"Need more newspaper?" her father said. He was watching the man across the street through the window, his lips pursed.

"No, I got a stack here," she said, waving her hand at the *Times-Picayune's* at her feet. "I think I'm gonna take a break, go out back for a minute and sip on some water."

“You feel alright?” he asked, his forehead wrinkled in concern. “If you get too hot, sit down.”

“I’m not that delicate,” she said. “Just need a minute to chill. That man out front is depressing me.”

“Who?” Louis said and walked from the next room towards her window. She tapped the glass in the man’s direction -- he had decided to sit by Mon Cher’s front door next to the morning’s stack of vegetable crates. The bar looked closed, but the door swung open and Jamarquez emerged from within. He waved his arms at the man and hollered at him, his words lost through the glass. The old man ignored him and looked down at his busted shoes.

Jeff crossed the room and stood next to them at the window. “Wish they’d get them off the street, or at least prevent them from loitering outside of the buildings like that,” he said. “I hate seeing that stuff, and I especially don’t want to see it in front of my house.”

“Harsh, Dad,” Louis said. “It’s probably not his fault that he’s homeless.”

“If he’s on drugs, which is likely, it is his own fault.”

“Dad,” Mary Clarke said. “That’s so backwards. Drug usage in underprivileged communities is perpetuated by a continuous cycle of poverty and an inability to economically prosper in a racist, capitalist system.”

“Yeah, Dad,” Louis said, laughing at Mary Clarke’s speech. “Don’t be such an old white man. I mean, you *are* an old white man, but it doesn’t mean you gotta *be* one.”

He rolled his eyes at both of them. “There are places they can go, y’all, don’t be fooled,” he said. “If that guy wanted a hot meal or a place to sleep, he could get it. But he’s out there asking for money to buy drugs.”

“There has to be some way we can help him, though,” Mary Clarke said. “I mean, you and Mom just bought this wildly expensive house in the middle of a neighborhood filled with homeless people. It’s not like we can just live here and ignore it.”

“Well, you won’t be living here except for Christmas breaks and the summer months,” he said, walking back into the parlor and to his pile of newspapers. “You don’t have to worry about it.”

Louis looked at her and rolled his eyes. “That sure solves it,” he said.

“I’m taking that break now,” she said, pulling her phone out of her back pocket. “I also have to make a call for a class project, so I might be a little while.”

“Don’t take too long, we need your help,” her father called as she walked down the hallway. “And watch out for mosquitoes, they’re everywhere back there.”

The courtyard was looking a bit more polished than it had last week -- someone had started to go at the brick underfoot with a pressure washer, spraying away years of mildew and revealing the beautiful, sun-faded reds and pinks of the original bricks. There had also been some work done with weed killer, and the little tufts of plant life had begun to die where it weaved its way up through the cracks. Mary Clarke took a seat on the edge of the fountain and dialed the number into her phone. She took a deep breath and pressed the call button.

The line buzzed for a few seconds before there was a click. “Hello,” an automated voice said through the receiver. “*Thank you for contacting the New Orleans Public Library System. We are committed to assisting you as best as possible. For a specific branch of our library system, press 1. To contact a department within the system, press 2. To-*”

She pressed 2 before she heard the other options. Her hands were clammy, and she wiped them on her shorts. It was so dumb to be nervous about talking to a machine. There probably wasn’t a person on the other line anyway.

“*For the Children and Young Adult Program, press 1. For the Architectural Archives, press 2. For the Historic Archives and the Louisiana Division, press 3.*”

She pulled the phone away from her ear and pressed the number three on the screen. Her foundation had left a greasy film on the glass surface and she wiped it off on her shorts. She noticed a fat mosquito resting on her calf muscle and swatted it before it could fly away. Its body stuck to her ring finger and left a blood smear on her leg.

Tinny, recorded jazz piano floated through her phone and Mary Clarke wiped away a bead of sweat from under her knee. The back door creaked open and Louis stepped out onto the porch, shielding his eyes with his hand.

“Dad’s gonna run across the street and get lunch for us,” he said, his voice and the incessant piano mixing in her ears. “What do you want?”

She sighed and lowered the phone a bit. “Is he going to Mon Cher?”

“I don’t know what it’s called,” he said. “What do you want?”

“Does he have a menu?”

“Lahweseana,” a woman said on the line, and Mary Clarke pushed the phone to her ear.

“Hi, um, I’m looking for...or well, I mean, I’d like to speak to Emily?” she said.

“There isn’t a menu,” Louis hollered. “They have sandwiches and stuff.”

“Emily who?” the woman replied.

“Just get me a BLT, then,” Mary Clarke said.

“Excuse me?” the woman said.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I was talking to my brother,” Mary Clarke said, flipping her hand towards Louis, who rolled his eyes and let the door slam behind him as he walked back into the house. “I actually don’t know her last name, my French teacher just told me to ask for Emily in the Louisiana Division.”

“Hold on a moment, ma’am,” the woman said. “It’s possible I know who you’re talking about. Lemme transfer you.”

The piano emerged again, its player doing their best to smash the keys as quickly as possible. She pressed down on the speaker button and let the grainy recording echo out into the courtyard. She felt hot enough to move out of the sunlight and into the shade by the bottom steps of the porch.

“This is Emily,” a bored voice said on the end of the line.

“Hi, my name is Mary Clarke Patrick,” she said. “I’m not sure if I’m speaking to the right person, but my French teacher referred me to an Emily in the Louisiana Division for a project on a house my parents bought in the French Quarter.”

“What’s your teacher’s name?”

“Guilherme, Ellen Guilherme,” she said. Another mosquito landed on her ankle and she swatted at it but missed, and it spiraled over towards the palm bushes under the porch’s railing.

“Ellen Guilherme over at Sacred Heart?” Emily said. “She didn’t tell me she was giving away my phone number. What’s the project?”

“My parents moved into a house on St. Louis Street,” she said. “I found some old letters and bills in the attic, and I’m seeing if I can do a historical project on the house and its French-speaking inhabitants for Guilherme.”

“Are you in her class?” the woman said.

“Yes ma’am, I am.”

“Do you have the papers you found?” the woman asked. “In good condition?”

“I do,” Mary Clarke said. “Would it be possible for me to come to the Louisiana Division and do research there?”

“I was just about to invite you,” Emily said. “It’s been pretty boring down here lately, so you can come Monday after school and we’ll take a look at those papers. I’m sure there’s more information on the house as well, if it’s in the Quarter. Just ask the girl at the front desk for me. My last name is Vance. If you don’t understand her, just nod and smile and find a map. Her accent is unbelievable.”

“Okay,” Mary Clarke said, wishing she could write everything down. “Thank you.”

“Email Guilherme and tell her that you’ll be working with me,” she said. “I’m sure whatever project you want to do will be green-lighted then.”



“Thank you, I’ll come down on Monday.”

“Not before four, okay?” Emily said. “We’ll talk then.”

“Thank you,” Mary Clarke said for the third time, but Emily had hung up on her before she could get in a proper goodbye, and the dial tone rang out from her speakers. She locked the phone and set it down beside her. There were a few problems; one was that she had no idea where the library or the Louisiana Division was. That could be solved by a quick search. The other was that she was running out of time. She only had the upcoming week and the next to get her shit together and scramble up a project that Guilherme could deem passable. That would take the whole week and some of next, she figured.

The courtyard had filled with light from the sun directly overhead with no shadows in which to hide, and Mary Clarke pushed herself up from the steps and pocketed her phone. She hadn’t exactly wanted a BLT again, but she couldn’t remember what else was on the menu. Louis hadn’t shut the back door all the way and it had stuck in its frame -- when she yanked the doorknob, it dislodged from the door with a loud pop that made her jump. That made two doorknobs to fix.

It was still so dusty, the floors so grimy, and what little light got through the windows was streaked with mites swirling in cyclical patterns. Her father and brother weren’t in the house; she peeked out the front window in the foyer and saw that Mon Cher’s OPEN sign had been illuminated. Jamarquez would tell her father that he had met her, and she wondered how they would get on. She didn’t think that he’d like the fact that she had started making friends with strangers in the neighborhood.

She held her breath for a moment and listened to the silence. It almost had a sound to it, a fuzzy ringing that was only perceptible if she twisted her head a little to the left. The Mandeville house was never that quiet — even if there was no one home but her, the air conditioning would grumble to life every thirty minutes, or the refrigerator would whine and groan as it made ice and battled the freezer frost. But there wasn't a refrigerator in this kitchen, and the air conditioning boxes that had adorned each window had been ripped out in preparation for installing central air, and the lack of electric noise made her feel as if someone had pressed pause on the world.

She turned and wandered into the parlor. Her father had really made progress in there while she was on the phone; each window was clear, and the light was brighter in the room than in the foyer. She put her hand on the mantle and came away with a dusting of grime, better than the last time she had been here with her mother. They could roast a pig in that fireplace. She wondered if it could still hold a fire, imagined how it would feel in the winter months when the winds off the river made the city unbearable frigid, but then remembered that she wouldn't be there for the winter months. Only Thanksgiving and Christmas, and maybe a little into the new year.

She strode back to her half-cleaned window in the foyer. There was no use in being sentimental about leaving; she could come back home whenever she wanted, could even come down for the weekend and go back to school on Sunday afternoon. It wasn't like she was being banished from her home, told to never come back again.

The front door swung open and she stepped to the side to avoid getting smacked in the back. Her father walked in with a plastic bag full of water bottles and a paper bag

of what she guessed were sandwiches. He raised his eyebrows and she took the paper bag from him as he shut the door.

“Where’s Louis?”

“He’s coming. He and the guy behind the counter struck up a conversation about music,” he said, nodding towards the stairs. She sat the sandwich bag down and began to dig for her BLT. “That waiter says he met you.”

“Yeah, I know him,” she said, unwrapping the butcher’s paper from around her sandwich. “Talked to him last weekend when I was waiting for Mom. Bought a BLT from him then, too.”

“Did it occur to you that its might not be a good idea to talk to people on the street?” he said. He didn’t sound mad, but she could tell that he was bothered by the way that the lobes of his ears were turning pink.

“He works at the restaurant across the street, which his brother owns,” she said. “It’s not like I gave him my social security number.”

“Still, don’t go talking to people like that,” he said. “Especially not down here.”

“People like what?” she countered. “Black men?”

“No, honey,” he said, giving her a look. “People you don’t know.”

“If I do that, I’m never gonna make any friends in Baton Rouge,” she said. “And clearly you felt alright to let Louis talk to him on his own. If you didn’t want us talking to people on the street, maybe you shouldn’t have moved us to this part of town.”

“Alright, enough,” he said, and she let it drop. She knew she had gotten her point across by the way he was huffing in between bites.

They ate in silence for five minutes or so before Mary Clarke got up and walked towards the window. “What’s taking Louis so long?”

“Do ya see him?” he said, and just as he said it, her brother walked out of the restaurant. The old man was still sitting by the front, his head tilted up towards the sky, staring despite the strong sunlight. Louis didn’t cross the street immediately -- instead, he loitered by the door until he nodded to himself and walked over to the man.

She raised an eyebrow as he crouched down beside the man, a little out of arm’s length, and held out a wrapped sandwich. The man glanced over and rubbed his bald head, shook it as if to say no and waved Louis away. But Louis didn’t go, he just sat there for a minute talking to the guy and placed the sandwich next to the man’s bag. The man held out a hand, no doubt asking for money, and Louis shook his head and stood up.

“He gave a sandwich to that homeless man,” she said, watching as her brother crossed the street. He looked a little uncertain but as soon as he reached the sidewalk in front of their house, he turned back to look at the man, who still hadn’t touched the sandwich. He shrugged and climbed the steps to the front door. A second later he had entered the foyer and locked the door behind him. He met his sister’s eyes and half-smiled.

“He was asking for money ‘cause he said he was hungry, so I went in and bought him something to eat,” he said. “He didn’t want that though, he still just wanted money. He probably wants it for heroin, but at least he has some food if he gets hungry.”

“That was good of you to do, son,” her father said. “Always offer to buy them a hot meal if they want it. Usually they’ll turn you down, but never just give them money.”

“Where’s your sandwich?” she asked.

“I ate while I was talking to Jamarquez, your best friend,” he said. “He’s a big fan of you.”

“He’s a nice guy,” she said, waving him away. “Y’all talked about music?”

“Yeah, he plays the trombone,” Louis said as he grabbed a water bottle. “I was talking to him about the drums. He knows a lot of bands around here.”

Louis had been looking for a band to play with for a year. There was a formal jazz band at his school, manned by the director of the school band at large, but it was notoriously difficult to get into. Brother Martin High School was filled with boys who had been classically trained in music since birth, all vying to get into the All-State band, and Louis had failed his audition for the second year in a row. So, he had tried starting a band outside the official school ensemble, but he hadn’t been able to garner interest, despite the fact that he had spent an entire Sunday in January printing flyers.

DRUMMER SEEKING JAZZ BAND, they had said. He hadn’t put his name on it, only his cell phone number -- still, no one had called or texted him.

“Maybe he could introduce you to a few guys,” she said. “I bet someone around here is looking for a drummer.”

Louis shrugged and tried not to look hopeful. “Yeah, maybe,” he said. “Anyway, it’s cool knowing he’s over there if we want a sandwich or something. Thanks for buying a house across the street from a bar, Dad.”

Their father had been eating his sandwich in silence, but he raised an eyebrow.

“And if I catch y’all at that bar, you’re in for a world of pain.”

“MC’s going to college in three months,” Louis said. “I’m sure she’d never drink.”

“Shut up,” she said, standing up and brushing the crumbs off her shorts. “I called the woman at the library that Guilherme told me to call. Looks like I’m going over there on Monday afternoon.” It occurred to her that she had no clue where the library was, or how long it would take her to drive there from school, but she could figure that out later.

“Need me to go over there with you?” her father asked.

“No, I think I’m okay on my own,” she said. She picked up the soggy mess of newspaper and threw into their plastic trash bag. “I’ll probably be gone until dinner Monday night.”

“Well, be careful over there,” her father said. “It’s not the best part of town.”

“Neither is this,” Louis said. He wandered over towards Mary Clarke’s window and peeked out. The homeless man was gone, and so was the sandwich. “Think he actually ate it?”

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Louisiana State University had been her fourth choice. It was every girls’ safety school, the one people brushed aside for more exclusive universities — the popular ones this year had been Emory, Vanderbilt, and Rice. There were some outliers who applied to the Ivies, mostly Columbia and Brown, and some weirdos who wanted to go to obscure technical colleges in Montana and Oregon, but everyone seemed to prefer private Southern universities. The only people who took the LSU and other SEC schools’

applications seriously were the party girls. Lorraine was one of them. Mary Clarke wondered if people now considered her one of those girls, too.

She had also applied to UT Austin, which was a long shot, but she had fallen in love with Austin, real Mexican food, the bats under the Congress Street bridge, the way people paddle-boarded to each other's houses in the bright blue creeks and canals that ran through the city. And then on a whim, she applied to Emory, where her parents had gone to medical school, and to UNC Chapel Hill.

The school counselor suggested that Mary Clarke apply to a safety, just for good measure, and thank god she had. She had watched as her top three sent rejection letters, all varying in degrees of sympathy and politeness, all saying *no thanks, not you*. She sent in her LSU application for the Ogden Honors College on Valentine's Day and was waitlisted a week later. After months of waiting for rejections, the swiftness of their response startled her. Surely she was worth more than an automatic waitlisting. She was just as good as the rest of her classmates who got into Bennington and Rhodes, if not better. It made her fume, but she couldn't exactly vent to her friends about how she thought she deserved more than them, so she bottled it up and tried not to roll her eyes when another classmate announced they had gotten into William and Mary.

Sunday night, after family dinner and their weekly trip out for ice cream, she had sat down with her MacBook and a piece of notebook paper. There were a lot of things she hadn't done -- she hadn't signed up for classes, hadn't picked out any of the dorm decorations Lorraine had sent to her in an email that was mostly blue hyperlinks, hadn't really decided what she would major in. But the one thing she had done, with a nervous

stomach and sweaty palms, was to scroll through the sorority recruitment website and look at all the happy white faces radiating from her computer screen.

She found herself in a tight spot with Lorraine, who was selling the sorority experience to Mary Clarke every chance she got. Mary Clarke didn't know whether Lorraine really wanted her to go through rush, or whether she just wanted the security of knowing she had an ally to rely upon during the process; regardless, it was driving Mary Clarke nuts. Every day there was some new story, some new development that Lorraine related to her in a mania of watery eyes and breathless whisper. *Last year, some girl had sex outside of the Sigma Chi house on top of an air conditioner and got dropped from every sorority in the second round.* Or, maybe it would be, *Anna Grace Kirkpatrick told me that the Sacred Heart girls were being pushed as Number Ones in rush workshop this spring at Kappa.* She had no idea what any of that meant, or how it applied to her, or why she should be excited about it — but she didn't want to hurt Lorraine's feelings, or start some shit with Lorraine by actively pretending not to care, so she always nodded along and did her best to participate in the gossip.

She also hadn't told Lorraine that she hadn't signed up for white girl rush. Which was why the alumnae, that mysterious group of women, hadn't invited her to the cookie party. They didn't know that she existed. It was sort of stupid to expect to get invited to a party when the hosts had no clue you walked the earth, and yet she had felt offended, almost enough to consider signing up for white girl rush just to go to the parties. So that was why she was looking up rush dates and information about the various sororities she could theoretically join. Whether they'd want her in the first place, she didn't know.



Her mother was downstairs packing up the china and crystal when Mary Clarke went to the kitchen for a water. It had been a frantic and intense week of work for her - she had been scraping away a cancerous mole on a man's neck when the rest of the family had been cleaning the new house on Saturday. Mary Clarke hadn't spoken to her for days, and she felt a pang in her stomach when she saw her mother leaning over boxes and wrapping plates in packing paper.

"Mom," she said, and Marianne looked up. There were dark circles under her eyes, but she smiled at her daughter. "What are you doing?"

"Hey," she replied. "Come here and let me love on you."

It was their nightly routine. Mary Clarke would bow her head and allow her mother to kiss her on her forehead before going to bed. She couldn't remember when she had started to do it, maybe in-between babyhood and childhood, in a time when her mother could kiss the top of her head without Mary Clarke bending down; regardless, she hadn't been kissed or hugged all week, and was startled by the realization. She would add it to the list of things college would lack: daily hugs.

Marianne kissed her, and she stepped back and looked into one of the boxes. "I didn't know you had so much nice stuff."

"That's because we never use it, except for Christmas," she said. "And then it's only that Christmas pattern that was so popular in the Nineties. I'm not an entertainer like Mamma, even after all these years."

"Why save it then?"

Her mother straightened up and rolled her eyes. “You’re gonna need some china and crystal when you get married, and no one around here is gonna buy it for you.”

“Not unless I join the nunnery,” Mary Clarke said.

“Who knows? You just might meet someone in college,” her mother said. “I didn’t think I would, but then I ran into a preppy little white boy who kept following me around.”

“Well, Dad is different,” she said. “That would be supremely creepy if someone else was stalking you around.”

Her mother smiled. “No one, that’s why I married him. Anyway, I wanna know about this man you’ve been talking to that works in the restaurant across the street from our new house.” Marianne gave her a look that questioned her sanity, made Mary Clarke feel foolish and thirteen again. Her mother clearly thought she walked out into the world with a determination to throw herself into the arms of murderers, rapists, and kidnappers.

Mary Clarke sighed. “He’s the guy that made me a sandwich while I was waiting for you. He is a perfectly normal human being, not a serial killer, from what I can tell. He didn’t do anything weird around me and he works across the street.”

“He didn’t ask for your number?” her mother said. Her eyebrows were arched so high that they nearly disappeared into her hair.

“No, mother, he did not,” she said. “He’s like, thirty. He’s old. And I’m pretty sure he’s gay. He wears glittery green nail polish.”

“That is not old,” Marianne said, shaking her head. “That’s young, sweetie, comparatively.”

“Whatever, he’s a perfectly nice dude, he makes a great sandwich,” she said brusquely. “But now that I’m down here, I wanna ask you what you think about rushing at LSU.”

Marianne blinked. “Which rush? Pan-Hellenic or Panhellenic?”

Mary Clarke tapped her fingers on her lips. “Which one is the white girl one?”

“Panhellenic,” her mother said. “Pan-Hellenic is what I did. Alpha Kappa Alpha.”

“Cool,” Mary Clarke said. “Lorraine just keeps talking it up constantly and I feel like if I don’t do it with her it’s really gonna piss her off.”

Her mother sighed and closed her eyes, ran a hand across her forehead. “Alright, let’s go on and get this conversation over with,” she said, and walked out of the room.

“Park it on the couch.”

Why was she suddenly nervous? She blamed it on her childhood — whenever she or Louis had done something bad, they got sat on the couch and hollered at for a good ten minutes or more by their mother while their father loitered in the archway that connected the living room to the kitchen, a pained expression on his face, as if he only wished he could say something to save their asses. Now she felt the same stomach knots twist inside her as she did when she was eight. Her mother walked out of the kitchen with a fresh cup of coffee and sat down on the couch next to Mary Clarke, careful not to upset the hot liquid in her mug. *Friendship Is God’s Greatest Gift*, said the mug in a cheesy cursive script.

“Alright baby,” her mother said. “Here’s what’s what. No one at your school is gonna tell you this, but I am ninety-nine-point-eight percent certain that the majority of those girls in the white sororities at LSU are racist pieces of shit.”

Marianne was infamous for using the word ‘racist’ as a stone in the slingshot she’d fire at any of her haters. “Y’all racist white trash idiot sons of bitches!” she’d yell at anyone carrying a Confederate flag in front of the statues of Confederate heroes scattered around New Orleans, southern Louisiana, and the South at large. It was both entertaining and frightening for her children, and Mary Clarke both believed that her mother could easily take on three burly men when mad, but also knew that one of these days someone might come after Marianne if she pissed them off enough.

“Here’s how I know,” her mother went on. “Last summer, I was talking to Cherie Yelverton from over near Gretna, you remember her?”

Mary Clarke opened her mouth to respond, but Marianne was already talking again. “Anyway, she was telling me about her daughter, Claire, who goes to Alabama. She went through both rushes, Pan-Hellenic and Panhellenic, and got invited back to both for the final round of rush. She went to Chi Omega first, I think, and put them as her number one in her final vote. Everyone at that place told her they wanted her, that they’d see her on Bid Day, and guess what?”

Mary Clarke already knew the ending to this story. Claire had gotten her hopes up, went to bed that night all giddy and excited, telling everyone how much she had loved Chi O and hoped that she’d get a bid from them tomorrow. But when the next day came, and she didn’t have an envelope, she was confused, thinking there had been a mistake.

“But there wasn’t any mistake,” Marianne said. “The house alumna decided they didn’t want a black girl. And then on Snapchat, while everyone was at the Bid Day party at the Chi O house, someone posted on their story: ‘Chi O got no niggers!!!’.”

The guilty Snapchatter had gotten in trouble, of course, but it didn’t stop Claire from finding out from the girls on her house that black girls weren’t welcome at Chi Omega.

“And then, to top it off, she didn’t get a bid from any of the Pan-Hellenic sororities, neither,” her mother said, pausing to take a sip of her coffee. “They decided that they didn’t want someone who wanted to be in a white sorority. So, Claire dropped out. She couldn’t take all that rejection.”

She nodded at her mother’s words, but her defenses went up. “It’s not like I’ve never been judged for my color before,” she said. “I mean, even if I did sign up and rush, I feel like I’d be able to tell which sororities were racist and which weren’t.”

“That’s not what I mean, honey,” her mother replied. “They’re gonna want to put a label on you: black or white. And then they’re gonna want you to behave like you’re black or white; but you’re both, and it’s gonna make some people mad.”

She grimaced. “I see what you’re saying, but I don’t think that’s very pertinent anymore, no offense,” she said. Marianne scoffed but she went on. “I mean, the world around us is so dynamic and interracial now. Hillary’s gonna be president in November, probably, and feminism is embraced now, so I mean...I know people are sometimes gonna be racist, but...”

“No, honey, no,” her mother said. “You live in a bubble, one where we can afford to put you in a school that at least pretends not to see color. But when you move out of here, you’re gonna be exposed to some shitty ugliness; I’ve tried to prepare you for that, but you still have to be expecting it.”

Mary Clarke didn’t want to concede to her mother’s point. “Well, I’ll avoid the racists.”

“I’m just afraid you’re gonna get up there and get lulled into a false sense of security,” Marianne said. “I love Lorraine, but Lorraine is trying to join a club that really only wants one type of woman: white, wealthy, Republican.” Marianne grimaced at the last requirement.

“So you think I shouldn’t join a sorority.”

“I know the girls they recruit, and I know the women they grow up to be,” her mother said. “Some of them go on to do great work, accomplish a lot, but a ton of them act as if they never left college. When I’m at the club sometimes, I’ll be playing tennis with one, and another ‘sister’ will walk up, and they’ll ignore me like I was a potted plant.”

“Rude,” Mary Clarke said.

“These women are part of a club,” she went on, “where they decide beforehand who’s in and who’s out.” She looked at Marianne with tired eyes. “Don’t be too surprised if they decide that they don’t have room for a black girl.”

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Monday morning was steaming hot, even at seven when Mary Clarke left her house in Mandeville and climbed into her car to do the daily drive across the lake. When she got to school, Lorraine was sitting in the courtyard between the upper school classrooms, drinking a massive green tea from Starbucks and chatting with Isabel Henley. Mary Clarke dropped her backpack down on the ground next to the table and took a seat, catching the look that Isabel gave her out of the corner of her eye.

Isabel and Mary Clarke had a mutual dislike of one another, but Isabel hung out with Medley Percy, who was friends with Lorraine, who was best friends with Mary Clarke, so they kept an icy accord, so frigidly polite to each other that it was deeply insulting. Isabel was snarky and pretty, but not very smart — according to Mary Clarke. Lorraine thought she was funny, and Mary Clarke made sure her friend's back was turned when she inevitably rolled her eyes at the diatribe that came out of Isabel's mouth.

That morning, however, Isabel watched her curiously as Mary Clarke sat down. “Where were you Saturday?” she said. Mary Clarke squinted at her and zipped open her backpack, pulled out her European History textbook and sat it on the table. “You didn't want to come to the party?”

If she lied and said that she was busy, would that make it better? Mary Clarke envisioned Isabel digging her claws into whatever information she gave her and taking it back to her little group of mean girls, dissecting it and finding the lie, then telling everyone at school that Mary Clarke had lied about going to the sorority's party because she was too much of a nobody to be invited.

“I wasn’t invited,” she said after a moment’s pause. “I didn’t sign up for Panhellenic rush.”

Lorraine covered her mouth with her hand, as if someone’s grandmother had just died. “Why didn’t you tell me that?” she said, her eyes wide. “I could have told someone, and you would have been invited anyway.”

“I didn’t know I needed to sign up for white girl rush,” Mary Clarke said. She reached into her bag and found a highlighter, uncapped it, and looked up at Lorraine. “I thought I could just do it when I got there.”

Isabel laughed, and it was mocking and clear; it echoed in the emptiness of the courtyard. “I swear to god, that’s the most ludicrous thing you’ve said in a while,” she said. “You can’t just waltz up to one of the sorority houses at LSU and politely knock on the door.”

Mary Clarke pursed her lips into a smile. “I didn’t know the protocol,” she said. “I haven’t been coached for rush like you have.”

Isabel blinked rapidly and pressed her mouth into a twitchy thin line that Mary Clarke guessed was supposed to resemble a smile, but Lorraine interceded before Isabel had a chance to say anything. “Well, did you sign up?”

Mary Clarke shook her head and Lorraine sighed as she picked up her phone. “I’m sure I can get some mothers to write you letters of recommendation,” she said as she scrolled her thumb up and down the screen. “Even though it’s really late in the year to send out resumes. But some of the forms are online now, so that will help.”



Mary Clarke didn't have the slightest clue what Lorraine was talking about, but she didn't want to clue in Isabel on her ignorance any more than she already had, so she nodded her head as Lorraine spoke and pretended as if she were reading her textbook. Isabel stayed at the table, her thumbs flying across the screen on her phone, probably texting her friends about poor little Mary Clarke Patrick, who didn't know how rush worked, who probably wouldn't get invited to any spring parties.

Mary Clarke pressed her highlighter to the page and illuminated a sentence that read, "*After that they put in the same trench many other bodies and covered them also with earth and so they laid them layer upon layer, until the trench was full*" — she convinced herself that the Black Death was far more interesting than whatever Isabel was typing on her phone.

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The New Orleans Public Library was massive, the main branch on Loyola Avenue a tall three stories with huge pillars and wide steps that made Mary Clarke think of a courthouse as she walked up them to the front door. A security guard looked her up and down as she entered the lobby, but decided she was not a threat as she gave him a polite smile and walked towards the information desk in the middle of the foyer.

A blonde woman sat behind the desk, her hair gathered up into a bun that resembled a rat's nest; she had a large piece of rose quartz dangling from one ear and a purple pen tucked behind the other and had created two wings of purple eyeshadow that arched up from her eyelashes towards her temples. The woman looked at her from behind

the pages of a People magazine. Prince Harry's face took up most of the cover — "All I Want to Do Is Make My Mother Proud," said the caption next to his sharp blue eyes.

"Can'uh help ya?" she said, the nasal Yat accent snapping out of her mouth slowed down by the slurred vowels.

"Yeah, I'm here to see Emily in the Louisiana Division," she said. Mary Clarke couldn't remember Emily's last name; the woman raised an eyebrow and slapped down the magazine, pulled the keyboard of the computer in front of her closer to her hands and typed. Her eyes narrowed at the screen.

"Gotta appointment?" she asked Mary Clarke.

"Probably," Mary Clarke replied. "I spoke with her on Saturday, she said to come by around four in the afternoon." As she spoke, she looked down at the clock on her phone: it was ten minutes 'til. *If you aren't ten minutes early, you're late*, said her mother's voice in her head.

"Mmmmm," hummed the woman in an unsure way. "Don't see ya on the calendar. Oughta call and make sure beforeya jump up there."

Mary Clarke stood there for five minutes, watching the woman try to operate the landline on the desk in a way that told her the woman had never used the phone at all; she kept pressing buttons, listening in silence for a few minutes, and then grumbled as she pressed the receiver's button to restart the process over again. The library was quiet; it was clear that the day's traffic had vacated hours earlier, and Mary Clarke saw the woman become more frustrated by the minute. She slammed down the phone at 3:55, by Mary Clarke's phone, and waved her hand at the staircase.

“Can’t figure this out,” she said. “Go on up, it doesn’t matter any, really.”

She nodded and headed towards the staircase, which wound upwards in a corkscrew and was clearly meant for decoration, not convenience. Mary Clarke was winded by the time she reached the second-floor landing and panting for breath at the third, and she walked briskly down the hallway despite breathing heavily. She slid into the glass doors of the Louisiana Division with one minute to go until four, by the clock that hung over a bust of Napoleon Bonaparte. Someone had tied a red bandana around his bicorn hat and shoved a pair of round women’s sunglasses over his eyes. It transformed his demeanor from a grumpy emperor to a sulky street model.

There was absolutely no one in sight inside the main foyer of the Louisiana Division, as far as Mary Clarke could tell, but there were many places someone could hide and not be seen — the foyer merged into a long, rectangular aisle, which held about fifty stacks in either direction, the shelves so tall that they could conceal someone standing on the opposite side. She walked into the mouth of this space and cleared her throat.

No one responded. The air conditioning kicked in, a good twenty degrees cooler than the weather outside, and Mary Clarke shivered and rubbed her bare arms with her palms. If she had driven all the way down into the Central Business District to be stood up at a library, of all places, she would lose it — and there was no way that she’d be able to do the project looming over her head on her own if it came to independent study. She sighed deeply, thinking that it was about time for her to trek back to her car, which she had illegally parked in the Tulane Department of Dermatology parking lot across the

street, when the glass doors opened behind her and a brown-haired girl with a bored expression on her face walked into the room.

Mary Clarke turned and looked at the girl, but realized that she wasn't quite a girl, that she was in fact a few years older than her, in her early twenties; the brown-haired girl cocked her head, glanced over her shoulder at the clock, and snorted.

"I forgot about our appointment," she said out loud, mostly to herself. The girl turned back to Mary Clarke and ran a tongue across her teeth. "You're Mary, right?"

"Mary Clarke," Mary Clarke said, reaching out a hand to shake. The girl took it and gripped it hard enough for Mary Clarke to feel the callouses on the tips of the girl's fingers and palms.

"I'm Emily Vance," the girl said, and Mary Clarke blinked hard. "You probably were imagining some old biddy up here with all the dusty files. I nearly forgot that you were coming today, I was down the hall in the bathroom, drinking."

"It's nice to meet you," Mary Clarke said, now noticing the whisky smell floating from the girl's mouth. "Thank you for making time for me."

Emily laughed, her teeth perfectly straight and white. She gestured to a reading area a few yards down to the right and strode ahead, leaving Mary Clarke to catch up. "Look, if I'm so bored up here that I'm taking shots in the communal bathroom, then it's my pleasure," she said. She pulled out a chair for Mary Clarke and one for herself, and sat down in it, crossing her legs and letting one of her wedges dangle from her big toe.

Mary Clarke took the backpack from her shoulder and sat it down on the table top, reached inside and plucked out the plastic bag that the attic papers had lived in since

she found them the week before. She slid them across the table to Emily, who picked up the whole package and held them up to the light. Mary Clarke realized that along with the cork wedges, Emily was wearing a denim skirt with brass buttons up the front and a black t-shirt for some band called the Sisters of Mercy.

“So,” Emily began, looking up and catching her staring, sending her a smirk but not calling her out for it, “you found these in a house your parents bought, correct?”

Mary Clarke nodded, and Emily reached into a container at the end of the table, a plastic storage box with the word ‘CONSERVATION’ written on the side in permanent marker. She pulled out a pair of white cloth gloves, pulled them on, and then shook her head and grabbed a pair for Mary Clarke and threw them across the table. “Sorry, it’s like my head isn’t even screwed on to my shoulders,” she said. “But let’s take a look, and then I’ll pull what I have on the house. What’s the address?”

Mary Clarke slipped a hand into a glove and found them too big; she put on the other one anyway and yanked them down her fingers. “821 St. Louis Street,” she said.

Emily nodded to herself as she pulled one of the sheets out of the bag. “Pretty solidly in the French Quarter, just around the corner, actually,” she muttered to herself while she scanned the page with her eyes. “Personal correspondence is always enticing but tricky, you know. It’s a rare day when one of us can identify who wrote it -- it all depends on context -- but you at least have an address.”

“Can you read it?” Mary Clarke asked.

Emily glanced at her over the top of the frayed paper. “Couldn’t Guilherme?”

Mary Clarke shook her head, and Emily snorted and smiled to herself. “Yeah, Guilherme likes for everyone to think she is *the* Master of the French Language, but there are a few things she can’t do,” Emily said as she laid the sheet of paper down on the table. “She’s pretty shitty at Louisiana history, doesn’t know much about the modern Afro-French culture here, could care less about Caribbean French. And she really doesn’t know Louisiana French as much as she’d like to admit.”

Emily pushed back from the table and stood up but hovered over the page. “But I do,” she said. “And from what I can tell, it’s a letter from some bird named Augusta to her aunt about a dress, a very specific white dress.” Emily tapped her fingernails on the wooden grain of the table and nodded to herself. “Chill here for a minute, I’m gonna go into the archives and see if anything comes up for your address. You thirsty? Need a water or anything?”

“No, I’m okay,” Mary Clarke said. “I need to call my mom. Is it okay if I do it in here?”

Emily glanced around. “When no one is in here, sure, but if there are people, go into the hallway,” she said. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Emily walked briskly into the stacks, her long hair swaying behind her, a mustard stain on the back of her denim skirt right above her left thigh. Mary Clarke sat there for a moment, trying to decipher how someone like Emily held the keys to the City Archives and was also swigging whisky in the bathroom, the way she knew Guilherme and her habits, how easily she had scanned a page of cramped, faded handwriting in an old French vernacular and understood it immediately. Mary Clarke pulled out her phone from

her backpack's front pocket and pressed her mother's number under her Favorites. She stood up and wandered to the nearest stack while the line rang.

There was a click, and then the sound of her mother sneezing loudly. "Sorry!" she hollered, before sneezing another time. "Ugh, sorry. My dang allergies are out of control."

"I'm at the library," Mary Clarke said. "I think they're really gonna have some good stuff here. The girl who works here just went in the back to see what she could find on our address."

"That's real cool," her mother said. "I'm glad you're doing a project on this, honey, I think it's definitely something that a lot of people don't think about. What time do you think you're gonna get home?"

"I don't know how long I'll be here," Mary Clarke replied. "I think this building closes at five, and I'm also in CBD, so the commute is gonna be a little bit longer than usual across the bridge, and I'll also hit the five o'clock traffic."

Her mother groaned through the phone. "So we'll probably see you around six-thirty," she said. "Be really careful when you walk to your car. Where did you park?"

"Near the Tulane Dermatology Department building," she replied. "I'll be okay, there's a security guard at the front."

"Just be aware," her mother said. "Someone across the street from our building got shot the other day, and we're in Metairie."

"I know, Mom," she said. "I'll text you when I leave here."

After she hung up the phone, she sat at the table and waited for at least ten minutes before she caught sight of Emily again, and when she did, she was surprised to see the girl holding a lawyer's folder the thickness of at least two bibles in her arms. Emily looked flushed and overworked and had a slight sheen of sweat over her forehead when she banged the folder down on the table. The look in her eyes was manic, and she was wearing an incredulous grin.

Mary Clarke stared at the folder in disbelief. "Is that all for the house?" she said. "That's so much."

"No," Emily said, slightly out of breath. "This is just the dossier for the house. There are four more boxes of papers and files back in the store room." She pushed the file towards Mary Clarke. "I only read the first page, but holy crap, did your parents buy a doozy."

Mary Clarke untied the string that held the covers together and opened it up. There were at least seven fully-packed files inside, each one with a tab on the side that denoted the time span inside. *1825-1846*, she read; *1848*, *1849-1879*, *1880-1930*, *1931-1963*, *1964-2014*.

"You didn't tell me it was the Lebrun-Scarsi House," Emily said as Mary Clarke thumbed through the papers, looking at the thickness of each file. "Everyone who does archival research in New Orleans knows about that place."

Mary Clarke stopped, put her hand down on a page from 1902. "Oh Jesus, please don't tell me anyone was murdered in it."



Emily snorted and shook her head. “Nah, I don’t think so,” she said. “Just a kidnapping.”

“What?”

“Yeah,” she went on, raising her eyebrows. “That girl who wrote the letter? Turns out she got kidnapped by a runaway slave — the first kidnapping in the city, and the first one to never be solved. The oldest cold case in New Orleans.”

## CHAPTER THREE

St. Louis Street, French Quarter, New Orleans

September 1847

Augusta Lebrun read everything — the books in her father’s library upstairs, the newspaper her brother brought home from the office in the afternoons, the French Bible on her father’s nightstand and the Spanish Bible her mother kept in the downstairs parlor, and the romances her cousins in Pensacola sent her, disguised in tonic water packages. Those she had to keep in the compartment behind the fireplace in her room, lest her mother catch sight of them and burn them in the kitchen’s open fire. Madame Lebrun had done away with Augusta’s copy of *Carmen* in such a way only a few months before, though Augusta had thrown a slipper at her mother’s head to try and stop the barbarous act. It had done nothing to deter her from her campaign against Augusta’s proclivity for “frivolous novels” as young Creole women of high standing weren’t supposed to be reading as voraciously as Augusta did. Why, they weren’t expected to pick up a book at all, let alone a newspaper, of all things. What business did they have in dabbling in the worldly, crass affairs of men? No, it was downright base, and classless, and if she could turn back the clock, Georgina Lebrun would have never taught Augusta to read in the first place.

“You give me the same uninspired speech every day,” Augusta said from behind the front page of *The Times-Picayune*. She extended her foot and hooked it around the leg of the ottoman, dragging it closer to her armchair by the fire. “Do you think it changes my disposition in any way?”

Madame Lebrun sat across from her, embroidering a silk handkerchief. “I’m not such an imbecile that I cannot see you reading the newspaper right in front of me,” she replied.

“If you were curious, they say that it is supposed to rain tomorrow,” Augusta said. “And that the river has dropped down a foot since it rained last month.”

“What we would do without this riveting information, I know not,” Madame said. She held her stitching up to the firelight and frowned. “I wonder if Ines McIlhenny has the pleasure of reading the barometer’s statistics to her family *apres le dejeuner*.”

“Miss McIlhenny can’t read a word, Madame,” said Helene, poking her head around the corner from the dining room. She had been eavesdropping on them for the past half-hour under the pretense of polishing the candelabras on the oak table and held a perfectly clean rag in her hand.

That piece of information launched Madame Lebrun on another fifteen-minute ramble about how Ines was a perfect example for Augusta, if only she would follow — someone who was a credit to her family, who was due to be married to a splendid young man from an equally acclaimed family, who knew her place in the world and was not continuously mumbling under her breath about how unfair everything was. Augusta

peeped her head over the top of her newspaper and glared at Helene, who was giggling behind her rag, the ends of her curly hair bouncing out of her white head wrap.

“Yes, well, we shall see how Ines’s marriage progresses,” Augusta said, and cocked an eyebrow. “I’m sure she will find ordering others to do her household chores deeply enthralling.” She reached out a hand to the side table that sat near the fireplace but was met with thin air. She frowned and lowered her newspaper. “Helene, where’s my tea?”

Helene sighed and slapped the rag against her skirt. “I forgot to make it, mademoiselle,” she said. “Shall I make it after I finish polishing?”

Madame Lebrun turned her head and gave the girl an even stare. “No, do it now,” she said, with a firm smile. “Because your mistress expected it ten minutes ago.”

Augusta watched as Helene thought about talking back, then nodded her head low and walked through the dining room out to the kitchen. She waited until she heard the door close behind Helene, and then gave her mother a look. “Was that necessary, *Maman*?”

“A firm hand is always required, darling,” her mother replied, her eyes lowered to her handkerchief. “It is in their nature to be unruly and desire to have their own way, like a child. You must always remember that they are children by nature and have to be scolded every now and then to be put onto the right path.”

Augusta grimaced. “But it’s Helene. You don’t have to fuss at her. She was going to do it.”

Madame Lebrun scoffed dryly. “They are made to obey. You must let them learn how to do it, and do it well, or else rid yourself of the baggage.”

Augusta could say something to her mother, a lecture on kindness, or how Helene felt more like a special pet to her than a slave or vex her with abolitionist theory — but the breath she took in to speak her mind always seemed to leave her mouth in a large sigh. It was not worth it to fight *Maman*. She was too set in her ways to have her mind changed. Their generation would bend to nothing.

Helene had returned from the kitchen with the tea cup, perched on a thin little saucer with a spoon lying across the delicate china. She sat the cup down noiselessly on the table next to Augusta’s chair. “My apologies, mademoiselle,” she said meekly, but Augusta could tell she was annoyed by the twitching of her cheek as she smiled.

“Thank you,” Augusta said. “It’s perfect, as always.”

“It’s taking you an awfully long time to polish that candelabra,” Madame Lebrun said. “If you can’t do it in a timely manner, go upstairs and help Maggie with this week’s laundry.”

Helene turned and dropped Madame Lebrun a neat curtsy and left the room, ascending the main staircase with a force that shook the hanging crystals in the chandelier. Madame Lebrun looked up at the fixture with distaste and shook her head. “*Que niña tan terrible.*”

Augusta could feel a headache blooming over her left eye and pressed the spot above her eyebrow. “When is Henry coming home from France?”

“Next week, God willing,” Madame Lebrun replied, crossing herself. “Your father told me last night that Henry will start in on the cotton trade as soon as he returns.”

Augusta nodded to herself, thinking how preposterous of an idea it was to force Henry into mercantile business. He only liked three things: horse racing, drinking, and quadroon girls looking for a dance partner at the Cordon Bleu gatherings. Everything was wasted on him: the privilege of a university degree, his ability to vote and voice his opinions, the freedom of travel. He appreciated nothing, and when he was home in New Orleans, all he wanted to do was sleep past noon and nurse his drinking ills with massive quantities of *étouffée*. And he was always allowed to eat more of it than she was. Her mother said she had to start watching her waistline if she wanted a handsome husband.

“I’m going upstairs,” Augusta said, pushing her skirts to the side so she could ease off of the chaise. “I don’t want to be disturbed, I feel unwell.”

Madame Lebrun rolled her eyes but kept her attention down on her embroidery. “I’ll send Maggie up with a tonic cure.”

“Don’t bother,” Augusta said. She walked into the foyer and peeked out of the door’s side windows. The street lamp lighters were out earlier than usual, firing the wicks with their torches. It would be foggy tonight, then. “I’ll send Helene down if I need anything.”

Every day was the same, the same schedule, the same ailments, the same patterns of conversation, occasionally interrupted by operas or weddings or funerals or balls thrown in a debutante’s honor, and Augusta hated it, was bored to tears by it. Some days she couldn’t get out of bed — only then would her mother ease a little on her lectures and

coldness, hold her hand and pray the rosary that her sweet girl hadn't come down with an early case of yellow fever. That was the only time they ever touched, one chilled hand holding on to another, warm with agitation.

Helene was waiting in Augusta's room, sitting on the windowsill and watching the street below. She looked up as Augusta opened the door to the balcony and listened to the noise of horse's hooves being sucked into the mud that lined the street, at the shouts of the men coming home from the wharf on the levee, the chattering of women's laughter and gossip floating towards them as they passed by on the banquette.

"Shall we try to read?" Augusta asked. "I know we usually do it later, but I feel a vicious headache coming."

Helene found the half-inch of missing wood on the wall panel next to the room's fireplace, wiggled her pointer fingers under the edge of it and pulled. The wall creaked but the panel gave way, shifting a foot into the room and revealing the dark space where Augusta kept her forbidden novels. Helene procured yesterday's newspaper, already turning yellow, and brought it to the bed.

"Can you read the first headline?" Augusta asked.

Helene squinted and held the paper closer. "Steam...steamboat. Steamboat on...uh, river...ex-ex..." She raised her eyebrows and handed over the wrinkled *Times-Picayune*. "I don't know that one."

"Explodes," Augusta said, tracing the word with her finger. "That means to combust, to catch on fire and go to pieces."

“I know what it means,” Helene said with a look. “I just didn’t know what the word looked like.”

Augusta chuckled and handed the paper back. “Try to do a few more sentences,” she said. “My eye feels as if the devil himself is poking it.”



## CHAPTER FOUR

Mary Clarke Patrick

AP French 4

Mdme. Guilherme

18 May 2016

### The Lebrun-Scarsi House: A Record of Life, Birth, Death, and Kidnapping within a Creole Family

The Lebrun-Scarsi House takes its name from the two prominent families that resided in it during the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries: the Lebruns, who built the home in 1825 and lived in it until 1879, and the Scarsi family, who purchased the home from the last Lebrun heir in 1880 and lived there until 1930. After the Scarsi family sold the house, the Diocese of Orleans Parish converted the building into a home for single mothers; in 1963, the Diocese sold the home to private contractors, who converted sections of the house into apartments for private residences. In March of 2016, the house went on the market again, and my parents bought it with the intent to restore it to its former architectural style and to live there as our family's new home.

The Lebrun family was headed by Eugene Goring Lebrun, the son of Henri Alexandre Lebrun, a French planter, and Arabella Goring, an heir to a British sugarcane fortune. Henri and Arabella originally lived on her father's plantation outside of Bridgetown, Barbados; Henri went into a partnership with Edward Goring, Arabella's father, and together they found the sugarcane trade to be extremely lucrative, until Bussa's Rebellion in 1816 when Edward Goring was killed by his own slaves. Henri gathered up Arabella and Eugene, who was eight years old at the time, and put them on the next ship to New Orleans; Henri stayed behind on the island in order to protect his property from burning down and to safeguard their wealth. Unfortunately, Henri was killed while trying to prevent slaves from setting fire to the family's plantation house. Arabella learned of his death a month later, when her husband's body was found in the sugarcane fields near the home.

Arabella and Eugene found solace in New Orleans among the white refugees who had fled from Barbados along with them, and with others who had escaped similar rebellions on other Caribbean islands. Though very British, Arabella and Eugene were embraced by the French community. Arabella inherited the majority of her father and Henri's fortune, allowing her and Eugene to live well in the French Quarter until Eugene came of age.

Eugene Lebrun, according to multiple accounts, was something of a hellion in his teenage years. He enjoyed spending time down at the docks with sailors of all nationalities, gambling, and racing horses up and down Canal Street

with his school friends. The national interest in shipping and steam boats lead him to break away from the family tradition of planting and processing sugar, and he pursued an apprenticeship with a local merchant who brokered cotton gins and other agricultural equipment to planters and farmers along the Gulf Coast. Eugene began to sail with the merchant to deliver goods, and I assume that was how he found himself in Pensacola, Florida, under the charms of fifteen-year-old Georgina Acilino, the daughter of a prominent Spanish don.

It was 1824, and though Eugene was only seventeen years old himself, he had already inherited his father and grandfather's money. He proposed to Georgina and they were married in January of 1825 in Florida, and afterwards the couple moved to New Orleans, where Eugene built the Lebrun-Scarsi House for Georgina as a wedding present.

The Lebruns' first child was Henry Eugene Goring Lebrun, who was born on December 4, 1827; their next and final child, Augusta Beatriz Acilino Lebrun, was born on September 15, 1830. Georgina nearly died of postpartum complications and "childbed fever" after Augusta was born.

There is then a period of eighteen years where nothing eventful happens. There are little to no documents about the family during this time, except for one letter written by Arabella Lebrun to her son Eugene, inquiring about Henry's time at an unnamed university. There are also records of the purchases of two slaves, both women — one named Helene, bought from a neighbor on Dauphine Street in 1831, and one named Maggie, bought in 1832. Helene is listed as three years old

at her time of purchase, and her occupation is labeled as “lady’s maid”. Maggie is simply listed as a cook, no age given.

In 1848, there are numerous newspaper articles regarding the kidnapping of Augusta Lebrun from her home on May 15th. According to the *Times-Picayune*, Augusta was kidnapped by a man named Gustave Pricard, who worked for Eugene in the small stable in the house’s courtyard as a coachman and right-hand man. There is a lot of hullabaloo about Gustave’s status as a quadroon, a man who could pass as white outside of the city — a few off-color sentences imply that it was his racial mixture that led him to taking Augusta and stealing away with her in the night. It also appears as if the kidnapping of Augusta was the first recorded kidnapping in New Orleans history, and the first one to go unsolved — the papers continue to ask what happened to her for eight months afterwards, but it appears as if the reporters begin to lose hope that they will ever find answers. After 1850, there are no longer any public documents that mention Augusta, and the Lebrun family seem to give up searching for their daughter or mentioning her by name ever again.

The Civil War was tough on the family. Eugene began to lose money as soon as the naval blockade was imposed on the Confederacy, and it is recorded that he fell ill with rheumatic fever in 1864. Henry went off to war with a cavalry unit and returned in 1867 to find that both Helene and Maggie had left the household, his mother had rented a room in the house to a Union major, and his father had become senile. By the fall of 1879, the family were

facing lean times - Eugene died in August, and in September both Henry and Georgina moved out of the house to the family's other home on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain. In the spring of 1880, Henry sold the house to the Scarsi family of Boston...

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Madame Guilherme tapped the stapled pages with the end of her red ink pen and narrowed her eyes. "Hmmm," she hummed, flipping the pages to rest at the end of Mary Clarke's research paper. "It's not very thorough."

Mary Clarke clasped her hands together behind her back. "In what way?"

Well, for one, Guilherme told her, there wasn't a lot of in-depth material to go over within the pages. Sure, Mary Clarke had succeeded in capturing the barest facts of the house's history — the dates, the occurrences, the names of the people who lived there — but facts didn't necessarily tell a story. And it was clear that there was a lot more story to be told within the paper, since Mary Clarke had felt the need to synthesize the house's history and write in a cursory way in order to keep the paper's length to five pages. Also, there were major questions within the paper that needed to be addressed: what was the importance of mentioning her mother's sociological ethos? Why not investigate more deeply into the missing Lebrun girl, as that was clearly the apex of the drama? Why not mention the rest of the Scarsi family by name?

"It has a lot of flaws," Guilherme said. "So many that I would give this paper a C if it weren't extra credit work."

Mary Clarke nodded sagely and tipped her head to the side. “Those are all valid points,” she said, “but there were so many files at the library on the house that I was afraid to go any deeper with the research. It would’ve been a fifteen-page paper had I reported on every detail.”

Guilherme raised an eyebrow and scanned the first page again. “Emily told me that you were very intrigued in the documents you found,” she said. “Which is why I think I crave more content — are you going to continue this project?”

Mary Clarke had considered it. She only had a short window of time to go through the thick dossier that Emily had dredged up from the archives and had yet to see what was in the other four boxes of material that was sitting in the back of the library.

“I think it would be a fun thing to do in the summer,” Mary Clarke said. “Considering we’re moving in to the place after graduation.” Guilherme frowned and Mary Clarke stood a little straighter. “But I have been considering your advice on majoring in history, and I think when I go to orientation I’ll ask around and see what classes there are for History majors.”

Mentioning the History major — and convincing Guilherme that she was truly, deeply inspired by the woman’s suggestion — had been the key play in securing her an A grade, which Guilherme had entered into the grading system that night, bumping her grade in the class up from that measly B into an A-. She sighed and closed the eleven tabs on her browser that she had been keeping open for research. The grade felt good but shutting her laptop and flopping face down on her bed felt better.

“I can’t believe you pulled that off,” Lorraine said. She had come over to go over test questions for their AP European History and AP English 5 tests, but their study session had quickly dissolved into Lorraine complaining about her grades, her hair, the dress her mother wanted her to wear under her graduation robes, and the fact that there weren’t any cute rugs for their dorm room online that cost less than two hundred dollars.

“Me neither,” Mary Clarke said, her face still pressed into the fuzzy weave of her bed’s throw blanket. She rolled over and opened one eye to watch Lorraine hold up a pair of Mary Clarke’s earrings to her own ears to her vanity mirror. “It was a pain in the ass.”

Mary Clarke looked up from her blanket and reached across the bed for her phone, wiggling a little to push her within arm’s reach. She had meant to text Emily yesterday, telling her the good news about her paper grade and to ask if she could come back down to the library sometime soon to look over all of the other material she hadn’t had the time to sort through, but had forgotten in the rush to print off her paper and get it to Guilherme in time.

*Paper grade was great, pushed my overall grade to an A! She typed. Can I make another appointment to come down to the lib and look at the other papers?*

She sent the message and glanced over at Lorraine, who was balancing her AP workbooks on her head. “Did I ever give you the entire paper for you to read?”

“No, why would you?” Lorraine replied, the books slipping off her head and falling to the floor. “I mean, is it interesting?”

Mary Clarke rolled her eyes. “Of course it’s interesting, I wrote it.” She pushed herself off of her bed and grabbed her backpack from the desk chair. “That house we’re

moving into is like, chock-full of drama and kidnapping and shady owners and like, all sorts of clichéd New Orleans bullshit.”

“Dude, what?” Lorraine said, grabbing Mary Clarke’s copy of the paper out of her hands. “You never told me any of that!” She flipped through it quickly, squinting at the size twelve font and the works cited page. “Oh, it’s like an actual research paper — I don’t know if I can read this right now, my brain is so fried from academic writing.”

Mary Clarke’s phone buzzed, and she swiped open the new text message. It was Emily. *Yeah, come around any time. Just let me know a day before so I can ditch my other responsibilities responsibly.*

Lorraine had taken Mary Clarke’s spot on her bed and was scrolling through Instagram, haphazardly double-tapping pictures at random when she saw something agreeable. She stopped on one picture and crinkled her nose. “Ew, come look at this picture of Isabel. Not cute.”

Mary Clarke had one hand deep in her backpack and the other filled with AP workbooks. “I can’t, describe it to me.”

“She’s wearing some kind of backless-looking, neo-J. Lo dress that’s eighty percent sequins and twenty percent see-through mesh,” Lorraine said. “I mean, she’s my friend, but sometimes I wonder if she has to have her tiddies out all the time, ya know?”

Lorraine was pretty infamous for having her tits out, too. Even though their school had required uniforms — garish, starched skirts and inflexible white polos that felt as if they were made out of parchment paper — Lorraine got called to the office at least once a week for uniform infractions. Her signature look was her skirt’s waistband rolled



up once and two undone buttons on her shirt, just enough for a hint of cleavage to show. She called it “‘Baby One More Time’ Chic”; Mary Clarke called it the “Desperate Jailbait Look.” Well, she did in her head — she’d never say that aloud to Lorraine. She was just starved for the presence of boys. They all were.

“Mary Clarke?” Marianne stood in the hallway, right outside her door. Her mother never knocked on her door, but she never came in either, just sort of loitered outside Mary Clarke’s room if she wanted something. “Honey, I got to go into the city and check up on the men who are replacing the wood in the balcony. Do y’all have any interest in coming with me?”

Before Mary Clarke could say no, Lorraine jumped up. “I want to go!” she said, a big smile on her face as she turned around to wink at Mary Clarke. “I’ve heard so much about it and I’d love to see the house for myself, Miss Marianne.”

What a suck-up, but it looked like her mother was buying it — of course, Mary Clarke thought, she’d die to talk about the house to someone other than her family and her friends at the club. And sure enough, her mother straightened up and gave Lorraine a bright smile.

Thirty minutes later, when they had battled the Wednesday afternoon traffic through the city and parked across the street by Bar Mon Cher, Mary Clarke was getting a pretty wicked headache from the incessant chattering and shouts exchanged between her mother in the front seat and Lorraine in the back while she was stuck in the passenger seat, staring at the water of Lake Pontchartrain off the side of the bridge as they drove along. There was a pretty steady flow of pedestrians on St. Louis Street, some who were

stopping to take photos of their new house, which was wrapped in plastic tarps from the bottom-down as workmen pried up rotten floorboards and tossed them into a moveable dumpster parked on the street.

Lorraine took off her Ray-Bans and ogled. "Is that entire building the house?"

"Yep," said Marianne. "It's three stories...well, two-and-a-half, to be specific."

"Holy moly," Lorraine mumbled. "Wow."

A door opened behind them, followed by the tinkling of a little bell. Jamarquez had emerged from the Bar and was wiping his hands on his apron, a glimmer in his eye. "Well hey there, angel dove," he said to Mary Clarke. "And Mama, too, even though I haven't had the pleasure."

Marianne looked baffled for a moment before something clicked behind her eyes. "Mr. Jamarquez, I presume?"

"You presume correctly, honey," he said, offering a hand to shake and squeezing her mother's when she put her own hand to his palm. "I've met seventy-five percent of your family, and now I've met all y'all and I'm happy to call y'all neighbors."

"You live around here?" her mother asked, patting her hair. It was her nervous movement, Mary Clarke had decided, something to do with her hands while her brain tried to work out the best course of action in any social situation.

"Nah, I live in Marigny," he said. "You gotta be a little crazy or a whole lot ambitious to live in the Quarter."

"Half of us definitely fall into the 'crazy' category," Mary Clarke said. Her mother shot her a look while Jamarquez laughed. She suddenly remembered that Lorraine

was there and saw her standing a good three feet away from the group, trying to act like she wasn't eyeing Jamarquez but failing miserably. Mary Clarke raised an eyebrow at her and Lorraine smiled tightly, flicking her eyes back to Jamarquez pointedly.

“Well, it was rotting,” her mother was saying to Jamarquez. “It’s a city issue too, since it hangs over the sidewalk, so they paying for half of it. Nobody wants a balcony to collapse on them when they walking down the street.”

“Mmph,” Jamarquez said, shaking his head. “Pain in the be-hind, I swear.” He looked over and gave Lorraine a once-over. “Who’s this?”

Mary Clarke waited a moment for Lorraine to introduce herself, but when it became apparent that she wasn't going to answer, Mary Clarke ran her tongue across her teeth. “That’s Lorraine,” she said, pointing behind her back. “My roommate next year at LSU.”

“How sweet,” Jamarquez said with a little grin. “I’ll let y’all girls go, y’all didn’t come down here to talk to me all afternoon. But if y’all get hungry come on over and I’ll feed ya good.”

They waited until Jamarquez had gone back inside the bar, pushing his way through a group of tourists checking out the menu that was posted on the window by the door. Marianne squinted against the sun and crossed the street, and Mary Clarke followed her, hoping that Lorraine would somehow get lost in the twenty feet that separated Bar Mon Cher from the house’s front door, but Lorraine hovered near Mary Clarke’s elbow as they walked.

“I’ve never seen you be that rude,” she said, cutting her eyes to Lorraine. “What’s your problem?”

“He seemed really shady,” Lorraine said, looking at her like he was crazy. “Like, what wait staff comes out to speak to the owner of the house across the street? He’s probably gonna rob y’all one night when you least expect it.”

“Look, he’s been really nice,” Mary Clarke said, angry that she had the same first impression, angry that Lorraine was reminding her that she had brushed it aside after he gave her a beer and a sandwich.

“He’s, like, a street person,” Lorraine whispered.

Once, when they had been younger, maybe in seventh or eighth grade, Lorraine’s mother had taken both of the girls to the Moonwalk by Café du Monde to eat beignets and walk around Jackson Square. It was a pit stop before going to the Audubon Aquarium, where they were supposed to do research on otters for their science project, and Lorraine had picked up a beignet and thrown it at a pigeon pecking hopefully on the other side of the iron partition dividing the café from the street. Powdered sugar had gone everywhere, and all Mrs. Macarty had done was roll her eyes as Lorraine laughed. Mary Clarke was on edge – her mother would have whooped her ass if she had wasted food like that, but Lorraine seemed to get away with everything. She kept an eye on the beignet as the birds fluttered around it, pecking at the bits of the pastry that had broken away when it had bounced, while Lorraine fought with her mother over whether she could order a café au lait or not. When a homeless woman wandered near the iron fence, sticking her hands over the railing towards the patrons of the café, Mary Clarke knew

what the grizzled, desperate woman would do before she even did it. Lorraine looked on in disgust as the woman picked up the beignet from the dirty flagstone and stuck it in her mouth, pausing to chew thoughtfully before wandering up towards the park in front of the Cathedral. “What a nasty bitch,” she had whispered under her breath to Mary Clarke as her mother paid their bill. “Can you believe that?”

She watched Lorraine follow her mother through the house, fawning over the crown molding in the corners of the ceilings and the new appliances in their tiny kitchen, and wondered why she hadn’t remembered the beignet incident until now. Where had that memory gone? She had pushed it to a corner of her mind she rarely visited, where she could ignore Lorraine’s faults and focus on how fun her friend was, how exciting she was to be around.

She sat on a metal folding chair a painter had left behind in the living room and inhaled the scent of turpentine and plastic tarpaulins, listened to her mother and Lorraine walk around upstairs, their pleasant tones echoing in the foyer, and closed her eyes. Lorraine had her faults, but she was a good friend. Well, sometimes she ignored Mary Clarke to hang out with Isabel, or told her that she was too busy doing homework to talk but posted pictures of herself at Sonic with their other friends on Snapchat, but overall, she was a pretty solid person. She’d be a good roommate. She’d more than likely throw up on the white futon she had purchased for their dorm room, ruining it forever, but other than that, Mary Clarke couldn’t envision too many horrible things happening between them as roommates. Lorraine was fine. It would be fine.

“Hey!” Lorraine said. She was crouched down on the topmost step, peeking through the gap between the last foot of the stairs and the ceiling. “Your Mom wants you upstairs. The workers want to restructure the fireplace in your room, or something like that.”

Mary Clarke shoved herself off the chair and groaned, wiped away the sweat behind her knees and headed towards the stairs. Lorraine had donned one of the aprons her mother had bought to protect her clothes from wet paint but had a streak of cream on her forearm. She seemed comfortable, despite the muggy heat that invaded the house from the open door upstairs. Halfway up the staircase, Mary Clarke tripped on the canvas runner the construction men had placed on the steps to protect the wood and landed hard on her knee. Lorraine rolled her eyes and walked down to help her up. She kissed her fingertips and slapped them lightly on Mary Clarke’s kneecap. “All better,” she sang, and flicked Mary Clarke on the forehead with her forefinger.

Two men stood by the fireplace in her room, studying a level they had placed on top of the iron mantel. Her mother leaned against the frame of the open French door, typing furiously on her phone, pausing only to look up when Mary Clarke walked into the room. “Oh good, come here,” she said. “Apparently your fireplace is uneven, and Juan says that they think the wall behind it has shifted. Our options are to have the fireplace taken out and put in a new one or leave it here and let it be dysfunctional.”

“You’d let me light a fire in here?” Mary Clarke said. She didn’t trust herself to light the gas fire at their house in Mandeville, and she couldn’t imagine piling up wood in her room to keep warm on the cold nights. A spark would jump from the brick opening

and land on her bed, or she'd walk by and accidentally kick up a hot log, and in a second her rug would catch on fire and she'd burn the whole house down.

“Well, no, but it's nice to know that the fireplace could work, if you wanted to light it,” her mother said. “I'm loathe to rip anything out of the wall, though – will it ruin the entire look of this room?”

Juan readjusted his orange John Deere cap. “I mean, I don't know about the look, but if it keeps shifting it might cause the wall panels to split apart, and then you'd have gaps in your wall.”

Lorraine ran a hand over the wall and frowned. “Or you could take out the fireplace and put in drywall, and then have more space in the room.”

“That's true,” Marianne said, sticking her phone in her back pocket. “There would definitely be more space for a desk in here.”

Mary Clarke liked the fireplace. It definitely seemed like a fire hazard, with its open mouth and sooty brick interior, but she liked to imagine that a Lebrun or Scarsi had sat beside it when the river air turned frosty. And even though she would never light it, she enjoyed the mental picture of her reading in bed with the warm glow of the fireplace making the shadows of the room dance on the walls and ceilings. She stepped forward and put a hand on the mantel, peeked inside and felt the draft from the opening above shake the dust bunnies that had gotten stuck on the ragged corners of the bricks.

“I like it,” she said, looking up at her mother. “I like the way it looks. And if the wall shifts, we could just caulk the cracks. It seems like a lot of trouble to take it out.”

Lorraine walked over to the open French door and leaned against the frame, raising an eyebrow at the missing planks and rotted remnants of the wooden balcony, wrinkled her nose when a gust of air brought the smell of the street into the room. “God, that reeks,” she said. “In my opinion, it’d be easier to just knock the whole house down and build a new one. It’s already halfway falling apart.”

Mary Clarke briefly thought about kicking Lorraine’s rear end out onto the balcony, through the gaps in the wood and onto the sidewalk below but decided against it. Today was not the day for a homicide charge. She didn’t like the house either, but she’d be damned if Lorraine insulted her mother’s obsession in front of her.

Marianne beat her to it. Her face stretched into a tight smile, the kind that told you that you were in trouble, the kind she wore when Mary Clarke and Louis used to try to misbehave in public as children. *You know better and you oughta quit ‘cause I’m on the verge of whooping your behinds*, it said, and it was always taken seriously. “It’s a work of love,” she said, and her tone held a hint of steel through the sugar. “Not everyone has the patience and expertise to do it.”

Lorraine wasn’t listening – she cocked her head to the side and regarded something down on the sidewalk. “There’s a blonde woman standing at y’all’s door,” she said. “She looks pissed.”

Marianne groaned and strode through the door and onto the landing of the stairwell. “Girls, stay upstairs,” she called behind her, and she quickly navigated the steps. “I’ll deal with this.”



Lorraine and Mary Clarke nearly tripped over each other getting to the upstairs hallway, stopping right at the edge of the stairs and crouching down behind the bannister. Lorraine was huffing loudly from the dash, and her hot breath wafted into Mary Clarke's ear. She elbowed Lorraine to get her off her back, and Lorraine toppled and fell on her ass. They both were wheezing into their hands when Marianne opened the front door downstairs.

The blonde woman walked into the house without greeting Marianne, a look of distaste etched into her heavily made-up face. Mary Clarke had no idea who she was, but with her white blouse that billowed at the sleeves like a pirate's, and her blue tweed skirt and impractical heels, she looked like a Pan Am airline waitress that had dropped right out of the Sixties. The woman took off her sunglasses, folded them neatly in her hands, and raised an eyebrow at Marianne.

"Why, come on in, Angela," Marianne said, still wearing the fake smile she had given Lorraine. "What is it this time? New building codes? City ordinances passed overnight?"

Angela sighed and tucked her sunglasses into a hidden pocket on her skirt. "No, Marianne, we've had a complaint." She stepped to the right and looked up at the ceiling's fresh paint, took in the newly dusted chandelier. "Although I must say, the work you've done so far has exceeded...expectations, for sure."

"Who complained?"

"Well, do you want the long answer or the short one?" she replied, fanning herself. "I'm going to tell you both. Short answer would be the entire Vieux Carré

Commission – they filed a violation based on the construction work you’re doing with the balcony outside.”

Marianne blinked, brow wrinkled in confusion. Angela took a deep breath. “You did get a permit from them, didn’t you?”

“No, I got one from City Hall.”

Angela smiled wanly. “Now, see, we did warn you that this would happen. We told you what was required, but we knew you wouldn’t want to jump through those hoops.” She tilted her head down and regarded the floorboards beneath her feet. “You have to have a permit specifically from the Commission to do any and all outside work on these houses, Marianne. We told you that.”

“Excuse me,” Marianne said, taking a step towards the woman. “I I recall correctly, City Hall representatives gave me express permission to do this, citing it as a safety hazard for pedestrians. They’re paying for these repairs.”

“We told you that the Vieux Carrè is a *mare claustrum*, if you will,” Angela said, her tone mincing. “City Hall has no jurisdiction over what happens, architecturally, in the neighborhood boundaries of the Quarter. You needed a permit from the VCC, and since you began construction without one, there are penalties pending.”

Marianne pressed a hand to her forehead and closed her eyes. “Why are you here, and not some official person from the VCC?”

Angela tilted her head and made sad eyes at Marianne. “Well, I thought it was right for me to come, since we’re neighbors now – and no one at the VCC had time to send anyone of their own. There’s a big hullabaloo brewing over on Ursulines, apparently

some idiot tried to dig a pool in his courtyard without VCC's permission and hit a dozen coffins or so. Quite the mess."

Lorraine tucked her head into the crook of her elbow and sneezed twice. "Bless you," Mary Clarke whispered. Lorraine patted her on the back.

"Anyway," the woman named Angela continued, opening the purse dangling off her shoulder, "this is for you – it's a Stop Work Order from the VCC."

Marianne held the piece of paper between her thumb and pointer finger like it was covered in poison. "You have got to be kidding me."

"Nope," Angela said. "That rolls into effect immediately, and if you don't send the workers home, you're susceptible to arrest. You can smooth all this over with the VCC in a few business days. All you need is a permit." She toed an empty paint pan and snapped her purse shut. "And their approval of all work plans."

"What am I supposed to do with City Hall?" Marianne said. Angela shrugged and swept her hair behind her shoulder. "You don't have any clue?"

"It's not my area of authority," she said. "I'm sure the VCC and City Hall can come up with a solution. You can get all of that ironed out, once you have the proper permits." She smiled at Marianne beatifically, as if she had truly enjoyed their conversation. Mary Clarke suspected that she had. Angela looked down at her watch and sighed. "Time for me to get going. I have three other houses I need to visit. The Research Center has me working like a busy bee."

The woman turned and walked out the door, stepping back into the harsh afternoon sunlight and strode up towards Dauphine Street. Marianne slammed the front

door behind her and threw the piece of paper at the back of the door, stalked down the hallway towards the courtyard, cursing loudly in creative ways that Mary Clarke had never heard before.

Lorraine sat back and looked at Mary Clarke, trying hard to fight the smile that hid in the corners of her mouth. “Should I get my mom to pick me up, you think?” she asked, then sneezed again.

“Yeah, that would be wise,” Mary Clarke replied. “Save yourself.”

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The ride back to Mandeville was silent, except for the stereo, which Marianne had tuned to the local National Public Radio station. Mary Clarke pretended to check her Twitter while her mother weaved in and out of traffic leading up to the Causeway.

*“Donald Trump, who has dominated campaign news for the last eleven months, was wildly in the spotlight this week – calling in to morning shows on television networks, speaking to a bevy of reporters from his office inside of Trump Tower, emerging on to the scene at Capitol Hill and keeping up his steady stream of boasts and insults on Twitter...”*

Marianne mashed her hand on the stereo’s power button, cutting off the amused announcer on NPR. Mary Clarke lowered her phone and raised an eyebrow at her mother, who shook her head but kept her eyes on the bumper of the car in front of them. “Sons of bitches,” she said. A sprinkle of raindrops landed on the windshield, and Marianne hit the wipers on – they grated against the dry glass and the women winced.

“I just try to ignore it,” Mary Clarke said. “I mean, he’s not gonna win, so what’s the point of stressing out about it?”

Marianne scratched her nose, her eyes flicking between the two bumpers in front of their car. “We don’t have the luxury of ignoring him,” she said. “You need to start paying more attention.”

Mary Clarke rolled her eyes and favorited a tweet from Ellen DeGeneres. She did pay attention, thank you – she read The New York Times every morning at school when she was supposed to be studying for her AP exams and watched CNN at night while her parents twisted their framed art in layers of bubble wrap. Her mother always got so riled up at the littlest thing, even politics, when it wasn’t worth getting upset over. There was nothing they could do to change politics, unless Mary Clarke poisoned Trump’s daily Big Mac or something.

Her phone buzzed and received a text message from her father. “Dad wants to know what we want for dinner.”

Marianne slapped the steering wheel with an open palm. “There are pork chops in the fridge, I told him that this morning.”

*There are pork chops in the fridge!! She told you that this morning!!*, she texted back, hiding a grin.

“Will you also tell him to find the city permit in the folder on my desk?” she asked as Mary Clarke typed away. “I guess I need to look over that as well.”

It felt safer now to ask her about Angela Cavender, now that her mother’s blood pressure had decreased somewhat. “Who was that lady?”

“A representative from the Vieux Carrè Commission,” she said. “They oversee the building guidelines and codes in the French Quarter. You’re basically not allowed to do any renovation work without their permission.”

After a leveling look from Mary Clarke, she continued with a sigh. “And I didn’t consult them because I loathe Cavender and her ilk. They’re racist, proven racists – they like to deny permits to people of color, and their renovation guidelines are restrictive, and they love to drag out a project for years. And they’re Presbyterians, and I don’t trust Protestants.”

“But you have to follow the rules,” Mary Clarke said. “I don’t know why you didn’t.”

“Sometimes, to get results,” Marianne said, “you gotta break the rules.”

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