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NECESSARY SINS

Lazare Family Saga
BOOK ONE



ELIZABETH BELL



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Book One of the Lazare Family Saga



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Claire-Voie Books

PROLOGUE



CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA
SEPTEMBER 1822

The characteristics of a saint are: deep humility, blind obedience, dove-like simplicity and a complete detachment from things of Earth. These virtues, however, are not incompatible in living saints with some defects and lingering imperfections.

— Bishop William Stang, *Pastoral Theology* (1897)

Joseph knew he was committing a terrible, terrible sin, but he could only draw closer. He'd been alive ten whole years, and he'd never seen anything so beautiful. It occupied the very center of the painting. Soft and round, smooth and *crowned*—there, between the lips of the Christ Child, unmistakable: the perfect pink nipple of the Mother of God.

Joseph should be imitating his patron saint, who stood at the edge of the canvas. White-haired and lumpy-faced, Mary's husband seemed oblivious to his wife and Son, peering at a book through the spectacles on his nose. Much as Joseph himself liked to read, he could not imagine concentrating on lifeless pages in such company.

Draped in rich robes and her own golden hair, the Blessed Virgin gazed down serenely at her divine Son. The Christ Child's arms encircled Mary's right breast possessively, His green eyes pointing out of the painting as if He sensed Joseph's unholy stare.

"Joseph!"

He jumped and closed his eyes. Only then did he realize his mouth was open too.

His sister Cathy continued behind him, from the threshold: "Haven't you found it yet?"

Joseph turned quickly, to distract her from the painting. He'd completely forgotten why he'd come into Papa's office. Mama, Cathy, and Hélène were knitting something for the children at the Orphan House, only their scissors had broken. Joseph had been seated nearby at the piano-forte, and he'd offered to fetch another pair from Papa's office.

Huffing with impatience, Cathy strode to his desk. Joseph tried the drawers of Papa's medical cabinet and found scissors. On their way out of the office, he and Cathy passed the painting of headless Saint Denis, the one their father had had for years. Joseph had never seen the portrait of the Holy Family before. Papa must have brought it back from Paris.

In the parlor, Mama signed her thanks for the scissors by touching her fingertips to her mouth and then gesturing toward Joseph. She would not be smiling if she knew why he had lingered in Papa's office. Mama snipped whatever needed snipping, then returned her attention to her work.

Joseph sat down again at the piano, but as he stared at the pages in front of him, the notes became fuzzy. He dropped his eyes to the keys, but all he could see was that breast, that nipple. Were all women so beautiful?

Were all boys as wicked as he was?

Joseph closed his eyes tightly, and still the vision lingered. He tried desperately to pray, but the words would not come.

Fortunately, before too long Papa returned from visiting patients. Hélène ran to show him the mess of wool she claimed would soon be a mitten. Papa praised it and kissed the top of her head.

Joseph ventured: "Papa?"

"Yes, son?" he answered as H  l  ne scampered back to Mama.

"May I go to church before supper?"

"Is the choir practicing today?" Papa sounded confused, though Joseph didn't see his expression because he couldn't meet his eyes.

"No, sir."

"Joseph? What's troubling you, son?"

His sisters stopped chattering to each other, and Joseph felt their stares. Mama must be watching too.

Papa moved a chair next to the piano stool and sat facing Joseph. When Papa spoke, he sounded very grave. "You want to go to Confession, don't you?"

Joseph nodded miserably. He'd committed a mortal sin. His soul was in peril. What if the negroes tried to rebel again and weren't caught as Denmark Vesey had been? What if they killed Joseph in his sleep tonight? He would go straight to Hell. He deserved it.

"Whatever it is you think you've done, Joseph, you know you can talk to *me* about it?"

Again he nodded. But his earthly father couldn't grant him Absolution, couldn't make his soul clean again.

"You do realize that most people confess only once a year?"

"Father Laroche says he confesses every week," Joseph murmured, "and that we should too." What a Priest had to confess, Joseph still didn't understand.

He heard Papa draw in a breath to respond; but then, from the other side of the room, came the familiar, insistent-yet-polite finger-snap Mama used to attract their attention. Cathy must have been translating for her. Mama made Papa's sign name, and the expression on her face turned it into a plea. 'Let him go,' she said with her hands.

Papa turned to her. 'In the three years since he began, our son—our *perfect* son—has made more Confessions than most people do their entire *lives*.'

Mama frowned. Papa was criticizing her too: she took Joseph every Saturday. Cathy would go with them only once a month. None of her friends confessed more often than that, she said. At the

church, Mama always went first, clutching her little notebook till she passed it to Father Laroche. He would read her transgressions and then write down her Penance. Afterward, as Joseph watched Mama burning the pages, he would wonder what she had to confess every week. Apart from her deafness, Mama was perfect, as sinless as a Priest.

Unlike him.

‘None of us is perfect yet,’ Mama argued with her hands and expression. ‘It is only through union with Our Lord—through the Sacraments—that we can become perfect. We are *blessed* to receive Absolution every week. Have you forgotten Bastien already?’

‘Of course not,’ Papa signed impatiently.

‘He is lucky if he sees a Priest once a year.’ Joseph knew his mother’s brother lived somewhere in North Carolina, surrounded by Protestants. ‘Here, we even have a Priest who knows our language!’

‘Father Laroche does *not* know your language,’ Papa insisted, emphasizing the sign. ‘He knows *French*. Your English is just as good, Anne. It’s certainly better than his. I wish you’d confess to one of the Irishmen instead.’

Mama tensed. ‘Father Laroche—’

‘Father Laroche makes you do Penance for’—Papa’s hands hesitated—‘for being a woman!’

Mama drew in a sharp breath, and crimson flooded her cheeks. Her eyes darted nervously to Joseph and his sisters. They were still watching, though Joseph didn’t understand what Papa had meant or why it should make Mama blush. ‘We were talking about Joseph. Please don’t discourage him.’

Papa sighed, glanced away, then finally signed his consent. But he added aloud: “If it’s Father Laroche, son—promise me you won’t believe *everything* that French bull-dog says.”

Joseph worried about Papa’s soul, too. At Mass, he always looked bored or angry. Now, Papa was acting as though a Priest could be wrong. That was like saying God could be wrong.

. . .

ILLUMINATED BY SEPTEMBER SUNLIGHT, two fine churches stood directly across Archdale Street from their house. Joseph turned away from them. They were Protestant. He hurried past the shops and houses on Beaufain till he reached Hasell Street and the Catholic church, which had no steeple.

Joseph climbed the steps, pulled open the heavy door, and genuflected to the Body of Christ in the Tabernacle. He peered into the sacristy, but he saw only Mr. Doré polishing the sacred vessels. "Is Father Laroche or Father Gallagher here?"

"I think Father Laroche is saying his breviary in the cemetery. Do you need him?"

Joseph nodded. "For Confession."

The sacristan frowned. "On a Wednesday?" But he agreed to fetch the Priest.

Joseph knelt in the stifling darkness of the confessional. This was the first time he'd truly dreaded putting his sins into words. Till now, his most serious faults had involved his great-grandmother Marguerite. So many times, he'd felt anger toward her and broken the Fourth Commandment, which included adults beyond your parents. Joseph knew it was wrong to blame Great-Grandmother Marguerite for his own sins; but with her buried, he'd thought the narrow path of righteousness would be easier.

Now he had no excuse, and he understood how wicked he was. Surely no one had ever stared at the Blessed Virgin as he had. Was Absolution possible for such a sin? Even if it was, how could Joseph ever face Father Laroche again?

At last, the Priest entered the other side of the confessional.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." Joseph could scarcely breathe. He knew how this would begin, but he was terrified about how it would end. "I confess to almighty God, to blessed Mary ever Virgin"—the words felt sharp in his throat—"to all the saints, and to you, Father, that I have sinned exceedingly...through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault." *His* fault, no one else's, Joseph reminded himself each time he struck his chest. "Since my last Confession, which was four days ago, I accuse myself of impure thoughts. For this and all my other sins which I cannot now

remember, I am heartily sorry and humbly ask pardon of God, and Penance and Absolution of you, Father.”

The Priest sighed. “How old are you?”

“Ten.”

“Did you entertain impure thoughts about women generally, or about someone specific? *Don’t* give me a name.”

“I-I *have* to, Father.”

“Now you’re being disobedient!” Father Laroche barked.

Joseph started. He hoped no one else had entered the sanctuary, or at least that they didn’t understand French.

“I don’t need the foul details, boy; I just need to determine the gravity of your sin.”

“But—my impure thoughts were...about Our Lady.”

“*What?*”

“There’s a new painting in my father’s office of the Holy Family. Our Lady, she’s nursing her Son, and you can see...”

“You looked upon the Blessed Virgin, the Queen of Heaven—the pure, undefiled Mother of Christ and the Church, the *only* woman who never sinned—and instead of falling on your knees and praising her, you *sinned* against her?!”

Joseph had wanted to fall on his knees and praise her too. He’d wanted to *worship* her. “Yes,” he managed aloud. “And I—I envied Our Lord.”

“Do you envy His sufferings, too? Do you understand that every time you sin, you make Christ suffer more? You’re driving another nail into His precious body, flaying His back open again and again with the scourge. Can you imagine the agonies He suffers when you look at His *Mother* with lust?”

Joseph squeezed his eyes shut, but the tears seeped out anyway.

“Because of what you’ve done, what you’ve thought, your soul is *filthy*, boy. Black as pitch. Black as a *negro*. You’re hideous! If you could see your soul in a mirror, you would vomit. Do you *want* to be white? Do you want to be beautiful in God’s eyes?”

“Yes, Father.”

“You must discipline yourself to avoid occasions of sin. If this painting is in your father’s office, you must never set foot there

again. If you might see it from the hall, then walk past quickly and do not even raise your eyes. Do you know of Saint Aloysius Gonzaga?"

"No, Father."

"You should. He is the patron of young people for a reason. He kept his eyes *always* downcast. He did not dare look at any woman—even his own mother—because he knew she might be a temptation for him. You would do well to follow his example."

But Joseph *had* to look at his mother, or he couldn't obey her, because he couldn't see what she was signing.

"You are entering a very dangerous period of your life. These next few years will determine what kind of man you'll be. As Saint Jerome reminds us: 'The Devil only wishes us to begin.' If you open the door but a crack, he will gain possession of your soul."

Finally Father Laroche instructed Joseph to say the Act of Contrition: "I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins... I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to sin no more and avoid proximate occasions of sin."

The Priest gave Joseph Absolution and his Penance. He concluded: "And say a prayer for me."

"Y-Yes, Father."

"Don't sound so reluctant, boy."

"I'm sorry, Father," Joseph answered quickly. "I will; I have been. Mama tells me to pray for you and Father Gallagher and Bishop England too. It's only...you're Priests. I don't understand why you *need*—"

"Priests need prayer more than anyone! Whose souls do you think Satan covets most? Think how valuable each Priest is, how many souls he saves in his lifetime! For every one of us lost, Satan can claim thousands of you. It is your responsibility to protect us. When Priests sin, it's because their parishioners haven't prayed for them. That's why there are so many bad Priests in America—because there are so many bad parishioners. Don't be one of them. Do you hear me?"

. . .

JOSEPH TRIED VERY hard to obey Father Laroche and keep his eyes always lowered, at least when no one was signing. For a few days, he was successful. Then they went to visit Mama's sister. Her son Frederic was five years older than Joseph.

The moment they were alone, Frederic started chuckling. "Am I so very ugly, cousin?"

"No," Joseph stammered without looking up.

Frederic stooped over sideways till his head was lower than Joseph's. "Then why are you keeping your eyes cast down like a negro?"

It was *pride* that made Joseph raise his eyes then—another sin. He shouldn't be ashamed if someone mistook him for a negro. Not all of them were like Denmark Vesey. Many negroes were as humble and docile as saints. They obeyed their superiors without question and took correction when they deserved it. They knew they were nothing.

PART I
ABATTOIR



1789-1822

SAINT-DOMINGUE, FRENCH WEST INDIES;
PARIS, FRANCE;
AND CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA



You will see all my blood flow before I consent to your freedom,
because your slavery, my fortune, and my happiness are inseparable.
— Saint-Domingue planter Prudent Boisgerard, 1793 letter

CHAPTER 1



THIRTY-THREE YEARS EARLIER

APRIL 1789

SAINT-DOMINGUE, FRENCH WEST INDIES

There are physical needs that make themselves felt more urgently in hot countries. The need to love there degenerates into a furor, and it is fortunate that in a colony like Saint-Domingue black women are found to satisfy a passion that without them could cause great devastation.

— Michel René Hilliard d'Auberteuil, *Considérations sur l'état présent de la colonie française de Saint-Domingue* (1776)

Marguerite watched in her mirror as her maid vomited into her chamber pot. She clenched the muslin on her dressing table till her fingernails scored her palms, as though anything could dull the pang in her empty womb. Marguerite wanted one more child, just one—there must be a way to convince Matthieu before it was too late. She'd do better this time, nurse it herself...

Instead, God gave a child to this little *mulâtresse*, who surely did

not even want it. As soon as her baby was born, she would probably stick a needle into its brain, so its soul could fly back to Africa.

There could be no doubt now: the girl was pregnant. This was not the first morning she'd run for the chamber pot. Marguerite had felt a difference when the girl brushed against her to retrieve her wig or a hatpin, but for too long, she'd told herself the girl was simply developing—she was what, fourteen?

“Well?” Marguerite inquired. “Who is the father?”

The *mulâtresse* wiped her face with her apron, still looking green in spite of her dark skin. Not as dark as the pure Africans—a sort of chestnut. “I do not know, *Madâme*.”

“What do you mean, you do not—” When the truth hit her, Marguerite almost laughed. “You mean there is more than one possibility?”

“Yes, *Madâme*.”

The expression was true: “*The mulatto’s only master is pleasure.*”

The girl wobbled to her feet, bringing the chamber pot with her. She carried the noxious basin to the other end of the belvedere.

Marguerite turned her attention to her powder box and plucked off its silver lid. “I want their names,” she called, twirling the swan’s-down puff in the powder. “You *do* know their names?”

“Of course, *Madâme*.” Her words grew louder as she returned. “Their names are Gabriel and Narcisse.”

Marguerite dropped the puff. Powder bloomed like a burst mushroom. She whirled around on the stool, as fast as she could fully dressed, and gaped at the girl; but such impertinence stole her voice as surely as a voodoo curse. The idea that Marguerite’s sons would fancy this little brown bitch...

The girl smirked.

Marguerite struck her hard enough to leave her palm on fire, as if she’d been stung by one of Matthieu’s bees. Marguerite flung open the window and shouted his name. If the girl did not respect her mistress, she *would* respect her master. But everyone else had risen hours ago; the hot flashes had robbed Marguerite of sleep.

Over the shingled roof of the gallery, past the plumeria trees,

Marguerite saw blue parasols, and below them, male legs. “Matthieu!”

No one answered.

Marguerite didn’t have the strength to drag the girl with her bodily, so she hurried alone through the children’s bedchambers to the other end of the belvedere—and nearly tripped over the chamber pot. The clinging billows of her peignoir slowed her pace down the stairs, so she tore it off. The motion pooled perspiration at the small of her back, reminding her to snatch a straw hat from the rack. She reached the back gallery—empty, though she heard voices through the jalousies.

Without pausing to peer between the slats, she hurried down the steps into the cloying fragrance of the plumeria. Gabriel and Narcisse stood with their backs to her in the scant shade of the parasols held aloft by their valets. From this distance, her sons looked like half-grown cherubs, their golden curls tapering into queues.

Under her breath, Marguerite cursed the little whore, for making her come out here like this, for interrupting her toilette. Her face was utterly naked, and in her slippers she felt as if she were wading through the thick grass. She tied the hat’s ribbon awkwardly. The girl’s accusation was so ridiculous, Marguerite refused to sully her sons by addressing it; but she damn well intended to tell Matthieu and ensure a just punishment.

Another slave approached her sons and their valets, a woman past her prime with skin as black as pitch. The negress carried a basketful of lemons in her only hand. Her right sleeve was pinned and empty. The boys seemed to be waiting for her: as she neared, Gabriel called an order in Creole and pointed west.

Narcisse’s valet noticed Marguerite and shifted his parasol. Narcisse glared at the man, saw her, and laughed. “You’re redder than cochineal, *Maman*.”

She would address his manners later. “Where is your father?”

Gabriel glanced toward the citrus hedge. “I think he took Étienne to the apiary.”

How many times had Marguerite told Matthieu she did not

want their sons anywhere near his bees! Especially an eleven-year-old! She picked up her skirts, consigned her slippers to ruin, and plowed toward the hives. What need did they have for honey, amidst a hundred acres of sugarcane? Why couldn't Matthieu keep birds like their neighbor? Marguerite would not lie awake at night fearing parakeets might turn on their master.

Ahead, she heard Matthieu whistling. He thought it calmed his little monsters. He'd read that continence calmed them too, as if the bees could smell her on him. He'd slept on the gallery for months now. He preferred *insects* to her. Was *she* one of his experiments? Was he testing how long it would take before he drove her mad?

Behind her, Narcisse yelled: "Farther!"

She knew perfectly well where the apiary was! Marguerite did not stop but glowered over her shoulder.

She realized her son was shouting at the one-armed negress. With her basket of lemons, the slave trudged closer to the cane nearly three times her height. "She must think we are terrible shots," Narcisse complained to Gabriel, who peered into a wooden case another slave had brought them.

Marguerite gritted her teeth and kept striding toward Matthieu's whistle. Fifteen was too young to be playing with pistols. Seventeen, too—but she had lost that debate months ago. At least her sons had found a use for the cripple.

That negress must be the latest mill worker to fall asleep feeding cane into the machine. The cast iron grinders had crushed most of her arm along with the stalks, ruining the entire batch of juice. Dr. Arthaud had been their guest that night. Matthieu had urged his friend to return to his bed and not to bother with the woman—they'd just buy another—but Arthaud had revelled in the opportunity.

Marguerite halted well away from the citrus hedge, where dark bees assaulted white blossoms to Matthieu's whistled tune. No matter how he went on about queens and workers or the pastry scent of the hives, she would not venture any closer to that dangerous mass of life. Did he think fire wouldn't burn? "Matthieu Lazare!"

The whistling stopped at once. For a moment, only that unearthly buzzing filled her ears. Then Étienne giggled. Matthieu called from the other side of the foliage: "Coming, my queen!"

Apian humor. It made a mockery of her. If Marguerite were truly in charge of this household...

The report of a pistol made her start, twice when it echoed against the mountains. A whoop of pride drew her attention back to her eldest sons. White smoke hung over Gabriel, who held his gun aloft and beamed in victory. At a distance, the crippled negress stood with her eyes squeezed shut and her face turned away from her single extended palm. It was empty, the remains of a lemon presumably propelled somewhere behind her into the tall green sea of cane, where anything might hide.

They should all be in Le Cap right now. No fountain, convent, or theatre could make it Paris, but the city was more tolerable than this plantation, surrounded by wild animals and negroes. In Le Cap, Marguerite could take the children to the wax museum (how the proprietors kept the figures from melting, she'd never know) and pretend that she was back at court in the most civilized country in the world.

Finally, the beekeepers emerged from the citrus hedge, the first looking like an executioner and the second like a mourner: Matthieu in his masked hood and Étienne with his straw hat draped in black crape. Neither of them wore gloves. Marguerite rushed toward her son, who tucked his swollen thumb behind his back.

"I am all right, *Maman!*" Étienne kept on his path toward the house. "Papa got out the stinger. It was a warning; that's all. They don't attack unless you've done something wrong."

Marguerite cradled the boy's hand as they walked; and she remembered what waited for them back in that house. She narrowed her eyes at Matthieu. "I told you that girl would be trouble!"

"Pardon?" He doffed his hood to reveal a shaved head gleaming with sweat.

"That little"—Marguerite thought of Étienne and restrained

herself—"mulâtresse has gotten herself with child, and she had the audacity to accuse our sons!"

Ahead of them, another gunshot cracked. Marguerite's attention jumped from the negress, who stood quivering with an undamaged lemon on her head, to Narcisse in his cloud of smoke. Pistol arm limp, her son scowled at the ground and muttered, "*Merde*."

Marguerite stamped her foot. "You know how I feel about cursing, Narcisse!"

Looking remarkably contrite for once, he mumbled, "I couldn't help it, *Maman*."

Before Marguerite could argue, Matthieu cleared his throat as though he were about to speak; but in the end, he only stood there with the bee hood under his arm.

Instead, Gabriel spoke. "It was as if she bewitched us."

Suddenly, Marguerite couldn't breathe.

After a moment, Étienne leaned closer to her. "Does...this mean I am going to be an uncle?"

She gaped at Matthieu. "You *knew* of this?"

He only shrugged. "It was bound to happen eventually."

"How can you—" Marguerite sputtered. "After what she has done!"

Matthieu took her elbow to direct her away from the boys and lowered his voice. "I don't think Ève is the one to blame here."

Marguerite threw off his arm and planted her feet. "She seduced our children, Matthieu!"

He kept walking, up the glacis toward the east garden.

She was obliged to follow or lose his ear. "We should burn her at a stake!"

Matthieu glanced over his shoulder, frowning. "She is carrying our first grandchild."

Marguerite clenched her fists. "That baby is an abomination!" God's blood, would the thing have two heads? "I never want to set eyes on it!"

"You know what's expected, Marguerite. We owe that child its freedom."

"That is *custom*, Matthieu, not law!" She pursued him through

the shade of the flamboyants. “Don’t you *dare* give that little bitch—”

Marguerite heard a squeal. Their daughter Delphine sprang up from behind one of the rose bushes, giggling, her face the color of its petals.

Matthieu chuckled in return. “*Bon matin*, Guillaume.”

“Good morning, sir.” Their daughter’s suitor stood up from the garden bench next, buttoning his waistcoat and not even attempting to conceal his grin.

Marguerite buried her face in her hands and groaned. This island was ruining her children. When she peeked between her fingers, Delphine was wearing one of those gauzy white chemises she called gowns, whose inadequate ruffles left no part of her to the imagination. Her unpowdered hair was bound up in a garish turban, as if she were a negress. “*This is how all my friends dress!*” she would argue.

Matthieu, meanwhile, chatted amiably with their daughter’s corrupter. “I see you’ve returned from your Grand Tour.”

“Last night.” Guillaume glanced at Marguerite and added: “I do not mean I *spent* the night. I have been *here* not more than a quarter of an hour.” And what a welcome Delphine had given him.

“Look what he brought me, *Maman!*” Her daughter bounded toward her, those unmistakably aroused nineteen-year-old breasts jouncing behind the sheer muslin. She thrust forward a dull grey pendant, a cameo of a nude Cupid playing a flute. “It’s carved from *lava*,” Delphine declared. “From Mount Vesuvius! And Guillaume got to watch it erupt! Can you imagine?”

“It wasn’t like the eruption that buried Pompeii,” the lecher shrugged, “only puffs of smoke.”

What a pity, thought Marguerite. *We might have been rid of you.*

“But it’s an active volcano, just waiting...”

Guillaume could have brought Delphine a rosary blessed by the Holy Father himself. Instead, their daughter’s suitor had brought her a piece of God’s wrath, His judgment on all those hedonist Romans.

Marguerite sank to one of the iron benches and let her eyes drift

from her daughter's lack of clothing, across the road, beyond Guillaume's banana fields, to the clouds looming beneath the dark peaks in the distance.

Twenty years before, those emerald mountains had been her first sight of the island. After three months at sea, she'd clung to Matthieu and exulted as they inhaled the fragrance of the tropical blooms that carried all the way to the ship. Nestled between the mountains and the sea, the grand buildings and parks of Le Cap appeared like a heavenly city. She thought they'd found Paradise.

Saint-Domingue: the Pearl of the Antilles, the richest colony in the world, it promised them a new beginning, a shedding of their old lives. They wouldn't need to work or dress or build anything more than a hut; fruit would drop from the trees and the weather would always be perfect...

Then they'd stepped onto this American soil and seen, thick as locusts, twelve black faces for every white one. Their neighbors were the refuse of France. Even the Priests kept colored concubines.

The wrath of God took every form but volcanoes. Less than a year ago, a hurricane had decimated Port-au-Prince, when the city had barely recovered from its last earthquake; two years before that, not a single drop of rain had fallen on this Northern Plain. And in the jungles on those emerald mountains, bands of runaway negroes worshipped snakes, drank hogs' blood, and plotted how to murder them all.

Delphine and Guillaume's murmurings grew more distant. Marguerite supposed Matthieu had sent them away. She watched the pair go: swaying closer together as they walked, the shape of her daughter's posteriors clearly visible through the chemise.

"I know what my mother would say," Marguerite muttered. "'What else did you expect, from children conceived in sin? God is punishing you for your lust.' And I suppose she would be right. But it isn't only us, Matthieu. This island is cursed. It ruins everyone it touches."

His bee hood still tucked under one arm, Matthieu glanced quizzically at their retreating daughter. "How has living here harmed Delphine?"

Once, she had thought him intelligent. “Look what she’s wearing!”

“*La chemise à la Reine*? What our Queen and her ladies are wearing?”

“Who introduced the fashion to that Austrian bitch? Creoles from this island.”

“I imagine it’s comfortable.” Matthieu tugged at his own shirt, plastered to his skin with sweat.

“Look who she’s ruining herself with!”

“They intend to marry, Marguerite. After all these years apart, that hasn’t changed. Delphine might have wed a dozen other men while Guillaume was at university and travelling.”

Precisely. Not that anyone on Saint-Domingue deserved her. Marguerite narrowed her eyes as her daughter tilted up her face for a kiss. “I had hoped the old proverb would prove true.”

“‘Far from the eyes, far from the heart?’” Matthieu offered with a smile.

Marguerite nodded gloomily.

“I prefer: ‘Absence is to love as wind is to fire; it extinguishes little ones and feeds great ones.’”

Marguerite could only sigh in defeat as the lovers vanished around the corner of the house.

“Why is Guillaume so objectionable to you?”

“He’s a *Creole*.”

“Our children are Creoles too.”

Yes, they had been born here—but Guillaume’s family had been wallowing on this island for more than a century. “He is descended from pirates and whores.”

“And I am the son of a barber! If it were not for those ‘pirates and whores,’ France would never have gained a foothold on Saint-Domingue. We owe them a great deal.”

“Do we?” She forced her eyes to the four rose bushes surrounding them. White, pink, red, and variegated—a rose for each child they had lost. Marguerite remembered their birthdays, their death days, and every day in-between. Félicité would have been two years old today, if she had lived.

Soon they would be unable to visit any of their children's graves. So cramped was the cemetery in Le Cap, every three years, negroes turned over the soil to make room for more corpses. This was not the New World Matthieu had promised her. No one had warned them about the fevers, that they would "pay the clime's tribute" with half of their children.

Matthieu sat beside her on the bench. "We might have lost just as many in France."

That was no comfort. She knew it wasn't a child stopping her menses now. She was forty-six: she had reached the critical age. If Matthieu ignored her much longer, she would *never* have another child to love or to lose. She wasn't sure whether to lament or give thanks.

The *mulâtresse* came outside with a jar on her head and sauntered toward the well. Marguerite clenched her teeth.

"Do you really think any of it would have been different in France?" Matthieu asked. "It is hardly a bastion of morality, and there are servants there too."

This *was* different. Just look at her.

"If Ève bothers you so much, she will be gone by nightfall." Matthieu set the bee hood on the ground next to them. At the back of the house, they heard gunshots and whooping again. "I made certain Gabriel and Narcisse confessed before Holy Week. They are far from ruined. Remember Saint Augustine?"

Marguerite remained silent. She was waiting for the little whore to disappear.

"You cannot say the island has ruined Étienne."

"Not yet."

Matthieu took her hand, but she left it limp. "Are you ready to write to Denis?"

Marguerite closed her eyes. In his letters, her brother had mentioned the fine school in his parish. Even if the boys began their educations on Saint-Domingue, the island would never have a university—such a thing encouraged independence, as the British colonies had proved. She knew it would be best to surrender her

sons to Denis's keeping, that they should have sent Gabriel and Narcisse to France years ago; but to lose them, too...

"Can't we go back with them, Matthieu?" She squeezed his hand in supplication. But when she opened her eyes, he was shaking his head. "Surely no one would recognize us now."

"You have only a convent to fear; I have a noose." His voice became strident. "I won't risk it—not while your husband is still alive."

"Matthieu! The children might hear you!" Her gaze leapt toward the sounds of their laughter.

Matthieu stood at once and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Gabriel! Narcisse! Étienne! Delphine!"

He'd always wanted to tell them—the lies were hers. Panic strangled Marguerite, and suddenly her limbs were useless—she couldn't stop him.

But the corner of Matthieu's mouth flickered with a grin, and not one of their children appeared. She realized he'd chanted each name loud enough to frighten her, but not loud enough to attract their attention. Still he motioned to the garden bench across from their own. "Sit down, please. Your mother and I have something very important to tell you." Matthieu paced before their imaginary audience with his hands clasped behind his back in mock gravity. "Remember the choleric baron we've told you about? My erstwhile employer? The reason we cannot return to France? He is not in fact your mother's father, but her husband. I tutored her stepson. You are all—"

Now her own threatening laughter lent her strength: Marguerite sprang to her feet and clamped her hand over his mouth so he wouldn't say *that word*.

Matthieu pulled it off and continued: "—indebted to the little demon for bringing me under your mother's roof. Where she and I made the beast with two backs until we made *you*, Delphine. Your mother was elated but terrified. She thought she was barren: ten years with her husband and not one child—until you. Until me. What were we to do but flee? We couldn't do that without money. Unfortunately the baron didn't see this as reclaiming your mother's

dowry; he used it to convince the court that I deserved to hang.” For the first time Matthieu’s smile faded, and his steps faltered. “I was nineteen years old.”

Even that would shock the children; she and Matthieu lied about their ages as well, to obscure the fact that he was seven years her junior. Too many questions would be raised: why had Marguerite still been unmarried at the age of twenty-six? Their name itself was false—Lazare belonged to his mother.

It would be exhilarating, after all these years, to tell the truth. But it would serve only themselves, not their children, blissful in their ignorance. The truth was a door that, once opened, they could never close. The children would see themselves differently, see her and Matthieu differently, and each of them would have their own decision to make. For all these reasons, they must remain in exile, or some police spy or gossip would make the decision for them. Matthieu was right.

But so was she. This place was destroying them all, and only the children could escape it. Marguerite stared at the blue pleats of her lustring skirt. “It’s ruined us too, this island.”

“What do you mean?”

She’d been deceiving herself, to think it would last forever. It was a wonder they’d lasted so long. He’d made no vows to her. “When we came here, we were like...*oxygen* to one another.” Till the day she died, she would never forget Matthieu’s countenance that first time, his gratitude and astonishment that *she* wanted *him*. “Now...” Fiercely she wiped away the tears that rose against her will. “You haven’t touched me in months, Matthieu.” It was like the baron all over again—she’d become more furniture than woman—except she and her husband had never loved each other, so it hadn’t hurt like this. “I know I’m—shrivelling up...” She grimaced at her own breasts, concealed though they were beneath her fichu, elevated as they were by her stays. She knew the truth. “And you’re still...” She raised her eyes miserably to his face: skin tanned and lined now; but he was as virile and handsome as he had ever been, those luminous blue eyes undimmed after all these years.

Yet that beloved face was crinkling to *laugh* at her. “Oh, *m’amour*.”

It was cruel, for him to call her “my love” now. She tried to pull away, but he grasped her hand.

“I haven’t touched you because I am waiting till you are a little *more* shrivelled. Till we can be certain you won’t...”

She made herself look at him.

“Three in succession, Marguerite. Félicité was *so hard* on you, even before she was born.” With a sigh, Matthieu’s eyes settled on the flowers beside them. “I decided we have enough rose bushes.”

Marguerite stared at him. Every line of his body was taut. How could she have mistaken his own suffering? “It isn’t because of the bees, then?”

Matthieu chuckled. “The bees are a welcome distraction; that is all.” Yet he kept his gaze averted. “I would give them up tomorrow—if you would allow me to *prevent* another child.”

How she wanted to say yes... But she could not let him commit such a sin.

It was only for her brother’s sake that Marguerite felt any guilt about what she and Matthieu had done. Not for her tyrant of a husband; not for her terror of a stepson; not for her parents, who had chained her to a widower twice her age simply because he was a baron. Denis was the only member of her family who had not disowned her, he who might have the greatest reason to recoil; he was a Priest. *If you persist in this sin*, had come his first letter to Saint-Domingue, *do not compound it. Live faithfully as husband and wife and accept joyfully all the children God gives you. If you do anything to prevent them, you usurp a prerogative that is His alone...*

Surely it wouldn’t be much longer till this women’s hell passed, till there was no risk of conception. More than another child, she’d needed to know that Matthieu still wanted her. So she would not break her promise to Denis now. Slowly Marguerite shook her head, even as she met Matthieu’s blue eyes. “You will wait for me?”

“I have been waiting for you for twenty years,” he smiled, taking her face in his hands. “One day, *m’amour*, I *will* make you my wife. All we have to do is outlive your current husband.”

CHAPTER 2



TWO YEARS LATER

I felt a certain revulsion when I first saw what resembled the heads of four small children in the soup, but as soon as I tasted it, I easily moved beyond this consideration and continued to eat it with pleasure.

—Jean-Baptiste Labat, on consuming monkeys, *Nouveau voyage aux isles de l'Amérique* (1742)

Her son raised the skull like a Priest elevating the Host at Mass. “*Maman!*” Étienne cried. “Look!”

Even through the jealousies of the gallery, Marguerite could see that his fingers were as filthy as the bone. When he moved toward the steps, she scowled. “I don’t want that thing in the house, Étienne.”

“Yes, *Maman*.” Her son stopped and lowered his trophy, his shoulders sagging with it. The boy did not take his eyes from the dead sockets but turned toward the *ajoupa* he had fashioned for such artifacts. The collection in his hut was beginning to rival the

museum in Le Cap. Étienne would make a name for himself someday, if he ever escaped this island.

Narcisse, meanwhile, seemed to belong here. Snoring open-mouthed beside her, he sprawled in one of their caned chairs with his legs propped up on the extended rests. Marguerite worried about him. He had inherited Matthieu's face, but little of his intelligence and none of his good humor. Instead, Narcisse too often reminded her of the parable about the Creole boy who wanted an egg. When he was told there weren't any eggs, the boy responded: "*In that case, I want TWO!*"

With a sigh, Marguerite tried to resume her brother's letter, but Gabriel emerged from the doorway behind her. In spite of the heat, he retained his militia jacket, though he had undone its gold buttons. Gabriel must know how fine he looked in it, how the indigo dye matched his eyes. "Where have you been digging now, little brother?" Gabriel called to Étienne as he leaned against the outer doorway and sliced into a guava.

The boy returned breathlessly, still cradling the skull. "*I wasn't digging. The negroes found it in the latrine—what will be the new latrine, when it's finished.*"

The monkey Gabriel had brought back from the market in Le Cap shrieked in anticipation and skittered up the jalousies in pursuit of the guava. The noise finally awoke Narcisse, who grumbled as he stirred.

Gabriel flicked seeds between the slats, distracting the monkey, then motioned to the skull with his knife. "How long has he been dead?"

"At least three centuries! This was an Arawak."

"An Indian?" Gabriel asked around the pulp in his mouth. "The ones who were here when Columbus landed?"

Étienne nodded. "See how the forehead is sloped? The Arawaks did that on purpose."

"Whatever for?"

Étienne shrugged. "If the Spanish hadn't killed them all, maybe we'd know."

"The Spanish didn't kill *all* the Indians," Narcisse interjected,

letting his feet thump to the floor and startling the monkey. It retreated past the slave working the fan. "You think you know *everything*, but you don't. We had a half-breed right—" Narcisse caught himself, glancing at Marguerite.

Yes, she remembered: on one of Dr. Arthaud's visits, an entire dinner conversation had been dedicated to whether or not one of their servers had Indian blood—the little whore Marguerite managed to forget about most days, since Matthieu kept his promise and disposed of her.

"I've seen Indians in town," Narcisse amended. "Live ones."

"Slaves, you mean?" Étienne remained undaunted. "Those aren't Arawaks. They're from our colonies in Canada and Louisiana. We brought them here just the same as the Africans."

Narcisse mumbled something and consoled himself by lighting a cigar.

"The Arawaks were different." Étienne kept gazing in awe at the skull. "Maybe even better than us. The Spanish tried to enslave them; but the Arawaks were 'kindly and peaceable men,' so they didn't fight back. They only threw themselves off cliffs."

Marguerite scoffed. Suicide was a sign of merit? The negroes would kill themselves, too, if you didn't watch them.

Étienne continued as if he and the skull were alone in the world: "There were millions of Arawaks on this island—they called it Hayti—and in a couple of decades, they were extinct. Maybe that's why God gave us the best part of the island, because of what the Spanish did to the Arawaks. In his pamphlet, Dr. Arthaud says—"

Gabriel rolled his eyes. "You and Arthaud and Rousseau and your noble savages. Natural man is not noble, little brother; he is simply savage."

Étienne launched into some impassioned defense, but Marguerite stopped listening. The boys' conversations were usually abstract like this, with no bearing on their lives. For all their differences, Marguerite missed Delphine—only a palm avenue and a banana field away, and yet so far, over the rutted roads.

Marguerite returned to Denis's latest missive. These past two years, every letter brought fresh horrors. The King and his family

were being treated like prisoners—pious, harmless Louis XVI and his innocent children! They were not to blame if their mother was a traitor.

This upstart National Assembly knew no limits. It had abolished not only noble titles but also religious orders and confiscated Church property. It had even granted suffrage to mulattos if their parents had been born free! France was mad, Denis warned. It was not safe. Planters were being attacked in the streets, despised for their wealth. Human heads had been paraded on pikes! This was why their sons remained with them on Saint-Domingue under Matthieu's tutelage, though Gabriel was nearly twenty.

Meanwhile, the former baron had celebrated his sixty-fifth birthday in perfect health, apart from his gout. Clearly her husband planned to live to one hundred simply out of spite. Marguerite had thought they'd be free of him years ago, that she and Matthieu could quietly, truly marry and legitimate their children before any of them came of age.

May God in his infinite mercy guard you from accidents, Denis had prayed from the beginning. *If you take ill, dear sister, and you feel death approaching, you know what you must do: send for a Priest immediately and repent. You must renounce Matthieu, or you will die in a state of mortal sin and be damned.*

Marguerite could not stop thinking about their last King. The year she was born, a grave sickness had struck Louis XV. Preparing for death, the King had repented of his mistress and sent her away. He had recovered and lived another thirty years, but that mistress could never share his bed again. No Priest would absolve even a King for the same mistress a second time: the first Confession would be proven insincere. Louis XV soon found himself new strumpets—but what if such a false alarm happened to Matthieu or herself? Even if death were certain, could Marguerite truly repent of her choice? And yet without that Confession...

On the back of her hand, Marguerite felt the familiar stab of a mosquito. She smacked at it but missed. *Merde*. Perhaps it had been Makandal, she thought wryly. A decade before she and Matthieu arrived on Saint-Domingue, the slave had conspired to poison all

the whites on the island. He'd been caught and burned alive; but Makandal claimed he was immortal, that he would turn into a mosquito to escape the flames and return someday to finish what he'd started.

The bite itched fiercely. Marguerite glared at the little *griffe* who had abandoned the fan and was instead staring uselessly at Étienne's skull. "Did I tell you to stop?"

The slave jumped and stepped back toward the fan's cord. Narcisse, however, grabbed his arm. "Your mistress asked you a question, *crétin*: Did she tell you to stop?" He did not let go, though he knew full well the boy wouldn't answer. "Why do you *never* say anything?" Narcisse demanded. "Do you think you're better than us? Because your father went to university in Paris? If he was so smart, why didn't he know the penalty for aiding runaways? It's his fault you're here now. You know that, don't you? Your father put you here. He must really hate you." Narcisse's argument made no sense: the boy's father had forfeited his own freedom, too.

The *griffe* did not argue; he only kept his silence, even when Narcisse pressed the lit end of the cigar to his wrist. The boy squirmed and fat tears dropped from his eyes, but still he did not speak.

"Stop it, Narcisse," Marguerite ordered, scratching the back of her hand till she drew blood. "I want the fan."

"I will stop when *he* tells me to."

Fortunately Matthieu's return from the fields distracted Narcisse and allowed the boy to resume his duty. Étienne ran over to introduce his skull, but it elicited only a murmur of acknowledgement from his father. Marguerite frowned. Last week, Matthieu had been ecstatic about a rock their son had brought him. Now, he kept his eyes downcast and climbed the steps of the gallery as if each were a mountain.

"Is something the matter, Matthieu?"

"Hm?" He looked up like a man awaking from a dream. "Oh. The...crabs are eating the cane roots again." As if this drought were not enough. He paused at the inner doorway, then turned

back. “What would you think, Marguerite, about going to Eaux de Boynes tomorrow?”

“Are you feeling ill?”

“No, not at all.” His smile did not convince her. “I just think it would be good for all of us to get away from here for a while.”

“But Gabriel just returned from Le Cap.”

“Don’t delay on my account, Papa—I can be ready at a moment’s notice to view ladies in bathing attire.”

Marguerite tried to ignore this remark and how Narcisse snorted when he laughed. “Should we invite Delphine and Guillaume? I don’t know if she will want to travel...”

“Her confinement isn’t for another month, is it? I think the waters will do her and the baby good.” Matthieu turned to their youngest son, who stood on the steps still holding his trophy. “What do you think, Étienne? Can you tear yourself away from your skeletons?”

The boy frowned, considered the skull, and glanced in the direction of the latrine pit. Finally he looked back at his father and nodded. “I still have today!” he cried as he ran toward his *ajoupa*.

CHAPTER 3



Everything is disastrous under slavery; it renders the master cruel, vindictive, proud; it renders the slave sluggish, deceitful, hypocritical; sometimes it brings man to atrocities which, without it, he would never have been capable.

— Pierre-Paul-Nicholas Henrion de Pansey, *Mémoire pour un nègre qui réclame sa liberté* (1770)

In the humid oppression of August, sleep was a welcome release. Naturally, as soon as Marguerite achieved it, she felt a familiar hand on her shoulder and heard Matthieu's voice in her ear. Their year of continence had certainly fed the flames of *his* desire.

"It's too hot, Matthieu..." she moaned.

"*Please*, Marguerite." For heaven's sake, he sounded as frantic as he'd been at nineteen.

Something assaulted her nostrils then, at once pleasant and acrid, and she squinted open her eyes. "Do I smell...smoke?"

"The cane is on fire."

She still didn't understand why Matthieu was waking her. He had planned the plantation to protect them from such danger. Even

in this drought, the flames shouldn't jump across the irrigation ditches. She rubbed her eyes. "A lightning strike?"

"I don't think so."

The silence began to worry her—not a single tree frog or insect drumming. Marguerite's bleary vision focused slowly on a pattern of blue and ivory stripes: Matthieu's banyan. He had said he wanted to finish reading the latest *Affiches Américaines* before retiring—yet beneath the robe, he still wore his breeches, as if he had never intended to come to bed.

When he turned his attention from her, Marguerite followed his gaze through the mosquito netting. Étienne stood in the doorway holding a rifle as tall as he was. She sat up at once.

"Pellé rode to warn us," Matthieu explained. For the first time, she saw the pistol butt sticking out of his banyan pocket. "There's a band of negroes coming up the road. They've got hoes and cane knives."

"What?" She stared at the window as though she could see them. Through the slats seeped only a strange orange glow. It couldn't be any of *their* slaves rebelling. Perhaps their family was not as lenient as the Gallifets, but neither were they like "Caradeux le cruel," burying negroes alive in the—

"You have to hide yourself, *Maman*." Étienne was offering her a pair of his own leather boots.

Matthieu caressed her cheek, but only for a moment. "You are still a beautiful woman, Marguerite."

What use did flattery have— Then she realized what he meant: Forty-nine years and eight childbirths would not deter the lusts of black men. Marguerite grabbed the boots from her son and did not bother with stockings, though she glanced longingly toward her wig. Somewhere on the first floor, Gabriel's monkey began screeching.

"Pellé and the boys and I will try to scare them off," Matthieu promised. "But if we can't... You have to hide."

In nothing else but her chemise, she stood, and found that Étienne's boots almost fit her. "Hide where?" Apart from that road, beyond the outbuildings, they were surrounded by cane fields, and if those were on fire...

“Étienne suggested the new latrine. I can’t think of a safer place.”

“It hasn’t been used yet, *Maman*,” their son put in before she could protest. “It’s not even finished.” Fluidly he passed the rifle’s sling over his head and under his right arm, then took the lantern from his father. In that moment, he looked so much older than thirteen.

Matthieu pressed the foreign weight of the pistol into her palm. “I’ve loaded it and put it at half-cock. Remember: you have only one shot.” She opened her mouth to object, but he silenced it with his own, kissing her quickly—yet so fiercely it frightened her even more than the gun.

“Come on, *Maman*.” Étienne seized her hand. Marguerite had only a moment to glance back at Matthieu, who tried to smile. Their son towed her past the other bedchambers and down the staircase without stopping. At the bottom, she tried to pull against him, to catch a glimpse of Narcisse and Gabriel; but Étienne was surprisingly strong. “There’s no time, *Maman*.”

She surrendered to his momentum. Through the back gallery and down the steps they raced, out into the night glaring orange and furious. They did not need the lantern. From the cane, knives of flame slashed at the sky. Black plumes of smoke surged all the way to the stars.

To the right, she was sure she heard the shrieking of their horses in the stable, and passing far above their heads, the angry hum of Matthieu’s bees. Behind them, she thought Gabriel yelled a question and his father answered. Then the snap and roar of the fire in the cane filled her ears as the ghastly light filled her vision.

Étienne pulled her closer and closer to the flames, to the heat, until at last he halted at the edge of the new latrine. Marguerite doubled over, but she could not catch her breath; she inhaled only burning air.

Her son set the lantern near the pit and tapped the top rung of the ladder. “You go first, *Maman*.”

She hesitated, still gasping, looking over her shoulder past the plumeria trees to the house. She heard a gunshot and started.

“We have to hurry,” Étienne urged, taking the pistol from her.

She had no choice. She descended cautiously, keenly aware that she was nearly naked, with nothing beneath her chemise but Étienne’s boots, without even a cap. At least the half-dug latrine was not as deep as she’d feared—not quite six feet. Inside, she could breathe more easily. Her son knelt at the edge and handed her back the pistol as well as the lantern. In the candlelight, she scanned the small floor of the pit for a flat spot. When she’d set down the lantern and the pistol, she looked up to find her son still above ground. He was pushing the ladder at an angle into the latrine, till its top sank below the surface of the earth.

“Étienne, what are you doing?”

He checked the flintlock mechanism of his rifle. “I have to help Papa.”

From the direction of the house, shouts now—and more shots.

Étienne turned toward them as well. “I have to help Gabriel and Narcisse.”

“No, Étienne!” She reached for his ankle, but he had only to step away from the pit, and in an instant he was lost to her. “Étienne!” She sucked in a terrified breath and tried to hoist herself above the earth. But the breath was all smoke; her lungs seized with coughing, and she collapsed into the latrine.

She did not know how much time passed before she recovered enough to move. Her eyes tearing, she groped for the ladder and dragged herself upwards into a ceiling of heat. She held her breath as best she could, but the stench of burning overwhelmed her and took on a new edge, harsher than the cane. She supposed *she* was roasting now. She dared not open her eyes any farther, but—

Her left foot slipped between the rungs, and she fell hard against the ladder. It wobbled sideways under her weight and dumped her back into the latrine. She coughed and moaned and extracted her leg, pulling it protectively against her. Bruised but not broken, she hoped. At least she could breathe again.

Still supine, she assessed her person. Her hands and forearms radiated heat, and the skin of her fingers was painfully stiff when she slid them into Étienne’s boot to check her ankle. Her hair—her

natural hair, cut close to the skull—was strangest of all: *unnatural* now. Clubbed. Brittle. Forlornly she stared upward through the rungs of the ladder. What could she do for Étienne that armed men could not do?

From this pit, she could see nothing but a few bright stars, and then smoke swallowed even those. There was no moon. She worried that the negroes might see the candlelight. Careful of her left ankle, she made herself sit up and crawl to the lantern. She grabbed the pistol, then blew out the flame. She heard no more gunshots, only cries that sounded like animals, or savages.

She retreated to a corner of the latrine, till something hard and bulbous jabbed her in the spine. Terror twisted her stomach. She scrambled away in a crouch, gritting her teeth at the sudden pain in her ankle and aiming the pistol wildly. She squinted hard but saw only shadows. She wished she had not extinguished the lantern. She had no way to relight it.

She backed away the few feet she could, under the ladder again. It must be Indian bones, she reasoned. She pulled her knees against her body, protected from the naked earth only by her son's boots and the muslin of her chemise, nearly as thin as netting.

Was Delphine hiding somewhere like this? How many plantations would these negroes attack before they were crushed? Surely even savages would spare a woman eight months with child.

Marguerite clutched the pistol and stared up at the lurid firelight above the pit. She knew that if a black face appeared, she would have the strength to shoot. *And then what?* The explosion would only draw more of them.

Perhaps Matthieu had intended her to use the shot on herself. But suicide was sin, mortal sin, whatever the reason... Then again, she was already damned.

Not if she made an Act of Perfect Contrition. God might still forgive her, if she was truly sorry, if she repented not from fear of Hell but love of Him. She closed her aching eyes. Why hadn't she remembered her rosary? If only the bones in this pit belonged to saints and not savages. She didn't care what Étienne said, they were

all the same: red or black. How she wished he were here to argue with her...

New, precise pain seared into the flesh of her knee. Her eyes flew open to find an ember of cane perched on her chemise. She smacked at it and only burned her palm. She tossed aside the pistol and flipped the ember from her skirt, but the muslin had caught fire. She grabbed one fistful of dirt after another and threw them at her legs until the flames died.

Beside her, the ember pulsed dimmer and dimmer like an injured insect. "*The Virgin's chemise is full of fireflies.*" Her lungs convulsed in a mad, noiseless laugh, that the Creole expression should come to her now. Marguerite had never understood it, but she knew it was some kind of blasphemy. Not even the Mother of God was sacred on Saint-Domingue. How could Marguerite expect her intercession? She doubted Saint Dominic would listen either; the colony was an insult and not an honor to him.

She recovered the pistol. She thought it was still at half-cock, but she wasn't sure. Gabriel had given her that shooting lesson almost a year ago, after the mulatto uprising. The danger had been over; she'd nodded indulgently, but she hadn't really—

A sound speared through her, worse than her twisted ankle, worse than her burns. She knew who made the sound, though there was no way she could know. She had heard Matthieu howling with laughter; she had heard him bellowing with anger; she had heard him groaning with pleasure; but in their twenty-three years together, she had never heard him scream. Now, he would not stop.

She clenched her eyes shut and tried to cover her ears without letting go of the pistol. Her own whimpers became desperate whispers, a prayer to drown out those screams: "*Pater noster, qui es in caelis...*"

Perhaps the sweet stench of the cane would simply suffocate her. "Thy kingdom come." She would welcome it, to be anywhere but this world where subjects imprisoned their King, where slaves raised their hands against their masters.

"Thy will be done..." The words choked her like the smoke. "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those—who trespass..." She

couldn't say the rest, but in her head, she chanted: *Deliver us from evil. Deliver us...*

If the Lord turned His face from anywhere, she knew it would be from here.

Have pity on me, Saint Margaret... Huddled in the dark, waiting for death or delivery—was this how her patroness had felt, after she had been swallowed by the Devil in the form of a dragon?

Was it morning yet, in France? Her brother would be saying Mass. *Offer it for us, Denis...* Unless he was in prison, awaiting his own executioners. When she came out of this pit, would there be anything left?

She should have gone back with Étienne. Why hadn't she gone back? *Saint Monica, Saint Anne, Blessed Mary, all you holy mothers—only spare my children; only spare my children...*

CHAPTER 4



[Blacks'] griefs are transient. Those numberless afflictions, which render it doubtful whether heaven has given life to us in mercy or in wrath, are less felt, and sooner forgotten with them.

— Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787)

She waited and prayed until silence fell thicker than the ashes, until her throbbing eyes found it easier to call shapes out of the shadows: the unfired pistol; her burned knee poking through the filthy muslin; the toes of Étienne's boots; the ladder. This must be morning: the sky was grey instead of black.

She could not remain in this pit forever. Marguerite crawled to the ladder and used it to drag herself upright, ignoring the pains in her left leg. She stared at her hands and saw the blisters for the first time. She tried to swallow, but her throat was dry as bone.

Cautiously she raised her eyes, sensitive to any trace of movement in the world above.

She found neither threat nor ally, only ravaged earth. To the east, their cane was still burning. Past the plumeria trees with their eerie white blossoms, she *should* be able to see the house. She set the pistol at the edge of the pit and pulled herself from the latrine rung

by rung. Where the belvedere of bedchambers should have been hung only smoke—and below, charred boards, smoldering embers. Marguerite's heart seized. No one had been inside, surely...

She snatched up the pistol and tried to call Matthieu's name. It came out as a croak. Better that way; better not to make too much noise; what if one of *them* heard her? Still she needed water desperately. She reeled toward the well, grasped the crank, and drew back her hand. What if they'd poisoned it, as Makandal had planned?

Étienne's *ajoupa* stood relatively untouched, its palm fronds only singed. She sighed with relief and started running as best she could. He might have hidden here. "Étienne?" she whispered. Pistol first, she ducked beneath the leafy roof of his museum.

In the murky light, her eyes skimmed over the boards displaying Étienne's treasures: arrowheads; bits of pottery; little fetishes fashioned from conch shell (one of them clearly a penis, which she had insisted he throw back where he found it); ribs and limb bones from the latrine pit; the skull he'd brought her yesterday; another one; and—the head of her son.

Marguerite clapped a hand over her mouth to muffle the surfacing scream and nearly dropped the pistol. She stumbled backwards, trying to convince herself she hadn't seen it, but the shelf leaking blood drew her eyes irresistibly like metal to a lodestone, and it wasn't just Étienne, it was *all* of them, all her sons, set there amidst the bones.

She staggered only a few steps before the bile overtook her, before her knees gave out, and when she opened her eyes again her stomach convulsed again—it did not stop, because she was kneeling next to the body of one of the older boys, she couldn't even tell which. She wanted to squeeze his hand, as if it could comfort either of them now; she wanted to go back and close their eyes—she should, she was their mother, how could she be afraid of them?

She stroked the trigger of the pistol. But the sugar works on the rise pulled her attention away from her sons: the machine for crushing cane stalks, the channel for the juice, and below, the boiling shed with its row of vats. Under the roof, the form of a man leaned

over the clarifier vat. Her legs shuddering beneath her, she made herself stand.

As she limped toward the boiling house, the man did not move; he only stared into the first vat as if it were a wishing well. Realization weighted her steps. The tilt of the man's body was too severe, too complete. His feet did not quite touch the ground. She halted just outside the roof. The man's face was submerged in the grey-green juice, his bald head boiled crimson. He had been drowned in the sugar, his blood streaking it as though some part of him had burst.

But the body was too short and stocky to be Matthieu—it was only their overseer, Pellé. She released a breath and leaned against one of the roof supports. To her left rose the channel for the juice, a neat narrow man-made river descending from the machine. The great geared wheel and the three iron grinders stood motionless now, no oxen to turn them. Marguerite frowned. Why was the channel stained with blood as well; it would have to run uphill from Pellé in the vat...

Her gaze followed the channel to the machine again, and she saw it. A ragged, white-cored, horribly branched red *thing* erupting from the grinders meant to crush cane. That *couldn't* be a...

The closer she came, the more she sank towards the ground, the more she began to crawl. Grass and dirt and ash ground into her burns, her ankle throbbed, yet she hardly felt it. She reached the machine but refused to look up at the grinders, to see any closer what she knew was there. Still gripping the pistol, she dragged herself around the side of the base. Her eyes groped ahead of her, saw—blue and ivory stripes. Matthieu's banyan.

The pistol dropped from Marguerite's hand. She reached out to grip the edge of his robe, to convince herself this was not some mirage of smoke and madness. Beneath her fingers, the silk was horribly smooth, horribly real. She sank into the ash and sobbed and did not care who heard.

The skirt of his banyan pooled on the ground, concealing most of Matthieu's legs. He must be kneeling. Among the folds of silk hung his pale left hand, white as marble. Above her, she could just

see the back of his shaved head, sagging forward in death—so close to the still grinders, to the place where his right arm disappeared into the machine and the stripes of the banyan became blue and ivory and red.

She crawled to him, pulling herself upwards with the robe, wanting to pull him free of the grinders and yet dreading what she would reveal. Dear God, he was still warm, but she knew it must be only the heated air of this inferno. She wrapped her arms around his back; she buried her face in the open throat of his shirt; and she felt a shudder that was not her own.

Marguerite cried out, let go, and fell to the ground. She gaped up at the groaning corpse. “Matthieu?”

His eyelids fluttered. He was trying to say her name.

“I’m here! They didn’t find me!” She ducked beneath his good arm and kissed his neck, his jaw, his cheek, whatever she could reach. “Thank God, Matthieu!” She fought to support his weight. She knew she mustn’t put any more pressure on what remained of his right arm. Or...should she look for the machete they kept here to free the slaves? “I have to find a doctor!”

He answered in a murmur she couldn’t understand.

“What?” She had to hold her breath so she could hear him.

“Too late...”

When she gripped his undamaged hand, his fingers felt like ice. She bit into her lower lip, tasting blood with the vomit. Too late for a doctor. Too far to go. For a Priest, as well. But there was still a chance Matthieu could die in a state of grace. “All right. All right. Do you remember the Act of Perfect Contrition?”

Matthieu only repeated hoarsely: “Too late.”

“It’s not! I’ll help you—”

“Not sorry.”

“You *must*, Matthieu! If you don’t—”

“Only sorry— My fault. Our sons...”

Marguerite pressed her face into his neck, willing away the images. If he didn’t know, she couldn’t tell him.

“Safer in France,” he muttered.

He *did* know. Merciful God—*merciless* God, had the fiends made Matthieu *watch* while they...

"Forgive me, *m'amour*."

"Of course I do; but—"

"Find Delphine," he whispered fiercely, "and our grandson."

Did he mean the child yet to be born?

"Please." He was shivering in the heat.

"I will; after—"

"His eyes—remarkable."

Whose eyes? But she stumbled then beneath Matthieu's weight; he felt heavier suddenly. She planted her feet, struggled, stood with him, admitted: "Matthieu, I don't understand." She held her breath, waited for him to reply. He must be gathering strength. "Matthieu?"

Nothing.

"I'll go to Delphine, but what did you mean, about..."

He was so still.

Gingerly Marguerite slid her fingertips over his lips, felt for breath. She felt nothing, but surely it was only weak, surely he'd only passed out again. She was trembling too much to tell. She closed her eyes and kissed him, clung to him.

Only their daughter remained. Almost Matthieu's last words: "*Find Delphine*."

"I love you," she whispered into his ear. She let go and turned without looking back. She only stooped to retrieve the pistol.

She glanced toward the stables, but they were blackened ruins. She would have to walk, in spite of her burned knee and her sore ankle. She was grateful for Étienne's boots.

In the ditch beside the road, tall grass grew wild, making the way more difficult but offering her shelter while she made sure no one was coming. Job's Tears, the grass was called. She almost laughed. Job had been lucky.

She darted across the road into the banana field on the back of Guillaume's land. The long leaves waved above her like thick green feathers, in welcome or in warning. She smelled burnt flesh but

found only a wild pig collapsed in the dirt. Her empty stomach begged her to stop, but she went on.

Between the banana leaves appeared the orange tiles and blue shutters of Guillaume and Delphine's belvedere. Still intact. Thank God. Marguerite limped faster. At the center of the enclosed gallery, the front doors yawned wide, but they were left that way, night or day, for the breeze.

"Delphine?" Marguerite did not see the chairs till she entered the gallery, and her voice gave out. The caning of the seats had been stamped through. The negroes had been here after all. Marguerite gripped her pistol more tightly and swallowed, still tasting bile.

Inside, the sphere of Guillaume's globe greeted her first, loose from its base and upside down on the floor. Nearby, one of his model ships lay sunken in debris next to the dining table: shattered crystal and china, papayas oozing their shocking black seeds. On the walls, crooked portraits of Guillaume's mother and father were slashed through, decapitated.

Marguerite shuffled through the destruction to the side gallery and the foot of the staircase. Guillaume lay face down on the landing in his night-shirt, blood and brains dripping down the steps. No matter. Delphine was better off without him.

Marguerite waded back to the smashed papayas, knelt, and ate like a watchful animal. The soft pink flesh soon alleviated her hunger and her thirst. In the beginning, she used her fingernails to claw out the guts, the peppery seeds inside their gelatinous sacs. Then, she chewed a few purposefully and grimaced at the strength of their bitterness; but the taste of vomit remained in her mouth.

Delphine was young yet and beautiful. As a widow with a tragic story, she would have no trouble finding another husband, a superior husband. Marguerite would see to it. Their ties to this godless, godforsaken island had been severed completely. Together she and Delphine would leave this place; they would make a fresh start in—not France, not till that revolt had been quelled. Charleston; yes, Charleston, in one or other of the Carolinas. Matthieu had an uncle who was a merchant there.

Marguerite sucked her fingers clean and passed Guillaume's body as quickly as possible. She reached the spare bedchamber in the belvedere. Through the doorway of Delphine's room, Marguerite caught a glimpse of a black face.

She flung herself against the wall and clutched the pistol. "Come out of there right now!" Marguerite ordered in Creole, pleased some of the strength had returned to her voice. "I have a gun!"

No response.

"Did you hear me? There's nowhere for you to go!"

Still no reply. It had been only an aging *mulâtresse*, probably robbing her mistress.

Marguerite took a breath and strode forward, leading with the gun. In the dressing glass atop the small table on the other side of the bed, she met only her own reflection. Her own singed curls and haggard face, so smeared with dirt and ash that her skin was more black than white. Marguerite lowered the pistol and released her breath. She looked like a *zombi*.

Between her and the mirror, the great canopy bed stood violated. It had been her and Matthieu's gift to their daughter and son-in-law, with its beautiful mahogany posters carved like pineapples and its headboard like palm fronds. The rich wood had been shredded as if by the claws of a monster, the coconut husks of its mattress bulging out like intestines. At her feet, a smashed decanter filled the room with the tantalizing scent of rum, but it did not quite mask the reek of urine.

Across the soiled bed, that hideous reflection kept mocking her. Marguerite snatched up the decanter's crystal stopper and hurled it at the dressing glass. The stopper hit its lower half, giving a satisfying *crack* and tilting the broken mirror to reveal what waited on the other side of the bed.

Delphine. Eyes and mouth gaping. Dark hair spilling down the front of her white chemise, framing the blood that had spilled from her open throat.

Marguerite staggered closer. In the fragmented glass, between her daughter's limp arms where her great belly should have been,

there was only more blood. Marguerite gripped the ravaged bedpost but slid to her knees.

This was God's punishment. There was no other explanation. To lose the man she loved and every one of their children in a single night...even their *grandchild* before it was born... In one terrible swath, the scythe had destroyed every fruit of her sin. These savage negroes were merely the instruments of God's wrath. Marguerite had been running from this judgment for half her life. She'd dishonored her parents and committed adultery for twenty-three years. "*The wages of sin is death.*" And death, and death...

So be it. Nothing mattered now. Not even damnation. She refused to spend eternity praising the God who had done this. She preferred Hell with Matthieu.

The pistol was still in her hand. It felt as heavy as a millstone, but she raised it. Beneath her chin, the mouth of the barrel was one last caress, not so very different from the ones that had brought her here. She did not regret one of them. What else could she have done?

Before she could pull down the cock, a child's cry pierced through her labored breathing, coming from somewhere below. Still trembling, she let the pistol sag a few inches. Could—could Delphine's child have *survived*? Marguerite wobbled to her feet, to the window. A mule stood tethered to the star-apple tree beside Guillaume's office, where the unseen child was whimpering now.

Marguerite wheeled toward the stairs before she remembered she was nearly naked. She yanked open a drawer of Delphine's wardrobe and found a morning gown. Marguerite fastened it over her ruined chemise, covering black with white.

She found a large pocket as well, tied it around her waist, and tucked the pistol inside. She might need her hands for the baby. She hastened down the stairs, past Guillaume's body and into the yard. The mule did not look up from cropping grass. It was harnessed to a cart filled with calabashes, blankets, and sacks of supplies.

Marguerite crept up the steps of the office and peered through the open doorway. She saw a child seated on a skirted lap. Perhaps two years old, not a newborn. But he was beautiful, with a halo of

dark curls. Something in his small face was familiar, though he looked Spanish. What would a Spanish child be doing on this side of the island? He wore only a dirty shift that ended above his knees. One of them was skinned.

A female voice was cooing to him. Broad lips bent to kiss his forehead, and a brown hand offered him a piece of succulent orange fruit—mango, perhaps. The boy accepted it, and the brown hands lifted him from her lap to stand on the floor. With her back to Marguerite, the *mulâtresse* strode toward Guillaume's desk.

Silently, Marguerite crossed the threshold. Mouth still full, the boy reached for another piece of mango from the wooden bowl on the chair beside him. He saw her and hesitated, as if she might scold him, gazing up at her with huge blue eyes, blue as indigo, blue as—

The *mulâtresse* turned then, as she wiped the knife on her skirt, and Marguerite's breath caught. It was the girl who'd seduced Gabriel and Narcisse. Matthieu had banished her *here*. For two years, he had lied, by omission, by concealment; Delphine and Guillaume too, every time Marguerite visited their plantation...

The girl looked her up and down, then smirked. "*Madâme.*" Without another word, she leaned over Guillaume's closed fall-front desk, frowned at the lock, and poked it experimentally with the point of her blade.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Getting our papers." The girl did not turn. She jammed her knife into the slit just above the fallboard. "If the *maréchaussée* catch us, I can show them we were going to be free." She was running away, taking this beautiful little boy into the jungle to live with the maroons.

"You can't read," was all Marguerite could stammer.

"I saw what the master signed, the day René was baptized."

"What who signed? Matthieu? Guillaume? They're dead!"

The girl paid no attention to her. She only grunted with the effort of using the knife as a lever.

"They're *all* dead!"

With a great splintering of wood, the fallboard dropped open.

"Étienne was thirteen! Thirteen!"

"Same age I was," the girl muttered, "when the other ones started pawing me."

Was she *bragging*? Marguerite strode forward and grabbed her wrist. "Did you cut my daughter's throat with this knife? Did you—"

The girl twisted away with appalling ease. She thrust the blade so close to Marguerite's face, she nicked her cheek. Marguerite stumbled back and fumbled for the pistol.

"You whites started this, long ago," the girl hissed.

Inside the pocket, Marguerite cocked the pistol fully.

The girl didn't hear it. "This is only 'eye for eye,' as your precious Book says—for Makandal and Ogé and all the others you've killed and mutilated: 'burning for burning, stripe for stripe, hand for hand'—"

For a long moment, the memory of Matthieu caught in the machine blinded Marguerite. "Were you *there*? Did you tell them to—"

"I didn't do anything! I was hiding!"

"Hiding?" Marguerite scoffed. "What did *you* have to fear?"

"I wasn't afraid for me." The girl seized a pile of letters from the ruined desk and squinted at them. "I was afraid for René." She glanced at the child. "They were crazy for white blood. I didn't want them to think..."

Marguerite looked back to the boy, who was pouting at the now-empty bowl. René. Yes...someone might mistake him for white, with those eyes. Astounding, that such a fine child should have come from this brown bitch. His complexion was olive, at most. Marguerite had seen Frenchmen with darker skin. Away from this tropical climate, the shade would surely lighten.

Gingerly, Marguerite reached down to touch his black curls. Coarser than she'd hoped. But with the right care, and a wig when he was older... The width of his nose worried her, but perhaps age would improve it. He must be Gabriel's boy, with those eyes; that was in his favor.

This child was all that remained of Gabriel, of any of her children—of Matthieu. *He* had planned to free René. If the girl had been lying about the manumission papers, why would she have

returned here? It was just like Matthieu. Marguerite could still carry out his wishes. This boy was what he'd meant: *Find our grandson with the remarkable eyes.*

Marguerite assessed the girl as coldly as she could, setting aside what the little whore had done to her sons to conceive this child. With the corner of her head kerchief sticking up like a feather and those high cheekbones, she did look part Indian. If Étienne's theories about their nobility had any merit, then that was in the boy's favor also. Indian blood would explain the girl's melancholy, and why her shade was more like a *griffonne* than a true *mulâtresse*.

Whether quarter or half, she clearly had *some* French blood, so altogether the child was more white than anything else. The best in him simply needed to be nurtured. To let this girl take him up into the mountains to be lost among the drumming and dancing of the negroes would be like tossing a pearl among swine.

Marguerite simply had to invent a new mother for him. She had lied to her children all their lives and they'd never suspected; she could lie to one grandchild with ease. Stiffly she knelt before the boy, who stared back at her with the curiosity of his uncle Étienne. Marguerite smiled. "*Bonjour, René.*" *Re-né. Re-born.* She could not have chosen a better name.

The girl snatched up her knife again. "You get away from him," she ordered, as if she had the right.

Marguerite scooped the boy into her arms and backed outside. "I can take better care of him than you *ever* would."

"Let go of my son!" She was only a child herself. But as the girl stalked toward Marguerite, she looked more like a panther than a kitten, baring her single metal claw.

René began whining at once, but Marguerite *had* to clasp him tight in one arm in order to access the pistol. She wrested it from the pocket and pointed it between the girl's eyes.

They widened at once and she hesitated, so close to Marguerite that the end of the barrel nearly touched that chestnut skin.

Whining in her ear, René pushed against Marguerite's shoulder and chest, trying to twist around.

"Please don't take him," the girl whispered, obsequious at last.

Marguerite glanced down the steps to the animal waiting below. A baroness riding in a mule-cart... She would do what she must. With her injured leg, Marguerite could never outrun this girl, and she needed those provisions. But how in the world would she untie the mule and keep the pistol steady, while holding a flailing child?

The girl guessed her thoughts. "Let me come with you! You sit in the cart, and I'll lead the mule."

She might be useful, it was true...

"There's food and water already, and I'll get more, whenever you want it!"

She would run off the first chance she got, and probably take the boy with her. He was fussing worse than his father ever had, blubbering nonsense in Creole. Marguerite would soon correct *that*.

The girl seemed to think Marguerite had agreed. She hurried down the steps ahead of them to spread a blanket on the seat of the mule-cart.

Without lowering the pistol, Marguerite followed and climbed inside with René. Before she'd even set him down, he crawled toward the girl. Marguerite gripped the neck of his shift to keep him from going too far, which only set him to wailing louder.

"I'm here, *trezò mwen!*" the girl babbled, swiping at his tears with the pale undersides of her thumbs. "It's all right."

This would never do. "Take off your kerchief," Marguerite ordered, motioning with the pistol barrel.

The girl pulled the cloth from around her neck and swabbed at René's snotty nose.

"The one on your head, then!" Marguerite clarified through her teeth. "Tie him to the rail."

She only stood there slack-jawed while the boy continued struggling, proving Marguerite's point.

"He'll fall out otherwise!"

Finally, the girl unwrapped the large green kerchief from her braided hair. She tethered one corner of the cloth to the rail on the side of the cart.

René slipped from Marguerite's grasp and stood on the seat to fling his chubby arms around the girl's neck, sobbing something that

sounded like “*Maman! Maman!*” His paler skin against hers was a startling contrast, proof they did not belong together.

Great crocodile tears began to splash down the girl’s cheeks as she disentangled him and bound his wrist to the cart. “It’s only for a little while, *trezò mwen*.”

Marguerite swallowed and picked up the reins in her left hand. She did not let go of the pistol. “Now untie the mule.”

The girl obeyed. René cried even louder, if that was possible. “I’m not leaving you!” she assured him. “I’ll never leave you!” She looped the mule’s tether around her wrist.

Marguerite waited till the girl had walked the rope’s full length, till she was as far away from the animal as possible. The girl’s back was to her. That made it easier. She had no chance to react or dodge. Marguerite knew she was a terrible shot, even at this range, and she couldn’t be certain the pistol would still fire. But it did. The explosion startled Marguerite as well as the mule, making her drop the reins. The animal bolted and dragged the body of the girl several yards before the rope came loose and they were free of her.

Marguerite retrieved the reins, but she let the mule run. She did not look back.

She tried not to worry. Even if the girl lived, everyone knew negroes had minds like sieves. In a day or two, the girl would forget René entirely. She’d throw herself at other men and get more children. Marguerite never could.

Beside her, René strained against his binding, but he was only making it tighter. She wished he would stop screaming.

“Shhh,” Marguerite soothed him. “Your grandmother’s here now.”

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NECESSARY SINS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Bell has been writing stories since the second grade. At the age of fourteen, she chose a pen name and vowed to become a published author. That same year, she began the Lazare Family Saga. It took her a couple decades to get it right.

After earning her MFA in Creative Writing at George Mason University, Elizabeth realized she would have to return her two hundred library books. Instead, she cleverly found a job in the university library. She works there to this day.

Elizabeth loves hearing from readers and chatting about writing and history. Visit her on social media or her website:

<https://elizabethbellauthor.com/>

