

Chapter One

May, 1834

Jefferson Parish, Louisiana

“A commoner? Father, you do realize our family can be traced back to the echelons of European royalty? You still correspond with relatives in England and France.” Francine Beaumont was hardly ready to lay down her virginity for a man who bought his way into high society.

“What a despicable thing to say about a man you do not know. Besides, he can offer you a large plantation, slaves, and wealth. We are faltering, my dear. Certainly you have seen how household expenses have been cut in the past year,” Lord Arnaud Beaumont admonished his eldest daughter.

Francine had spurned nearly every suitor placed in her path, but now it was time to marry off the bane of his existence. How had something so vicious spawned from such a gentle-born woman as Francine’s mother? If only she were living now. Perhaps genial Marie would have been able to calm their daughter’s ire.

“It is tantamount to selling *me* off to the highest bidder, Papa!” Francine attempted to use the childhood endearment so often uttered by her much more pliable sister.

“The matter is settled!” Lord Beaumont pounded his fist on the top of the polished desk, causing Francine to flee the room in tears, past her younger sister, Adrienne. She watched the retreating form of Francine for a few moments before creeping into her father’s study.

Arnaud was relieved to see his sweet, patient daughter appear in the doorway. Her pleasant face was encircled with golden ringlets, her clear, blue eyes full of love and concern. Adrienne, his pride and joy, so much like her mother in every way, would never have protested an arranged marriage. She would have considered it her honor, and duty, to oblige. She was the opposite in every way to her tantruming sister.

“Papa, you mustn’t let Francine trouble you. Remember your constitution...” Adrienne had always been aware of the troubles plaguing her father. They had caused him to suffer horribly with stomach pains, only recently diagnosed as ulcerous. She knew Francine had no idea, nor would she care.

“*Ma petite*, you are too kind. If only it were you who Henri Du Cormier sought.”

Seventeen-year old Adrienne was already well-versed in the matters of arranged marriage, knowing though she had more chance of marrying for love than her titled, elder sister. Francine looked upon Adrienne with contempt, envying her freedom, however minute.

“Papa, if I could, I would gladly take her place. Why does Monsieur Du Cormier seek a bride with a title? Surely such things do not matter here anymore.” Louisiana was a part of the United States. The French Revolution had dispatched with the monarchy, and the British held no control over them. Titles were obsolete relics of the past.

Arnaud rubbed the bridge of his nose, removing his silver-rimmed spectacles, and closing his doleful chocolate brown eyes. His greying, dark brown hair only betrayed his age. “I wish I knew, *ma petite*. He came into this money suddenly, only able to buy St. Esprit through sheer luck! I wish it were different. My title, therefore Francine’s, is useless.”

Adrienne crossed the room, kneeling at her father’s side, no care that she wrinkled her carefully pressed silk gown. “Mayhap we could speak to him? Surely he would not want such a wife as Francine, once he sees her ways.”

“Francine would never disgrace herself by behaving poorly at a public function, especially with the height of society attending.” Arnaud shuffled some papers aside. “It would alleviate my anguish greatly if you were to find a husband, someone to make you completely happy beyond your wildest dreams.”

Smiling warmly, Adrienne gazed up at her mother’s portrait above the fireplace. Her mother, Marie, was captured in the prime of youth and beauty. She saw her mother’s features in herself, knowing this was why her father favored her so. “You mean like how you were with Mama?”

Arnaud lifted his gaze, peering up at his beloved. They had grown up in a tumultuous world in pre-revolutionary France, hiding their aristocratic upbringing. When Arnaud had prospered in the shipping business, the young couple made their way to the French owned Louisiana territory. How they celebrated when the United States bought it, knowing their daughters would grow up in a free country.

Adrienne was three when their mother passed away from consumption. She vaguely remembered the tender-hearted woman who soothed her nightmares with soft, French lullabies. Often, her dreams were full of the music, as she twirled her small fingers into the woman’s blonde ringlets. She felt cheated not to have spent more time with her mother, but guilty for those feelings at the same time.

Finally, Arnaud spoke, “Yes, like how I was with Mama. I wish she were here. She had a way with Francine. Francine would throw the most violent tantrums, sending nannies and maids running from the nursery. Marie walked in, composed, and quieted the storm.”

Before melancholy could descend over the pair, Adrienne changed the subject. “Helene says everything is prepared for this evening. All the silver is polished, and the ballroom floor has been swept and cleaned. She wanted me to ask your approval on the canapés for the hors d’oeuvres.”

Patting his daughter’s hand, Arnaud left the final touches to Adrienne. “I am sure what you decide will be scrumptious. Is she preparing a full course meal, or a buffet?”

“I believe she thought it best to provide guests with titbits of food right in the ballroom. It’s very new-fangled. I believe I will ask for the salmon and dill. It is my favorite, after all.” Adrienne rose, brushing the fabric of her pale pink dress.

“I leave it all in your more than capable care, *ma petite*. Now, hurry along and reassure Helene. I am sure she will be beside herself, wondering what my decision shall be.” Arnaud winked and stood, placing a doting kiss on his daughter’s brow.

“I will, Papa.” Adrienne exited the room in a rustle of skirts, her heels clicking delicately on the wooden floor.

Arnaud sat down again, pressing his hand to his stomach to find some relief from the gurgling sensation building there. He slid open a drawer in his desk, and took a dose of the prescribed laudanum. Reclining back in the chair, he waited for the pain to recede, praying to his long silent God that Francine would do something for the family, for once in her life.