

TAMERA ALEXANDER

→ FOUNTAIN CREEK CHRONICLES | BOOK THREE ←



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Remembered
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Cimetière de Montmartre, Paris, France
July 17, 1870

VÉRONIQUE EVELINE GIRARD laid a single white rose on her mother's grave, and bent low to whisper into the afterlife. "If somehow my words can reach you, *Maman* . . ." Her hand trembled on the cool marble. "Know that I cannot do as you have asked. Your request comes at too great—"

An unaccustomed chill traced an icy finger up her spine. Sensing she was no longer alone, Véronique rose and slowly turned.

Cimetière Montmartre's weather-darkened sepulchers rose and fell in varying heights along the familiar cobbled walkway. Rows of senescent, discolored tombs clustered and leaned along meandering paths. Canted summer sunlight, persistent in having its way, shimmered through the leaves overhead and cast muted shadows on the white and gray marble stones.

Movement at the corner of her eye drew her focus.

There, peeking from behind a centuries-old headstone, sat a cat whose coat shared the color of ashes in a hearth.

Véronique sighed, smiling. "So I am not alone after all. You are the *racaille* skulking about."

The cat made no move to leave. It only stared at her, its tail flickering in the cadence of a mildly interested feline. Cats were common in Paris these days, and they were welcome. They helped to discourage the overrunning of rodents.

“He is not the only *racaille* skulking about, *mademoiselle*.”

Véronique jumped at the voice close behind her, instantly recognizing its deep timbre. “Christophe Charvet . . .” Secretly grateful for his company, she mustered a scolding look as she turned, knowing he would be disappointed if she didn’t. “Why do you still insist on sneaking up on me here?” She huffed a breath. “We are far from being children anymore, you and I.”

Contrition shadowed his eyes, as did a glint of mischief. He took her hand and brought it to his lips. “Mademoiselle Girard, be most assured that it has been many years since I have looked upon you as a child.” Playful formality laced his tone even as his expression took on a more intimate look—one Véronique remembered but considered long ago put behind them. “With the slightest sign of encouragement from you, *mademoiselle*—”

“Christophe . . .” She eyed him, anticipating what was coming and wishing to avoid it.

Gentle determination lined Christophe’s face. “With the slightest sign of encouragement I would, *mademoiselle*, for the final time, attempt to capture the heart of the woman before me as easily as I once won the heart of the young girl she once was.”

She stared up at him, not completely surprised that he was broaching this subject again—especially now, after her mother’s passing. What caught her off guard was how deeply she wished there were reason to encourage his hopes.

She’d known Christophe since the age of five, when they’d tromped naked together through the fountain of Lord Marchand’s front courtyard. Remembering how severe the punishment for that offense had been for them both, she curbed the desire to smooth a hand over the bustle of her skirt. Those escapades had extended into their youth, when after hurrying through their duties, they had raced here to explore the endless hiding places amidst this silent city of sepulchers.

She’d adored Christophe then. Of course it wasn’t until later in life that he had noticed her in that way, but by then those feelings for him had long passed and showed no sign of being resurrected.

She repeated his name again—this time more gently. “You know you are my dearest friend . . .”

A dark brow shot up. “*Dearest friend* . . .” He grimaced. “Words

every man hopes to hear from a woman he adores.”

His sarcasm tempted her to grin. But she was certain whatever rejection he felt would be short-lived. After all, he had said *a* woman, not *the* woman.

He gave an acknowledging tilt of his head. “You can’t blame a man for trying, Véronique—especially when such a prize is at stake.” Resignation softened his smile. “In light of this, I hereby renew my solemn vow made to you in our twenty-sixth year as we—”

“Twenty-fifth year.” Véronique raised a single brow, remembering that particular afternoon five years ago when he’d made the promise as they strolled the grassy expanse of the Champs-Élysées.

“*Pardon, ma chérie.* Our twenty-fifth year.” His eyes narrowed briefly, a familiar gleam lighting his dark pupils. “I stand corrected, and will henceforth extinguish the fleeting hope that my *dearest friend*”—wit punctuated the words—“will finally succumb to my charm and consider altering her affections.”

With a serious sideways glance, she attempted to match his humor. “You will not regret your restraint, Christophe, for you would not be pleased with me. On that I give you my vow.” She shrugged and gave herself a dismissive gesture, secretly hoping her mother could somehow hear their exchange. *Maman* had always enjoyed their bantering, and had loved Christophe dearly. “I am like wine left too long in the cellar. I fear I have lost my sweetness and grown bitter with time’s fermenting.”

He tugged playfully at her hand, and a familiar quirk lifted his brow. “Ah, but I have learned something in my thirty years that you apparently have not, Mademoiselle Girard.” His smile turned conspiratorial.

“And what would that be, *Monsieur Charvet*?”

Truth tempered the humor in his eyes. “That the finest French Bordeaux, full-bodied and rich in bouquet, does not yield from the youngest vintage, *ma chérie*, but from the more mature.”

Unable to think of a witty reply, Véronique chose silence instead. Christophe’s handsome looks and gentle strength had long drawn the attention of females. Why he still held a flame for her, she couldn’t imagine.

A silent understanding passed between them, and after a moment, he nodded.

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze, then bowed low and proper, mimicking the grand gesture used daily among the male servants in the Marchand household in which they'd grown up serving together. "I will henceforth resign myself to the designation I hold in your heart, Mademoiselle Girard, and I will treasure it." He smiled briefly and added more softly, "As I always have, *ma petite*."

My little one.

Christophe's use of his childhood name for her encouraged Véronique to draw herself to her full height. But barely brushing five-foot-three, she hardly made for an intimidating figure and knew full well she looked far more like a girl of eighteen than a woman of thirty. Her mother had often told her she would one day be thankful for such youthfulness. That day had yet to dawn.

Christophe motioned in the direction of the street. "I've come to escort you home. Lord Marchand has requested a meeting with all members of the household staff." He took a breath as if to continue, then hesitated. The lines around his eyes grew deeper.

Véronique studied him, sensing there was more. "Is something amiss, Christophe?"

This time the quirk in his brow didn't appear fully genuine. "Be thankful I came to retrieve you, *ma petite*. Dr. Claude volunteered to come in my place—that *racaille*—but I would not abide it."

She grimaced at the mention of Dr. Claude's intent.

"You must watch yourself around him, Véronique. Though I have overheard nothing absolute, I believe he deems himself worthy of your hand and has spoken with Lord Marchand about pursuing it."

Véronique pictured Dr. Claude, the personal physician to the Marchand *famille*. "Of his worth there is no doubt, and his rank and situation are far above my own. But—"she made a face—"he is so old and his breath is always stale."

Christophe laughed. "Fifty may be older, yes, but it hardly portends impending death, *ma chérie*." He shook his head. "Always such honesty, Véronique. An admirable quality, but one that will get you into much trouble if not balanced with good sense."

She let her mouth fall open. "I have perfectly good sense, and while you've always warned me against being too honest, my dear *maman*—may she rest in peace—always said that giving a right, or honest, answer resembles giving a kiss on the lips."

He smiled. “When the answer is one you’re seeking, no doubt it is just that.” He held up a hand when she started to reply. “But let me say this—if your dear *maman* held any belief that contrasts one of my own, I will instantly resign mine and adopt hers without exception.” His gaze shifted to her mother’s grave. “For she was a saint among women.”

He stepped past Véronique and knelt. Laying a hand on the tomb, near the white rose, he bowed his head.

Véronique watched, knowing the depths of his affection for her mother. She knelt beside him and ran her hand across the cool, smooth stone. Her mother had died slowly. Too slowly in one sense, too quickly in another.

Arianne Elisabeth Girard had suffered much, and there were many nights when, in a fitful laudanum-induced sleep, she had begged God to take her and be done with it. For a time, Véronique had begged God *not* to grant her mother’s wish. How selfish a request that had been.

But no more selfish than what her *maman* had asked of her in that final hour.

It had been unfair and carried much too great a cost. Her mother would have realized that under ordinary circumstances, but the fever and medications had confused her thinking. Véronique had heard it said that one could never recover from the loss of one’s mother, and if past weeks were testament, she feared this to be true.

Picturing her mother’s face, she struggled to find comfort in a sonnet long ago tucked away in memory. Beloved by her *maman*, the sonnet’s words, penned over two hundred years earlier, were only now being made to withstand the Refiner’s fire in Véronique’s own life.

Wanting to feel the words on her tongue as the author himself would have, she chose the language of the English-born poet instead of her native French. “‘Death, be not proud, though some have called thee mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so.’”

Christophe spoke fluent English, as did she. Yet he remained silent, his head bowed.

Her brow furrowed in concentration. Her voice came out a choked whisper. “‘For those whom thou think’st thou dost overthrow, die not, poor death. Nor yet canst thou kill me.’” Her memory

never faltered, but more than once the next passages of the sonnet threatened to lodge in her throat.

John Donne's thoughts had often lent a measure of consolation as she'd been forced to watch her mother waste away in recent months. But instead of affording comfort that morning, Donne's Holy Sonnet seemed to mock her. Its claim of victory rang hollow, empty in light of death's thievery, however temporary the theft might prove to be in the afterlife.

She pulled from her pocket the diminutive book of Holy Sonnets, its cover worn thin, and turned to the place her mother had last marked.

The note at the bottom of the page drew her eye.

Still remembering her mother's flowing script, the artistic loops and curls that so closely resembled her own, Véronique experienced a pang in her chest each time she looked at the barely legible scrawl trailing downward on the page at an awkward angle. But dwelling on her mother's last written thoughts offered her a sliver of hope.

"'Death is but a pause, not an ending, my dearest Véronique.'" Véronique softened her voice, knowing that doing so made her sound more like her mother—people had told her that countless times in recent years. If only she could hear the resemblance, especially now. "'When the lungs finally empty of air and begin to fill with the sweetness of heaven's breath, one will realize in that instant that though they have existed before, only in that moment will they truly have begun to live.'"

Ink from the pen left a gaunt, stuttered line that disappeared into the binding, as though lifting the tip from the page had been too great an effort for the author.

Christophe's hand briefly came to cover hers.

Véronique closed her eyes, forcing a single tear to slip free. She still cried, but not as often. It was getting easier—and harder.

Her gaze wandered to the name chiseled into the marble facing—ARIANNE ELISABETH GIRARD—then to the diminutive oval portrait embedded in stone and encased in glass beneath it. She had painted the likeness at her mother's request one afternoon in early February, shortly before her passing, by a special bridge along the river Seine. Some of Véronique's most cherished memories could be traced back to that bridge.

Memories of a man she'd never truly known . . . and yet had always struggled to live without.

Her memories of him were clouded and murky, much like the Seine. Yet she remembered the feel of her father's hand enfolding hers. The tone of his voice as he used words to paint mental portraits describing how the early morning light played against the ripples of the water, rewarding the observant onlooker with multifaceted prisms of color.

Though only five when he left, she recalled how he'd made her feel as they'd walked the canals together—cherished, chosen, *loved*.

Véronique studied the small portrait of her *maman*. She had sketched the curves of her mother's face from memory, just as she did everything. Another gift from the Giver, her mother had called it. The ability to see something once and commit the tiniest details to memory. To store it deep inside, kept safe as if locked away in a trunk, to be taken out and painted or sketched at a later time.

At least that's how it used to be. She hadn't lifted a brush in months, not since her mother had grown ill.

But she couldn't blame that solely on her mother's illness—unflattering critiques about her work from a respected instructor had contributed. She'd been at the Musée du Louvre, copying portraits of the masters along with other students, and the instructor's criticism had been especially pointed. "*You're merely trying to impress us, Mademoiselle Girard, when you would be better served staying within the bounds of conventional artistry. You are here to learn from the masters, and their techniques. Not give us your interpretation of their paintings.*"

His assessment stung. Though the criticisms were not new, and were partly founded in truth, his public declaration that her work was not worthy of distinction and that her talent was lacking did nothing to bolster her confidence.

Wind rustled the trees overhead.

Véronique's gaze trailed the luminous shafts of sunlight as they slanted across the grave, turning the marble a brilliant white against the drab brown of an over-dry summer. As far back as she could remember, a place existed deep inside that remained incomplete, wanting. Surely God had granted her this *gift* of painting with the purpose of meeting that need.

Yet since her mother's death all attempts at filling the void with it

had fallen grossly short of the mark.

The emptiness within spawned the jolting reminder of her mother's last request. "I want you to do what I never could, Véronique. Go to him. . . ." Véronique had wanted to turn and run, but her mother's urgency had rooted her to the bedside. "Find him. . . . I know your father is still alive." Her mother's eyes pooled with tears. "Do this for him, for yourself. . . . Your *papa* is a good man."

Her mother's gaze had trailed to the table by the bed and settled upon a stack of letters. Once white rectangles, now yellowed with time and bearing marks of oft-repeated readings, the bundle was tied tight—too tight it seemed—and with a ribbon Véronique didn't remember seeing before. "They are no longer my letters, Véronique. They are yours." A tear had slipped down her mother's left temple and disappeared into her hairline. "In truth, they have always been yours. Take them. Read them, *ma chérie*."

She couldn't refuse her mother at the time, but Véronique didn't want the letters. She didn't need to read them again. She already knew of her father's promises to send for his young wife and their five-year-old daughter once he was settled in the Americas—once he'd made his fortune in fur trading.

But Pierre Gustave Girard had never sent for them.

Christophe chose that moment to rise from his quiet vigil and offered his arm. Véronique stood and slipped her hand through, willing the voiceless question hovering at the fringe of her thoughts to be silenced once and for all.

Paris was her home. How could her mother have asked her to leave it to go in search of someone who had abandoned them both?

Christophe walked slowly down the cobbled path, shortening his long stride in deference to hers.

The shaded bower they walked beneath, courtesy of canopied trees, encouraged the chirrup of crickets long after the creatures should have fallen silent in the summer's warmth. Lichen clung to the graves, frocking the rock surfaces in blankets of grayish green. Iron gates of mausoleums barred entrance to keyless visitors, even as the chains hanging from their doors drooped beneath the weight of their mission.

"How can time move so slowly in one sense, Christophe, when

there seems to be such a scarcity of it in another?” Her question coerced a smile from him, as she knew it would.

“Always the poet and artist’s perspective on life.” He looked down at her. “Something I have aspired to understand but have failed miserably to do.”

“And give up your realism? Your ability to”—she tucked her chin in an attempt to mimic his deep voice—“see the world as it truly is, not as others see it?”

Christophe shook his head, smiling. “Oh, for the memory you have, *ma petite*. To so fully capture both phrases and images with such distinguishing clarity. You never forget anything.”

“That is not true, and you know it. My thoughts are easily scattered these days, and I often forget things.”

“Ah yes, you forget to eat when you’re painting late at night.” His look turned reprimanding. “Or when you used to paint. You forget to quench the flame as you fall asleep reading”—he snapped his fingers—“whatever foreign poet it is that you’re so fond of.”

She slapped his arm, chuckling. “You remember very well what his name is.”

“*Oui*, I know the master John Donne. But why must he be . . . *English*?”

She giggled at the way he said the word. As though it were distasteful.

Pausing, he looked down at her. “It’s good to hear you laugh, *ma petite*.” He started down the path again. “Let’s see, where was I?”

“I believe you were listing my faults. And none too delicately.”

“*Oui*, mademoiselle. But it is an extensive list, *non*?” His tone mirrored his smile. “Just the other day, when you forgot to put sugar in *Madame* Marchand’s tea, I thought we might have to convene the parliament to decide your fate.”

She smiled while cringing inwardly, thinking of *Madame* Marchand, the family’s matriarch. Six years ago Lord Marchand had transferred *Véronique*’s services to his elderly mother after his only daughter, to whom *Véronique* had served as companion since childhood, had married.

Madame Marchand had reminded her of the sugar oversight no less than four times the day of her grievous error. And without uttering another word, the woman had prolonged the reprimand in

proceeding days through short, punctuated glares—starting first with the sugar bowl then slinking to Véronique.

She sighed and shook her head. “I’m afraid my mind has been elsewhere of late.”

“But I have saved the worst of your faults for last.” Christophe stopped and she did likewise. “You continually forget others’ shortcomings even when they’ve purposefully set you at naught. You extend grace where none is due. . . .” He grew more serious. “And you, along with your dear *maman*, have always given the Marchand household the best of service, regardless of Madame Marchand’s ill temper and demanding disposition. The ungrateful, aging . . .”

Her eyes widened at the name he assigned to Madame Marchand, but she would’ve been lying if she denied having thought the same thing on occasion.

They rounded the corner and she spotted one of Lord Marchand’s carriages waiting near the entrance. She had walked the two-mile distance that morning, enjoying the time to think—and to be out from under Madame Marchand’s scrutiny. “Is Lord Marchand’s requested meeting so urgent, Christophe?”

He kept his focus trained ahead.

The seriousness in his expression caused her smile to fade. “Has something happened?”

He aided her ascent into the carriage, climbed in beside her, and rapped the side of the door; the driver responded.

Véronique wanted to press the matter but held her tongue. Pressuring Christophe had never met with success. Quite the opposite, in fact.

The driver merged the carriage onto a main thoroughfare and chose an avenue running adjacent to the Musée du Louvre and the Seine. The river arched through the center of town, its dark waters murky and pungent from the daily deluge of rituals from the city’s inhabitants.

Véronique pushed back the velvet curtain from the window to allow movement of air within the carriage, aware of the shadow stealing across Christophe’s face.

He leaned forward and rested his forearms on his thighs. “There are things I must say to you, and I ask that you allow me due course, *ma chérie*, before you offer response.” He glanced back at her. “Or I

fear I will not be able to complete my task.”

His tone held unaccustomed solemnity, which provided ample motivation to fulfill his request. Wordless, Véronique nodded.

“Within hours Emperor Napoleon is to declare war on Prussia. Lord Marchand has secretly received word that Prussia is mobilizing an army even now. No doubt they’re finding Spain a willing alliance. Lord Marchand—” The carriage came to an abrupt halt. Christophe glanced out the window before continuing, his voice lowered. “Lord Marchand predicts the dispute will be far reaching. Already our *patron* has made plans to depart for Brussels within the week, and . . . I am to accompany him. His entire family will be journeying with him as well.”

Suddenly the reason behind Christophe’s reticence became clear. She gently touched his arm. “I don’t want to leave Paris, Christophe, now of all times. But if—” The carriage jolted forward, and resumed its pace. “But if Brussels is where the family must go, then I’ll happily accompany Madame Marchand. I’m certain it won’t be for long, and that this . . . blow our country has suffered will be quickly resolved.”

He nodded just as the carriage jolted forward, then resumed its pace.

The look he gave her made her feel like a naïve schoolgirl. “It’s not that simple, Véronique, for many reasons.”

The lines of his brow deepened, and she sought to ease his worry. “I’ll be fine. The trip to Brussels might even be good for me. And once we return everything will be—”

“Madame Marchand has informed our *patron* that she has no plans for you to accompany her.”

His voice came out flat and final, and Véronique felt as though someone had suddenly cinched her corset two sizes smaller. She tried to draw breath. “But I . . . I don’t understand.” She shook her head. “I’m . . . her companion.”

Christophe’s eyes narrowed. “I’ve been informed that . . . Madame Marchand has already arranged for a new companion to escort her to Brussels.”

Véronique moved her lips but no words would come.

The carriage turned onto the cobbled road leading to the Marchand estate.

The discovery of her reduced rank—whatever her position might

be—encouraged the emotion to rise in her throat. Véronique swallowed against the knot of anger and tears, and struggled to find the positive in this situation, just as her mother would have urged her to do. “Am I to assume that the remaining staff will stay and maintain the home’s readiness for the Marchands’ return?”

He didn’t answer. His lips formed a tight line.

“Christophe,” she whispered, growing more unsettled by the second. “We have always been honest with each other. Tell me what my new position is.”

Staring at the floor of the carriage, he exhaled an audible breath. “After this week, you will . . . no longer be employed within the Marchand household. He has secured a position for you in the household of Lord Descantes, and they depart for England straightaway.”

When summoned to Lord Marchand’s private study that same hour, Véronique gathered her remaining nerve and willed the frenetic pace of her heart to lessen. She always found the formal nature of Lord Marchand’s study intimidating, and the latching of the oversized door behind her compounded her unease.

She spotted Christophe standing by the far window, his back to her. Lord Marchand had requested to meet with him first, and relief filled her, gathering that Christophe would remain for her meeting as well.

“*Bonjour*, Mademoiselle Girard.” Standing behind his desk, Lord Marchand motioned for her to sit in one of the mahogany gondola chairs opposite him.

She paused long enough to curtsy, and then chose the seat that put her in Christophe’s direct line of vision. If only he would turn around.

Lord Marchand said nothing for a moment, his hesitance giving her the impression that what he was about to say required great effort. “Monsieur Charvet has informed me that the two of you have spoken, Mademoiselle Girard. And that you are aware of the change in circumstances.”

She nodded, wishing Christophe would look at her.

“Before I continue, let me say that it was of utmost concern to me to locate a position for you that would reflect my appreciation for your years of excellent service, mademoiselle.” Regret flickered across

Lord Marchand's face. "As well as for your mother's," he added with surprising tenderness. "Therefore, my request that you be placed with Lord Descantes' family."

"*Merci beaucoup*, Lord Marchand." She coerced a smile, glad that Christophe had confided to her about the Descantes family in the carriage earlier. She remembered having met the couple at a formal dinner once. Lord Descantes, severe in his countenance, was in fact most kind, and his wife his equal in that regard. "I'm greatly indebted to you for using your influence for my benefit."

Lord Marchand held up a hand. "It is not only my influence that gained you the position, but also Monsieur Charvet's. He put his own reputation on the line when he recommended you. You may be naïve to the ways of parliament, but no doubt you are aware of agreements made between alliances."

She nodded.

"Negotiations are reached, deals are struck and sealed, all with a single handshake. Nothing more. The integrity of a man's word is the binding force of that contract. Nothing need be written because the man's reputation, the man himself, is the guarantee. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

"Certainly, your lordship," she answered. Whatever had transpired, the position with the Descantes family would be binding. If she chose not to work for them, there would be no other position for her, and it would compromise both Lord Marchand's and Christophe's reputations.

"You're a bright young woman, Mademoiselle Girard. It is one of the reasons I handpicked you to be companion to my daughter all those years ago. Francette never had much initiative on her own. I think it partly due to the loss of her mother at such a young age, but I also blame myself. As her only parent, I gave her too much, too easily."

Véronique had long considered this to be true, but of course had never voiced the thought.

"So I sought to locate a companion who would challenge my daughter, inspire her by example." Lord Marchand's smile held endearment. "And I did not have to look far, for I found that child living right here in my own home. You did those things for

Francette.” A knowing look moved over his face. “You did what I never could.”

Lord Marchand’s last phrase, coupled with something in his expression, made Véronique sit straighter in her chair. “Lord Marchand, I—”

She fell silent at the look he gave her.

“Véronique . . .” A sigh escaped him. His expression became aggrieved. “I would ask that you not interrupt me, mademoiselle, as I lay out the circumstances to you.”

Surprised by his informal address and reminded of her place in this home, Véronique nodded, wordless. Twice in one day she had received such an admonishment.

“As Monsieur Charvet informed you earlier today, you do indeed have a position with the Descantes. You will serve as tutor and companion to each of their four daughters. But what he did not know, and what I intentionally withheld from him, is that the family will not be traveling to England.”

He paused, and the moment seemed to pause with him.

Véronique stared across the desk at this man she’d known all her life, and yet had never *really* known. Christophe turned, drawing her attention, and the look in his eyes communicated one single overriding emotion—anger.

Queasiness slithered through her midsection. The air in the study suddenly grew thick and moist.

“Your *mère* and I . . .” Lord Marchand kept his gaze confined to the ornate desk behind which he sat. “We often conversed late in the evenings, here in this room. Over the years, we became . . . friends. Nothing beyond that,” he added quickly, as though reading Véronique’s thoughts. “But I grew to care very deeply about your mother. She loved you more than her own life, Véronique. She shared with me her dreams for you, her hopes. And toward the end . . . her regrets. I made your mother a promise before she died.”

Véronique found it difficult to breathe, much less remain seated. Her mother’s last request played over in her mind. “*I want you to do what I never could.*”

She rose slowly, fisting her hands to ease their shaking. She heard herself asking a question, while somehow already knowing the answer. “To what destination will the Descantes be traveling?”

Lord Marchand rose and came around to her side of the desk. So close, yet maintaining a respectful distance. “They are bound for the Americas, *ma chérie*. They leave for Italy one week hence, and you are to accompany them. Lord Descantes will conduct parliamentary business there for some weeks—perhaps longer, and then you will travel with them to the Americas, to a place by the name of New York City. When you arrive, your service to the Descantes family will be concluded, and someone will meet you to take you the rest of the way.”

Véronique looked between Lord Marchand and Christophe, numb with shock, feeling betrayed and yet absurdly protected at the same time. “The . . . rest of the way?”

Christophe stepped closer. His eyes were bright with emotion. “You are strong, *ma petite*. Much stronger than you look, and far stronger than you consider yourself to be.”

She shook her head. That’s what her mother used to say. “I’m tired of being strong, Christophe.”

Lord Marchand’s gentle sigh drew her attention back. “Through a connection Lord Descantes has established, I have hired a gentleman who will meet you in New York City. I posted a missive with instructions to him this very morning. Lord Descantes will inform him of your date of arrival once that is determined.” A tender smile accentuated the traces of vanished youth about Lord Marchand’s eyes. “According to your mother’s wishes, and in keeping with my promise to her, this gentleman will accompany you to the Colorado Territory, to the last known whereabouts of your father—a town by the name of Willow Springs.”

Near Big Hill, Oregon Trail
March 1871

KNEELING OVER A DESOLATE PATCH of drought-ridden valley, Jack Brennan slipped off his hat and briefly closed his eyes. An early morning sun warmed his back and cast a long shadow over the familiar plot of earth. Slowly, reverently, he placed his right hand over the unmarked place.

Moments accumulated in the silence.

A zealous spring breeze swept fine granules of dust over and between his fingers. Without pretense of a marker, this unadorned spot in southeast Idaho held what had once meant everything to him.

He studied the grave that cradled the bodies of his wife and their only child and welcomed the haze of memories that always huddled close when he came back to this place. The place where it had happened. The memories were brief in the reliving, and yet those precious recollections were what had sustained him through his hardest times.

It had taken years, but healing had come. Finally, and completely.

Gradually his gaze was drawn to the lone wild flower sprouting up right where a headstone might have been placed. Braving the desolate landscape, the delicate petals of the yellow owl's-clover bloom bore the palest shade of its name. Its leaves were sticky to the touch and edged in a fine fur that gave the plant a grayish color. The slender

flower lifted heavenward, bespeaking courage and a persistence not easily worn down.

An apt flower to be covering his Mary's grave.

Jack let out a held breath and surveyed the western horizon, far in the distance, where the brown plains blurred with the gauzy blue of sky. "This will be my last visit here, Mary." He spoke quietly, relatively certain she could hear him and knowing that he needed to get these things said. One thing he was sure of—if Mary *was* listening, it was from somewhere other than beneath his feet. Despite knowing that, something had compelled him to return here year after year.

He knew this location as sure as he knew every trail, hill, creek, and riverbed—both dry and running—from here to California and on up into Oregon. He'd traveled the fifteen hundred mile stretch from Missouri to the western territories so many times he didn't feel at home anymore unless he was on the move. Or at least that's how it used to be.

Over time, things had changed. *He* had changed.

In the past thirteen springs of guiding wagons west, he'd made camp at this spot each time, the families traveling under the care of his leadership never having been the wiser. Grief was a private thing. Not something to be hoarded and turned into a shrine as he'd seen others do when they lost a loved one, but rather a formidable adversary to be met head on, without hesitation and with a due amount of respect. Otherwise a man might never find his way through to the other side, where grief became less an enemy and more a venerated, even trusted, teacher.

He scooped up a fistful of dirt and let it sift through his fingers.

Slowly, he stood. "For years, Mary, not a day passed but what you didn't occupy my every thought. I'd be wishing I could hold you close again, that we could . . . make love just once more, like we did the night we made our son." He shifted, and sighed. If not for the faded daguerreotype buried deep in his saddlebag, her exact features might be lost to him now. Time had a way of erasing even that which at one time seemed unforgettable.

"Sometimes I try and picture where you and Aaron are, what you're doing . . . what he looks like now. If he's a young man approaching full grown, or still the little tyke I carried on my shoulders." He glanced behind him, remembering.

He'd long since released the guilt of being unable to prevent the ropes from slipping and the wagon careening downhill, crushing the two people he would have gladly given his own life for. Life wasn't always fair, nor did it repay a person kind for kind. A man didn't live thirty-eight years on this earth and not learn that early on.

Two thoughts had assuaged his grief. First, believing there was something better waiting after this life. And the second, akin to the first, trusting that the good-byes said on this earth weren't meant to be forever.

He breathed in the scent of prairie grass and sunshine, and distinguished a pungent scent of musk on the breeze. For good measure, he retrieved the rifle on the ground beside him and scanned the patches of low-growing brush surrounding the area. The gray mare tethered nearby pricked her ears but gave no indication of alarm.

After a long moment, Jack lifted his gaze skyward. He kept his voice soft. "Things have changed so much in the fifteen years you and Aaron have been gone, Mary. It's not like it was when we first set out. There're forts and stagecoach stops along the way now. Miles of telegraph wire stretch across the prairie as far as the eye can see."

If it was quiet enough, he could sometimes hear the whining hum as messages zipped along the woven strands of copper from one side of the country to the other.

It seemed as though the Union Pacific rarely paused for breath these days. Journeying from Missouri to California used to take four months of slow, arduous travel. Now it took two weeks by rail. Many of the railroad lines, such as the Santa Fe, had built tracks directly over the old dirt trails, replacing them forever. All of these things combined, though good in their own right and an indication of a growing country, signaled the end of his livelihood—and the end of an era.

"This country's changed, Mary, and I've had to change with it." He looked away for a moment. "I used to see your face in a crowd and my heart would about stop right then and there." He shook his head. "'Course it wasn't you. I knew that. It was just someone who favored you."

But that hadn't happened in a long time, which made him even more confident that his decision to return one last time was the right one.

He slapped his hat on his thigh, sending out a cloud of dust, then slipped it back on. "I'll always carry you in my heart, Mary. Same goes for you, son." He thought back to the morning Aaron was born. Losing a wife and losing a child carved deep, but very different, scars. He'd be hard-pressed to define which loss had borne the greater burden through the years, but it went against the nature of things for a parent to bury their child. Of that he was certain.

"Part of me thinks you've been waiting a long time for me to do this, Mary. And that maybe you've even been encouraging it somehow, but . . ." He cleared his throat. His heart beat a mite faster. "I'm movin' on. I sold our land up in Oregon a while back. I just never could settle down there without you and Aaron with me. Didn't feel right somehow."

Mary's soft-spoken ways had made it hard for her to express her feelings the first time their opinions had differed. "You always said my stubborn streak was as thick as the bark on a blackjack, Mary Lowell Brennan." He eyed the wild flower again, smiling. "But you'd be surprised at the patience God's taught me through the years." *And what a difference living with you, even for those three short years, made in my life.*

Bowing his head, Jack offered up a final wordless good-bye.

He walked to the mare and loosened the tether, then swung into the saddle. He sat astride and studied the scene that lay before him, wishing he possessed the ability to capture such landscapes on paper. He'd even purchased a sketch pad and pencils a few years back—to fill up some of the lonely nights on the trail. And though he could draw enough to get his point across, sketching with any sense of artistry was a talent that clearly eluded him, and therefore was one he admired all the more. To be able to capture how the young spring grasses, barely calf high, bent in the wind as though bowing in deference to the One who created them—and how the prairie, though seemingly flat for mile upon endless mile, actually rose as it stretched westward, in gradual measures until finally reaching the foot of the great Rocky Mountains, where a new beginning awaited him. At least that was his hope.

The gray mare shifted beneath him.

Jack leaned down and gave her a firm stroking, smiling when she whinnied in response. "Steady, girl. We're 'bout ready."

When guiding his last group of wagons from Denver to Idaho, then on to Oregon last summer, he'd met a couple by the name of Jonathan and Annabelle McCutchens. About a week into the journey, Jonathan had taken ill, and they'd been forced to leave him and his wife behind. But the day before that happened, Jonathan had asked him to mail a letter, and had told him about the town of Willow Springs.

As Jack turned the mare westward and nudged her flanks, Jonathan's words replayed in his memory as though it were yesterday.

"I didn't find what I came looking for in that little town, but I discovered what I'd been missin' all my life."

Jack urged the mare to a canter and, sensing her desire, gave her full rein. One of the first things he planned on doing when he reached Willow Springs was to deliver the letter in his pocket from Annabelle to a preacher by the name of Patrick Carlson and his wife, Hannah. He'd been given specific instructions to hand it to them personally and had gotten the distinct impression that Annabelle wanted the three of them to meet. He looked forward to it.

The next thing he wanted to do in Willow Springs was to visit the banks of Fountain Creek and pay his last respects to Jonathan McCutchens, who had died on the trail. Passing through Idaho, Jack had taken the opportunity to visit Annabelle and her new husband. Thinking of that visit again brought a smile. He couldn't help but think of how much Jonathan McCutchens would have approved of her choice.

Just as he would approve of Jack's right now.

Something in the way Jonathan had spoken about the town, about what he had discovered there, had kindled a spark of curiosity inside him. Jack needed a fresh start, and he hoped he might find it in a little town tucked in the shadow of Pikes Peak.