

SLAVE STEALER

Historical Novel
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by

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Part One

What You Don't Know, You Can't Tell

ONE

Lula was wearing her gold tooth. That alone was an omen. It wasn't exactly *her* tooth, at least not in the sense that she grew it or had it made, but nevertheless she owned it. It had originally belonged to Granny Grimes and Lula had frequently said it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. Thus, it seemed fitting for Granny to leave it to Lula when she passed. Lula wore the tooth only on special occasions.

Although she'd had no missing teeth, it was a simple matter to pull one out so she could replace it with her inheritance. That Granny's was slightly smaller and that it must be held in place with her tongue to show it off to best advantage was but a minor inconvenience, rather like suffering for the sake of art.

But, the fact that Lula was wearing her tooth on the day that Edward Shield arrived could not be considered insignificant. At the first sight of him, she bawled out, "Mrs. Royale! Mrs. Royale! Company's coming!"

Reyna Royale received the man in her seance room where her sacred objects would unsettle a non-believer. She had also mastered the ability to fake a trance when she wanted time to think before an answer. No one staged a more credible trance than Reyna, also known as Mamaloi, interpreter of voodoo sign.

She had arranged herself artfully on a golden yellow silk divan when he entered. Her mourning garb, layers of gray and black watered silk, shone gloriously against the yellow, and

the combination of the two colors rendered her creamy skin even fairer. She used no cosmetics other than a touch of olive oil across her eyebrows and lids to brighten and emphasize her large, feline eyes.

Not a day passed that Reyna did not offer thanks to Vodou for the inheritance of her flawless white skin, the product of her mother's café au lait lightened further by a master's dalliance. The trickery of passing as white, however, never softened her heart: in that chamber, her identity remained solidly, fiercely African. Her luscious beauty and white skin were simply tools that slavery had forced her to learn to use.

At the head of the divan lay a wicker basket, home of Mojo Hand, her ritual snake, a copperhead she was especially fond of. At the other end, a wooden cage held Caesar, a large black game cock who frequently jumped up as though in combat then settled down to crow loudly as though he'd won a furious battle. On the wall behind her, a collection of beaded and feathered conjure bags hung from brass hooks.

Leaving his servant on the porch, Shield followed Lula into the seance room, crossed over to touch Reyna's fingers in respectful greeting.

Although his look swept the room, he did not express the surprise she'd hoped for. He hardly glanced at Mojo Hand who'd raised his head to see who had come near his basket. Disappointed by her failure to startle him, Reyna was further disconcerted by his cool appraisal.

"Madam," he said. "It is my pleasure to meet you."

He was older than she'd guessed; probably close to sixty, but a handsome, vigorous-looking man all the same. His square cut jaw was determined, not arrogant or haughty. Sandy hair, shot through with silver, led to stylish mutton chop sideburns against his ruddy complexion.

He wore a tan suit with big brown buttons — and a glove on his right hand and carried the other. The gloves matched the buttons of his suit. Whether this was a personal fetish or some effete convention of etiquette she couldn't guess.

Shield's eyes were a dark, warm brown framed by long, curling lashes. The gentleness in his expression in that instant exchange seemed actually to leap across the room and caress her. She felt her cheeks redden for harboring such thoughts about a white man. *Velvet Eyes. I shall call you Velvet Eyes.*

He said, "I was referred to you by Reverend Thomas Randolph, a man you know."

Despite her effort to remain calm, her heart jumped in her chest.

"Yes," she said, leaning forward a tiny bit, fighting to keep her composure. "Yes, I am acquainted with the man."

He coughed behind the gloved hand. "Over the years we have done business together."

His scrutiny grew more intense, as though not believing this lovely young woman, sitting in this weird parlor, could have been the one recommended by Thomas Randolph. Furthermore, on the frontier, it was unusual to find a self-sufficient and beautiful young woman who was not a prostitute.

"And, he wanted especially for me to tell you how grateful he is for your help — "

Caesar leaped up in the air, flapped his wings, and threw his legs about as though his feet were equipped with the razor-sharp spurs of cockfights. Then, as quickly as he'd begun, he dropped back to the floor of his cage where he strutted back and forth, crowing madly.

Apparently unperturbed, Shield bent forward, searching her face. "I wonder," he said.

“Can I trust you?”

The direction of their conversation set off danger signals in her head. Working as she did with large numbers of people, rich and poor of every color, a voodooienne needed to be continually alert to trouble and all her warning senses rang as loud as fire bells. But, it was also true that Reyna had not become rich and powerful because she was faint of heart.

After a moment, she said, “You can trust me.”

He paused, as if pained and in deep thought, then blurted out, “I must say this plainly if we are to talk at all. I’m taking a chance in trusting you, but you must know that I also know that you’re not entirely innocent in the matter I want to discuss.”

Reyna looked away from him, a hardness set in the line of her mouth. She couldn't allow emotion to betray her.

“Your reputation for the work you’ve done with Reverend Randolph has reached the ears of important people in the east.” He paused as though embarrassed by his outburst, then went on, “Many persons are in prison at this moment for less than you've done, helping runaway slaves.”

His brief speech ricocheted around in Reyna’s head and the old, familiar panic returned. As clear as day she saw her mama beaten on the cross of the workmaker at Riverview Plantation; she felt again the suffering of the beatings she had received at the hand of Mistress Suzanne; and the pain and degradation Master Hamber inflicted upon her when he raped her and sold her away.

Still, she found the steel to force a calm if tentative voice to form a reply. “So? What do you want here? What do you want of me? To put me in prison?”

At that last, Mr. Shield looked stricken and fell to one knee, his great brown eyes

pleading. “Oh, no dear lady. Far from it. I commend what you've done. I'm here because of your success. I merely came here to bring you greetings from my friend. And, to ask for your help if I may.”

“You speak of trust,” she said. “Who are you?”

“I am Edward Shield. I have a home in Boston and a farm in Virginia, but I can't tell you where I've been staying in California.”

“Then, what is trust if you can't even tell me where you live?”

“I can't tell you for the same reason I'd never tell someone else about you. We're better off not knowing some things. What I don't know, no one can make me tell. If you become one of us, only you and I will know that.”

“One of us?” she asked. “One of who?”

Perspiration beaded his forehead and his jaw clenched. At last, he said in a guttural voice so low she could scarcely hear, “I want you to join in our operation in the Underground Railroad. What you've done here is amazing. You have an intuitive quality of leadership that many men never develop. You've . . . so many gifts to offer us. The large number of people who attend your ceremonies. I've thought about it for several months and your situation is perfect. I am a conductor, one who assists passengers on the line. I've been staying at a station up north. That's why I can't tell you where I've been living. Now, do you understand why I have great difficulty confessing to you? I made the mistake of trusting someone once before.”

Reyna's brow wrinkled with her confusion. “Pardon me, sir. I know of no railroad to California. What is this railroad you speak of?”

“Forgive me,” he said. “I didn't stop to think. Let me explain.”

When he'd finished, Reyna sat a long moment considering the wonder of what she'd heard. Her eyes moistened over at the kindness shown by the abolitionists toward hapless fellow creatures. Then, color drained from her face, she said, "You're right. We can be arrested even for having this conversation. A voodoo woman has many enemies and a white man who talks of helping slaves also has a price on his head. But, how do I know who you are, Mr. Shield? How do I know that you are who you say you are?"

Shield hung his head as though deeply ashamed. "I think this will tell you what you want to know."

Carefully removing his elegant brown suede glove, he held out the palm of his hand. A great white scar, etched by a branding iron on that tender skin, formed the initials 'SS,' the brand used to punish those who helped runaway slaves. By that crude tattoo, Edward Shield would be forever known as a Slave Stealer.

Had she believed in lucky coincidence, Reyna would have thought it pure chance, but the voodoo queen put no faith in accidents, lucky or not. Voodoo religion considered all matters, material and spiritual, to be so intertwined that there were no accidents. What she found this day was too perfect not to have been put there for her by the great father, Vodou.

The two weeks had left her little time for anything but seemingly endless preparations for her journey. As she went through the steps of delegating to her most intelligent and responsible employees the management of her affairs while she was away, she came to realize the extent of her business enterprises. No wonder her days were so full that her life had sped past like a

runaway race horse.

Although competent in their duties, her workers knew only to follow her orders. Now, she must teach them to operate without her direction. She must appoint and train lead cooks and managers for the three guest houses. No less awesome was the task of seeing to the staffs in her parlor houses. In addition she owned a public stable and two rental homes. And then there were her laundries where black people competed for jobs where the majority of the proprietors were Chinese. Reyna won the competition easily because of her firm business hand and the respect her voodoo leadership had among the workers.

At last she had packed a steamer trunk — in fact, packed and repacked it several times to be certain — with the clothes she thought she'd need back East in a variety of climates. It was in the City of Paris, the dry goods store named after the French ship that had been San Francisco's foremost supplier, that she stumbled upon the miracle.

In the Notions' Department, she found a Ladies' Secretaire, a small box covered in pale-blue padded leather. Measuring two feet long and eighteen inches wide, it was ten inches deep. Opening the tiny brass lock and lifting the lid, she saw that the inside was lined with a series of small pockets to hold stationery, envelopes, paper, and perhaps calling cards. A fitted mahogany writing top separated the lid from the lower compartment of the portable desk. In that area, a lady might keep inkwells, pen nibs, sand for blotting wet ink, and wax seals. Reyna could scarcely keep herself from shrieking out loud with delight. The beautiful and cleverly designed little lap desk would be excellent for her use as a portable altar, a cabinet of the so-called "mysteries" of her faith. A perfect companion for her travels.

The two compartments seemed to have been deliberately designed by the spirit loas to

hold the herbs and seeds she used in ritual: the upper lid could contain a supply of peppermint for purification, sage for wisdom, thyme for healing. In the lower half she'd hide her more sacred remedies: Adam and Eve root for love, juniper for sexual advance, and valerian root to summon devils to defeat enemies. She snatched up her new prize, hurried home, and began immediately to pack the herbs and magic potions she used in Voodoo.

Each of Reyna's Presentation Sisters, her acolytes in the faith, worked as maids in rich, white households. They scrubbed and dusted, emptied and washed the chamber pots, made the beds and ironed the laundry ten hours a day, six days a week, not much different from their sisters in slavery. For those who'd come up from laboring as field hands, Reyna herself trained them to domestic work and found them employment just as Marie Laveau had once done for her in New Orleans. When Reyna left "to visit family back East," she left a gaping hole in the life of many of her followers.

This evening, when Lula returned to her home, a makeshift dormitory for the Presentation Sisters in the hay loft of a barn in nearby Rancho San Miguel, she knew why she felt gloriously happy most days. Against skin as dark and shiny as a blackberry, her gold tooth shone in her smile like the new sun; and she spent her days humming the church hymns she knew from First Methodist Church of Christ, A.M.E.

The word *freedom* played on her lips and almost nothing dragged her down now that she was free. No matter how exhausted or sore her muscles from ten hours in Miz' Richmond's kitchen, the minute Lula opened the barn door and climbed the ladder leading up to their room, a

breath of air as sweet as new mown hay filled her lungs and she knew. After a long day in the white man's world, cleaning his house, minding his kids, emptying his slops, it came over her like a spell in the light of a new moon. Here, in the barn with her black sisters, all of them smelling of sweet grasses on the floor, Lula could take off her shoes, wiggle her bare feet in the straw and just feel free and black all over.

Sister Ruth and Sister Martha were there when her head cleared the ladder to the loft. Sister Ruth, a skinny, dark brown creature with pickaninny braids worked like the knobs of a prickly pear sticking out all over her head, looked over as Lula stepped off the ladder. Sister Martha didn't open her eyes, feigning a nap on her pallet in the straw.

"Hey. How ya doin' Lula?" Ruth asked.

"I fine, thank you, Sister. How 'bout yo'self?"

"We be fine . . . no, we ain't be fine. Both me and Martha got the blues over Mamaloi goin' away."

Martha lifted her head, looked over at Lula, "It just don't seem right, her leavin' us like this. Shoot!"

"Mamaloi got family back East. You know, you gotta go when it's family," Lula said.

"What family she got back there? You ever heard her mention some family back East?"

Their conversation was interrupted by the slam of the barn door below, then steps Lula recognized as those of Sophia crossing the barn, then mounting the ladder. In another moment, her round, brown face appeared. "What's goin' on?" she asked. "You three look like sick puppies."

"We just talkin' about where Mamaloi go? . . . an' how bad we feel."

“To be honest and fo’ true,” Lula said, “it’s just that life is so excitin’ with her aroun’ and so boring when she not. Now, she gone and she don’ say when she come back.”

Nodding her head, Sophia, put in, “Makes me mad, too. Her goin’ off with a white man like that.”

Martha sat up in bed, “It’s not the white man that I find ‘spicious, it’s that friend of his, that Indian fellow, Hawk. What she want with a no account Indian? White man ain’t funny for her, her being white an’ all herself.”

At that the Sisters Lula, Ruth, and Sophia chorused, “Girl! What you talkin’ about? Her bein’ white an’ all?”

“You some kind of dumb or what?”

“Whoever put that in your head?”

Sophia added a shrill, mocking laugh “I can’t believe you said that.”

“Well,” Martha said defensively. “She gotta be white. All her friends be white. And she be rich. Ain’t no white man gonna let a nigger be rich.”

“Get some logic in your brain, child.” Sophia said. “Where you think Mamaloi got the power, the power of Vodou. Where you think she got that?”

“Well . . .”

“You ever seen a white woman got that? Any ol’ raggedy-assed white woman who say she gots the power ain’t nothing but a common witch, an’ a crazy one at that.”

“Well . . . what about her color?”

“Lots of high yellow girls where she come from, down New Orleans way, they all white as milk. But mind this, the law say that if you got one drop of black blood, you be colored.”

Well . . .I don't know."

"I do an' I know because I just *feel* that she be colored. Don't you know it's more than looks and fancy manners? Don't you *feel* that way? Don't you *feel* that there's something differnt about her, differnt in the way she moves in her skin? It just *feel* like she's one of *us*." Sophia paused a moment, cocked her head back as though reflecting on the movements of her Voodoo Queen, then went on, "If'n I was her, I'd pass as white, too, 'specially if I had something to hide back where I come from. Like they was someone lookin' for me . . . like they was a certain master whose property done run away."

Martha bit her lower lip, pouting, said, "Well, I just don't know."

"Well, you just trust old Sophie. Believe on it." She thought a moment, then added, "'Sides all that, girl. Ain't a white girl alive can dance like Mamaloi."

TWO

The odor of fish and the squawk of seagulls pierced the gray winter morning as the *SS Egypt* made its way into Boston's India Wharf. Atop a debris box on the pier, two large gulls, wings arched in the "V" of combat, faced one another in a tug of war over a rope of entrails from an animal of undetermined species. Thirty yards away, a long line of drays had stopped, delayed by a wagon whose mangy brown nag refused to move. Curses in Italian, Greek, German, French, and thick-tongued Gaelic scorched the air like a crowd scene in a Verdi opera. As a third generation Bostonian, Shield, who had lived in this city most of his sixty years, gave scant attention to the pandemonium below.

The purser's manifest for Suite 2B indicated it belonged to Mr. Edward Shield who was returning home after a business trip of three months' duration. Shield was accompanied by his ward, Miss Reyna Shield, a young woman who it was said, had been raised by nuns at the Ursuline Convent in New Orleans. With them was his manservant, King Hawk, a Natick Indian.

Gripping the railing with his strong right hand, he put a protective arm around his "ward." His large brown eyes misted over and a sigh escaped him. All that mattered was the young woman he sheltered in the crook of his left arm. He could not remember a time when he'd been happier.

Bending toward her ear, he muttered, "You have given me the family I've wanted for a long time. My wife and child died in childbirth in '43, and then my parents passed on . . . in the

influenza epidemic of '45 . . . I was nearly twice your age . . . I've yearned for a family all those years and here you are, a full grown . . . er, ahem . . . niece."

Shield considered Reyna no more than a girl. Her intelligence and organizational ability, the qualities that had brought him to recruit her for the underground, were as nothing alongside his delight in her childlike wonder as she explored a world she'd never imagined.

By nature a quiet man and somewhat formal, he had been singularly driven all his life by his compassion for others. He did not examine the source of his compulsive need for philanthropy, he simply knew that his greatest rewards came from helping less fortunate people. In that, he found their meeting prophetic because they had each appeared at the exact moment they were ready for one another: she to be cared for and he to do the caring.

It was a measure of his abiding sense of morality that Shield never once considered the beautiful young woman as anything other than apprentice and partner in his underground railroad work. As Reyna was twenty-eight and he was thirty years her senior, he'd have been outraged by the suggestion that their relationship could be other than business and the affection due a child. He was sometimes embarrassed when he caught a raised eyebrow on the face of a man he was introducing to this "niece," but he dismissed the attitude as that of a cad. When he thought of Reyna, he thought of her as a young relative in his care; hence the notion of intimacy was as repugnant as incest.

While Shield had simply wanted to use her many businesses in San Francisco as stations for the railroad, he began to see that it had been foolish of him to think that the powerful Voodoo Queen could be a mere cog in someone else's wheel. Once she agreed to become a part of the railroad, she'd insisted upon traveling the line to know more about its operation. Reluctantly, he

had consented to show her that part and those stations of the underground railroad where he was a conductor. In private moments, he secretly admitted to himself, too, that he feared the mysterious power of the voodoo ritual. Was it superstition, or was it real? Could such things touch white people? Him?

Leaning against his arm, Miss Reyna Shield seemed as different from Mrs. Reyna Royale as it was possible to imagine, a transformation that had come about in eight short weeks. Gone was the rice powder and paint, the sultry throb of the cult, the steel-hard edge of Mamaloi. Gone was the powerful businesswoman in widow's weeds at the heart of the new frontier. Now, her complexion was that of a lovely peach, rose and dark cream, and her pouting, full lips were like the inner flesh of ripe plums. Her life before this new undertaking had taught her to survive as a slave, then as a voodooienne, then as a beautiful woman in a rough mining camp — all of this by means of artifice, pretense, and an ability to burrow and hide deep within her own mind to a place no master or foe could reach.

This journey had been relatively uneventful for Shield, but not a single day passed without astonishing experiences for her. From San Francisco they had traveled by riverboat to Sacramento where they boarded a Wells Fargo coach for the trip over the Sierras and as far as the Mormon settlement in Utah. From there, they went by horseback to Cape Girardeau, Missouri, to connect with paddle wheel vessels for the trip up the Mississippi River to the Great Lakes where they met the *SS Egypt*.

For all Reyna's power in the secret religion and her business acumen, every day of the

journey left her speechless. She'd lived among miners for five years, but had never seen the mountains honeycombed with the rabbit holes they dug in search of their fortunes. Now she could appreciate their courage and stamina. The vastness of the territories of Nevada and Utah with their limitless herds of buffalo spread out to the horizon took her breath away. She was strangely moved by the silent files of ferocious-looking Indian warriors who passed at a distance.

Their stop at the first railroad station, Cincinnati, had been to outfit her as an urbane young lady. In a way she hadn't expected, Reyna's new wardrobe broadcast her new life. Her stylish gowns required eight petticoats filled with six pounds of horsehair to maintain their hourglass shape. When she protested the weight and heat of them, the dressmaker assured her that twice as many were necessary for fashionable ladies in Paris and New York. Reyna had been further astounded the first time she tried on a hat. The enormous silk and lace creations sat uneasily on the head of one accustomed to a simple bonnet and widow's veil.

While her clothes were being made, they'd stayed in a station run by a certain Mr. Williams. There in Cincinnati, Queen City of the West, where 40,000 people gathered on rolling hills nestled between three rivers, her true education had begun. This first "depot" was but one of dozens spaced some thirty miles apart on the way north. There, too, she had met her first white man whose sole motivation for helping slaves escape was mercenary. Completely without deceit in the matter, Williams accepted the dangers of the underground only so long as Shield made regular payments. In some wryly distorted way, his indifferent manner worked to the advantage of the railroad because he was always cautious, never influenced by emotions that led to taking dangerous chances.

Further, Williams' suspicions, his overt questions and cocked eyebrow, led Reyna and

Shield to bolster the invention of her as his ward. Her father, Mr. Shield's younger brother, they said, had been aboard a sailing ship that sank off the coast of Florida. Now an orphan, Reyna was Shield's niece and legally his ward. The story was so convincing that if Williams had any doubts, they focused upon his curiosity about her peculiar eyes. The fact that one could be born with golden eyes fascinated him beyond telling.

Reyna fell in love with the station on Drummond Island. The fishermen accepted the windblown island as their home because of its natural harbor and its proximity to the living they wrested from the water. The savage look of the sailors and the tales they told, the heavy odor of fish oil clouding the air, the hanging nets drying on the docks at Whitby Bay, and the cleaning, skinning, and butchery of a dozen species fresh caught for the tables of all the northern states, all of it excited a chord deep in Reyna's breast. There, too, Reyna noted that the island wrenched heartsick sighs from the servant, Hawk, the ex-whaling man.

The station at Drummond was operated by an old woman known to them only as Grandma. Worsening arthritis and a succession of heart attacks had slowed her down and doubled her over a little, but her spirit soared as strong as ever in her weakened body. Grandma owned the general store, a big, peak-roofed, weather-beaten barn of a building that guarded the entrance to the town. There, carefully concealed brass pulls lifted a set of trap doors into the cellar where Grandma stored her collection of homemade wines and the human cargo of the station. Grandma lived across the road in a two story stone house that was painted with the gray-green lichen of wet wind and rain.

When it was time to leave, Reyna took the old woman's two hands in hers and spent several minutes staring into her eyes. At last, the lump in her throat had eased enough for her to

mumble, “Thank you, Grandma. I won’t forget your kindness and we’ll meet again by and by.” Then, she impulsively hugged the frail old body so hard she could feel the ancient heart beat stiff against her ribs.

Entering Boston Harbor, Reyna wore a fashionable gown of rose-colored wool. Leg of mutton sleeves began at her lace collar and fell to her wrists where they met dainty, crocheted mittens. An ankle length maroon cape protected her from sharp winds. Her face was hardly visible beneath an enormous hat piled high with flowers and lace. The point of her wispy parasol touched the tiny toe of her high-heeled rose slippers.

A sudden gust of wind raked the deck of the *SS Egypt* and sent Reyna’s hand to her hat. Even now, her mind reeled at her own audacity — to leave San Francisco and the security she’d built there — to join a lawless group of abolitionists assisting runaway slaves. True, Shield offered her protection, but she had a past, a slavery past, to conceal. If caught, he would go to prison; she would return to slavery, a slavery that included the brand “R” on her cheek for “runaway,” and the harsh treatment of a master who dared to buy such chattel.

There was something else, something incomprehensible and frightening about what she was about to do. She’d toiled for five years to establish her successful and comfortable refuge in San Francisco. What on earth had possessed her to gamble everything? Although the admission that she had no choice terrified her, it was true. The beatings, the rape, the indecencies she herself had suffered and those she’d witnessed upon her people had hardened something deep inside her, a force so strong it could never be denied. Now, protected by the skin, the clothes, and

the manners of a white woman, that thing inside lay coiled like her talisman serpent, ever ready to strike a blow for her people still in chains. She was prepared to risk it all in that cause.

She gasped at the sight of India Wharf when their ship banged to rest against the fenders of the dock. Not in her headiest fantasy had Reyna imagined such things could exist; neither buildings of such size nor such throngs of people.

On the dock below, sailors scurried about hauling and securing the ship's lines and lowering the gangplank for passengers' debarkation. India Wharf, at the foot of Broad Street, an enormous pier of three and four story granite buildings stretched out as far as she could see. The buildings, the transverse streets, the dozens of ships at dock, boiled like a cauldron with stevedores, warehousemen, and bustling merchants directing the storage and consignment of cargo. Bully boys carrying bags, boxes and chests on their backs, hurried here and there as if the loads were feathers. Riders on horseback, carriages, wagons and drays, a restless sea of humanity roiled between the ships and buildings. At the far end of the wharf, still more activity surrounded the customs house, a massive, granite Doric temple.

The boatswain piped the signal for passengers to disembark and the animated travelers pointed out luggage, then scrambled after baggage carriers. Reyna followed Hawk with their bags down the steep, bouncy gangplank.

A row of sleek Victoria's, open-topped, four-wheel carriages for hire, waited at one side of the gangplank. Drivers in black silk top hats and coats matching the plum-colored cushions of their coaches nonchalantly eyed prospective customers. Hawk unceremoniously tossed their bags onto the floor of a cab and held the door for them before climbing up to the buckboard.

“Louisberg. Number Ten Louisburg Square,” Shield ordered regally.

Hiking up to the high seat behind the horse, the driver drew a thin, black buggy whip from a fitted leather holster on the dashboard and flicked the flanks of the chestnut mare.

As they wheeled across town, up Broad Street, down Kings to Walnut, then to Beacon Street past the Commons, then to Mount Vernon Street, she'd have liked to question Shield, but perversely pretending to be blasé, she denied herself the pleasure of his interpretation of what she saw. It seemed that all of Boston's 90,000 citizens were out on the streets, walking, riding. The city seethed with the energy of its citizens. Outside the United States Hotel, they inched their way through a sea of carriages so dense they moved only at a snail's pace. Shield merely grunted at her excitement with the melee.

Despite the side-by-side crowding of three story brick houses, so different from the open space of Drummond, Reyna gasped at the loveliness of Louisburg Square as soon as they turned off. Of bright, red brick, undarkened by the smoke of the factories beginning to invade the city, the houses were prettily trimmed with federal style porches and white-painted window sashes. A small wrought-iron fence enclosed a grassy park in the middle of the street and a fanciful iron horse trough on a pedestal was duplicated in miniature for neighborhood dogs. Just to the left of the door of the third house on the street, polished brass numerals proclaimed, "Number Ten."

When the maid answered, Reyna nearly leaped from her skin. The servant wore a black bombazine domestic's costume with a snowy lace apron and pelerine. A wisp of lacy ruffle perched precariously in her woolly hair. Blacker than black, her skin was midnight blue. Thick-lipped, squash-nosed, and bulging-eyed; and an African's mounded, high-hipped rump protruded further behind than her bosom in front. Reyna gaped as at a ghost.

After three months traveling as a white woman among white people, almost unrelieved

by contact with blacks, Reyna found herself going weak in the knees. She wanted to rush forward and hug her, woman to woman, black to black for the solid feeling of community such action engendered.

She stifled the urge. Instead, following a butler with her luggage into the house, she avoided the maid's eyes.

THREE

Reyna awoke the next morning feeling as low as a coffle of slaves. Her head hurt, her muscles cramped, and her mind seemed unable to focus. Her heart felt ripped out of her chest, as it had following the death of her murdered friend in New Orleans. To make matters worse, she knew that the problem behind her misery came from the life she led.

In assuming the guise of a white widow, she had cut herself off from more than work-related contacts with black people. Walking a tightrope between the two worlds, black and white, she belonged to neither. Although she was comforted by her voodoo rituals, her relationships with blacks could never be public. She could never be white, nor could she return to the arms of her black community. Coming to Shield's house as a white woman had opened a wound she had no way to heal.

She told herself she passed as white in order to help her race, but that was only lately and it was only partially true. The plain fact was that passing as white had enabled her to escape from slavery. The nub of the matter lay in a place deep inside herself where she dared not go. She could trust no one, black or white. Mama. Mistress Suzanne. Master Hamber. The Sisters of the Ursulines. Marie Laveau. Robert MacGill. Black and white, they had all betrayed her. And when she sold her black heritage for a white face, she accepted a debt of guilt she could never expiate.

Eyes scratchy with sleeplessness, she came down to breakfast early and sat primly in the morning room waiting for him. Underneath her steadied poise, her mind boiled with misgivings. How could she have been so stupid as to make this trip without careful investigation? What did she *really* know of Mr. Edward Shield? Was his seeming affection a masquerade for some ulterior motive? What had she seen in the black face of the maid, Florette, yesterday? Would she be friend or foe? Now, here she was in a world of strangers without a single friend or ally.

Although it was cold outside and snow lay in drifts against the shrubs of the side yard, a clear winter sun warmed the steeple-ceilinged conservatory glass and speckled her pale blue gown with rainbow reflections. Just within her vision, a brilliantly-colored bluebird hopped across the icy slick on the fountain and bullied a pair of sparrows away from a juniper bush he claimed as his. To complete the chain, a sleek, gray tomcat hunkered down in the pounce position to eye the bluebird. The unfolding drama of cat and bird distracted Reyna for a moment from her own dilemma.

Shield rushed in, crossed over to her, kissed the top of her head, and greeted her heartily. “Good morning, child. I trust you slept soundly.” Nothing about him indicated anything amiss.

Reyna, guarding against the slightest tremor in her voice, said, “Yes, Mr. Shield, I did. My room is quite comfortable, thank you.”

Florette brought their tea and toast and treated Reyna to the same look she’d give a cockroach in the kitchen. Each time the maid’s eyes flashed in her direction, Reyna felt demeaned. Still, reaching back to a lesson she had learned as a maid for a sadistic mistress, she put herself in that place in her mind where she could not be hurt. Moreover, she also knew she had the power to take revenge when the time was right. Mistress Florette would be wise to watch

her step.

At last, after she'd sipped at her tea and tasted the toast, she stood. "I'm sorry, but I'm feeling peaked and feel that I must rest."

Shield leaned toward her, concern written on his face. "Are you unwell? Should I summon a physician?"

"No, thank you. It's nothing serious. Perhaps only a letdown after the voyage."

"Are you certain?"

Once more, his courtly airs of concern had begun to put her at ease. If it indeed were pretext, he was a master of the art. *But, no*, she said to herself. *I dare not drop my guard. Not ever.* She said aloud, "Yes, I'm certain. Please don't worry about me."

As she reached the door, he called out, "Oh, I'd nearly forgotten, Reyna. We're invited for dinner at the home of a potential business associate. They live in an impressive new development called Pemberton Square. Captain James Gardner is a retired sea captain, now a lawyer, but are you sure that you're well enough to go? I could easily set another time."

"That's not necessary. I'm sure I'll be well enough to go."

"Ah, well, then, you go along and rest. I'll meet you in the drawing room at six o'clock."

That night Shield had hired a hansom cab outfitted with sleigh runners and a driver high in the box at the rear. Freezing temperatures made the hard packed snow and ice of the roadway perfect for sleigh riding. After her emotional turmoil of the last twenty-four hours, Reyna gratefully seized the opportunity to be away from the house and in the company of others.

Perhaps, she thought, I've been too close to Shield and Hawk as my only companions of the past three months. I probably just need a change.

The coachman followed the favored route for sleigh-riding lovers, out Beacon Street, over Mill Dam, and onto Bright Road. Strings of diamond ice clung to the frozen branches of trees and shrubs along the way. The hollow clop of horses' hooves, the brassy tinkle of sleigh bells and the creak of harnesses punctuated the hilarity of mischievous boys stealing rides on the rear runners of passing carriages. She kept her distance as best she could for there was only a single robe for them to share in the cab.

At Pemberton Square, a Negro maid answered the door. Reyna was not taken aback, but the maid blocked the door, apparently dumbfounded by the sight of them.

"Good evening," she said, distantly. She had seemed about to say something more but restrained herself. *A most inhospitable response from a clumsy girl*, Reyna thought. *If she were my employee she'd be gone in half an hour.*

An instant later, Captain James Gardner appeared behind the maid.

A long-faced man of fifty, Gardner's lifeless gray eyes never settled on hers. His longish gray hair straggled about his collar and his cheeks had an unhealthy, sick-bed pallor. There was about him, too, an evasive quality that made her uneasy. He kept his lips pursed above his pointy chin.

"Halloo," he said. "You must be Shield. Yes. And this must be your lovely niece. Halloo, Mistress Shield. Welcome to this house."

As quickly as he had appeared, Gardner whirled on his heel, took Reyna's hand to lead her to the burgundy-draped dining room where servants had laid out what looked like a ton of

polished silver on an enormous table and sideboard. He directed Reyna and Shield to places set opposite one another while he took the master's chair facing that of his wife at the other end. Reyna shifted nervously, not sure how to behave. *What was wanted after so begrudging an introduction? Furthermore, the sullen silence among strangers was also ominous.* Beyond the arms of a massive silver candelabra Shield seemed no less uncomfortable. The candles twinkled in his soft, velvet eyes and reflected on his cheeks still ruddy with cold.

Phoebe Gardner was not at all the matron Reyna had expected to meet. Rather, she seemed to be in her early thirties and exuded the warmth her husband lacked. She had brilliant blue eyes that sparkled above a merry smile so constant it seemed to be sculpted. This night, in a wine-red velvet hostess gown, she rose at her end of the long table, held out her hand in greeting, said ceremoniously, "We are pleased to have you here, Mr. Shield. Mistress Shield, I've looked forward to meeting you." *How could she say that? Reyna wondered. This dinner party had been so latently planned: how could the woman know anything at all about me?*

"I am most pleased to be here," Shield murmured, seeming mesmerized by the mass of tapers in the candelabra. "Thank you for this."

Phoebe rescued the awkwardness by addressing Reyna. "I hear you're new to Boston, Mistress Shield. Where are you from?"

"New Orleans."

She leaned forward. "New Orleans! I've never been there, but I understand it's a very colorful city. Your family lived there?"

Reyna answered, reciting their practiced lie. "No, my parents were from Hartford. Mr. Shield is my uncle, my father's brother. When my parents passed on, their solicitor enrolled me

in school at the Convent of the Ursuline Sisters in New Orleans.”

Phoebe’s face brightened, her dazzling smile broadened. “Oh! How interesting! The Ursuline Convent here in Boston was the first Catholic order in the United States.”

All at once, without warning, Gardner interrupted her. “Phoebe, don’t go into that for pity’s sake.”

At his rebuke, the eternal smile left his wife’s face. “But it’s true, James!”

He said, “It’s also true that the Protestants burned the convent to the ground.”

“Oh, that’s terrible!” Reyna cried out. “Why did they do that?”

“Because the new Americans hated papists. And . . .” He paused as though hesitating to say the words. “And, because the nuns were teaching Indian children to read.”

The room went silent. Reyna sat still with her head at her breast, eyes distant, imagining what it must have been like for the innocent women to be martyred like their founder, Saint Ursula. She remembered all too well, a similar story of the courageous Ursulines in New Orleans. Her recall of the Ursulines, a flickering thing at best, was still enough to remind her that the Ursulines had given her up to slave catchers.

“How very awful,” she said distantly.

Gardner turned to Shield. “As I understand it,” he said, suddenly changing the subject, “you’ve come about a matter of shipping.”

A puzzled look wiped across Shield’s face. “Shipping?” he repeated. “Shipping?”

“Yes, several shipments throughout the year.” Gardner’s thin, pursed lips lingered over the words. For some reason she could not figure out, the sea-captain attorney never once looked his guest in the eye.

Shield recovered from his confusion, brightened, and said, “Oh, yes, shipping. I guess you could call me a farmer. I have a house here, but I spend most of my time at the farm. Tobacco. Charles Town, Virginia. We’ve just begun to use Boston Harbor. Roads are too bad to travel up the coast.” Shield spoke freely and his revelations clarified some of her doubts but still a smell of something false tainted his discussion.

At that a twisted smile broke out on the faces of both Gardners. Her mind racing rapidly for solutions, Reyna gasped, *Rum? Smuggling? Were they criminals?*

Their talk mystified Reyna. Starved for information about Shield, she hung on his every word, yet she sensed that their conversation masked something nefarious. The flow of questioning and answering seemed to be a charade — no one listened to the others. Nor did the three study each other as strangers do. She could not discern whether they were bored or mildly antagonistic.

At last the ordeal was finished. They stood simultaneously by unspoken agreement and exchanged good byes. In that brief moment, Reyna had the impression that the three who had appeared indifferent at the table nodded meaningfully, as if acknowledging a secret. Before she could think, Captain Gardner embraced her and said over her shoulder. “This is just fine. I’m glad you could come here, Mistress Shield. You’ll always be welcome. Perhaps a special companion for Phoebe.”

Under the fur robe in the cab, Shield sat stiff and straight. His shoulder touched hers only when the sleigh turned corners.

At last, breaking away from her deep thoughts, Reyna said, “They seem like good people.”

He said, “Gardner’s company has been recommended as completely trustworthy, but I wanted to size him up before I sent him business.”

After a long pause, he stammered, “I’m not accustomed to talking about my feelings, Reyna. But I must talk to you now about feelings I have. I sense that you’ve been hurt some time in the past. I don’t know where or when, but I know people can be quite cruel and I fear that someone has been so to you. It’s none of my business, but I’d like to protect you from that.”

“I have enjoyed your company, too, sir.”

“You have made me happier in the past two months than I have been in many years.”

“I also . . .”

“No, please. Allow me to finish. When my wife died . . . that was thirteen years ago . . . I thought I would never have a family. Then I met you, child.”

“I’m not a child,” she said sharply, stirring under the robe.

He found her hand and held it until her tension dissipated. “Please hear me out. I will soon be sixty. You may not think of yourself as a child, but you’re closer to the age my daughter would have been had she lived than you are to me.”

They rode the rest of the way to Number Ten Louisburg Square in a deep silence that she dared not break. A part of Reyna felt enraged to be considered a child after all she’d accomplished. Yet, another part yearned for the warm feeling of security and protection he claimed to offer. But, dinner with the Gardners convinced her that there was much to learn about Mr. Edward Shield before she could trust him.

