

HEART'S GAMBIT



J. D. MYALL


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PART ONE

THE PRELUDE



CHAPTER ZERO

Grand Belle Island, 1860

Death smells like sugar and dirt. When a hard Louisiana rain mingles with a lightning strike in the cane fields, the scent chokes the plantation, a bittersweet reminder that the only way out of here is burial in shallow ground.

No one wastes a marble crypt on people like us.

Fog swirls through weeping willows and rolls low in the fields, and a full moon glares, teasing me with its freedom in the starry night sky.

Ahead, a haze bends into the form of a woman, gliding through the grass separating the big house from the field. Missus Sabine is out of bed.

I freeze and consider running back inside the big house, but that will make me look guilty. I'm not supposed to be out at this time of night, and she's already seen me. I fight the tremble rumbling through my body. My mind turns over the lie I must tell.

She slowly walks closer. Her heels stabbing the dirt. A specter like death himself closing in. I wonder who's getting whipped tonight, who has angered her and yanked her away from her beauty rest.

The broad expanses of cane fields merge with the trees of the distant wood. She ignores the slave quarters, glancing ahead to her two-story plantation home.

My heart races. My fingers grip my bag as I tuck it behind me. Guarding my plan and all I own. She'll demand to know why I'm not asleep in my attic room or preparing her breakfast for tomorrow morning. I hold my breath.

Sabine's skin blends with her white nightdress. Her hair looks like flames tied up in a bird's nest of a bun. Her sharp angular features and icy blue eyes are as hard and jagged as the two stone chimneys rising above the house. She belongs here.

But I won't stay on this island and be worked into the grave. I'll take my chances with the handmade boat hidden on the other side of the wood. I'm not sure if freedom or anything else exists beyond the bayou, but I'm willing to die to find out.

Sabine nears the porch stairs now. *Please don't let her notice my bag*, I think. She's more brutal than the overseer, laying down fury with her whip and tongue. Her eyes, laced with crow's-feet, find me. "Venus," she shouts, nearing the porch. "It's dangerous to be out at this hour."

You're out. That's the danger. I bow, then tuck a curl under my scarf, knowing the sight of it will cause her to slap me. She hates everything about me. My skin. My eyes. Every part of me that reminds her of the Master. My father. Her husband. I lower my eyes and fixate on the freckles of blood scattered across the columns of the big house. Or "the big evil" as we call it. I wish my mama was still here. She'd know the best way to handle Sabine. She knew how to tuck her fear away in times like these, but my hands shake.

"Did you hear me, girl?" Sabine says.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm heading round to the cookhouse now." I knit my fingers and thank God the kitchen is at the back of the house, that you can reach it from outside. "Mabel wanted me to sleep there with her so we could get an early start on breakfast. She's making something that tastes real good, and it's gonna take hours."

"Oh, well, get to it."

My muscles tense as I prepare to get as far away from her as possible.

Sabine catches sight of my ragged little bag. Realization lights her face. "What are you up to, Venus Davenport?"

Goose bumps rise on my arms. My mind flashes to images of others starved till their bones showed for disobeying her. I imagine the overseer's cowhide whip ripping my flesh for trying to run away. A lie comes quickly. "Picked some herbs for Mabel, ma'am. Got some jars in here so she can season breakfast too."

"Mmmm." She looks at me with suspicion. "Are you thick in the head, or do you think I am?"

"Huh?"

Titus comes out of one of the slave cabins in the distance. I still, my pulse racing, *He's here!* But late as ever, I hope she doesn't look back. I want to signal him to go inside until she's gone. But I'm scared she'll notice.

At least the sight of him distracts me from my fear. Even in ragged tan cotton pants, his dark skin is intoxicating in the silvery glow of the moon. He holds a cloth bag of his own. He waves at me, stepping forward. He notices Missus Sabine. He freezes, but his hands don't seem to shake like mine do.

She dismisses me with a wave and doesn't notice Titus. "You can't cook outside of the kitchen, girl. Go on now."

"Yes, Missus," I reply, relieved she believed me. I tug at my plain cotton dress and head down the porch steps toward the back of the house. I hear the creaky front door slam behind Sabine as she steps inside. I walk slow, watching through the windows as she makes her way through the house, ensuring she's in for the night. I spot her figure passing the parlor window. The sight of the checkerboard floor sends a chill up my spine. The room of no return. Her punishment room. Misbehaving slaves enter but never leave. Its blue walls spill over with gaudy gold frames between the matching stone columns that hold blue-flamed candles. Statues of enslaved children line the edges of the room, their stone bodies white as salt but their features frozen in perpetual horror, vacant eyes swollen with frozen tears, mouths yanked open, as if recoiling from evil. Their fear is as great as mine. But I push forward because Titus and I have plans tonight.

When I am sure she's not coming after me, I ease back around to the front of the house.

Titus meets me by the stairs.

“Let’s go,” I whisper.

Under the full moon, we hurry down the grimy path beside the field, clutching our faith and our cloth bags that hold rice and what little else we own.

My heart beats so hard it’s all I can hear as I run. The lush flowery trees become a blur. My lips move in silent prayer.

First the forest. Then the shoreline. The hidden boat. And finally, onto an ocean of possibility.

Fog rushes through the weeping willows. Pink petals rain down on us like blood. As we dash, the haze melts into the form of a woman racing behind us. Missus Sabine.

“Never run. Stay in the big house,” Mama had told me before she and my older brother were sold off. Her voice drums through me now. I wish I had listened. “Getting caught would be worse than just up and dying,” Mama had warned. The memory of her worried face flickers through my head. Her warnings echo. *The overseer’s whip will be unforgiving. The sounds of the hounds will ring in your ears. Bloody ribbons of flesh ripped from your back or worse . . . that room.* “Let the clock run down. The Master and Missus don’t have no children. When they die, that’s it,” she’d claimed. “You’ll be all that’s left of that man on this godforsaken earth. That ought to count for something.” I’d wanted to believe her, to just bide my time, but I couldn’t stay away from Titus Baldwin. And I couldn’t say no when he asked me to run before they sold him away from me. His bright smile soothed the fear inside me. For the first time since they’d taken Mama and my big brother, I found someone to love—someone who valued me. Someone who dulled the pain all around and made me wonder what freedom might feel like. Even when freedom was a drink neither of us had tasted.

Master bought Titus and his little sisters three years ago from a plantation in North Carolina. At the time he and I were both fourteen. He’d arrived in a carriage, playing his fiddle as his little sisters giggled and clapped, unaware that they were arriving in hell. I hadn’t stopped thinking about his dark, haunting eyes since. I loved the way he adored his sisters. The way he always made them smile. That day, his shirt was as brown as the tree trunks

I'm now running through. My heart had rushed; my hands had longed to hold his. Mama had called him "uppy." She'd said, "A boy with a smile that pretty can't be trusted." But she didn't trust any man. Not after the Master. My father. The man she'd had to stomach for decades. Of course, he didn't deserve trust. He let his wife torment Mama for things beyond her control.

My mind flashes to Mama screaming and flailing, her hair wild, as white men brutally dragged her away. She'd shouted to me, "Don't let that Devil woman break you!" I cried so many tears, my heart stuck and stumbling because Mama's mind hadn't been right in years. But Master wouldn't let Missus Sabine kill her. He called what happened to my mama a mercy. I called it evil. Mama had blamed her troubles on the mistress and her dark magic, but no one believed her. My chest tightens thinking of the heart-break of being forced to have a child with a man who owned you. Being forced to serve his even crueler wife.

"Hurry, Titus!" I shout. We run faster.

I look over my shoulder. Sabine is so close that I can make out her ghostly nightdress. I speed up. We need to get through the forest and down the hill to the boat that will carry us to freedom.

Tired. Panting. Sprinting.

The forest's witch grass slaps me, leaving red marks on my legs as I dart through it. Nature's punishment for the foolish risk I've taken to be with Titus.

To love him.

My mind flashes to the songs we sang, the all-night talks and stolen moments we'd shared, to how he is the first boy I've ever kissed. Was it worth it? The word *yes* echoes inside me. A life away from the plantation with my love.

I curse the slashing grass and the branches under my feet for their loud crunching sounds.

Titus grabs my hand, pulling me forward faster. We race down the hill. I risk another quick glance over my shoulder. A silhouette of movement flickers between the trees.

The figure behind us is raising a gun.

A bullet hits a tree branch above. The limb crashes down, blocking my

path and narrowly missing my head. We quickly scramble left, my bare feet slipping on mud and leaves with each movement. I steady myself, placing a palm against a tree trunk. Panic floods me. My stomach threatens to empty itself.

Titus yanks me again, nearly dragging me off-balance. We dash through the bushes into a clearing.

The full moon casts its silver light, illuminating the bayou and its peculiar black sand. Stars blink out a message of hope above the shore. Just ahead, across from the dock, rises the mountain of branches that hide the boat Titus made us painstakingly, piece by piece.

I smile at him. My thundering heart slows a beat. We're going to survive. We have to.

I quickly toss branches from the massive pile, trying to free the boat. I survey the sparkling beach, which ends at a ragged, rocky cliff. The dock, a frayed road to the unknown, juts into the water. A dry road to hope. Stones, dark sand, and sharp branches that will not stop me.

“Hurry!” I say. We need to be in the water and well on our way.

I toss more debris, trying to uncover the boat.

“Don’t move.” It isn’t Sabine’s voice.

It’s Titus’s.

I turn.

He stands, trembling. The gun in his hand is pointed squarely between my eyes. My mouth falls open, and my arm goes limp. I don’t understand what’s happening.

Tears well in my eyes, matching the ones spilling from his. “What—Titus, please . . .”

His hands shake. “I—I don’t want to hurt you,” he sobs.

“What are you doing? Let’s go. Let’s get out of here!”

“I can’t let you. Sabine—you don’t know what she’ll do if I let you go.”

“I love you,” I plead. “This is our chance.”

Sabine’s laugh echoes from the trees. I tremble from the bones out.

The hair on my arms spikes to attention. My knees quake as sweat stings my eyes. I feel the cold metal of her rifle at the back of my head.

“Good job, boy,” Sabine says. “Now pull the trigger.”

"I can't," he replies.

"Don't you want freedom for your sisters? Your entire bloodline?" She sets her gun on my shoulder, pointing straight at him.

"Yes. But—"

"No buts. Freedom comes at a cost."

I grit my teeth. "Let us go, Missus. We don't want no trouble. Please. You don't need me."

Sabine clucks her tongue. "Why should you get to leave Grand Belle Island?" Sabine moves in front of me. Rifle held high. She curls her lips into a smile.

"Let us go. We're in love," I say.

She laughs. "You think love exists? You think there's any possibility for love in this place, this time?"

My stomach tightens. Words lodge in my throat. The image of freedom slowly disintegrates in my mind, replaced by the ever-present reality of iron chains.

"We're more alike than you might think. I didn't get a choice either, you know? I was sold here." She gazes around at the bayou. "Right from under my mother's nose to a rich planter ten years my senior. Forced to carry and bury ten children." She sweeps a curl from my forehead. "And now, here you are . . . the only thing of my husband's that's survived besides me." Her eyes gaze off in the distance, toward where a garden of crypts sit, full of her dead unborn children.

"That—that's not my fault, I—" I stammer.

"I suppose not. I suppose this is what life has dealt. This is the game to be played." She smiles so wide I can almost count all of her rotten teeth. "But I will win. The old gods of the Haguenau wood blessed me with great power long before I arrived here." She jams the rifle deeper into my chest, then looks at Titus. "Now, boy, a wise one casts away their doubts when they have nothing to lose."

I stare at Titus, desperate to meet his gaze.

She steadies her gun. "Kill her, and I'll give you and every person who shares your blood the divine gift I promised you. True freedom from Grand Belle Island, from time itself. There are versions of this world to come that

will be beyond what you can dream of . . . where there are no chains, no plantations for either of us."

Sweat pours down his face. I search his eyes for the boy I love, the boy I thought I knew.

"Titus, what is this?" I swallow down angry tears.

"Shut up, girl," Sabine warns with another shove of her rifle. "Dark gifts require the ultimate sacrifice, Titus."

"Let Venus go." His voice shakes.

"Come on now." Sabine laughs. "She's sick. She'll be dead soon enough anyway."

"Don't listen to her, Titus!" I cry out, the worry, the anger, the sadness breaking loose. "I love you. Please!" I stammer through clattering teeth. "She's lying! I'm fine."

"I saw you coughing blood last night," Titus says, the warmth in his voice gone. He sounds like a stranger.

"You love me. We're supposed to be together." Hot tears pour down my cheeks. I can't die now. Seventeen years isn't enough. "Please."

Titus spits, cursing, and lowers his gun a little. "You've been tired."

"Everybody's tired here!" I shout. "The work never stops. You know that. How can you trust her?" I point at him. "Shoot her! For what she's done to all of us!"

He shakes his head. "You think my sisters would live if I did that?"

"You promised we'd be free. Be married!"

"I'm sorry." Titus's hands shake. "I have to keep my sisters safe. I told my papa I would do whatever it took."

The noise of the bayou fades as a shot rings out. No more bleating frogs and buzzing cicadas. No more wind whipping through the sleepy trees. With wide eyes, I look down at my belly. A red stain blooms, darkening my dress. I grip my stomach, and crimson streams through my fingers, causing pressure as it starts to burn. The taste of betrayal coats my tongue as hot pain sears through me.

Sabine's laugh rings in my ears.

"I'm sorry." Titus sobs as I crumple on the sand. "Master's been looking at my little sister like he used to look at your ma. Before my pa died, I

promised I'd do anything I had to do to protect my sisters. Missus would sell me and leave my sisters alone with Master if I didn't." He weeps, eyes pleading for understanding, when all I want to give him is my pain. "I have to free them," he says. "Change my family's future. Make it bright for all of us."

"And change will come," Sabine says. A skeleton of a smile cracks her lips, and she puts her weapon down. "But you . . ." She towers over me. "You will be added to my collection."

As I twitch and groan in agony, she dips her finger into my blood. A drop dangles from the tip of her black fingernail. She opens the pink cavern of her mouth and lets it fall on her tongue, then licks her finger clean before smiling down at me. "Real power is in the blood."

Ravens collect in the trees above her.

I squirm, looking at the water, the black sand, Titus's feet. My heart hurts as it struggles to beat under the weight of my grief, of his betrayal.

"A promise is a promise!" Sabine smiles, twirling in the light of the full moon. She extends her left arm. "Your bloodline will receive the gift, Titus. And the price." Beneath her pale white skin, veins rise like black vines. She slices open her own forearm with her long fingernail. Inky blood leaks from her wrist. I shudder as a curling worm wiggles and drips from the nasty gash.

My eyes widen in terror. Mama was right. Sabine's a Devil woman, a witch! The worm grows into a massive snake. Sabine's eyes darken and morph from ice-blue orbs to pools of midnight.

Titus is shaking. "No!" he cries out. "I changed my mind. I changed my mind, I said." The snake slithers toward him, hissing. "I don't deserve freedom after I— Get a doctor. Spare Venus. End this! I made a mistake."

"End?" Sabine scoffs. "This is just the beginning." Her eyes lock on Titus. Black blood flows down her arm and cascades from her fingertips. She slowly trails her palms down her tiny waist. Storm clouds thicken in the skies above. Bolts of magic crackle and disturb the murky stillness of the bayou. A blinding flash of lightning strikes the snake, severing it in an explosion of white. The creature splits into two massive serpents that slink in the sand by Sabine's heels.

Sabine smooths her dress and glares at Titus. "Trust me. Power will look almost this amazing on your sisters, too."

I try to breathe, but my lungs can't hold air. My throat constricts. Everything seems thicker and bloodier. Like the sticky red pool growing around me. My vision is coal black at the edges, as dark as the sand I hemorrhage onto.

A raven calls out.

The serpents twist and grow, their dark scales igniting, outlined in flickering blue flame as they slither toward me and Titus. He cowers and inches back. I roll over, trying to slide onto my back, fighting to get on my feet. But my body has wilted under the gunshot. One snake loops around my torso, pressing its weight into my wound. It opens its pink mouth wide, and its razor-sharp fangs bite its own tail. I'm locked in place, stuck in its vise.

My vision turns hazier from the pain. I can't figure out what's happening. The other serpent curls and spins its flaming body around Titus's leg. He flails and punches as it climbs him. He falls back, tripping over the branches that had concealed the boat. The snake circles his muscular chest, pinning him in place.

I'm too weak to fight the snake as it squeezes tighter. Sabine screams in French; my mind is too frantic to translate. The snakes begin to sink into us; their scales burn as they cut our flesh and bury themselves inside our bodies. The pain ruptures through me like the lightning cutting through the sky.

My chest tightens, my breath turning to gasps. I struggle to see Titus, only spotting the bloody hole the snake left behind in his shirt. Did she kill him? Is he dying too?

His fingers twitch. Titus's body glows, a soft golden light emanating from the gashes on his flesh. I watch as his wounds grow less puffy, less red, and fuse together.

I look down as my skin illuminates. In shock, I watch the bullet lift out of my belly and roll into the sand. My injuries knit themselves back together, and I gasp.

Titus scrambles to his feet and crawls toward me. He tries to reach out, but I slap his hand away. I stand and prepare to run.

"Marvelous!" Sabine shouts. "It is done."

A cold settles over me despite the muggy heat.

Sabine smiles. "I forgot to tell you about the tax, Titus. In this world, there's always a price." Her words echo like a prophecy. "The moon has the sun. Beginnings have ends. And everything in life has an opposite to match it. So the blessing I gave you comes with a curse."

Blessing? Curse?

"The universe requires balance," Sabine says. "Titus Baldwin, I've given you and your bloodline the power to travel and move freely. You can escape this time entirely, and you'll have other gifts that shall appear with each descendant."

"I can take my family? Get away from here?" Titus asks. "Leave all this hate and misery behind?"

Sabine smiles. "Yes."

He turns to run.

"But . . . the hate you're so eager to escape, I cannot erase—only shift it. There's so much of it in this place and time, and more will come." Sabine gazes out in the distance like she can see it. "So in return for the hate you can try to avoid now, that hate will linger inside you and your bloodline."

Sabine tugs at her dress, and its color shifts from white to royal blue.

"I don't understand. You said—" Titus quivers with fear.

"I'm done with this game." I look around, frantically wondering if it's still possible to get away on the boat.

"And, Venus, I could've let you bleed to death." Sabine's dress spouts into an elegant upside-down tulip shape. "You and your bloodline will also be blessed with gifts, but in turn you shall experience the Baldwin family's hate in the most agonizing ways." She shakes her head, and the messy bun crowning it falls to curling strands that darken from red to brown. "From this moment on," she declares as the lines around her mouth and eyes soften, her face no longer wizened but beautiful and barely twenty, "you and your descendants will live to see their babies die. You will be the cause of it."

"No!" My voice is sharp as I yell it.

Her red pupils almost glow. "Your families will seek violence and vengeance. It's important to anticipate your opponent's actions. Every move matters. Play without a well-informed plan, and you're going to lose," she says. "And your freedom will be wasted, buried in the ground."

I can't look away. I can't make sense of what she's trying to say.

"Bloodlust will bubble up like boiled cane syrup whenever members of your bloodlines share the same space for too long. A hunger for violence that will only be satisfied by the kill. It's unavoidable. Hatred demands an outlet, and that bloodlust *must* be satisfied."

"Why are you doing this?" I ask.

"My reasons are between me and my gods." She cracks her knuckles. "You live at and by my mercy no matter how long you live and how long your bloodline grows. Every generation the tax for freedom must be paid. The Baldwins and the Davenports will be forced to play a little game—my game—my Tethered Gambit. But first, I hate disloyal men." Sabine shoots Titus in the chest.

I cover my mouth, the shock freezing me in place.

His eyes turn glassy as the blood pours out of him. He exhales his final breath with a gentle whoosh.

Sabine smiles. "Such tender skin we all live in. My Tether will show your entire bloodlines how much it bleeds."

The earth shakes under my feet. The clouds above the trees tremble, and stardust rains down on the ravens and me. My hands soften despite the rage inside me.

Sabine coos, "Now the nightmare begins . . ."

PART TWO

THE DEADLY PLEDGE



CHAPTER ONE

Emma Baldwin

.....

HARLEM, 1943

When the moonlight hits the circus tents, they bleed. Ruby drops turn to rose petals before raining down on the audience.

"A symbol. That's all anybody wants. Something that feels bigger than them. No matter the city, no matter the time." Mom always said this when we were fortifying the fabric together, using our hands to imbue the crimson silk with our gifts. "Something magical, something beautiful. And if we remind them that we're the best Black circus on the circuit in the process, what's the harm?"

Oohs and aahs ripple as the crowd begins to file into the big top. They settle in their seats and prepare for the show as that bloody rain begins.

I watch from my perch above in the tent's sky well, distracted by a full moon the color of decaying bones. A warning. It looks close enough to touch.

I'm tempted to launch myself into the Harlem night as fireworks splash across the sky. I'd become a beautiful dark comet. Then I'd burn away.

My sister Grace used to say doing something like that would give our enemies too much joy, though. And I'd be dead before the show began. A waste. A disappointment. I suppose she was right.

The crowd gapes up at the light spectacle as they enter from outside. Our signature start to every show. But they never seem to see me, oblivious to where I sit, legs dangling over the side of the massive gold ball that crowns the big top. Because no one is really looking. No one wants to see the strings or learn how magic is really made. They don't want to know the sacrifice.

The wind sends a ribbon spiraling from my hair. I lean forward, trying to grab the swirling silk, but it's pointless. The breeze has freed it while I'm stuck here, fulfilling a duty I never wanted.

My existence is a movie stuck on repeat. Show after show. Eight o'clock: the lights dim. 8:05: fireworks. I glance at my watch: 8:10. I look down. Click. Right on time, the ball under me illuminates, a beacon inviting the audience to prepare for wonder and amazement. This week marks our circus's arrival in the hundredth city of my short lifetime. Countless rabbits turned into rainbows; countless stars spun into dreams. My fake smile masking my boredom all the while.

At eight thirty, my stage performance will start. The thought of doing the same thing again, night after night without my sister, makes the downward slope of the tent roof and the crumbling path below look delicious. My blood would join the rose petals collecting on the fedoras and pillbox hats. No one would notice.

Voices roar below. More fireworks explode above, leaving trails of smoke and fountains of glowing pink flashes. My pulse pounds in my ears. I wish I could fly away from it all. If I had that sort of magic, I'd be long gone, but sadly that's not how my gifts work.

The light show winds down like clockwork, the gold sparks burning the air. Briefly, I wonder: What if I wasn't there to watch my brother, Demetri, as he reaches into the minds of the audience members, compelling them to join us onstage? What if I never saw Mom, "the Infamous Isabel Baldwin," use her telekinetic skills to lift the big top and its crowd high above the city like nothing more than dolls? What if I never again admired my papa in his decadent ringmaster suit as he conjured animals and transformed our silk tents into faraway landscapes like Moroccan deserts or Grecian arenas?

Would the show go on without me?

The dark desire to run flickers inside me again. I look down. More people stream past in a wave of colorful suits, ties, and hats. Oceans of flowing skirts, matching gloves, crocodile purses, wombat collars, and fur stoles—the height of fashion for 1943. I envy them. Their freedom is more enchanting than the magic pulsing through my veins.

They're not cursed to forever run from an enemy like we are.

I feel the heat of eyes on me, reminding me there's no more time for wallowing in fantasies. An old white man glares upward, finding me. His gaze burns. His sharp chin is as pointy as a dagger. His scowl tells me he'd be the type to wave a Confederate flag. I smirk, knowing it's probably the first time some of these white folks have looked up to a Black person. It makes me wish I got to see more brown and black faces. Customers who can't afford tickets to our sold-out shows with their rations in this era. Sometimes after experiencing so much of the future, I forget how sharp the color lines of the past are.

The skies above Harlem will ignite soon. Not with our fireworks, but with the flames of white-owned businesses burning. The Harlem Race Riot of 1943. The neighborhood has no idea what's to come.

A cloud trembles overhead. Then, a snapping sound, so soft that only I can hear it, before silver flecks of stardust drizzle down like glitter.

The people below cheer. Some twirl in the shadow of the big top, dancing in the sparkling rain. The crowd doesn't know that I've conjured the stardust, but they do know to expect the unexpected. Le Cirque Noir's banners flicker, full of promises: THE MAJESTIC. THE MARVELOUS. THE MAGNIFICENT. MAGIC MADE REAL AT THE GREATEST SHOW OF ALL TIME!

A small girl with hair as dark as raven feathers claps her hands and stares at the shimmering specks, her joy lighting up the night.

My sister's happiness used to do that too.

The moon disappears, and the stardust thickens into a haze that hangs over the crowd like cotton candy, blocking their faces from my view.

Grace and I would watch the patrons arrive from up here. We'd make guesses about what sorts of secrets they had or where they were headed after the show. She never shared my jealousy of them. I can almost hear my sister's voice whisper on the breeze, "We're the lucky ones, Emma. We've

performed everywhere from New York City to San Francisco. I've traveled from 1880 to 2050. I've seen the world in so many forms, never bound by the limits of time. This life is everything! We're blessed!"

And I guess I was when she was here.

But now, it's just me.

My hand rises to the necklace at my throat—a miniature silver clock cradled by a crescent moon, a star poised on the other side. My star. I kiss it softly before climbing off the ball and carefully positioning myself on the slope of the tent roof. I need to be more like Grace and less like myself.

Past the circus entrance gate, the tops of flashy cars shine in the parking lot—Cadillacs, Hudsons, Kaisers. Most of them this year's models. I imagine getting behind the wheel of one, racing along the highways. Not that I'd ever be allowed to. After what happened to Grace, my family holds me so close it's suffocating.

A raven perches on the wrought iron fence. Its eerie call makes the hairs on my neck stand up. Grace was terrified of ravens. Even Mom believes they're a bad omen, but she never says why.

I narrow my gaze. "What do you want?" Unease fills my chest as its eyes burn into mine.

With a sudden flap of its wings, the raven dives like a missile in my direction. I duck, and it brushes against my hair before flying away. My stomach roils even after the bird is out of sight. What does it mean?

Our circus clock chimes. Eight thirty. I don't have any more time to think about the bird. Mom's eyes find me. I push myself forward, rocketing my body down the circus tent. The wind rushes through my hair, loosening a few strands from my victory rolls. Stars sparkle at the edge of my vision. My tiny skirt flutters as I launch myself into the night sky and prepare for the perfect landing on Mom's platform.

It's showtime.

"Ladies and gentlemen, children of all ages!" The gleam of the footlights and layers of makeup give Papa's handsome face a mysterious glow. "Welcome to Le Cirque Noir!" The sequined jacket of his ringmaster costume shimmers in the torchlight. "The place where magic is a dream made real."

From his podium, he gazes around the tent, his smile proud as he takes in the opulence. Colorful paintings and lush tapestries in fine pink-and-gold satin and velvet line the tent's inner walls. The whole space is illuminated by large torches with black stars and blue constellations etched on their handles. Their light casts strange shadows onto the seated crowd. The liver-spotted old man who glared at me earlier is in the front row, his scowl cemented in place.

Papa inches closer to the crowd, his jeweled buttons shining and his white glove stark against the gold ball on the top of his cane. "For generations the Baldwin family have traveled the world and entertained audiences. We have showcased for you the world's most prominent singers, performers, and peddlers of otherworldly delights. And tonight"—he lifts his left hand, and with a swirl of white, his glove floats off his dark brown fingers—"we carry on that tradition!" The glove expands into a massive balloon above the audience. With a loud pop, it explodes into white lilies that shower the crowd. "Welcome to the best show in the land, the best show of all time!"

Applause erupts, and some rise, clapping delightedly. They probably think he did that trick with wires or string so thin you can't see it. But what Papa conjures is real—there's no sleight of hand. If you're quick enough to catch a lily, its pollen will briefly tickle your nose before the flower dissolves into the breeze.

Appearance is more important than honesty in my family. Even our circus is a pretense. Papa makes it sound glamorous to a crowd. But behind his words is a lifetime of monotony—of rehearsing acts we know so well we could do them in our sleep, of setting up the stages, of cleaning the costumes, of performing nearly every night, and, of course, of running when there's a Davenport-family sighting.

The wonders of our act, *Le Cirque Noir*, echo in the wind no matter where we travel. Some think we're vying for the audiences of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, but we don't think twice about them. Over the years, my family has reinvented itself in different decades. We've performed in speakeasies, vaudeville theaters, opera houses, juke joints, and jaw-dropping circuses, all while trying to avoid the Davenport family.

Grace flutters through my mind again. Her skin dark and beautiful

as midnight, her gently sloping eyes, and the dimples framing her angelic smile. I touch the silver clock pendant on my necklace, grit my teeth, and shut down the memories.

Papa glances at me with big eyes. “And now, my beautiful daughter, the great Emma Baldwin, is here to astound you with an act you won’t soon forget. She can make your wildest dreams come true. How about a round of applause for her?” Polite claps echo as Papa steps off his podium and exits stage left, no doubt heading to the family tent, where he likes to relax between introducing acts.

Music pulses around me. I push away everything else and dance toward the stage. My hips rock fast as my feet slap the carpet, mimicking the fast footwork I’ve seen performed by Josephine Baker.

My palms are still unsteady, but I raise them high, willing the stardust I gathered outside to form a shimmering spiral. Thankfully, the trillions of hours I’ve spent practicing, learning to control it, are starting to pay off. The drumbeat reverberates through my limbs, stirring in me the stories Grandmère shared of our ancestors fighting for freedom.

My brother Demetri glares at me from the front row. His eyes say, *Stick to the script.* He knows all too well how tired I am of the same old routine.

I’m sick of pretending to be some trickster magician who makes her assistant disappear. For once, I’d love to perform honestly—to use my magic for the gift it is and stop trying to hide who I am. To let people see the fullness of our power, rather than a mere hint of it. To prove to my family that I can control it. I want to be proud of it.

Bright lights flash behind me. I lift my hand, and the stardust spiral rises, spinning like a funnel cloud. And I do what is expected of me.

“Tonight, I’m going to make someone’s dreams come true,” I call out, eyeing the eager, mostly white audience. “Raise your hand if you want me to spin this stardust into your greatest wish.”

The audience members scoot to the edges of their chairs, hands held high as they lean forward. I walk into the crowd, staring at their captivated faces as I pretend that I’m searching for someone special.

Demetri, still seated in the front row, is a vision in a white zoot suit,

complete with a skinny black tie and high-waisted balloon-leg trousers. He fiddles with the lapels on his drape coat and brushes something off his padded shoulders. A black wide-brimmed hat shades his eyes. He usually wears a dimpled smile so bright and movie-star handsome that people always notice him. Tonight, though, he frowns at me. Right on cue, he raises an exasperated hand.

I pause by his chair. He keeps his hand high. This is the part where I'm supposed to pick him and grant his wish for me to pull a fluffy white rabbit out of his hat. I'm about to do it for the millionth time when something catches my eye. An inky fog rolls across the velvet carpet toward Demetri. That's definitely not part of my act. I look around for Papa. Did he add a surprise illusion to the set tonight? No, he is nothing if not methodical.

Demetri follows my gaze, before crumpling back in his seat, eyes wide. I tilt my head, wondering why this strange fog has him so rattled. My brother is usually calm, even in a crisis. His obvious fear makes my finger-tips tremble.

The vapor rolls over Demetri's shoe as he sits frozen like a statue. The audience stares at me, puzzled by my lack of movement. None of them are looking down. Maybe they can't see it.

The haze creeps toward the stage, toward me. I step back. Demetri opens his mouth to say something, but before he can, the fog thins into a coil of smoke and melts into a glittery gold thread by my feet. Demetri remains stuck for a moment. Then, as if he's been released from a trance, he shakes his head and straightens his hat.

Whispers crackle around me. People are starting to notice my silence. My stillness. Demetri sends me a pointed look. The show must go on.

I send him a look in return. Does he know what the fog was about? What it means? If he thinks he can weasel out of explaining what just happened, he's sorely mistaken. But my interrogation can wait until after my act.

"You, sir," I begin in my cheeriest voice, pretending not to recognize my older brother.

Next to Demetri is the little girl who clapped when she saw the stardust

raining on the tent. In the brighter light, I notice a bruise on her cheek and a sadness in her eyes. They chill me almost as much as the fog has.

Maybe I'm shaken because her eyes slope like Grace's. Maybe I just want to take my mind off the fog, bad omens, and a family who won't be honest with me. To bring joy to those little eyes and make this child smile again.

I swipe my brother's hat and plop it onto my head. "You, sir, have great taste in hats." My brother frowns, but the crowd loves it. This isn't part of the script. I turn to the girl with a smile. "But you, young lady, I think you deserve a wish."

"My mom," she says softly, pointing to the woman next to her. The lady is skeleton-thin and white as bones. She quakes, clutching the thick arm of the beefy man to her right, as a scarf masks her throat and dark glasses block her eyes.

Is she afraid of crowds? Attention? I wonder.

"Can you grant my mom a wish instead?" the girl asks.

"Of course," I reply with a wink. I try to stroll to the stage, but Demetri grabs my wrist, jerking me to a stop.

"But what about my wish?" he teases. His eyes plead with me to stick to the routine. But nothing has been routine about tonight, not the raven, the fog, or the way it rattled him. I shake him off, knowing he won't make a scene in public. He leans back in his chair, nervously twisting a button on his jacket.

I step onstage, raise my hand, and look at the frail woman in the audience. The stardust shimmers and swirls above my palm, casting a tiny shadow on my fingers.

"Behold the starlight," I call out, "for it will show you a glimpse of your past—and, in so doing, it will reveal what your heart most desires for your future." For a moment, nothing happens, and my stomach sinks. What if I can't pull this off, after all? What if all those hours of daily practice weren't enough? With relief, I see an image begin to appear in the glittery cloud above my hand, faint at first, before growing clearer and more distinct. The image shows the beefy man shoving the child. It expands to show the

woman racing to save her. The woman is slapped to the ground. Her eye turns red, then black, from the assault.

The audience gasps. Concerned murmurs buzz through the crowd.

“This is fake!” The beefy man launches out of his chair, face red, nostrils flaring.

My jaw clenches. “I assure you, nothing you’ve seen tonight is fake.”

Demetri starts to rise from his seat, but I toss him his hat and give him a look that says, *Sit down. I got this.* He complies, grumbling.

I have to prove myself, even though I’m still learning to control the power of the stardust. I can pull it from above, but I can’t manipulate or control the visions of the past that it reveals. Learning how to spin its power into wishes has been a difficult process. But if I can use it to conjure a rabbit in my brother’s hat, I should be able to grant this woman’s wish too. Maybe she’ll wish for a getaway car—that should be easier to conjure than something living. Or maybe she wants money so she and her daughter can escape into a better future. I know all about wanting to escape.

The stardust morphs into a dark, murky cloud, and the man sits back down. The image changes as the stardust glows and shimmers with the woman’s unspoken wish. Every night in our show, when my brother wishes for a white rabbit, I see that white rabbit clearly—its floppy ears and pink twitching nose. But this image? This one is hazy. It’s not even as clear as the image of the past from moments ago. In fact, I’ve never seen a wish this cloudy.

She must be wishing for something intangible, like freedom and peace for herself and her child. That would be my wish too, if I were in her shoes.

“May the ancestors and the starlight protect you as the stardust grants your wish,” I say. With those words, my pulse quickens, my skin tingles, and a smile bends my lips. It’s time to make her wish come true. It feels amazing to finally do what I want—what feels right.

People clap as the cloud of stardust flies across the tent. But instead of heading toward the woman, it races into the man’s mouth and curls into his nose. He sits straighter, and his eyes turn red and bulge.

Dread twists my insides as I watch.

Inky blackness begins spilling from the corners of the man's eyes. His brow beads with sweat, and he grunts. He jolts up from his chair, and I stagger backward, as if he's shoved me, but he's too far away for that. What just happened?

The crowd is wide-eyed and silent. They think this is part of the show. But then the people around him see what I see: his strained breathing and clear distress. People jump to their feet, knocking chairs over. Voices cry out for someone to help him.

The man tugs at his hair and scratches red lines around his eyes. He falls to the ground, his body flopping like an electrocuted fish. He's having a seizure right there in the front row. He vomits blackness onto the feet of the now-frightened old racist man and the people around him. The man's body shakes uncontrollably.

I don't know what to do. I can't scream. I can't speak. I can't move. I fixate on the man's pulsing belly and the black vomit streaking his white shirt like tar. Bone-shaking shivers rock me as I stare in horror. I glance at my brother.

Demetri gapes, and he's as scared as he was when he saw the fog . . . as scared as our mom when she sees ravens.

I look for the girl's mother. She stands silently, hugging her daughter. Was hers a wish for revenge? Is that why her wish was murky and unclear? Am I now an accessory to whatever this is? My heart races as wildly as my thoughts.

Oh, God! I messed up! A trembling in my belly shakes through me.

The man thrashes, tries to stand, foaming darkly at the mouth. Black tears run from his eyes. He seems to reach for the girl, but the mother pulls the child away. She cradles her daughter closer. The girl's body relaxes, and she exhales hard as the man falls flat on his face, gasping one last time.

He doesn't move again.

Fear nails my feet to the stage. It glues my mouth shut. The crowd stands, unmoving. Shock and terror immobilize them too.

A red-haired woman bends down and checks the man's pulse beneath sticky black vomit. "He's dead!" she hollers. "He's really dead!"

Someone screams.

Demetri leaps to the stage and stands protectively in front of me. "Ladies and gentlemen, please don't panic," he shouts. "I'm going to ask you to walk calmly toward the exit and let us seek medical attention for our guest."

"She killed that man!"

A little boy in a baseball cap and overalls gives a terrified shriek. His mom covers his eyes to shield him from the gruesome sight. Children are crying. More shouts echo. The cacophony rings in my ears. What have I done?

"Black witch!" The old white man glares at me again. He points a skinny finger, yelling, "She's the Devil."

"Murderer!" the redhead shouts.

"Monster! Get them both!" someone else yells.

I look at Demetri, panicked. I've killed a man. A white man. Put my family in jeopardy. All because I couldn't stick to the script. I thought I could handle the stardust . . . At eighteen years old I should've known better. "Ladies and gentlemen!" Demetri protests. "Please remain calm and find the nearest exit! This isn't her fault!"

But he's wrong. It is my fault.

"Kill the Black witch!" The old man rushes the stage.

Demetri waves a hand in the air, compelling Papa's animal illusions to storm the big top. The crowd scatters in a thousand directions. He grabs my hand, and we dash toward the hidden tent flap that leads backstage.

I look over my shoulder toward the audience. Mothers scoop up crying children, carrying them toward the exit. The faint wailing of police sirens can be heard.

In the center of the melee, the girl's mom stands calmly, her dark glasses removed to reveal a blackened, swollen eye. Just before the curtain blocks the crowd from view, I catch her mouthing the words *Thank you*.