

MISS LAVIGNE'S LITTLE WHITE LIE

One

New Orleans

Grandmamma had always said nothing good happened under the cloak of darkness. The witching hour was ripe with men practicing their evil. Therefore, it was with much trepidation that Lisette Lavigne huddled together with her younger brother and cousin in the shadowy gardens of Passebon House, praying the night would conceal their escape from the wickedest of men, her betrothed.

The coarse language of Louis Reynaud's men carried on the sluggish air. They made no attempt to hide their presence outside the gate of her father's Vieux Carré home, and hadn't since their arrival two days earlier. The men had even followed her on a shopping excursion to Rue Royale earlier in the day, confirming her suspicions. Her betrothed sensed she no longer wished to marry him, and he had no intentions of releasing her from their agreement.

Her brother shifted and whimpered softly. Hiding in the gardens rather than being tucked into bed at this hour would disturb any child, but to one with Rafe's temperament, a fit of temper could ensue at any moment.

Their cousin, Serafine Vistoire, placed a comforting arm around his shoulders. "There, there, sweet child," she murmured. "Look for your stars."

Rafe rocked side to side as he searched the star-splattered sky, soothing himself, at least for the time being.

The deafening trill of cicadas pierced the night, their ever-rising call tweaking Lisette's taut nerves. She forced herself to slow her breathing.

"Where are they?" Lisette whispered. "Monsieur Baptiste said midnight."

Serafine nodded. The whites of her eyes stood out in the darkness.

What if they didn't come? The wedding was in two days. This would be their only chance to flee. Lisette's fingers tightened on her bombazine skirts until her

knuckles ached.

“Good evening, *messieurs*.” A throaty laugh floated on the heavy air, the call of a temptress. Relief flooded through Lisette. The distraction had arrived at last.

“*Sacre bleu!*” one of the men yelled. “Are ya seeing what I see?”

“Whores. Whatta they doing here?”

“Perfect night to take exercise,” one of the women purred. “Wouldn’t you agree, gents?”

Her companion chuckled, her voice heavy with seductive promise. “*Oui*. Two virile *messieurs* like you must take exercise often.”

Reynaud’s man uttered a combination of unspeakable words that might have impressed Lisette under different circumstances, for he excelled at the art of vulgarity. She considered herself an expert, having developed an ear for inappropriate language while visiting Papa at the waterfront.

Rafe wiggled, his control nearing the limits.

Sweet Mary. This had best work, and quickly.

“Just for a bit? *S’il vous plaît.*”

“Damn,” one of the guards muttered. “I’m gonna hate myself for this, but we can’t leave our posts.”

Really, the man’s integrity was shocking. How did one go about locating such upstanding criminals?

“May I share a secret, mister?”

“I s’ppose. What kind of secret?”

“As your friend implied, a pair of whores do not happen by on a lark. Perhaps you should think of us as a reward for a job well done.”

“Reynaud sent you?”

Lisette held her breath as she waited for the woman’s response.

“Shh. ’Tis a secret, remember?”

Both men chuckled as if they couldn’t believe their good fortune. And anyone with sense would know better. Lisette was barely acquainted with her betrothed, and yet she understood he did nothing that benefitted anyone aside from himself.

“Ain’t no harm in exercise, right?”

“Splendid. This way, sir, where we may enjoy some privacy.”

“What about here? In the garden.”

Lisette froze like a rabbit that had spotted the family pet. If the women led them through the gate, she and her family would be discovered. Frantic, she searched for a place to retreat among the potted flowers and garden statues.

“Flowers make me sneeze, monsieur. But I know a better spot for amorous sport.”

Their voices faded as they moved away from the house.

Lisette crept from their hiding place and slung the bag of their belongings over her shoulder. “We must go quickly.”

Seeing no one else outside on the walk, she pushed open the gate and captured her brother’s hand. Dressed in all black to blend with the night, they headed toward the wharf.

No one spoke as they crossed Rue de Chartres. Moss draped like gauze from the gnarled limbs of the trees as they drew closer to the river.

Rafe dragged on her arm, forcing Lisette to stop. “I want to go home.”

She reassuringly squeezed his hand and urged him forward. “But we have a surprise for you, remember?”

“I want to go home.”

Serafine tugged his other arm. “Not now, *ma biche*. We must hurry.”

Rafe had maintained excellent control up to this point, donning black clothing despite his abhorrence of the color and kneeling in the garden where dirt might soil his hands. Expecting anything more from him seemed unfair, but they required his cooperation now more than ever.

Lisette crouched at his level. “Shall I reveal the surprise now? We are sailing on a ship.”

“A ship?” A twinge of interest colored his voice.

“Yes, a majestic ship called the *Cecily*. We must sleep close to the port for we cannot miss our ship.”

“Cannot miss the *Cecily*.” Rafe resumed his measured strides. “Baltimore flyer, clipper, frigate, Indiaman.” He recited the types of ships he knew with a note of

excitement.

She had handled her brother without much difficulty this time. Now if only they could enter *The Abyss* without drawing notice. Reynaud had nefarious connections all over New Orleans, and hiding among the derelict of the city was a risky endeavor. What manner of man must the captain of the *Cecily* be to commune with petty thieves and cutthroats?

Lisette forced her concerns to the edges of her consciousness. Captain Hillary's ship was the *only* ship departing for England and provided the sole means of protecting her brother. Nothing would deter her when it came to keeping Rafe safe.



Captain Daniel Hillary loved two simple pleasures in life: a woman's supple curves beneath his body and his Indiaman with sails unfurled, forging through the ocean waves. But damn it to hell, women and the sea didn't mix, and based upon Paulina's determined eyes staring up at him, he was in for a row.

Why she chose to make her request *before* they had taken their pleasure was beyond him. They were still wearing their clothes, for the love of God.

He rolled off his handsome mistress and flopped to his back. "I don't allow women aboard the *Cecily*. End of discussion."

Paulina lifted to her elbow and frowned down at him. Her mussed chestnut hair made her appear as if she'd already been tumbled, increasing his discomfort. "That is untrue. What of the beautiful blonde woman?"

"She's my brother's intended. I can't leave her in New Orleans." He reached for Paulina, but she jerked back. "I'll leave more money this time. You will never know I'm gone."

She leaned over to nip his earlobe then trailed kisses down his neck. This was more like it. "It—is—not—the—money—I—want." She spoke between pecks, unwilling to abandon the topic after all.

Daniel sighed. Paulina resided in luxury. She would not forfeit her comfort for weeks on a bloody ship, which meant she had another objective. He lifted her chin to look at him.

“Tell me what you want, and don’t insult my intelligence by claiming you only want me.”

He was aware of her other gentlemen benefactors, even if she believed herself discreet. His connections kept him abreast of the happenings in New Orleans, and the reports on Paulina’s indiscretions could keep him occupied for the better part of a day. If he cared to listen.

She sat back on her haunches and pushed out her bottom lip. “Don’t you want to be with me all the time?”

He linked his fingers behind his head. Paulina was a talented woman who knew how to please him, but he *didn’t* want to be with her all the time. He didn’t wish to be with any woman all the time, not after Cecily.

“I’m content with our arrangement.” He didn’t bother to tread lightly with her sensibilities.

As he expected, no hurt crossed Paulina’s face, only irritation. “Very well, but I *would* like some security. You spend more time in England than here now. I don’t enjoy your protection as I once did. Nor do you bring me beautiful trinkets as in the beginning. I am not getting any younger, Daniel. My beauty will fade and my prospects will dwindle. I need to know I won’t end up in the streets.”

He cocked a brow. “This isn’t your attempt at proposing marriage, I hope.”

“You mock me.” She crawled toward the edge of the bed.

“Wait.” Grasping her around the waist, he pulled her back.

Paulina had been an accommodating mistress these last two years. He supposed he could fulfill one of her wishes, if they could get on with other matters.

“Tell me what you really want, my dear, and dispatch with the theatrics.”

She turned in his embrace, victory shining in the depths of her brown eyes.

“There is a house I fancy. I wish you to purchase it in my name.”

“A house?”

He glanced around the exquisite boudoir with the Turkish carpet, gilded mirrors, and silk curtains, all gifts he had given her. Not to mention that horrendous ruby amulet she draped around her neck, the fruits of her last sulk. It was a wonder she didn’t walk hunched over from the weight.

When he had offered his protection, her home had required an extensive remodeling. He could ascertain no good reason to fund a different residence. “There’s nothing wrong with this one.”

She scooted to the far edge of the bed out of his reach and crossed her arms. “It is too small. In fact, the lack of space troubles me to the point where I fear I cannot perform my duties this evening.” She tossed a sultry look over her shoulder. “A simple promise from you, however, would ease my mind.”

Her petulant behavior was growing tiresome. Too tiresome. They had been through similar pouts when he’d last visited.

“Very well,” he conceded, “then we shall consider our affair settled.”

Paulina’s eyes widened. “Pardon? Settled in what way?”

He climbed from the bed and fastened his trousers, no longer interested in satisfying his lust with her. “My man of business will complete the transaction.” He shrugged on his waistcoat before grabbing his boots and jacket. “Consider the house your severance. Your services are no longer required.”

Paulina gaped, frozen to the spot on the bed. “But, Daniel. You cannot—oh, Daniel, don’t, please.” She burst into tears, burying her face in her hands.

He stood there in awkward silence while she sobbed. *Devil take it.* What was he to do now? After all, she might genuinely hold a *tendre* for him.

Daniel took a step forward, prepared to offer a retraction, but Paulina chose that moment to peek at him. Her dry eyes sent a flood of indignation rattling through his veins. Was there a bloody woman alive who didn’t use tears to advance her agenda?

“Do give my best to Anderson and Molyneux.” Plopping his hat on his head, he spun on his heel and stalked from the premises with no intentions of ever looking back.

End of Chapter

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