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GULF COAST CHRONICLES • BOOK 2

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THE  
*Creole Princess*

A NOVEL

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BETH WHITE

  
Revell

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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To Debo, my lifelong mentor—  
Yoda of storytelling, cake baking, cymbal playing, doll dress  
making, and innumerable other creative pursuits.  
This one is for you.

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# 1

## MOBILE, ALABAMA AUGUST 1776

Lyse Lanier danced on bare feet along the Water Street wharf with her crab bucket bumping against her leg, face lifted to a welcome early-morning breeze off the bay. The end of a long, hot summer had brought the usual stifling humidity, warm brackish waters, and rising threat of fall storms. Still, she was glad to be outdoors, free to poke about among the shrimpers docked alongside the merchant ships, fishing boats, and ferries. She was sixteen and a woman now, no longer confined to the classroom. In fact, it might be time to put up her hair, lengthen her skirts, maybe think about practicing some of the ladylike skills other girls her age found so important.

Lifting herself to the balls of her feet, she imagined herself in a spangled gown, walking the parapet of a gilded castle, high-heeled slippers pinching her toes, corset so tight she could barely breathe. *Head high, back straight, my girl. The duke may ask you to dance tonight.*

The sunbaked odors of salt and fish and oil became the smoke of a hundred tallow candles and expensive perfumes wafting from the silken clothing of her ball guests. Landing chains creaked against

boats. Ship hulls sawed against their piers. The music of the wharf was an orchestra that flowed through her as she turned, head tipped back to follow a bank of clouds shifting across the hot summer sky.

Swaying, she closed her eyes and envisioned a young man pushing through the crowd with aristocratic authority. A clean-lined French face with serious eyes and . . . and a sword like Grand-père's—

“Hey, girl, I want a place to spend the night. Help a sailor out!”

The rough voice dissolved her daydream like waves on a sand castle, and she whirled to scan the crowded waterfront to find its source. Market day had brought merchant ships from Havana, Pensacola, Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and ports beyond. Men of all ages, color, and social strata abounded, but few women. Few ladies, anyway, for the eastern edge of the city was home to sailors, slaves, shopkeepers, and travelers. And women of easy virtue.

Her gaze lit upon a swarthy, bearded creature leering at her over a pile of canvas near the closest pier. Dressed in sailor's garb of ragged sailcloth, with oily curls straggling from beneath a dirty knit cap, he was a signally unprepossessing sight.

“Try Burelle's,” she said. Pray God the quiver in her voice didn't betray her fear.

“He's not as pretty as you.”

She laughed and kept walking.

Simon had warned her this morning to take their young stepmother along. But Justine was due to deliver her fourth child any day and waddled like a cow. “I can take care of myself,” Lyse told Simon, reaching inside her bodice for the scabbard sewn into her shift. She'd jerked her little knife free to wave it under her brother's disapproving nose, then tucked it away again before he could grab it.

Now, she *hoped* she could take care of herself.

The odor of old sweat and fish came up fast from behind. An iron grip caught her upper arm, jerking her around to face him.

“Think you’re too good for the likes o’ me, little girl? I fancy a little café au lait of a mornin’.”

She stared into the sailor’s twitchy eyes. “Matter of fact, *little man*—” the wicked point of her knife snicked beneath his chin— “I think you got me mixed up with somebody else. I’m the town barber, specializing in the extra-close shave.” Dropping the bucket, she braced to jab upward.

“*Permiso, señorita,*” came a deep voice behind her.

She jerked out of the grip of the sailor, barely noticing that he took the opportunity to melt away among the crowd, and turned to look up into a pair of sleepy brown eyes set in a good-looking olive-skinned face.

“What do you want?” She’d been looking forward to drawing a little blood, thus proving to Simon that she could protect herself.

“Eh, *pardon.*” The young man’s French was just as lazy as his Spanish. “Do you not speak Spanish?”

She switched to English. “You can apologize in any language you choose—just mind your own business.” One by one, she flicked the knife under the three ornate silver buttons adorning his waistcoat and smiled as they bounced onto the boardwalk.

“Lud, what a destructive little mite it is,” he said in English, watching the buttons roll into a crack and disappear. “Ah, well, saves me the trouble of doing them up from now on.” He gave her a lopsided grin.

“Perhaps you’d like me to cut the rest of it off you,” she said, “since dressing is such a—Hey! Give me that!”

He held her knife close to his Castilian nose and examined its beautiful carved ivory handle. “Oh, I shall. In a moment.” He tested the blade against the pad of his thumb, frowning when a thin pink line of blood welled. “My dear,” he said faintly, watching his blood drip onto the boardwalk, “perhaps you could direct me to a doctor. I seem to have injured myself with your little skiver.”

“Do *not* faint!” she gasped, looking around for help. “You’re too big for me to carry! And give me my knife!”

“Very well, if you promise not to perpetrate further damage to my wardrobe.” Sliding his arm around her shoulders, he slyly tucked the knife into its scabbard—how did he know where it had come from?—and sagged against her. “Would you be so good as to direct me to Master Burelle’s establishment? I believe he is holding a room for me.”

“Make up your mind. Do you want the doctor or the inn?”

“I want to sit down. Anywhere will do.” He closed his eyes, giving her the opportunity to admire eyelashes that would have been the envy of any debutante.

Lyse, however, refused to admire anything about him. Whoever he was. “All right, you big baby. Come along.” Grunting under his solid weight, she wheeled him toward Royal Street. “There’s a barbershop and surgery across the street from the inn.”

“Mademoiselle is too kind . . .” The young man had switched back to French, perhaps sensing it was her native language, but his deep voice maintained its languid, sibilant Spanish cadence. “I regret that we have not been properly introduced. I am Don Rafael Maria Gonzales de Rippardá, merchant of New Orleans, at your service.”

“I would say, rather, that it is I at *your* service.” She looked up at him and caught a mischievous dimple creasing one lean cheek. “Oh, you are such a faker!” She dipped out from under his arm. “What a fuss for such a little bit of blood.”

He gave her a wounded look. “Mademoiselle, it is not so! Every drop of one’s blood is infinitely precious!”

“How do you know I am *mademoiselle* and not *madame*? Hm? You are very forward, for a stranger to our city.”

“Are you indeed *madame*? Your poor husband must be obliged to beat you daily. Only see the damage you have inflicted.” He held open his mangled waistcoat. “One wonders why anyone would come back, after such a welcome.”



“You *are* welcome—to go away and *never* come back!”

He blinked at her sadly. “Are you really not going to tell me your name?”

She regarded him tight-lipped for a moment, arguing with herself. He was too lazy to be dangerous, despite his height and the clever way he had relieved her of her knife. And he *had* frightened away the nasty sailor. Also he smelled very good, faintly of sandalwood. “I am *Mademoiselle* Lyse Lanier. Of Bay Minette,” she added, surprising even herself. “I’m not usually rude, and I thank you for sending away that—that miscreant.”

She was treated to the full impact of Rafael Gonzales’s flashing white teeth and sparkling dark eyes as he swept off his tricorn, making its extravagant red plume quiver. He bowed deeply at the waist, twice, a ludicrous exaggeration considering her ragged and barefoot state.

“You are utterly forgiven, beautiful mademoiselle, señorita, miss—and what an enchanting name for an enchanting young lady! If all the women of Mobile are so gracious as you, I am doomed to enslavement! Perhaps I should, like Perseus viewing the Sirens, go about blindfolded in order to maintain my sanity.”

She laughed and took his arm, tugging him in the direction of Burelle’s. “Then you would certainly be in trouble, you ridiculous man! Odysseus is the hero you’re thinking of—and he had his sailors plug their ears and tie him to the mast, for it was the Sirens’ song and not their beauty that was so dangerous.”

He waved a languid hand. “One of those moldy Greek fellows is so much like the other, I can never keep them straight. But I assure you, if you begin to sing to me, I shall run away in terror.”

Lyse had never had a conversation like this with another human being, ever. He spoke with the musical syntax of the classical heroes in her grandfather’s library. She waited for Rafael Gonzales to inquire how a tattered Creole girl came to know the difference between Perseus and Odysseus.

But he continued to saunter alongside her, whistling something that sounded like “Down among the Dead Men,” until she finally said reluctantly, “I can’t sing.”

“That is of no moment. I can sing well enough for both of us.” And, to her astonishment, he burst into a sweet tenor rendition of “*De Colores*.”

The street was crowded, and people were turning to smile and stare as they passed. Lyse clutched his arm. “Stop! This is not New Orleans. People do not sing on the street.”

He broke off a liquid melisma to give her one of his sleepy stares. “Do they not? How very inconvenient. Next time I shall bring my guitar.”

“We do not play the guitar in the street either.” She couldn’t help giggling. In front of the inn she halted. It was the largest building outside the fort, a two-story with a broad front gallery graced with several large rocking chairs and a swing. “Here is the inn. Would you like to sit down before claiming your room? I can go inside and get someone to bring you a tankard of ale.”

“You are very kind, mademoiselle, but if I could trouble you for one more favor, I should like you to deliver a message to Major Redmond for me.”

“Major Redmond?” What business could Daisy’s gruff father have with this lazy, musical young Spaniard?

“Do you know him?” Gonzales’s black brows came together. “I have not stopped at the wrong fort again, have I?”

She laughed. “His daughter is my dearest friend. What would you have me tell him?”

Gonzales smiled, clearly relieved to be in the correct port. “I have brought a hundred pounds of sugar from Havana, being off-loaded even as we speak. And I would like to entertain him for dinner this evening, if he is free.”

Lyse nodded. “I will tell him.” She privately doubted the busy major would be interested in leaving the fort to share a meal with

a young merchant who couldn't be bothered to deliver his own invitations. But she hadn't seen Daisy for several days, and she was now provided with an excuse to visit. She backed toward the street. "Are you sure you don't want me to find a servant to help you in?"

"No. I thank you." He flapped open the beautiful red brocade waistcoat, sadly lacking in buttons, to display his trim middle. He reminded her strongly of a preening cardinal. "As you see, I am quite restored. No need to worry after all." Propping one hand on his sword hilt, with the other he caught her fingers and carried them to his smiling lips. "Adieu, mademoiselle. Adios, señorita. Goodbye, milady. We shall meet again, I vow."

Lyse dipped a curtsey, recovered her hand, and hurried to the street before she could betray the odd flutter in her stomach at the touch of that warm mouth upon her skin.

*Jackanapes*, she thought as she hurried toward the fort. How Daisy would laugh when she told her about this absurd young Spaniard.



Daisy was not amused. "And why were you at the waterfront by yourself? You know Simon has forbidden it!" She set aside her embroidery and rose, her blue eyes worried. "You could have at least taken along one of your little brothers."

Lyse snapped her fingers. "*That* for Simon's pronouncements! He is neither my father nor my master." But she couldn't help smiling at her friend's idea of protection. "And what possible good would a five-year-old be if I were attacked by brigands?"

"He could run for help!"

"Pooh." Lyse reached around Daisy to pick up her needlework. She studied the tiny stitches in awe. "I don't know how you keep from going blind. Justine's is nowhere near this fine."

Daisy was not to be distracted. "You are fortunate this Spaniard

came along to frighten away the sailor. I will make Papa reward him handsomely.”

“He is quite handsome enough already.” Lyse grinned as Daisy rolled her eyes. “Don Rafael doesn’t need money. He just wants to talk to your papa, which is the least I can do in return for his . . . chivalry.”

“He sounds like a proper fop. Did he really faint at the sight of his own blood?” Daisy drew her lacy shawl from the back of her chair and led the way to the front door.

Incurably honest, Lyse shook her head. “He was only looking for an excuse to put his arm around me.” A laugh bubbled up. “I think you’ll like him, Daisy. At least he smelled good!”

“Which is more than I can say for your brother,” Daisy said with a rueful laugh. “He always smells like fish.”

Lyse smiled as she went down the gallery steps. “He would say that is the smell of bread and butter. He’d better bring in a good catch today, or we’re all going hungry. I sold out of everything we had by midday—which is why I went down to the docks to begin with.” Shading her eyes against the glaring sun, she paused at the bottom of the steps to look up at the looming main gate of the fort. “Is your papa on duty?”

“Yes, he’ll be in his office in the administration building. He told me to have supper ready by seven, as he’s bringing a couple of junior officers with him.” Daisy gave a ladylike snort. “He keeps hoping to take my interest away from Simon.”

“A French Creole fisherman will never be good enough for you, Daisy. Especially one who is the grandson of a slave.” Lyse said it without self-pity. It went without saying that many of the British military and civilian population of Mobile disapproved of the deep friendship between the two young women. The budding romance between Major Redmond’s daughter and Simon Lanier had developed into quite a scandal.

“But the *other* side of your family is one of the oldest in the city.

And Simon is my best friend's brother." Daisy hooked her arm through Lyse's and marched her toward the gate. "Papa will just have to get used to the idea that I'm not going to marry a soldier, no matter how many redcoats he makes me cook for."

"At least you can cook! I sometimes wonder if part of Simon's interest isn't prompted by the prospect of escaping Justine's fish stew!"

"Now, Lyse . . ." Daisy gave her a reproachful look. "Poor Justine—"

"*Poor* Justine knew what she was getting when she married my papa." Lyse bit her lip against further criticism. Her young stepmother was a beautiful paper-skull, but she did not deserve the hardships that accompanied life with a charming drunk, two willful adult stepchildren, and three—almost four—children under the age of five.

As usual, Daisy followed her thoughts. "How much longer, do you think, before . . ."

"Before the new baby comes?" Daisy's manners might be too delicate to directly refer to the subject of childbirth, but Lyse had no such qualms. She had helped to deliver her youngest siblings, Geneviève and Denis, and had vivid memories of Luc-Antoine's squalling arrival into the world.

Daisy's cheeks pinkened. "Papa said I might send a pork pie or something else nourishing when the time comes."

"I'm sure a pork pie will cheer her right up," Lyse said with a twinkle. "It shouldn't be much longer. Lord knows she's big as a whale. She quite shakes the house when she walks from the kitchen to the back porch."

"Lyse!" Daisy burst into a fit of giggles. "That's very—unkind!"

"But true." Lyse mimicked Justine's waddling gait, one hand at her back for balance, then suddenly twirled on her toes, arms gracefully aloft. "Oh, Daisy! Your pork pie makes me want to dance! How can I ever thank you!"

Arms about each other's waists, shaking with laughter, the girls saluted the guard who opened the gate for them and passed into Fort Charlotte—formerly known, under the long French regime, as Fort Condé. The British had rebuilt the crumbling fort and renamed it for their queen eight years ago, but its timbers were already rotting again under the onslaught of hot, moist summers and continuous infestation of bugs. Lyse fully expected the stockade to topple under the next hard rain.

She would never have dreamed of entering the fort alone, but Daisy had free rein. The two of them often had occasion to run errands which took them to Major Redmond's office. As they walked toward the headquarters building, situated on the far side of the drill green, Lyse looked for familiar faces. During the past year, a few boys with whom she'd grown up had declared loyalty to the British Crown and enlisted as soldiers.

She recognized no one today, until a young officer hurried out of the gatehouse and caught up to them.

"Miss Redmond!" he said breathlessly, falling into step. "Lyse—I mean Miss Lanier! May I escort you to—wherever you're going?"

Daisy halted long enough to give him an annoyed look. "Thank you, Niall, but we're capable of finding our way across the green."

Removing his misshapen tricorne, the ensign executed an awkward bow and rose with clanking of sword and sweat dripping off his spotty brow. "I'm sure you are, but your papa told me not to let you—that is, he asked me to look out for you, if you should come this way—"

"For heaven's sake, Niall," Lyse interrupted. "Where is Major Redmond?"

Niall plopped his hat back onto his rusty curls. "He's with Colonel Durnford—but you can't go in there!" He scampered after the girls, who had looked at each other and resumed their walk. "Hey! I said—"

“I heard you,” Daisy said over her shoulder. She quickly mounted the steps onto the gallery and pushed open the heavy oaken door of the admin office, Lyse and Niall right behind her. Daisy paused at the desk of her father’s subaltern. “Corporal Tully, I would speak with my father.”

Tully looked up from some task he’d been concentrating on. He sighed. “Miss Daisy, you know you can’t come barging in here without a by-your-leave. Major’ll have my head.” He gave an uneasy look at the closed office door. “He’s got Colonel Durnford with him.”

Daisy opened her mouth to argue, but Lyse blurted, “We heard. Why?” In her experience, the arrival of the lieutenant governor of West Florida generally preceded some unpleasantness.

“That would be nothing I could discuss with little girls—even supposing I knew.” Tully scratched his head, disarranging the thinning sandy hair. “They’ve been in there close on two hours and not a peep out of ’em.” He frowned. “So best you two go home and play with your dolls.”

Daisy’s gentle expression frosted. “Corporal Tully, you overstep—”

The office door opened, and Daisy’s father stuck his head out, along with a virulent cloud of cigar smoke. “Daisy? I thought that was your voice. Are you all right?”

“Yes, Papa. But Lyse brings you a message.” Daisy took Lyse by the elbow and tugged her closer. “Tell him, Lyse.”

Lyse hesitated. She and Daisy had been friends since the day they’d met as small children, but the handsome, bewiskered major still gave her the shakes.

And the impatient dip between his thick brows didn’t help. “What is it, girl? I’m in rather an important meeting.”

Lyse studied the two uniformed men inside the office—a youngish one puffing on a big Havana Special cigar, and the other, a grayer version of Redmond, nursing a snifter of French cognac.

She gathered her courage. “Sir, I apologize for the interruption. But I bear a message from a young man I met this morning on the waterfront—Don Rafael Maria Gonzales de Rippardá, merchant of New Orleans.” Reeling off the young Spaniard’s litany of names, she quelled the urge to roll her eyes. The busy major would never take her seriously.

But Redmond opened the door wider. “Rippardá! In truth?” He grinned. “I’m surprised he didn’t come with you! Where is the young scalawag?”

Lyse exchanged looks with Daisy. “He—he’s settling in at Burrelle’s, sir. He told me to say he wants to entertain you for dinner tonight—or at your earliest convenience.” Well, she added that last bit herself, for courtesy’s sake.

Major Redmond didn’t seem to notice. He turned to address the officer with the most gold braid on his uniform, the young one with the cigar. “Colonel Durnford, you’ll want to meet this young Spaniard. Protégé of Oliver Pollock—a wealthy Irish merchant with quite a bit of influence among the Spanish military.”

“It’s the Spanish crown I’m most concerned about,” Durnford growled. “King Carlos tells the military where to go and provides the coin to get it there.” He stuffed the cigar between his teeth and spoke around it. “I’ve heard of Pollock. If you think this boy might connect that coin toward us and away from the rebels, it’s worth the time.”

Redmond nodded and turned back to Lyse. “Can you find Rippardá and convey another message?”

Lyse dipped a quick curtsey. “Of course, sir.”

“Good girl. Tell him . . .” He turned the cigar in his fingers. “Thank him for his invitation, but say it would be more convenient if he would join my family in my home.” He nodded at Daisy. “Daughter, you’ll need to lay six more places at the table this evening. Rippardá, plus the Durnfords.”

Daisy swallowed. The Durnford clan included two little girls



and a boy, all under the age of six. But she curtsayed obediently. “Yes, sir.” She gave her father a cozening look. “Could Lyse come too? I’ll need help with preparing all that extra food.”

“Yes, yes, whatever you think, my dear.” He backed away, already disengaging from the conversation. “Run along, we’re very busy here.” He had already shut the door before Lyse and Daisy had time to curtsay again.

They looked at each other, laughing, and Daisy put a hand over her mouth. “*Only* six more for dinner!”

Lyse sobered. “I hope Justine can do without me tonight. She wasn’t feeling well this morning. What if the baby comes early?”

Daisy shrugged. “You’ll have another little brother or sister, and I’ll manage.”

“True.” Lyse smiled at Corporal Tully as she and Daisy left headquarters arm in arm. “How about this—you drop a message at the inn for Don Rafael, and I’ll go home and check on Justine, then come back to your house. What are you making for supper? Want me to bring some oysters?”

“Good idea. They’ll fill out the gumbo. And you can make the cornbread—yours is so much better than mine.”

“All right.” Lyse grinned. “I can’t wait for you to meet Don Rafael. His accent is so droll!”

“And yours isn’t?” Daisy laughed and mimicked Lyse’s Creole patois. “Come, my little cabbage, let us dance the night away under the moonlight.”

“Oh, you English, always so serious. Come on, *cher*, I’ll race you to the gate.” Lyse dropped her friend’s arm and took off running.



The French girl was the one to keep in his sights, and not only because she was good to look upon. Behind those golden eyes lurked a dangerous intellect.

As she ladled Miss Redmond’s excellent gumbo, thick with

oysters and shrimp, aromatic and steaming, into his bowl, Rafa gave her his most inane Don Rafael grin. “Mademoiselle, you are kind to notice my great famishment. Will you not be seated, so that I could serve you as well?”

Her gaze flicked to their host, who was entertaining Colonel Durnford at the far end of the eight-foot table. “Thank you, monsieur, but I am not . . . hungry.” The quirk at the corner of her generous pink mouth deepened.

Puzzled, he watched her glide to serve one of the Durnford children, her movements unhurried, graceful, but efficient. What had she implied by that hesitation? That she was not welcome at the Redmonds’ table? But why? Clearly she and Miss Redmond were great friends. The dynamics here were very strange. But perhaps it was simple British snobbery at play.

Do not be distracted, he reminded himself. His mission was not to flirt with a girl who walked like a dancer through places no lady should go. If he hadn’t happened along this morning when he did, she might have found herself dragged into an alley by that sailor.

But what a surprise—and delight—to find her here, a quasi-guest in the Redmonds’ home.

Lyse. Her name was Lyse. He deliberately removed his gaze from the curve of her waist, made even more alluring by the glossy black curls that clung to her apron sash. He turned to Daisy Redmond, seated at his left, and found her watching him with a twinkle in her large blue eyes.

“*Caray!*” He thumped himself in the forehead. “I have turned my back upon my hostess, when she is so kind to take in a stranger and feed him the most excellent of creole dishes!”

The twinkle became a dimpling smile. “Lyse taught me to make it, *señor*.”

Do not look at the French girl, he told himself again, as he blew across the steaming fish stew and spooned it carefully into his

mouth. She was like the spices melding upon his tongue, with her Gallic-accented English and dark gold eyes in that caramel-skinned face. Such Creole girls walked all about New Orleans, as common as flowers, so that one eventually became dulled to their exquisite beauty. But this one was different, and he wanted to know why.

He swallowed, closing his eyes in ecstasy, then smiled at Miss Redmond. “You are a student to be commended. My nose thanks you. My belly thanks you. Indeed, I am your slave forever. Only tell me your lightest wish, and I shall cross a hundred seas to grant it.”

She laughed. “Lyse was right. You are droll.”

He contrived to look hurt. “Droll? My English is not of the best, but I think I would rather be intrepid or gallant—or even irresistible. Droll, Miss Redmond? Really, you wound me.”

Her mouth pursed even as her blue eyes danced. “I beg your forgiveness, Don Rafael. How may I make it up to you?”

Rafa placed a finger between his brows and crossed his eyes, as if the act of thinking were painful. “Hmm. Perhaps you might . . . Yes!” He beamed at her. “I will allow you to take me on a tour of the fort and the city on the morrow. Then we shall once more regard one another with mutual respect and admiration, *sí?*”

This time she laughed outright. “I’m very sorry to turn down such a wonderful offer, but Thursday is my day to teach the children of the town their letters.”

“Ah, that is very much too bad.” He gave the French girl a side-long look, unable to resist teasing. “Then perhaps, if I solemnly promise to refrain from singing or playing my guitar, Señorita Lanier would agree to take your place.”

Lyse was bending over the littlest Durnford child’s dish, picking the shell off an oyster. Hearing her name, she looked up and gave him her crinkle-nose grin. “Your restraint is admirable, sir. But it seems I have given you the impression that I dislike music—when nothing could be further from the truth.”

Miss Redmond was looking from her friend to him and back

again, clearly perplexed by the conversation's subtext. "But do you have a guitar with you? You must entertain us this evening!"

Rafa shrugged. "I was a cantor as a child, so, yes, I have been trained. But I didn't mean—" He saw Lyse's satisfaction. "I mean, of course I will sing. Allow me but to fetch my guitar from the antechamber."

Miss Redmond caught her father's attention by clinking her spoon against her goblet. "Papa! When everyone has finished eating, let us adjourn to the salon, where Don Rafael will give us a bit of a concert, shall we? Timbo—" She turned to the elderly slave who had been quietly removing empty dishes and refilling wine glasses. "Will you set up the tea cart in the large salon?"

"Yes, miss." The man inclined his grizzled head and backed out of the dining room.

As he dealt with his dinner and fielded Miss Daisy's prattling, Rafa covertly watched Lyse Lanier as she took her place at the table, opposite Daisy. He couldn't quite place her in the social strata. The French of New Orleans, he had noticed, tended to hold a rather inflated view of their importance, despite the fact that they were a conquered people in a Spanish colony. Here in British West Florida, less than two hundred miles away, he had expected the same. But Lyse gazed upon him, not with superiority, but rather as if she found him entertaining—a sort of egalitarian amusement which oddly heated his blood.

He swallowed a sigh along with the last of his dinner ale. How he wished he could shed Don Rafael's shallow persona, just long enough to prove to her that he was a man, and not a musical manikin.

Ah well, he had neither time nor mental energy for serious courting, even had she been so inclined.

Still. She was *very* good to look upon, in a wildflower sort of way. He mentally entertained himself by imagining her family. She lacked the polished femininity of Daisy Redmond, whose smooth

golden hair, milky skin, and blue eyes proclaimed the aristocratic English lady; indeed, Lyse's coppery complexion, wild black curls, and exotic mouth bespoke native or African descent, belied by the beautiful gold-shot eyes, which would be an anomaly amongst the dark browns and blacks of the African, mulatto, and mestizo slave culture.

Parsing that culture was part of his assignment here. As they all adjourned to the salon, the two British officers, Major Redmond and Colonel Durnford, lagged behind the ladies. Daisy took her place behind the tea tray, settling in with a precocious matronliness that was as funny as it was charming. Her lady mother having succumbed to yellow fever shortly after the family's arrival in Mobile, Daisy had functioned since as mistress of the house.

The fact that she served the town as schoolmistress only added to her general air of *I am in charge, so do not cross me*. Rafa kept expecting her to remind him to tuck in his shirttail and not to belch in public—which he wouldn't have done in any case, as his own dear mama had drilled him endlessly on the *etiqueta* of a gentleman while he was still in short coats.

He was pleased to discover that the men and women did not separate in the parlor, as was customary in many places he had visited. Even the children gathered to play Spillikins in a quiet knot at their mother's feet, while the adults conversed over their heads.

Rafa sat listening for a moment, taking in his surroundings with the eye to detail his father had taught him long ago. The Redmonds' home was built in the French fashion, a square two-story construction elevated on stilts above the muddy ground, with a broad front porch facing Conception Street. Inside, it was two rooms across, with a breezeway between—one room for family living space, the other for dining. At the other end of the breezeway, he presumed, one would find the kitchen and another service room, with bedrooms upstairs. Judging by the softening wood and

wattle of the walls, the house was about four years old, comfortable without being overly fine.

Rafa shifted in the sturdy, ugly armchair to which he had been assigned; it was short of back, high of arm, hard and uncomfortable as only a stiff-rumped Englishman could conceive. He thought wistfully of his mama's elegantly appointed parlor in New Orleans, with its rich jewel-toned rugs and curtains, plush upholstery, and tasteful artwork. She had taught him to appreciate fine architecture, good books, and the French love of cuisine, to complement his father's head for commonsense military and business practices.

Fortunately, his own quirky sense of the ridiculous rescued him during these ever more frequent trips to barbarous outposts like Mobile and beyond. That, and a certain talent for extracting—and planting—pertinent information.

“Colonel Durnford,” he said, firing the opening salvo, “it is my hope that British ports along the Gulf Coast will not be closed to Spanish merchants such as myself—now that the crazy colonials in the northeast have elected to cut off the nose of their collective face. We Spaniards, of course, have no interest in making war with our best customer.”

Durnford's mottled complexion darkened. “You heard about that, then?” He did not, Rafa noted, answer the question.

“’Tis news likely to spread at the rate of fleas in a kennel.” He spread his hands in a gesture copied from his Gallic friends in New Orleans. “This so-called *declaration of independence*, which is as stupid as it is appalling, is like to create shock waves in all manner of unexpected places.”

“It was indeed ill-advised.” Durnford exchanged glances with Redmond. “What do you know about it, Don Rafael?”

Rafa smiled and brushed an invisible speck of lint from his breeches. “That your King George is the grossest villain since Caligula. He has, they say, ‘obstructed the administration of jus-

tice,' making judges dependent on his will alone. That he and his minions subject colonial citizens to a 'jurisdiction foreign to their Constitution and unacknowledged by their laws.' That he has erected a multitude of new offices and sent 'swarms of officers' to harass people and to eat them out of house and home. That he levies taxes without the people's consent. That he has, in short, fundamentally altered all aspects of British government."

Rafa had kept his voice quiet, but by the time he finished, he was aware that a certain intensity colored the words. The women had abandoned the topic of fashion and turned to listen, Made-moiselle Lyse staring at him with wide golden eyes.

He would have given much for a window into her brain at that moment. Many French Americans resented British presence but were, for a variety of reasons, unable to leave their homes and businesses in order to start over elsewhere. Those who did remain were required to swear at least nominal loyalty to King George.

Before he could ascertain anything like truth, the heavy lashes fell, shielding her gaze.

Daisy Redmond sat forward, her small fists clenched. "How dare they make such absurd claims! King George is—is . . . Why, he's the king! He has a perfect right to tax anyone he chooses! And how else could he pay for the military protection provided by my papa and his soldiers?" She glared at Rafa. "How *dare* they?"

"I am only repeating the main phrases that have been passed along the information circuit."

Colonel Durnford tapped his fingers against his lips. "That is quite a mouthful of accusation. And you say they have literally declared themselves independent of their sovereign nation?"

"It would seem so." Rafa sipped from the fragile cup in his hand. "Personally, I think it's all a tempest in a teapot, so to speak."

He got the expected laugh from that. Miss Daisy sat back, and the conversation veered to less volatile topics, such as the price of

sugar and the problem of freebooters who infested the shipping lanes between Havana and Pensacola.

Fortunately, as he had hoped, Rafa seemed to have laid to rest any suspicions the officers might have harbored regarding the purpose behind his visit. Both men continued to treat him with a mixture of amusement and mild disdain.

Which was perfectly acceptable. Desirable even.

Eventually Miss Daisy remembered that he was to have entertained with his voice and guitar. Agreeably he rose and fetched his instrument, a beautiful rosewood guitar designed and built by his grandpapa. He pulled it from the protection of its red velvet drawstring sack, made by his grandmama, grinning at the expected gasp of admiration from his audience. The inlaid mosaic of colored chips of turquoise and ebony encircling the sound hole made it a thing of great beauty as well as augmenting its resonance.

He rippled off a minor scale and chord progression, grimacing to find it out of tune, then bent to pluck the strings and turn the pegs to his satisfaction. Finally he tried the same cadenza and shrugged, glancing at the French girl. "It is as good as I can make it in this terrible heat. What would you like to hear?"

Lyse straightened, apparently startled to find herself the one being addressed. "The rest of '*De Colores*,'" she blurted.

"*Bueno*." He fingered a few arpeggiated chords, held her eyes, and began to sing. It was not a love song, but he made it so. Such was the gift he'd been given.

She stared back at him, her quizzical expression softening until her lips began to curve in a smile.

Then he remembered he was to charm the English young lady and not the French. *Caramba*. Sometimes the *estúpido* act became all too real.