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C H A P T E R

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As I walked up the sidewalk to the piazza of the deMarionne mansion on the evening of my return

to Charleston, I knew that I neared a moment where, on each side, everything in my past and future would hang in perfect balance.

Unlike many of the events of the four days that followed, this was a moment of crystalline significance that required no further thought or consideration. I understood its fullness and finality at that moment. With each halting step toward the gloom of the piazza, I was keenly aware that I also approached the edge of my own Rubicon, with its dark, swirling waters between me and the uncertainty that waited beyond the boundaries of the far shore.

Shadows swallowed me as I stopped in front of the

mansion's massive door. Wicker chairs, which had been barely visible from the street through the white railing, filled much of the length of the gray-painted boards of the piazza. Above, moths frantically struck at the glow of a lightbulb. Dusk had settled to deep purple, sending the caress of saltwater breezes past these waterfront mansions and on through the dark, twisting cobblestone alleys of the old quarters of Charleston.

On the door, an arm's length away, was the thick, ornate handle of an iron knocker, molded into the circle of a snake eating its own tail—a shape I had always found appropriate for this mansion.

I had spent fifteen years approaching this moment. Yet I still had the choice to turn back, to remain safe, with my advance silent and my presence unknown and my retreat unseen.

Countless other times on this piazza, I had raised the ancient iron of the door knocker. Countless other times I had let it drop to announce my call here at the deMarionne mansion.

But those days belonged to my life two decades earlier—before I'd become a black sheep, long assumed to have run away or been taken by wolves. I doubted, though, that anyone had cared to wonder about my fate. I had never truly been considered one of them, for I had been tainted early on by my mother's reputation. To the world—which in Charleston simply means to those who matter in Charleston—my mother was remembered as a tramp and runaway thief who had abandoned her only son.

That she had left me before my tenth birthday was one of the central truths in my life, something I had buried so deeply during my years away from Charleston that I had never expected to begin any search for her, let alone at the deMarionne mansion, bolstered by icy resolve that masked my long-held fury.

Here, on the piazza, I hesitated in the interval before the final moment that so clearly marked a division between my past and the future I had decided to claim. Outwardly, this hesitation might have appeared as uncertainty.

Not so. This brief hitch in time on the piazza came as I savored my fury and anticipated its release.

Unable to escape my southern past, however, I could not unleash this wrath without some semblance of civility. I took satisfaction, then, that my hand did not tremble as I reached for the door knocker to irrevocably set everything in motion.

This was the moment.

Once, then twice, I lifted the heavy weight of the black iron snake eating its tail.

And let it fall.



The echoing deep clank of iron against iron faded, leaving behind nothing but the fluttering of moths' wings against the lightbulb. I stared straight at the spy hole set in the door and waited. A familiar pain seeped into my awareness, an uninvited guest I had learned to expect at the end of a long day of travel, from the unyielding yoke of a plastic limb cutting into the long-healed stump of my right leg. This pain brought me fleeting, ironic amusement; I had no need, at this moment, of its reminder.

The door opened slowly and completed my sense of irony. I should have expected this person at the door, and her manner of opening it.

The black woman holding the interior handle peered around the edge of the door as suspiciously as she had almost a decade and a half earlier. Except for short curly hair gone from ebony to white, except for glasses set in a heavy frame, except for wrinkles around her mouth further

deepened to reflect the perpetual frown that had shaped her face, Ella was still Ella, crisp maid's apron over the functional black blouse and long skirt.

I had never known her last name. Decades earlier, Martin Luther King, Jr. and a Memphis garbage strike might have begun to change the nation's perception of racial status, but here in Charleston, many of the old families proudly retained a paternal attitude toward their servants.

"I am here to call upon Helen deMarionne," I said to Ella.

"I am afraid Mizz deMarionne is not taking visitors."

"I believe she will overlook the inconvenience."

"You, sir, are mistaken." Among the older Charlestonian servants, a pecking order was established by the quality of family in which they were employed. As part of the deMarionne household, and as one who had ladled her acid over me for years, Ella was as fully capable of snobbery and disdain as any blue blood.

"Inform her, then, that if she does not receive this visitor, he shall begin to serenade her forcefully enough to disrupt the neighbors."

Ella glared at me, the same fierce, intimidating stare I remembered from all those years before. But I was no longer a lanky, longhaired teenager, tiptoeing in Ella's presence among the other antiques of the deMarionne mansion.

"Something from *Showboat*," I said. "That would suit this neighborhood, wouldn't you agree?"

"I agree I should call the police. Which I shall if you do not leave immediately."

"What a lovely disturbance that would make. And highly entertaining for the neighbors."

As she pondered her options and the resolution on my face, Ella blinked slowly behind her thick glasses, finally

swallowing her defeat with the appearance of a lizard closing its eyes to choke down a large insect.

“I shall see if Mizz deMarionne will permit an appointment.”

The massive door closed on silent hinges.

Ella had not asked me my name. Which meant, although all these years had passed, she had recognized me in return.

Which also explained why I had not been invited inside to wait.



My taxi journey from the airport on this evening had taken me into the heart of old Charleston, that collection of ancient buildings on a flat peninsula barely eight feet above sea level. I'd sat in silence in the backseat of the taxi, reading the familiar street names as I traveled closer and closer to my childhood haunts. King. Tradd. Then the crossing of Broad Street, which was the invisible boundary that separated the aristocracy on the south side from all those in the rest of Charleston to the north.

The taxi driver had taken me past the familiar outlines of the mansions turned sideways to the street—in Charleston's peculiar manner of protection from the eyes of tourists and commoners—until finally he had reached the tip of the city, at a bed-and-breakfast, where I had checked in and rid myself of my single piece of luggage.

From there, I had walked only a couple of blocks, passing an impressive array of Charleston's storied East Battery antebellum mansions—ornamental ironwork, raised entrance, massive three-story columns, carriage house in the back, hidden gardens.

The deMarionne mansion, like the others, faced the seawall on the other side of the street, giving a daytime view of Fort Sumter smudged on the water's horizon, where—as

newcomers were told only half jokingly—Charleston's Ashley and Cooper Rivers converged to form the Atlantic Ocean just beyond. From behind the oleanders that lined the promenade of East Battery, passersby would point at Sumter as they imagined its role at the start of the War between the States. It was at this seawall that a battery of guns had been placed to protect the city during the War of 1812; if Charleston worships anything, it is its own history, and the ensuing East Battery street name endured with pride. As did the name of the family that had owned this East Battery mansion for four generations.

The deMarionnes.

Their family history appeared in every Charleston guidebook, along with the predictable exterior and interior photos of the mansion. More than a century earlier, Jonathan deMarionne had been a blockade runner, dodging Union forces as he brought rum and gunpowder to the besieged city, trading his goods for gold and silver. His good fortune ended a week before the war itself did, when a Yankee cannonball took off his arm at the shoulder and he died instantly of shock. Since he was a difficult man, subject to drunkenness and violence, his widow found little to grieve, and in the economic chaos that followed the Confederate surrender, she took whatever solace she needed by shrewdly tripling the already massive fortune he had accumulated, avoiding the many marriage offers that followed, leaving her money to her two sons, who—in a Charleston tradition not mentioned in the guidebooks—stayed in banking and law and did little more than hoard the family fortune. Nor did the guidebooks add that this money had provided for the private schools and debutante balls for the indolent generations to come.

This I knew without a guidebook, knew without photos of the interior of the mansion that no tourist was ever invited inside to see.

For I had returned. Out of exile.



The door opened twenty minutes after I first knocked. It was not Helen deMarionne.

Ella frowned at me, her square black face crinkled with distaste. “Tomorrow evening,” Ella said. “Seven o’clock. Mizz deMarionne will expect you then.”

“Tonight,” I said.

“Tomorrow evening,” she said. “Gentlemen make appointments.”

She swung the door shut in my face.

Denied. Again.

I had early determined to take my triumph with full control, not as a madman. Instead of kicking futilely against a locked door, I departed from the mansion. Again.

I walked down the sidewalk toward the inn at the southern tip of Meeting Street, where I had checked in for the duration of my stay, a stone’s throw from where I’d grown up in one of the antebellum mansions on South Battery.

As the uneven rhythm of my steps took me along the streets of my childhood and teen years, I was conscious that every good memory of Charleston was stained with darker memories of disappointment and betrayal, as if every wonderful thing I had been granted then had only been provided to taunt me with its future absence.

I did not need to look far to find disappointment.

To my right, looming over the old buildings like a dark sword stabbing at the bank of clouds that glowed above the streetlights of Charleston, was the steeple of St. Michael’s Church, mocking me, mocking my long disillusioned faith, mocking the memories of my mother. And in mocking all of that, mocking my return to search for her after all these years away.



I should make it clear that upon my return to Charleston, I was a man without a sense of God, unless one counts denial as a begrudging form of relationship.

Much of that denial had to do with my mother, who I now see was one of the few examples of real faith in my childhood.

Church puzzled me then. It was pleasant enough when all that was required of my faith was to follow the instructions of Sunday school teachers who encouraged me to use crayons to color drawings of men in fishing boats. They did not like my questions, however, and learned to ignore my waving hand.

Christmas, for example, was confusing to me. I was expected early to stop believing in the legends of a bearded Santa Claus and flying reindeer, yet I was instructed to maintain faith in flying angels who sang above the manger and in bearded wise men who followed a moving star. I found Easter equally confusing; I was told that the Sunday morning egg hunts across the lawns of Charleston mansions were the result of a mythical bunny. These gaily attended events provided surreal contrast to the blood-drenched story preached in church an hour earlier about a man who was whipped, beaten, nailed by his hands and feet to a cross, then, I was told to believe, rose from the dead.

When I was old enough to join my mother with the adults in the church service, I endured long and boring sermons among the highbrow Charlestonian women, who wore wide-brimmed hats and white gloves and pastel dresses and smiled sweetly at each other across the pews, then turned and whispered vicious gossip during the passing of the collection plate.

Where is God in this? I wondered as a child.



Again and again my mother answered my questions as wisely as she could, telling me repeatedly that there was a difference between faith and religion, and in so doing, gently led me to trust in a God of love invisible beyond the man-made boundaries of the church. She promised me that God's love was forever, just as a mother's love was forever.

Then she abandoned me.



If my mother's unexplained departure was not enough to drive me from God, there were the formative years of my adulthood. I spent those years away from Charleston and the United States, yet I saw enough of the whirlpool that is American culture to scorn the little religion that managed to surface among the other flotsam. I glimpsed the television shows where slick con artists promised healing in exchange for money sent to support their ministry. Newspapers gave me details about protesters hatefully and self-righteously shouting the name of Jesus as they condemned people who didn't share their beliefs; occasionally on AM radio I heard the arguments of those who insisted the world was only six thousand years old and fossils were planted by the devil to fool us; I heard the rantings of white supremacists and the claims of their fanatical religions.

Because of self-imposed isolation during my exile, books were my companions at all opportunities. Through the smoked glass of history accounts that let readers peer into the past, I learned the religious evils that had been hidden from me by the Sunday school teachers so determined to entertain us with crayons and paper: the popes who fathered illegitimate children, who built the golden glories of the Vatican through the sweat and blood of terrified,

indulgence-seeking peasants; the history of Crusaders who raped and pillaged and killed tens of thousands in the name of a man of love; cultural eradication doled out by harsh, unyielding missionaries who followed the slave traders to the depths of Africa.

Lastly, in defense of the stubbornness of my soul's early flight from God, there were all the events before I left Charleston—events that seemed totally bereft of the touch of a God of love.

God, however, as I was about to discover, is a patient hunter.

I can now examine my years of exile and see earmarked on the pages of my personal history the times he beckoned, times that I resolutely turned aside to my own path. I imagine that in a way, I was like Jonah, determined to head in the opposite direction of God's calling.

For Jonah, the city he desperately wanted to avoid was Nineveh. For me, it was Charleston.

Unlike Jonah, however, it did not take the belly of a great fish to convince me to return.

But a letter.

So it was that I had returned to the place of birth—and death—of my childhood.

My mission was simple.

I wanted to find the truth about my mother. I wanted revenge. I wanted justice. I wanted the love I had abandoned.

I certainly did not expect to find God. Or the forgiveness I desperately needed.



Along that street, I briefly closed my eyes against the outline of the steeple against the sky, as if the feeble barrier of the darkness behind pressed eyelids might stop the

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memories I had vowed to discard in the same way I had once promised never to return to this city.

Although some southerners place honor above all, I felt no remorse at breaking that promise. No, the letter that drew me home had granted me a total and unexpected absolution.

With that absolution, I intended to take my vengeance, pound by pound, no matter how closely I gouged near the hearts of those who had driven me away.