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C H A P T E R

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As a child, I knew well the greatest tragedy of the Larrabee family, for many around me were happy to openly speculate on its delicious horror. This was the tale of the thunder-filled night that young Timothy Larrabee delivered a potion of death to his grandmother.

Indeed, most of Charleston's proper families are haunted by the tales of eccentricity and madness and scandal and deviances of previous generations, tales flaunted with proud defiance in the way that the once rich will cling to ancient and fading silks even as they are reduced to begging. These tales circulate among the other proper families, so that all of us among the self-crowned aristocracy of fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-generation Charlestonians each know the shrouded heritage of the others.

The legacy of the Larrabee family was no different, as its members could count among their ancestors the regular assortment of rogues and idiots, ranging from pirates and slave traders to

cowards and heroes of the war of Northern aggression, imposed upon the South by Lincoln.

But it was Timothy Larrabee who achieved the most notoriety among all the scandals in the two-hundred-year recorded history of the Larrabee family. This story was not even a generation old at the time of my childhood, so it was treated as recent gossip, and it was not difficult for me to imagine how it happened.

He was only ten the night it occurred, slender and constantly aware of his grooming in clothing and heritage, and had already learned to carry himself with great elegance and to speak with perfect clarity, as if constantly and consciously rehearsing a style of delivering future edicts that would be firmly obeyed once he took official reign of the Larrabee dynasty—even though the dynasty had dwindled to his grandmother, himself, and the vastly reduced fortune that had once bolstered their family name. It was with this great elegance that he stepped into the bedroom of Agnes Larrabee that night, in a mansion two streets over from the similar mansion that would become my childhood prison, and roughly a decade before I was born.

I have been told it was his habit to wear a tailored, freshly pressed double-breasted black suit, and that he greased his hair back Gatsby-style to add maturity to his precocious appearance. As on all other evenings, he approached his grandmother's poster bed where she sat waiting in a white dressing gown, propped against a half dozen pillows. Timothy Larrabee looked like a tiny adult as he crossed the hardwood floor and Persian throw rug, balancing in his white-gloved hands a polished silver tray with shortbread biscuits and a gold-rimmed china cup filled with densely sweetened Earl Grey tea. The sweetness of the hot tea, the delivery of the tray, and the manner in which Timothy was

dressed to perform his task were part of a nightly ritual that Agnes demanded in the Larrabee household. Timothy Larrabee did not see it as a burden, for young as he was, Timothy Larrabee had been well taught to respect ritual and tradition and all the power they would bestow upon him in adulthood.

On this evening, as on all others, Timothy Larrabee had taken the tray in the kitchen from Samson Elias, the lifelong family servant who prepared it nightly. This was the same servant subsequently accused of stealing from the Larrabee family a seventeenth-century miniature portrait of King Charles I, father of the namesake of Charleston. This was the same servant accused of the murder of Agnes Larrabee, convicted and sentenced to execution despite his advanced age.

Because on this night, the sweetness of the tea in the gold-rimmed china cup disguised the taste of enough rat poison to kill a horse. Among the unkind whispers that followed her death was the observation that the dosage was so strong simply because Samson Elias knew well that Agnes Larrabee had the meanness of temperament and constitution that would have survived any less.

Sheet lightning cracked the darkness of the rains that pounded the bedroom window as Timothy Larrabee glided forward with his tray and waited for his grandmother's approval of his manners and presentation before setting the tray on a nightstand. With those white-gloved hands, he passed her the gold-rimmed cup that would deliver death.

Perhaps as Agnes Larrabee took that first gulp of cooling tea, she did taste some of the bitterness of the poison. But a well-bred Charlestonian simply does not spew as lesser creatures might. So it was that Agnes Larrabee swallowed her death potion with as much dignity as she could manage, and within minutes

died beneath a down-filled duvet, clutching the gold crucifix on the chain around her neck and calling out the name of Jesus, her cries of agony lost in the crashing thunder and the rain that poured upon her mansion.

It has been commonly maintained that Timothy's downward spiral into juvenile delinquency and subsequent years in federal prison resulted from the terrible combination of innocently delivering the instrument of his grandmother's death and then watching her die in such a horrible manner.

Yet I now know that what I believed about Timothy Larrabee as I grew up in Charleston was only a small part of the whole truth.

For the childhood that broke him held other stories.

Far more secret.

And far worse.